

LTC12D100

Title: NAM Regulations for Starred Firsts
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Issue

A report from the Academic Director of Taught Programmes on the regulations relating to Starred Firsts under the New Academic Model. The ADTP's report contains information about current practices across UEA, practice across the wider HE sector, and puts forward recommendations for a change to the regulations pertaining to Starred Firsts. Essentially, the ADTP recommends that Exam Boards should be allowed some flexibility/discretion in this area, but that they also clarify the 'criteria' they use and that they publish these to students. This paper was considered at TPPG on 13 March 2013.

Recommendation

LTC members are asked to consider and formally approve the recommendations contained in the paper on Starred Firsts.

Resource Implications

Many of the recommendations contained in the report will have resource implications for the University. LTS is aware of the contents of the paper on Starred Firsts and is confident that the recommendations, if approved, can be effectively implemented. Exam Boards will be expected to discuss their criteria and forward them to Julia Jones for collation and subsequent approval by LTC.

Risk Implications

Many of the recommendations contained will have a 'risk' element for the University in the sense that decisions about policy issues will have an impact on processes and outcomes for students, and the student experience. However, the risks involved in this paper are minimal.

Equality and Diversity

It is not envisaged that any of the recommendations contained in the report will impact on groups with protected characteristics.

Timing of decisions

This paper on Starred Firsts contains recommendations for approval by LTC at its 20 March 2013 meeting. Subsequent to this, Exam Boards will forward their preferred criteria to LTC for approval (via Julia Jones).

Further Information

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Background

TPPG is an advisory group which provides guidance and advice to the Academic Director of Taught Programmes on issues relating to UEA policy and teaching/pedagogy in general. TPPG is not a decision-making body and has no executive powers – it is a body with cross-University membership which puts forward recommendation to LTC for the latter to consider and/or approve.

Discussion

The paper is for discussion and contains recommendations for approval.

The Award of Starred First Class Degrees: A Discussion Document for TPPG

Introduction

UEA is one of only a tiny handful of Universities to award Starred Firsts. 153 Starred Firsts have been awarded over a 5 year period. As we consider the regulations associated with the New Academic Model, this provides an opportunity to review our practice in this area and consider whether the conferment of Starred First awards remains congruent with our institutional mission. This paper sets out the wider context within which we need to consider the issues, current practice across the University, the extent to which Starred Firsts are awarded within the HE sector, and proposals for change.

Current regulations with the CCS

The current *Instructions to Examiners* in the Common Course Structure (CCS) regulations allow the award of Starred Firsts by UG Exam Boards. The wording is as follows:

Starred Firsts

The Board of Examiners shall consider the performance of all Honours Degree students recommended for a first class degree. At its discretion, the Board may indicate with a star those Honours Degree students whose performance displays exceptional merit.

As part of the wider discussions around the regulations for the New Academic Model it is necessary to revisit this particular category of award in order to determine whether any revisions to the regulations are desirable in terms of achieving more consistent and fairer outcomes for students.

As part of this study the Academic Director asked colleagues in LTS to investigate practice in other HEIs – in particular those in the Russell Group and '94 Group. The Table below (**see Table 1**) reveals that, in fact, we are rather unusual within our immediate competitor group in awarding Starred Firsts. The vast majority of the universities in the Russell and '94 Groups do not award Starred Firsts – the only exceptions being Oxford, York and Cambridge. We can view this either as a positive – that we are able to give our very highest performing students a slight 'edge' in an increasingly competitive employment environment; or as a negative – we are 'out of step' with our close competitors and are rewarding an academic 'elite' rather than those students who, for example, might have made the most progress on their course (i.e. 'value-added').

As ADTP I believe that there are powerful arguments for continuing to award Starred Firsts. As a University we need to ensure that we give our UG students every possible advantage in an increasingly competitive employment market place. Awarding Starred Firsts is one way in which we can do so at little cost to the institution. It equips our highest-performing students with an award which places them on an equal footing (at least in terms of the exclusivity of their degree classification) with the brightest and best-performing students from Oxbridge, whilst not devaluing the First Class degree classification itself. Recent studies have shown that the number of First Class degrees being awarded by UK HEIs has increased dramatically over the past three decades. HESA data indicates that the number of first class degrees awarded has tripled in the past 13 years, leading to suggestions the 200-year-old system of 'first', 'second' and 'third-class' degrees is "far too blunt a tool" to mark out student ability. This could lead to more competition for graduate jobs, with some employers even refusing to consider students who fail to gain a first¹. Professor Alan Smithers, Director of the Centre for Educational and Employment Research at Buckingham University, has

suggested that Universities should all be considering the use of Starred Firsts as a way of differentiating between first class students of varying abilityⁱⁱ. We have stolen a march on our close competitors in this area and we should continue to use Starred First as a way of marking-out and acknowledging exceptional levels of performance. In a changed HE environment where students are providing the lion's share of the funding for Universities, this is one way in which we can add 'value' to the degrees awarded to exceptional students.

Table 1 Practice in other HEIs

Institution	Group	Starred First Awarded?
Birkbeck, University of London	1994 Group	No
University of Essex	1994 Group	No
Goldsmiths, University of London	1994 Group	No
Institute of Education, University of London	1994 Group	No
Royal Holloway, University of London	1994 Group	No
Lancaster University	1994 Group	No
University of Leicester	1994 Group	No
Loughborough University	1994 Group	No
School of Oriental and African Studies	1994 Group	No
University of Sussex	1994 Group	No
University of Birmingham	Russell Group	No
University of Bristol	Russell Group	No
University of Cambridge	Russell Group	Yes
Cardiff University	Russell Group	No
Durham University	Russell Group	No
University of Edinburgh	Russell Group	No
University of Exeter	Russell Group	No
University of Glasgow	Russell Group	No
Imperial College London	Russell Group	No
Institution	Group	Starred First Awarded?
King's College London	Russell Group	No
University of Leeds	Russell Group	No
University of Liverpool	Russell Group	No
London School of Economics & Political Science	Russell Group	No
University of Manchester	Russell Group	No
Newcastle University	Russell Group	No
University of Nottingham	Russell Group	No
University of Oxford	Russell Group	Yes
Queen Mary, University of London	Russell Group	No
Queen's University, Belfast	Russell Group	No
University of Sheffield	Russell Group	No
University of Southampton	Russell Group	No
University College London	Russell Group	No
University of Warwick	Russell Group	No

Whilst the CCS Instructions allow the award of Starred Firsts, not all Exam Boards currently exercise their discretion in this area. For example, UG Exam Boards in AHP do not currently award starred firsts, though the School has considered the idea and may do so in future. AHP may wish to consider whether it is disadvantaging its students by not doing so. The vast majority of Boards do routinely award Starred Firsts, across all four Faculties, as is shown in the table below (**See Table 2**).

However, although almost all Boards award Starred Firsts, the criteria they refer to in making decisions are not consistent. NSC, for example, require “80% and above for all elements including both theory and practice and look for excellence in the student’s performance throughout his/her programme”, whilst in ART Starred Firsts are awarded “on the basis of unusually high mark averages (in practice, 73% or above) or a very high number of modules at first class level (in practice, 220 credits at first)”. In PSY meanwhile, Starred Firsts are awarded to students “with a consistently excellent performance across the honours years, a first class empirical project and a final overall average which sets them apart from those receiving standard firsts”. In EDU students are expected to achieve “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”. In MTH it is expected that students will have gained an “overall aggregate of 90.00% or within 2%”. In ENV the usual criteria for a starred first are “an aggregate of 75% or above, and 200 weighted credits of first class modules”.

These differences in custom and practice have evolved over a number of years. They have often developed in close consultation with external examiners who have brought to bear their own experience of practice in other HEIs. They reflect, also, fascinating disciplinary differences in terms of assessment and marking practices and differing levels of student performance. The expectation in MTH, for example, is instructive. Here, the threshold of 90% is arguably realistic since exceptionally able MTH students can consistently achieve extremely high marks over 90%, whereas disciplinary cultures and marking practices in other parts of the University means that very few students might reasonably be expected to achieve an aggregate over 90%. This is why in Schools like EDU, the ‘bar’ is lower at 80% or 75% with ECs. Even in other SCI Schools like BIO and CMP the differences in assessment and marking cultures results in an 80% threshold (or within 2% of this in case of BIO), rather than 90%. The disciplinary differences which produce these variations in criteria around Starred Firsts should not be undervalued – each subject area has its own complex history and culture and experience suggests that academic staff serving on Boards of Examiners are able to recognise exceptionally high levels of performance by students (even if the criteria they apply are slightly different) and to reward these students accordingly.

Table 2: Practice at UEA

School	Faculty	Starred firsts?	Criteria
AHP	FMH		AHP examiners do not currently award starred firsts, though the School has considered the idea and may do so in future.
MED	FMH	N/A	

NSC	FMH	Yes	80% and above for all elements of the modules including both theory and practice, aiming for excellence in the student's performance throughout his/her programme.
AMS	HUM	Yes	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.
ART	HUM	Yes	Starred firsts are awarded on the basis of unusually high mark averages (in practice, 73% or above) or a very high number of modules at first class level (in practice, 220 credits at first). We also always consult our externals explicitly, to make sure they approve.
FTM	HUM	Yes	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.
HIS	HUM	Yes	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.
LCS	HUM	Yes	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	HUM	Yes	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.
MUS	HUM	Yes	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.
School	Faculty	Starred firsts?	Criteria
PHI	HUM	Yes	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.
PSI	HUM	Yes	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.

BIO	SCI	Yes	BIO has not offered a starred first for a couple of years, though the practice before abolishing vivas was to offer a viva to any student with an aggregate >80% and take the recommendation of the external. Before NAM kicks in the School will look at an aggregate of >80% with a first class mark in all modules – the Chair will be guided by the BoE and externals.
CHE	SCI	Yes	Overall aggregate close to 80% (normally within 2%) and 1 st class marks achieved in all modules in years 3 and/or 4.
CMP	SCI	Yes	Overall aggregate within 2% of 80.00% 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 chairman’s 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	SCI	Yes	Overall aggregate of 80.00% and all modules at 1 st class.
ENG	SCI	N/A yet	
ENV	SCI	Yes	Usual criteria for a starred first are: An aggregate of 75% or above, AND 200 weighted credits of first class modules
MTH	SCI	Yes	Overall aggregate of 90.00% or within 2%. MTH would not like to see the threshold any lower than 85.00%.
NATSCI	SCI		Overall aggregate above 80.00% and all modules at 1 st class.
PHA	SCI	Yes	Overall aggregate above 80.00% and all modules at 1 st class.
DEV	SSF	Yes	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.
ECO	SSF	Yes	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.
School	Faculty	Starred firsts?	Criteria
EDU	SSF	Yes	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	SSF	Yes	No set conventions as such, but usually looking for nearly all first class credit in the counting years. The examiners look for the obvious excellent candidates where there is a clear gap between those and the following group.

Five Starred Firsts were awarded in 2010/11 and seven in 2011/12. Starred First awarded in 2011/12 were to students whose overall aggregate was over 74.42% (there was a natural break in the Rank Order List at this point, with the next student obtaining 72.98%). The Board looks at the top performers and makes a decision as to who gets the Starred Firsts.

NBS SSF Yes

Under the guidance of external examiners the starred first recognises students with a consistently excellent performance across the honours years, a first class empirical project and a final overall average which sets them apart from those receiving standard firsts.

PSY SSF Yes

Under the guidance of external examiners the starred first recognises students with a consistently excellent performance across the honours years, a first class dissertation and a final overall average which sets them apart from those receiving standard firsts.

SWK SSF Yes

The number of Starred Firsts awarded at UEA on UG degree programmes over a five year period is shown in the table below (**see Table 3**). This reveals interesting variations in the aggregate marks achieved by students who were awarded Starred First. Only in the SCI Schools have students achieved marks of 85% or higher. In the vast majority of cases, Starred Firsts have been awarded to students with marks in the 70-74.99% range or the 75-79.99% range, the first group being significantly larger than the second.

Table 3

Analysis of classification marks for those students achieving a starred first, from 2006/7 to 2011/2

SPR Code	Column Labels						Grand Total
	70-74.99	70-75	75-79.99	80-84.99	85-89.99	90-95	
AMSUGBA	6		3				9
ARTUGBA	3						3
BIOUGBSC			4	1	1		6
CHEUGBSC			1				1
CHEUGMCHE			2		1		3
CMPUGBSC			1	6			7
DEVUGBA	4		1				5
	70-74.99	70-75	75-79.99	80-84.99	85-89.99	90-95	Grand Total
DRAUGBA	3						3
ECOUGBSC	3		7	2			12
ENVUGBSC	2		6	1			9
FTVUGBA	2						2
HISUGBA	6		2				8
LAWUGLLB	1						1
LCSUGBA	2						2

LCWUGBA	10						10
LITUGBA	8	1	2				11
LLTUGBA	1						1
MTHUGBSC				1	1	2	4
MTHUGMMTH						1	1
NAMUGBSPRE			1	1			2
NBSUGBSC	15		8	1			24
NSCUGBSPRE				4	1		5
PHAUGMPHA			3	4	1		8
PHIUGBA	1		2				3
PSIUGBA	1		1				2
SCIUGBSC			4	1	1		6
SWKUGBSC	2						2
SWPUGBA			1				1
SWPUGBSC			2				2
Grand Total	70	1	51	22	6	3	153

A simple summary table provided below (see Table 4) shows that a total of **153 Starred Firsts** have been awarded over a five year period.

Table 4: Summary of Starred Firsts over a 5 Year Period

Row Labels	Count of SPR Code
70-74.99	70
70-75	1
75-79.99	51
80-84.99	22
85-89.99	6
90-95	3
Grand Total	153

Recommendations from the Academic Director of Taught Programmes

There are considerable dangers in imposing on all Exam Boards regulations or criteria which do not take account of the disciplinary cultures and differences I have referred to above. Applying a 90% aggregate requirement (like that in MTH) on other Exam Boards would simply result in hardly any students being awarded Starred Firsts outside of MTH. Applying an 80% aggregate threshold would result in a major increase in Starred Firsts in some schools and a subsequent 'devaluing' of the award. TPPG members need to be cognisant of this.

Having consulted Exam Boards and considered the issue at length I am not convinced that the imposition of a set of uniform, prescriptive criteria is either desirable or necessary. Boards are succeeding in differentiating between different levels of First Class performance and are awarding

Starred Firsts – often in relatively consistent numbers year on year. The numbers are often small, but this reflects the exclusive nature of the award which recognises exceptionally high levels of performance. This is, in short, an area where I think Exam Boards should be free to exercise their judgement and discretion. I am not inclined, therefore, to present LTC with a set of standardised criteria for approval.

However, I do believe that we should consider requiring the following:

- 1) Exam Boards should be encouraged to review the contents of this discussion paper (discussions should include external examiners). Having discussed it they should consider whether they wish to make any changes to the criteria they are currently applying in order to exercise discretion in the award of Starred Firsts. Exam Board chairs should report the outcome of these discussions, setting out clearly the criteria they wish to employ, to Julia Jones (NAM Project Officer) who will be able to collate them.
- 2) The preferred, collated criteria for each Exam Board should be presented to LTC for formal approval.
- 3) Each School should ensure that the approved criteria for Starred Firsts for their degree programmes are then published and communicated clearly to students.
- 4) Proposed regulation wording for the NAM UG Regulations:

Starred Firsts

The Board of Examiners shall consider the performance of all Honours Degree students recommended for a first class degree. The Board may indicate with a star those Honours Degree students whose performance displays exceptional merit.

The criteria used by the Board of Examiners to award starred firsts must be approved by LTC and be published to students at the start of their studies.

Dr Adam Longcroft

Academic Director of Taught Programmes

28 February 2013

ⁱ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/universityeducation/9792964/Number-of-first-class-degrees-has-tripled-since-late-90s.html>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2040806/First-class-Top-level-degrees-34-prompting-fresh-concerns-grade-inflation.html>