

LTC11D007

Title: **The Good Honours Issue**
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Issue

Good Honours

Recommendation

Recipients are invited:

- To note the discussion of issues in section 1 and the action plans in section 2.
- To receive updates on this report
- To consider the implications of future LTC policy decisions on the Good Honours issue

Resource Implications

None in addition to current commitment to related initiatives in SSF

Equality and Diversity

Students for whom English is an additional language are identified in this report a group who find it difficult to attain good honours degrees. There is discussion in the report about how to address this issue.

There is a minor reference made to differing achievement between male and female students on degree programmes although this is far from a comprehensive study into the issue.

Timing of decisions

Data will be collected in relation to on-going initiatives in the academic year 11/12. LTC may choose to take this into account in decision making for future academic years.

Further Information

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Background

5 out of 6 SSF schools of study award fewer first class and upper second class degrees than our 1994 group competitors. The remaining school meets the 1994 group average. No SFF school does better than the 1994 group average in this regard. This is something we are seeking to improve. Section 1 of this report outlines the evidence for this and discusses the issues. Section 2 of the report gives detailed action plans at school, faculty and university level which are aimed at improving the proportion of Good Honours degrees awarded in SSF.

The impact of this problem is evident in both students' employability and on league table positions. The action plan at the end of the report is evidence that, for the most part, improving the number of Good Honours degrees we award in SSF is wholly within our control.

Discussion

There are 7 issues identified and discussed in the report;

1. The Nature of the Student cohort
2. Admissions criteria
3. Marking Culture
4. Study Skills
5. External Examiners
6. Student engagement
7. The formula for awarding degrees



The Good Honours Issue

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Contents

SECTION 1

Preamble

Good honours issue

1. The Nature of the Student cohort
2. Admissions criteria
3. Marking Culture
4. Study Skills
5. External Examiners
6. Student engagement
7. The formula for awarding degrees

SECTION 2

Action plans

SECTION 1

Preamble

A good honours degree is a first or upper second class degree. In the current social, political and economic climate, where opportunities for graduate employment are becoming more limited, holding a good honours degree is vitally important to a graduates employment prospects, in both the public and private sectors. In addition, UEA's standing in crucial league tables is influenced by the number of good honours degrees we award. League table standing is important as the HE sector adapts to new challenges. For these reasons it is important for UEA to look at the number of good honours degrees it awards, and increase that number if possible, without risking a diminution of academic standards.

In discussing the Good Honours Issue in this report, we do not particularly differentiate between the desire to improve the number of Upper Second class degrees we award and the number of first class degrees. In some schools, the number of firsts is particularly low and those schools might like to look at that issues themselves. While some of the measures outlined here might improve the number of firsts, the main purpose of this report is to get students over the upper second class hurdle. Once this is achieved, we may look again specifically at the number of first class degrees.

In the Faculty of Social Sciences, the number of good degrees as a proportion of all our graduates is the lowest in the University (SSF 61% SCI 66% HEA 69% HUM 82%). It could be argued that this is the result of the type of students we have in SSF, or the nature of the subject matter. However, in comparison to other '94 group universities none of our schools award more good honours degrees than the average of other social science schools (NBS is our best performer as it equals the average for '94 group business schools other schools vary between 2% and 16% below that average).

Looking at the faculty as a whole, the picture is an improving one. ECO and DEV report a steady improvement in the numbers of good honours degrees awarded, and EDU and SWP can demonstrate that with their 'non standard' entrants to degree programmes that there is substantial value added. NBS and LAW are either at or nearly at '94 group averages for number of good degrees awarded. However in looking at these statistics at a school level, some important details about the reasons for situation are lost, and in many cases statistics at programme level are more helpful.

In comparison to our UEA colleagues and direct competitors in other universities, most SSF schools could improve the number of good honours degrees it awards. This report examines the reasons behind the current levels of good honours degrees awarded, and sets out the ways in which we intend to approach making the changes which should help us improve.

1. Issue and evidence - The nature of the student cohort

Across the faculty there background of the student cohort varies enormously. The nature of different cohorts and intakes within a school of study varies enormously, so 'average' percentages of classifications at school level can be misleading.

The correlation between entry tariff and eventual degree outcome is weak but there are a range of differences between cohorts. One which is mentioned in several reports from schools is the issue of International students. The difficulties that *some* international students encounter relate to their English Language ability as well as their previous educational experience. ECO noted that although they work with DOS and INTO in supporting International Students, take-up for some support activities for International Students was limited.

NBS also has a large international cohort, some entering degree programmes in the second year after spending a year in INTO (both at Norwich and London campuses). The second year entry is also relevant for ECO, and this group on average performs relatively poorly. ECO has tightened its admission criteria for both home and international students. In addition support is being increased from 2011. ECO described the 'steep learning curve' they have encountered as a result of having greater numbers of international students and providing more consistent and available support in these circumstances is very important. DEV report briefly, that in terms of gender, progression of marks is generally clearer with female students than with male students. No other reports tackle the issue of gender.

In SWP in AY 09-10, the UG programmes in Social Work awarded a higher proportion of good honours than the 1994 group average - and that was with 58.4% getting good honours. In AY 10-11 the BA in Social work and BA in Specialist Practice combined achieved 76.5% good honours. Psychology is a little lower, but it went up from 63 to 72% this year. A comparison at programme level to 1994 group averages is important. In considering which cohorts of students might have the best chances of attaining a good honours degree we should consider the whole profile of a student and what that tells us about their preparedness for Higher Education.

With the implementation of the new Code of Practice for Peer Observation, observers and observees might decide to focus on addressing the needs of different learners in their teaching sessions. The extent to which our teaching in the faculty is routinely differentiated is not known and could readily be investigated.

Discussion

There are two ways to approach this issue. Either we try to recruit more students from high performing cohorts, or we find ways to make low performing cohorts achieve more. Specifically if English Language competence is an issue then it would be sensible to discuss how to enhance this capability in partnership with INTO.

The issue of gender differences in results and learning approaches in the compulsory education sector is well documented and regularly discussed. However we have not, in detail, examined gender as a factor in producing more or fewer good honours degrees. It may be worth schools examining this, and if significant differences are found, planning to target male and female students

in appropriate ways which maximise their potential. However before this there is work to be done in uncovering whether gender is a factor at all.

In terms of subjects previously studied, we may need to look at setting more specific entry criteria.

Action Points

- ECO will work with INTO and DOS to improve provision for specific cohort
- EDU will identify students with borderline classifications in year 1 and offer support
- As a faculty as a whole, we need to work together to identify cohorts (International, EAL, students at the borderlines of classifications) which need most additional support. We then need to investigate the impact of additional support. This could form the basis of a UEA funded Teaching Fellowship.
- Investigate the methods by which teaching is differentiated, and the different learning needs of groups and individuals are met.

2. Issue and evidence – admissions criteria

In some schools, for instance, LAW, the entry tariff is high in relation to the rest of the faculty (390 in for the cohort starting out in AT 2007/8) but that cohort scored the fewest number of firsts (2.2% of those graduating) for any school in the faculty in the year they graduated. However that year had the highest percentage of good degrees (66.2). By contrast the school with the lowest tariff that year (DEV with 333) awarded 9.4% firsts and 64.1% good degrees to that cohort – only marginally behind LAW. More evidence is needed about the relationship between good honours outcomes and entry criteria - Associate Dean for Admissions, Nick Gee, is investigating this. There might also be a link between the subjects studied at A-level and degree outcomes (whether or not it has a relationship to the degree subject) perhaps those with History A-levels make better Law graduates?

Two schools, EDU and SWP, have a significant numbers of students from non-standard academic backgrounds. Managing the entry criteria for these cohorts is more challenging. These challenges are lost in the school level stats, and this makes addressing the issues in a sensible way difficult. For example:

ECO report that not all their students have A-level mathematics and this means that those students find some aspects of the degree challenging. LAW report that A-level Law is only an advantage to students in their first year.

Discussion

Entry tariffs are not a particularly helpful measure to predict degree outcome. This may be because the requirements of A-level success are different from the skills needed to get a good degree, or it may be the way in which the points are calculated (included such measures as success in Music exams).

Action points

- ECO report they plan to tighten up entry requirements from AY12/13
- NBS are increasing their tariff of UCAS points to 450 to match top 20 universities
- LAW report that going to clearing for a few students may significantly lower their tariff average
- As a faculty and at University level more work needs to be done on identifying effective indicators of degree performance that go beyond the UCAS points system.

3. Issue and evidence – Marking Culture

Despite the use of the shared marking ladder/senate scale marks may not be applied in a consistent manner between schools or even between programmes. There is evidence that marks awarded, particularly for Coursework, bunch between 45 and 65%. ECO have produced some interesting charts showing that some modules produce a wider range of marks than others.

ECO have given some useful detail on their application of the senate scale: The module convenor is typically the moderator and the overseer of the marking process. Seminar leaders are typically the primary markers. All markers are given the senate scale, answers and detailed marking guidelines. To break the barrier created by a conservative marking culture ECO has circulated a new guideline, in which a module will be flagged up as soon as an item of assessment produces low average. The marking will then be monitored and remedial measures will be taken.

ECO have produced some interesting diagrams to show the distribution of marks on different modules. The range of marks awarded differs substantially. It would be useful for other schools to examine which modules in their programmes give the widest range of marks and which modules give the narrowest range, and then identify the characteristics (of module, type of assessment or marking approach) which produce the widest range of marks. It would also be instructive to compare this across the faculty, with a view to designing assessment approaches for the New Academic Model which give a wide range of marks, including marks above 80%, which are rather rare in any Social Science modules at present.

Reports from all schools discuss the role of assessment and feedback. Sometimes the issue is a conservative approach to awarding marks, in others it is the amount or timing of assessment, in others it is the engagement of students in the feedback process. It is clear that issue of assessment, marking a feedback culture is very complex. LAW have reported that it is not felt appropriate within the culture of the subject to mark up to 100% and that attempts to do so might have an adverse effect on their reputation. Other schools may feel the same given the pervading culture in Social Sciences.

Anecdotally, Teaching Directors have mentioned that they are aware that for some modules there are not always strong links between the content of a taught module and the assessment tool used on that module.

Discussion

ECO have begun to investigate which modules produce the widest range of marks. This would be an interesting exercise to carry out for modules across the faculty. It may be that modules which produced bunched marks have specific characteristics and those that produce a wide range have other characteristics. This would be worth investigating, along with their checking system of modules which produce low marks.

The issue of the 'culture' of assessment, marking and feedback is probably the most complex one in this report. It involves investigating deeply held personal and institutional beliefs. However the complexity of this should not put us off working on this issue, especially with the New Academic Model in mind.

Related to marking culture, there is also an issue of the relationship between the content of a taught course and the substance and method of the assessment used to give credit for that module. As the NAM approaches we need to look in detail at the extent to which module assessment really allows students to demonstrate what they have learned on the module in the most effective way possible.

The marking culture in SSF broadly reflects the (perhaps hidden) assumption that a student doesn't have to do very much in terms of meeting learning objectives and displaying academic skills to get to 40%, then makes steady improvements to quality between 40% and 70%, covering more learning objectives and demonstrating better academic skills. However around 75% the students appear to have to make superhuman efforts to be awarded the top marks. In essence there is no pedagogical reason why a student it should be harder for a student to get from 70% to 90% than it is for them to get from 50% to 70%. However the marking culture seems to indicate that most academic members of staff could readily provide advice to students on the latter, but that the former is thought to be beyond the realms of possibility.

The reluctance to award marks over 75% also means that, with an alogrythmic approach to the award of degree classifications, one excellent piece of work (marked at 75%) might be 'cancelled out' by one minor blip on another module (for example a mark of 64%).

Action points

- Using what ECO have done as a starting point, investigate which modules produce the widest range of marks in the faculty and look for common characteristics of these modules. AD to work on this with Teaching Directors.
- SSF ran an assessment workshop in the last academic year. This is an initiative that should be repeated.
- Each school should examine its marking cultures in detail.

4. Issue and evidence – Study Skills

Study skills modules are common in the first year of programmes but there is little explicit focus on these at levels 5 and 6 (UEA levels 2 and 3). Many SSF degrees feature a level 6 dissertation and research skills for these are important in achieving a good mark in this crucial piece of work.

LAW report that they are making progress in weaving skills into the fabric of their degree programmes, as well as explicitly teaching ‘study skills’. Certainly recent initiatives had made it clear that we need to think about how study skills impact on students at a programme level.

DEV report that their degree programmes have a strong interdisciplinary feel. It may be that this contributes to making the subject matter of the degrees harder to grasp in itself because a successful student has to grasp a very wide set of skills and concepts. This might apply to all the Social Sciences to a greater or lesser degree, but the nature of the subject matter is undoubtedly important.

ECO does not have a dissertation at UG level. However, students can take 80 credits (i.e. up to 4 modules) as coursework only modules, in which they write a long essay as their final piece of assessment. These essays directly contribute to their study skills. Besides, Methods of Economic Research, a 2nd year module which is compulsory for almost all of our degrees, provides essential econometric skills necessary for the UG level and beyond. Our detailed anti-plagiarism guidelines are also helpful for developing writing skills.

Discussion

It is likely that students need for what we might loosely called study skills is highly varied. More needs to be known about how these skills are included *throughout* programmes. In particular the preparation for and carrying out of dissertations where applicable is likely to be an area in which research/study skills can be improved.

Arguments about what constitutes a ‘hard’ subject are likely to continue as long as academics teach, but it may be that the nature of some subjects makes them harder to grasp. It might be that the subject is generally new as an academic discipline to the students (Social Work or Education Studies) or that it requires some exacting level of skill in an area like Mathematics (Accounting or Economics) It might be that significant powers of recall are required (Law) or that the mixture of skills is required to be successful (Development Studies). There is no simple rationale for deciding which subject is the most intellectually demanding. However it is important that, in providing study skills support in a school of study, the distinctive nature of the subject is taken into account.

Action points

Map study skills across degree programmes and investigate relationship with other methods of student support.

Investigate the impact of dissertation achievement on final degree outcomes across the faculty

5. Issue and evidence – External Examiners

All schools note the influence of External Examiners on the award of marks and here are no significant concerns from any groups of examiners about the standards at UEA.

While external examiners in ECO have agreed that our marking standard is in line with other UK universities, the rules and regulations of the university has not been particularly helpful in deciding on the borderline cases of 2:2-2:1 and 2:1-1. On many occasions either the Board of Examiners failed to agree on a positive decision or the external examiner applied a much stricter condition; so many borderline cases could not be favourably decided. A clear guideline from the university would be very helpful. This point has been raised by the Head of School with the University Director of Learning and Teaching.

DEV report positive feedback from External Examiners although there have been some questions raised about whether DEV students were being 'sold short' by conservative marking. They have compared their students to a wide range of other institutions through having a diverse External Examiner cohort. One examiner in DEV raised a question about a piece of work marked 75%. The examiner wondered what the student was expected to do additionally to earn the remaining 25% of marks [to make the mark up to 100%].

SWP report that examiners have consistently endorsed the standards of marking on both degree programmes, and that there is general encouragement to use a full range of marks.

Discussion

We need to harness the support of External Examiners in approaching this issue, emphasising that we are not seeking to make our programmes easier but aiming to maximise the potential for student success.

Action points

- At faculty/university level approach all external examiners with information about our approach to the Good Honours Issue. Ask for feedback.

6. Issue and evidence – Student engagement

ECO, SWP and DEV have identified student engagement as one of the most important factors in improving their rate of good honours degrees awarded.

ECO have identified this as an issue and are working towards providing feedback to students and using more innovative forms of assessment, where students did 4 pieces of work for seminars then two marks for this work were randomly selected. The result was improved student engagement and a significant shift into the first and upper second class classifications. In addition the ECO report discussed the issue of streaming students (grouping students according to ability and offering teaching which best meets the learning needs of that group). In effect this is already done with the 1st years (streamed by whether or not they have Mathematics A-Level) but ECO are experimenting with other approaches. EDU report the provision of extra tutorials for students who are identified

with weak academic writing skills during year 1. This approach has been helpful in producing high levels of value added.

LAW have made significant progress in giving students feedback on assessed work. It is now general policy for markers on all core modules to provide some sort of generic feedback. They also have plans to introduce a dedicated academic support team, working alongside and in addition to advisers; two in each year, running regular small groups sessions not on substantive topics but on, for example how to use and interpret feedback; better essay writing; preparing for exams; what do your examiners want students to demonstrate.

The enforcement of Regulation 13 may also help to improve levels of student engagement. New methods of attendance monitoring possible by schools working in partnership with LTS should help to support this.

Discussion

When new fees and admissions regimes kick in over the next three academic years, the challenge to engage students in their learning will become even more pressing, and it is likely that both teaching staff and students will become more aware of this. However levels of student engagement are difficult to quantify beyond actual attendance and marks awarded, so it is likely that we will need to explore this issue more fully in the years to come. While it is not possible to definitely say that there is a relationship between staffing numbers and successful student engagement, it must surely help to have as high a staff:student ratio as possible.

Many of the measures for enhancing levels of student engagement require intensive staff engagement in reviewing students work pursuing student attendance issues and giving extra teaching time.

Action points

- ECO have a range of initiatives in hand, including using new assessment techniques and a lecture series
- SWP note the use of personal development folders and the careful monitoring of student attendance and engagement.
- DEV report new initiatives around assessment including using new feedback techniques.

- Monitor the LAW programme of extra support, and investigate funding across the faculty
- Schools to examine critical factors which influence performance (for example a particular entry qualification or an indicator in 1st year marks?) and use this as a way of group students for teaching.
- Schools should consider how best to work with LTS to make good use of attendance data and to have a robust policy which allows them to support student attendance.

7. Issue and evidence – the formula for awarding degrees

UEA has a consistent policy of applying a numerical formula to the awarding of degree classifications based on average marks and the weighting of the final two years of study. Exam boards have very little discretion to change a decision that is made by this formula. In several reports from Teaching Directors and in discussion since, this formula based approach has been compared to the approaches of other institutions and it is felt that there should be some consideration at University level of different approaches to the award of classifications.

LAW report that they work with convention and discretion: they have a 2% bracket so that students who score overall 1% under the border need either a final year average of 60% (taking to exit velocity) or need 120 of 240 credits at 2:1. Those whose aggregate is 2% under the class border need both exit velocity and 120 credits in the higher class. But that means that the board can award 2:1s to those with aggregates say at 57.8% with one poor paper not dragging them down so much. That said, once they are under the 2% discretionary band, there is nothing we can do for one poor paper on an off day. SWP report that one external examiner has discussed practice at another institution where a student may choose to 'drop' one poor mark, possibly replacing it with a better mark from the first year. It is not possible to say how widespread this practice is.

Discussion

In a sense, changing the numerical formula by which degrees are awarded would be the easiest thing to do, but in practice this would need wide consultation, and the impact of different approaches on degree outcomes would need to be modelled before any decision was made.

Action points

- LTC to consider the formula for awarding degree classifications

SECTION 2

The following action plan sets out at school, faculty and university level the actions which need to be taken to address the issue. The blue boxed action points have been taken from this report and set out at the back in a table. The AD LTQ and the Teaching Directors will review this action plan at least twice a year over the course of the next 3 years, and update it in the light of (hopefully) improving results.

In addition some schools might decide to set up their own working parties focussing on the specific issues for their school (for instance ECO have a working party on marking schemes).

School specific action points

Aim and action	Resources, people costs etc.	Timescale	Success criteria
DEV will continue with initiatives around assessment including using new feedback techniques.	DEV teaching team monitored by DEV TD	Continuing in AY11/12	Improved NNS scores in feedback categories, improved numbers of 2:1 and 1 st class grades
ECO will work with INTO and DOS	There is a potential cost, if admission target is not met.	2012 Autumn	Short term: to meet our admission target while being able to raise the standard
ECO's plan to tighten up the entry requirements	Some additional admin cost	For entry 2012	ECO's are able to admit more students with AAB+ for AY12/13
In order to improve student engagement, ECO have new assessment techniques and a lecture series	Academic time – ECO TD to monitor	From AY2011/12 onwards	ECO attendance improves and engagement in assessment tasks is evident in more 2:1 and 1 st class grades
EDU (BAES programme) will identify students with borderline classifications in year 1 and offer support	Staff time – but not additional as this is already underway	From AY 10-11	EDU will maintain and improve high proportion of Good Honours Degrees
NBS are increasing their tariff of UCAS points to 450 to match top 20 universities	Admissions team may need to target resources	Student for admission from AY12/13 onwards	NBS have growing proportion of entrants with 450 points

LAW will monitor their programme of extra support	LAW TD and LAW Teaching Team	AY11/12 onwards	LAW will report impact to SSF FLTQC
LAW will try to avoid going to clearing (which lowers tariff)	Admission team improve conversion from offers to students	From AY12/13 entry onwards	LAW avoid admissions through clearing
SWP will continue the use of personal development folders and monitor attendance and engagement	SWP teaching team – monitored by SWP TD	Continuing in AY11/12	SWP report increased student engagement and more marks in the 2:1 and 1 st category

Action points at Faculty level

Aim and action	Resources, people, costs etc.	Timescale	Success criteria
To identify cohorts within SFF which might require additional input to move over 2:2 -2:1 borderline All schools to identify at least one cohort (see school plans above)	AD LTQC to coordinate	In Autumn semester 2011	Faculty is able to target resources appropriately.
Improve admissions' understanding of which pre-university qualifications are best indicators of good honours potential	AD Admissions	From July 2011	Admission are able to target offers more effectively at revised criteria
Investigate the characteristics of effective module design and assessment, including dissertation modules	AD LTQC and TDs	From November 2011 to July 2012	Short report detailing common characteristics (if any) of modules (including dissertations) which produce wide spread of marks (inc.75+ marks). Use this report in designing post NAM modules.
Run SSG assessment workshop on marking	AD LTQC and Academic Director of Taught	Spring semester 2012	Workshop will facilitate discussion

cultures (use new senate scale marking ladder).	Programmes		and understanding or marking cultures
In reviewing NAM programmes within the faculty ensure that study skills, including those which relate to a dissertation are mapped effectively across programmes	NAM working party and FLTQC with Julia Jones and AD LTQ	Nov 2011 - March 2012	Progression in study skills is evident throughout post NAM programmes
Schools should consider how best to work with LTS to make good use of attendance data and to have a robust policy which allows them to support student attendance.	HoS with TDs and LTS managers	AY 11/12 – to be reviewed for AY 12/13	Better understanding and engagement in student attendance issues

Action points at university level

Aim and action	Resources, people, costs etc.	Timescale	Success criteria
At faculty/university level approach all external examiners with information about our approach to the Good Honours Issue. Ask for feedback.	PVC Academic and AD LTQ	In time for boards for AY11/12 and in subsequent years	External Examiners will provide feedback on our efforts to raise the number of good honours degrees awarded and understand the context in which we are seeking to do so.
LTC to consider revising the formula for awarding degree classifications	PVC Academic and AD LTQ	AY 11/12	LTS will have considered a robust rationale for the formula for awarding degrees