

LTC14D218

Title: The consideration of marks for periods of study abroad
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Issue

There has been mixed practice regarding how marks obtained abroad are considered in relation to the classification of UEA degrees for a number of years. Some Schools have used grade conversion tables, others have used their experience and expertise to convert grades and some set and mark work themselves so they did not rely on marks awarded at the overseas institution.

With the introduction of the Bachelors and Integrated Masters BIM regulations, four-year Bachelors degrees including a year abroad were standardised, so the year abroad marks no longer contribute to the classification of the degree. The calculation of the award mark for the classification of the degree is based on marks obtained on modules studied in years 2 and 4, at UEA. There is no proposal to change this regulation. However, there are other courses where study abroad is awarded a mark which counts towards the degree classification. This is currently the case for (i) Bachelors three-year courses where a semester is spent studying abroad, (ii) 3-year Bachelors courses which include a year abroad (currently only 3-year computing science with a year abroad), (iii) four-year integrated masters courses with a semester abroad, and (iv) four-year integrated masters courses which include a year abroad. A meeting was held on 12 February to consider these issues with a view to introducing more transparent and defensible practices where appropriate and this was discussed further by TPPG at its meeting on 10 June. The main points are summarised below, along with follow-up considerations to how this might work in practice and timescales.

Recommendation

Recipients are invited:

1. To consider and approve the changes to the regulations, detailed in the discussion below, namely (i) that for Bachelors courses where there is a semester abroad, the study abroad is considered pass/fail and does not contribute to the classification of the degree and (ii) that for these students, their degree classification would be based on 180 credits, with Year 2 (60 credits) weighted 25% and Year 3 (120 credits) weighted 75%.
2. To note that further consultation in specific areas is planned, as detailed below, and the recommendations from this consultation will come to a future meeting of LTC for consideration.

Resource Implications

There is administrative resource required to (i) set up new degree weightings in SITS, (ii) set up new semester-abroad course variants in SITS and (iii) to move affected students from the

standard course to the semester abroad course to ensure they pick up the correct degree weightings.

Risk Implications

None

Equality and Diversity

None

Timing of decisions

If the recommendations are approved for semester abroad modules for Bachelors' degrees, this would come into force for 2016/7.

Further Information

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Background and Discussion

i. For Semester Abroad study for three-year Bachelors degrees

The number of semester abroad opportunities is increasing, with an associated increased challenge to convert marks obtained abroad in a fair, transparent and consistent manner. HUM has recently announced that all undergraduate students would have the opportunity to study abroad, and with the increased focus on internationalisation and mobility, these initiatives are likely to increase.

One option would be to move to pass/fail for the semester abroad, so that only the credits obtained at UEA counted towards the classification. The marks abroad would still be available to the students, in the form of a visiting student transcript from the host institution. The main discussions points and possible follow up action are summarised below:

- a. Moving to pass/fail may lead to less engagement and achievement with academic study abroad. Although students would still have to pass the year, the lack of a counting mark may lead to students doing 'just enough' which may turn out to be 'just not enough', which may lead to the student failing the period of study and therefore the course. This is in contrast to the year abroad, where a student who has failed the year abroad can just move to the 3-year home-based course. This potential lack of engagement can be mitigated by Schools clearly setting the expectations for the students, and ensuring that measures are in place to make sure students are actively engaged with their studies whilst abroad (as required by the Code of Practice on Placement Learning).
- b. The majority view was to move to pass/fail notwithstanding the risk to academic engagement.
- c. One option considered was not to count the marks obtained abroad, but ask students to do an additional assignment which would be marked at UEA. This did not have support.
- d. Moving to pass/fail for the 60 credits abroad would mean that classification for those students would be based over 180 credits instead of 240 credits, and UEA modules studied by both semester-abroad and standard course students would contribute differently to their overall classification if the standard 40:60 weighting was maintained. Following the meeting, the module/credit weighting was re-considered, and a 25:75 weighting of Year 2: Year 3 would be equivalent to 40:60 (See Appendix for the calculation and example).
- e. Also considered was how best to deal with this in the Student Information System, to ensure degree weightings were correctly assigned and calculated. The least

risky, in terms of manual intervention and errors, would be to move all affected students to a semester-abroad variant of the standard course, and this variant would have the semester-abroad classification rules built into the system ie 25:75% year weightings.

- f. If the move to pass/fail for all semester-abroad modules were approved, this could be brought in for modules from 2016/7 ie students going into year 2 in 2016/7. If Schools wished to bring this in earlier ie for students finishing in 2015/6 or 2016/7, they would need to seek the consent of **all** affected students and if they were all in agreement, a concession could be applied for and would be looked on favourably.

ii. For the three-year Bachelors Course

There is only one three-year course which incorporates a year abroad currently run at UEA. This is Computing Science with a Year Abroad and there are only 4 students on this course, two due to finish this year, one currently in year 1, and one currently abroad in year 2. This wasn't discussed in detail at the meeting, and further discussions will need to take place with the School. Options appear to be:

- a. Ensuring that the School has a very good understanding of the modules and assessment carried out in the host institutions to the extent that the School can publish set criteria to students on how they will be assessed and how any grade conversion works. This would be made easier if the number of institutions were restricted.
- b. Consider the future of the course, either re-launching the course as a standard four-year course, where the year abroad doesn't count towards classification or dropping the course/changing it to just one semester abroad.

iii. For Integrated Masters Courses which include a semester abroad

There is only one integrated masters course where there is a semester spent studying abroad, namely the Forensic and Investigative MChem course, where students can opt to study at the Florida International University (FIU) for the Spring Semester in Year 3. As there is a longstanding and close relationship between FIU and UEA, in which the School is familiar with the curriculum and assessment undertaken at FIU, the conversion of marks obtained for this semester can be justified. The School is expected to have a robust and transparent QA process for considering and converting the marks awarded.

iv. For Integrated Masters Courses with a year abroad

Integrated Masters courses consist of 360 undergraduate credits (120 at each level 4, 5 and 6, in line with the BIM regulations), and 120 credits at level 7 (Masters level). The classification of these courses under BIM is based on year weighting of 20:30:40 for years 2, 3 and 4.

There was some discussion at the February meeting regarding the IM issue, but further discussions will need to take place. Unlike four-year Bachelors programmes, where the year abroad can be discounted from the classification, IM year abroad marks currently count towards the degree. If this were to change to *not counting*, there were concerns that students on a year-abroad variant would be being treated differently to those studying at home. The effect would be that no level 6 modules would count towards classification and a rather complicated weighting of 28^{4/7}, for Year 2, and 71^{3/7} for Year 4. It seemed from the mood of the meeting that this felt a step too far, and some other solution should be found. Alternatives include:

- a. Restrict the number of institutions IM students can go to, and their module choice whilst there, and build up relationships with those institutions, so that there is a good understanding of the curriculum and assessment. This will lead to greater confidence and transparency in the conversion of marks. If this were chosen, we

would expect Schools to publish the conversion scales they use in calculating the marks.

- b. In addition to the above, reduce the weighting for the study abroad year. This would not be recommended, as it suggests that there isn't the expected confidence in the conversions being used.
- c. Explore whether treating the pass/fail option would be acceptable, to the University, the students and any professional body, such as the Royal Society of Chemistry.

Recommendations

In all cases, the recommendations should be discussed with students in the affected Schools, normally through the Staff Student Liaison Committees in the first instance.

1. No change is made to the current regulation that the year abroad study for 4-year Bachelors degree courses is considered pass/fail and does not count towards the classification of the degree.
2. For Bachelors courses where there is a semester abroad
 - a. The study abroad is considered pass/fail and does not contribute to the classification of the degree.
 - b. Students would still receive the actual marks obtained whilst abroad, in the form of a visiting student transcript; this would not be linked to their UEA record or HEAR.
 - c. The classification of the degree would be based on 180 credits, with the following weighting: Year 2 (60 credits) – 25%, Year 3 (120 credits) – 75%.
 - d. In system terms, students with a semester abroad would be transferred to a course variant to ensure the correct weighting was applied to their classification rules computed within SITS. This would require new variants to be set up for each course where a student went abroad for one semester.
 - e. Timing – if approved, this could be brought in for modules from 2016/7 ie students going into year 2 in 2016/7. If Schools wished to bring this in earlier for students who are already enrolled or who have chosen their study abroad option, the Schools would need to seek the consent of **all** affected students and only if they were **all** in agreement could a concession then be applied for.
3. For the 3-year Computing Studies with a Year Abroad, the ADTP and Head LTS have further discussions with the School to reach an agreement based on either
 - a. Continuing with the current weighting, but with a restriction on the number of institutions students can study at, and where the School has confidence in the curriculum and assessments of the host institution, and the School publishes the conversion scale used, or
 - b. Finding alternative ways to offer study abroad opportunities, either as a standard four-year course, or one-semester-only options.
4. For the Integrated Masters MChem with a semester spent in Florida International University, carry on with the conversion of marks, justified due to the close relationship and the School's understanding of the curriculum and assessment carried out at FIU.
5. For the Integrated Masters courses with a year abroad, Schools to consider the recommendations below and decide on the best option for their School, in discussions with the ADTP and Head LTS:
 - a. Restrict the number of institutions IM students can go to, and their module choice whilst there, and build up relationships with those institutions, so that there is a good understanding of the curriculum and assessment. Publish the conversion scales they use in calculating the marks
 - b. Explore whether treating the pass/fail option would be acceptable, to the University, the students and any professional body, such as the Royal Society of Chemistry.

6. Other issues arising from the discussions which should be addressed:
 - a. Good practice in operating study abroad:
 - i. Reiterate requirement to ensure students obtain prior approval from their Adviser or Study Abroad Coordinator of their module choices to study whilst abroad
 - ii. Ensure that there are clear published guidelines on how a failed period of study abroad is reassessed.
 - iii. Ensure that Course Profiles are amended to incorporate the option for a semester abroad where this is available.
 - b. Ensure that any change to regulations and processes are published to students in a transparent and timely way.
 - c. Thresholds for year abroad were set with the introduction of BIM, with a standardised 55% in years 1 and 2, prior to going abroad, for Bachelor 4-year programmes. Although not all Schools are happy with this, and some are operating other thresholds by concession, the recommendation is that this is not reviewed until we have more information on how the current thresholds have affected outcomes. This will be picked up in the annual BIM reviews, with a recommendation that this is not reviewed until after the first graduates from the regulations ie 2016/7 at the earliest.
 - d. Thresholds for semester abroad was touched on in the discussions, with some colleagues stating that these should be in line with the 55% requirement for year abroad. As things stand there is no threshold, with the recommendation that this is also reviewed in 2016/7.

Attachments

Appendix - Classification of 3-year degree courses with a semester abroad which does not count towards classification

Appendix: Classification of 3-year degree courses with a semester abroad which does not count towards classification.

		Weighting for student studying wholly at UEA			Weighting for student studying with a semester abroad		
		no. credits	weighting	proportion	no. credits	weighting	proportion
Year 2 (40%)	Sem 1	60	0.2	1	0	0	0
	Sem 2	60	0.2	1	60	0.25	1
Year 3 (60%)	Total	120	0.6	3	120	0.75	3

Example			Student A		Student B		
Year 2	Average for Sem 1		73.75	0.2	-		
	Average for Sem 2		70	0.2	70	0.25	
Year 3	Average for Year 3		75	0.6	75	0.75	
Classification			73.75	$(64*0.2)+(70*0.2)+(75*0.6)$	73.75	$(70*0.25)+(75*0.75)$	