

University of Glasgow**Academic Standards Committee – Friday 15 November 2013****Report from Meeting of Academic Regulations Sub-Committee held
on 28 October 2013****Professor Bob Hill, Convener****1. Guidelines on Exam Board Discretion**

Guidelines on the exercise of discretion by Exam Boards were implemented for the first time at the May/June 2013 Exam Boards. Feedback in relation to different aspects of the Guidelines was considered by ASC at its meeting in October and ASC requested that ARSC consider the various issues raised.

ARSC members reported disquiet among colleagues as to whether the Guidelines effectively removed discretion and thus whether there was any remaining reason for Exam Boards to meet. It was therefore important that revisions to the Guidelines distinguished clearly between what Boards were required to do and those areas where genuine discretion remained. Members also reported that Boards were looking for stability in the rules under which they were required to operate. A variety of other views were noted, such as that from one external examiner whose opinion was that Exam Boards should not have any discretion. One incident was noted of a Joint Board where the two subject areas had difficulty in reaching agreement on outcomes. It was acknowledged that so long as discretion existed, there was always the potential for tension between two different subjects. It was often the case at Joint Boards that only one of the external examiners was present, which in itself could be problematic.

a) Preponderance*i) What constitutes preponderance?*

The current Guidelines left Boards free to decide whether preponderance meant 'at least 50%' or 'more than 50%' of grades. Feedback had highlighted the difficulty that this caused for Joint Honours Boards where two subjects had adopted different views on the question. For one of the two subjects there would be inconsistency in the way that single Honours and Joint Honours candidates were treated.

ARSC's view was that having two definitions was confusing and could not be justified.

Members agreed that the usual understanding of the term preponderance was of a 'greater number'; therefore the more appropriate definition was 'more than 50%' of grades.

It was noted that this definition would be problematic in areas where courses had a large credit weighting. For example, there were a number of PGT programmes in MVLS where the taught component was made up of two 60 credit courses. In such situations, it was suggested that preponderance might be established by achieving at least 50% at the higher grade (i.e. in just one of the two courses).

ii) Grade profile

The Guidelines currently indicated that where there was a preponderance of grades in the higher band the higher award might be made, but were silent on the significance of the distribution of grades both above and below the relevant borderline. As previously noted by ASC, in the case of a student on the 2.1/2.2 borderline who had D grades as well as Cs and

Bs, a Board's view might be that the presence of D grades undermined the case for promotion, even if preponderance was established. On the other hand, a Board might simply point to the fact that, despite the lower grade, the student overall had achieved the GPA required to place them in the discretionary zone and had achieved preponderance, so would not take the lower grade as an indicator against promotion. Another approach might be that a lower grade in a 'peripheral' course did not have the same significance as a lower grade in one of the core courses.

ARSC members considered that this was an area where Boards should have discretion to refer to the grade profile in whatever way they believed was justified on their programme. Boards would be required to note clearly in Exam Board minutes the practice adopted and then apply this consistently to all students in the cohort.

iii) Weighting of grades contributing to preponderance

In calculating final GPA many programmes applied weightings to the results achieved in different years. The Guidelines were currently silent on whether those same weightings should be applied when considering the preponderance of grade profile. As ASC noted at its meeting in October, on the one hand, the weighted GPA determined whether a candidate was placed in the discretionary zone at all and to also weight the grades for preponderance appeared to be double counting. On the other hand, in some programmes the final year was weighted more heavily because the learning was cumulative, final year building on the foundation of previous years. In this case, the results achieved in final year had particular importance and to apply the same weightings to the final year grades when considering preponderance had some justification. (In some Honours programmes a suite of courses were taken across Junior and Senior Honours years, some only being offered in alternate years, so there was not so clear a sense of cumulative learning.)

ARSC members again concluded that this was an area where it would be appropriate for individual Boards to exercise discretion, depending on the reasoning behind the weighting of the different years, and that the approach adopted should be explained in the Board minutes.

ARSC therefore proposes to ASC that the Guidelines should be amended to indicate the following:

- **Preponderance is established where a candidate has more than 50% of the course grades at or above the relevant band.**
- **In the case of programmes with only two equally weighted contributing course grades preponderance may be established with only one grade in the higher band.**
- **Exam Boards have discretion in the way that they take into account grade profile and any weighting of course grades that was applied when calculating GPA. These factors may mean that even where preponderance is established the Board may decide not to promote.**
- **In exercising discretion Boards should record in Board minutes the criteria adopted for promotion and apply these consistently to all candidates in the cohort.**

b) Role of the External Examiner

A number of queries had been raised regarding the role of the External Examiner in the exercise of discretion but the Guidelines stated that Boards must ensure that Externals did not make their judgments with reference to any of the non-permitted criteria. (E.g. advice from an External 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.)

ARSC's view was that the External Examiner would contribute to consideration of the criteria relating to discretion but that this was distinct from the role of the External Examiner as described in the Code of Assessment to 'adjudicate where necessary, subject to the authority of Senate, over the grade to be awarded to any particular candidate' (s 16.64 e) (ii)). 'Grade' was understood to refer to a course grade rather than the final award to be made to a particular candidate.

2. Submission of PGT dissertation where student not eligible to progress

The generic PGT regulations envisage a clear progress point where students who have achieved the required GPA of 12.0 in the taught courses are permitted to progress to preparation of the dissertation or other independent project. However, there are two situations in which students might begin work on the dissertation before the GPA threshold has been achieved: first, where the structure of the programme is such that students are required to begin work on their independent project before they have completed the taught courses; and secondly where the Exam Board, exceptionally, makes the judgment that the student has a reasonable chance of achieving the GPA of 12.0 following reassessment. In either of these scenarios there is a question as to what should happen to the dissertation/independent project in the event that ultimately the student fails to achieve a GPA of 12.0 in the taught courses. The student would not be eligible for the award of Masters even if the dissertation/independent project was of very high quality because the GPA of 12.0 in the taught component is an absolute requirement.

ARSC noted that in the event that a student was required to be reassessed on any of the taught components their results – and thus the final GPA – would not be confirmed until the end of August, which was very close to the point at which the dissertation would normally be submitted. The Committee's view was that the University would be acting in bad faith if it did not acknowledge the work done on the dissertation/independent project in such a situation. (Students registering for a taught masters pay the full fee for the programme and a failure to progress to the dissertation does not result in any fee refund.) **The Committee therefore agreed to propose the following to ASC:**

On a taught Masters programme, at the point that a final GPA of less than 12.0 is confirmed:

- **If the dissertation has been submitted then it should be marked and a mark recorded on the transcript.**
- **If the dissertation is almost finished, with no further supervisory input required, the student should be permitted to complete the dissertation, submit and have the mark recorded on the transcript.**
- **If there is still significant work to be done, with supervisory input required (e.g. a draft yet to be commented on) then the project should be brought to a halt.**

3. Late submission penalties for part-time students

A query had been raised in relation to the way that penalties for late submission of coursework should operate on a part-time PGT programme. It had been suggested that for students who only attended 1 day per week (and worked full time, often at some distance from the University) a 'working day' should be interpreted as an attendance day rather than simply as consecutive days excluding weekends. The view was that applying the usual rules to such students placed unreasonable expectations on them and created a considerable number of unnecessary 'good cause' claims. It was suggested that an exception to the strict rules might be permitted, with submissions up to two calendar weeks late being subject to penalties though still applying the rule regarding work that was so late that marked assessment had been returned to other students.

ARSC members considered that this proposal was problematic for a number of reasons (e.g. the wide range of study patterns applying across different programmes, courses being studied simultaneously on a part-time and full-time basis, and judgments being made in relation to responsibilities carried by students outwith their studies). In Arts there was a large number of part-time students. It was noted that the students completed their programme of study over a longer period than full-time students but in relation to any particular course they were treated the same as the full-time students taking that course: they studied together and assessment was completed at the same time for all students. In the case of the Honours dissertation, full-time and part-time students were all given the same period of time to complete the work.

The committee concluded that the rules on penalties for the late submission of coursework should be applied to part-time students in the same way as to full-time students. **ASC is invited to endorse this position.**