

University of Glasgow

Academic Standards Committee – Friday 18 February 2011

Report from Short Life Working Group on Discretion in the Award of Honours Classifications

Professor Tom Guthrie, Convener of Working Group

Report from the one-off meeting of the Working Group held on 19 November 2010.

The meeting was attended by Professor T Guthrie (Convener), Dr J Huggett, Professor K Lindsay, Professor J Morrison, Mrs R Cole (clerk).

Background

ASC had commissioned the working group to consider the issue of discretion in the award of honours classifications. One of the conclusions in the most recent ELIR report was that there was currently no guarantee of 'equity of treatment for degree candidates, both within boards and between boards in the same or in different faculties'. The report urged the University to review its guidance in relation to boards' exercise of discretion and the criteria to be applied in considering awards to be made in borderline cases.

Issues considered

1. *Should discretion be retained and, if so, should the current borderline ranges be retained?*

The consensus of group members was that an element of discretion should be retained. However, the view was that the current zones of discretion were too wide and that promoting a candidate from the lowest part of a discretionary zone to the next class represented a significant shift in relation to the marks achieved across the full range of honours assessments.

The group agreed to propose the following narrower discretionary bands to ASC:

Borderline	Range of aggregation scores	
	Current	Proposed
First or upper second class honours	17.1 - 17.9	17.5 – 17.9
Upper or lower second class honours	14.1 - 14.9	14.5 – 14.9
Lower second or third class honours	11.1 - 11.9	11.5 – 11.9
Third class honours or fail	8.1 - 8.9	8.5 – 8.9

2. *Guidelines on the exercise of discretion*

Members agreed that guidance should be developed that could be applied across the University as a whole. The aim was to be as helpful to exam boards as possible but not to be so prescriptive as to effectively remove the essence of discretion.

Members agreed to propose to ASC the following criteria to be taken into account by exam boards:

- *Preponderance*: Where the majority of grades lay in the upper classification, this would suggest that the higher classification should be awarded.
- *Outlying grades*: (i) Where there were any 'outlying grades', i.e. any in non-contiguous bands, boards could consider eliminating the best and worst grade to see what impact there would be on the overall profile. However, (ii) a first should not normally be awarded where there were any grades below a D, an upper second should not normally be awarded where there were any grades below an E, and a lower second should not normally be awarded where there were any grades below an F.
- *Aggregation score*: A candidate scoring 17.9 would be more likely to be promoted than a candidate scoring 17.5.

Members agreed to propose to ASC that the following criteria should not be taken into consideration:

- *Exit velocity*: It appeared that this criterion was currently applied at many exam boards. However, members felt that if a greater emphasis was to be placed on the senior honours year, this could be achieved by formally applying a greater credit weighting to the senior honours year when calculating the aggregation score. (Where the years were weighted differently in this way, boards might find it useful to be aware of the unweighted means.)
- *Rank order*: some boards applied the rule that rank order should not be disturbed by the decisions made in the discretionary zone. Members were not persuaded that there was justification for this principle.
- *Borderline vivas*: Members did not favour the use of vivas as a means of identifying candidates for promotion to higher classes because of problems with lack of transparency and reliability.

Members agreed to seek ASC's views on the following criteria:

- *Special status of dissertation/honours project*:
When considering borderline cases, some boards gave additional weight to a candidate's performance in the independent work/dissertation. Members had mixed views on this, as in some cases this piece of work represented a drawing together of many of the elements of the honours programme, while in others it might simply be a piece of independent research on one relatively narrow component of the honours programme.
- *View of External Examiner*:
Members noted s. 16.64(e)(ii) of the Code of Assessment which included the following as one of the external examiner's functions: to 'adjudicate where necessary, subject to the authority of Senate, over the grade to be awarded to any particular candidate'. There was some discussion as to the extent to which this meant that the external examiner's view on classification should be followed.

3. *Joint Honours*

It was agreed that in recommending the award for a joint honours candidate, exam boards should follow the same general guidance as for single honours.

The Code of Assessment currently gave no direction on the operation of joint boards. In practice, the boards of examiners for the two subjects met sequentially, with representatives from the first board attending the second, and the final decision on classification being made at the latter. Given the numerous permutations of joint

honours, it was not practicable to have designated joint honours boards. **Members agreed to propose to ASC the following principles for the operation of exam boards when considering joint honours candidates:**

- Both subjects should be represented at the board taking the final decision on classification.
- Regardless of the number of board members present, equal weight should be given to the views of both boards' representatives.
- Where possible, the provisional results from the second board should be available to the first board, and those present at the first board, including the external examiner, should give consideration to the overall award to be recommended.
- Given the impracticability of the external examiner from the first board attending the second, the members of the first board present at the second should represent the views of their external examiner(s).

Members considered whether guidance should be developed on how to resolve a failure to agree on the final classification for a joint honours candidate. There were various possibilities as to how this could be handled (e.g. referral to the relevant Dean(s) of Learning & Teaching), but members considered that it was preferable to have a strong expectation that the joint board would reach agreement, and therefore that 'failure to resolve' should not be included in the guidelines.

4. Discretion in PGT programmes

It was noted that the generic regulations for postgraduate taught programmes provided for the application of discretion in the award of merit and distinction (for candidates whose aggregation scores fell within the ranges of 14.1 – 14.9 and 17.1 – 17.9 respectively). **It was agreed that ASC should be invited to consider whether there should be a review of these borderline ranges and whether guidelines should be developed in relation to the exercise of this discretion.** Such a review could be referred to the Academic Regulations Sub-Committee.