

Education Committee: Working Party on Grading

Introduction

Following discussion of grading issues in 2004, Education Committee set up a working group to frame recommendations for its consideration. The Grading Working Group was made up of Gay Brennan, Jennifer Weller, Lorraine Stefani, Doug Carrie, Ivan Reilly and John Morrow.

It was decided to focus on two issues, the use of descriptors and the basis on which classifications of honours are awarded. Responses to a paper discussed by faculties in 2004 suggested that these matters might be progressed. They are important in terms of students' expectations and the transparency and consistency of examining procedures across the University.

The Working Group gathered information from faculties, schools and departments and examined prevailing practices. While significant variations are apparent, there are also patterns of common practice which indicated that it should be possible to arrive at a consistent position on each issue.

Descriptors

A number of schools and departments already use a variety of descriptor statements to inform students of expectations and, in some cases for the guidance of staff. The Working Group recognised that these variations reflect the distinct nature of requirements in different disciplines and that it would not be appropriate to seek uniformity in the details of descriptors. It accepted, however, the research-based arguments on the value of descriptors that appear in teaching and learning policy statements.

The Working Group recommends that Education Committee consider developing a policy statement on descriptors on the following lines: All schools and departments should develop a set of descriptors that are appropriate to the requirements of their discipline and which align specified levels of attainment with letter grades on a 9 point scale. Descriptors should be included in information on marking and assessment that is made available to students.

Classes of Honours

Information on the assignment of classes of honours showed that while there is consistency of practice across a number of faculties there are also some marked variations. These are indicated in the document attached. The Working Group believes that these variations are undesirable since they suggest that different standards are applied in signalling what is the most significant outcome of an honours programme, that is, the class of honours with which the degree is awarded. In so far as these differences are purely formal, they are likely to be confusing; if they are substantive then they are indefensible. The Working Group took the view that classes of honours should be aligned consistently with particular grades across the University.

John Morrow and Lorraine Stefani were assigned the task of communicating with key staff members in the Faculties and the School of Theology to try to work towards consistency. Following these discussions they suggest that Education Committee considers framing a policy on the assignment of classes of honours.

It is recommended that a policy statement on this issue include a clear definition of what students need to achieve in order to gain a First Class Honours Degree.

For example, it might specify that 'in order to qualify for a First Class Honours Degree, students' overall performance must be within the 'A' range.' The other Degree classifications would then follow on from this definition.

The policy should also specify a process for determining classes of honours which starts with the identification of an appropriate set of descriptors to be aligned on a 9 point letter grade scale. These descriptors will be disciplinary specific, easily understood and made available to students, tutors and academic staff members. The grade for each component of a course of study will be translated into a GPA to produce an overall GPA. The assignment of classes of Honours should be based upon identical GPAs across all Faculties, Schools, Departments. On the basis of definition offered above classes of honours might be aligned with GPAs as follows: 7.0 and above 1st class honours, 5.0- 6.0 for a 2.1 classification, and 5-4 for a 2.2 level degree.

John Morrow
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