Discussion Paper B:

Taught Postgraduate Classification Regulations 2018/19

Summary:
This paper outlines some suggested enhancements to the existing standard postgraduate taught scheme of award and seeks views on the role of the dissertation/independent research project.

Key Questions for Discussion:
1. Should the dissertation mark continue to be a separate criterion for Classification?
2. Should an independent research project/dissertation of at least 60 credits continue to be required for all postgraduate taught programmes?

1 Background

For a number of years UCL’s Graduate and Taught Postgraduate programmes have operated under a common Classification scheme with relatively few derogations. It is generally felt that this system is working well and there is, therefore, little rationale for large-scale change. However there are some ways in which the regulations could be improved, and these are described below.

2 Borderlines and Rounding

The Graduate/ PGT Scheme already includes an automated Borderline policy based on a mean and preponderance. However, it may be useful to standardised rounding practices to ensure that all students are being treated equally, as set out below:

- Rounding of Component Marks (e.g. an exam is marked out of 40 and scaled to a percentage mark): Round to 2 decimal places
- Rounding of Module Marks (where Component Marks are weighted and averaged): Round to 2 decimal places.
- Rounding of Classification: Round to 2 decimal places.

3 Removal of Cap on Classifications due to Condoned or Resit Marks

As part of the 2015-16 consultation process, many staff and students were keen to remove the restrictions on Merit and Distinction Classifications for students with marks below 50%, Condoned Marks and Reassessment Marks and instead to cap module reassessment marks, as is planned for the cross-UCL implementation of Late Summer Assessments in 2017-18. This change will have some impact on future attainment rates as shown in figures 5-7 below.
4 Masters Dissertation/ Research Project

A number of Faculties and External Examiners have asked UCL to review the status of the Dissertation/ Research Project within its Masters programmes. At present, UCL Masters must include a sustained piece of independent research of at least 60 credits, and the mark for this Dissertation/ Research Project has a significant bearing on a student’s Classification. The current regulations are deliberately designed to emphasise that UCL is a leading, research-intensive institution and to ensure that students are adequately prepared for the sustained independent research required of Doctoral-level study. The Dissertation/ Research Project is also a defining feature of a Masters qualification in the UK Framework for Higher Education Qualifications:

“4.17.3 Master's degrees are often distinguished from other qualifications at this framework level […] by an increased intensity, complexity and density of study. Master's degrees, in comparison to postgraduate certificates and postgraduate diplomas, typically include planned intellectual progression that often includes a synoptic/research or scholarly activity”.

Some Faculties and External Examiners have questioned whether the Classification places too great an emphasis on the Dissertation/ Research Project – the current system ‘double counts’ the Dissertation, giving it a high weighting in the final weighted mean as well as its own separate criterion. There have also been a number of applications for suspensions of regulations to allow the award of a higher Classification to students whose Dissertation mark falls below the threshold.

Some Faculties have also queried whether the Dissertation/ Research Project is always necessary or desirable, arguing that UCL’s competitors do not always stipulate a 60-credit minimum. It has also been argued that in some disciplines, such as Business and Management, Laws and Education, this requirement is unhelpful because students are seeking to go into professional practice rather than research careers, and favour taught modules over extensive research projects. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the 60-credit Dissertation affects student perceptions of how much they will ‘learn’ on their Masters, which in turn affects UCL’s competitiveness in some disciplines. A range of programmes have therefore asked if this requirement can be reduced (e.g. to 30 credits) or removed completely.

The removal of the separate Classification criterion for the Dissertation would facilitate much greater flexibility in the structure of Masters programmes and would remove the need for some of the current derogations from this regulation.

Of other competitor institutions, Imperial has a separate criterion for each ‘element’ of the programme, including the Dissertation, whereas King’s use a simple weighted average. Manchester also uses a simple weighted average as a standard method but allows schools to specify a higher criterion requiring 70+ in both the dissertation and taught element for Distinction, though does not have similar provision for Merit. LSE programmes are structured differently and not directly comparable, but Classification is by preponderance.

A focus group was undertaken with students attending the UCLU Education Conference in February 2017 in order to obtain a student perspective on some of the issues. Students were asked to respond to a number of questions posted on walls around the room. In each case they were asked to ‘vote’ by putting an ‘x’ in the relevant box. Their feedback was unanimously in favour of Classification by weighted average only.

Modelling of 2014/5 and 2015/16 data for all 180 credit MA and MSc programmes with at least a 60-credit Dissertation indicates that the overall weighted average method would lead to a slight increase in Distinctions (30.78% compared with 28.62), and a significant increase in Merits (58.46% compared with 47.17%) across UCL. However, it should be noted that much of the increase in Merits would be caused by the proposed removal of the Classification cap for students with resits and condoned modules. This change alone would account for an increase in the proportion of Merits (54.83% compared with 47.17%). Figure 5 below compares current actual outcomes with those that would be achieved by removing the cap on Classifications for students with resits/condoned modules, and those that would be achieved on the
basis of weighted average alone.

This shows a slight dip in Distinctions between the current regulations actual and the new regulations with no classification cap on resits and condoned marks. However this variance is likely to be due to the fact that actual results include cases of students raised through extenuating circumstances (2014/15 cohort and part-time students in both cohorts) or suspensions of regulations. Furthermore, under the new regulations, relatively few students are likely to achieve an overall average in the Distinction range if they have a condoned mark.

**Figure 5: Comparison of UCL-wide PGT Classification outcomes (Distinction – D, Merit – M and Pass – P) - comparing removal of cap on Classification for resits and condoned modules against a simple weighted average and against the current actual outcomes**

**Figure 6 Faculty comparison of percentage of Distinctions - comparing removal of cap on Classification for resits and condoned modules against a simple weighted average and against the current actual outcomes**
Figure 7 Faculty comparison of percentage of Merits - comparing removal of cap on Classification for resits and condoned modules against a simple weighted average and against the current actual outcomes

![Merit % by Classification Method](chart)

5 Proposals for Consultation

It is proposed that the postgraduate classification scheme be amended to calculate classification on the basis of a weighted average only, and to clarify procedures for rounding. Details are set out in the extract from the draft regulations below.

N.B. The following proposals cover Masters Degrees only for ease of reference during the consultation period – cognate regulations will be developed for Postgraduate Certificates and Diplomas etc.

UCL Academic Manual 2018-19
Chapter 4: Assessment Framework for Taught Programmes

10 Classification (Masters)

Scope & Definitions

1. The classification algorithms in these regulations should be used on all UCL taught programmes.

Pass/Fail Degrees

2. Subject to approval by UCL Education Committee or its nominee, a qualification may be awarded on a pass/fail basis i.e. without a classification. This must be documented in the Programme Summary.

Non-modular Programmes

3. Subject to approval by UCL Education Committee or its nominee, a non-modular programme may operate a different classification algorithm which must:
   a) Align with the standard UCL classification principles for the qualification in terms of
averaging methods, rounding methods and borderline marks, AND
b) Ensure that students on the programme are not advantaged or disadvantaged by the
differential classification algorithm when compared with other UCL students, AND
c) Be documented in the Programme Summary.

Rounding

4. The Final Weighted Mark must be rounded to 2 decimal places.

Classification Scheme

5. A student who meets the Award Requirements for a programme of study leading to a Masters
must be awarded a Pass, Merit or Distinction classification.
6. The Final Weighted Mark must be calculated from a credit-weighted mean of all marks.
7. The following rules must be used to determine the classification:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classification</th>
<th>Condition 1</th>
<th>Condition 2</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Qualifies for Distinction</td>
<td>A Final Weighted Mark greater than or equal to 69.50%</td>
<td>OR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A Final Weighted Mark greater than or equal to 68.50%</td>
<td>AND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Module marks of at least 70% in at least 50% of the credits</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualifies for Merit</td>
<td>A Final Weighted Mark greater than or equal to 59.50%</td>
<td>OR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A Final Weighted Mark greater than or equal to 58.50%</td>
<td>AND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Module marks of at least 60% in at least 50% of the credits</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualifies for Pass</td>
<td>A Final Weighted Mark greater than or equal to 50.00%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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