

University of Glasgow

Academic Standards Committee – Friday 23 March 2018

**Report from Meeting of Academic Regulations Sub-Committee held
on 9 March 2018**

Professor Marc Alexander, Convener of the Sub-Committee

1. PGT Review: Criteria for the Award of Merit and Distinction

As part of the routine review of the generic degree regulations for taught Masters degrees, ARSC has considered the regulations governing the award of merit and distinction on PGT programmes. The regulations governing the award of merit and distinction were last amended 2009-10 in response to concern that the existing criteria made it too easy to achieve these awards.

ARSC received responses to a consultation that had been sent to all Schools and RIs. There were three questions concerning different aspects of the current regulations. A total of 23 responses were received. Submissions were in some cases made at College level and in others at individual, School and/or Programme-levels. A summary of the responses is provided in the **Appendix**.

Question 1: Is it appropriate to require candidates to satisfy separate requirements in relation to the dissertation and the taught component? Would it be preferable to stipulate an overall average performance with some lesser standard (if any) required in relation to the taught component and/or dissertation?

A range of responses was received with a small majority indicating a preference for considering an overall grade point average across the full 180 credits of the programme rather than considering separate requirements in relation to the dissertation and the taught component. Reference was made to candidates whose overall performance was strong but who failed to satisfy the current criteria for merit/distinction by narrowly missing either the taught courses or dissertation requirement. Concerns included students being unable to overcome the impact of a weaker performance in semester 1, and students whose overall performance was very strong being denied the classification by a dissertation that just missed the relevant threshold.

ARSC agreed to recommend to ASC the following possible amendments to the regulations.

Current regulations:

9. Requirements for the Award of a Masters Degree and Rules for Award of Distinction and Merit
 - 9.1 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. [...]
 - 9.2 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. [..]

New requirements Proposal 1:

- 9.2 A candidate will be eligible for the award of Merit on achieving at the first attempt:
- a) a grade point average of 15 (equivalent to B3) or above in the 180 or more credits completed on the programme, and
 - b) a grade point average of at least **12** (equivalent to C3) in the taught courses, and
 - c) a grade of at least **C3** in the dissertation or other substantial independent work...
- 9.3 A candidate will be eligible for the award of Distinction on achieving at the first attempt:
- a) a grade point average of 18 (equivalent to A5) or above in the 180 or more credits completed on the programme, and
 - b) a grade point average of at least **15** (equivalent to B3) in the taught courses, and
 - c) a grade of at least **B3** in the dissertation or other substantial independent work...

OR

New requirements Proposal 2:

- 9.2 A candidate will be eligible for the award of Merit on achieving at the first attempt:
- a) a grade point average of 15 (equivalent to B3) or above in the 180 or more credits completed on the programme, and
 - b) a grade point average of at least **14** (equivalent to C1) in the taught courses, and
 - c) a grade of at least **C1** in the dissertation or other substantial independent work...
- 9.3 A candidate will be eligible for the award of Distinction on achieving at the first attempt:
- a) a grade point average of 18 (equivalent to A5) or above in the 180 or more credits completed on the programme, and
 - b) a grade point average of at least **17** (equivalent to B1) in the taught courses, and
 - c) a grade of at least **B1** in the dissertation or other substantial independent work...

Question 2: Is it appropriate to allow discretion in relation to the taught component but not to the dissertation? Is the current discretionary range appropriate?

Again responses on this question were split, with some maintaining that the dissertation grade should be an absolute requirement. However, adopting one of the proposals above would suggest that the discretionary zone should be applied to the GPA for the full 180 credits.

The wording for amended regulations 9.2 and 9.3 would therefore continue as follows:

9.2 [...] Where the grade point average for the 180 or more credits completed on the programme falls within the range 14.1 and 14.9 the Board of Examiners shall have discretion to make the award with Merit.

9.3 [...] Where the grade point average for the 180 or more credits completed on the programme falls within the range 17.1 to 17.9 the Board of Examiners shall have discretion to make the award with Distinction.

No discretion should be applied in relation to the GPA required on the taught courses or to the minimum grade required for the dissertation or other substantial independent work (set out in clauses (b) and (c)).

Considering the operation of discretion, it is worth noting the impact of adopting either **Proposal 1** or **Proposal 2** above on eligibility for promotion:

If **Proposal 1** above were to be adopted, candidates with the following profiles could be eligible for possible promotion:

Merit: overall GPA 14.1, C3 in dissertation

Distinction: overall GPA 17.1, B3 in dissertation.

If **Proposal 2** above were to be adopted, at least C1 or B1 respectively would always be required in the dissertation.

In light of consultation responses, no amendment to the extent of the zone of discretion is proposed.

Question 3: Should performance in reassessment contribute to eligibility for merit and distinction?

Responses to this question were almost unanimous in support of retaining the current position where only performance demonstrated at the first attempt should contribute to eligibility for Merit and Distinction. No change is proposed to ASC.

2. Defining Features of Dissertation/Independent Project Work for PGT Programmes

At its January 2018 meeting ASC received a report from the Adam Smith Business School concerning its current review of the MBA. The ASBS had asked for feedback on what was permitted under the term 'dissertation'. In other institutions MBA students might undertake a company project, business case study or similar. A range of such options was under consideration to make the MBA more attractive to the market, but these needed to be consistent with University regulations.

The ASBS was proposing the following Short Description of the Dissertation (Project) Course: 'As a capstone course, it will show how a student integrates material covered in core and elective courses, and conducts an in-depth investigation of an issue that is applicable and relevant to business and/or management, theoretically underpinned and using appropriate methods to show rigour in its approach and development.'

ASC was satisfied that the proposal was consistent with the requirement for a 'dissertation or other substantial independent work' set out in the PGT regulations but asked ARSC to reflect on whether further guidance could be published on the features required in a 'substantial independent work' in order to ensure appropriate academic rigour. Currently the PGT regulations simply stated:

4.1 In order to qualify for an award in respect of the programmes specified in §11 and §12, a candidate must complete minimum credits as follows:

i) For the award of a Masters degree: 180 credits, which includes both taught courses and a 60 credit (or more) dissertation or other substantial independent work.

ARSC members considered it most important that the term 'independent' was emphasised. Their view was the current definition encapsulates what is required but in order to indicate that there was a wide range of possibilities falling under the term 'substantial independent work' **the following amendment and additional footnote is proposed to ASC:**

4.1 In order to qualify for an award in respect of the programmes specified in §11 and §12, a candidate must complete minimum credits as follows:

i) For the award of a Masters degree: 180 credits, which includes both taught courses and a 60 credit (or more) substantial independent work. (*Footnote*)

Footnote: The work should be appropriately supervised and may take the form of a dissertation or project.

Summary of Responses to ARSC Consultation on Requirements for the Award of Merit and Distinction in PGT Generic Degree Regulations

Question 1: Is it appropriate to require candidates to satisfy separate requirements in relation to the dissertation and the taught component? Would it be preferable to stipulate an overall average performance with some lesser standard (if any) required in relation to the taught component and/or dissertation?

Current regulations:

- 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...
- 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...

Comments in favour of retaining separate requirements

- The dissertation was the strongest indicator of aptitude for PhD research and this would need to be factored in if the weighting was lessened.
- When compared against other systems, which staff have observed as external examiners, there was praise for the clarity and transparency of the current GU system.
- The Dissertation should be in the same band (or higher) as the award.
- There were thoughts expressed about the impact on standards and whether a change to GPA would bring down overall standards and University of Glasgow's position within the Higher Education sector and amongst other Russell group universities.
- The dissertation is the 'end point' so should reflect a culmination of the candidate's best thinking/writing/research etc. It is the piece that shows whether students have the capacity to draw together learning from the individual courses – synthesize etc.

Comments in favour of adopting requirements in relation to the GPA (aggregate score) across the full 180 credits

- Separate requirements unfair, contrary to practices at UG, may have impact on students' future applications for doctoral research funding and results in PGT programmes becoming less attractive in international market.
- An average across all components of a master's programme would better represent students being rewarded for strengths in different areas and different graduate attributes, without heavy emphasis being placed on the dissertation, and an acknowledgement that a PGT programme should also prepare students for a career outside of academia.
- In subjects that involve experimental creative practice, a student might attempt quite a risky project for their portfolio. If it didn't fully pay off, this could pull a distinction-calibre candidate down into merit despite excellent performance throughout the taught components.

- On programmes with high proportion of international students/students who are writing in a second language, student performance tends to improve over the course of the academic year.
- The final degree grade should represent the overall average performance without prioritising either dissertation or coursework.
- Disadvantageous to students, specifically where regulations prevent those who achieved Distinction in the dissertation, but whose coursework GPA falls just outwith the zone of discretion, from being awarded an overall Distinction by virtue of the taught component.
- Current approach penalises students with a strong 'exit velocity'; it fails to recognise that students need time to respond to and absorb pedagogical methods aimed at improving their performance; and, most seriously, it puts GU students at a competitive disadvantage when it comes to national scholarship competitions like the AHRC doctoral training scheme.
- On programmes with a substantial portion of the final mark determined by the first semester's work the current system has a tendency to set the level achieved initially as a ceiling, failing to reward students who improve significantly over the course of the programme.
- The entire average, including Dissertation and coursework, should be taken into account, with the sole stipulation that the final award cannot be higher than the Dissertation banding. I don't see this as a 'lesser standard' but a fairer one. It still requires an average in the higher banding, which is all we require at UG level.
- Suggested preference for average over both taught component and dissertation, with minimal requirements in both.
 - Distinction: Average ≥ 18 with both components ≥ 17 (e.g., B1 project)
 - Merit: Average ≥ 15 with both components ≥ 14 (e.g., C1 project)
- We frequently have students with high grade points who fail to gain a merit or distinction because their dissertation fall just below the threshold grade. It is also difficult to justify treating one 60 credits differently to another 60 credits when parity between Level 11 credits is meant to exist under the SCQF.

Question 2: Is it appropriate to allow discretion in relation to the taught component but not to the dissertation? Is the current discretionary range appropriate?

Current regulations:

- 9.2 ... 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 ... 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.

Comments received:

- Current regulations are unfair: for example, a student who has received a lower aggregate score in the taught component and, for example, makes it just into the zone of discretion at 17.1 but has received an 18 for the dissertation may receive a

Distinction, whereas a candidate who has received a string of 20s in all the taught components and a 17 in the dissertation has no chance of getting a Distinction although the aggregate score is considerably higher.

- The dissertation (as one component) does not receive an overall aggregated numerical mark, therefore it is unclear how discretion could operate for the dissertation.
- It is important for the dissertation itself to be merit/distinction.
- We should consider discretion and we should do this based on the final scores over all 180 credits. We believe that anything else is to discriminate and create two classes of courses.
- A leaning towards allowing some Dissertation discretion.

Responses received in relation to the size of the zone of discretion were almost unanimous in saying that the current zone was appropriate.

<p><i>Question 3:</i> Should performance in reassessment contribute to eligibility for merit and distinction?</p>

Current regulations:

9.2 A candidate who has achieved at the first attempt ...

9.3 A candidate who has achieved at the first attempt ...

Responses almost unanimously indicated that only results achieved at the first attempt should count towards eligibility for Merit and Distinction.