IRR/IRP: Potential Change to Marking Scheme

Frank Keller, with input from Iain Murray and Mark van Rossum

August 19, 2015

1   Background

The progression criteria for the MSc have recently changed. In order to progress, students must (according to the Taught Assessment Regulations):

53(a) pass at least 80 credits with a mark of at least 50% in each of the courses which make up these credits; and

53(b) attain an average of at least 50% for the 120 credits of study examined at the point of decision for progression.

Previously, Informatics computed the average for criterion 53(b) without taking into account IRR and IRP, i.e., over the 80 credits worth of regular courses that students take. Now the regulations explicitly require us to include IRR and IRP in the average.

IRR and IRP are currently marked on a pass/fail basis. For such courses, the regulations now stipulate:

53.3 In Regulation 53(a) above, where some of the 80 credits are pass/fail courses, then where these courses are passed, they can be included in the 80 credit total. However, a mark of 50% is the mark that is to be applied in calculations under Regulation 52(b) [sic].

This change of regulations comes into effect for academic year 2015/2016 (in the previous academic year, Informatics had obtained concessions to apply the old regulations, but such concessions will no longer be granted).

The regulations currently do not specify a numeric equivalent of a failed pass/fail course. It seems natural to assume a mark of 0% in these cases, but this would significantly disadvantage students who have failed either IRR or IRP – they would have obtain 62.5% over the 80 credits of regular courses to still achieve an overall average of 50% when IRR and IRP are included IRP (or an average of 75% if both IRR and IRP are failed).

Furthermore, we need to take into account the regulations for the award of the MSc with merit (new for 2015/16), and for the award of the MSc with distinction:

56 Taught postgraduate degrees may be awarded with merit. To achieve a merit, a student must be awarded at least 60% on the University's Postgraduate Common Marking Scheme for the dissertation, if the programme has a dissertation element, and must pass all other courses with an average of at least 60%. Borderlines, for both the dissertation and course average elements, are considered for merits.

57 Taught postgraduate degrees may be awarded with distinction. To achieve a distinction, a student must be awarded at least 70% on the University's Postgraduate Common Marking Scheme for the dissertation, if the programme has a dissertation element, and must pass all other courses with an average of at least 70%. Borderlines, for both the dissertation and course average elements, are considered for distinctions.

Again, the practice in Informatics so far was to disregard IRP and IRR for the computation of the course average for distinctions. The regulations do not explicitly mention pass/fail courses here, but it could be argued that a pass should be converted to 50% (in line with regulation 53.3), and a fail to 0%. This would significantly raise the threshold for merits and distinctions: if a student passes both IRR and IRP, and we count them as 50% in the average, then they need an average of 65% over the 80 credits of regular courses to obtain a merit, and an average of 80% to obtain a distinction.

2 Options

We can react to the changes in the Taught Assessment Regulations in a number of ways, which I present in order of increasing complexity.

1. Take No Action. This effectively means that we decide not to mitigate against the elevated progression hurdle for students who fail IRR or IRP. However, we still have to decide:

- How to interpret a fail in IRR or IRP numerically (as 0%, or perhaps as a different mark <50%, in which case we effectively introduce a three-way marking scale, assuming a non-submission would still count as 0%).

- Whether to include IRR and IRP in the calculations required for the award of merits and distinctions. It does not seems sensible to include them, as it raises the bar for merit/distinction considerably, even though this would perhaps be in the spirit (if not the letter) of the regulations.

2. Introduce Limited Numeric Marking for IRR and IRP. The problem with IRR and IRP and progression is limited to students who have failed one of these courses. We could therefore decide to award a numeric mark between 0% and 49% in these cases, and leave the pass mark at 50% for everyone. This would require guidelines to be developed for the marking of failed IRR and IRP reports, and perhaps for the moderation for failed reports (which already happens now informally).

This option would again require us to interpret the Taught Assessment Regulations in such a way that the average for the award of merit and distinction can be calculated without taking IRR and IRP into account. This however, may be hard to justify as we now have effectively a numeric mark for these courses. Also, we would have to decide whether we want the numeric IRR and IRP marks to appear on students' transcripts (currently only a pass or fail is recorded for IRP and IRR), or whether numeric marks should be internal to Board of Examiners.

3. Introduce Full Numeric Marking for IRR and IRP. Finally, we could mark IRR and IRP numerically, using the full 0%–100% scale. In many ways, this the cleanest solution, as it is clearly compatible with the regulations, and does not require any additional stipulations (e.g., capping the mark at 50%, assuming that IRR and IRP are not included when averaging for merit and distinction).

However, there are reasons as to why IRR and IRP are currently not numerically marked:

- These two courses together are worth 40 credits, and hence would present a large portion of the overall 120 credit course average. Also, it can be argued that the student effort required for IRR and IRP is less than for four regular 10 credit courses, and the pass/fail marking reflects this.

- IRR is traditionally delivered by PhD students as tutors, who also do the marking. These students, being less experienced than academic staff, may not feel comfortable to assign numeric marks. Also, it is difficult to ensure that students receive the same level of support across tutors, which may lead to student complaints.

- As IRR and IRP represent 40 credits (1/3 of the overall credits excluding the dissertation), it may be appropriate to introduce double-marking to ascertain the reliability of the marks. (However, the Taught Assessment Regulations require double-marking only for a *single* item of work which is worth 40 credits or more.)

- In any case, a new marking scheme and sufficiently detailed marking guidelines would have to be developed for IRR and IRP. Experience with the MSc dissertation shows that it is hard to achieve consistency in marking student reports, and presumably the same would apply to IRR and IRP reports. Also, under this scenario a total of 100 credits (out of 180 in total for the whole MSc) would be awarded for student reports.