

University of Glasgow

Academic Standards Committee – Friday 24 May 2013

Supplementary Report from Meeting of Academic Regulations Sub-Committee held on 31 March 2013

Professor Bob Hill, Convener

External Examiner Comments from 2011-12

Comments relating to the Code of Assessment or other regulatory matters made in External Examiner Annual Reports are referred to Academic Regulations Sub-Committee for information or action, as appropriate.

Twenty comments from External Examiners are reproduced below together with observations from ARSC. ASC is invited to note that the total number of External Examiner reports received in relation to the 2011-12 session was 440.

TITLE	DESCRIPTION
Assessment of Students with Disabilities	
Catholic Teachers Certificate	It would be worth the School of Education (even the university as a whole) considering the approach to grading work of students with dyslexia. For example, if work to be graded is anonymous or the student unknown to the tutor is dyslexia taken into account and how? At my own institution students that have been diagnosed with dyslexia and prepared to disclose the information use 'red spot stickers' on the cover sheet of their essays. Thus, marking tutors are aware that the coursework is from a dyslexic student (no need for names etc). Students still need to develop strategies if they have dyslexia (especially if they are going into teaching) but a process of identification during courses at university may be beneficial. This is beyond the remit of this exam board but may be worth considering with another panel/steering group etc.
<p>ARSC comment:</p> <p>Members noted that this was not strictly a matter for the sub-committee, but in discussion it emerged that members were unclear as to whether – and if so how – adjustments should be made in the marking process. The Committee's understanding was that adjustments should be made through support offered in preparation for assessment and then in relation to the conditions of assessment (e.g. additional time being allowed in exams) rather than through adjustment to the actual marking process. It was agreed that clarification was required from the Disability Service.</p> <p>The Head of the Disability Service was consulted and confirmed that the University has no policy for concessionary marking of dyslexic students' work. This is similar to other institutions in the Scottish HE sector where such policies have proved unworkable because of issues around consistency, accountability, quality auditing and subjectivity. It was confirmed that there is already a full range of 'reasonable adjustments' which the University arranges for dyslexic students and engagement with these strategies should ensure that every dyslexic student feels well supported in relation to assessment.</p>	

Good Cause

Politics
(Level 2 +
Honours)

The handling of special circumstances was effective, but from observation of both the Politics board and the joint boards I would recommend more procedural rigour. Most special circumstances were straightforward in that evidence had been produced by the student and considered by the Department prior to the Board; the Board was then invited to accept or discuss further the recommendation made to it. However in five anomalous cases the Board was placed in the difficult situation of having to decide what to do, where it was known or there were grounds to suspect that special circumstances might apply but where relevant evidence covering the periods of assessment in question had not been submitted (and where no good reasons for non-submission were presented either). In these circumstances the inclination of the Board was to give the student the benefit of the doubt, at least partly it seemed due to the perception that, should the matter go to appeal, the Appeals Panel would tend to favour the student's case. I have two worries about this: first, if it is in fact the case that the Appeals Panel responds systematically to these cases in the way it is perceived to do, that risks leaving Departments unable to insist that students present evidence in time for it to be properly considered, and consequently undermines the possibility of having a fair and consistent special circumstances regime under which students are treated both equally and impartially. Secondly, since such cases were unable to be deliberated upon along with all other cases by a sub-committee prior to the Board they were instead raised and discussed individually and ad hoc by the whole Board, and this allowed each decision to be overly driven by contingencies. In one case the decision derived ultimately from the contingency that a member of staff who happened to be present happened to guess correctly who the student was and happened also to remember some relevant 'special circumstance'-type facts about that student. My recommendation would be that evidence for special circumstances should be required (unless there are exceptional reasons for non-submission, which should be fully explained - with supporting documentation as appropriate - prior to the Board meeting), and that deadlines for its receipt should be made explicit to students well in advance of the Board, and enforced. That would allow all claims to be considered at the same time by the same group of people and help to ensure consistency of judgement and equity between students.

ARSC comment:

The External Examiner's comments suggested that cases had been considered which had not been submitted in good time or with appropriate supporting evidence, and that Appeals Committees would take a lenient approach to claims of good cause even if they had been submitted late. ARSC members did not believe that this was a fair reflection, particularly as considerable efforts had been made across the University to emphasise to students the importance of submitting claims in good time. The External Examiner's comments had been forwarded to the College's Dean of Learning & Teaching and would be discussed with the relevant Assessment Officer.

Honours Dissertation	
Commercial Law (LLB and BAcc)	I am concerned that Regulation 16.1 has the effect of barring a student who fails their dissertation from obtaining an Honours Degree, regardless of their performance in the remainder of their degree. I am not at all sure what the rationale is for singling out the dissertation in this manner and the rule has the potential to be extremely harsh. The dissertation can be a very challenging piece of work for students and it seems surprising that failure in this module can have such consequences whereas failure in other modules, where the student has more guidance and teaching, does not. In terms of meeting learning outcomes surely failure in the taught modules should be of more concern than failure in the dissertation? I understand that this is a university regulation and so the School has no control over it but I would urge that this matter be revisited and that it be raised through the appropriate channels. I am also concerned about the potential knock-on effects. Does it result in a reluctance to award a grade lower than D3 to a dissertation that has been plagiarised but where there are some circumstances? Again, if a mark lower than D3 is awarded for a plagiarised dissertation is it appropriate for a student to suffer the additional penalty of failing to obtain an Honours Degree? I was incidentally a little surprised this year by a case where a student who had plagiarised their dissertation was given the opportunity to have it marked with the plagiarised material disregarded but with the mark capped at D3. I think it is unexpected that a final year student who had plagiarised their dissertation should have the potential to have it marked as satisfactory. I accept that I did not know what the student's circumstances were. This was not a case dealt with within the School.
Medical Law (LLB)	This comment is directed at the University and not the Law School. Under the University's rules students must pass a dissertation in order to graduate with an Honours degree. It is unclear why this rule exists only in regard to dissertations which are not more heavily weighted than any other course. An explanation for this and further reflection and consideration on this rule would be helpful.
Mixed Jurisdictions, Family Law and Issues of Family Law (LLB)	The rules relating to dissertations. At present failure of this one module results in failure of the Honours component even though the dissertation bears no more weight than other components and is not the entire sum of the honours element. The present situation means that a student who fails one other final year module may still graduate with an honours degree while the student who just fails the dissertation cannot do so.
<p>ARSC comment:</p> <p>These external examiners, all from Law programmes, had raised concerns about the requirement for students to achieve at least D3 in the dissertation in order to qualify for the Honours degree. One had commented that this seemed unjustifiable given that failure in other courses 'where the student has more guidance and teaching' did not have the same consequence. Members felt that this was misleading, because there was a strong commitment to appropriate supervision of the dissertation. In relation to the case of an Honours dissertation that contained plagiarized material, ARSC members believed that the usual outcome in such a situation would be a fail with no opportunity to resubmit, and the consequence would indeed be that the Honours degree would not be awarded. As the External Examiner had noted, the exact circumstances of the case cited were not known. (Senate Office subsequently confirmed that the typical outcome where plagiarized material was included in an Honours dissertation would be a fail with no opportunity to resubmit.)</p> <p>It was agreed that a response to the external examiners would be drafted explaining the</p>	

history of the introduction of the D3 requirement.	
Marking	
Financial Accounting (BAcc)	I am surprised that students can gain a first class degree, with a module mark at the 2:2 or lower level. There are other such anomalies that remain.
ARSC comment:	
<p>Members noted that if C or lower was achieved in any courses, the other course grades needed to be correspondingly stronger if the first class degree was to be awarded. Members noted that when criteria for the exercise of discretion in the award of degree classification had been discussed, it had been agreed that the existence of outlier grades should not be used as a ground for deciding against promoting a candidate.</p>	
Marking of Honours Assessments for Non-Honours Students	
Sociology (3H/4H) & Anthropology (3H/4H)	The one issue that did come up was the issue of marks for those students graduating with ordinary degrees. For those in that category the university appears to have introduced a rule about adding 3% to all marks obtained from modules. We didn't feel completely clear on what the rationale for that was. In addition, the subject area found out about this very late in the day before the board met. So there seems to be an issue about being clear with subject areas about what the rationale for such rule changes are, giving the opportunity for feedback on such proposals and ensuring any decisions are fed through in good time.
ARSC comment:	
<p>Members noted that the generic undergraduate regulations permitted the reassessment of Honours work at Level 3, so long as this was stated in the supplementary regulations. The MA (SocSci) regulations included such a provision, but members were concerned that this appeared not to be being implemented in an appropriate way (i.e. the work should be reassessed in relation to Level 3 ILOs).</p> <p>Members noted that in their own areas students sometimes studied what were essentially the same courses but at different levels, so there were separate course specifications and separate course codes, and the schemes of assessment were different.</p> <p>The Head of Sociology was invited to comment on this issue, and acknowledged the difficulty of retrospectively assessing students against ILOs of a level different from that which they had been working towards.</p> <p>It is suggested that ARSC consider this issue further with a view to developing guidance on how schools and subject areas should deal with such situations, both in terms of setting out ILOs in advance and then reconsidering assessments when required.</p>	
Marking of Placements	
Chemistry (Organic Chemistry)	Q.8.2 We noted that the average marks for external placements seemed a little high, and the range profile quite narrow. It is particularly important to have a clear system for calibration of marks awarded by external supervisors. There does seem to be (at least) informal scrutiny by the Class Head (I was pleased to see evidence, for example, that full written justification had been actively sought in an example when the external supervisor had awarded a very high mark). It would be good to ensure a formal procedure for calibrating all of the placement marks, and

	documentation of any discussions where external and Glasgow marks differ significantly.
ARSC comment:	
Members noted that it was not unusual for the mark awarded by a placement supervisor to differ from that awarded by the internal marker, as they were assessing different things (performance in the workplace on the one hand, and the standard of the final report submitted by the student on the other). The ARSC convener advised that this report related to his own area, and he had been in correspondence with the external examiner and no further follow-up was necessary.	
Masters Regulations	
MSc in Structural Engineering & Mechanics	I am a bit worried that it is possible to get an MSc degree with grades of 3 and 4, that roughly correspond to 15-20 % mastering of the subject. I would urge the University of Glasgow to review whether this is desirable (in my opinion it is not!), or whether the School of Engineering can be allowed to have locally stricter progression rules.
ARSC comment:	
Members noted that given the requirement for a GPA of 12.0, students with grades of F2 or F3 would require considerably stronger performance in other courses in order to achieve the Masters degree. It was also noted that while the generic regulations allowed course grades as low as F, programmes were permitted to specify minimum grades to be achieved on particular courses if performance in those courses was considered to be critical to the achievement of the overall standard required on the programme.	
Assessment of Study Abroad	
English Literature Level 1, 2 and Honours	Q. 8.3 May I repeat my concerns from last year: a) For joint honours students differing practises emerge across different departments b) These include the internal translation of year abroad grades and the differing levels of preponderance.
ARSC comment:	
Members acknowledged that the translation of year abroad grades was a challenging area, and that the regulations necessarily permitted the exercise of discretion. Knowledge had to be built up over time as to the standards being applied at other institutions and within the different subject areas of those institutions.	
Schedule A / Discretion in the Award of Honours	
Chemistry (Inorganic) (ug)	This is an issue for the University of Glasgow, not for the School of Chemistry. The 22 point scale used for allocating degrees is unfair to students at the University of Glasgow. The major problem is that by setting up bands you are effectively requiring students to average a mark at the middle of the band. The end result is that the 1st:2.1 borderline is actually at 72.5%, not at 70% as elsewhere in the UK. The 2.1:2.2 boundary is 61%. Any simple understanding of arithmetic would have realised how flawed this system is. Simple example: a student with marks of 73, 73, 73, 68 would average above 70% and obtain a 1st class degree in most institutions. At Glasgow this person would average below the 1st:2.1 borderline. This is a major institutional mistake and must be rectified as soon as possible. Any School that has operated this scheme this year has disadvantage students at borderline severely. I would

	appreciate receiving written confirmation that this 22 point scale has been amended.
Chemistry (Organic Chemistry) (ug)	The External Examiners took considerable care to consider the cases of students in the "discretionary zones" between degree class boundaries. I noted in my report last year that we found the non-standard, 22-point scale difficult to work with and of no apparent logical basis or value. However, we realised this year that the use of this scale has more serious consequences. In particular, the scale is non-linear with a discontinuity at the First/Upper Second boundary. The effect of this is that students with average marks of just above 70% which would have been an automatic First in the past and would still be at most Universities can appear in the discretionary zone (17-18). Added to this are potential errors arising from the averaging of rounded marks. We requested that in addition to the 22-point scale, all candidate final results were provided to us based on the percentage scale. We found that four candidates in the First/Upper second discretionary zone (with marks ranging from 17.0 to 17.8) had an overall mean mark of above 70%, and our unanimous view was that all four should be awarded a First automatically. We applied a similar principle to other degree class boundaries. We strongly suggest that percentage marks are always provided and used in determining final degree classes, and any conversion to a 22-point scale is used for final presentational purposes only.
Environmental Chemistry	I did have some difficulty understanding the 22 point scale which I understand is a University recommended scale. Moving between percentage scores, the 22 point score and a letter classification seems unduly complex to me. it would be easier to navigate this if it were clear how many marks each question was marked out of, particularly for Parts B, C and D of exam scripts by giving a mark at the end of each question and then stating where this lies on the 22 point scale, e.g. X/Y = 8 (E1)
ARSC comment:	
<p>These concerns all related to the operation of Schedule A in relation to assessed material which had initially been marked in percentages. While the examiners' view was that the process of rounding had a harsh impact on borderline students, members were satisfied that the operation of Exam Board discretion would ensure that such students would not be penalized. The Convener explained that in Chemistry it had now been decided that the scheme for the translation of marks from percentages to Schedule A should be amended to a linear one, and this decision had been conveyed to the External Examiners.</p>	
Financial and Management Accounting (UG)	Q. 5.4 I looked at two students (randomly) on MA1. They were 1003488 and 1101998. 1003488 was awarded a B2 and 1101998 a B3. But if you look at their results more closely, 1101998 actually had slightly better grades overall than 1003488. Indeed, if you simply did raw averages of their marks overall, the two students' grades would be rather different. $1003488 = (.15 \times 9) + (.15 \times 11) + .7[(.25 \times 16) + (.25 \times 21) + (.25 \times 21) + (.25 \times 13)] = 15.425 = B3$ BUT Glasgow awarded B2 $1101998 = (.15 \times 13) + (.15 \times 11) + .7[(.25 \times 15) + (.25 \times 20) + (.25 \times 20) + (.25 \times 14)] = 15.675 = B2$ BUT Glasgow awarded B3 This is because of the "rounding process" for the examination, which deducts marks from some students (while adding marks to others). I understand that this was a first year examination and so in some senses this marginal difference is unimportant. But I do not feel comfortable deducting marks from students since for honours classes this could end in a student being given (for example) a C1 instead of a B3 (and consequently may miss the chance

	of an accounting traineeship). This is especially a concern when there is a reluctance to move marginal student grades.
Financial and Management Accounting (UG)	Q. 8.2 I always worry about the Glasgow marking system. This isn't simply a question of my unfamiliarity with it. Each year I spend significant amounts of time ensuring that I understand it and understand how it is applied by individual academic staff. Some staff award numerical marks for numerical questions while others award grades for numerical questions. The examinations in which numerical questions were marked using "grades" provided an extremely poor audit trail. For examinations which were marked (very well in my opinion) by awarding numerical marks to numerical questions, these would then have to be "translated" into grades. But, there was still an "audit" problem in that in some cases it was impossible to tell how numerical marks were translated (while in others it was always clear)-- For example in one examination paper, in a 40 mark question, there was a 36 which appeared to be crossed out and made into an 18 and then to A5. But if the mark was actually 36, then $36/40 = 90\% = A1$. I actually made the marks add up to $27/40 = 67.5 = B1$
ARSC comment: The second comment raised the issue of translation of grades to grade points and appeared to represent a misunderstanding of the fact that this was not a mathematical exercise but related to achievement of the verbal descriptors. It was noted that earlier in the current session a member of staff from the Business School had met with the conveners of ASC and ARSC to discuss various issues concerning marking. The rules on rounding were clear and they were required to be applied consistently across the University.	
German (Honours)	Q. 5.4 There seems to be considerable flexibility for each board to determine the final classmark for students whose aggregate ranges from 0.1 to 0.9 on the relevant catchment banding (e.g. anything from 17.1 to 17.9 in the case of determining if a candidate should receive a first-class honours degree). My personal view is that not enough guidance is offered in this respect, and I would be concerned to know whether other boards at the university approach their borderlines in the same way). Might the School consider deriving and then implementing a number of appropriate criteria?
History - Modern (ug)	I expressed concern in my report last year about the practice of rounding up fractional marks at the module stage to whole marks (e.g 17.76 to 18.00 and 14.62 to 15.00). I wish to reiterate this once again, though I understand it has now been the subject of scrutiny at university level and that a review of procedures is likely to recommend that this be abolished in future. I would urge the university to do so and to insist that no rounding takes place until the final stage of degree classification as soon as possible. The existing practice of rounding has the effect of making some candidates' performance looker stronger than it actually is, and it can result in some anomalous degree classifications. I would draw attention to two cases that illustrate the potentially unjust effects of this practice: one student achieved an average for a particular module of 17.44; the other 17.58. The latter was rounded to 18; the former to 17. Closer scrutiny revealed that the performance of the 17.44 candidate was in fact better than that of the 17.58 candidate, because more of the marks for individual components lay in the first class. This illustrates the artificiality of and problems associated with the rounding process very clearly. I would also suggest that it is more important for the University to

	resolve this issue than to reduce the width of the discretionary zone, which I understand is also under discussion.
MLitt in Victorian Literature	There is one small niggle, I have: I remain a little unconvinced by the particular grade banding protocols used on this programme: aggregation scores of '0-22', each score except the lowest being broken into either 2, 3 or 5 'secondary bands'. I don't entirely see what is gained by adopting this system over a more conventional 100% grade spread divided into the conventional fail, pass, merit and distinction. This matter was discussed at the exam board, and the programme teachers expressed a desire to move to the more usual 100% schema, although it seems that this is not a decision that rests with them. I would urge the higher authorities to enable the board to make this change.
Philosophy Level 3H/4H (Combined/Single)	There still remains some unclarity on how to handle marks in the discretionary zones, where it appears that each department develops its own 'case law' on this - some greater degree of standardization seems desirable?
Politics (Undergraduate)	Marking Scheme = Cryptic I know that I am going to be controversial here as I know that you have wrestled with your marking schema over a number of years, but I do not like one aspect of the marking schema – the scale reminds me of the imperial system and is as cryptic as 14lbs making one stone and 16oz making 1lb. However, it does have its own logic (although not sure why 5 cats for an A and 3 each the rest) and provided I check this every time I mark it does make sense. But it is frustrating. Perhaps I will get used to it... One thing I think the Americans do get right in terms of transparency and clarity and international understanding is the 90 to 100 = A, 80 to 89 = B, 70 to 79 = C...etc. That said, I do like that you have bands within degree classifications (esp. the three bands per grade e.g. weak 2/2, mid 2/2, & high 2/2) rather than the more tricky individual percentages and ideally I would prefer a hybrid with the metric numerical ease of the US system and the error-reducing banding you use. No doubt you have a conversion scale for dealing with the rest of the world?
<p>ARSC comment:</p> <p>A number of External Examiners had commented on various aspects of the operation of Exam Board discretion. Members noted that the new guidance on operation of discretion would be in force at the May/June Boards and confidence was expressed that this would address many of the concerns being raised.</p>	