

Memorandum 16

Submission from the Student Assessment and Classification Working Group (SACWG)

1. Research, much of it conducted by SACWG, has shown the following.
 - Assessment regulations and practices ('practices' is taken to include not only the rules and conventions that complement the published regulations, but also assessment methods) across the higher education sector are quite varied.
 - The profiles of honours degree classifications in different subject areas are varied.
 - The type of assessment task set for students influences the grades that they receive for their work.
 - Assessment criteria are, in practice, fuzzier than is often acknowledged.

2. Further, there is a lack of clarity across the sector as a whole regarding the rationales for assessment regulations and practices. Yorke et al (2002, p.278) observed:

The higher education sector does not know enough about what its grading methodologies and award algorithms are actually valuing and how they operate to produce the results that they do.

3. All of these points weaken the role of the honours degree classification as an index of a student's overall achievement.
4. It is inappropriate to impose a standardised approach to assessment on autonomous institutions which offer diverse programmes to diverse cohorts of students. Nevertheless, developmental work aimed at clarifying and evaluating assessment regulations and practices ought to enable the sector to advance them on a more collective basis than has hitherto been the case.

What is SACWG?

5. The Student Assessment and Classification Working Group [SACWG] is a small and informal body of academics and administrators who share an interest in assessment. Its membership has evolved over time, and the organisational hub of the Group is Oxford Brookes University, where Dr Chris Rust acts as convener of the Group. The membership of SACWG is annexed to this submission.

6. SACWG was formed in 1994 and took as its main purpose the investigation of issues that had hitherto been largely ignored: honours degree classifications (with particular reference to the modular schemes that had relatively recently been adopted in the erstwhile polytechnics); the implications for grading of different kinds of assessment demand; assessment regulations and related matters. It has also undertaken occasional commissions of research. The Group has, since its inception, run seminars and

workshops on relevant topics, and has published a number of academic papers. It was commissioned to report to the Burgess Group (which was considering the future of the honours degree classification) on issues relating to degree classifications, other national approaches to final awards, and assessment regulations. SACWG is currently investigating the assessment of work-based learning in foundation degrees.

Some aspects of SACWG's research

7. Quite small variations in the way in which degree classifications are determined (the 'award algorithm') can have more effect on the classification of some students than is probably generally realised. Running a set of results through other institutional award algorithms produces different profiles of classifications (Woolf and Turner, 1997).

8. A number of institutions permit a small proportion of module results to be dropped from the determination of the class of the honours degree (provided all the relevant credits are gained). Dropping the 'worst' 30 credit points from the normal 240 of the final two years of full-time study might raise one classification in six, and (separately) changing the ratio of weightings of results from the penultimate year to the final year from 1:1 to 1:3 might change one classification in ten, the majority of changes being upwards (Yorke et al, 2004).

9. Marks for coursework assignments tend to be higher than those for formal examinations, though some instances were found where the reverse was the case (Bridges et al, 2002). Simonite's (2003) work points in a similar direction.

10. The distribution of marks (usually in the form of percentages) varies between subject disciplines in terms of both mean mark and spread (Yorke et al, 1996; Yorke et al, 2002). Subjects in which student performances are more likely to be adjudged right or wrong (as is the case with science-based studies) tend to have wider, flatter distributions of marks than do subjects in which discursiveness predominates. Some subjects tend to have high mean marks (e.g. subjects allied to Medicine) whereas others tend to have low means (e.g. Law). The honours degree award data published by the Higher Education Statistics Agency [HESA] clearly show these effects (see Yorke, 2008, p.118). One cannot therefore with confidence interpret classifications without an appreciation of the norms pertaining to the particular subject(s) involved.

11. A minority of institutions use a grade-point system instead of percentages. Whereas this appears to mitigate the disparity in mark profiles at the level of the module, the mitigation appears not to extend to the level of the honours degree classification (Yorke et al, 2002).

12. The 'subject benchmark statements' produced under the auspices of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education [QAA] were intended to act as reference-points for curricula, and thereby give employers (particularly) a common frame of reference when considering graduate applications. In practice, the emphasis given to different kinds of learning outcomes varies between these statements (Yorke, 2002). SACWG showed that, despite the existence of the subject benchmark statement for history,

learning outcomes and assessment criteria in the subject were suffused with fuzziness and that, as a consequence, assessment was dependent upon the exercise of a considerable degree of professional judgement (SACWG, 2005; Woolf, 2004).

13. A study of assessment regulations across 35 varied institutions in the UK showed that there were considerable variations between them (Yorke et al, 2008). Amongst the variations were the following:

- The weightings in the award algorithm ranging between 1:1 and 1:4 for penultimate: final year
- The treatment of ‘borderline’ performances as regards classification
- The adoption (or not) of ‘compensation’ (i.e. allowing weakness in one aspect to be offset against strength in another) and ‘condonement’ (i.e. not requiring a relatively minor failure to be redeemed).
- The ‘capping’ of marks for re-taken assessments (at the level of a bare pass).

The view from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education [QAA]

14. In its *Quality Matters* series the QAA (2007) published a Briefing Note on the classification of degree awards, based on its experience of institutional audits. The following observation chimes with the evidence from research:

The class of an honours degree awarded to a graduating student by an institution does not only reflect the academic achievements of that student. It also reflects the marking practices inherent in the subject or subjects studied, and the rule or rules authorised by that institution for determining the classification of an honours degree. This is based on the marks obtained in the components of the study programme followed by the student. The implications of the role these different factors play in determining the class of an honours degree are that it cannot be assumed students graduating with the same classified degree from different institutions having studied different subjects, will have achieved similar academic standards; it cannot be assumed students graduating with the same classified degree from a particular institution, having studied different subjects, will have achieved similar academic standards; and it cannot be assumed that students graduating with the same classified degree from different institutions, having studied the same subject, will have achieved similar academic standards.

QAA (2007, para 2)

References

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Recommendation

The evidence from SACWG's research and elsewhere indicates that there is considerable variation across the higher education sector in assessment practices. Whilst this can be seen as a consequence of institutional autonomy, the rationales for the various institutional choices that have been made are unclear. During the Burgess Group's deliberations, suggestions were made that the sector would benefit from development work which would explore and evaluate the rationales for assessment regulations, with a view to providing a basis from which the sector could – more collectively than hitherto – advance its assessment practices.

SACWG recommends the commissioning, at an early date and probably through the Higher Education Academy, of a study of the rationales for assessment regulations in higher education institutions, and of their associated rules and conventions. This is seen as an essential precursor to the advancement of assessment practices across the sector.

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