

University of Glasgow**Academic Standards Committee – Friday 14 February 2014****Report from Meeting of Academic Regulations Sub-Committee held
on 27 January 2014****Professor Bob Hill, Convener of Sub-Committee****1. Guidelines on Exam Board Discretion**

At its meeting in November 2013 ASC considered proposals from ARSC on various aspects of the Guidelines on discretion applied by Exam Boards.

ASC asked ARSC to give further consideration to the following:

Preponderance

ASC expressed reservations in relation to a definition of preponderance that cannot be applied across all programmes, as is the case with the definition of 'more than 50% of grades'. If a definition of '50% or more' is adopted, the term 'preponderance' is not strictly appropriate.

ARSC agreed that there should be one threshold, which can be used by all Exam Boards, and the definition of '50% or more' should be adopted. Members could not agree on an alternative term to 'preponderance'. ARSC therefore proposes that this should simply be the first consideration under a general heading of grade profile.

Grade profile and year weighting

Under both these headings ASC expressed disquiet at ARSC's proposals for Exam Boards to reflect local considerations in their application of discretion, and requested that ARSC provide more detailed guidance on what criteria could be used, identifying elements in grade profiles that can and cannot be taken into account and any priority amongst the various factors.

ARSC's view was that the Guidelines should present the following criteria:

- a) Profile of course grades: where 50% or more of course grades lie in the higher classification, the candidate may be promoted to that degree classification.
- b) Weighting of grades: some degree regulations provide that in calculating a student's GPA, course grades from different years should carry different weightings. (E.g. the Code of Assessment states that for the five-year integrated masters programmes, the weighting applied to the final three years should be set within the range 10:20:70 to 20:30:50.) In determining whether 50% or more of course grades lie in the higher degree classification (as set out in (a) above) Boards may elect to apply the same weighting to the course grades as adopted in the calculation of GPA.
- c) Exam Boards may choose to promote all candidates who have 50% or more of the (weighted) course grades in the higher classification. Alternatively, the Board may choose to consider further aspects of the grade profile before deciding whether to promote. For example, a Board may decide that for students whose grades are equally divided between the lower and the higher classification, any grades in a band either higher or lower than the two classifications being considered may be taken into account. (E.g. for a student on the 2.1/2.2 borderline with grades divided equally

above and below the borderline, the Board may decide that a single grade in the A band or in the D band would determine that the higher or lower classification respectively should be awarded.) The Guidelines will include a number of examples.

ARSC were content that there should be no change to the Guidelines in relation to the following:

Criteria that should not be referred to by Boards:

- rank order (though there is still some discontent at the fact that GPA is entirely disregarded in the discretionary zone, leading to some anomalous cases, i.e. students promoted while some with higher GPAs are not);
- elimination of outlying grades (this is different from the consideration of grade profile as described in c) above: when eliminating outlying grades, the highest and the lowest grades are discarded with no account taken of how far from the relevant threshold they are);
- applying additional weight to performance in any one assessment component, e.g. dissertation.

Criteria that may be referred to:

Unrounded mean

Borderline vivas

Exit velocity

ASC had asked ARSC to comment on the priority of the various criteria. ARSC's view was that the first consideration should be grade profile, working through points a) to c) above. The further permitted criteria are optional, i.e. it has already been accepted that some areas wish to operate these borderline criteria while others do not.

ARSC noted that the continuing discussion appears to reflect the tension between, on the one hand, the wish to achieve consistency of approach across different parts of the University (thus promoting transparency and fairness) and, on the other, to retain for Exam Boards genuine discretion. Members noted that the views of external examiners varied widely (often reflecting the policies of their own institutions) including some who believed that Exam Boards should have no discretion at all. ARSC's view was that the guidance on discretion should explain the options available to Exam Boards rather than giving a prescriptive series of steps that effectively determine the outcome for each student. There should, however, be consistency in the way that any individual Exam Board applies the criteria. ARSC's view was that in the interests of transparency, the criteria to be applied by a Board should, if possible, be publicised in advance. ARSC members expressed the wish for Exam Boards to achieve a stable approach from year to year. It was also suggested that it might be helpful to explore the possibility of achieving consistency across areas, e.g. a common approach across the whole of the MA, though this might prove challenging.

ARSC members noted that it was at Joint/Combined Honours Boards that difficulties with discretion were most likely to arise, where the different subjects had different practices in relation to discretion. However, the view was that the Guidelines on discretion had already gone a significant way towards minimising these difficulties.

ASC is asked to consider ARSC's proposals in relation to the criteria to be referred to in the Guidelines for Exam Boards on the operation of discretion. ASC is also asked to comment on the view that Boards should consider publishing in advance of Board meetings the discretionary criteria to be applied.

2. Attendance requirements/Academic penalties for non-attendance

ARSC considered various issues related to student attendance, including the use of attendance as a requirement for the award of credit.

The Code of Assessment allows course teams to stipulate a level of attendance as a requirement for the award of credit on a course. Failure on the part of a student to meet that requirement will result in the award of Credit Refused (CR) at the end of the course. In October 2011 an amendment was introduced into the Code allowing for up to 25% of the attendance requirement to be waived where Good Cause was established (e.g. student was unwell). Thus on a course with ten class meetings, the attendance requirement for the award of credit might be set at 80% (i.e. a minimum of 8 classes must be attended). A student who attended six classes, missing two without good cause and a further two through illness would satisfy the attendance requirement. However, a student who attended five, then became unwell and missed the remaining five classes would not satisfy the attendance requirement and would be awarded CR.

A student might be prevented from attending through illness but otherwise be able to keep up with the learning (e.g. through podcasts of lectures/classes and other material made available on Moodle), and complete all the assessment. In such circumstances, for the student to receive CR simply through failure to satisfy attendance requirements appears harsh. However, one view is that attendance requirements should be linked to the award of credit only where attendance is deemed to be critical to the achievement and demonstration of ILOs. From this position it follows that the reason for absence is irrelevant, as the key issue is that the teaching (and possibly assessment) events have been missed. For this reason, increasing the proportion of attendance that could be waived in the event of good cause is not appropriate.

Some areas of the University have expressed a desire to find a way to encourage attendance which will not have severe consequences for students who fail to attend through good cause. (At Honours, failure to achieve the minimum level of attendance on one course will result in failure to be awarded the degree.) ARSC had been asked to consider whether, as an alternative measure, an academic penalty could be applied where, in the absence of good cause, a student fails to achieve a specified level of attendance (e.g. reduction of overall course grade by one or two secondary bands).

Members expressed their reservations about such a suggestion. It was noted that academic penalties are applied where coursework is submitted late, but there is clear justification for this, in that a student would benefit from having more time in which to complete the piece of work. In contrast, the rationale for an academic penalty arising from non-attendance is not clear. Once a student demonstrates a particular level of achievement of the ILOs in assessed work, a penalty applied for non-attendance does not seem justifiable.

ARSC members reported that, particularly at pre-Honours, there are some areas that are increasingly concerned by poor attendance: if the early 'building blocks' of the curriculum are not fully in place for these students, this could have an impact on their performance at a later stage in their studies.

Members reported various different practices in relation to attendance. In the sciences there are attendance requirements for labs but there is some flexibility in that if a student misses a lab there might be a later opportunity to overtake the missed work. In Engineering students are sometimes permitted to progress with a requirement that an outstanding component such as a lab book, which must be submitted in the following year. In Education attendance is linked to GTC requirements, but again there is a degree of flexibility (e.g. a school placement can be extended for a short period if a student has fallen just below the attendance

requirement). Members reported that in other areas attendance is monitored at some sessions, with a register being taken and students who miss a certain number of sessions are contacted. While there is no penalty associated with absence, the fact that staff take these steps appears to improve attendance. Members concluded that this was an issue that could be best addressed from a Learning & Teaching, rather than a regulatory, point of view.

ASC is asked to endorse ARSC's view that it is not appropriate to introduce academic penalties for non-attendance except where the absence can demonstrably be linked to ILOs associated with assessment (e.g. student presentation of work to a group).