



The University of Sydney

Undergraduate Studies Committee of the Academic Board

“Merit Degrees at the University of Sydney”

Objectives of the Policy

The recent policy changes to the Honours degrees at the University of Sydney strongly associate “Honours” as a research (or research training) degree. In, especially, professional disciplines, students are not as strongly focussed on research, but on professional training excellence in their chosen profession. The university currently allows “Merit degrees” (i.e. recognition of academic excellence in the degree title), however, there are no guidelines on the name of the merit degrees, nor on the standards required to achieve such a merit degree. The consequence is that the University offers a variety of merit titles, with a variety of standards.

The policy below is motivated by two principles:

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

Summary of Recommendations

The Working Party recommends to the Undergraduate Studies Committee:

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

Recommendation 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.

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

Background

The University of Sydney prides itself as being a “research-intensive” university. Despite this, there is a cohort of students who are focussed on excellence in their chosen profession, rather than research. The recent adoption of the Academic Board policy on Honours, strongly associates Honours degrees with research and research training. This means that the previous method for rewarding excellent performance across an undergraduate degree used by some professional Faculties, which is to award Honours on the basis of undergraduate WAM, can no longer be applied.

The University has allowed the awarding of “Merit Degrees” for a very long time (we haven’t been able to find when they started yet). To date, the use of Merit degrees has been sporadic. The names of the degrees are varied, as is the standard required to achieve a Merit degree.

Objectives of the Policy

The objective of the current proposal is to merge the two issues above and to implement a consistent form of Merit degrees that are used to reward students in professional disciplines who have sustained an excellent performance across their whole degree. In keeping with these objectives, we recognise:

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

Survey of Existing Merit Degrees at the University of Sydney

Merit degrees have been offered by the University of Sydney for many years. At least three different titles have been used between, and even within, Faculties: “with Merit”, “with Credit”, and “with Distinction”. Even Honours and Masters degrees have been awarded with Merit in the past. There is no consistency nor (stipulated) standards nor quotas for the students who receive these degrees.

Survey of Existing WAMs upon Graduation

Any discussion of Merit degrees must involve a discussion of standards, including absolute reference standards (e.g. students graduating with a WAM > 80), or relative standards (e.g. top 20% of graduates). As such, the Working Party surveyed the graduating class of 2006 across the whole University. The survey was conducted using FlexSIS, which queried the number of graduating students in each degree who graduated with a WAM >85, 75-80, 70-75, and <75. Each degree was collated into a Faculty average, weighted by number of students in each degree. The Faculty averages were likewise collated into a University weighted average. The FlexSIS query returned 2228 students, which is clearly not the whole 2006 graduating class, but still representative of 20-25% of the graduating cohort. The final compiled numbers are in Table 1.

TABLE 1: Percentage of 2006 students graduating with specified WAM ranges

WAM Range	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%

Summary of Discussion and Recommendations arising from the Working Party on Merit Degrees

1. Types of Degrees to be offered with Merit

The motivation for considering the award of degrees “with Merit” is to recognise very high performing, non-research-oriented students. The intent is to decouple the Honours degree from WAM-based (non-research) performance, while retaining a similar form of recognition for which the Honours grade was used previously in WAM-based Honours awards.

The scope of the present document might be more relevant to professional degrees, (defined broadly as those degrees that offer Honours as an integrated part of the whole degree), but there is no exclusion for degrees that offer appended Honours years. The intent of this policy, however, is that a student graduating with **Honours**, will **NOT** graduate with **Merit**. A student who graduates with a Pass degree with Merit, and then returns later for an Honours degree will have their Pass degree superseded by the Honours degree and so the Merit title will lapse.

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

2. Number of Merit Degree Levels and Standards for each Level

The Working Party discussed a number of options for the number of Merit degrees and the standards that should apply. The unanimous opinion from Faculties that commented on the Green Paper (2/3 of Faculties replied) was that Merit degrees should be reserved for about 10% of graduating students and that only one level of Merit degree should be awarded

There was substantial discussion as to whether the standard should be absolute (e.g. WAM>80), or relative (e.g. top 10% of class). The advantage of an absolute, predetermined scale for students is that it gives them something concrete that they can aim for. However, without the relative standard, there is a risk of “grade creep”. With reference to Table 1, the WP recognised that the currently awarded grades within the University as a whole, provide convenient and contemporary absolute standards: ~3% of students graduate with WAM>85 and ~10% of students graduate with WAM >80. Recognising, however, that WAMs are calculated differently, weighted differently, and have different overall ranges in different Faculties, this policy will not stipulate the choice of a WAM or percentage. There was a clear preference for a WAM-based criterion and Faculties are encouraged to develop such a criterion. However, to protect the University standards with respect to Merit degrees, the Undergraduate Studies Committee felt strongly that the cohort be strictly limited to 10% of the graduating cohort in any degree and that the WAM criterion therefore be chosen conservatively.

Recommendation 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. Names of Merit Degrees

The UGSC considered three options for the names of the Merit degrees:

- a) “with Credit”, “with Distinction” or “with High Distinction”

These names are clearly associated with Unit of Study grades. Despite this broad recognition, the UGSC was not generally satisfied with these names, for two reasons: i) the aim of ≤10% eligibility would require an average WAM of about 80% (see Table 1), which lies between the two recognised ranges; and ii) the Committee felt the need to separate the

names associated with performance in a relatively small Unit of Study, with sustained performance over a whole degree.

b) “with Merit”

The “with Merit” name already has a precedent in the University. The Committee felt the “merit” did not reflect the level of sustained performance required to finish in the top 10% of the graduating class. “With merit” sounds a little like “with credit”, which, in a similar vein to a) above, sounds like a Unit of Study grade, but not an exceptional one.

c) “cum Laude” or “Magna cum Laude”

The WP also considered the system of Latin honours, as used extensively by US universities, and increasingly adopted across Europe and Asia. Appendix 1 contains a short summary of the use of Latin titles by the US Ivy League universities. Latin merit degrees have been used by these Universities for about 150 years. There is no one mandated, or even consistent set of standards across the Ivy League schools, and sometimes even within the one school. Typically, there are 3 levels of Latin honours, “cum Laude” (with praise), “Magna cum Laude” (with great praise) and “Summa cum Laude” (with highest praise). The WP considered that the University Medal would be the equivalent of “summa cum laude” and therefore this third level of Merit degree is not recommended, should Latin honours be adopted. The standards applied by the Ivy League universities for “Magna cum Laude” are in broad accord with the standards proposed here. To our knowledge, Latin honours are not used in any Australian university. Despite this, they have significant international recognition.

The Faculties that responded to the Green Paper expressed mostly a preference for the Latin honours system or were split or ambivalent between Latin and English. Only one Faculty expressed a preference for English over Latin titles.

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

4. University Medals

The award of a University Medal is already subject to University policy. The UGSC supported the Medal being awarded for exceptional performance in Honours. The UGSC does not consider the award of the University Medal for purely coursework performance to be appropriate.

5. Risks and Opportunities

The UGSC discussed various risks and opportunities associated with the widespread award of Merit degrees.

a) risk of lower Honours numbers. If the prestige of the Merit degrees, particularly the “Magna cum Laude” degree becomes very high (as we would wish for our graduates), then there is a risk that exceptional students might not undertake Honours research. The risk will be reduced if Honours retains its very high prestige and recognition. In addition, for these exceptional students, the Medal is only awarded for performance in Honours, which will be a considerable incentive to do Honours for the best students.

b) risk that the Merit degrees would devalue the pass degree. Any additional form of recognition must also reflect on those students who do not receive this recognition. The University has always rewarded superior performance with extra recognition, by grades of Honours, Medals, scholarships, Unit of Study grades, etc. The Merit degrees under discussion here would fill a gap, where the University does not currently recognise superior performance over a whole (Pass) degree. The majority of graduates (90%) will still receive the normal pass degree, which must still be viewed as a significant achievement.

c) opportunity to be a leader in the Australian tertiary sector. No other Australian university offers Latin Honours. If the University chooses to adopt this nomenclature, then, overnight, we will have a very recognisable brand for our best students. If the prestige of these degrees is as high as we envision, then this will reinforce the University’s reputation for both local and international students. Doubtless, if the Merit degrees structure is successful and prestigious, it will be copied, but the University of Sydney will retain the marketing advantage for some years.

APPENDIX 1: MERIT DEGREES AT IVY LEAGUE UNIVERSITIES

A system of awarding undergraduate degrees with Latin honours to recognise outstanding academic achievement has been in existence in the United States since the middle of the 19th Century. Most commonly, three levels of achievement are recognised, though the academic performance required for the award depends on the institution. These levels, in increasing order of excellence, are: *cum laude* (“with praise”); *magna cum laude* (“with great praise”); and *summa cum laude* (“with highest praise”). Harvard University is credited with initiating the trend towards the conferral of Latin honours in 1869 when degrees began to be awarded *cum laude* and *summa cum laude*; the *magna cum laude* category was added in 1880.

Most of the leading universities in the United States currently award their undergraduate and professional postgraduate (e.g. law) degrees with Latin honours at all three levels. In the Ivy League, the notable exceptions are Princeton University, which awards three levels of English honours, and Brown University which only confers degrees *magna cum laude* (Table 1). The award requirements vary between institutions and in some cases within an institution, depending on the discipline. In general, a percentage of graduating students on its own or in combination with a minimum grade is used to determine those students that receive Latin honours.

Such a system has been shown to require regular monitoring and adjustment. In 2005, Harvard University altered its honours policy to address concerns that over 90% of students were receiving honours degrees and that this devalued their conferral. In moving from a system in which the award of honours was determined solely by an invariant minimum grade to one in which a minimum grade was set annually to achieve specified percentage targets for each honours level, a balance has reportedly been restored.

Table 1. Criteria used for conferral of Latin honours by members of the Ivy League. Princeton University (also a member of the Ivy League) awards English honours at three levels (Honours; High Honours; Highest Honours), the requirements for which are determined within each discipline.

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