

Informatics Policy on Borderline Marks

Teaching Committee 2016-02-10

This paper proposes a fixed policy across all Informatics Boards of Examiners on the treatment of student marks at borderlines. The policy itself is the following two pages of this document.

University Regulations are now rather precise about the actions a Board of Examiners may take, in particular when considering promotion of a student across a borderline — to pass a course, progress to a higher year, or receive a degree. So far this has been managed by individual Boards, with some discussion and coordination between the conveners. Having reached a degree of consensus in this, I'm tabling a candidate policy here for consideration by Teaching Committee. The intention is that this would be made public and followed by Informatics Boards of Examiners at all levels.

The key item here is the list of factors taken into account when considering promotion across a borderline. This is to be published in advance of meetings, and complete: a Board may not introduce additional considerations on the fly.

Two items require special attention: they have been raised during discussions among the internal examiners, but without uniform agreement. I'm asking Teaching Committee to decide on these.

Visiting Students

Should the fact that a student is visiting from another institution be enough to consider awarding promotion at a borderline for passing a course?

We have used this a number of times in the past, and staff have argued both for and against it. Currently this is in the proposed policy, but it could be removed. The following points have been given in favour of it.

- Visiting students may be unfamiliar with our teaching and assessment methods.

Of course, this also applies to many of our MSc students, who are often taking the same courses.

- Visiting students take back marks to home institutions who may judge failure harshly.

Our whole-year evaluation means that students can offset failure in one or two courses with strong performance in others; and institutions with a purely modular view may not consider such overall performance. However, this cuts both ways: for institutions where it's expected that students get good grades across every course, our 40% pass mark is already low, and knowing that a student hasn't even reached that is if anything more important to identify.

Students with Learning Profiles

Should a student's Learning Profile, as issued by the Student Disability Office, be taken into account when considering promotion at a borderline?

We have not historically done this, and Learning Profile information is not presently provided to Boards.

The agreed adjustments in a Learning Profile are intended to support a student so they can study and be assessed on a level with other students. This could mean that additional consideration at a borderline would be unfair double-counting. On the other hand, it might be that even after adjustments some assessment methods give a less reliable measure of a student's knowledge and skills.

This is not in the proposed policy, but could be added.

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Borderlines

School of Informatics Boards of Examiners

The University Taught Assessment Regulations (see <http://www.inf.ed.ac.uk/teaching/tar>) require the following treatment of borderlines.

- Boards of Examiners must consider all students with borderline marks.
- Borderline marks are defined as marks from two percentage points below the class or grade boundary up to the boundary itself.
- Boards of Examiners must publish in advance the factors that will be taken into account for borderline decisions.

To “consider” a student’s case does not mean automatic promotion: simply that the Board should take note of it and act where appropriate. This may include taking account of where within the borderline a mark lies.

When students are promoted at a borderline their marks are unchanged but the outcome may alter: passing a course, progression between years, award of a degree, or classification of that degree.

Factors Taken into Account for Borderline Decisions

Boards must base their judgement of borderline decisions on these factors only.

For Course and Programme Borderlines

- Direction of the Special Circumstances Committee

This is binding on the Board.

For Programme Borderlines (Progression or Award and Classification of Degree)

- A student’s individual profile of performance

This includes consideration of the following.

- The quality of a student’s project.
- Strong performance in courses at a higher level.
- Strong performance in higher Honours years.
- Where a student has taken a year abroad, so their classification is based on a reduced collection of higher-level courses.
- Where a student has performed well in courses identified as generally low-scoring.

For Course Borderlines

- Where a borderline decision for a course or course component has a disproportionate impact on a programme-level decision.
- Where a visiting student will take their results back to be considered as part of a programme at their home institution.
- Exceptionally, where assessment of part or the whole of a course is considered less reliable.

Relevant Borderlines

Course pass mark: 40 for Undergraduate Degree or Postgraduate Diploma; 50 for Postgraduate Masters

Progression: 40 or 50

Degree classification: 40 (3rd class), 50 (2.2), 60 (2.1), 70 (1st class)

Range of the Borderline Region

All marks are returned to the University and reported to students as whole-number percentages. Where a fractional mark has been rounded, that integer is the number considered by the Board. For example, where a student's course mark is calculated as 37.75, rounded up to 38, that is within the borderline region for passing the course. Additional information on position within the borderline is available to the Board, but its decision must remain consistent with the number eventually given to the student.

This consideration of only integer marks is specific to Informatics, has been agreed with College, and avoids the situation where a student is given a whole-number mark that appears inconsistent with the Board's decision.

Fractional Marks

Marks presented to the Board of Examiners are given as whole-number percentages, but with further fractional information where appropriate. This takes the form of a decimal modifier from (-.5) to (+.5). So, for example, a mark of 63(-.2) indicates a whole-number percentage of 63, as rounded up from 62.8. The use of both (-.5) and (+.5) reflects the fact that marks close to .5 may be rounded either up or down: thus 63(-.5) means almost half a mark below 63, but not enough to go down to 62; while 63(+.5) is almost half a mark above 63, but not enough to go up to 64. All of these marks are eventually returned as 63.

This additional information may be useful when considering marks in the borderline region. For example, 38(+.3) and 38(-.5) are both borderline pass marks, but the first one is higher; while 37(+.5) is below both of them, and outside the borderline region.

The figure below illustrates this representation of fractional marks.

