

## Part One should count towards students' final degree classification: a University Debate

On 30<sup>th</sup> November, University staff and students came together in the Madejski Theatre to debate whether the marks from Part One should contribute to students' final degree classification. Arguing for the motion were Dr Matthew Nicholls (Classics), Dr Marina Della Giusta (Economics) and Liam Burns (President, NUS). Opposing them were Tony MacFadyen (Education) Prof Will Hughes (CME) and Natalie Tremlett (student). The debate was chaired by Professor Tony Downes. Both sides put forward cases that were eloquent, persuasive and often humorous, eliciting many pertinent comments from the audience. The final vote on the motion was as follows: For - 24; Against- 31; Unsure - 6. Feedback from the debate has been extremely positive with agreement that the event was a useful consultation exercise and a valuable precursor to further University discussion on the issue. The inclusion of the student voice on this issue in particular was welcomed.

### Summary of arguments 'for'

- Could provide an incentive for some students to take Part One more seriously and achieve marks that more accurately reflect their potential.
- Would allow those who perform well at Part One to have their marks contribute to their degree outcome.
- Inspiring 'proper' study at Part One would lay the foundations for success in later years, both in terms of knowledge acquired and in study habits.
- Would make clear the 'consequences' of poor performance, building on the lessons learned in school and thereby providing continuity in systems of incentives. At the moment Part One can feel like a gap year.
- Waiting until Part Two for students to take their work seriously is not helpful in identifying what particular individual support they may need.
- Adding greater weight to Part One would help make the transition to Part Two less acute.
- Would help identify at an earlier stage those who simply aren't suited to University - would students (and their parents) rather know this in first rather than second year when another £9k has been paid?

### If it were to count, what and how much should count?

- The top four-scoring modules
- Those modules that are prerequisites for Part Two
- Only core subject modules, not subsidiaries
- 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> term modules
- Part One should count for about 10-15% of the overall degree

### Summary of arguments 'against'

- We should not rely on extrinsic motivation in order to 'make' students perform well at Part One; by doing this we are reducing studying to being about gaining marks rather than the process of learning itself.

- Part One should be a time for trying new things, making mistakes and exploring oneself as a learner in HE without fear of being penalised.
- Part Two and Three work contributes to the final degree classification but Part One should not, as at this stage students have not yet had chance to build the knowledge or skills base needed for degree level study. We should not allow every aspect of their development to influence their final mark.
- We already over-assess our students.
- Having to achieve 40% at Part One already provides a motivation for students to work hard.
- Mature students returning to study after a number of years would be deterred from embarking on a programme if Part One counted in any formal way.

Additional comments received via post-it notes and by email following the debate are given below, alongside the preparatory notes of Will Hughes and Matthew Nicholls (with permission).

The footage of the debate is available at:

<http://www.ruon.tv/ondemand/video.php?vidid=401>

*Joy Collier*

*February 2012*

**A University debate: Should the marks from Part One count towards students' final degree classification? 30<sup>th</sup> November 2011**

Additional comments received at the end of the debate (on post-its) and via email to Joy Collier:

*'To do study abroad etc. You need at least 60 – because I got 58 in my first essay I didn't get put down – if I had known this counted there is no way I wouldn't have achieved this – I think Part 1 should count! (5% or 10%)'*

*'Students deserve better/any feedback in first year – otherwise how are we expected to improve? Lecturers care less about 1<sup>st</sup> years and do not take marking as seriously. I don't care about students who don't work hard – students who want to deserve the best (they want to do well!).'*

*'In a 3 lap race you don't tire yourself out on the first lap, success is in the third'*

*'When AS levels were introduced to encourage widening knowledge base, most students chose a subject which supported their chosen University subject'*

*'In deciding whether Part 1 should count the University should decide if it can afford the resources to fairly assess and quality assure the first year – e.g. external examining, student support, admin staff, exams office etc.'*

*'Could there not be an alternative compromise? Perhaps offering a variety of two year courses for those students that feel confident in their already acquired knowledge, such as psychology students who achieved a high grade in a thorough psychology A level. And the same could apply to many subjects including ones like philosophy or computer science.'*

*'There are a large number of students who switch degree classifications between Part 1 and 2 – some switch from single honours to joint, others between single honours courses. If Part 1 was to count, this may prove detrimental to those students who switch degree classifications.'*

*'Skills and knowledge acquired in 1<sup>st</sup> year should be used and assessed as they are applied and further developed later on during their degree.'*

*'Should count but not equally to 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year'*

*'If a student requires motivation – be it a 'nudge' or merely questioning if they do, I don't think an assessment that counts or one that doesn't will make any difference'.*

*'The increase in fees will alienate enough mature students, don't put off the few that might still come to university'.*

*'For what it is worth, I strongly oppose making part 1 count. I think it is a mis-conception of what we should be trying to do with our assessment, which is to say something about what a qualified student can do - when they finish. To make part 1 count is like including a diver's training period in judging whether they get an olympic medal, or qualifying an airline pilot on the basis of how fast they learned in pre-flying training, not whether they can fly.'*

*'If it doesn't ...: What about offering Part 2 students the option of replacing a (low) mark of ONE Part 2 module with a higher mark of ONE Part 1 module from their core subject? It could encourage students who might not otherwise do so to take Part 1 seriously... There are doubtless 'cons' to this ... but you get the drift :)'*

**Will Hughes - Against**

First year already counts qualitatively, because you have to pass. The proposal is to make it count quantitatively.

The real problem about relating every aspect of study to marks is the idea that this will motivate students. This is the worst kind of behaviourist dogma and is more about control than motivation.

Linking rewards to certain kinds of behaviour is not about making people inherently want to do something, it is simply about making them do something. If people do not want to do something. You cannot get inside their minds and make them want to do it, but you can try to make them do it on the basis that if they do not do it, then they will suffer bad consequences.

So , I would not ask, "how can we motivate our students?", I would ask "how motivated are our students?" The key thing being that there is a huge difference between intrinsic motivation (where something is seen as appealing of itself) and extrinsic motivation (where a task is seen as a means to an end, a prerequisite for receiving a reward or avoiding a punishment).

Albert Einstein is credited with saying "if people are good only because they fear punishment, and hope for reward, then we are a sorry lot indeed". We assess final year work in order to give recognition to what students have achieved in their time at University. In the first year, they have not yet had sufficient time to learn the craft of being a student, to learn how to be an independent learner. If we are going to allow every aspect of their development to influence their final mark, where is the space for experimentation? Where is the flexibility to allow people to adapt and develop creatively? Where is the room for experimentation if there is no room for mistakes.

I think the most evil thing about this suggestion is the idea that the only thing that matters in the University is what happens between lecturer and student. This is a cruelly impoverished view of higher education. I often tell my students that more than half of what they learn at University, they learn from each other. Moreover, the first year of study is particularly difficult as a time of adjustment and learning a new way of living, a new way of thinking, a new way of arguing.

The problem with slicing assessments into small pieces is to do with disaggregation of learning. We might say that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Assessment in final year tends to be around large-scale integrated tasks that draw on diverse skill sets simultaneously, involving judgements and many different routes to the answer. The early parts of a programme are typically built around smaller pieces of the syllabus, more elementary skills, which, of themselves, are not final year degree level skills. This is why they do not count towards the classification of the degree. They are needed, and they contribute to the skill set, but they are not of themselves the kinds of things that justify the award of a degree, except when they are used in sensible and useful combinations in the appropriate circumstances. Thus, first year learning is not the same as final year learning.

I entreat you to resist this move that will give too much emphasis to slavishly learning what is pre-ordained in systematic syllabuses. Give students space to develop and room for experimentation and mistakes. Vote against the motion.

Matthew Nicholls - For

We are for the motion that Part 1 should count because we **want students to do well**, to get the most out of their time at University.

It is fair to say that opinion divides on this question – hence this debate.

- The appetite for making Part 1 count officially for credit within your degree programme comes in large part from students, in fact – it is good that we have the president of the NUS, no less, on our side.
- Students do tell us that this would reflect the investment of time, effort, and money on their part, though we reject the simplistic ‘consumerist’ idea that Part 1 should count simply because they’re now paying more for it.
- Some of them also tell us later in their courses that they wish they’d taken Part 1 more seriously – that the added incentive of knowing it counted towards their final result would have forced them to settle down to studies more quickly and in a more focused way, with clearer academic goals in mind and a more defined plan for achieving them.

I should say at the outset that the majority of our students are of course hard working, mature, and diligent in their first year studies.

- The proposal to make Part 1 count towards their final degrees would not really affect this majority; if anything, it might work to their advantage by allowing their strong initial performances to contribute to their overall mark.

So it’s really the weaker-performing students that this measure would affect.

- We do hear that weaker or less committed students have the idea that their degree doesn’t really get started until the second year when results start to count towards your final classification: we’ve seen that in recent student feedback.

But of course they’re wrong about this: there is a very strong correlation between not doing well at Part 1 and carrying on not doing well:

- Proper study in Part 1 lays the foundations for success in the later years, both in terms of knowledge acquired but also (more importantly) in terms of habits of mind and practices of study.
- So you can’t just turn on suddenly in the second year and make a better job of it; you’ll already be behind.
- Making part 1 count would therefore in our view not rob students of a year in which to adjust to University learning, but simply formalise what already happens when you mess up Part 1 of your degree.
- And by making the consequences of this plain from the outset, this change should actually help weaker students’ overall results, not harm them, by showing them early on the consequences of poor performance.

**There are of course counter arguments, which we will hear from the other side:**

“Part 1 is useful as a time to make the transition between School and University styles of learning, to make mistakes or ‘fail creatively’ without permanent consequences”

- Agreed – and we need to take careful account of the fact that this transition is difficult for some.
- But continuity is important. Muck up in school and you pay for it, and muck up at Parts 2/3 or in your professional career and you pay for it.
- So we’re currently making Part 1 a gap year in terms of our systems of incentive.
- We should be looking to set incentives right, to help people perform at their best from the start of their time here to get the most out of University.

So how do we do this without unduly spoiling people’s chances if they take a while to make this transition, and without losing Part 1’s function as a time to try out new things?

### What mechanism are we actually proposing here?

Obviously this will require working out consistently at the highest levels of the University, but here are some initial ideas:

- The **top four-scoring modules** (i.e. 80 academic credits out of 120) should count, rather than all six – allows you to try a couple of new things and fail. Or perhaps just count those modules that are already pre-requisites to progression to Part 2.
- E.g. In Classics we actively encourage people to try a year of Latin even though we know some will find it’s just not for them – fair enough. So this way you could carry a couple of low scores without harming your eventual degree.

Also, Part 1 shouldn’t count for too much:

- **About 10-15%** of your overall degree seems right, with Parts 2 and 3 still counting for much more in proportion.
- This figure feels large enough to be a proper incentive to avoid disaster and try to perform as well as possible – but in practice at this level most people’s Part 1 marks will not be the determining factor in their overall result. Later marks will still count for much more.
- Also, the principle of Exit velocity is already admitted into the classification of Reading degrees<sup>1</sup> and could be refined to take account of Part 1 performance, so good performance later could help redeem a wobbly start.

In short, we think that making Part 1 count for about 10% would be enough to act as a proper incentive but would also allow students to bloom in later years, and for this reason **we beg to propose the motion.**

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<sup>1</sup> University exam regulations 7.4.2: if the Dominant Quality or the Exit Velocity is in (or higher than) the class above the borderline, the candidate should normally be raised to the class above the borderline.



### A matter of incentives: sending the right signals on the part of the University.

The current Part 1 regime sends the wrong signals to start with

We therefore find ourselves with students who are not what we would like them to be.

- → provision of other services (Student Support, Library), but these are poorly taken up by weaker part 1 students.
- All departments see students who fail at Part 1 and then come to them and say 'I'm sorry, I didn't take this seriously'
- Waiting to year 2 before it counts is not helpful to them or to us in finding out what (individual) help they need.
- People know they need stick as well as carrot: e.g. behavioural economics shows examples of companies asking for e.g. emissions targets to force them to act.

Step change from first to second year is currently quite acute: shouldn't be able to send signal to people that they can be in UoR behaving in a certain way without consequences.

- There are things that they need to think about from the start of their first term: organising work experience, placements, opportunities for studying abroad: should be getting into mindset of using their degree for planning a career.
- The current attitude of some that the first year is a time to play around, socialise, and not concentrate on academic study: wrong. Have a gap year if that's what you want to do.

It might be objected that the **first year is a time for trying out new things** and being able to fail at them without damaging your prospects – that the current not-counting Part 1 therefore encourages more adventurous study.

We think University should offer a chance for people to find out what they're really good at – and by offering a more immediate incentive to do really well at things they want to succeed in we help them focus on that choice earlier than many of them currently do.

- We could argue that the current system reduces choice because reduces incentive opportunities to find out what they're good at and bad at early on
- Including the important question of whether they're good at university at all as costs £9k a year and opportunity cost of not working for that year.

- More honest on our part to force them to face up to that early on: at present we accommodate those who aren't suited to University study for rather too long.

#### Other systems:

- MdellaG's experience in Venice: everything counted, no closed numbers of students, no student support at all. Had to physically fight to get a seat at lectures.
- MCN's experience in Oxford: 100% examined course, so nothing counted at all until final exams at the end of year four. No coursework for credit, no attendance monitoring at lectures, years 1-3 did not count at all towards final degree. Entirely self-motivated, then.

But in Reading we have already admitted the principle of continuous assessment – second year counts. So why not the first year as well?

#### Parallels from professional world:

- Almost any job will come with a probationary period in which your conduct has consequences. Screw up and you get sacked.
- Some of the weaker performances we see at Part 1 involve a lack of personal skills and discipline that would be fatal to a professional career: disorganisation, not being able to communicate promptly or effectively, not being able to use a diary to organise appointments, not handing in work on time.
- At the moment our sanctions against these failings are distinctly limited. If Part 1 counted you could really focus students' minds and efforts.
- In the current system, though, Part 1 can feel like a laid-back holiday between the frequent testing of A-Level and the meaningful parts 2 and 3.

#### New fees regime:

Degrees will cost £9k a year so make it count.

- Parents increasingly count and whether that's good or bad we needn't go into here: we need to show we provide the right service but also set the right incentives.
- Parents won't believe that a course of study should be all carrot and no stick and still pay off.

We are not selling a consumer good but an education: not making Part 1 count suggests that in turning up here you are more or less buying the right to a degree but that it not how we should be presenting our undergraduate experience.

- Rather, we are offering the opportunity to study with experts in a supportive environment and should be telling students that it is their job to make sure they benefit from it.