

## University of Glasgow

## Academic Standards Committee – Tuesday 15 April 2014

## Revised Guidelines on Discretion

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## Proposed Revisions to Discretion Guidelines (Section 2.7 of the Guide to the Code of Assessment)

## 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 degrees.<sup>1</sup> 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 ~~must 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 degrees<sup>2</sup> 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 a candidate~~ may be awarded a higher classification:

<sup>1</sup> 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>

<sup>2</sup> 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.

- Elimination of outlying grades ([i.e. disregarding the highest and the lowest grades irrespective of how far they lie from the relevant borderline](#));
- 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 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 will~~ 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<sup>[1]</sup>.~~ 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.**

[In the interests of transparency, the criteria to be applied by each Exam Board should, if possible, be publicised in advance, e.g. in the programme handbook.](#)

#### 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~~ [Course grade profile.](#)

The course grade profile of the candidate should be reviewed – taking account of course credit weighting - and if ~~there is a preponderance~~ [50% or more](#) of credit ~~falls~~ 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 promoted<sup>3</sup>. ~~Alternatively, Boards may also choose to apply the same process where there are an equal number of credits above and below the~~

<sup>3</sup> On PGT programmes, the grade achieved for the dissertation or other independent work should not be taken into account ~~in determining preponderance~~ [when considering course grade profile.](#)

~~borderline classification. Whichever convention is adopted, it must be applied consistently to all candidates considered by that Board.~~

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 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, Boards may elect to apply the same weighting to the course grades as adopted in the calculation of GPA. On the other hand, Boards may elect to disregard any such weighting and consider all course grades equally. Whichever approach is taken, each Board must be consistent for all candidates.

Having established whether 50% or more of the grades are at the higher classification, Boards may choose to promote all such candidates. Alternatively, Boards may consider further aspects of the grade profile, and establish specific rules which determine which candidates to promote.

Examples:

1. Irrespective of the number of grades in the higher classification, any grade more than one classification below those under consideration will determine that the candidate is not promoted.

E.g. A candidate in the discretionary zone for possible promotion from 2.1 to 1<sup>st</sup> class (assuming equally weighted course grades):

A3 A5 B2 A4 B2 A3 D1 A5: at least 50% of the grades are above the borderline so the student could be promoted to a first. However, the D grade determines that the candidate is not promoted.

2. If grade profile is divided equally below and above the relevant borderline, a course grade in the classification either above or below the classifications under consideration will determine the outcome:

E.g. A candidate in the discretionary zone for possible promotion from 2.2. to 2.1 (assuming equally weighted course grades):

B2 B1 C2 B2 C3 D1 C3 B1: There are an equal number of grades above and below the relevant borderline but the D grade determines that the candidate is not promoted. The Board might have the rule that an A grade in the profile would balance the D grade and would therefore allow for promotion.

Note: These are only examples. Each Board may adopt its own rules in relation to grade profile, but these rules must be applied consistently to all candidates being considered by the Board.

Secondly, w

Where the candidate is not promoted using ~~preponderance~~ grade profile 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 band<sup>4</sup> 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)

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 course<sup>5</sup> 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  |
| <b>Totals</b>  |                        |       | <b>240</b> | <b>3510</b>                          | <b>3600.7</b>  |

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]

Fewer than 50% of the credits are~~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**

<sup>4</sup> 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).

<sup>5</sup> 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.

*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 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<br>(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  |
| <b>Totals</b>  |                        |       | <b>240</b> | <b>3540</b>                             | <b>3537.8</b>  |

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]

Fewer than 50% of the credits are ~~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 could** 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.