Playing by the many rules: Taught masters and their assessment regulations

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Abstract

In recent years the taught masters course has become an even more important component of the curriculum portfolio for universities in the UK and elsewhere. In the spring of 2021, the Student Assessment and Classification Working Group (SACWG) surveyed a small number of English and Welsh universities to compare assessment regulations for taught masters courses. The survey revealed substantial differences in the use and application of rules between institutions. The issue of divergence and convergence of the principles on which assessment rules are based was discussed further at a SACWG seminar that took place the following year. At this event, participants took part in a thought experiment that required them to set aside any prior application of assessment regulations and to attempt to agree on the rules for taught masters courses. These group discussions provided a high degree of openness and positivity. We discuss the results of the survey, the seminar, and the experiment. We consider, also, the benefits of generating an open dialogue that aims to increase consistency of practice and understanding of the educational value of key assessment rules in higher education.

Keywords: taught masters courses; assessment regulations; student achievement.

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Introduction

Members of the Student Assessment and Classification Working Group (SACWG) have reported on the role and variation of use of assessment regulations in the UK higher education sector for three decades. In this paper, we focus on the formal framework of rules that are used for setting and maintaining academic standards for taught masters courses in England and Wales. However, we recognise that other factors, such as marking practices (Bloxham and Boyd, 2012, Bloxham et al, 2016, Rinne, 2024) or the practical application of regulations, may also impact academic standards.

It is generally accepted that the meaning and use of assessment regulations are a product of socially constructed activities that result in context-dependent practices that generate variations in practices across universities. The setting and the maintenance of academic standards, it is claimed, are outcomes of political processes that reflect institutional histories and educational policies (Gipps 1999, 2002; Leathwood 2005; Shay 2008). The meanings and uses of assessment regulations mirror the complexity and diversity of these activities. Differences between universities are to be expected and derived from the needs of autonomous and rule-making institutions that craft and re-craft assessment rules to reflect changing priorities and competing demands (Stowell, Falahee, and Woolf, 2016:516-7). Therefore, it can be argued that the development of a university's regulatory framework reflects a host of priorities, including discipline needs, student engagement requirements, policy aims, and pedagogical desiderata (*ibid.*).

While variations of assessment regulations are to be expected there is also a presumption in the UK higher education sector that there is broad comparability of academic standards. Assessment regulations are the supporting framework of assessment standards and reflect the adoption among the majority of universities in the UK of a common credit-based academic framework as per the Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) guidance (QAA 2024). In this

system, academic standards are maintained and upheld through the independent oversight and scrutiny of the application of assessment regulation by external examiners (Yorke et al, 2008). Indeed, the processes of what Brown (2013) refers to as 'mutuality' are intended to reflect assumptions about the nature of learning and assessment. Inherent to this is an assumption that students studying at the same or a similar type of institution will be subject to broadly comparable treatment. However, it might be argued that it is difficult to maintain this position in the face of substantial variations in the use of assessment regulations and where these differences generate variable outcomes for the same individual.

The SACWG survey of the regulations for taught masters courses reveals substantial differences in assessment regulations governing the design of awards, the achievement of awards, and the classification of awards. The findings replicate earlier studies in this area or areas related to it (Yorke et al, 2004a, Yorke et al 2004b, Yorke et al 2008, Stowell, Falahee, and Woolf, 2016) and, in a similar vein, they suggest that these differences could lead us to conclude that the sector is inadvertently inequitable in its awarding practices.

An analysis of the survey results led members of SACWG to consider whether an increase in understanding and agreements in principle around the meanings of assessment rules could be achieved in a context in which dialogue is allowed to flourish. To test this view, approximately 40 participants from a range of higher education institutions took part in a seminar in the Autumn of 2022.

The survey results and the seminar activities are discussed in the second and third sections of this paper. Before this, we look at the context in which taught masters courses are delivered in the UK. In recent years demand for these courses has grown rapidly and concerns have been raised about the maintenance of academic standards.

In the final section and the conclusion of this paper, we consider ways in which an agreement in principle around the use of some key assessment rules might be formulated,

why it is important to encourage greater dialogue about the meanings and uses of assessment regulations for taught masters courses, and how this may benefit the reciprocal arrangements that institutions use for maintaining academic standards.

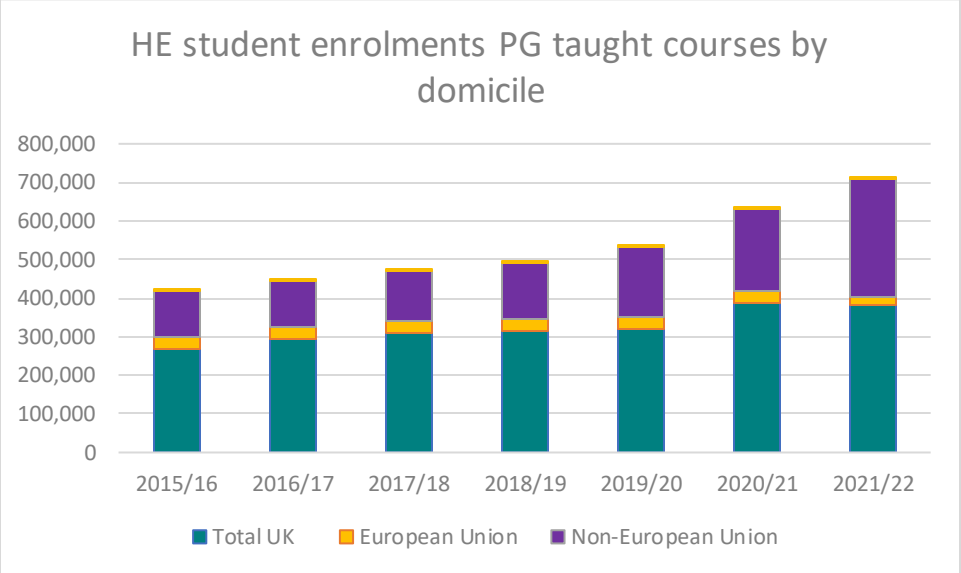
The growth in registrations for taught masters courses

Taught masters courses fall into two broad categories: an advanced or specialised award or a professional or practice-based award (QAA, 2020). Historically, advanced taught masters courses were designed to provide specialised postgraduate subject training. This made them particularly suitable, in the middle part of the twentieth century, for initial registration or study for a PhD (or DPhil). They also served as an exit award for those who failed to continue to this level (Clark Bartlett, 2004). Hence, the main purpose of these advanced taught masters courses was (and still is) to provide specialised knowledge of a particular discipline combined with a requirement to produce original research. The emphasis on the latter may explain the continued practice at some institutions to privilege the mark of the dissertation or major project in the classification of the final award (we discuss this below).

In contrast to the advanced or specialised course, the professional or practice-based taught masters courses traditionally served sectoral or general professions. Sectoral taught masters are usually tied to an external Professional, Statutory or Regulatory Body that will accredit, recognise, and approve programmes taught by Higher Education Institutions (HEI). A cousin of the sectoral taught masters course-is the general professional taught masters award. A quintessential version of this is the MBA whose history can be traced to its pioneering delivery at the Harvard Business School, its spread across North America, and its adoption in Europe and elsewhere from the late 1960s onwards (Kaplan, 2014). Unlike specialised taught masters courses there is no expectation that MBA students (and other professional course students) will have prior knowledge of the discipline they are studying (Alam et al 2021).

In both specialised and professional taught masters there has been a substantial increase in the number of student enrolments in recent years. Registrations in the UK have nearly doubled, increasing from 400,000 in 2015/16 to just over 700,000 in 2021/22 (see Figure 1). A similar increase in income from registration fees has followed (see Kernohan, 2022). While there are many reasons why students sign up for a masters course (Hanson, Paulsen, & Pascarella, 2016) the current increase appears to be linked to the introduction of the PGT loans scheme for UK students in 2015/16 (House, 2020) and changes to the visa requirements for international students since 2021 (Kernohan, 2022).

Figure 1. Student enrolments: All PGT courses by domicile (UK)



Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency (2023)

The increase in enrolments led David Kernohan (2022) of *Wonkhe* to ask if we can be confident that the postgraduate experience in England is a happy one for students. Some assurance came from Advance HE's Jason Leman (2022a) who reported that the overall satisfaction score of the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (Leman, 2022b) returned to its pre-pandemic norm in 2022. But Leman also warned that there are unexplained differences in 'satisfaction scores' between different types of students. While international

students seem very satisfied, there has been a marginal drop in overall satisfaction for UK students (being 'satisfied' has fallen from 82.7% in 2016 to 79.0%).

Concern about the learning experience of students also arises from the disproportionate number of complaints received by the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) in England from postgraduate students (including those registered on a research degree). Postgraduates make up 28% of the student population but contribute 40% of all complaints. The OIA speculates that this over-representation is linked to the additional financial pressure that PGT students experience (OIA, 2023:12).

At the same time, in England, we can observe that the Office for Students (OfS) checks on quality appear to bias undergraduate rather than postgraduate experiences. Of the five key measures used by the OfS (continuation, completion, degree outcomes, student experience, and progression) two are not in scope for taught masters courses. Student experience measures are derived from the undergraduate-based National Student Survey while the HESA-generated 'degree outcomes' statistics are restricted to bachelors degree outputs. Furthermore, data that is gathered for continuation measures (OfS, 2022) seems better suited to three or four-year courses; rather than one-year courses.

While sector-wide regulatory oversight of academic quality and outcomes may evolve in coming years the maintaining of academic standards falls mostly on internal and mutual arrangements that universities and their academic partners put in place (Brown, 2013, Hood *et al*, 2004). These include internal and external examiner scrutiny of curricula, the external review of academic performance and, awarding qualifications. There are well-known limitations to these processes (Bloxham and Price, 2015, Medland 2015, Medland 2019)

Within this context and following previous research that focused on undergraduate degree assessment regulations SACWG members designed a survey aimed at revealing the differences in applications and uses of assessment regulations in higher education in the UK.

The SACWG Survey of taught masters assessment rules and regulations

The SACWG survey was distributed between April and May 2021. The survey yielded 21 responses from HEI providers and, although small in size (with some methodological limitations) it captured a cross-section of universities from England (19) and Wales (2); which included an almost equal split between pre-92 (10) and post-92 (11) institutions and a mixed representation from HEI mission groups (6 from GuildHE, 3 from MillionPlus, 3 from the Russell Group, 2 from University Alliance, and 7 with no affiliation).

In this section we report on three areas of the survey: the design of an award; the achievement of an award; and the classification of an award. While we make some references to differences between institutions that are pre-92 and post-92 we did not observe significant distinctions in this area or any other category. Although some of the differences may seem minor when considered as singular variances the cumulative impact may be significant.

Designing an award

The survey revealed that there is common ground for the requirement of 180 credits to achieve the award of the masters but there is considerable variation in the volume of credit attached to modules. The range across all respondents includes 5, 10, 12, 15, 20, 30, 40, 45, 60, 80, 90, and 120 units. Multiples of 5 and 10 credits represent the norm and the most used units are 15 credits (9 institutions), 20 credits (9), 30 credits (12), and 60 credits (5). The variety of module sizes raises questions about the relationship between credit volume and the number of learning outcomes associated with each credit block. And, the use of very large and very small credit units within the same regulatory framework may present problems of

consistency when, for example, there are credit limits set against entitlement to compensation and/or condonement.

The survey asked respondents whether the regulatory framework they operated for taught masters/postgraduate courses is different from the one used for undergraduate programmes. Implicit in this question is the idea that masters courses may serve a unique function in the history of advanced courses as a prerequisite to registration for a postgraduate research programme. We found an almost equal split between those that had separate and distinct masters regulations (10) and those that did not (11). But interestingly, pre-92 HEIs were more likely to operate a separate set of regulations (9 from 11) than post-92 HEIs (1 from 10). This difference may reflect the strength with which institutional histories continue to impact course design.

For similar reasons, it might be thought that the completion of a long dissertation or an equivalent major project is a distinctive and essential feature of a masters course. We found that more than two-thirds of the universities (15 from 21) required a student to complete a dissertation or major project. A similar number (14 from 21) requires the credit volume of this module to be 60 credits or more. There is considerable variation amongst those (12 from 21) that set or advise a word count for the dissertation or major project. Half require (or recommend) a maximum of either 15,000 or 18,000 words with two setting their maxima below these numbers and two setting it above. The requirement of a viva to complete the dissertation or major project is not compulsory at any of the universities but it is an assessment design option for courses at 13 of the 21 institutions. We also found that just over a third of universities (8 from 21) privileged the mark of the dissertation or major project in the calculation of their students' final classification by requiring that its mark is at least equal to the weighted average of the remainder of the contributing credits or by adding further weight to the mark given to it. These results suggest that there is considerable variation in the

design and role of the dissertation or the major project and at many institutions it does not provide the masters course with a special or distinctive status or one in which it is seen as a preliminary step towards undertaking further research.

Finally, in the design section of the survey, we found that maximum periods of registration range from 1 year to (one institution that reported) 'no limit'. Most institutions cluster between 2-6 years but there is very significant variation with the most common maximum periods for full-time students being 3 years (5 from 21) and 6 years (4 from 21). Half of the universities indicated that they have the same maximum period of registration for both part-time and full-time study. The distribution and range or registration limits suggest that this is an area of regulation that may benefit from sector-wide discussion concerning the currency of knowledge at master level and fairness around the different learning opportunities that are available to part- and full-time students.

Achieving an award

The QAA's (2021:8) *Higher Education Credit Framework for England: Advice on Academic Credit Arrangements* shows that 'the minimum [credit value] ...typically associated with' the Taught Masters is 180 credits with a 'permissible minimum' of 150 credits at Level 7 FHEQ (postgraduate taught study or equivalent to second-cycle European Higher Education Awards). Just over a third of our survey participants (8 from 21) allows undergraduate modules (equivalent to first-cycle European Higher Education Awards) to be included in a taught masters. These tend to be pre-92 universities. Seven universities permitted (only) level 6 (year 3 undergraduate study) modules to count towards the taught masters. The other institution allowed both level 5 (year 2 undergraduate study) and 6 modules to be included in the programme. The use of undergraduate modules raises questions about the purposes for which they are integrated into masters programmes and the level at which they are assessed.

The mark or grade required to pass a module varied between institutions. The majority (13 of 21) set their pass mark at 50% but a significant minority (7 of 21) adopted 40% (both totals include institutions that provide numerical equivalents for grades). One respondent gave a grade (D-) without a numerical equivalent. The majority of those that have a 50% pass mark are pre-92 institutions (8 of 13) but five are post-92s. The other two pre-92 and five post-92 institutions adopt their undergraduate pass mark of 40%. The pass mark for a module has important ramifications for classifying an award and we return to this issue in the next part of this section.

While the numerical score required to pass a module seems straightforward, the rules for passing a module are not. Nine of the respondents adopt a single rule for passing. For six institutions it is 'achieve an overall pass mark/grade for the module (irrespective of marks/grades for individual assessments)'. A further six allow their course designers to adopt one of two rules; three permit one of three rules to be applied and three provide a menu of four different rules for passing. Two-thirds of the respondents adopt intra-module compensation, often combined with other rules such as achieving a qualifying mark for each assignment or attempting all elements. These complex rules raise two issues: the relationship between a module's learning outcomes and passing the module and, for those universities that incorporate multiple passing rules in their regulations, how far students' achievements can be said to be comparable.

We found that most providers (15 out of 21) adopt inter-module compensation and/or condonement. One-third of institutions (7 of 21) only compensate, a similar number (6 of 21) only condone while two universities compensate and condone. The rules that allow for compensation or condonement of credit are varied, as are the maximum number of credits/modules that can be compensated or condoned. For compensation, five institutions set the qualifying mark 5% below the pass mark and three set it at 10%. Six require all

modules to have achieved an average minimum mark. For condonement, the qualifying mark is set variously at 3, 5, 10, and 30% below the pass mark. The use of compensation and/or condonement may lead to uncertainty about the relationship between marks or grades and the achievement of learning outcomes. It highlights, also, differences that may mean that individuals with similar performances can be granted a pass at one institution and not at another one.

All but three institutions (18 of 21) give students the automatic right to be re-assessed in a failed module. The remainder requires a student to reach a near-pass standard to qualify for reassessment. There is near uniformity in the application of a penalty for a failure at a first attempt, which is to cap the re-sit at the minimum pass mark, but one institution does not cap a re-sit. The overwhelming majority cap the module mark following failure but four (of 19) cap the assignment mark. The one exception caps the re-assessed module at '5% below the pass mark'. In general, there is a significant variation of practice taking place in all of the areas discussed in this part of this section.

The classification of an award

The most common classification system is Pass, Merit, and Distinction with the thresholds for each grade 40/50, 60, and 70% respectively. We found that 18 of 21 institutions use this classification system. Just under half of the providers allow a small amount of undergraduate credit to count towards the award although not necessarily towards the classification. The majority of institutions use a weighted mean to calculate the classification of awards. There is considerable variation around practices such as discounting, privileging a final project (or dissertation), and using borderline/preponderance rules. Discounting of credit is not used in the majority of institutions (15 of the 21). The six institutions that practiced discounting were Post-92s. The importance of the final project or dissertation is prevalent in one-third of the

institutions (7 of 21). In five of these, the classification algorithm requires the mark awarded for the final project to be that of the classification. In two specialist arts institutions the final project is given additional weight in the calculation of the award. One-third of the universities make use of borderlines. There is variation in the breadth or size of the borderline (0.5 or 1 or 2%) as well as a case where a condition or rule (usually a preponderance assumption) is required to be met to move up to a higher classification. As with undergraduate classifications (Yorke et al, 2008:165-166), the algorithmic variety means that students with the same run of marks may be awarded a different class at another institution.

It is not only the algorithm that can influence the classification. As noted in the previous section, the sector is split between institutions that adopt a 50% pass mark (13 from 21) and those that apply a 40% pass mark (7 from 21). The use of a 50% pass mark may lead us to wonder if some institutions are failing students who may have gained credit and/or an award elsewhere. Or it may be the case that what is a 50% pass at one university is the same as what is a 40% pass at another institution; where the descriptors for the 'pass' mark are the same, but the numbers or symbols are different. However, this alternative position is structurally problematic as comparisons or translations of marks will be incomparable and may lead to different classification outcomes.

Setting aside other assessment-related factors that impact marking (Bloxham and Boyd, 2012, Bloxham et al 2016, Rinne 2024) let us assume as an example that two institutions operate under different (but similar) circumstances where they both classify by the standard convention (Fail, Pass, Merit, Distinction) but one adopts a threshold pass of 40% and the other sets its pass at 50%. For simplicity, we can also assume that both use a weighted mean when classifying awards. In this situation, the options available (expressed as numbers) to the markers within the Pass category are set out in Table 1. So, for example, an assignment of a

particular standard may be given a mark of 48% at what we might call a '40% institution' and 54% at what might be known as a '50% institution'.

Table 1. Mapping of grades based on 40% and 50% pass thresholds.

Pass mark	**Equivalent marks**									
40%	42	44	46	48	50	52	54	56	58	60
50%	51	52	53	54	55	56	57	58	59	60

Translation of marks in this format creates obvious problems for classification outcomes. Let us imagine that Alpha is studying at a '40% institution' and Beta is enrolled at a '50% institution' and both HEI offer similar course structures where the credits are distributed evenly. Alpha and Beta are of equal ability. As we can see in Table 2, following mark translation, a circumstance may arise where Alpha and Beta achieve similarly but leave with different awards.

Table 2. Classification of awards based on 40 and 50% pass marks.

	Mod 1	**Mod 2**	**Mod 3**	**Mod 4**	**Mod 5**	**Mod 6**	**Rounded Average**	**Award Class**
Alpha	44	56	65	58	50	68	57	Pass
Beta	52	58	65	59	55	68	60	Merit

The markers at Beta's university have fewer marks to play with in the 'pass' category than do the markers at Alpha's university. Although the example is contrived it is obvious in reality that markers at the two institutions must operate under different (and incomparable) assessment regulations relating to grading at the threshold and above. This has obvious implications for the proportion of classified awards generated at each institution and how similar performances will be differently classified depending on the regulatory regime under which an individual is assessed.

In summary, the survey results reveal not only that there exist considerable differences in all of the three areas of assessment regulations discussed here but also that the reasons for adopting these are inexplicable or enigmatic (Yorke *et al*, 2008). The assumption that student

achievements on masters courses are comparable is somewhat undermined and it is clear that institutions that deliver taught masters courses are playing by very many diverse and different rules. With the survey results in mind, members of SACWG organised a seminar to look at differences in assessment rules and consider ways in which these may be understood.

The SACWG seminar

The online SACWG seminar took place in November 2022. Membership included participants from a wide range of mainly English universities. Attendance at this event was similar to participation in the survey. It included delegates from 41 HEI of which there were 22 from post-92 institutions, 17 from pre-92 universities, and 3 from other organisations. The seminar included two discussion group sessions: the first on 'rationales for variations in practice' and the second on 'the idea of common assessment principles'. Participants were divided into six focus groups which were made up of six to eight members. The groups included a chair (a SACWG representative) whose role was to guide the discussion around a pre-determined set of assessment regulation issues and an agreement to provide a set of responses to an online survey. The results were reviewed in a plenary session.

The group discussions shared some things in common with focus group research. They were dialogical in character and a moderator introduced the topics, guided the participants through themes, and allowed group dynamics to dictate the discussion (see Berg and Lune, 2012). Indeed, there is a similarity with the use of focus groups in health care research, where the emphasis is on understanding decision-making within a qualified set of circumstances (Barbour, 2007).

The second discussion group was particularly important. Here, participants were reminded of a statement sent to them in advance of the seminar:

As a thought experiment, we would like participants to work within a group to define a common set of principles that relate to the areas discussed so far. The purpose of this activity is to see if individuals with different HEI backgrounds and experiences can agree on a single set of rules or principles around the taught masters degree.

Participants were reminded that they should:

1. eliminate from their thoughts the position of their institution.
2. agree that the group (or majority) position will prevail; and
3. assume that whatever principle or regulation the group chooses will be adopted by all institutions.

The use of a thought experiment was borrowed from the Rawlsian (Rawls, 1971) imagined position of an individual who is forced to choose principles of justice from a veil of ignorance. Participants were obliged to set aside any prior experience of the use of assessment principles and to rationalise the merits or otherwise of adopting universal principles. The online survey contained ten closed statements, and members of the groups were asked to agree on a response from two or more options. Agreement on principles mirrored the results from the survey. However, the seminar group outcomes were more accentuated in support of certain rules or principles. The groups also split in opinion in areas where the survey indicated that there are variable practices in the sector. The results are set out in Table 3 which we present as a comparison with results from the survey (in ratios) of support for and against a rule or principle.

Table 3. A comparison of the survey results and the seminar group discussion outcomes

Assessment rule or principle		**The ratio in favour** and **against** or **multiple split** outcomes	
		Survey Outcome[†]	Focus Groups' Opinions
1. Automatic entitlement to reassessment		85:15	6:0
2. Classification of final award		95:05	6:0
3. The use of UG credit		40:60	1:5
4. 50% pass mark		70:30	5:1
5. Separate set of master's regulations		50:50	5:1
6. Use of compensation or condonement		75:25	3:3
7. Word length of dissertation or project		multiple split	multiple split
8. Maximum period of registration		multiple split	multiple split
9. Privilege dissertation mark		30:70	1:4[‡]
10. Classification rules	10a. Use weighted mean only	Unclear	3 supports
	10b Allow borderline or preponderance rules	30:70	2 supports
	10c Allow discounting	30:70	0 support

[†] Some of the survey ratios are rounded approximations. For example, where 6 of 21 respondents favoured a principle or rule we have rounded this to 30:70.
[‡] Includes a non-response from one of the six groups.

Discussion

The results of the SACWG survey of assessment regulations for taught masters courses highlight some of the differences in practices in the sector but there were areas where individuals participating in the seminar were broadly in agreement. These are set out below:

SET A: ASSESSMENT REGULATION PRINCIPLES

1. Students should be allowed an automatic right to reassessment.
2. A taught masters course should be classified.
3. A taught masters course should not include undergraduate credit.
4. The module and classification pass mark should be set at 50%.
5. There should be a separate set of regulations for masters courses.
9. The dissertation or major project should not be privileged when calculating a final award.

10a. The weighted mean should serve as the main basis for the calculation of an award.

10c. There should not be an option to discount credits or module results when calculating an award.

However, there was no consensus on the following issues:

SET B: ASSESSMENT REGULATION PRINCIPLES

6. The inclusion or use of compensation and/or condonement at masters level.
7. An agreement on a maximum word length for the masters dissertation or major project.
8. A maximum period of registration for a taught masters student.

10b. The use of borderline or preponderance rules for the final classification of an award.

The seminar outcome suggests that assessment rules or principles may fall into three categories. Those where:

- In principle we can all agree upon a shared meaning or purpose of the rule.
- In principle we may be able to agree on a shared meaning or purpose of the rule following dialogue.
- The meaning or purpose of the rule is essentially contested.

The agreements reached for SET A fit with the first of these three categories. For these rules, there is general agreement on their meanings and purposes. We can attempt to explain why this is the case by referring to the group discussions that took place. Principles 1, 9, 10a, and 10c relate to generally agreed notions of fairness or justice of outcome. Principles 3 and 5 may reflect the respect that most of the sector pays to the Framework for Higher Education Qualification levels of knowledge. Principle 2 may be seen as agreeable because its absence

seems unreasonable when, in the UK, one in ten adults completes a postgraduate taught course (PGT). Discussion around Principle 4, we sensed, supported the view that the sector should have a single pass mark for reasons of consistency and validity.

It is important to clarify at this point that agreements of this kind represent *only* an agreement in principle. The application of a rule is always a value judgement and its effectiveness '… crucially depends on judgements about what is educationally desirable' in a given context (Biesta 2007:5). However, discussions of this type highlight the basis from which agreement may be reached and from which divergences may be justified.

We can also gain some understanding from our discussions of why it is more difficult to gain agreement on the meanings and purposes of the assessment principles in SET B. The form and application of compensation and/or condonement (Principle 6) is contestable at undergraduate level (Yorke et al, 2008: 167-168) and likely to cause debate for designers of taught masters courses where expectations about academic achievement are higher. The dissertation or major project word lengths (Principle 7) are dependent on particular or distinct discipline practices and seem (correctly) to be out of reach of universal agreement. Principle 8, a maximum period of registration bumps up against the need to ensure that learning is current (currency) and that a course is completed in a reasonable time frame (competency). Both are debatable. The notion of preponderance or what constitutes a borderline near miss (Principle 10b) is also very contentious. As Yorke et al (2008:172) observe policies relating to borderlines (and discounting) are an acknowledgment of difficulties associated with the accuracy of grading.

In general, the nature of the discussion and the results of the SACWG seminar sessions suggest that (in certain circumstances) there is a willingness to enter into a constructive dialogue about the meaning and uses of assessment regulation principles. Furthermore, it is not beyond feasibility that the sector may be able to build on this in the guidance that is

provided to designers of programmes. As such, it may be possible to reduce some of the enigma associated with variations in assessment regulations and explain differences where they occur. This could take the form of a working paper on assessment rules, similar perhaps to the discussions that have taken place around undergraduate algorithm practices (Snelling and Fisher, 2020). Or it could involve adding further guidance information to the QAA (2020) *Characteristics Statement: Master's Degree* (QAA 2020) or the development of a Degree Outcomes statement (Universities UK, 2023) for taught masters courses. All of this is dependent on increased dialogue among the stakeholders in UK higher education (and elsewhere). A step in this direction may provide a better understanding of why an institution (or course) has adopted the assessment rules it is using as well as increasing a sense in which assessment regulation practices seem equitable to those studying taught masters courses.

Concluding comments

Currently, there is an assumption that student achievements on taught masters courses are broadly equivalent between similar institutions. However, the SACWG survey reveals considerable disparities in assessment regulations between institutions. This may undermine confidence in the level of comparability. It also raises questions of equity in that it is clear that the same performance by an individual in terms of grades achieved can result in different awards (classifications) and that this is dependent on the assessment rules and their application.

The impact of differences in assessment rules is most obvious in the existence of unexplained different pass marks (40% and 50%). However, there is also a considerable variation between universities for taught masters courses in setting rules around compensation and/or condonement, the inclusion of undergraduate credit, registration limits, the value of the dissertation or major project, and classification rules.

Assessment regulations are fundamental to the maintenance of academic standards and the credibility of University degrees including at masters level. Well-designed, coherent, and consistent regulations, fairly applied and overseen by independent external examiners are part of the fabric on which standards are maintained. With the OfS-driven shift to measuring academic quality and standards through outcome indicators, this paper raises questions about the validity of such approaches if there is no recognition of the deep-rooted variation in assessment regulations. At the same time, we have shown that there is potential for more dialogue about the limits of and reasons for application and variation of assessment regulations.

We have argued that the higher education sector in the UK (and elsewhere) may benefit from finding ways to either address the diversity of assessment regulations or to make clear the reasons for the existence of different uses of assessment regulation principles. While it remains important to respect the autonomous status of universities and acknowledge that the adoption of assessment regulations reflects challenges of educational complexity (Stowell, Falahee, and Woolf, 2016: 528), the research in this paper suggests there is a willingness to engage further in dialogue aimed at establishing the reasons why and when different types of assessment regulations are used.

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Data Availability

A copy of the survey questions and the data received from the 21 institutions that completed it is available by contacting the corresponding author. A copy of the questions and the responses from the SACWG seminar is available through the same means.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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