

SEN15D032

Title: Starred First Classifications
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Issue

The Learning and Teaching Committee considered a proposal to remove the Starred First Class degree award classification which is in part a response to recommendations arising from the Higher Education Review. The Committee noted that the principle reasons for proposing to remove the classification of a starred first, is a lack of understanding by students, employers and other stakeholders of its meaning and a lack of consistency across Schools in the criteria for making this award. The latter being largely due to discipline specific marking norms.

Recommendation

Recipients are invited to:
consider the recommendation from the Learning and Teaching Committee that the classification of starred first degrees will not be available to any student registering on a course from 2016/17 onwards.

Resource Implications

There are no resource implications for the University.

Risk Implications

As this matter was raised in the Higher Education Review there would be a risk in not addressing this issue.

Equality and Diversity

N/A

Timing of decisions

Approval at the June Senate meeting will allow the change to be implemented for all students registering on a new course (including course transfers by existing students) from the 2016-17 academic year onwards.

Further Information

For further information regarding the issues in this paper please contact Dr Jon Sharp (Head LTS (Quality)) on 01603 9597374 jon.sharp@uea.ac.uk

The contents of this paper were discussed by the Learning and Teaching Committee in May 2016 (LTC15D131).

Background

The University provides for the award of Starred Firsts in the Bachelors & Integrated Masters (BIM) Regulations. However, the regulation relating to this categorisation does not indicate what band of marks or other criteria should be regarded as indicative of a Starred First award:

16.3.5 For Starred Firsts, the Board of Examiners shall consider the performance of all Honours degree students recommended for a first class honours degree. At its discretion, the Board may indicate with a star those Bachelors degree and Integrated Masters degree students whose performance displays exceptional merit, in line with the Board's published criteria.

A summary of the various criteria currently used to determine what constitutes 'exceptional merit' is provided at Appendix 1. The wide range of approaches being applied across different schools is significantly at odds with the aims of both the New Academic Model with regard to equivalence and also with the requirements of the Quality Code (Chapter B6) in terms of consistency of assessment criteria.

The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) carried out the Higher Education Review of UEA in the week commencing 12th October 2015. The final report was issued in January 2016 and contained as one of its recommendations, a statement that the University should:

Review assessment board regulations and their application to ensure greater consistency and equity of treatment of students (Expectations B6 and A2.1)

This recommendation was primarily aimed at differential progression requirements in relation to Study Abroad (and this aspect is being dealt separately), but the current practice around Starred Firsts also falls short of the need for consistency and equity of treatment.

Proposal

It is proposed that the University deal with the inconsistency currently present in the criteria for Starred Firsts by removing the categorisation completely.

The rationale behind this proposal rather than adopting a single set of criteria for Starred Firsts that would be applied to all courses is as follows: There is very little awareness among employers and other stakeholders about the meaning of a Starred First. Some might even interpret the presence of an asterisk as representing a negative qualifier rather than a positive qualifying statement. Our graduates are operating in a national and often international context and indications of merit that are not understood beyond the institution are of little value.

The only way Starred First awards could be maintained in such a way as to conform to the requirements of the Quality Code and the recommendations arising from the HER would be if the institution established a fixed boundary above which a Starred First would be awarded. However, the distribution of marks in the First Class category is very much linked to the discipline specific marking norms. The setting of an institution wide Starred First boundary would lead to a significantly skewed awarding pattern.

In the absence of any clear evidenced benefit to the retention of Starred First awards; the Quality Assurance issues arising from their retention as currently awarded and the problematic nature of establishing a genuinely consistent model, it would be appropriate to simply remove Starred Firsts as an option.

If approved, Starred Firsts would not be available to any student registering on a course from the 2016/17 academic year onwards. Students transferring from a course on which they registered prior to the 2016/17 academic year into a new course would be bound by the rules applying to that new course. Consequently, any student transferring courses after the commencement of the 2016/17 academic year would be classified at his/her Final Examination Board without the option of a Starred First award.

Appendix 1

Detailed summary of current criteria and thresholds applied in awarding Starred Firsts.

Faculty of Health

NSC

Award Mark $\geq 80\%$
AND Ascending profile in year 2 and 3
AND Dissertation mark $\geq 80\%$

Faculty of Humanities

AMS

No set conventions as such, but examiners look for nearly all first class credit in the counting years. In particular, they look for the obviously excellent candidates where there is a clear gap between those and the following group.

ART

The Board of Examiners shall consider for a starred first-class degree all BA finalists with an average exit mark of 70% or above. Starred firsts are awarded on the basis of unusually high mark averages (currently 73% or above) or a very high number of modules at first class level (currently 220 credits). Starred firsts cannot be awarded without the approval of all external examiners. The mark averages and credit levels given here will be reviewed annually and may be changed at the discretion of the Board of Examiners. Any such changes must be communicated to all undergraduates in the School.

FTM

Award mark $\geq 72\%$ plus majority of counting credits in first class range

HIS

The Board will be guided by the following: Award mark $\geq 72\%$ and at least 200 credits obtained in the First Class classification range.

LCS

No set conventions as such, but usually looking for nearly all first class credit in the counting years. The Board look for the obvious excellent candidates where there is a clear gap between those and the following group.

LDC

No set conventions as such, but usually looking for nearly all first class credit in the counting years. The examiners don't tend to like to award too many starred firsts so may look for the obvious excellent candidates where there is a clear gap between those and the following group.

PHI

The Board of Examiners may, at its discretion, indicate with a star those Honours Degree students whose performance displays exceptional merit. 'Exceptional merit' is treated by the Board as an essentially subjective designation except insofar as 'exceptionality' must imply genuine rarity. The Board will be guided by the following: award mark $\geq 75\%$

PSI

No set conventions as such, but usually looking for nearly all first class credit in the counting years. The Board look for the obvious excellent candidates where there is a clear gap between those and the following group.

Faculty of Sciences

BIO

The Board of Examiners shall be guided by the following criteria: Award mark $\geq 80\%$ with a first class mark in all counting modules

CHE

The Board shall be guided by the following: an overall award mark of 78% or above, and 1st class marks achieved in all final year modules

CMP

Overall aggregate of 80.00% or above but is largely algorithmic based on third year project first and exit velocity second. The chairman makes a recommendation to ensure consistency each year. Chair of Examiners wishes to emphasise the importance of having board discretion at the boundaries in the NAM, the system we have (algorithmic chairmans recommendation followed by board discussion) seems to work well and the externals often comment that this is a good way of ensuring fairness.

CMP (Actuarial Sciences)

Award mark $\geq 80\%$ with a first class mark in all counting modules

ENV

Award mark $\geq 75\%$ AND 200 credits of first class counting modules (for 3 year-degrees) / 300 credits (for 4 year-degrees) NB, students who fulfil only one of the two criteria may be awarded a starred first at the discretion of the exam board

MTH

Candidates for BSc and MMath with an aggregate mark $\geq 90\%$ will receive a starred first

NATSCI

Award mark $\geq 75\%$ AND 200 credits of first class modules (for 3 year-degrees) / 300 credits (for 4 year-degrees) NB, students who fulfil only one of the two criteria may be awarded a starred first at the discretion of the exam board

PHA

Award mark $\geq 80\%$ OR Award mark of 78.00% -79.99% PLUS 160 credits $\geq 80\%$ achieved during the 3 counting years (levels 5, 6 and 7(M-level))

Faculty of Social Sciences

DEV

In recommending a starred first award, the board will seek to recognise outstanding performance which will normally be expected to fulfil at least one of the following criteria: 1. Award mark $\geq 78\%$ 2. Award mark $\geq 75\%$ and at least 200 credits at first class 3. Award mark $\geq 70\%$ and at least 220 credits at first class including 120 credits in Year 3

ECO

The Board of Examiners for the School of Economics (ECO) considers the performance of all Honours Degree students recommended for a first class degree and, at its discretion, indicates with a star those Honours Degree students whose performance displays exceptional merit. 'Exceptional merit' is treated by the ECO Board as an essentially subjective designation except insofar as 'exceptionality' must imply genuine rarity. For guidance, the Board uses the following principles: 1. A student of 'exceptional merit' will have a mark profile, typically comprising nearly all first-class marks, which though it may or may not have been judged the most distinguished performance in the final assessment of the present year, might reasonably be expected to have been so judged in a 'typical' year. 2. There may be some years in which no student is designated to have displayed 'exceptional merit'. 3. If more than one student is designated to have displayed 'exceptional merit', it will be only a very small number, and there will normally be a clear, discernible difference between the mark/performance profiles of the students so designated and the profiles of the remaining first-class students.

EDU

The board will consider awarding a starred 1st to students who achieve 200 credits at 1st class across counting years in addition to receiving a final mark above 80% OR a final mark above 75% obtained in documented severe circumstances OR a final mark above 75% with an exceptional (mark above 80%) dissertation.

LAW

The Board may, at its discretion, indicate with a star those Honours Degree students whose performance displays exceptional merit. 'Exceptional merit' is treated by the Board as an essentially subjective designation except insofar as 'exceptionality' must imply genuine rarity. To that end, the Board will be guided by the following criteria as a minimum: Award mark of 73% and at least 180 credits obtained in the First Class classification range during 2nd and final year.

NBS

Award mark \geq 75% and at least 200 credits obtained in the First Class classification range.

PSY

A consistently excellent performance across the honours years as evidenced by a minimum of 210 credits at 1st classification AND A mark of at least 75% for the final year empirical project AND Award mark \geq 75%

SWK

Award mark \geq 75% AND Commendation in the final placement report