

UNIVERSITY OF ULSTER

TEACHING AND LEARNING COMMITTEE

11 December 2012

FACULTY OF LIFE AND HEALTH SCIENCES

ULSTER SPORTS ACADEMY

VARIATIONS AND DEPARTURES FROM THE UNIVERSITY'S REGULATORY
FRAMEWORK

PROPOSAL TO COUNT ACHIEVEMENT IN YEAR 2 TOWARDS FINAL DEGREE
CLASSIFICATION

Background

Revalidation of the University's Undergraduate Sport programmes took place on 31st October 2012. One of the key recommendations of the Revalidation Panel, chaired by Professor Alastair Adair, was "that the School considers a change of assessment policy that the final classification of the degree is based on only the level 6 modules". To that end, the Ulster Sports Academy proposes that the second year of the BSc Hons Sports Studies (now BSc Hons Sport: Theory and Practice) and BSc Hons Sport and Exercise Sciences programmes should contribute 25% of the marks towards the final degree classification. Having met with student representatives and considered the comments of external examiner reports it was the unanimous view of the panel (Chair: Prof Adair, Internal: Prof Lloyd, Externals: Dr Harrison and Dr Twitchen) that this measure would be highly significant in terms of student satisfaction, retention, motivation and attendance. Support for such a proposal is also widespread among course teams in the Ulster Sports Academy.

This proposal was previously brought forward by the then School of Sports Studies in 2009 and was unfortunately rejected. The report submitted by the School at that time to the University Teaching and Learning Committee stated that:

"The consensus amongst School staff was that the current regulations around degree classification create issues at Year Two in terms of student engagement, application and motivation. The experience of most School staff is that those students who fail to engage fully with their studies at Level 2 do so primarily because of their belief that their performance does not have a direct bearing on their final degree classification."

This view has not changed in the interim period and indeed discussion with our student body has strengthened our view that this proposal should be supported, even as a temporary trial upon which future recommendations can be made.

External examiner and student views

It is particularly noteworthy that mention of the issue is continually made in external examiner reports, staff/student consultative committee minutes and Academy

Teaching and Learning minutes. Most recently, Prof Gill McInnes, stated in her final report that:

“The students had enjoyed completing many of the assignments, in particular their research project, and commented that they had worked much harder in their final year than in the previous two. They all thought that they would have got more from the whole experience if the first two years had counted towards the degree classification and I would endorse this view.”

These comments reiterated views Prof McInnes had expressed in 2010 when she reported that students had told her that Level 6 felt very rushed and that they “would like second year to count”.

The most recent meeting of the Staff/Student Consultative Committee was held on 8th November 2012 and once again there was considerable debate around this issue. First and second year students were both represented by two students and final years by one. All of these students were wholeheartedly in support of this motion and verify that this view had been solicited from a widespread cross-section of each year group and that it was a source of much debate and contention.

Staff have become increasingly frustrated at the lack of engagement by a sizeable percentage of second year students, many of whom see little merit in striving to achieve grades much beyond a mere pass. This was recently referred to by student reps as the development of a “passing culture”. The obvious effect this has on the quality of work is further exacerbated by poor attendance patterns and a general malaise which many feel it is difficult to overcome when they enter final year. The re-adjustment required at this stage is often remarked upon, whether or not the student has taken a year on work placement.

Proposal

The Academy recognises that the University’s desire to have a degree classification that represents the student’s ‘exit velocity’ is a worthwhile goal. We are also aware that many of our students who undertake an optional one year placement return to final year better equipped for the demands of final year study. However, we believe that the inclusion of some weighting on second year would help to improve student’s abilities at graduation (exit velocity) by adding further incentives to excel in second year. We believe that this should over time lead to better overall student performance by increasing active engagement with the course material. The significantly higher weighting towards final year will still allow the classification to reflect exit velocity while also rewarding students appropriately for their scholarly work in second year. Student engagement in second year is our primary reasoning for supporting this proposal and we contend that this would, in time, become the basis for better performance across all Level 5 students in the Academy.

We are aware that all of our arguments have been well rehearsed and refuted by the University. We believe, however, that cognizance should be taken of these views in this instance as the strength of feeling is such that it has been supported by a revalidation panel. The Ulster Sports Academy is proud of both the student experience we provide and the degree to which this is informed by student feedback. We feel strongly that the proposal would enhance both the student experience and

their perception of the programmes we offer. We are arguing for this step on the basis that it will provide a clear incentive for students to perform to the best of their abilities and will also subsequently have a beneficial effect on staff morale and performance.

Although we understand that a pilot of a similar proposal is underway in another Faculty but that the results of this pilot have yet to be compiled. We contend that our students (some of the highest caliber in the university) represent a group for which this pilot should be extended

Recommendation

That members approve the Ulster Sports Academy piloting crediting Year 2 of the newly validated BSc (Hons) Sport: Theory and Practice and BSc (Hons) Sport and Exercise Sciences from September 2013.

Academic Office Note

The Committee reaffirmed the principle of classification of Honours degrees on the basis of performance in Level 6 only (established in 2002) as part of the 2008/9 regulatory review. At that time it was agreed that any proposed exceptional deviation should be accompanied by formal evidence of a professional body requirement or a detailed evidence-based rationale.

All proposals which have provided a statement from a professional or statutory regulatory body have been approved, as the University does not wish to risk the relevant accreditation.

The Ulster Business School, while supporting the 'exit velocity' principle, considered the BSc Hons Accounting to be an exception and this course was permitted a Level 5 contribution from the 2008 intake, but as a time-limited pilot study. The pilot has been extended to include the 2012 and 2013 graduating cohorts and the Faculty is due to present its final report to the Committee in October 2013.

Since the commencement of the pilot scheme, the Committee has approved neither of the two cases made in respect of six Honours degrees (Optometry; Occupational Therapy; Physiotherapy; Diagnostic Radiography and Imaging; Radiography and Oncology; Speech and Language Therapy).

From 2009, the 'exit velocity' principle was adopted for all other awards. One exceptional case has been made and the Committee has approved the case for the Diploma in Foundation English for Academic Purposes, which has an unusual structure, comprising 120 credits at Level 3 and 30 credits at Level 4. This course has its overall grading decided on the basis of the Level 4 module and one Level 3 module (25%).