

University of Glasgow

Academic Standards Committee – Friday 22 November 2019

Discussion Paper: Proposal to Review (a) the Operation of Discretion in the Award of Honours and Masters Degree Classifications and (b) the Operation of Rounding in the Calculation of Programme Grade Point Average

Professor Jill Morrison, Clerk of Senate

ASC is invited to consider reviewing the operation of two key aspects of the Code of Assessment:

1. Operation of Discretion in the award of Honours and Masters degree classifications

Discretion has been used in the University for final degree awards for many decades and as such was incorporated into the design of the Code of Assessment when it was introduced in the early 2000s. Discretion was seen to offer protection from the potential unfairness of using a final score generated from marks alone by allowing some further input of academic judgment in marginal cases. This is set out in the Guide to the Code of Assessment as follows:

“The simplest and most readily transparent method of combining grades is to convert them into numbers, and Chapter 2 explains how this should be done and how the final score should be translated to a course result or a classified degree. The Code acknowledges the danger that these calculations will suggest a precision which may be deceptive. For Honours and Taught Masters Degree classification it therefore requires that Examination Boards look afresh at the position of students for whom the aggregation process delivers a marginal result (the Code defines these ‘zones of discretion’).”¹

Our approach to the operation of discretion has been evolving over many years. A consultation undertaken in 2010-11 led to a proposal to Senate that the GPA discretionary bands should be reduced from .1 - .9 to .5 - .9. It was noted that when the Code of Assessment was introduced wide zones of discretion had been set, deliberately, with a view to reviewing these once confidence in the operation of the Code had been established. Senate requested further consideration of the issue. Through the University-wide consultation that followed it was noted that there was significant activity in promoting students to higher classifications when they fell in the .1 - .4 range. It was agreed that the full discretionary bands should be retained. Guidelines were introduced in 2013-14 that sought to achieve greater consistency in how discretion was applied. These have continued to evolve. While the Guidelines encourage consistency and put limits on the way that discretion may be exercised, some academic staff have concerns that, in reality, the existence of any discretion can itself lead to a lack of fairness in degree outcomes. Some External Examiner reports refer to the operation of discretion, with a range of views being expressed but a number in recent years expressing concern at the wide discretion available to exam boards.

There is a question of whether the potential unfairness that discretion was seeking to address remains an issue of concern. It is easy to see how in previous eras marking approaches may have been less consistent as there was less structure and guidance than the framework provided in the Code of Assessment. The latter is now firmly embedded in our

¹ See Chapter 1 p. 4 of the [Guide to the Code of Assessment](https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/Media_124292_smx.pdf) [https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/Media_124292_smx.pdf]

academic practice. A greater number of assessments and a wider range of assessment types is now in use. Discretion (academic judgment) is applied in every assessment. This, combined with improved confidence in our current marking and moderation procedures, brings into question the need for a mechanism to review borderline cases.

The potential for unfairness in our current review mechanism is put into sharp focus by the comparison of students in single and joint Honours where two students could have an identical set of grades but one student gains a better degree classification than the other because the two subject exam boards apply the discretionary principles differently. The problem is not confined to a comparison between single and joint honours but can occur when two single honours students from different subject areas have an identical profile of grades and identical GPA but one receives a higher degree classification than the other because the two subject exam boards apply the discretionary rules differently.

The issue of discretion is also raised in the recently published ELIR Technical report (extract appended). The report recommends that the University should: "Develop a systematic way of monitoring and analysing the use of discretion by examination boards in order to have a clear view of the effectiveness of these arrangements and to have clearer and more detailed information about the consistency with which this aspect of the assessment regulations is applied across the University." The response to this recommendation will require careful consideration.

The key principles to guide our deliberations on this issue should be fairness to students and the maintenance of academic standards. Related to this should be an attempt to simplify the procedures, as their current complexity adds to the potential for introducing unfairness, either through misunderstanding of the rules or through inconsistent application of the rules or both. This is also a good time to look at simplifying our procedures to inform the Assessment and Feedback Transformation project.

Given that discretion, while being offered as a solution to potential unfairness, itself has the potential to generate unfairness in its outcomes, an alternative approach is suggested through the removal of discretion and the adoption of a simple numerical solution. Instead of employing zones of discretion, revised hard borderlines could be introduced: a student with a programme grade point average of 17.5 or above would be awarded a first class honours/Masters Distinction. If their GPA is below 17.5, they would be awarded a 2:1 honours degree/Masters Merit. This solution would be both simple and fair, and could be readily applied consistently at all borderlines and across all programmes.

2. Rounding

The Code of Assessment currently states that programme grade point average is calculated by aggregating the integers associated with the relevant overall course grades. These overall course grades are usually the product of aggregating assessment component grades. Therefore the overall programme GPA usually reflects at least two stages of rounding. This can cause both inflation and deflation of GPA, allowing students to move in and out of the zone of discretion and across grade boundaries.

There is a case to argue that if Exam Board discretion is eliminated and GPA alone is to be used to determine degree classification, then an unrounded GPA should be used, that is, the programme GPA should be calculated using all the assessment component grades, appropriately weighted, from all of the contributing courses. (However, individual overall course results would still be calculated and recorded on the student's transcript.)

The possible impact of using a rounded rather than an unrounded GPA is illustrated by the examples given in the Guide to the Code of Assessment (Examples 2.O and 2.P.)²

Currently the Guidelines on application of discretion allow the use of an unrounded GPA to resolve discretionary cases but this does not address the potential unfairness that arises in the following scenarios:

- (a) the rounded GPA puts a student below the zone of discretion, whereas the unrounded GPA would have placed them in the zone of discretion and they would have satisfied the criteria for promotion
- (b) the rounded GPA puts the student in the zone of discretion and they do not satisfy the chosen criteria for promotion but they would have been promoted if the unrounded mean had been chosen as one of the criteria
- (c) the rounded GPA puts the student in a higher degree classification whereas unrounded GPA would have left them in the lower zone of discretion and they would not have satisfied the criteria for promotion
- (d) the rounded GPA puts the student in the zone of discretion and they satisfy the criteria for promotion, whereas using unrounded mean would have left them below the zone of discretion.

Some of these scenarios are unlikely but there will be a number of such cases each year.

A note on the role of Exam Boards

It has been argued that removing discretion would give exam boards and external examiners too little to do and would somehow undermine the role of the academic body in determining degree outcomes. This needs to be challenged – it is not a good reason for continuing with an unfair process and much of the time in exam board meetings is taken up with reporting results. Removing this aspect of the assessment process would enable exam boards and external examiners to spend freed up time on quality enhancement, discussion of grade profiles across a programme, assessment practices, and sharing of practice with external examiners in addition to the maintenance of standards.

ASC is therefore asked to consider whether to take forward a consultation on:

- **Reviewing zones of discretion in the award of Honours and Masters degree classifications.**
- **Amending grade point average thresholds for the award of degree classifications**
- **Calculating programme grade point average on the basis of aggregated assessment component grades rather than overall course grades.**

² See Chapter 2 p. 18 of the [Guide to the Code of Assessment](https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/Media_124293_smx.pdf) [https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/Media_124293_smx.pdf]

Appendix

Extract from ELIR Technical Report (2019)

134 In response to the 2014 ELIR report recommendation - that the University should ensure the consistent application of its assessment regulations across all exam boards and continue to monitor the impact of its guidelines on the use of discretion by exam boards - the University reported that the Code of Assessment sets out both principles and specific regulations to standardise the approach and management of assessment at undergraduate and taught postgraduate levels, and is supplemented by additional documentation and guidance. The University decided that direct monitoring would require significant, disproportionate effort and staff time, but that the operation of the guidelines would be monitored by the Senate Office through the Academic Regulations Sub-Committee and Academic Standards Committee and, periodically, through engagement with the colleges. From November 2016, all exam boards have been required to publish their chosen criteria in advance and the guidelines have been clarified to emphasise that the same criteria must be used in each discretionary zone. Following these revisions, the University noted a number of positive comments from external examiners on the more detailed guidance. In March 2017, ASC noted that the issue of discretionary decisions for honours and postgraduate taught level classifications had continued to prompt comment from external examiners in their reports for 2015-16. However, the number of comments had fallen since previous years and the University hoped this trend would continue. At the time of the current ELIR, a small number of queries from external examiners remained annually and the University indicated that it expected this to continue and committed to addressing any misunderstandings identified.

135 In discussions with the ELIR team, staff highlighted that consistency of approach in the operation of discretion across different subject areas continues to be a concern. The use of discretion by exam boards is not routinely analysed in a manner which would allow for monitoring and comparison of trends across the institution. There would be considerable benefit in the University being able to analyse this data systematically, in order to monitor instances and the pattern of discretion across the institution.