



Senate

Paper title	Assessment Governance Task and Finish Group: Eligibility for award
Outcome requested	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Senate is asked to agree that there is a need to change the regulations on eligibility for award. • Senate is asked to comment on the paper, and make suggestions on the exact nature of the regulatory changes. • Senate is asked to agree to the proposed regulatory review process led by the Assessment Governance Task and Finish Group.
Points for Senate members to note and further information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • QM's requirements for award in terms of total credits passed and credits passed at the level of award are significantly more lenient than those of other institutions, to such an extent that this may be deemed a risk to standards. • The paper includes the results of benchmarking against other institutions, and broad proposals for reform. • Changes to the award requirements would trigger a need for review of regulations on progression and resit provision. • Changes to the award regulations would damage QM's progression figures, but help the 'good honours' figures.
Questions for Senate to consider	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does Senate agree that there is a clear need for change? • What form might a new set of regulations take? • Is Senate satisfied with the work of the Assessment and Feedback Task and Finish Group on this issue?
Regulatory/statutory reference points	The award rules are central policies in the Academic Regulations. They are scrutinised by the professional and statutory regulatory bodies that endorse some QM awards, though any changes made as a result of this review would strengthen the awards, and not pose any risk to those associations.
Strategy and risk	Failure to act could pose a substantial risk, and would be a probable topic of discussion in the next review by the Quality Assurance Agency. Students and employers may deem that a QM award is worth less than that of an institution that requires students to pass a significantly higher proportion of credits.
Reporting/consideration route for the paper	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Submitted to Senate, December 2013. • To be circulated to Schools, Institutes and the Students' Union for consultation (in a revised format) in early 2014 as part of a consultation exercise.
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Assessment Governance Task and Finish Group Eligibility for award

Background

The Assessment Governance Task and Finish Group ('the Group') considers regulatory and policy-based issues related to assessment and award. In 2012-13 the Group's work included the harmonisation of year weightings for undergraduate programmes, and harmonisation of progression criteria for postgraduate and integrated masters programmes. In June 2013, Senate agreed that the Group would continue to harmonise and rationalise the regulations, and to ensure that practices were broadly aligned with those elsewhere in the HE sector.

With the exercise of independent degree awarding powers for the first time and QM's entry to the Russell Group, the Group deemed that a review of the criteria that made students eligible for award would be timely. The External Member to the Undergraduate Degree Examination Boards agreed that such a review would be positive. The majority of the existing regulations were inherited from the old University of London regulations. The Group focused on undergraduate programmes, and conducted a benchmarking exercise, comparing QM's requirements for the award of standard three year bachelors degrees against those of other Russell Group members, and a number of other institutions.

The benchmarking demonstrated that QM's requirements for award were significantly more lenient than those of other institutions. QM's requirements are detailed below, but the central requirement is that students take 360 credits and pass at least 270 (with an overall mark of at least 40.0 for 2012-13 and later cohorts). Students must take at least 90 credits at academic level six, but are not formally required to pass these. The vast majority of institutions in the sample offer ordinary (non-honours) degrees as exit awards for students who fail to meet the honours requirements; almost without exception, the requirements for an ordinary degree are to pass at least 300 credits including at least 60 credits at level six. For an honours degree elsewhere, students must generally pass at least 315-330 credits (including 90-120 at level six), with a system of condoned failure for the remaining credits (allowing only narrow failures).

QM's requirements are significantly out of line with those of the sector. The issue requires urgent review, and poses questions over academic standards and the comparability of QM's awards to those elsewhere.

This paper asks Senate to recognise the issue, and to agree that the Group should develop recommendations to amend QM's requirements for award, to take effect from 2014/15 (for new students). The benchmarking focused on bachelors degrees, but all undergraduate programmes will require review. Changes, if approved, could not be limited to the overall credits that students must pass. In order to stay on track for an award, progression requirements would need to become more stringent, which in turn would necessitate a review of resit provision to ensure that students have the best possible opportunity to progress. The academic level of modules taken by students, and the proportion of those that must be passed also requires review.

Changes in this area will increase attrition, as fewer students will meet the requirements for progression and award. However, the proportion of 'good honours' degrees awarded will increase, as those students who do meet the award requirements will have noticeably better results. It has been noted previously that QM's good honours rate is lower than would be expected (notably [SE2012.57](#)), and this regulatory issue is likely to be a significant factor.

QM's current requirements for award (standard three-year bachelors awards)

Taken from the *Academic Regulations 2013-14*:

4.69. To be eligible for award of BA, BSc, BSc (Econ), BEng, or BSc (Eng) a student must:

- i. meet the requirements for the approved programme for which they are registered;
- ii. meet the requirements for the duration of registration;
- iii. take the required total credit value for the award (see below);
- iv. meet the minimum credit value at the level of the award (see below);
- v. not exceed the maximum credit value at the lowest level for the award (see below);
- vi. meet the progression requirements at the end of each developmental year, and be in the final developmental year;
- vii. achieve a minimum College Mark of 40.0.

4.70. To be eligible for award of BA, BSc, BSc (Econ), BEng, or BSc(Eng), a student must:

- i. take modules to a total value of 360 credits, equivalent to 120 credits per developmental year;
- ii. take modules to a minimum value of 90 credits at Level 6;
- iii. take modules to a maximum value of 150 credits at Level 4, of which 30 credits may be at Level 3;
- iv. pass modules to the value of 270 credits (excluding modules at Level 3).

Benchmarking

The benchmarking considered all institutions in the Russell Group, comparator institutions in the University of London, and a small number of other institutions in order to show a range of approaches. Of the 24 Russell Group institutions, two had no single policy (Oxford and Cambridge); two operated under the substantially different Scottish system (Edinburgh and Glasgow), and two had regulations that were insufficiently clear to be usefully included (Warwick and York - variance by programme was indicated). The table is presented in order from the most stringent requirements to the most lenient. All programmes require that 360 credits be taken unless otherwise stated. It is also noteworthy that most institutions operate in blocks of ten or 20 credits, rather than 15 credit blocks, which increases flexibility in progression and condones failure rules..

Total credits to achieve for award

Note: credit is generally given when condoned failure is used, so if the total credit is 360 then that does not necessarily mean that a student must pass every module outright.

Institution ¹	Total credits required for award
Imperial (RG)	360 (there is compensation, but the requirements aren't comparable, focusing on performance across the year rather than in individual modules)
Newcastle (RG)	360 (no formal condoned failure, but an exam board, " <i>notwithstanding the student's results [... may] deem a student to have passed specific modules – including core modules</i> ")
Sheffield (RG)	360 (condones ≤20, but only at L4 (Y1))
LSE (RG, UoL)	360 (condones ≤30 across Y1 and Y2)
Bristol (RG)	360 (condones ≤40: ≤20 in Y1 and ≤20 in Y2)
Durham (RG)	360 (condones ≤40: ≤20 in Y2 and ≤20 in Y3)
Manchester (RG)	360 (condones ≤40 for a First, 2:1 or 2:2, condones ≤60 for a Third: ≤40 in Y1, ≤40 in Y2, ≤40 in Y3.
Westminster	360 (condones ≤45, but only at L4 (Y1))
KCL (RG, UoL)	315 (condones ≤45)
Cardiff (RG)	360 (condones ≤60 total but only ≤30 in any one year)

¹ RG = Russell Group; UoL = University of London.

Goldsmiths (UoL)	360 (condones ≤ 60 , but only ≤ 30 in any one year)
East London	360 (condones ≤ 60 : ≤ 20 each year)
London South Bank	360 (condones ≤ 60 : ≤ 20 each year)
Southampton (RG)	360 (condones either ≤ 90 or ≤ 60 : ≤ 30 per year, but unclear whether that applies in the final year)
Nottingham (RG)	360 (condones, but has three sets of condoned fail rules; will <i>potentially</i> condone ≤ 120 - ≤ 40 at each stage – but that would be very rare.
Liverpool (RG)	330 (condones ≤ 60 : ≤ 30 in Y1 and ≤ 30 in Y2. Allows (non-condoned) failure for ≤ 30 in Y3 if there has been 'a reasonable attempt'.
Queen's, Belfast (RG)	320 (allows outright failure in the remaining ≤ 40 , but must pass all Y1 modules)
UCL (RG, UoL)	330 (allows outright failure in the remaining ≤ 30)
Birmingham (RG)	320 (allows outright failure in the remaining ≥ 40)
Leeds (RG)	300 (allows outright failure in the remaining ≤ 60)
Exeter (RG)	270 (condones ≤ 90 : ≤ 30 each year but doesn't give credit)
Royal Holloway (UoL)	270 (allows outright failure in the remaining ≤ 90 , but must pass ≥ 90 at L6)
London Metropolitan	270 (allows outright failure in the remaining ≤ 90 , but must pass ≥ 90 at L6)
Queen Mary (RG, UoL)	270 (allows outright failure in the remaining ≤ 70)

Warwick, and York: unclear. Edinburgh, Oxford, Glasgow, and Cambridge: not comparable.

QM currently has the most lenient award regulations of any institution in the sample, and this requires address. The benchmarking indicates that a new policy should include 300 credits as an absolute bare minimum to be passed outright (315 or 330 may be thought more appropriate, given that 300 is the norm for an ordinary degree), with a stringent condoned failure rule for the remaining credits.

Academic level requirements for award

QM requires that students take 90 credits at academic level six (the level of award), but does not require that they pass any of them. This is out of line with all institutions in the sample.

Institution	Min. level six credits taken	Min. level six credits passed ²
Sheffield (RG)	120	120
Westminster	120	120
East London	120	120
Cardiff (RG)	120	100
Durham (RG)	120	100
Leeds (RG)	120	100
Queen's, Belfast (RG)	120	100
Nottingham (RG)	100	100
Birmingham (RG)	Unclear (≥ 100)	100
Glasgow (RG)	120 (L6 equivalent)	90 (L6 equivalent)
Goldsmiths (UoL)	120	Unclear, but is ≥ 90
Manchester (RG)	90	90
Newcastle (RG)	90	90
UCL (RG, UoL)	90	90
Royal Holloway (UoL)	90	90
London Metropolitan	90	90
Bristol (RG)	Unclear (≥ 90)	90
Liverpool (RG)	90	Unclear, but likely 90
Southampton (RG)	90	Unclear, but likely 90
London South Bank	120	80
Exeter (RG)	≥ 90	60
KCL (RG, UoL)	90	45 (no explicit requirement, but only ≤ 45 credits can be condoned overall).
Queen Mary (RG, UoL)	90	0

LSE, Warwick, and York: unclear. Edinburgh, Oxford, and Cambridge: not comparable.

² A condoned level six module generally, but not always, counts as a pass for this purpose.

A substantial number of institutions require that students take 120 credits at level six and achieve this by locking developmental years to academic levels (i.e., students only take L4 modules in year one, L5 modules in year two, L6 modules in year three). QM may wish to explore this approach; it would eradicate the recurrent problems with students who reach the point of award with credit loads that break the Academic Regulations, requiring suspensions. QM should also consider introducing a requirement to pass a minimum amount of level six credits to be eligible for award (such as 'take 120 and pass 90 credits at level six').

Consequences of changes

There is a strong case for amending the regulations on eligibility for award to increase the total credit requirements for award and to increase the requirement for credits at the level of award (level six for bachelors degrees, as in the benchmarking). These changes would impact on a number of areas and consideration should be given to how best to manage the consequences of such changes:

Progression, attrition, and good honours

Increasing the requirements for award would necessitate higher hurdles for progression. If these were not introduced then a student might progress to the final year and pass all final year modules, but not meet the requirements for award. Progression currently operates on the same formula as award – students must pass three quarters of the modules that they take (take 120 and pass 90/take 240 and pass 180),

Because QM does not have a consistent approach in allocating credit values to modules, an increase requiring students to pass 105 rather than 90 credits would not be practicable (as it would disadvantage students on programmes with only 30 credit modules). There are two possible solutions: (i) the requirement to pass 90 credits per year could be left in place, with a very stringent condoned fail rule for the remaining 30 credits, or (ii) the condoned failure could be cumulative – i.e. students could have a total condoned fail allowance of (e.g.) 45 credits, and as soon as they hit that limit, whether in the first year or the final year, no further condoning would be permitted. Even with a very strict rule, option (i) appears lenient in light of the benchmarking results, so option (ii) may be considered preferable.

Higher hurdles for progression will, unavoidably, damage QM's retention figures. Methods to counter this, and to prevent large numbers of students from repeatedly resitting out of attendance, would therefore require consideration. The wider, or universal, introduction of late summer resits would be one such measure for consideration.

Change on some scale appears necessary from the perspective of standards management. Although the effect of regulatory changes on progression may make the changes appear negative, there would also be a benefit, in that QM's proportion of good honours degrees would be considerably increased.

Ordinary degree

An ordinary degree is an award issued without honours, generally as an exit award. QM is one of only two Russell Group institutions that explicitly does not issue these awards (the other being Manchester, which instead has a lower credit requirement for the Third Class degree. Regulations from Oxford, Cambridge, and Imperial are unclear but, nonetheless, there is a clear precedent). QM has never issued such an award due to a peculiarity in the University of London regulations, which do not allow for a non-honours degree (the Pass degree, which QM dropped last year, was an honours degree, and entirely distinct).

With the exercise of independent degree awarding powers, QM is now able to introduce such an award, and there seems to be a strong case for doing so. Almost without exception, the requirements for ordinary degrees at the benchmarked institutions are to pass 300 credits, including 60 at level six (Birmingham requires 80 at level six; Cardiff requires 320 credits including 120 at level six; KCL only requires that 60 credits at level six be taken).

Linking developmental years and academic levels

It is suggested above that consideration be given to firmly linking academic levels to developmental years. Such a change could not be introduced for 2014/15, as it would require significant changes to module diets for many programmes. It is therefore noted that such a change, if approved, would not take effect before 2015/16 (for the new cohort only).

Next steps

Senate is asked to **agree** (or otherwise) that there is a need for change in the regulations on eligibility for award.

Senate is asked to **agree** (or otherwise) that the Assessment Governance Task and Finish Group should coordinate a regulatory review process as follows:

The Group shall:

- January 2014: formulate initial recommendations for new policies based on the benchmarking work and feedback from Senate.
- February – April 2014: send the initial recommendations to schools, institutes and the Students' Union for comment and other input.
- March 2014: send the consultation documentation to Senate (while the consultation is on-going) for comment and input, and to address any significant issues raised at that stage in the process.
- May 2014: formulate revised proposals based on feedback from the consultation.
- June 2014: send the revised proposals to Senate for consideration/approval, for implementation from 2014/15 (for the new cohort only).

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