

Hurdles in Inf2 courses

proposal for change

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I wish to raise the issue of our Inf2 hurdles, based on my previous few years' experience as non-Hons BoE convener, and my recent experience as Senior Tutor, dealing with progression issues, and in particular with complex progression cases that have to go to College.

1 Current position

Currently, Inf2{A,B,D} are 75% exam and 25% coursework, while Inf2C-{CS,SE} are 60% exam and 40% coursework.

All the courses state in the DRPS that passing requires a mark of 25% on the coursework, 35% on the exam, and 40% overall.

To the best of my knowledge, we are unique in the university in having these hurdles at sub-pass levels.

2 Problems

The hurdle structure, which we have had for very many years, causes, and has caused for many years, a number of problems for students, exam boards and progression boards. It is also unclear that there is any sound justification for its current form.

2.1 Exam/Progression problems

The hurdle structure makes it very hard to deal with failures in a way that is compatible with the assessment regulations. Regulations state that a student may not re-take an assessment, *or a component of an assessment*, that has been passed. What does it mean to pass the exam or coursework component of an Inf2 course? If we mean the hurdle, then we reach the situation where a student with 35% on both exam and coursework has passed both components (so can't re-take them), but not the course, which is absurd.

However, if 'pass' means what it means everywhere else, we still have a problem: our response in Inf2{A,B,D} to students who fail the coursework hurdle is that if they take the re-sit exam, and perform well (usually defined as 60%), then the re-sit Board will waive the coursework hurdle. (Consequently, in recent years the first diet Board has also done so.) But if they've passed the exam (whether that means 35% or 40%), they're not allowed to re-take it ... The only way round this is to deem the re-sit exam to be an assessment for the entire course, not just the exam component. However, in practice the re-sit exam is the same structure and potential content as the main exam.

On the other hand, the Inf2C Boards will, other than in exceptional circumstances, always require hurdle-failed coursework to be re-taken, as they feel it is an essential component of the course.

2.2 Justification for the hurdles

In Inf2C, the coursework is a larger part of the course, and it clearly tests different skills from the exam – for that reason, the Inf2C Boards don't waive it.

However, the Inf2{A,B,D} Boards justify their fairly free waiving of the hurdle exactly by saying that the coursework does not really test anything that isn't tested by the exam.

Given this, it seems unclear to me that there is any justification for the hurdle structure in Inf2{A,B,D}, other than some vague desire to incentivize the students to pay some attention during the course instead of just cramming for the exam.

Conversely, if for Inf2C, the coursework is assessing a vital aspect of the course, why is the hurdle 25% rather than 40%, particularly given that it's generally easier to pass coursework than exams?

3 Comments and Proposals

In the first version of this document, I proposed dropping the hurdles for Inf2{ABD}, and moving to a dual hurdle at 40% for Inf2C-{CS,SE}. This was discussed amongst the Inf2 team, and most supported, and none objected to, the Inf2{ABD} suggestion. Therefore:

- I propose that this Board abolish the hurdles for Inf2{ABD} with effect as soon as possible, namely from session 2016/7.
- Should the Boards of Examiners for those courses use their discretion to apply the proposal for this session also? (Since this is uniformly advantageous to students, there should be no regulatory objection.) If agreed, this should be done by returning revised results now, so that students do not take August exams unnecessarily.

In the most recent first diets, the proportions of candidates who failed due to hurdles and would pass under this proposal were around 2–3% in each course.

The view for 2C is less one-sided. Boris Grot, who teaches Inf2C-CS, was happy with the dual hurdle at 40%, but also suggested that we could alternatively just abolish the hurdle for 2C also: since 2C has a higher weighting on coursework, it is harder to pass the course while doing very poorly on the coursework. (25% on coursework requires 50% on the exam to get a pass overall.) Paul Jackson, who teaches Inf2C-SE, agrees that it would not be unreasonable to do this. However, he has a slight preference for the dual 40/40 hurdle, since the 2C-SE coursework is mostly done in pairs – so an exam hurdle is a good safety check; and most of the coursework marks are for skills (design, documentation) which are hard to assess by examination – so a coursework hurdle is useful to check acquisition of these skills.

Paul also asked to what extent these hurdles really make any observable difference down the line. It would be possible with some work to look at correlations between hurdle failures and subsequent performance. I have not done this, but can do so if further discussion is desired.

I therefore put two alternative proposals forward for discussion and if possible decision:

- (1) For Inf2C-{CS,SE}, the argument that the coursework is an essential part of the course should be taken seriously, and the current passing rules should be replaced by the simple (and found elsewhere in the university) rule:

Candidates must pass both coursework and exam at 40%

and should they fail just one component (after applying any Special Circumstance decisions and borderline considerations), they re-take that component *only*, automatically and without discretion.

This would not be a cost-free change, as it would increase the number of students failing Inf2C on coursework, and needing to re-take it. However, on the basis of recent figures, this cost is very small.

In the first version of this document, I asked whether it was feasible to offer a re-sit assessment for coursework. The unanimous and strongly expressed opinion was ‘no’, so I do not now suggest considering it.

Impact: in the most recent 2C-CS diet, of the 193 candidates, 2 more would have failed on exam, and 3 more would have failed on coursework. In 2C-SE, the impact would have been greater: of 178 candidates, 13 more would have failed on exam, and 2 more on coursework. Paul observed that in this proposal, the impact could be ameliorated by looking at the proportion of ‘easy’ marks on the assessments, and given these figures, that might be sensible – an exam that puts 7% of candidates in the 35–39 range is probably not ideally calibrated.

If adopted, this proposal cannot be considered for application this session.

- (2) The hurdles for Inf2C- $\{CS,SE\}$ are abolished along with those for the other Inf2 courses.

Impact: for 2C-CS, of the 193 candidates, 7 would have passed, all of whom failed the exam hurdle. For 2C-SE, of the 178 candidates, 4 more would have passed, all of whom failed the exam hurdle.

If adopted, this proposal could be applied by discretion for this session.

In the light of the figures, my personal recommendation (with my ex-BoE-convener and Senior Tutor hats on) is for option (1), as this seems pedagogically better justified, and (given some attention to exam setting) without undue negative impact.