



Senate

Paper title	Discretion
Outcome requested	Senate is asked to consider the proposals, and to approve a review exercise coordinated by the Assessment Governance Task and Finish Group.
Points for Senate members to note and further information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discretion is the process by which examination boards can recommend deserving borderline candidates for a higher classification of award. • QM's discretion procedures remain somewhat inconsistent across examination boards, despite successful projects to harmonise elements of the process in recent years. • The paper includes proposals for two discretion schemes common to all programmes across QM – one for programmes classified on the honours scheme, and the other for those on the Pass, Merit, Distinction scheme.
Questions for Senate to consider	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does Senate agree that QM should aim to approve more consistent discretion schemes? • What factors should be considered in determining discretion? • Do the proposed schemes seem acceptable? Can they go out for consultation in the current form?
Regulatory/statutory reference points	Discretion falls under QM's assessment policies. It is covered in the Assessment Handbook, and relates to Academic Regulation 4.55/5.56: <i>"A Subject Examination Board may recommend to a Degree Examination Board that a small degree of discretion be used in the classification of a student, within the permitted scope of QM policy. There is no discretion at the Pass/Fail borderline."</i>
Strategy and risk	Clarifying and harmonising discretion policies would further strengthen QM's academic standards. The Quality Assurance Agency raised inconsistencies in discretion as a concern in their 2010 report; those concerns have been addressed in large part, but further refinements are desirable.
Reporting/consideration route for the paper	N/A
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Discretion

Introduction

Discretion is the process by which examination boards can recommend deserving borderline candidates for a higher classification of award. Typically, in order for a student to be considered for discretion, the final 'College Mark' must be within a specified limit from the classification boundary (a 'zone of consideration'), and one or more additional criteria must be met.

In the past, QM received a large number of comments from external examiners and – particularly – the external members to the Degree Examination Boards, strongly recommending that policies be harmonised. Prior to 2010/11, discretion policies were entirely set by individual SEBs, both in terms of the zone of consideration (which ranged between 0.5 and three per cent) and the criteria within the zone. This inconsistent approach dis/advantaged students depending on their SEB, and created particular problems for joint honours programmes, where two students with identical results and on very similar programmes could receive different classification outcomes.

In 2010/11, a review of undergraduate discretion policies established fixed zones of consideration – two per cent at the First/2:1 and 2:1/2:2 borderlines, and one per cent at the 2:2/Third and Third/Pass borderlines. The criteria within the zone of consideration remained at the discretion of individual SEBs, though the SEBs reporting to the UG Arts DEB created a harmonised policy due to the high proportion of joint honours programmes. No formal policy was adopted for postgraduate discretion, though a recommendation for a one per cent zone of consideration (plus SEB-devised criteria) is included in the Assessment Handbook. There is no discretion at the Pass/Fail borderline for UG or PG. Following the 2010/11 review, it was agreed that further review would take place in the future. QM continues to receive comments from external examiners and the external members advocating greater harmonisation (though commending the improvements made to date). This paper seeks to commence work on this new review, and to establish common standards for postgraduate discretion.

It should be noted that discretion should never be relied upon as the primary mechanism for ensuring that deserving students achieve the appropriate classification. Marks should stand for themselves, and in many cases an increased use of the full range of marks (particularly above 70) would substantially reduce the number of discretionary cases. This is an issue often flagged by external examiners and members. The external members have in the past commented that discretion can be done away with entirely when institutions are fully secure in their marking.

Specific comments from the external members

The PG external member noted in 2012/13 that (i) most of the students raised were within 0.5 per cent of a border and (ii) most students within 0.5 per cent of a border were raised, and therefore suggested that consideration be given to awarding the higher classification automatically at that threshold, and dispensing with discretion. The UG external member noted issues of terminology, and suggested that under many of the existing schemes in use it would be more accurate to describe the discretion policies as borderline policies, as the requirements for 'discretion' were in many cases very clear, and rigidly enforced.

Note on terminology

The true division is not between undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, but between programmes that classify on the First, Upper Second, Lower Second, Third scheme, and programmes that classify on the Distinction, Merit, Pass scheme. For purposes of clarity, the terms 'undergraduate' and 'postgraduate' have been used in this paper, but postgraduate should be read as including undergraduate certificates, diplomas, and other such awards.

Undergraduate (except programmes on the P/M/D scheme)

The UG Arts DEB has a fully harmonised discretion policy. UG Sciences expressed a wish to work towards such a policy at its meeting in June 2013. UG Engineering is unusual in that three of the four constituent SEBs are from the same school (SEMS), and so is broadly harmonised already. UG Medicine and UG Dentistry do not classify their awards, and while they would nominally be covered by any new policy, it would not have any impact for the MBBS or BDS. UG Law does not classify on College Mark, so must remain separate for now; the LLB has substantially different regulations from other UG programmes, and has a detailed set of conventions for classification and discretion.

While adopting one policy per DEB would be progress, it would be best to adopt a single policy for all DEBs (excluding UG Law), to allow for joint honours programmes between schools reporting to different DEBs and to guard against any potential future amendments to the DEB structure.

Zones of consideration

The zones of consideration for UG awards were harmonised previously: two per cent at the First/2:1 and 2:1/2:2 borderlines, and one per cent at the 2:2/Third and Third/Pass borderlines. The distinction was made so that the zones of consideration covered the top 20 per cent in each classification zone. With the recent removal of the Pass degree and the expansion of the Third zone from 45-49.9 to 40-49.9, two per cent would be used for all borderlines once the 2013/14 cohort reach the point of classification in the absence of a policy review in the meantime.

In June 2013, the UG Arts DEB expressed a collective desire to reduce all zones of consideration to one per cent, noting that efforts by SEBs had resulted in use of a wider range of marks to the point that such a large zone as two per cent was no longer necessary. Informal feedback from some other SEBs suggests that such a change would also be acceptable elsewhere.

Criteria within the zones of consideration

There is still variance in the policies used within the zones of consideration. SEBs are required to stipulate one or more criteria that students must meet in addition to falling within the zone of consideration; these are detailed below. The Language Centre and Science and Engineering Foundation Programme SEBs classify on the Pass/Merit/Distinction scheme, so have not been included here. The MBBS, BDS and LLB are excluded, for the reasons detailed previously. 'At the higher level' refers to 'at the level of the higher classification'. Substantive extenuating circumstances not taken into account elsewhere are considered by all SEBs, so have not been included in the table.

Existing practice

School/SEB	Requirements	DEB
English & Drama (2 SEBs)	60+ final year credits at the higher level.	Arts
Languages, Linguistics & Film	60+ final year credits at the higher level.	Arts
History	60+ final year credits at the higher level.	Arts
Geography	60+ final year credits at the higher level.	Arts
Politics & International Relations	60+ final year credits at the higher level.	Arts
Engineering & Materials Science (3 SEBs)*	Project at the higher level. At least one year's performance at the higher level. Positive exit velocity.	Engineering
Electronic Engineering & Computer Science (2 SEBs)	Final year project at the higher level; and/or, Positive exit velocity.	Engineering/ Sciences
Mathematical Sciences	'Strong marks' in 60+ credits at levels 6/7 for First and 2A borders or 45+ credits for 2B and Third borders. Final year average at the higher level. Final year project mark. Any other strengths or trends in the student's marks. Script review (for all students in the zones of consideration)	Sciences

Biological & Chemical Sciences (2 SEBs)	Final year performance: - Positive exit velocity; - Final year average at the higher level; - Four or more modules at the higher level. Script review by external examiners.	Sciences
Physics & Astronomy	Final year average at the higher level <u>and</u> either i) 60+ level 6/7 credits at the higher level, or ii) a final year project mark at least 15% above the classification boundary.	Sciences
Economics & Finance	Uses a formula known as the 'proportion index' to determine how many credits were achieved with marks higher than the College Mark**. Full text below.	Sciences
Business & Management	150+ credits at the higher level, including 45+ credits at level six.	Sciences
Intercalated SMD Programmes	60+ final year credits at the higher level.	Sciences

* Students must meet at least one criterion if they fall within 0.5% of a border, two criteria for 1%, three for 1.5%, and all four for 2% (the fourth criterion is ECs).

** "In order to select the candidates to consider from the remaining marginal cases the SEB uses a *proportion index*. This index shows the proportion of marks in classes above the level currently indicated by the mean. This proportion is determined taking the following into account. First, for each Fail in a given year we subtract one from the number of courses at higher levels - compared to the borderline mark considered - in that year. Second, we use weights of 10, 30 and 60% for these proportions of development years 1, 2 and 3. Normally marginal candidates with a proportion of modules at the higher level of at least 50% will be strongly considered to be moved up one class. The proportion index thus provides information to facilitate the discussion at the SEB meeting, thereby supporting the transparency, consistency and fairness of the SEB's *academic judgment*."

Common themes

Credits at the higher level

A significant number of policies require that students achieve at least a minimum number of credits at the level of the higher classification. There is some variance in whether these credits must be at a specified academic level, or taken in a specified developmental year, but these two categories should – in most cases – be broadly aligned. Seven of the thirteen policies ask for 60+ credits at the higher level in the final year, two for 60+ credits at levels six or seven, and one for 150+ credits at the higher level including at least 45 level six credits. Of the remaining three, two factor in exit velocity as a criterion, and the third (SEF) uses a calculation to ensure that there is a majority of marks at the higher level overall. A requirement for a specified number of credits at the higher level seems a clear criterion for inclusion in any new policy.

Exit velocity

A number of the policies consider exit velocity in its own right as a criterion. It should be noted that exit velocity is already built in to the classification scheme, as awards are weighted 1:3:6:(6). Consideration of exit velocity in discretion effectively constitutes double counting.

Project/dissertation marks

As with exit velocity, project and dissertation modules generally already carry a greater weight within a programme due to the higher credit value (a 30 credit third year bachelors degree project counts for 15% of the programme, and 20% for Electronic Engineering). Placing an additional positive focus on the project for discretion could be seen as double counting, though to a lesser extent than exit velocity given the particular disciplinary importance of the project. In addition to considering the inclusion of a positive weighting on the project, when developing a new policy a minimum threshold could be considered (e.g. must have 60+ final year credits at the higher level, and the dissertation or project mark must not be less than five marks below the higher level).

At least one year's performance at the higher level

This criterion is only used in one policy, but is a sensible inclusion. Otherwise, students who have never attained (for example) a year average of 70.0+ can achieve First Class degrees.

Script review by external examiners

SEBs should normally seek approval from the externals in all cases of discretion. However, the externals should not make direct recommendations for classifications as their role is to review the processes rather than the individual students. It is good practice for SEBs to show externals samples (or even all) of the borderline cases, but they should not make direct recommendations to the SEB.

Extenuating circumstances

Significant extenuating circumstances not taken into account elsewhere are included in all of the existing policies, and would remain in any new policy. It should be noted that the vast majority of extenuating circumstances *should* have been taken into account elsewhere, however, and that cases where this criterion is employed should be relatively uncommon.

Cases in recent years have generated two types of situation in relation to extenuating circumstances and discretion; cases where a student falls into the zone of consideration and the ECs are used as a factor in raising them to the next class, and cases where a student falls outside of a zone of consideration, but has ECs that a SEB believes should push them into the zone of consideration. A new policy could factor in both approaches, but it would need to be explicit that the ECs could only be used for one purpose or the other (not to push a student into the zone and then to raise them). If a student was pushed into the zone of consideration by extenuating circumstances then they would also need to meet all other discretionary criteria.

'Vivas'

In 2012/13, Senate took a decision to discontinue the use of viva-type assessments at the point of classification to determine whether a candidate should benefit from discretion. These assessments were undertaken purely for the purpose of classification, and did not form part of the approved curriculum for the respective programmes of study. These assessments are no longer used by any of the SEBs, and will not be used in any future policy on discretion.

Proposal

The proposal below takes into account the most common practices from the existing policies. It is intended only as a starting point for discussion.

1. Students with College Marks within one per cent of a borderline (except Pass/Fail) shall be determined to fall within the 'zone of consideration';
2. Students with College Marks within two per cent of a borderline [or 1.5 per cent?] and significant extenuating circumstances not taken into account elsewhere may be determined to fall within the zone of consideration. However, if this approach is taken then the extenuating circumstances may not also be used as a reason to raise the classification itself;
3. All students falling within the zone of consideration shall be considered as possible cases for discretion;
4. Students falling within the zone of consideration and with at least 60 final year credits with marks at the level of the upper classification (or higher), including the dissertation or project*, shall be considered as strong cases for the exercise of discretion;
5. Students falling within the zone of consideration and not meeting the requirements of point 4, but with significant extenuating circumstances not taken into account elsewhere may be considered as strong cases for the exercise of discretion provided the SEB is confident that – without the effect of the extenuating circumstances – the student would have achieved the higher classification.
6. Discretion is not an automatic process, and in addition to the criteria detailed above, SEBs should ensure that the remainder of a student's profile is also consistent with the recommended classification.

* The underlined section is likely to stimulate discussion. It could be omitted entirely, made a requirement for all SEBs, or imposed as a requirement on either a DEB or (preferably) Faculty basis.

Postgraduate (and UG programmes on the P/M/D scheme)

There is currently no formal QM policy on discretion at postgraduate level, and SEBs are responsible for determining their own procedures. DEBs consider all cases of discretion, and would highlight any scheme that appeared unfair or inappropriate.

Zones of consideration

Although there are no formally set zones of consideration, the Assessment Handbook has for some time recommended that zones of one per cent at the Distinction/Merit and Merit/Pass borders be utilised, with no discretion at the Pass/Fail border. At the postgraduate DEBs in October 2013, all SEBs except two used the one per cent zones, and those two noted that they would review their processes and adopt the one per cent zones for 2013/14. The formal introduction of one per cent zones of consideration would therefore appear uncontroversial.

Criteria within the zones of consideration

The criteria within the zones at postgraduate level are less clearly recorded centrally than the undergraduate ones, which were approved by Senate in 2010/11. However, those for which details of an explicit scheme are known are detailed below. Unlike the undergraduate schemes, which do each have measurable criteria, many of the postgraduate schemes do depend only on profile review, which may be seen as subjective and not necessarily consistent year-on-year. It is assumed that all SEBs consider substantive extenuating circumstances not taken into account elsewhere as a factor.

Unlike undergraduate programmes, postgraduate programmes vary considerably in the number of credits taken and the duration of study. Additionally, in most cases the concept of a final year of study is irrelevant, as programmes are generally either one year, or part time over multiple years. In order to bring consistency in the review, credit-based requirements have also been expressed as percentages or proportions. All SEBs consider substantial extenuating circumstances not taken into account elsewhere as a factor in determining discretion.

Current practice (where explicitly known – other SEBs have been excluded)

SEB	Criteria	DEB
Business and Management	90+ credits (50%) at higher level.	Sciences
Economics and Finance	Tutors and specifically the project supervisor comment on calibre of this candidate and overall performance. Consideration of decisions made for other borderline candidates and factors contributing to that decision. Results of examinations versus project mark. Has the candidate produced a project within the range of the higher classification? Precedence during the meeting.	Sciences
Electronic Engineering & Computer Science	Profile review.	Sciences
English and Drama	120+ credits (66.7%) at the higher level.	Arts
Geography	Profile review (all students who were raised had at least 60 credits (33.3%) at the higher level, though that isn't explicitly a requirement).	Arts
History	90+ credits (50%) at higher level, with special attention to the dissertation.	Arts
Languages, Linguistics and Film	Profile review. A strong dissertation is specifically mentioned in the minutes.	Arts
Law and Finance/Law and Economics	90+ credits (50%) at higher level.	Law
LLM (London)	Within 0.5%: 90 credits (50%) at higher level. Within 1%: 135 credits (75%) at higher level.	Law
Mathematical Sciences	Average of best 120 credits of level seven modules (66.7%) is at the higher level.	Sciences
Politics and International Relations	60+ credits (33.3%) at higher level.	Arts

At postgraduate level (and for UG foundation programmes, diplomas and certificates) there are less factors to consider than at undergraduate level. Exit velocity plays no part. The dissertation or project already counts for a large proportion of the award (generally at least 33.3%), but the importance of a good dissertation or project for a masters programme may compensate for this double counting. The remaining criteria relate to the mark profile, and this must be the basis of any new policy.

The amount of credits required at the higher level varies somewhat, from 33.3% of credits to 66.7% of credits. Recommending discretion for students with less than 50% of credits at the higher level may not seem appropriate, as such students would have failed to achieve a College Mark at the higher level and have a preponderance of credits at the lower level; this would seem to indicate that such students were performing at the level of the lower classification, even if they were at the very top end. Other boards use 50% or 66.7%, both of which seem more appropriate. The 50% rule can be applied to all programmes, while the 66.7% rule would not work for programmes such as the LLM that teach in blocks of 45 credits (these students would need at least 75% to achieve more than 66.7% at the higher level, and would be disadvantaged). A variant scheme could be introduced (the existing LLM London scheme would serve well), but increased consistency is desirable insofar as it is possible.

Proposal

The proposal below takes into account the most common practices from the existing policies. It is intended only as a starting point for discussion.

1. Students with College Marks within one per cent of a borderline (except Pass/Fail) shall be determined to fall within the 'zone of consideration';
2. Students with College Marks within two per cent of a borderline [or 1.5 per cent?] and significant extenuating circumstances not taken into account elsewhere may be determined to fall within the zone of consideration. However, if this approach is taken then the extenuating circumstances may not also be used as a reason to raise the classification itself;
3. All students falling within the zone of consideration shall be considered as possible cases for discretion;
4. Students falling within the zone of consideration and with at least 50% (or 66% with a variant LLM scheme?) of their credits with marks at the level of the upper classification (or higher), including the dissertation or project*, shall be considered as strong cases for the exercise of discretion;
5. Students falling within the zone of consideration and not meeting the requirements of point 4, but with significant extenuating circumstances not taken into account elsewhere? may be considered as strong cases for the exercise of discretion provided the SEB is confident that – without the effect of the extenuating circumstances – the student would have achieved the higher classification.
6. Discretion is not an automatic process, and in addition to the criteria detailed above, SEBs should ensure that the remainder of a student's profile is also consistent with the recommended classification.

* The underlined section is likely to stimulate discussion. It could be omitted entirely, made a requirement for all SEBs, or imposed as a requirement on either a DEB or Faculty basis.

Requested action

Senate is asked to **consider** the two proposals for new, common, discretion schemes, and to comment on both the schemes in general and on the specific queries (e.g. the amount of credits required at the higher level, and the impact of dissertations and projects).

If Senate is broadly satisfied with the proposals, Senate is asked to **agree** that the proposals be sent to schools and institutes (via examination boards) for comment, with the objective of presenting final recommendations for approval later in the year. The Assessment Governance Task and Finish Group would coordinate this work. Any approved policy would take effect from the 2014/15 academic year.

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