



## “Upper or Lower?”

### Report of a workshop to identify standards which could apply to dissertations at 2:1 and 2:2 grades in HLST programmes

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#### 1. Introduction

Traditionally, first class honours have been awarded sparingly to students who show exceptional depth of knowledge and originality. But, according to newspaper reports<sup>1</sup>, most recent graduation figures add weight to a report by MPs last year which described ‘inconsistency in standards’ being ‘rife’ and which accused vice-chancellors of ‘defensive complacency’. More than one in ten undergraduates now achieve the highest university accolade, a first, while more than half achieve the top two grades - either a first or upper second. Firsts alone have gone up from seven per cent in 1997 to more than 11 per cent and out of 289,200 undergraduates awarded degrees last year, 172,000 were awarded a ‘good honours degree’.

Lord Willis of Knaresborough, the Liberal Democrat peer who was critical of degree grade inflation when he chaired the Commons science and technology select committee is reported to have said that the rise in tuition fees is a huge gamble and if we are going to award degrees that are not at the same academic standards as they were 20 or even 10 years ago then we will be short-changing the individual students and short-changing the nation.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see:

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-428471/Scale-grade-inflation-exposed-half-students-As.html#ixzz1K4VoPDJ3>

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/universityeducation/8235115/Dumbing-down-of-university-grades-revealed.html>

<http://gu.com/p/2zeg3>

Professor Nigel Seaton, senior deputy Vice- Chancellor of Surrey University, is reported to have said that degree classification is unfair to some students. The life chances available to a student with a 2:1 and a student with a 2:2 are very different indeed and many blue-chip companies will only interview graduates with a first or a 2:1. A top-class degree also makes it much easier to get a scholarship for postgraduate research. Yet the difference in academic achievement and, therefore, in their potential as an employee, between a student with a 2:1 and one with a 2:2 might be almost nothing - 60.1% compared with 59.9%. In such a case, the difference in life chances reflects no difference at all in academic achievement.

That an increasing number of 'good honours' degrees awarded in UK higher education is evidence of 'grade inflation' is difficult to argue against when there is reticence about articulating standards, and about making them transparent and thus comparable within and between institutions and within and between subject areas. At the same time, there is undoubtedly pressure on and from students to achieve at least a 2.1 honours degree to ensure their success in a highly competitive job market.

## **2. The Workshop**

This is the report of a recent workshop held by the Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism Network (HLST), a Subject Centre in the Higher Education Academy, to discuss the characteristics of student work which is awarded a mark in the 2.1 bracket (60 – 69%) as opposed to a mark in the 2.2 bracket (50 – 59%). As a focus for discussion, the final year undergraduate dissertation was chosen. This has customarily been seen as a test of the honours standing of students. Formulae for the calculation of honours classification continue to include the requirement of a dissertation graded at the classification level of the degree to be awarded or above, or perhaps as an indication of an upward trajectory in marks obtained and a measure of truly independent, individual academic achievement

There is evidence of a move away from a compulsory dissertation requirement in degree programmes, with capstone modules, synoptic modules or work-related consultancy projects replacing it. In some cases, students are offered a choice of modules. Some institutions require only secondary research in dissertations while others expect primary research. Again, students may be offered choice. In some institutions a literature review is undertaken, and in some cases separately assessed, before the parameters of the dissertation are approved.

The workshop enabled a multi-disciplinary view to be developed, from across the range of the HLST subject grouping, as to what constitutes student work at the 2.1 level and what distinguishes it from the 2.2 level. Ten academics from across the HLST subjects and a range of UK universities met firstly to re-assess dissertations previously given a 2.1 or 2.2 grade individually and then to discuss and agree criteria

which separated the two grades. They also considered approaches taken to marking projects and to agreeing grades, as well as supervision. The views of a small group of business students who had recently submitted dissertations for assessment were also obtained.

### **3. Re-assessment**

Prior to the workshop, each participant was sent three anonymised dissertations which had already been marked by the providing university and grades awarded. Percentage marks awarded indicated marginal differences between the dissertations but nonetheless different grades had been given. Two of the three had either been given a grade at the 2.1 level or at the 2.2 level and the third was graded at the other level. Participants were asked to choose which of the three dissertations the odd one out was and to explain why. This approach was based on the 'triangle test' to detect difference used in sensory analysis.

### **4. Results**

Of the ten participants, five selected correctly the dissertation which had been awarded a grade different from the other two but five were unable to do this. For the difference between the two types of dissertation (i.e. those awarded 2.1 and those awarded 2.2) to be significant at the 1% level, eight correct identifications would be expected. The difference would be significant in that only one in every hundred times would the correct selection be made by chance. Ninety nine times out of each hundred it would be made because there was a significant difference between the dissertations. Even at the 5% level of significance, seven correct identifications would be necessary for the result to have been likely to have happened by chance only one in twenty times.

Thus the test demonstrated, alarmingly, no significant difference between the sample dissertations, although they had been previously formally assessed as being a mix of 2.1 and 2.2 grade pieces of work.

### **5. Standards**

Participants now worked in two groups representing Tourism and Hospitality programmes and Leisure and Sport programmes. Using the dissertations they had just re-assessed as examples, they were asked to identify the characteristics expected to be demonstrated for the award of 2.1 grade.

## 5.1 Outcomes

### ***Hospitality and Tourism Group***

Following the assessment and the discussion of each dissertation, the Hospitality and Tourism Group identified a number of attributes which they felt applied to a 2:1 dissertation:

- *Aim and objectives.*  
Clear, unambiguous and achievable objectives which need to closely align with the content of the study and to be clearly achieved;
- *Literature review.*  
Relevant, up-to-date and analytical. Needs to relate to the aim and objectives;
- *Methodology.*  
Justified stance. Academic underpinning. Reliable and valid approach. Recognition of limitations;
- *Data Collection and Analysis.*  
Adequate data to meet aims and objectives with sufficient thematic analysis and discussion. Discussion linked to aim and objectives and literature review;
- *Conclusions.*  
Cohesive, with clear links and recommendations.

### ***Leisure and Sport Group***

The Leisure and Sport Group, with a different set of dissertations, highlighted a similar set of attributes:

- Good coherence;
- Clearly critical (the student's interpretation of the subject matter to be clearly presented);
- Clearly stated conceptual framework (on the part of the student);
- Clearly stated purpose, rationale and methodology;
- Clear achievement of aim and objectives.

## 5.2 Shared standards

Each group was now asked to consider the criteria proposed by the other and to critique each other's proposals. They were then asked to agree a set of attributes to distinguish a 2:1 dissertation from a 2:2.

Both groups agreed that the language used was important in presenting a clear and consistent message to students about the requirements for dissertations (and any other assessed work).

It was established that the intensifier 'very', as used in level descriptors, should be used at the 2:1 level to identify the greater extent to which dissertations should demonstrate each attribute or criterion. It was also acknowledged that reading and references need not necessarily be up to date if they are still relevant and authoritative to a particular topic. The final substantive point concerned the level of criticality of dissertations awarded a 2.1 grade and the student position (interpretation) on the topic, and the related conceptual framework for the study. There was much discussion about the extent to which a 2:1 dissertation should be original and authentic and make a contribution to the knowledge and understanding of the topic.

### **5.3 Agreed criteria**

Participants concluded that a dissertation awarded a 2.1 grade should demonstrate:

- Very good coherence with very clear alignment between aim, objectives, the literature review, the methodology and the conclusions (which close the loop on the aim and objectives);
- Very good depth of criticality (analysis, synthesis, evaluation and reflection where appropriate) very clearly representing the student's interpretation of the topic; and therefore
- A very clearly established and presented conceptual framework for the study (in which the students goes beyond presenting a critical position essentially based on others' critical perspectives into incorporating those perspectives very effectively into their own critical interpretation of the subject matter;
- A very clearly stated purpose and rationale for the study and very clear achievement of the aim and objectives;
- A very thoughtful and clearly presented critical appraisal of the study, acknowledging its limitations and strengths.

Further , they agreed that although many of the same criteria apply to both a 2:1 and a 2:2 grades, a 2:1 dissertation should demonstrate a genuine and sustained critical curiosity in the topic, and the related methods of enquiry, leading to a evident deep learning in which a constructivist approach by the student is very clearly established and articulated. It was felt that 2:2 dissertations had a tendency to be descriptive and more naïve. Similarly, the 2.1 dissertation should also contain a very clear explanation and justification of methodology and methods chosen.

## 6. Student discussion

Six final year undergraduate business school students attended the workshop for a question and answer session which lasted just over an hour. They had recently submitted dissertations for assessment. The students were both articulate and thoughtful, reflecting on their recent experiences and contributing much to the discussion.

### ***Question 1: What words / ideas do you associate with a 2.1? What constitutes a 2.1 rather than a 2.2 in a dissertation?***

The students felt that a dissertation worthy of a 2.1 grade should:

- demonstrate awareness of methodology
- describe and justify a clear strategy and appropriate method for information and or data collection
- not be descriptive only, or show a lack of critical judgement
- be analytical, and include knowledge gained from literature
- link ideas together
- express objectives and answer these well
- develop an argument
- have a good structure and layout
- express clearly what further research it would lead on to.

### ***Question 2: How did you acquire this knowledge of what a 2.1 dissertation should be like?***

The students responded that their awareness had developed throughout their university careers and that they had picked up knowledge through the three years' experience of studying. A comment was made that there are useful texts on how to undertake research which complement what is learnt from lecturers.

They emphasised the great importance of a good working relationship with their supervisor, and the level of support and feedback available. They felt this could make a critical difference to their success.

### ***Question 3: In what way do think a first class dissertation differs from one awarded a 2.1 grade?***

The students thought that a first has a very high quality of critical analysis, shows continuity and linkage in the development of ideas, is convincing, recognises alternative arguments and views, demonstrates the use of a range of sources, cites relevant references, contains innovative thought, and really 'sells' the topic.

On a final note, the students agreed that the keys to producing a good dissertation were enthusiasm and commitment to the subject.

## **7. Conclusions**

This workshop, the third in the series that we have undertaken in the last twelve months, has demonstrated again that the process of assessment and the determination of appropriate standards is a key issue facing us in HE and in the HLST subjects. An encouraging outcome of the day was the ability of a group of academics from different subject backgrounds and from different institutions to agree a number of criteria which can be used to characterise a 2.1 dissertation, and the degree of similarity between their views and the perceptions of the student group about the requirements of a dissertation at the level of a 2:1. It did, however, highlight the difficulty in identifying at the threshold between a 2.2 and a 2.1 grade what represents 'two-oneness'. This difficulty is compounded further because different approaches and requirements across the HLST subjects and institutions have been adopted. Early work by the HLST Network on benchmarking dissertation practices identified this variability<sup>2</sup>.

## **8. Next steps**

The group agreed that openness and the sharing of practice associated with the supporting and assessing student dissertations were essential if widely understood and implemented standards were to be achieved, and that these were best promoted within subject communities. They proposed that marking schemes and the guidance provided for students on dissertations should be shared via the HLST web site, as well as information on approaches to supervision and marking used in different institutions

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/hlst/documents/LINK\\_Newsletter/Link11.pdf](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/hlst/documents/LINK_Newsletter/Link11.pdf) (page 25)

See also,

[http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/hlst/resources/detail/resources/guide\\_to\\_current\\_practice\\_Dissertations\\_projects\\_and\\_synoptic\\_module](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/hlst/resources/detail/resources/guide_to_current_practice_Dissertations_projects_and_synoptic_module)