

**University of Glasgow**

**Academic Standards Committee – Friday 15 April 2016**

**PGT College Annual Monitoring Summaries for 2014-15: College of Arts - Update**

**Calculation of Distinctions and Merits – PGT Programmes**

College of Arts - Distinctions and Merits on PGT programmes

The Graduate School wrote to 36 PGT programme conveners asking for their thoughts on the issues raised:

“The College of Arts CAMS report asked Academic Standards Committee (ASC) to consider an alternative method for the calculation of distinctions and merits on PGT programmes.

There was, in fact, discussion of this at Graduate School Board on 23 February and the issue has been discussed in parallel by ASC. ASC is now asking the Graduate School to gather more information from Schools to inform further discussion.

The Dean, therefore, asks that you consider the following questions in Schools/Subject Areas and let me have your responses to these **by Thursday, 24 March**.

1. Is the issue highlighted below a particular issue for your PGT programme(s) and, if so, please provide numbers and concrete examples?
2. What consideration has there been (or, indeed, might there be) at subject level of adjusting the approach, in semester 1, to teaching and assessment in order to address the challenge of Masters level study?”

17 responses were received. These are listed below.

**School of Culture & Creative Arts**

MLitt Music Industries

In my experience students experience exit velocity and their marks get better as they progress.

So, I would support weighting each semester of the taught part - e.g semester 1 counts for 40% and 2 counts for 60%.

MLitt Renaissance Art History

This is not an issue for the MLitt in Renaissance Art History.

MLitt Art History: Art, Politics, Transgression

I am returning a ‘nil’ response because with regard to the programme I teach on and co-convene I am not aware of this having been a “particular issue” for our PGT programme and its students to the extent that a change is required and also because we have not (or I have not been party to) formal discussions of the question at School/Subject level.

MSc Media Management

My view, as Convenor of the MSc in Media Management, is that the current approach appears to work fine with a substantial but not an unreasonably large portion of the students

meeting the criteria for a 'with merit' award. Many are from overseas and, for a small few, their grades will show improvement over the year which means the current basis of calculation works slightly against them but, nonetheless, I think it is right to reward a consistently high performance across the year and, based on our experience on Media Management, I don't see any compelling grounds to change the current regulations.

#### MLitt Dress & Textile Histories

With regards to Dress and Textile Histories MLitt there do not seem to be any examples of students missing out on a distinction because of their grades from coursework in semester 1 and 2. (There are examples of it happening the other way around with three instances (2013-4 and 2014-5) of students who did not get a merit because of their dissertation mark – if more information is required on this then let me know).

With regards to the approaches to teaching in semester 1, at induction for History of Art PGT students are told that it will be an intense year and that they are expected to hit the ground running, but that all staff are there for support and guidance when/if necessary. 'Research Methods in Practice' is a core course for all students and I believe this is intended to facilitate some of the transition to postgraduate study. The Dress and Textile Histories programme also has its own methodology course which runs in semester 1, this has formative assessment exercises built into a number of the classes and the course is designed to give the students the skills for their individual research for the rest of their Masters.

#### MPhil Textile Conservation

I appreciate that our two-year PGT programme, the MPhil Textile Conservation, is unusual. However my concern has generally been the other way around, i.e. I have regretted that some students have failed to get an overall distinction or merit having failed to gain a B or A mark for the dissertation, despite an excellent performance in the taught courses. The students gain the usual 60 credits for the dissertation, but because our programme is two years long, this represents a smaller proportion of the total credits (360 in total). Last year at our exam board we discussed the case of one student who had an average of 16.78 for the taught units, but only a C grade for her dissertation, so we were unable to give her a merit overall, despite doing so well for the whole two years, and I felt that her final grade was not a true reflection of her performance or ability.

#### MLitt Film & Television Studies

I consulted with the previous convenor of our MLitt in Film and Television Studies, and his feeling was that our students usually have problems the other way around. We tend to have students that excel in the taught programme and then just miss out on a better degree result overall because of their dissertation mark. We compiled some statistics from the past 5 years, and this proves to be the case - see attached.

In order to try and overcome this issue and improve overall results, we have in recent years put in place a dissertation workshop for students and the support and preparation meetings for the dissertation planning now take place much earlier on in the academic year (the students have one-on-one meetings with the convenor to check progress at 3 different times during semester 1 and 2).

#### MLitt Theatre Studies

Theatre Studies has encountered a set of different challenges surrounding the criteria for PGT degree classifications to the ones identified in your email below - our concern is not with the criteria regarding the taught components since there is room in the guidelines for considering those students who fall in the zone of discretion in relation to the taught components.

Rather, **our concern is with the stipulation concerning the dissertation** (that a student must have received an 18 or above to be eligible for a distinction, or a 15 or above for a merit). **Our especial concern is that the criteria and wording in the calendar does not currently allow for any discretion in relation to the dissertation.**

It has been our experience that this stipulation concerning the dissertation has resulted in some truly excellent students not receiving a distinction in spite of having the highest overall aggregate score. For example, in session 2013-14 one of our students, [REDACTED], on the MLitt Playwriting and Dramaturgy received first class marks for his taught components (an aggregate score of 18.5 for the taught components) but received a 17 (B1) for his dissertation. We were therefore unable to issue a distinction due to the regulations in the University calendar which state (in section 9.3) that candidates must have a grade 18 or above in their dissertation in order to be awarded a distinction and also that "No discretion can be applied in relation to the grade required for the dissertation or other substantial independent work". This meant that in spite of [REDACTED] having the highest overall aggregate score in the year group (his combined GPA across ALL courses including both taught and dissertation, and in spite of dissertation being treble weighted at 60 credits) and the clear evidence that he was a first-class student, we were unable to award him a distinction - and yet other students who had received an 18 in their dissertation and an overall taught aggregate score of 17.1 could be considered for distinction. There is a serious imbalance here that is negatively affecting some of our outstanding students, which in turn impacts on both the students involved and the University when it comes to applying for funding for doctoral study. This particular case led to our external examiner for the programme voicing concern that this student was being disadvantaged by the lack of discretion available in relation to the dissertation. The student also officially submitted a complaint concerned with the University's generic rules on how masters results are classified as being with merit or distinction (how the B1 awarded to him for the dissertation barred him from eligibility for a distinction) but unfortunately his appeal was not upheld because of the wording in the calendar which does not allow for discretion in relation to the dissertation.

This situation is something that has also been noted and **raised as a serious matter of concern in our external examiners' (past and present) reports** for our respective PGT programmes in Theatre Studies. For example, the University of Glasgow calendar regulation which stipulates that students can only gain a distinction if they have a first class mark in their dissertation is something that our external examiner for the MLitt Playwriting and Dramaturgy, [REDACTED] **expressed concern about in his report for academic session 2012-13**, where he commented:

"I note the regulations for award classification which put a great emphasis on the final piece of work in order to gain a merit/distinction award, allowing discretion only for the taught components. In the current cohort, this has resulted in some close misses of merit/distinction awards where the purely mathematical addition of marks according to weighting would have pushed the students above the threshold for the better classification, even though their final work did not quite achieve in itself a distinction (or merit) mark. One may argue that the final component is already weighted at 60 credits, and therefore the ultimate requirement (without room for discretion) of achieving above the bar for the final piece punishes students who due to circumstances dipped just below the bar in their final project, while else displaying a consistent mark profile in the higher (merit or distinction) band. I wonder whether this model allows students to succeed in the spirit of a coherent taught Master programme with a range of distinct achievements, some of which get devalued by the present system."

And [REDACTED] **commented in his 2013-14 report for the MLitt Theatre Practices** that:

"I recommend that some attention be given to the reconsideration of the final sentence in 9.3 from the Generic Regulations for PG taught degrees: No discretion can be applied in relation to the grade required for the dissertation or other substantial independent work. In an Arts and Humanities context, it is difficult to understand why the Independent Research Project (when its weighting already gives it a super-significance) has the potential, in one or two cases, to override the prevalent overall classification for the programme. I note, in retrospect, that the External Examiner on the parallel MLitts made a similar comment last year."

The Theatre Studies team at Glasgow has also expressed this concern at numerous Graduate School Boards and School PG Committee meetings over the past couple of years – we are concerned that the regulations for award classification at GU with their emphasis on the final IRP/dissertation mean that it really is very difficult for our students to graduate with a distinction in comparison to the methods used to determine final degree classifications at other Universities – and in particular with how this impacts on our students' profiles when they are applying for doctoral study and for doctoral funding.

It's also important to note that the nature of the courses which make up the Theatre Studies MLitt programmes (MLitt Theatre Practices; MLitt Playwriting and Dramaturgy; and MLitt Theatre Studies) are very different to more traditional programmes - that is, **there is not necessarily such a distinction between taught components and the independent learning and research entailed in the dissertation/Individual Research Project (IRP) as in other subjects, or in a more traditional PGT model.** Several of the taught courses (e.g. Independent Practices on the MLitt Theatre Studies, and Playwriting 2 on the MLitt Playwriting and Dramaturgy) place significant emphasis on independent learning and research. This means that **the privileging of the dissertation/IRP in the current University Calendar/guidelines is not really appropriate for our programmes in that a number of the courses which make-up the programme (not just the dissertation/IRP) demonstrate research skills and suitability for doctoral study.** Finally, we also note that the threat of bringing their grades down also perhaps acts as a disincentive to students to take risks and produce innovative work in their IRPs/dissertations.

TS would urge Senate to review these guidelines and to remove the stipulation regarding the dissertation (which is already weighted at 60 credits). We have been advised by our external examiners that this is out of synch with other comparable Universities and how they calculate their degree classifications (at other comparable institutions the degree classification is determined simply by the overall aggregate score including BOTH taught components and dissertation, with no conditions surrounding the dissertation). We believe that it is unethical to allow for discretion in relation to the taught components and not for the dissertation - this has led to some very difficult situations whereby, as with the Roberts example cited above, a student who has received a string of first class marks and has an overall GPA well within the first class category is not able to be awarded a distinction.

### **School of Humanities**

#### **MLitt Celtic & Viking Archaeology**

I write in response to this email. I convene the MLitt in Celtic and Viking Archaeology and the several elements of the taught section (i.e. Sem 1 and 2) are weighted slightly differentially. The dissertation is obviously potentially a separate item where students can exit without this for a Diploma or with it for an MLitt. I don't think this is any different to any other programme. It is the case that in Sem 1 some students struggle to find their feet, and commonly in my experience it is the American students who are impacted most. However, I have no real evidence that the performance in Sem 1 is not mitigated by that in Sem 2 and that those who do well in the dissertation are the same students who have done well enough throughout.

My view is that since most students cope with the transition to MLitt and are assessed accordingly at that level -which after all is supposed to be a step up from their previous studies - it could be a further downgrading of this degree to make the changes suggested. The number of Merits and Distinctions is a clear reflection of ability and performance throughout this course and I have no evidence to the contrary.

#### Archaeological Studies/Landscape

This has not been an issue in my PGT programme Archaeological Studies, but [REDACTED] has told me he recognises the problem from his Landscape MSc.

I am not aware of any efforts made to counter this at subject level although we are reviewing our core PGT teaching provision just now and we could certainly have this in mind when filling out content for this generic course.

#### MLitt Classics

As far as I'm aware, this has not been a particular issue in Classics.

#### MSc Museum Studies

I've only had time to go through the figures for 2013-14 and 2014-15 for Museum Studies but the pattern is as follows, all based on recalculating graduating grades on the mean basis.

##### 2013-14 (35 Graduating Students)

Students whose Coursework was Merit but whose Dissertation brought them down to a Pass: 5

Students whose Coursework was Distinction but whose Dissertation brought them down to a Merit: 0 (plus 1 student would have been in the zone of discretion)

Students whose Coursework was a Pass but whose Dissertation would have brought them up to a Merit: 2 (plus 1 student would have been in the zone of discretion)

Students whose Coursework was a Merit but whose Dissertation would have brought them up to a Distinction: 2 (plus 1 student would have been in the zone of discretion)

##### 2014-15 (32 Graduating Students)

Students whose Coursework was Merit but whose Dissertation brought them down to a Pass: 3

Students whose Coursework was Distinction but whose Dissertation brought them down to a Merit: 0

Students whose Coursework was a Pass but whose Dissertation would have brought them up to a Merit: 2 (plus 1 student would have been in the zone of discretion)

Students whose Coursework was a Merit but whose Dissertation would have brought them up to a Distinction: 0 (plus 1 student would have been in the zone of discretion)

My own view is that it's unfortunate that we have a regulation that doesn't reward student effort, they can't improve their average, and certainly the students who are adversely affected by this feel it is unfair. If this regulation was brought in to tackle grade inflation then it seems it is treating the symptom not the cause.

#### MLitt History

In the cohort for 2014-15, we had nine students with A dissertations who did not make A on the taught course side (three were in the discretionary band). Three students made the 17.1-9 discretionary band on the taught course side but had B dissertations. For Masters History, I

can see no convincing pattern to support the argument that some students missed out on a Distinction because of poorer performance in semester 1 coursework. A more convincing pattern was that students came down on 'outside' courses, such as language courses (e.g. medieval history students doing Latin).

From 2015-16 our compulsory core course holds back assessment until the end of semester 2 and beyond. This gives students more time to concentrate on assessment for other courses in semester 1, and allows them to benefit from any exit velocity generated come semester 2.

Personally I would support the suggested reform. Had it been in place in 2014-15, I do not think that it would have resulted in significantly more Distinctions, but might have made a difference to the three students who scored A dissertations and were in the 17.1-9 discretionary band for coursework. I presume that the suggested reform involves retaining the discretionary bands?

### **School of Critical Studies**

#### **MLitt American Studies**

I've consulted with the American Studies staff on the matters you've raised. After consulting course sheet marks back to 2009-10 we have found only one student who scored a distinction in the dissertation, but whose earlier course marks were significantly lower, leading to them not receiving a distinction overall. Instead, we have a very healthy number of students who secured distinctions in both their coursework and dissertations, so we have not considered adjusting our approach to teaching and assessment: our system seems to be working for us.

Not only then have we not faced this problem, but we suspect that the proposed solution here might, in fact, create a new problem for us. Perhaps what should happen here is that other schools experiencing a problem should examine their marking and criteria?

#### **MLitt Creative Writing**

1. Numerous instances exist of our students being disadvantaged by one assessment grade that is lower than the others, particularly in the case of part-time students who may have been out of formal education for a long time and join us for two years. The current system penalises these students – who may move from an initial grade C to an A in their final portfolio submission – by making it impossible for them to gain a Distinction or Merit.
2. While the 'exit velocity' argument is one that we agree with completely, there are additional factors related to the specific pedagogy of creative writing and the way in which our assessments are structured. A key example is our Craft and Experimentation seminar course, which deliberately encourages creative risk-taking, and in which we strive to sustain the greatest scope for our students to attempt new things. Necessarily, part of the learning experience is that some experiments do not fulfil their potential. Under the current system, one assessment worth 10% of the overall mark that is graded at a C or B, excludes an otherwise grade A student from an overall Distinction mark. This focus on risk-taking and experiment is absolutely crucial in our discipline.
3. Our previous system was that students needed to achieve a Distinction (or Merit) in the final portfolio to gain a Distinction overall. As this is such an extended piece of work, the largest and most sustained that our students produce, we are keen to maintain this (if we can implement a zone of discretion for those who miss out by a tiny fraction). It is also important in terms of maintaining the acknowledged reputation for quality of our Distinction grade in the eyes of e.g. the publishing industry.

4. Ideally we would wish to average the marks for the four smaller portfolios for CX1, CX2, EP1 and EP2 into one mark that could then be combined with the final portfolio grade.

#### MLitt Modernities

1. **Is the issue highlighted below a particular issue for your PGT programme(s) and, if so, please provide numbers and concrete examples?**

Yes, it is. I was one of the convenors who instigated the original request to ASC to reconsider the PGT regulations. (I also as it happens sit on ASC.) I did so at the request of and with the full support of my teaching team, who at both final examination boards I have chaired expressed their extreme dissatisfaction with the outcomes generated by the current regulations.

In my own experience of convening the Modernities MLitt there has been one instance per year of a student who just missed out on the opportunity to be considered for a Distinction, despite having a very high dissertation grade, owing to their GPA for the taught component of the programme. The relevant runs of marks are below (Students 1 and 2; they were out of a cohort of 17 and 16 respectively). As you see Student 1, whose dissertation mark was the highest in her cohort, also demonstrated notable 'exit velocity' over the course of the year, but with a GPA of 16.8 was ineligible for a Distinction. By way of comparison, I have included marks from Student 3, whose final GPA was just into the zone of discretion at 17.15, and with a dissertation mark of A5 was eligible for (and was awarded) a Distinction.

	Core course 1 (30 credits)		Special Topic 1 (20 credits)		Core Course 2 (30 credits)		Special Topic 2 (20 credits)		Research Training Programme (20 Credits)		Taught component GPA	Dissertation		Final degree classification
	Mark	Grade												
Student 1 (2013-14)	14	C1	17	B1	18	A5	19	A4	P		16.8	20	A3	MERIT
Student 2 (2014-15)	17	B1	18	A5	17	B1	15.2	B3	P		16.84	20	A3	MERIT
Student 3 (2014-15)	16	B2	18.6	A4	16	B2	19	A4	18	A5	17.15	18	A5	DISTINCTION



**2. What consideration has there been (or, indeed, might there be) at subject level of adjusting the approach, in semester 1, to teaching and assessment in order to address the challenge of Masters level study?**

Traditionally, all Modernities courses were assessed through a single end-of-semester essay. For the session beginning 2014, all Core Course and Special Topic assessments were revised. Core Course 1, taught in semester 1, is now assessed through a 2,500 word reflective journal and a 5,000 word final essay. Both assessments are due at the end of the semester. However, students are given the option of submitting a draft of their journal entry at a mid-point in the semester for formative feedback on their written work.

All Special Topic Courses (some of which are offered in semester 1 and some in semester 2) also now include a mid-term assessment in addition to a final essay; some use a short written piece of work, others a class presentation.

Finally, from autumn 2014 the convenors of the English Literature MLitt programmes have run an annual two-hour workshop, timed at a few weeks before the first final essay deadline in semester 1, on Writing Postgraduate English Literature Essays, tailored for the needs of our PGT students in the subject.

**School of Modern Languages & Cultures**

**MLitt Comparative Literature**

The MLitt in Comp Lit hasn't yet had such a case. We do not have measures in place to account for 'exit velocity', i.e. a case where the semester 1 marks are lower than the semester 2 ones. To me, this is not really the issue here, as I would still think it unfair to deny a 'Distinction' just because a low mark was awarded in semester 2. The issue is more likely to be that a student ventures to take a class outwith their home Masters and may be operating in a different environment and get a lower than characteristic mark. As Comp Lit is especially keen to get students to travel between Masters, it would be a real pity to have a disincentive to this sort of adventurousness.

College of Arts Graduate School – April 2016