

UNIVERSITY OF ULSTER

TEACHING AND LEARNING COMMITTEE

11 December 2012

PROPOSED COMMENDATION BAND IN POSTGRADUATE AWARDS

The Faculty of Life and Health Sciences has proposed revisions to University award regulations for postgraduate certificates, postgraduate diplomas and Master's degrees to add a grade of Commendation for candidates who achieve an overall result in the 60-69% band (paper attached).

The proposal should not be restricted to one Faculty and must be treated as a possible University-wide change. Faculty representatives should, therefore, consider its merits for their own postgraduate provision. **The Committee should decide whether or not to propose the introduction of a Commendation band to Senate and consider any adjustments to mark bands or whether to consult further with other Faculties.**

Any changes will also apply to Integrated Master's degrees (MBiomedSci, MEng, MPharm, MSci).

The specific award regulations are:

Postgraduate Certificates and Diplomas :	No 23
Master's degrees :	No 22
Integrated Master's degrees :	No 27

(The Faculty's paper cites the template regulations used by course teams.)

In arriving at its decision the Committee is asked to note the following points.

- a) There is no national guidance on the grading of postgraduate awards. While the informal surveys of 2009 and 2010 suggest that the majority of institutions have three pass bands in postgraduate awards, it is not universal practice. From 2008/9 Queen's University, Belfast has had common mark scales of 50+ Pass, 60+ Pass with Commendation, 70+ Pass with Distinction. (In Master's degrees, 70+ must be achieved in the dissertation and 65+ as an overall average in the other modules.)
- b) For all students of postgraduate courses, with the exception of Postgraduate Certificate of Higher Education Practice and Postgraduate Certificate of Education (Pass/Fail grades only), a full transcript and an overall average percentage mark are available, which may be provided to prospective employers and others as a more precise indication of performance. (The eventual expansion of the HEAR to postgraduate courses will support this.)
- c) Since the University's inception, its postgraduate awards have only had two bands, Pass and Commendation or Distinction. The Committee has formally considered this matter on three occasions in the last decade.

From 2002 the pass threshold in postgraduate certificates and diplomas was raised from 40 to 50% following a redefinition of postgraduate awards to relate these to Master's level of study (in light of the guidance in the new national qualifications framework), but it was decided to retain the Commendation threshold at 60%. (No Distinctions were available in these awards.)

A number of external examiners had commented on the narrowness of the Pass band 50-59%. Faculties were consulted on the options, and four out of five which replied favoured the introduction of a Distinction band at 70%. None preferred the introduction of Distinction and retention of Commendation. From 2004 intake common bands of Pass 50-69% and Distinction 70+% have applied in postgraduate awards.

In 2008 a major review of the University's regulatory framework for taught courses was undertaken with consultation on a wide range of matters, including the grade bands in postgraduate awards. Four Faculties favoured the reintroduction of Commendation and the Teaching and Learning Committee was asked to consider this option, its threshold mark standard and any adjustment to the standard for Distinction. In June 2008 the Committee determined that no additional band be introduced.

The Committee established a working group, representative of the Faculties and Students' Union, to consider three outstanding matters, including the classification of Honours degrees and asked the Working Group to consider the basis of classification of all awards, not just Honours degrees.

The Working Group consulted widely and made its recommendations to a special meeting of the Teaching and Learning Committee in April 2009. While proposing a number of changes it explicitly did not propose the introduction of Commendation. It stated that 'there does not appear to be any good reason to introduce any further classifications such as Pass with Commendation at 60%. Such a threshold is deemed to be too close to the required pass mark of 50% as to have any significant merit'.

30 November 2012

AGF/lh

PROPOSED CHANGE TO REGULATIONS FOR THE CLASSIFICATION OF THE AWARDS FOR MSc PROGRAMMES

Existing Regulation:

MSc

14.3 The following shall be the minimum overall percentages used to determine the final gradings of candidates:

Pass with Distinction	70%
Pass	50%

14.4 A mark of 70% or above must also be achieved in the dissertation/project in order for the degree to be awarded with Distinction.

PgDip

14.1 The results of candidates who have successfully completed the Postgraduate Diploma shall be graded by order of merit as Pass with Distinction and Pass.

14.2 The assessment results for the final level of the programme (Level 7) shall determine the overall grading. The weighting of each module's contribution to the final result shall be determined by the module's credit value. (See table at Section 17).

14.3 The following shall be the minimum overall percentages used to determine the final gradings of candidates:

Pass with Distinction	70%
Pass	50%

Proposed PgDip/MSc Regulation:

MSc

14.3 The following shall be the minimum overall percentages used to determine the final gradings of candidates:

Pass with Distinction	70%
Pass with Commendation	60%
Pass	50%

14.4 A mark of 70% or above must also be achieved in the dissertation/project in order for the degree to be awarded with Distinction. A mark of 60% or above must also be achieved in the dissertation/project in order for the degree to be awarded with Commendation.

PgDip

- 14.1 The results of candidates who have successfully completed the Postgraduate Diploma shall be graded by order of merit as Pass with Distinction, Pass with Commendation and Pass.
- 14.2 The assessment results for the final level of the programme (Level 7) shall determine the overall grading. The weighting of each module's contribution to the final result shall be determined by the module's credit value. (See table at Section 17).
- 14.3 The following shall be the minimum overall percentages used to determine the final gradings of candidates:

Pass with Distinction	70%
Pass with Commendation	60%
Pass	50%

Rationale

Following comments from External Examiners and based on staff experience of external examining at other HEIs in the UK, a request for change to the academic regulations is being submitted for consideration. This departure from the University's regulatory framework is for consideration of a Commendation award for MSc programmes, based on a student attaining an overall average of 60%-69%, with a minimum of 60% in the dissertation element (for MSc programmes).

Currently students who perform well within the 60-69% commendation range are recorded as a pass whereas their peers with a similar grade from other HEIs will have certificates which record merit/commendation. The introduction of a commendation award would provide a more equitable field.

During 2009 and 2010, the Academic Office accessed two separate studies of HEIs nationally, to determine the number of Institutions that award a merit or commendation in their PgCert, PgDip or MSc (Tables 1&2). The survey carried out in 2009 examined the classification bands used in other HEIs across the UK and identified that 74% of the HEIs (23 respondents) awarded a merit/commendation to those students achieving between 60-69%. Statistics obtained from a similar survey carried out in 2010 suggested that the majority of HEIs (65%) use the merit/commendation award (26 HEI respondents) at MSc level and 46% of HEIs questioned, had a merit/commendation at PgDip level (Table 2).

Table 1: Survey of the classification bands in other HEIs across the UK (2009)

Award	Number of Institutions with award	Number of Institutions with no award*
Distinction (70%+)	21	1
Merit/Commendation (60% threshold)	15	5
(65% threshold)	2	
Pass (50%)	13	0
(40%)	9	

*One institution used a graded-based system

Table 2: Survey of the classification bands in other HEIs across the UK (2010)

Award	Number of Institutions that award Distinction	Number of Institutions that award Merit
Masters	24	17*
PgDip	18	12
PgCert	15	8

*In most HEIs the passmark is 50%, however some may have a passmark of 40%

The fundamental basis for proposing the variation to the University's regulations is outlined by Schools below:

- Observations made by the School of Biomedical Sciences in the MSc Biomedical Science cohort have provided evidence that 26 students (27%) were within 4% of the 70% classification grade. 3% of students failed, 17% achieved 50-59%, 40% achieved 60-69% and 40% achieved a distinction.

Table 3: MSc Statistics for the MSc Biomedical Science cohort (n=95; 2011)

MSc Biomedical Science Cohort (2011)	
Category of final course mark	Number of Students
< 49	3
50 – 54	6
55 – 59	10
60 – 64	12
65 – 69	26
70 +	38
Total student number = 95	

- In the field of psychology, professional qualifications are generally set at Doctoral level and many of the MSc graduates wish to proceed to a PhD. As the MSc is another stage in the training and education of psychologists, student achievement at MSc level plays an important role in selection onto further training. Hence most MSc courses in Psychology in the UK have a merit level award which allows a distinction between students in the 60% range from those in the 50% range, just as the distinction does for the 70% and above range. If there was greater differentiation in the classification bands at M level, 43% of students in the two programmes, MSc Health Psychology and Applied Behaviour Analysis would have achieved a commendation award during 2011.

Table 4: MSc Health Psychology and Applied Behaviour Analysis Cohort data (n=29; 2011)

Category of final course mark (%)	Number of Students (%)
50 – 59%	7%
60 – 69%	43%
70 +%	50%

- The School of Environmental Sciences would support the introduction of the commendation award as there is a gulf in performance between passes at 50% and 68%. Greater differentiation would motivate students further to perform in this range.
- Currently, MSc courses in the Ulster Sports Academy lack the differentiation of rival courses in the UK so graduates would benefit from the introduction of a Commendation award when seeking employment or applying for further study. Course leaders and School Executive were all in agreement and welcomed a commendation category from 60-69% on PG programmes. From the student perspective, students who achieve a mark in the high 60s would be distinguished from a student in the low 50s. It is also helpful for HEIs to distinguish applicants for PhD, and encourage students to work harder at MSc level.

Conclusions

Feedback from Schools in the Faculty would favour three divisions in MSc programmes representing a Pass, Pass with Commendation, and Pass with Distinction. The Faculty requests the introduction of the Commendation award principally to acknowledge student achievement at the upper end of this category. We acknowledge that any employer or institution would consider the quality of the graduate by their percentage mark, however the introduction of the commendation award would ensure that students who achieve a grade close to distinction, would obtain recognition of their performance. The award classification is often declared in a Curriculum Vitae. These students would normally be awarded a ‘pass’ which could also be achieved by students achieving a mark close to 50%. The high quality of our postgraduate students would be highlighted by the inclusion of a commendation award.