



Standards for Master's Degrees in Medical and Health Professions Education

WFME Global Standards for Quality Improvement

WFME Office
2016

Explanatory note to guide the use of the Standards

These standards are based on our current understanding of fundamental principles and best practices in designing, maintaining, and enhancing medical education programmes.

Standards are intended to guide medical education programme development and evaluation, facilitate diagnosis of strengths and weaknesses relating to the medical education programme, and to stimulate quality improvement.

Each institution or regulator should review the relevant standards and develop a version of them that is appropriate to the local context. It would be helpful if those local, contextual standards are mapped on to the original WFME standards.

Not all standards may have application in every setting.

A medical school may well receive a satisfactory overall evaluation and maintain accreditation (where appropriate) without necessarily meeting every standard and sub-standard.

Note: In 2017 the document design was updated. The content remains unchanged.

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Introduction

Master's degrees in medical education and health professions education have proliferated over recent times. Between 2000 and 2015, the number of such degrees grew from seven to 121¹ and the growth continues. Although there is considerable commonality, a survey of such programmes concluded that:

There is a need to establish criteria and mechanisms for evaluation of these programmes.

The World Federation for Medical Education, as the current repository of global standards for medical education, has responded to this call and has developed standards for Master's Degrees in Health Professions and Medical Education.

Purpose

The purpose of these standards is to:

- guide programme directors in their work of course design and management
- offer prospective and current students a framework for judging the quality and qualities of the provision they are contemplating or experiencing
- offer a framework for institutions and regulators in judging that provision.

The issue of quality of Master's programmes underpins these standards. As Tekian and Harris:

.. given the fact that there is a proliferation of such Master's-level programs in HPE, there is a clear need to establish criteria for evaluation of these programs and perhaps an accreditation process for such programs. Furthermore, best practices should also be established to insure that all programs maintain a minimum acceptable quality. These best practices would provide an example of excellence to strive for by all programs.

Rationale

The role of global standards is not to homogenise educational provision but to allow a rich diversity of contextually relevant courses that meet agreed standards for content, process and outcome. We hope that these standards will liberate educational providers to be creative in their planning within the necessary quality parameters for an academic course.

There are many ways of interpreting each standard. We intend that each standard should be reviewed and the ways in which it is locally relevant identified. This might sometimes involve a recasting or rewording.

A Master's degree must show certain academic characteristics. Students should graduate with a sound knowledge base, an appreciation of the nature of evidence and theory in social science, a sound grounding in research methods, and an ability to analyse, synthesise and critique theories and trends so that appropriate contextual decisions can be made about which to apply.

¹ Tekian, A., Roberts, T., Batty, H.P., Cook, D.A. and Norcini, J. (2014) Preparing leaders in health professions education. *Medical Teacher*, 36, 269-271.

The challenge of undertaking a Master's degree in medical or health professions education is that students must move to a social science paradigm and knowledge base that is different from that already learned within basic and clinical sciences. This presents challenges not only to the student, but also to the teacher.

We hope that these standards will assist programme planners in addressing such problems.

Structure

The standards presented here follow the same general framework as previous sets of WFME standards. We have used the same nine headings:

1. Mission and outcomes
2. Educational process
3. Assessment of students
4. Students
5. Staffing
6. Educational resources, settings and scholarship
7. Monitoring and evaluation of the educational process
8. Governance and administration
9. Programme renewal.

Within these, however, we have not offered the previous WFME structure of basic and quality development standards. Our consensus view is that all the standards set out should be addressed as a baseline for all Master's programmes.

Use

We intend the standards to be used in at least five ways:

1. As a guide for new programme designers
2. As a framework for local quality assurance and programme evaluation
3. As a means for current students to judge their own Master's courses
4. As a guide to help prospective students choose between courses
5. As a framework for regulators and accreditors.

We trust that the standards are practical and relevant for these purposes across the globe.

How the standards were developed

A first draft of the standards was prepared on the basis of the general WFME framework. This, and two subsequent iterations, were then discussed by an international committee of ten experts in the field. These consisted of:

Ara Tekian, Janet Grant, John Norcini, Ilene Harris, Steven Durning, Olle ten Cate, Renee Stalmeijer, Diana Dolmans, Lambert Schuwirth and Larry Gruppen.

The agreed draft was presented for discussion to an invited meeting at the 2015 conference of the Association for Medical Education in Europe. This was attended by the WFME president, Professor David Gordon.

Thereafter, a final draft was presented to the WFME Executive Committee for remaining amendments and approval.

We welcome feedback and comment on the standards as they are used.

1. Mission and outcomes

1.1. Statements of purpose and outcome

The programme director **must**:

- Formulate the purpose of the programme and make it available to potential students, their sponsors, employers or funders.
- State the intended outcomes resulting in a graduate who:
 - Demonstrates mastery of the theories, concepts and practices of health professions education, including critical appraisal of their rationale and evidence base, and comparative, contextual and cultural analysis to determine applicability to the student's own context
 - Understands the particular nature of theory, research and evidence in the social sciences
 - Demonstrates intellectual, personal and professional abilities for:
 - Independent thinking
 - Synthesising information
 - Creative problem solving
 - Communicating clearly
 - Demonstrating appreciation of the social, environmental and global implications of their studies and activities.
 - Demonstrates applied knowledge and skills to take on a variety of leadership, management or organisational roles in educational development in their institution or department
 - Demonstrates applied knowledge and skills to conduct health professions education research and programme evaluation
 - Is prepared to undertake higher level study, such as doctoral level study
 - Demonstrates commitment to a professional and ethical approach to educational development, research and evaluation.

1.2 Participation in the formulation of mission and outcomes

The programme director **must** involve the principal stakeholders, including potential students, in formulating the programme mission and outcomes.

1.3 Autonomy and academic freedom

The programme director **must** have autonomy to formulate and implement the policies for which the teaching, academic and administrative staff are responsible, especially regarding:

- Design of the curriculum
- Use of the allocated resources necessary for implementation of the curriculum

1.4 Programme title and description

The programme description **must** provide documentation of appropriate breadth and depth that describes:

- Programme purposes, philosophy and values
- Programme learning goals, objectives or outcomes and content
- Modes of delivery including methods of face-to-face, individual, group, self-directed and distance learning
- Expected time commitment and credits to be awarded
- Assessment policy, methods, progression and completion conditions, including arrangements for acceptable deadline extensions, penalties for late submission and conditions for resubmission of inadequate work
- Purpose and arrangements for dissertations, including design, structure, length, style, supervision and marking
- Student support systems
- Plagiarism and collusion policy
- Conditions for admission and enrolment, including advanced standing and exemption arrangements
- Programme fees and bursaries
- Advice on study and academic skills (including presentation of written assignments and referencing) and time management
- Warnings and complaints procedures
- Programme evaluation and quality assurance.

2. Educational Process

2.1 Instructional and learning methods

The programme director **must**:

- Describe the blend of instructional and learning methods, including the rationale for the methods
- Use instructional and learning methods that stimulate, prepare and support students to take responsibility for their own future professional development and learning
- Offer a balance of carefully planned instructional methods² that offer students a range of learning experiences, and individual learning support and guidance, consistent with the learning goals and objectives.

2.2 Academic skills development

The programme director **must** ensure that the programme enables each student to develop the Master's level academic skills of:

- Independent thinking
- Analysing, synthesising and offering a critique of information
- Creative problem solving
- Communicating clearly
- Appreciating the social, contextual and global implications of their studies and activities.

The programme director **must** describe expected standards of work, including length and presentation of assignments and other required elements.

2.3 Programme content, scope and contextualisation

The programme director **must**:

- elect programme content that educates students in the full breadth of educational concepts, theories, models, historical perspectives and practices
- Ensure coverage of basic and advanced theories and models in each topic, methods of critique and critical-reflective application to the student's own context
- Draw on both the health professions literature and on practice, models and theories from wider educational and social sciences
- Ensure that the content selected is presented in its social and historical context, and is appraised for its current applicability to the student's context.

² **Note:** *Specific instructional methods might include face-to-face interactions, individual and group learning, distance learning, online education (synchronous and asynchronous), e-learning, tutorials and seminars, written programme units, supervision, mentoring, blended learning and independent learning.*

2.4 Research and scholarship

The programme director **must** ensure that students:

- Demonstrate appreciation of the process, nature and limitations of educational research
- Demonstrate understanding of the evidence base for any statement or programme topic, especially where there is no, contradictory, or little evidence
- Demonstrate skills to make an informed critique of educational research and scholarship
- Demonstrate understanding of the social, contextual and historical basis of educational ideas
- Demonstrate skills to develop original research and scholarship appropriate to their own contexts.

2.5 Programme structure and duration

The overall structure and duration of the Master's programme **must** be described with clear definition of:

- The duration of the programme, and whether it is full-time or part-time, stated in terms of actual hours of study
- Start and completion dates
- The expected distribution of work, programme activities, their duration and deadlines
- Components which are compulsory and optional and a rationale for these components
- Amount and role of independent learning
- Available resources
- The formative and summative assessment system
- Provision of feedback
- Evaluation of the programme
- Requirements for completion of the programme
- Arrangements for extension and deferrals, if any.

2.6 Process of curriculum development

The programme director **must** describe:

- The process of curriculum design, including needs assessment and contextual analysis, survey of the academic field including the wider literature in the parent fields of psychology and social science, appropriate selection of content, and practical issues of delivery, communication and cost
- What reference was made to stakeholders during curriculum design and development.

3. Assessment of student learning

3.1 Assessment methods

The programme director **must**:

- Define, state and publish the principles, rationale, methods and practices used for assessment of student learning, including the criteria for setting pass marks, grade boundaries and number of allowed retakes
- Ensure that assessments are open to scrutiny by external examiners, the institutional Exam Board or other authorities
- Document the methods of quality assurance of the assessments and marking process
- Offer a system for appeal against assessment results.

3.2 The assessment system

The programme director **must** ensure that:

- Both formative and summative assessments are offered
- Assessments adequately sample the programme content
- The assessments address the Master's level academic skills *as stated in 1.1*
- A range of assessment methods and formats is used, according to their appropriateness to the learning objectives and context.

3.3 Feedback to students

The programme director **must** ensure that personalised and detailed written feedback (or oral feedback with a written record) is given to each student after both formative and summative assessments.

3.4 Quality assurance of the assessment system

The programme director **must** appoint a qualified academic external examiner to verify standards and results.

4. Students

4.1 Admission policy and selection

The programme director **must**:

- Formulate, implement, publish and periodically review an admission policy and process based on the principles of required prior achievements, equality and objectivity
- Have a policy and implement practice for admission of disabled students.

4.2 Student intake

The programme director **must** define the size of student intake and relate it to programme capacity.

4.3 Student support and counselling

The programme director **must** allocate resources for and offer student support, including counselling in relation to academic, social and personal needs.

4.4 Student representation

The programme director **must**:

- Formulate and implement a policy on student representation and appropriate participation in the design, management and evaluation of the curriculum, and in other matters relevant to students
- Encourage and facilitate student activities and student organisations.

4.5 Graduation requirements

The programme director **must** set out requirements in terms of:

- Evidence of successful completion of all degree requirements (programme, projects, thesis, practicum, portfolio, transcript, etc.)
- Expected standards of work
- Evidence of research skills and critical appraisal.

4.6 Progress and attrition rates and reasons

The programme director **must**:

- Set out requirements for progress, including:
 - Range and role of formative and summative assignments
 - Deadlines for assignments
 - Arrangements and acceptable reasons for late submission
 - Arrangements for resubmission, including deadlines and maximum possible marks on submission.
- Keep records of student progress and compliance with milestones
- Have a system for follow-up of students whose progress gives cause for concern
- Keep records of student attrition rates
- Determine and record the reasons why any student who leaves the programme before completion has done so.

5. Staffing

5.1 Appointment policy

The programme director **must**:

- Provide a list of full-time, part-time or consulting staff required to run the programme, including:
 - Academic programme design staff
 - Academic teaching staff
 - Administrative staff
 - Technical support staff
 - Staff involved in assessment
 - The programme director.

For each type of staff, the programme director **must** formulate and implement an appointment policy, consistent with the mission of the programme, that specifies:

- The expertise and level of qualification required
- Criteria for scientific, educational and experiential merit, including the balance between teaching, research and service qualifications
- Their responsibilities, including:
 - Hours and distribution of work
 - Communication with students
 - Submission of records and reports of activity.

5.2 Obligations and development of staff

For each category of staff, and each staff member individually, the programme director **must**:

- Provide a list of duties and responsibilities
- Specify the programme policy on staff induction and support
- Provide induction and training
- Provide appropriate monitoring and feedback
- Make provision for all staff to provide feedback to the programme director on their roles, responsibilities and the support provided.

5.3 Number and qualifications of teaching and supervisory staff

The programme director **must** ensure the presence of:

- Teaching and supervisory staff with education-related academic qualifications at least one level above that for which the students are studying
- A student-to-staff ratio that is specified and sufficient to allow students appropriate access to teachers and supervisors
- Qualified dissertation mentors with sufficient research experience.

5.4 Administrative support

The programme director **must** describe and publish the arrangements that ensure:

- Sufficient administrative support for students
- Sufficient administrative support for teaching and supervisory staff.

6. Educational resources, settings and scholarship

6.1 Educational settings

In the case of face-to-face programmes, the programme director **must** ensure:

- Sufficient physical facilities for staff and students to ensure that the curriculum can be delivered adequately
- A learning environment which is safe for staff and students.

In the case of distance learning, the programme director **must** ensure that:

- Materials are provided in formats that are accessible to all students
- Clear guidance about materials, resources and study requirements is provided.

6.2 Information technology

The programme director **must**, for both face-to-face and distance learning:

- Formulate and implement a policy which addresses effective use and evaluation of appropriate information and communication technology in the educational programme
- Enable teachers and students to use appropriate information and communication technology for:
 - Independent learning
 - Accessing information.

7. Monitoring and evaluation of the educational process

7.1 Mechanism for programme monitoring and evaluation

The programme director **must**:

- Have a programme of routine monitoring of curriculum activities, processes and outcomes
- Establish and apply a mechanism for programme evaluation that:
 - Addresses the curriculum and its main components
 - Addresses student progress
 - Identifies and addresses student and staff concerns
 - Reviews the continued appropriateness of educational and study settings.
- Ensure that relevant results of monitoring and evaluation influence the programme
- Ensure that stakeholders have access to results of the programme evaluation.

7.2 Feedback from staff and students

The programme director **must**:

- Systematically seek, analyse and respond to teacher, staff and student feedback
- Use feedback results for programme development.

7.3 Performance of students and graduates

The programme director **must**:

- Analyse the performance of cohorts of students and graduates in relation to:
 - The programme mission and intended educational outcomes
 - The curriculum
 - Provision of resources.
- Use the analysis of student performance to provide feedback to the committees responsible for:
 - Student selection
 - Curriculum planning
 - Student counselling.

8. Governance and administration

8.1 Programme director

The programme **must** have:

- A named programme director
- Accountability to specified higher management.

8.2 Governance

The programme director **must**:

- Define programme governance structures including the managing committee structures, relationships, conflicts of interest and accountability
- Ensure transparency of governance processes and decisions.

8.3 Academic leadership and integrity

The programme director **must**:

- Describe the responsibilities of its academic leadership for definition and management of the educational programme
- Periodically evaluate its academic leadership in relation to achievement of its mission and intended educational outcomes, objectivity and conflicts of interest.

8.4 Programme management

The programme **must** have:

- Appropriately qualified (i.e. having a degree higher than a Master's award) academic leadership and/or programme director(s) and administrative staff with responsibility for planning and implementation
- Clear lines of appropriate responsibility and management for programme design and the various components of the programme.

8.5 Funding and resource allocation

The programme director **must**:

- Define a clear line of responsibility and authority for resourcing the curriculum, including a dedicated educational budget
- Have autonomy to allocate the resources necessary for the implementation of the curriculum.

8.6 Administration

The programme director **must** have an administrative and professional staff establishment that is appropriate to:

- Support implementation of its educational programme and related activities
- Ensure effective management and resource deployment.

8.7 Requirements and regulations

The programme director **must**:

- Ensure that the administrative staff are appropriate to support the implementation of the programme
- Show that the management process includes a programme of quality assurance
- Demonstrate compliance with relevant regulatory requirements, including the award of an academic qualification.

8.8 Process for start-up and approval

Programme documentation **must** show:

- A formal documented process at start-up of vetting the programme and other degree requirements by a group of experts in education (e.g. graduate education or an external advisory board)
- A formal initial approval and subsequent review process for the programme
- Documentation and evidence of any joint participation with other institutions and/or adjunct faculty
- Appropriate official approval by a university to enrol students.

8.9 Finance

The programme director **must** show:

- Adequate documentation of the cost of completing the programme
- Clearly documented fees for the programme (minimum cost for receiving the degree and explicit documentation of cost for additional programme components)
- Evidence of financial sustainability.

8.10 Financial management and probity

The programme director **must** provide evidence of financial management and probity, including independent audit of finances.

8.11 Programme information

The programme director **must** ensure provision of:

- Full and accurate accessible information for prospective students about programme content, structure, costs, processes and events, including the assessment system
- A variety of information channels appropriate to prospective students including a website, a brochure and help-line
- A comprehensive student handbook for registered students to include information on:
 - Programme philosophy
 - Programme aims and values
 - Learning goals and objectives
 - Program structure
 - Study times
 - Approaches to teaching and learning
 - Learning materials and resources
 - Feedback and supervision
 - Assessment policies and practices
 - Coursework requirements
 - Description of assessments at each programme level
 - Admission and enrolment
 - Requirements for admission with advanced standing
 - Specific requirements for approving module exemptions
 - Course fees and bursaries
 - Course materials
 - Available faculty and staff for teaching and student administrative support
 - Study skills
 - Academic, personal and technical support for students.

9. Programme renewal

The programme director **must**:

- Initiate procedures for regularly reviewing and updating programme structure and functions
- Have a system for rectifying documented deficiencies
- Base the process of renewal on results of programme evaluation and wider changes in educational knowledge, theory and practice, where appropriate.

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