

University of Glasgow

Academic Standards Committee – Friday 20 May 2016

Responses to Comments by External Examiners: Vivas and the Application of Discretion in the School of Life Sciences

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Of the 17 reports received from External Examiners in the School of Life Sciences and relating to the academic session 2014-2015, only four make comment on or raise concerns relating to the application of discretion and the use of the viva.

Preamble:

In this academic year, we have revised, clarified, and unified School policy on the application of discretion by *all* boards in the School. This new policy has been widely explained, disseminated and clear explanation will be given to all externals. ***Inconsistency and confusion should not occur again.***

Although course grade distribution is considered and may be sufficient for promotion, other criteria such as GPA based on unrounded course grades and “review of work” are included, as allowed for by the code of assessment. The viva is now the ***very last stage*** and will only apply to ***a small subset*** of cases (~25%). We expect that the vast majority of cases should be agreed ***without*** reference to performance in viva.

The externals’ comments relate to the old policy or indicate some confusion or both. Nonetheless, on behalf of the School, I respond to each as follows:

Immunology

Comment 1: It was clear at the Examiners meeting that there are difficulties with the promotion system as it stands. Students were promoted if they met only one of the four stated criteria. Thus, regardless of their performance at the viva, students with 50% or more of course grades falling into the higher band were promoted. Whilst this was deemed appropriate for BSc (hons.) students, it was felt that more stringent criteria should be applied to MSc students. *A suggestion is that MSci students should need to meet two, as opposed to one of our criteria, for promotion.* There is a need for clarity in this area.

Response: We reject that suggestion. Our revised policy also does not make any distinction between BSc and MSci degrees when applying discretion, nor should it according to our interpretation of the code of assessment. *We see no reason to make discretion more demanding for MSci students: the course itself is more demanding; the application of discretion should be the same.*

Comment 2: The second issue concerns the recent introduction of 4 criteria to help determine final degree classification of students within the zone of discretion between degrees, as only one of these must be satisfied for promotion to the higher classification. The current system allows a student to attain a higher degree classification having failed one of six modules providing 50% for example are in the higher band. *This outcome should be reviewed and a regulation requiring that all modules for example must be passed for promotion to higher classification be permitted*

Response: We reject that suggestion. The placement of students in discretionary zones is based on GPA, an average. Any low grade, be it a fail or otherwise, is thus counted and can have a significant effect. The **only** part of our assessment that must be passed for award of an honours degree is the 20 credit research project, a piece of independent work that is key to demonstrating competence in the discipline. However, even that piece of work carries no special weight when discretion is applied. Indeed, *the code of assessment is very explicit in not allowing any one piece of work to be considered above another when applying discretion*. Finally, ours is not a professional qualification and competency does not need to be demonstrated across the piece.

Microbiology

Comment: Vivas continue to be used to make decisions on candidates at degree classification borders. These sessions include non-borderline students as markers. As indicated in previous reports, most UK Universities have long recognised that this is not an appropriate external examiner activity. The role of externals is to evaluate the quality and fairness of the examinations process rather than student performance. I also believe that vivas favour more extrovert candidates and place unfair pressures on candidates used as degree classification markers. Hence most institutions have adopted formulaic methods to arrive at final degree classifications and if used, all students are viva'd by internal examiners as part of their overall assessment.

Response: Our revised scheme places emphasis on formulaic decision-making, and involves the external as much with “review of work” as with the viva. We do not agree that the viva by the external examiner should be part of the **assessment** for all students. At the very most, it is used only when applying discretion and for as few students as possible.

Physiology & Sports Science

Comment: There were a number of students this year who were awarded the higher degree classification despite *their viva performance suggesting that they shouldn't have been*. At my own institution borderline students must achieve more than 50% of their 2nd and 3rd year module grades in the higher classification to be upgraded. As more weight is being given to objective criteria for the assessment of students in the zone of discretion, there needs to be a discussion about the worth of the viva. If there are a number of objective criteria against which the borderline case can be reviewed, then *the purpose of the viva becomes less obvious*. Although I think the viva provides a very good indication about the academic strength of each student, if is *ultimately pointless* if the viva performance of the student is not taken into account.

Response: We agree with the external to a limited extent. Subjecting students to unnecessary vivas is undesirable, not least because of the unnecessary stress imposed on the student(s). ***Our revised scheme will minimise the number of students requiring viva***. The revised scheme leaves the viva as a (but not the only) key tool for the few cases that cannot be decided by formulaic methods. Those few students alone will be called for viva. The viva will be neither “pointless” nor central. We do, however, reject the external's implication that the viva is more robust than other allowed instruments when applying discretion: *“..awarded a higher classification despite their viva performance suggesting that they shouldn't have been”*. The viva is, and should be, used as a last opportunity for a student to demonstrate ability, and not as a requirement that must be met.

Physiology

Comment: It would help to have greater clarity surrounding borderlines and promotion. Whilst I support the use of vivas, the introduction of promotion by predominance as well has introduced a level of complexity. *I would suggest that either system are used but not*

both. If predominance is used it should be a recommendation to the external for further scrutiny and enable the external to look into the case in greater depth.

Response: We reject that suggestion. The suggestion is not consistent with the code of assessment. Furthermore, the new (or indeed the old) scheme used in the School is not particularly complex.