Discussion Paper A:
Undergraduate Classification Regulations 2018/19

Summary:

In 2005/6 UCL introduced a ‘Harmonised Scheme of Award for Undergraduate Course Unit Degrees.’ Whilst this brought about some harmonisation of approaches within Faculties, in practice a significant amount of derogations and variations were permitted. This paper sets out proposals for the further harmonisation of undergraduate Classification methods in order to improve transparency and fairness for students. It presents details of sector benchmarking and work that has been undertaken to model the implications of different Classification methods.

We are seeking the views of the academic community on the following key issues:

- Inclusion of first year marks
- Principles for determining borderlines
- Allowing fail/condoned marks to be dropped from the Classification calculation

Detailed modelling of the implications of different approaches has been undertaken and spreadsheets containing full details are available on the Academic Manual website.

Annexes:

- Annex A: Current UCL Honours Classification Systems
- Annex B: Sector Analysis of Honours Classification Systems
- Annex C: Classification Modelling Methodology
- Annex D: Honours Degree Classification Modelling
- Annex E: Faculty Classification Analysis
- Annex F: Nett effect of Condonement, Capping and Classification
- Annex G: Dropping Marks Analysis
- Annex H: Feedback from Student Focus Group

1 Rationale

1.1 Variations and Derogations

At its visit to UCL in 2016, the Quality Assurance Agency advised that the institution should seek to minimise the amount of variation and derogation across its programmes as soon as possible. There are currently at least 33 different ways of classifying an honours degree at UCL (Annex A) This level of variation has been caused by a range of factors including institutional mergers and historic differences in assessment practices across Faculties and Departments.

However, it has led to a situation in which the same module taken by students from different programmes can have a different impact on the final award mark, and a student could receive a different Classification
for the same profile of module marks, depending on their programme. Figure 1 below illustrates how an identical hypothetical mark profile can generate different outcomes according to the Classification algorithm used. Whilst typical mark profiles may vary according to discipline, it is difficult to justify a system where the same marks will lead to a different outcome purely on the basis of the student’s Faculty or programme. Applying different existing algorithms to a single hypothetical mark profile showed that there could be a difference of three marks or more in outcome. This is can be seen more clearly in the chart in figure 1.

### 1.2 Institutional Risks and Other Concerns

The high level of variation and derogations outlined above presents a number of problems:

- A high level of risk in terms of complaints about fairness to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OiA.) Whilst the OiA does not get involved in matters of academic judgement, it can look at whether an institution has correctly followed its assessment, marking and moderation procedures, and whether there was any unfairness or bias in the decision-making process. This risk is exacerbated by the high number of Boards of Examiners calculating their results outside the student record system, leading to greater risk of error and disparity in the application of key principles such as averaging, rounding and determination of borderlines.

- Difficulty of demonstrating fairness and transparency of information provided to students in relation to increasingly strict requirements of the Consumer and Markets Authority (CMA)

- Increasing concerns across the sector about the transparency and comparability of degree outcomes, especially around the 2.1/first boundary where final marks tend to cluster.

- Employer requirements for an increasingly accurate reflection of student ability across different disciplines.

See Annex E for further details.
However, it is important to acknowledge that there may be good academic reasons for some of the current variations and derogations – for example, non-modular programmes struggle to fit the UCL norms and professionally accredited programmes have their own distinct requirements. The aim is not, therefore, to remove all derogations but instead to re-evaluate where derogation is necessary and, where it needs to continue, to build appropriate options into a single set of UCL regulations that is sufficiently flexible to meet all programme needs.

1.3 National Grade Point Average (GPA) Discussions

In 2013-14, UCL participated in a national pilot to investigate the replacement of the UK Honours Classification system with a Grade Point Average (GPA). At that time the sector was unable to reach an agreement, and UCL Academic Committee therefore agreed to keep a ‘watching brief’ on developments. In anticipation of the GPA, UCL has already postponed discussions around other Classification issues for a number of years. As a national GPA is looking unlikely in the near future, it is now necessary to address these other concerns. Should a GPA be introduced at a later date it would take a number of years to agree a final model and then replace the current UK Honours Classification system. However, greater standardisation of UCL Honours Classifications would simplify this transition process.

2 Method and Principles

The project has included the following steps:

2.1 UCL Analysis

As a starting point, an analysis was conducted of the UCL regulations to identify all of the Classification schemes currently in use. The analysis identified at least 33 distinct Honours Degree Classification algorithms – see Annex A for full details.

2.2 Sector Analysis

In order to inform the discussion, an investigation was carried out into the regulations for a standard three-year Bachelor of Science (BSc) at 19 Russell Group universities including Birmingham, Bristol, Cardiff, Durham, Exeter, Imperial, King’s, Leeds, Liverpool, London School of Economics (LSE), Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham, Queen Mary, Queen’s University Belfast, Sheffield, Southampton, Warwick and York (Edinburgh, Glasgow, Oxford and Cambridge were not included due to significant differences in programme structures) – see Annex B for full details.

2.3 Student Views

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, and they could also leave comments if they wanted to. There were around 45-50 students present.

2.4 Modelling

The UCL and sector analyses were used to identify a number of areas for improvement in the UCL Honours Classification regulations and a number of models were tested using typical programmes from each Faculty. The sample programmes were selected to avoid complicating factors such as extra-mural years abroad (for which regulations have changed as of 2016/17 entry).

Each model was assessed for its impact on attainment rates on each of the sample programmes over five years of data. In addition, we also carried out hypothetical modelling based on a single set of student results in order to isolate the impact of different regulations.

2.5 Attainment Rates

The modelling aimed to ensure that changes in attainment rates (i.e. the proportion of each Classification awarded) would be kept to a minimum, whilst also ensuring that any efforts to minimise variance did not
result in a Classification algorithm which is significantly ‘easier’ than its competitor institutions and which might run the risk of artificial grade inflation and, as a result, compromise UCL’s academic standards.

Whilst any change will inevitably have some impact on attainment rates, this can be controlled by adjustments to the size of the borderline zone and the rounding methods used. 

Annexes C to G provide further details of the modelling. When reviewing the data, it should also be borne in mind that in 2015, UCL introduced new Extenuating Circumstances (EC) regulations, which no longer permit Boards of Examiners to raise marks or Classifications as mitigation for ECs. The 2011-2014 data will therefore include some candidates whose Classifications may have been raised under the old policy whereas this is very unlikely to be the case with 2015 candidates, whose final year will have been assessed under the new policy.

3 Discussion Points

The following points arise from the sector research and modelling undertaken.

3.1 Inclusion of First Year Marks

Most UK Classification systems are predicated on student performance improving over time, giving the greatest weight to the final year of study. Analysis of average student achievement by year of study at UCL (2015/16 data) illustrates how average marks do increase over time. See figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Average student achievement by year of study

In the standard UCL regulations, exit velocity is acknowledged by including only the ‘best’ module marks in the Classification, and by giving a higher weighting to later years:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year 1</th>
<th>Year 2</th>
<th>Year 3</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>UCL 3 year Bachelors</strong></td>
<td>Best 90 credits (3 c.u.) x1</td>
<td>Best 105 credits (3.5 c.u.) x3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A number of UCL’s variations and derogations include different year weightings and different counting marks (see Annex A). We also looked at the systems in place at competitor institutions. Only King’s and LSE operated any form of ‘best marks’ scheme (although Queen’s University Belfast allows students to drop 1 poor mark). In contrast, 13 of the 19 competitors recognised exit velocity by excluding the first year from the Classification entirely (in the following table, each institution’s system has been standardised to the same ratio format):
A number of the current variations and derogations at UCL are based on this principle, and so the modelling also tested whether this would help to reduce the variance for the derogations and variations. Details of the modelling can be found in Annex D.

There is, however, a concern that excluding the first year from classification entirely may lead students not to take their studies seriously. It should be noted that a student focus group at the UCLU Education Conference was 80% to 20% in favour of including some first year marks at a low weighting, as they felt that it provided an incentive to work hard.

3.2 Dropping of fail/condoned marks

In considering whether year 1 marks should be included in the Classification algorithm, the impact of the planned introduction of late summer assessments and associated changes to the regulations for progression and award, which were the subject of extensive consultation last year, should be taken into account. The planned changes include the capping of resit marks at a bare pass (see Briefing Paper 2) and the condonement a small amount of failure (up to 30 credits a year and 60 credits over a programme) instead of resit (see Briefing Paper 3).

Condonement before resit represents a change in current practice for years 1 and 2 of a programme, but is necessary in order to manage the volume of late summer resits. UCLU have expressed concerns about the impact of this on final Classification. Final year students who fail a module and are otherwise eligible for an award are not permitted a resit opportunity under current regulations. Failing a final year module therefore already has a significant impact on final Classification.

A condoned failure in year 1 would only have an impact on Classification if all first year modules were included. However, excluding all year 1 would imply the inclusion of all year 2 marks in order to avoid introducing an algorithm that is ‘easier’ than that of competitor institutions.

We therefore modelled the effect on a student’s final Classification of failing a module in year 2 (Annex F and Annex G). This indicated that including either 15 or 30 credits failure from year 2 could have a considerable negative impact on Classification outcomes.

3.3 Borderlines

At present UG Boards of Examiners have the discretion to consider students whose weighted average falls 1% below a Classification boundary. The Board can take a number of factors into account, such as whether the majority of marks are in the higher class or whether there is evidence of exit velocity. An improvement in Classification is not guaranteed, but the modelling suggests that a majority of students may be raised to

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1 Sample of 20 students who responded.
the next Classification. Boards of Examiners are conducted anonymously at UCL, removing some of the attendant risks of bias or favouritism that can be problematic in a discretionary method. However, in order to ensure that all students are treated equally, it would be beneficial to consider an automatic, criteria-based borderline policy, such as that in use on UCL’s PGT programmes.

Of the competitors examined, all 19 had a Borderline policy. 13 ‘automatically’ promoted Borderline candidates to the higher class if given criteria were met. 10 of these 13 considered students whose weighted average fell within 2% of the next class boundary, whilst Birmingham considered students within 2.5%, and Queen Mary and Liverpool considered students within 1%. At the remaining 6 institutions, Borderline decisions were discretionary, with some only considering Borderlines in exceptional circumstances. Of the discretionary policies, Imperial considered students within 2.5% of the boundary, whilst Durham, Warwick and Newcastle considered students within 2% and Leeds considered students within 0.56%.

Each of the 13 institutions with an ‘automatic’ Borderline policy used a Preponderance Method to determine whether a student should be raised to the higher class. However, they varied in the way in which preponderance was used, with some considering a preponderance of final year marks and others looking at marks across the whole programme of study.

3.4 Rounding

Across UCL there is a proliferation of rounding systems for module marks, year means and Classifications, with different Boards of Examiners either rounding to the nearest integer or to one or two decimal places. Further variations are caused by the software used to apply the rounding e.g. in Portico, module marks of 0.3 are rounded up, whilst Excel might show 2 decimal places but the figures behind the spreadsheet include no rounding.

These differences in turn affect whether a student meets a Classification boundary, and whether they fall into the Borderline Zone. For example, on some programmes, a student with a weighted mean of 69.5% is automatically awarded a First. However, on others, this student is flagged as a Borderline who may or may not be awarded a First, depending on the Board’s discretion. This also means that, on some programmes, the Borderline is wider, at 68.5% instead of 69%. Whilst these appear to be a relatively minor differences, the clustering of UCL Classifications around the 2.1/ First Borderline means that inconsistent policies can have a significant impact on attainment rates.

Whilst each rounding method is valid in and of itself mathematically, it would be preferable to identify a single system for use across UCL. Looking at other HEI’s, there are a number of ways in which rounding can be applied, but it does tend to be consistent within an institution. Generally, it is better to include more decimal places than fewer, and it is best to apply rounding on as few occasions as possible. It is also important to ensure that records and transcripts are transparent.

The following is therefore proposed. This was applied to year means and Classification in the modelling:

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

4 Proposed Model

Following the modelling and sector-wide benchmarking undertaken, we are proposing a model which represents a slight adjustment to the existing standard regulations or ‘harmonised scheme’ to clarify procedures for rounding and consideration of borderlines and to adjust the Classification algorithm to allow 30 credits to be dropped from year 2, rather than 15 credits as at present.
This will enable the maximum amount of condoned marks to be dropped and would avoid the somewhat opaque additional weighting that currently needs to be used in cases where a student has taken only 30 credit modules.

N.B. The following proposals cover 3 Year Bachelors Degrees and 4 Year Integrated Masters Degrees for ease of reference during the consultation period – cognate regulations will be developed for Study Abroad/Placement programmes, Top-Ups, iBScs, Cert HEs, Foundation Degrees etc.

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

10 Classification (Honours Degrees)

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.

Honours Degree Classification
5. A student who meets the Award Requirements for an Honours Degree must be awarded an Honours classification.
6. The Final Weighted Mark must be calculated from the Mean of the following counting marks:

| 3 Year Bachelors | i. Credit-weighted mean of the best 90 credits in Year 1, weighted at 1 AND  
|                 | ii. Credit-weighted mean of the best 90 credits in Year 2, weighted at 3 AND  
|                 | iii. Credit-weighted mean of all 120 credits in Year 3, weighted at 5 |
### 4 Year Integrated Masters

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<tr>
<td>i.</td>
<td>Credit-weighted mean of the best 90 credits in Year 1, weighted at 1 &lt;br&gt; <strong>AND</strong>&lt;br&gt; ii. Credit-weighted mean of the best 90 credits in Year 2, weighted at 3 &lt;br&gt; <strong>AND</strong>&lt;br&gt; iii. Credit-weighted mean of all 120 credits in Year 3, weighted at 5 &lt;br&gt; <strong>AND</strong>&lt;br&gt; iv. Credit-weighted mean of all 120 credits in Year 4, weighted at 5</td>
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#### 7. The following rules *must* be used to determine the classification:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualifies for First Class Honours (1)</th>
<th>A Final Weighted Mark greater than or equal to 69.50%  &lt;br&gt; <strong>OR</strong>  &lt;br&gt; A Final Weighted Mark greater than or equal to 68.50% &lt;br&gt; <strong>AND</strong>  &lt;br&gt; Module marks of at least 70% in at least 50% of the Final Year credits</th>
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<tr>
<td>Qualifies for Second Class Honours Upper Division (2.1)</td>
<td>A Final Weighted Mark greater than or equal to 59.50%  &lt;br&gt; <strong>OR</strong>  &lt;br&gt; A Final Weighted Mark greater than or equal to 58.50% &lt;br&gt; <strong>AND</strong>  &lt;br&gt; Module marks of at least 60% in at least 50% of the Final Year credits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualifies for Second Class Honours Lower Division (2.2)</td>
<td>A Final Weighted Mark greater than or equal to 49.50%  &lt;br&gt; <strong>OR</strong>  &lt;br&gt; A Final Weighted Mark greater than or equal to 48.50% &lt;br&gt; <strong>AND</strong>  &lt;br&gt; Module marks of at least 50% in at least 50% of the Final Year credits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualifies for Third Class Honours (3)</td>
<td>A Final Weighted Mark greater than or equal to 40.00%</td>
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