

# Report of the Merit Degrees Working Party

Undergraduate Studies Committee  
of the  
Academic Board



# Objectives of the Policy

The policy changes suggested below are motivated by two principles:

- that there be a single consistent nomenclature of merit degrees within the University; and
- that the standard required to achieve a merit degree be documented, consistent and equitable across all degree programs.



# Background

- The University has offered Merit degrees since “time immemorial”,
- There are no current policies on their use, including names, standards, etc,
- Honours is now firmly entrenched as a research degree, so the use of WAM-based (coursework) Honours is now proscribed.



# Faculty responses...

- 7 Faculties would like to recognise high-performing graduates with a Merit degree
- 4 Faculties would consider using a Merit degree
- 1 Faculty would not use Merit degree
- 4 Faculties did not respond formally (although had input at UGSC)



There is a continuing perceived need for Merit degrees



# Recommendations of Merit degree WP

***1. that the University award Merit degrees for high performing students not undertaking Honours degrees.***



# Survey of existing Merit degrees



## The University of Sydney

**BACHELOR OF** [REDACTED]

**with Credit**

**BACHELOR OF** [REDACTED]

**with Distinction**

**MASTER OF** [REDACTED]

**with Merit**

## Graduation Ceremony



Academic Board

# Survey of existing Merit degrees

- Names used:
  - with Merit, with Credit, with Distinction, with High Distinction
- Fraction of degree cohort receiving merit degree:
  - from <10% to >75%
- Types of degrees:
  - professional, generalist, u/grad, p/grad



# Standards

- We considered;
  - 1 or 2 merit degrees
  - history of levels of achievement

*WAMs of 2006 graduating students:\**

| WAM Range    | HD       |            | D           |        |
|--------------|----------|------------|-------------|--------|
|              | WAM > 85 | WAM= 80-85 | WAM = 75-80 | WAM<75 |
| Band %       | 2.7%     | 8.1%       | 14.9%       | 74.2%  |
| Cumulative % | 2.7%     | 10.8%      | 25.5%       | 100%   |



# Faculty responses

- Unanimous for ONE Merit degree
- Consistent support for ~10% eligible
  - (range = 5-15%)
- Split between WAM-based and %-based
  - WAM-based is better
  - concerned that “bracket-creep” might occur



# Recommendations of Merit degree WP

***2. that the University award one level of Merit degree with a single name across the University. Although the standard should, ideally, be WAM-based, no more than 10% of a graduating cohort in a degree program can qualify for the merit degree.***



# Name of merit degree

- Considered:
  - Titles aligned with Unit of Study grades (**C, D, HD**)
    - brackets do not correspond with 10% (above)
    - don't want to mix recognition of UoS performance with degree performance
  - Other English titles (**with Merit, with Excellence, etc**)
    - with merit sounds like “with credit”
    - with excellence is most favoured of English titles
  - Latin titles (**cum Laude, Magna cum Laude, Summa cum Laude**)



# Brief history of Latin titles

- Started at Harvard (c. 1869)
- Most US universities award Latin titles, inc. all Ivy League, except Princeton
- Three levels are common:
  - cum Laude (with Honours)
  - Magna cum Laude (with high Honours)
  - Summa cum Laude (with highest Honours)
- Latin titles are increasingly used and recognised around the world (esp. Asia).



# Latin titles at Ivy League Universities

| Institution                | Criteria for conferral of Latin honours |  |  |
|----------------------------|---|--|--|
|                            | <i>summa cum laude</i>                  | <i>magna cum laude</i>                                   | <i>cum laude</i>   |
| Brown University           | <b>not awarded</b>                      | <b>~20%</b>  | <b>not awarded</b>                                       |
| Columbia University        | <b>Top 5%</b>                           | <b>Next 10%</b>  | <b>Next 10%</b>  |
| Cornell University         | <b>Varies between disciplines</b>       |  |  |
| Dartmouth University       | <b>Top 5%</b>                           | <b>Next 15%</b>  | <b>Next 35%</b>  |
| Harvard University         | <b>Top 4-5%</b>                         | <b>Next 15-16%</b>                                       | <b>Next 30%</b>  |
| University of Pennsylvania | <b>GPA <math>\geq</math> 3.80</b>       | <b>3.60 <math>\leq</math> GPA <math>\leq</math> 3.79</b> | <b>3.40 <math>\leq</math> GPA <math>\leq</math> 3.59</b> |
| Yale University            | <b>Top 5%</b>                           | <b>Next 10%</b>  | <b>Next 15%</b>  |



# Recommendations of Honours WP

**3. *that the name of the Merit degree be “Magna cum Laude”***

This was not unanimous across responding Faculties:

- one Faculty expressed strong support for English title
- about half of Faculties were ambivalent or split



# Risks and opportunities

- Risk of lower Honours numbers
  - if Merit degree is too highly valued
  - Medal goes with Honours, not Merit degree
- Risk that Merit degree will devalue pass degree
  - 90% of graduates will receive pass degree.
  - fills a gap in recognition of performance and should be well-accepted.



# Risks and opportunities

- Opportunity to be Australia leader
  - no other Aust. university offers Latin titles
  - if successful, other universities may well follow, but we will retain advantage of recognition for some years.
- Well-recognised overseas
  - advantages for our graduates in international market



# Consultation process

- The recommendations have been reported to the UGSC over 2 meetings;
- Student involvement at all stages;
- The report went to all Faculties for a 2 month period to comment;
- Faculty responses were overall very positive;
- All other Faculty comments/concerns were explained or included in the final document;
- *The final document was approved unanimously at the Feb UGSC.*



# Transition arrangements (proposed)

- existing Merit degree resolutions to remain for 2008;
- amendments to Faculty resolutions to be brought through UGSC during 2008 for implementation in 2009



# Summary of recommendations:

- 1. that the University award Merit degrees for high performing students not undertaking Honours degrees.*
- 2. that the University award one level of Merit degree with a single name across the University. Although the standard should, ideally, be WAM-based, no more than 10% of a graduating cohort in a degree program can qualify for the merit degree.*
- 3. that the name of the Merit degree be “Magna cum Laude”*

