

University of Glasgow

Academic Standards Committee – Thursday 9 April 2009

Independent Work in Undergraduate Degree Programmes

Ms H Butcher, Clerk to the Committee

In 2005 Senate agreed the principle of including independent work in all Honours degree programmes and this was further endorsed in 2007 by the Academic Structures Working Group Recommendation 63 that every honours, professional, and taught masters programme should include at least one compulsory course that is clearly identifiable as independent work. (**Appendix 1** provides relevant extracts from minutes of Senate meetings). In taking forward the ASWG recommendation EdPSC agreed that '*Faculties should enshrine the principle of the compulsory independent work (dissertation) explicitly in their honours degree regulations*'.

Reflecting this principle the Generic Undergraduate Regulations state:

- 16.1 To be eligible for the award of an Honours degree, the candidate must have obtained at least 480 credits, including at least 120 at level H, completed a piece of independent work worth at least 20 credits, and complied with the other requirements set out in the degree's supplementary regulations.

Following a request for clarification from the Faculties of Science along with a request that they be permitted to specify, for any programme, that a particular 'piece of independent work', possibly at a particular grade, be mandatory for the award of an honours degree; varying interpretations of the University's position have been revealed.

1. It has been suggested that the principle was to ensure that all honours programmes contained a piece of independent work, although there is not a requirement for students to submit this work in all cases. The Code of Assessment at 16.40 stipulates a requirement only for 75% of the total Honours assessment to be completed.
2. Standing in opposition to this view is the argument that 16.40 (b) includes the prior condition that "other requirements set out in Departmental Instructions" have been met. It is suggested that a compulsory dissertation will be just such an "other requirement".

The clause 16.40 of the Code of Assessment in establishing what is required for the award of credits states:

Where the outcome of a course contributes to a final honours classification the following procedure shall be adopted. In all cases the references to non-submission are to non-submission in the absence of good cause which is defined in §16.41 (a).

- (a) The extent of submission of honours assessment shall be determined as a percentage of the totality of summatively assessed work, based on the published assessment weightings required by the honours assessment scheme approved by Senate. The calculation of this percentage shall take into account all components of assessment over all courses contributing to the honours assessment, rather than being carried out on a course by course basis.
- (b) If by the end of an honours programme a candidate has:
 - (i) submitted 75% or more of the honours assessment, and
 - (ii) complied with other requirements set out in Departmental Instructions,

the grade for any course in which he or she has submitted less than 75% of the assessment shall be calculated by awarding a grade H for any missed assessment and the grade for the course calculated in accordance with the scheme of assessment described in the Departmental Instructions. This grade will be used for the purposes of honours aggregation.

- (c) If by the end of an honours programme a candidate has submitted less than 75% of the honours assessment he or she shall be refused credit for any course in which he or she has submitted less than 75% of the assessment.
- (d) Where a candidate has not completed all of the assessment for a course examined before the final year of the honours programme the grade for that course shall be returned as Credit Withheld. On completion of the honours assessment the grade for any such course shall be calculated as above.

ASC is invited to offer clarification on this matter and to consider whether current regulations make the completion and submission of independent work compulsory for Honours students. ASC is also invited to comment on whether any regulatory amendment is required, and whether it would be appropriate for the Faculties of Science to include the submission (and any minimum grade) of the independent work as a minimum requirement for the award of credit.

Extract of Senate Minute of 25 January 2007

SEN/2006/52. Education Planning and Strategy Committee: Report from the meeting held on Wednesday 13 December 2006 (SEN06/036)

Senate received and approved the report following the meeting of the Education Planning and Strategy Committee (EdPSC) on 13 December 2006.

SEN/2006/52.4 Academic Structures Working Group

An implementation Group was being established following Senate's approval of the report of the Academic Structures Working Group. The Group would prepare an action plan and ensure staff were kept abreast of developments. The Academic Standards Committee had already given consideration to the various recommendations of the report that would impact on its business. EdPSC noted the actions proposed, and copies of the relevant details were provided for Senate.

In the context of Recommendation 63 (every honours, professional, and taught masters programme should include at least one compulsory course that is clearly identifiable as independent work), EdPSC approved the recommendation from ASC that the previously agreed policy regarding the inclusion of independent work in all honours programmes, should be taken forward by the University, viz:

- i. All Faculties should enshrine the principle of the compulsory independent work (dissertation) explicitly in their honours degree regulations.
- ii. All joint honours programmes should require each student to undertake a dissertation in one of the two subjects, and departments should actively notify/remind joint honours students that their final year curriculum must include a dissertation.
- iii. Normally students would be able to choose which subject to take the dissertation in; although in line with current practice, it would also be acceptable for a particular joint honours programme to specify the subject in which the dissertation is taken. A level of dialogue between departments would be necessary to co-ordinate and confirm in the subject of the dissertation.
- iv. All principal-subsidary honours programmes (i.e. those composed of a 180-credit part-programme in a principal subject and a 60-credit part-programme in a subsidiary subject) should require each student to take a dissertation in the principal subject.

It had been agreed that the above policy should apply for students entering junior honours in 2007-08 and no later than Session 2008-09 for programmes with no junior honours.

Extract of Senate Minute of 24 February 2005

SEN/2004/70.4 The Inclusion of a Dissertation, Project or Other Piece of Extended Work within Undergraduate Degree Programmes

Senate noted that Education Committee had undertaken two surveys on faculty positions in relation to the inclusion of a compulsory dissertation, project or equivalent piece of extended work within undergraduate degree programmes and to the proposal that it should be appropriate for a research-led university to support the view that a dissertation, project or equivalent piece of extended work should normally contribute to an Honours Degree.

In considering this matter the Committee had also taken into account:

- strategic aim A1.3.1 of the University's Quality Enhancement Strategy "Education Committee will commend inclusion of dissertation/similar synoptic study in all undergraduate degrees. Special consideration to be given to dissertations in joint degrees".
- QAA Subject Benchmark Statements on academic standards
- SCQF level descriptor for Level 10 (Scottish Higher Education Level 4, Honours degree), statement on outcomes which says that a student should: 'Execute a defined project of research, development or investigation and identify and implement relevant outcomes'.

The conclusions drawn from the surveys were that that the majority of faculties supported the proposal but formal policies did not exist at faculty level.

Consequently, Education Committee agreed that

- a. a dissertation, project or equivalent piece of extended work should be included in all Honours degrees programmes
- b. faculties should be given sufficient flexibility to determine what was best and most appropriate for their curricula in terms of the nature of piece of extended work, credit rating, word length, etc., Faculties would be asked to review current practices with a view to obtaining a consistency between similar disciplines/cognate areas.
- c. in order to deal with QES aim A1.3.1 in full, ARC would be asked to:
 - take forward a consultation to determine faculty practices in relation to dissertations in joint degree programmes as it was recognised that differing practices operated across the University.
 - having conducted the review, propose two or three options for Education Committee to consider on how it might address the issues arising out of the review.

It had been proposed that (a) should be extended to unclassified professional undergraduate degrees (e.g. dentistry, medicine and veterinary medicine). The relevant faculties would be consulted on this proposal.

At Senate, the complicating factor of intercalated degrees was acknowledged. Following discussion, it was agreed that the term 'piece of extended work' offered sufficient scope for the policy adopted by Education committee to be endorsed.