

University of Glasgow

Academic Standards Committee – Friday 4 October 2013

Guidance on Discretion: Review of Initial Implementation

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Guidelines on the exercise of discretion by Exam Boards were implemented for the first time at the May/June 2013 Exam Boards. Feedback has been received in relation to different aspects of the Guidelines, which ASC is asked to reflect on.

1. Preponderance

A general observation was received regarding the use of grade preponderance as the first consideration of cases where overall GPAs fall within the zone of discretion for consideration of elevation to the next degree classification: that this leads to students with lower overall GPAs being promoted than had previously been the case. There were also comments of discontent at the 'formulaic' impact of the Guidelines.

a) *What constitutes preponderance?*

The Guidelines leave Boards free to decide whether preponderance means 'at least 50%' or 'more than 50%' of grades. Feedback has highlighted the difficulty that this can cause for Joint Honours Boards where two subjects have adopted different views on the question. For one of the two subjects there will be inconsistency in the way that single Honours and Joint Honours candidates are treated.

ASC is invited to consider whether a single definition of preponderance should be adopted whereby preponderance is achieved when more than 50% of grades are achieved in the higher category.

b) *Grade profile*

The Guidelines indicate that preponderance of grades in the higher band justifies the higher award, but are silent on the significance of the distribution of grades both above and below the relevant borderline. For example, a student on the 2.1/2.2 borderline with B2 B3 B1 B2 C1 C3 D2 C2: if the Board recognises preponderance where there is at least 50% at the higher classification, should this student be promoted or does the D grade undermine preponderance? Similarly, would the presence of A grades in the profile have an impact?

As the guidelines are currently written, Examination Boards have discretion in that they **may** consider promotion to the higher classification where there is a preponderance of grades in the higher category. However, this is not formulaic as they may also choose not to, and this could be determined by a consideration of the grade profile*.

(*One of the criteria listed as non-permitted when considering grade profile is the elimination of outlying grades. This is understood to mean the discarding of, say, the single highest and single lowest grade in the profile when establishing preponderance. E.g. for a profile of B2 B3 B1 B2 C1 C3 F2 C2, the B1 and F2 would be discarded. Taking account of A grades and D grades in the example above is rather different).

ASC is invited to consider whether further guidance should be provided on how grade profiles may be taken into account when decisions about preponderance are being made. If it is agreed that each Board is free to develop its own practice in taking account of grade profiles, this must be clarified in the current Guidelines.

c) Weighting of grades contributing to preponderance

In calculating final GPA many programmes apply weightings to the results achieved in different years. For example, on a five year MEng or MSci the weightings might be: Year 3 (20%), Year 4 (40%), Year 5 (40%). The Guidelines are currently silent on whether those same weightings should be applied when considering the preponderance of grade profile. On the one hand, the weighted GPA determines whether a candidate is placed in the discretionary zone at all and to also weight the grades for preponderance appears to be double counting. (The Guidelines indicate that double counting is generally not permitted. For example, where the final year's results are given additional weight in calculation of overall GPA, exit velocity is not permitted as a criterion for promotion to the next classification.) On the other hand, in some programmes the final year is weighted more heavily because the learning is cumulative, final year building on the foundation of previous years. In this case, the results achieved in final year have particular importance and to apply the same weightings to the final year grades when considering preponderance has some justification. (In some Honours programmes a suite of courses are taken across Junior and Senior Honours years, some only being offered in alternate years, so there is not so clear a sense of cumulative learning.)

ASC is invited to consider whether a standard approach should be taken in applying the year weighting of grades when considering the preponderance of grades. The Guidelines should be revised accordingly to articulate how year weightings should counted in calculating preponderance.

d) PGT programmes

The published Guidelines did not indicate whether the grade achieved in the dissertation or other independent project should be included in consideration of preponderance. It has since been agreed that it would not be appropriate to include the dissertation grade. This is on the basis that the GPA determining whether the candidate falls into the zone of discretion for promotion to the award of merit or distinction is based on the GPA of the taught courses; and that for the award of merit or distinction there is the absolute requirement that the dissertation grade is in the higher band.

ASC is invited to endorse the clarification that the dissertation grade is not included in the consideration of preponderance on PGT programmes.

2. Role of the External Examiner

The role of the External Examiner is recognised in the Guidelines but it is stated that Boards must ensure that Externals do not make their judgments with reference to any of the non-permitted criteria. (E.g. advice from an External that was based on evidence of exit velocity in the final year when that year was already more heavily weighted in calculating GPA would have to be rejected by the Board.) Clarification has been requested on whether the External Examiner's view must always relate to one of the specified criteria.

ASC is invited to comment on whether External Examiner input on discretionary decisions must always relate to one of the permitted criteria for determining discretion.

Comments from External Examiners

External Examiner reports for the 2012-13 session are currently being received. Two comments concerning the new Guidelines on discretion are reproduced in Appendix 2, for information.

2.7 Guidelines on the application of Discretion when determining final Honours degree classifications, and the awards of Merit and Distinction on taught Masters degrees

In 2012 the University agreed to harmonise the ways in which Boards of Examiners are permitted to exercise discretion in determining the final awards for Honours degrees and taught Masters degrees¹. It should be noted that while factors which can be taken into account by Boards in the exercise of discretion have been specified (and a number of factors excluded), Boards have latitude within the set parameters as detailed in the guidance below. These guidelines are to be applied by all Boards of Examiners from spring 2013 onwards.

The zones of discretion for Honours degree classifications provided in the Code of Assessment have **not** altered, and Boards are only permitted to consider alternative classifications when a candidate's overall GPA for the award falls within these zones (see Table 2.3 above). Similarly, the zones of discretion specified in regulations 9.2 and 9.3 of the generic regulations for taught Masters degrees² have not been altered and Boards are only permitted to consider promotion to Merit or Distinction when a candidate's GPA for the taught courses falls within these:

9.2 A candidate who has achieved at the first attempt a grade point average of 15 (equivalent to B3) or above for the taught courses and grade B3 or above for the dissertation or other substantial independent work will be eligible for the award with Merit. Where the grade point average for the taught courses falls within the range 14.1 and 14.9 the Board of Examiners shall have discretion to make the award with Merit. No discretion can be applied in relation to the grade required for the dissertation or other substantial independent work.

9.3 A candidate who has achieved at the first attempt a grade point average of 18 (equivalent to A5) or above for the taught courses and grade A5 or above for the dissertation or other substantial independent work will be eligible for the award with Distinction. Where the grade point average for the taught courses falls within the range 17.1 to 17.9 the Board of Examiners shall have the discretion to make the award with Distinction. No discretion can be applied in relation to the grade required for the dissertation or other substantial independent work.

Guidelines

2.7.1 Criteria which can no longer be used.

The following **must not** be used in reviewing a candidate's grade profile to determine whether they may be awarded a higher classification:

- Elimination of outlying grades;
- Rank order (i.e. the position of the candidate relative to other candidates (as ranked by GPA));
- Applying additional weight to the performance in any one component of the assessment scheme, such as the dissertation/independent project.

2.7.2 A note on Good Cause

Personal circumstances/good cause claims have never been a permitted criterion in the exercise of discretion for final awards, and this position remains. The University's procedures which allow adverse circumstances to be considered and taken into account in the assessment

¹ Considered at Senate on 7 June 2012 – see minute SEN/2011/075 at <https://frontdoor.spa.gla.ac.uk/commdoc/senate/SEN/Papers/SEN12001.pdf>

² See University Calendar 2012-13 p Arts.26(PG) College of Arts; p MVLS 41 (PG) College of MVLS; p SciEng 21 (PG) College of Science and Engineering; p SocSci 47 (PG) College of Social Sciences.

process are detailed in sections 16.45 – 16.53 of the Code of Assessment (See [Chapter 5](#) of this Guide). These circumstances can only have the effect of setting aside affected elements of assessment or allowing fresh assessment attempts. If an element (or elements) of assessment have been set aside then this should be reflected in the calculation of the student's GPA. If applied correctly, then personal or medical circumstances will have been accounted for in the calculation of the candidate's final GPA. So, at the stage when discretion is applied, the impact of the adverse circumstances will already have been taken into account. University procedures do not allow speculation over a candidate's achievement of ILOs in the absence of sound assessment. Using the Code of Assessment, Boards have to determine whether the candidate has undertaken a sufficient proportion of the total honours assessment, which has not been affected by adverse circumstances, to be able to judge their standard of achievement. Where not enough assessment has been completed, candidates cannot be considered for a final Honours or PGT award at this stage.

2.7.3 Applying Discretion

Boards must always record in their minutes which criteria have been applied in the exercise of discretion.

2.7.3 (a) Permitted criteria for the application of Discretion by Boards

Where a candidate's overall GPA falls within one of the zones of discretion determined in Note 3 of the Code of Assessment (see Table 2.3), or in regulations 9.2 and 9.3 of the generic Masters regulations, Boards should consider the following:

First:

Preponderance of course grades. The course grade profile of the candidate should be reviewed – taking account of course credit weighting - and if there is a preponderance of credit in the higher classification (i.e. a greater number of credits at the grades in this – or a higher – classification), the candidate's degree classification may be promoted³. Alternatively, Boards may also choose to apply the same process where there are an equal number of credits above and below the borderline classification. Whichever convention is adopted, it must be applied consistently to all candidates considered by that Board.

Secondly, where the candidate is not promoted using preponderance the Board may choose to consider the following:

Review of **unrounded mean scores**.

While individual course grades should always comprise a primary grade and secondary band⁴ with an associated grade point score which is an integer, the aggregation process for calculating a course grade may involve rounding in the process of calculating the grade point scores and weightings of individual components of assessment. Worked examples of these calculation processes are provided in section 2.3 above (see Examples 2.D and 2.E)

³ On PGT programmes, the grade achieved for the dissertation or other independent work should not be taken into account in determining preponderance.

⁴ This is the case even if the assessment was not originally marked as a primary grade/secondary band. Schedule A assessments, and assessment components, marked by other means e.g. with a percentage score must always be converted to a primary grade/secondary band result and aggregated with the appropriate grade points (see section 2.3 above for more detail).

Aggregated grade scores of course components falling below .5 are rounded down to give the final course grade (e.g. in Example 2.D the aggregation of Bert's results for his assessment components gives 10.25 which is rounded to 10 to provide a D2 course result). Boards may decide to calculate a GPA using the unrounded grade point scores for each course⁵ to see what effect this calculation would have on the overall GPA.

Example 2.K

Angus is a final year Honours student who achieved the following results in his honours assessments:

| Honours Course | Unrounded Course Score | Grade | Credits | Grade Points (grade score x credits) | Unrounded aggregation score (unrounded course score x credits) |
|----------------|------------------------|-------|------------|--------------------------------------|--|
| A | 14.2 | C1 | 30 | 14x30 = 420 | 426 |
| B | 14.48 | C1 | 30 | 14x30 = 420 | 434.4 |
| C | 14.49 | C1 | 20 | 14x20 = 280 | 289.8 |
| D | 14.41 | C1 | 20 | 14x20 = 280 | 288.2 |
| E | 15.45 | B3 | 20 | 15x20 = 300 | 309 |
| F | 14.49 | C1 | 20 | 14x20 = 280 | 289.8 |
| G | 15.4 | B3 | 20 | 15x20 = 300 | 308 |
| H | 15.3 | B3 | 20 | 15x20 = 300 | 306 |
| I | 16 | B2 | 20 | 16x20 = 320 | 320 |
| J | 15.48 | B3 | 10 | 15x10 = 150 | 154.8 |
| K | 14.49 | C1 | 10 | 14x10 = 140 | 144.9 |
| L | 16.49 | B2 | 20 | 16x20 = 320 | 329.8 |
| | | | | | |
| Totals | | | 240 | 3510 | 3600.7 |

His GPA is **14.6** and therefore falls in the discretionary zone for consideration of either upper or lower second class honours. Total Grade Points/Total Credit [3510/240 = 14.63]

There is no preponderance in the higher classification as there are 130 credits at C1 and 110 at B2/B3.

If the Board chooses to refer to the unrounded course scores, the GPA is recalculated (see unrounded aggregation score in final column above) – 3600.7/240 = **15.0**

In this case there is a marked difference between rounded and unrounded grades which the Board should take into account in exercising its discretion.

In such cases where Boards decide to promote candidates to the higher classification after consideration of the unrounded scores, **the formally calculated GPA using the rounded course results must remain as the final GPA score on the candidate's record** and the

⁵ Unrounded course grade point scores will not be available on central University records systems. Boards that elect to consider this criterion will therefore be reliant on local records of the aggregation of results.

minutes of the Board meeting should explain how discretion was applied by reviewing the unrounded course results.

Example 2.L

Example 2.K above illustrates an extreme case where the rounding of the course aggregation scores has consistently deflated the grade point scores and therefore the GPA. A more usual grade profile is provided in this example. Alexandra is a final year student on the same Honours programme as Angus, her results are as follows:

| Honours Course | Unrounded Course Score | Grade | Credits | Grade Points (grade score x credits) | Unrounded aggregation score (unrounded course score x credits) |
|----------------|------------------------|-------|------------|---|--|
| A | 14.2 | C1 | 30 | 14x30 = 420 | 426 |
| B | 13.60 | C1 | 30 | 14x30 = 420 | 408 |
| C | 14.49 | C1 | 20 | 14x20 = 280 | 289.8 |
| D | 14.10 | C1 | 20 | 14x20 = 280 | 282 |
| E | 15.10 | B3 | 20 | 15x20 = 300 | 302 |
| F | 13.89 | C1 | 20 | 14x20 = 280 | 277.8 |
| G | 15.4 | B3 | 20 | 15x20 = 300 | 308 |
| H | 15.82 | B2 | 20 | 16x20 = 320 | 316.4 |
| I | 14.89 | B3 | 20 | 15x20 = 300 | 297.8 |
| J | 16.20 | B2 | 10 | 16x10 = 160 | 162 |
| K | 13.70 | C1 | 10 | 14x10 = 140 | 137 |
| L | 16.55 | B1 | 20 | 17x20 = 340 | 331 |
| | | | | | |
| Totals | | | 240 | 3540 | 3537.8 |

Alexandra's GPA of **14.8** is in the discretionary zone for consideration of either upper or lower second class honours. Total Grade Points/Total Credit [3540/240 = 14.75]

There is no preponderance in the higher classification as there are 130 credits at C1 and 110 at B1/B2/B3.

Using the unrounded course scores, the GPA is recalculated (see unrounded aggregation score in final column above) – 3537.8/240 = 14.74.

In this case there is little difference between rounded and unrounded GPA, and this should be taken into account by the Board in exercising its discretion

2.7.3 (b) Further options that can be used

Boards may also elect to use the following criteria in their consideration of candidates with an overall GPA which falls within one of the zones of discretion:

Borderline Vivas

A small number of areas of the University have traditionally used borderline vivas. Continuation of this practice is permitted, and vivas may be arranged for all students falling within discretionary zones subject to them:

1. Being clearly structured, with guidance published to students in advance; and
2. Only being used as a possible means of promotion from borderline zones.

Exit Velocity

Exit velocity, which is the principle that students build up competence throughout their studies thus performing to a higher standard in their final assessments, is recognised in some Subject areas and is sometimes considered as a factor when determining borderline cases. In some Subjects the potential impact of exit velocity on the overall result for the final award is taken into account systematically by placing a greater weighting on later results (e.g. final Honours year results) in the calculation of the overall GPA. (Where this weighting applies, it must have been set out clearly in course documentation.) This allows all students to have an improving performance taken into account in their final results, rather than only applying the principle to borderline cases.

Where exit velocity is **not** factored into the assessment procedure through heavier weighting of later assessments, Boards may consider it for candidates who are within a zone of discretion.

2.7.4 The role of the External Examiner

In some areas external examiners play a key role in determining the final classification of candidates in the discretionary zone by reviewing the full range of the candidate's assessments and making an overall judgement on the standard of the work. This practice may continue, although Boards must ensure that external examiners are asked to judge the standard of the work without reference to any of the criteria detailed in section 2.7.1 above, or by giving emphasis to any particular assessment (such as the dissertation), and ensuring that any assessments judged to have been affected by adverse circumstances are dealt with in accordance with the procedures laid out in the Code of Assessment.

Comments received from External Examiners on first implementation of Guidelines on Discretion (Note: approximately half of all reports for 2012-13 have been received so far. Both comments below concern undergraduate programmes.)

1. I wasn't provided with the new rules for deciding borderline cases until after the board meeting. The rules were outlined to me but I was given the impression that preponderance of marks and external's views were equal weight. When it came to the Board it became clear that there was a rank ordering on these and so external's views didn't matter on any issues that I had spent considerable time assessing the day before. With the new rules in place the role of examiners and board members has effectively been eradicated and the decisions are formulaic. I am not sure this is wise as the full array of matters and for different subjects different forms of variation in mark patterns are obtained resulting in the same average mark (e.g. for maths and statistics much greater variability occurs particularly at the lower end and evidence of very strong performance on a subset of modules is often seen as particularly influential. This pattern doesn't happen for more essay based subjects without such tight mark schemes).
2. The Exam Board was run smoothly, but the strict application of the rule of preponderance of marks in discretionary cases is problematic, I believe, for three reasons: 1) other schools may follow different practices; 2) the final class of degree may be awarded consistently but not always fairly; 3) discussion and discretion are, as a result, overruled. The main task of the board seemed to be checking that there were no obvious mistakes in the application of the formulae: this can hardly be done with accuracy during the board and does not require the physical presence of the examiners.