

UNIVERSITY OF ULSTER

TEACHING AND LEARNING COMMITTEE

Minutes of a special meeting held on 8 April 2009 at the Jordanstown campus

PRESENT

Professor D A McAlister (Chair), Dr D Barr, Professor S Boyd, Professor C Curran, Mrs R Curran (for Miss C Cochrane), Mrs H Farley, Professor P Fleming, Mr A Freaney, Dr C Gormley-Heenan, Professor K Greenan, Mr I Hanna, Ms A Honan, Professor D Hunter, Professor R Hutchinson, Professor E M Lillie (for Professor P Ó Dochartaigh) Mr L McCurry, Professor H McKenna (for Dr T Cook), Mr M McKinney, Professor A Moran

APOLOGIES

Ms S Alexander, Mr M Beagan, Professor N D Black, Miss C Cochrane, Dr T Cook, Mr D McGivern, Professor R J Millar, Professor I Montgomery, Professor P Ó Dochartaigh

IN ATTENDANCE

Mrs C G Avery, Mr A G Faulkner

UNRESERVED BUSINESS

REVIEW OF REGULATORY FRAMEWORK: OUTSTANDING MATTERS – FINAL REPORT FROM WORKING GROUP

09.49 Background

The Committee at its June 2008 meeting had recommended to Senate a number of changes to the University's regulatory framework. It was agreed however that the rules on condonement, the basis for the classification of awards and also the arrangements for combined Honours degrees should receive further consideration in 2008/9. A Working Group was established in October 2008 (mins 08.134 and 08.189 refer).

The Committee at its February meeting received paper TLC/09/5 which summarised the views of the Working Group and set out proposals (mins 09.17 - 20 refer). The Working Group had taken account of practice in other universities and noted that, as universities were autonomous institutions with their own rules and regulations, there was no national consistency in condonement or classification. The proposals were issued for consultation to Faculties and through an online survey to all members of academic staff.

Mr McKinney, Chair of the Working Group, presented to the special meeting of the Committee the final report of the Group (TLC/09/19a), together with the detailed proposals and the reasons for them (TLC/09/19b). It was noted that a response had been received from each Faculty and, in addition, one individual

School and 35 academic staff. The majority of these supported each of the twelve proposals.

The Examinations Office had raised some concerns about a number of matters, which the Group considered more administrative in nature than academic. The Group believed that these should not be insurmountable.

The proposals and the issues discussed by Committee members are set out below.

09.50 Condonement

Proposal 1

A pass in a module be defined as “the achievement of the overall pass mark for the module with a minimum mark of not less than 5% below this threshold in each assessment element (coursework and examination)”.

Course/subject teams retain the option of requiring the overall pass standard in both assessment elements for ‘core’ modules.

The Committee noted that all Faculty responses and the academic staff responses agreed with the new definition of a pass in a module. For undergraduate programmes, this would require students to achieve an overall mark of 40% in the module with a minimum of 35% in each assessment element; an overall mark of 50% and a minimum mark of 45% in each assessment element would be required for postgraduate programmes. Course teams would retain the option of requiring the overall pass standard to be achieved in each assessment element or in all or specified components of each assessment element. It would be important to make this requirement explicit in the assessment strategy of the module and course teams would be expected to identify the modules concerned in regulations.

It was noted that the overall module mark would continue to be calculated using the relative weighting for the assessment elements. At present the weighting was disregarded for the purpose of considering condonement.

Proposal 2

Condonement of module failure be removed from University of Ulster regulations.

The Committee noted that, in refining the definition of a pass, the concept of ‘condonement within modules’ would effectively become redundant. The practice of ‘condonement across modules’, which was increasingly difficult to defend in an outcomes-based assessment regime, would also end.

All Faculties, with the exception of Arts, supported the removal of condonement across modules. The Faculty of Arts’ view was that the removal of condonement would disadvantage weaker students in coursework-only modules and in subjects with a high proportion of coursework. It was suggested that learning outcomes were normally met across the year as a whole and that, where a student failed to achieve a learning outcome in one module, it would sometimes be possible for

this to be met in another module. It was noted that some degree programmes in the Faculty of Arts allowed considerable choice in the range of subjects studied in year 1 and that students could now be faced with the consequences of a marginal fail in a subject which they did not intend to study in second year.

The Committee recognised that the new arrangements might cause course teams to review the design, structure and assessment of year 1. The Committee noted that an important benefit in removing condonement would be that the responsibility for all aspects of the assessment strategy and assessment decisions would clearly lie with the module co-ordinator and team. The Committee was particularly uncomfortable with the way in which the current rule allowed failure in one subject to be offset by success in a different topic.

The Working Group was of the view that the proposals were in the best interests of students. Students would have greater certainty at the end of the first semester of their position with regard to resit requirements than at present. There was a view that a condoned result was perceived as a failure and that this might devalue a student's award in the eyes of an employer, particularly as transcripts were becoming increasingly important in the overall record of achievement. Furthermore, the practice could demotivate other students as such failure was not penalised. The Students' Union representatives indicated their strong support for the proposals.

09.51 Award Classification

Honours Degrees

Proposal 3

The classification of Honours degrees normally be determined exclusively by students' average performance in the modules studied at the highest level (Level 6) weighted according to their credit value. NOTE: the option for courses with more than 120 credit points at Level 6 to restrict the proportion used for classification to 120 to be retained.

Proposal 4

Any proposed deviation from this rule be made by a formal request to the Teaching and Learning Committee. In making the request the Course/Subject Committee should:

- 1. Provide formal evidence that the relevant professional body requires the exception; OR*
- 2. Provide a detailed, evidenced rationale for the request.*

Proposal 5

Where an exception to the 'exclusive Level 6' rule is approved, a standard 25% Level 5 contribution normally be applied.

The Working Group had predicated its proposals for the summary classification of all awards on the principle that the class represented the 'exit velocity' of the

student and therefore should be determined by achievement at the highest credit level. The full transcript would evidence achievement in each module at the time it was taken. The final classification would represent the University's summative assessment of the student on the basis of the most recent evidence at the most challenging level.

The Committee noted that the responses from four Faculties supported the proposals that Honours classification be determined exclusively by performance at the final level. The Faculty of Social Sciences' response favoured the routine inclusion of year 2 results as a way of motivating students in the second year, a view which had also been expressed by a number of external examiners. Some staff in the Faculty of Arts held a similar concern. The Faculty of Social Sciences recognised that students benefited greatly from undertaking placement and that their performance in final year often improved as a result, but placement did not feature in many programmes in Social Sciences. The Faculty accepted that, should the proposal be endorsed, it would need to consider other ways of encouraging student engagement in year 2. The Faculty's Teaching and Learning Committee would give further consideration to this matter.

The Committee noted the common experience, including internationally, of a dip in student performance in the second year of degree and other long programmes of study, regardless of classification regimes: this was termed the 'sophomore slump' in US literature. It was noted that the adoption of the HEAR as a formative as well as summative record could potentially help encourage student motivation, given that employers might be provided with records of performance with job applications made at the end of year 2.

The Dean of the Ulster Business School reported that the University decision to remove year 2 contribution from 2001/2 had not led to a decline in performance in the School. The value of students having appropriate time for reflection in year 2 without the added pressure of a contribution to the award classification was noted.

All Faculties supported the proposals to allow the possibility of exception, and that, where this was allowed, a standard 25% contribution at Level 5 should normally apply. It was noted that different contributions would still be permissible. The eleven current exceptions would be maintained but the course teams would be asked to revisit them in light of the proposals.

Proposal 6

The classification of Honours degrees be determined with no requirement for a particular proportion of credits in (or above) the class.

The Working Group proposed to simplify regulations by removing the requirement for breadth of achievement through the '50% of modules in the class' rule, in addition to achievement of an overall average in the class. A recent national survey had revealed a minority of institutions which had both rules. The Committee noted that the number of students in such a position each year was likely to be very small but this outcome was perceived as unfair. All Faculties were in favour of the proposal except the Faculty of Life and Health Sciences

which considered that exceptional marks particularly in practice-based modules could distort the overall result.

The Committee considered that, if modules were marked and moderated in accordance with University assessment criteria, there should be no reason to reduce a student's classification to counter strong performance in certain modules.

Other Undergraduate Awards

Proposal 7

The classification of other undergraduate awards be determined exclusively by students' average performance in the modules studied at the highest level weighted according to their credit value.

Proposal 8

For the award of Pass with Commendation, there be no requirement for a particular proportion of credits in the class (currently 50%).

Proposal 9

An additional classification band of Pass with Distinction for an overall average mark of 70% be introduced for all non-Honours undergraduate awards (based only on students' average performance in the modules studied at the highest level weighted according to their credit value with no requirement for a particular proportion of credits in the class).

The Committee noted that the proposals for the classification of all other undergraduate awards were consistent with those for Honours degrees. Permission for exceptions was not proposed. The Committee noted that, currently in shorter courses of less than two years' duration (ie other than AB and Fd), all modules counted in the final classification and that some courses used a range of levels.

All Faculties supported proposal 7. All Faculties welcomed the proposed introduction of a new band of Pass with Distinction. The Faculty of Life and Health Sciences' opposition to the removal of the '50% of modules in the class' rule in proposals 8 and 9 was noted.

Taught Postgraduate Awards

Proposal 10

The classification of taught postgraduate awards (postgraduate certificate or diploma or master's degree) be determined exclusively by students' average performance in the modules studied at the highest Level (Level 7) weighted according to their credit value.

In Master's degrees of more than 200 credit points, the class is based on the final 120 credits.

Proposal 11

For the award of Pass with Distinction, there be no requirement for a particular proportion of credits in the class (currently 50%).

The Committee noted that postgraduate awards might include a small proportion of Level 6 modules and currently all modules counted in calculating the summary classification (except for Master's degrees of more than 200 credit points). The proposal would determine the classification on the basis of the Level 7 results only, which was consistent with the 'exit velocity' principle.

The Faculty of Life and Health Sciences had again opposed the removal of the '50% in the class' rule. It was, however, noted that it was intended that Master's regulations should continue to require achievement at Distinction level in the dissertation.

09.52 Modular Framework

Proposal 12

No change be made to the existing modular framework.

The Committee noted that the Working Group had considered that, although the introduction of additional flexibility into the modular framework arrangements appeared attractive, it inevitably brought greater complexity which would result in the framework becoming virtually impossible to manage. There was consensus in the Group for pedagogical and operational reasons that the current framework was the most appropriate structure. Faculty responses supported this view.

09.53 Recommendations

The Committee endorsed the recommendations of the Group.

AGREED:

- i) that Mr McKinney and members of the Working Group be thanked for their work and the extensive consultation with Faculties and academic staff to review the issues;
- ii) that it be recommended to Senate that the twelve proposals be approved;
- iii) that amendments to generic award regulations in respect of the removal of condonement and the '50% in the class' rules, the basis of classification and the introduction of the award of Pass with Distinction in undergraduate qualifications other than Honours degrees be recommended to Senate;
- iv) that the proposals be implemented from academic year 2009/10 for both existing and new students, except for the new rule to base the classification of taught postgraduate awards and all non-Honours undergraduate awards with more than one level on performance in the final level only, which should apply to new students only;

- v) that, subject to Senate's approval, the following action be taken:
- a) all requests for exemption from the normal classification regulation for Honours degrees be made to the Teaching and Learning Committee;
 - b) course committees of those existing Honours programmes with a Level 5 contribution to the final degree classification be asked to consider and comment on their intentions in regard to (a) continuing with the Level 5 contribution and (b) if the intention were to continue, the 25% norm for that contribution;
 - c) the changes to regulations be communicated to all staff, and to current students as appropriate;
 - d) the Academic Office update all regulations templates;
 - e) Course Directors ensure that student handbooks are appropriately updated;
 - f) the Department of Student Administration be advised of the changes to regulations and adapt systems as necessary;
 - g) the effect of the revised regulations be monitored by the Committee.

09.54 Student Survey - Module Evaluation

The Chair returned to the matter of arrangements for the semester 2 survey which had been discussed at the previous meeting (min 09.27 refers).

It was proposed that the timetable for the semester 2 exercise should proceed on the same basis as that for the survey in semester 1 with the incentive of the early release of marks. Students would be given advance notice and sent reminders to complete the surveys, particularly as the process was scheduled to be launched at the end of May after the examination period.

The Chair advised that Deans and Heads of School should have access to quantitative and qualitative data at module level for the purpose of assuring the quality of the student learning experience, given their responsibilities and the possible need to act on issues which could not be addressed at module coordinator level. The module questionnaire sought information on the whole module experience and was not an evaluation of individual staff members. The process should not be seen as a threat to staff's professionalism.

AGREED: that the proposals be endorsed.

Duration 1 hour 5 mins

22 April 2009

AGF/CA/lh