

University of Glasgow

Academic Standards Committee – Friday 15 April 2016

**Report from Meeting of Academic Regulations Sub-Committee held
on 4 April 2016**

Professor Bob Hill, Convener of Sub-Committee

1. Single Schedule of Assessment

Calculation of final course results where both assessment schedules are in use

In its report to the February 2016 meeting of ASC, ARSC had requested a policy decision on the rounding process to be used where assessment component grades were drawn from both Schedule A and Schedule B. ASC had concluded that the overall result should be reported as a Schedule A value where 50% or more of the components were marked under Schedule A. However, **ASC did not reach a view on the operation of rounding where the result will be reported as a Schedule B value (i.e. where Schedule A components make up less than 50% of the course assessment) so ASC is asked to reconsider this:**

Example:

Course assessment comprises Exam (40%), Practical skills assessment (60%):

Exam (Schedule A) = A3 = (20 x 0.4)

Skills assessment (Schedule B) = 0D = (11 x 0.6)

Overall course result (8 + 6.6) = 14.6

= 0B (rounded up from 14.6 to 15.0, which would then result in a value of 17 contributing to aggregation) **OR**

= 0C (reflecting the fact that 14.6 has not passed the threshold of 15 required to be in the B band, i.e. an 'achieving a competence' approach. This would result in a value of 14 contributing to aggregation.)

NB The overall course result (B or C) is higher than the level achieved on the competence-based component.

SLSD development work

SLSD had advised that the development work required to implement the proposed revisions for a single schedule of aggregation could not be completed in time for the 2016-17 session, and had recently requested that a business case be made in relation to the work. Meanwhile, ARSC noted that there was more work to be done in terms of different academic areas deciding how credits should be allocated to components assessed under Schedule A and under Schedule B.

Format of Schedules

At its meeting in February 2016 ASC had requested that further consideration be given to the proposed layout of the table presenting the single schedule of aggregation. ARSC will return to this at its next meeting. Discussions were on-going separately regarding re-formatting of the University Calendar in order to present it as an on-line document (rather than pdfs that were mounted on-line), and this also had implications for the presentation of tables.

2. External Examiner reports 2014-15 (postgraduate)

ARSC received a digest of comments relating to regulatory issues from External Examiners on PGT programmes from 2014-15. While the number of comments was small, a wide range of issues was highlighted including further comments on the operation of discretion, operation of good cause and anonymity of marking, but none required highlighting to ASC.

3. Rapid Return of Coursework/Late Penalties

ARSC noted that the Code of Assessment sets out standard penalties for the late submission of coursework. As currently worded, the relevant regulations implied that students had the right to submit work up to five working days late and still receive a (reduced) grade for it. In some academic areas a number of small assessments were now being set on a regular basis throughout the semester, with a grade and feedback being returned to students very quickly (e.g. one or two days after submission) in order to support students in preparing for the next submission. Typically, this work might be delivered electronically through a quiz system, though it might also be submitted on paper.

In a number of such cases the Clerk of Senate had agreed to an amendment to the position set out in the standard penalties for late submission, such that if students failed to submit on the due date they would be awarded a grade of H because, for example, on the following day the answer to the problem would be discussed with the class. It had also been agreed that when a student failed to submit on time but established good cause it would be acceptable to discount that assignment, and calculate the overall mark on the basis of the student's other submissions. This procedure could be repeated on more than one occasion, but it had been agreed that it should be for the academic area to judge at what point an alternative assessment would have to be set (e.g. if there were any exercises that were so crucial to the attainment of ILOs that they could not be missed) or alternatively adopt a standard approach where, say, after two such exercises had been missed, any other missed assignments would result in an alternative having to be set.

The Clerk of Senate's view was also that students who submitted late in such circumstances should not be debarred from seeking feedback on their work.

ARSC considered that the Code's provisions on late submission of coursework should be amended in order to encourage other areas to consider structuring assessments in this way, facilitating the rapid provision of feedback. The particular arrangements on courses where such assessments were in use would need to be explained clearly to students at the outset, ideally in person at the class/lecture and in the course handbook.

Members also agreed to propose to ASC that such rapid provision of feedback, resulting in the award of grade H for late submissions, should be employed for no more than 25% of the assessment for a course.

ASC is asked to approve ARSC's proposal that the Code of Assessment be amended to allow late submissions of coursework to be graded 'H' where rapid feedback on the work is to be provided (i.e. overriding normal penalties), for assessments which together contribute no more than 25% of the total assessment for a course.

4. Issue Arising from School of Geographical & Earth Sciences PSR

In 2015 the Periodic Subject Review of the School of Geographical & Earth Sciences had highlighted the practice in Geography of using only A1, A3 and A5 from the five available A grades when marking components of assessment. This practice had previously been highlighted in the DPTLA in 2008, and at that time the Code of Assessment Working Group and ASC had reached the view that the practice was in accordance with the spirit of the Code and should be permitted to continue.

Given the passage of time, ASC had asked ARSC to look at this issue again. ARSC members noted that the School had now provided a strong defence of its position, referring to what it perceived as the difficulties of generating specific grade-related criteria for five secondary A bands, and a reluctance of markers to award the highest grade where five grades were available. The School also referred to a trial carried out from 2011-12 to 2012-13, in response to concerns raised by the external examiners, when Geography markers used all five secondary bands in the A range whereas in Earth Sciences only three A grades were used. In that period no A1 grades were awarded in Geography, while 20% of the A grades awarded in Earth Sciences were A1s. Following this, Geography markers reverted to using only A1, A3 and A5 (although the overall course grade was calculated on the full 22-point scale). The School Learning & Teaching Committee had reviewed its position in December 2015 and concluded that it wished to continue with its current practice, noting that it did not consider there had been significant changes since ASC had previously approved the practice in 2009. It was also noted that no concerns had been raised recently by the external examiners.

ARSC members expressed surprise that ASC had previously approved the approach adopted by the School, as this appeared to undermine the expectation that the Code's marking scale should be implemented fully and consistently across the University. It was noted that GES Learning and Teaching Committee minutes from 2013 had alluded to the 'reluctance of staff to mark work at 22'. The comment had been made that: 'Fundamentally the issue is to change attitudes in Geography.' Members noted that this also seemed to be an issue in other parts of the University, with some areas believing that an A1 should be reserved for 'perfect' answers. In advance of the spring exam diet in 2015 additional guidance had been disseminated to markers strongly encouraging them to use the full range of grades available. This was an important issue, especially in view of the current debate within the University about the proportion of first class and 2.1 degrees being awarded. Various views were expressed by ARSC members, some believing that only having three A grades available would indeed encourage the award of more A1s, because A1 would be the only option where the performance was adjudged to be better than the default of the mid-point (A3) grade. Those from the more science-based disciplines felt that it was less of an issue for them to discern five separate A grades, particularly where percentage marking was in use.

Members acknowledged that the response from GES was persuasive in terms of their practice appearing to promote the use of the top end of the marking scale. However, so long as the University's Code of Assessment recognised 22 bands, ARSC's view was that it was unacceptable for a subject area simply to opt out of using two of those bands. Other areas of the University were persisting with fully implementing the 22-point scale and the view was that there should be consistency of approach.

ASC is invited to endorse ARSC's view that the School of Geographical & Earth Sciences should be required to reinstate the use of all five A grades in marking.

5. Role of External Examiner in Discretionary Decisions

The following is an extract from the discretionary guidelines in the Guide to the Code of Assessment:

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.

a) Assessed material from periods of study abroad

A question had been raised about whether assessed work completed at another institution should form part of the work seen by an External Examiner when considering the final honours outcome for candidates in the discretionary zone.

ARSC noted that the regulations concerning the assessment of study abroad required that grades achieved at a host institution should be converted to Glasgow grades using conversion tables and that these grades then contributed to the final GPA. It had come to light that some areas asked students who studied abroad to bring home with them their assessed work. That work would then be included in the 'bundle' should the external be required to consider the student as a discretionary case.

ARSC noted that, technically, this practice did not appear to breach any rules. However:

- the external would know little about the circumstances under which the work was produced
- coursework was more likely than exam scripts to be made available
- there could be lack of consistency/fairness in what materials a student was permitted to bring back depending on the institution
- students might withhold weaker assessed work and it would not be easy for an Exam Board to check whether what was produced was everything that the host institution had released to the student
- if the external looked at the work there was a risk that it could verge on a re-marking exercise ('all the work completed at X university appears to have been harshly marked so the candidate should be promoted').

But on the other hand, if there was a rule that work assessed abroad should not be brought back:

- Was there unfairness in those who had studied abroad having only half as much work available to be scrutinised?
- Or was there the risk of students being advantaged by the external only looking at final year work, which was likely to be stronger?

It was acknowledged that ARSC did not have a broad picture of practice across different parts of the University on this issue, so ASC might prefer to be informed by further views from College Deans of Learning and Teaching. However, while noting that there would be variability in what work was available for an External Examiner's scrutiny, ARSC's own view was that it would help inform an External Examiner's judgment in discretionary cases to have material available from periods of study abroad, where possible.

ASC is asked to endorse ARSC's view that a student undertaking study abroad should be invited to bring back to Glasgow work that had been assessed at their host institution, with a view to that work forming part of what was seen by an External Examiner if asked to consider, as a discretionary case, the final honours outcome for that candidate.

b) Wording of 2.7.4 of Guidelines on discretion

ARSC noted that an expanded version of 2.7.4 had been drafted, partly in response to an ongoing debate regarding the application of discretion in cases where students' profiles were

found to be very close to the borderline for promotion but did not justify promotion in relation to any of the published criteria.

The proposed revised wording was as follows:

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.

In advance of the Board a small number of students might be identified who would not be promoted using the discretionary criteria adopted by the relevant Board of Examiners, but whose overall performance puts them very close to promotion (see the later example). For each of those students, the External Examiner may then be invited to review the assessed work contributing to their honours classification. Applying academic judgment in the context of their role of safeguarding the consistency of academic standards across the sector, the External Examiner may reach the view that the overall performance demonstrated across the body of assessed work justifies promoting the student to the higher classification.

For example, a student with a GPA of 17.9, and a grade profile of 48% in the higher classification and 52% in the lower classification cannot be promoted to a first class degree under the criteria listed above. [This kind of grade profile may arise on programmes where there are a large number of courses contributing to the final classification.] As the student's profile is very close to that required for a first class degree, the External Examiner may be asked to review the overall performance to ensure that the appropriate outcome is achieved. As this is an exercise in academic judgment it does not follow that where one student is promoted, all students with a similar profile must also be promoted. In such cases, as in all other discretionary decisions, it is essential that the reasons for the decisions are clearly recorded in the Exam Board minutes.

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.

Members felt that the proposed new wording gave greater clarity and would be welcomed.

ASC is asked to approve the revised wording for inclusion in the Guidelines on Operation of Discretion, for dissemination to Boards in advance of the Spring 2016 diet.