SATISFACTORY PROGRESS IN THE BACHELOR OF PHILOSOPHY (HONOURS) COURSE

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☐ Draft  ☐ Ready for Review  ☒ Final

DOCUMENT MODIFICATION HISTORY

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<th>Primary Author(s) (name and position)</th>
<th>Description of Version</th>
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DOCUMENT APPROVAL

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1
SATISFACTORY PROGRESS IN THE BACHELOR OF PHILOSOPHY (HONOURS) COURSE

Background

At its meeting of 23 March 2012 the BPhil (Hons) Board of Studies noted that Academic Council had endorsed by R11/233 an amendment to Rule 15 of the Undergraduate Degree Course Rules for the BPhil (Hons) to read as follows: “To make satisfactory progress in a calendar year a student must pass all units in which they remain enrolled after the final date for withdrawal without penalty and normally receive a Weighted Average Mark of 80 or above.”

Council took the view that Rule 15 and the corresponding University Policy could be difficult to operationalise without more detailed guidance. It requested that the BPhil (Hons) Board of Studies consider further this aspect of the satisfactory progress policy and rule, taking cognisance of the intent of operational guidelines endorsed in 2009.

Subsequently the Senior Academic Reviewer was asked to prepare a paper on this matter for Board of Studies discussion. The present document responds to that request.

Principles

It seems axiomatic that criteria for satisfactory progress in this course ought to balance three principles:

1. The nature of the BPhil (Hons) requires participants to maintain a very high standard of achievement. In the words of the Honours/BPhil Working Party report (2009), this course is “designed to enhance the University’s attractiveness to students of exceptional brilliance and its reputation for providing education at the highest international standards of excellence.” Therefore the Working Party recommended, and Academic Council agreed, that “to remain in the B.Phil (Hons), students normally be required to achieve a Level 1 and Level 2 WAM of 80 or above, and a Level 3 WAM of 75 or above.”

2. It is undesirable that excellent students could be ejected automatically from the BPhil (Hons) on a technicality about their WAM. If, for example, someone with outstandingly high results in a chosen discipline were to drop below the threshold WAM level because of lower marks in a couple of broadening units, this could not reasonably be interpreted (in itself) as demonstrating unfitness to proceed. Therefore the qualifying term “normally” may be taken to mean that, for the purpose of assessing satisfactory progress, the WAM calculation should not necessarily attach equal weight to all the unit results at a given level.

3. Any criteria for progression should be formulated in terms that are clear enough to be readily understood by the student and transparently administered by the Academic Coordinator in consultation with the Board of Studies.

Statistical data for Semester 1, 2012

The Director of the Institutional Research Unit, Dr Greg Marie, has provided the information in Appendices A and B, showing Semester 1 unit results for the current cohort of BPhil students.
The table in *Appendix A* lists the 42 enrolled students in order of their SEM-1 WAM. Six students took 5 units in SEM-1 and 36 took 4 units. The table also shows students’ WAMs calculated from the best 4 units and the best 3 units.

With a WAM requirement of 80, the number of students below the threshold is as follows: nine if all their results are counted; eight if their best 4 unit results are counted; six if their best 3 unit results are counted.

The following observations arise:

1. If narrowly formulated or rigidly applied, the progression rule could produce a worrying high number of casualties. Excluding nine students out of 42 (more than one fifth of the group) would be seen as draconian; it could demoralise not only those excluded but some of those remaining, and would probably lead to a large public relations problem.

2. On the other hand, in a group of this size, applying any reasonable criterion of high-level academic performance would almost inevitably lead to some exclusions. For example even a WAM of 75 based only on the best 3 unit results would still find two students below the threshold in SEM-1.

3. As these results cover only half of an academic year, it is likely that a few other students may dip below the 80 WAM by the end of SEM-2. Conversely students whose WAM is already below 80 may struggle to lift it above that threshold.

4. As the term “normally” indicates, some administrative discretion is warranted in interpreting the progression requirement to take account of unusual circumstances. For example one student whose WAM for SEM-1 2012 fell below 80 had enrolled in 5 units and withdrew from one of them just after the deadline, registering a fail grade. Had the withdrawal been slightly earlier, the WAM in this case would be comfortably above 80, as it would also be if each student’s best 4 unit results were counted. Nevertheless, this student would be automatically excluded under the present rule 15(1), which states in part that “to make satisfactory progress in a calendar year a student must pass all units in which they remain enrolled after the final date for withdrawal without academic penalty”.

5. At this early stage – in only the second semester of the inaugural cohort’s eight-semester course – it would be premature to formulate an elaborate mechanism for decisions on student progress.

**Option A: revise the BPhil(Hons) policy and rules on satisfactory progress**

One possible response to the considerations summarised above is to adjust the relevant policy and rules so that in order to progress, students would be required to achieve a WAM of 80 calculated as an average of their best six unit results in each of their first two years, and a WAM of 75 for the their best six unit results in the third year. They could also be required to achieve at least a credit grade in every unit, along with the mandatory completion of the ACE, CARS and ISE modules.

Thus the policy on the Bachelor of Philosophy (Honours) would be amended so that clause 3.6 states:

“To remain in the BPhil (Hons), a student is normally required to achieve a Weighted Average Mark of 80 calculated as an average of the student’s best six unit results in
The rules on satisfactory progress –15 and 16 of the Undergraduate Degree Course Rules for the Bachelor of Philosophy (Honours) – would be expanded as follows:

15. Satisfactory progress

(1) Subject to (2) and (3), to make satisfactory progress in a calendar year a student must pass all units in which they remain enrolled after the final date for withdrawal without academic penalty, achieving a minimum Credit Pass in each unit.

(2) Normally a student must also achieve a Weighted Average Mark of 80 calculated as an average of the student’s best six unit results in each of their first two years, and a Weighted Average Mark of 75 for the student’s best six unit results in the third year.\(^1\) For students with an ‘excess’ of units at the end of a period, the WAM will be calculated using the lowest scoring units that permit progression, leaving the best unit results for the next period.

(3) A student who has not achieved a result of Ungraded Pass in one or more of the ACE module, the CARS module or the ISE module when their progress status is assessed will not have made satisfactory progress.

16. Progress status

(1) A student who makes satisfactory progress is assigned the status of ‘Good Standing’.

(2) A student who does not make satisfactory progress in terms of Rule 15(3) is assigned the progress status of ‘On Probation’.

(3) Unless the relevant board determines otherwise because of exceptional circumstances, a student who does not make satisfactory progress is assigned the progress status of ‘Excluded’.

Advantages of Option A:

- It allows pragmatic latitude in interpreting the spirit of the WAM principle. It recognises that some outstanding students may occasionally be unable to achieve outstanding results in all their units for various reasons – including very different grading patterns across particular units, or a choice of broadening units that turn out to be uncongenial.

- It works in a straightforward way for all full-time students who complete a normal load each semester – the great majority in the case of BPhil enrolment. The decisive appraisal checkpoints (see footnote below) are completion of 48 points, completion of 96 points, and completion of 144 points. A student who for any good reason, takes more than a calendar year to reach one of these stages but has otherwise satisfied progress criteria en route could simply be given a provisional green light to proceed.

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\(^1\) The University Policy on “Academic Year of a Bachelor’s Degree Student Calculation” contains the following definition: “Students enrolled in a bachelor’s degree course are in their

(a) first academic year until they have accumulated 48 credit points;
(b) second academic year after they have accumulated 48 credit points and until they have accumulated 96 credit points;
(c) third academic year after they have accumulated 96 credit points and until they have accumulated 144 credit points.”
Disadvantages of Option A:

- It is less transparent than the current BPhil progression rule. While quite simple to manage for those full-time BPhil students who achieve results in a neat 8 units per year, rule administration would be more complex for students who (for whatever reasons, including part-time status or medical problems) achieve results in fewer than 8 units in a year – or indeed for those who achieve results in more than 8 units.

- It reduces the performance threshold, increasing the likelihood that a group of students outside the BPhil will be achieving at a higher level than those enrolled in what purports to be the University’s most challenging and prestigious program for high achievers.

- It would have to be assessed outside Callista with the outcomes manually recorded in the Student System so that any unsatisfactory performance determinations could be enforced. This is feasible but undesirable. Appendix C explains the difficulties in more detail.

- It does not indicate how a student placed On Probation could eventually be restored to good standing, or how the problematic unit results would be treated in subsequent WAM calculations.

Option B: retain the current policy and rule requirements

The current BPhil policy, clause 3.6, states: “to remain in the BPhil (Hons), students are normally required to achieve a WAM of 80 or above.”

The corresponding rule (15.1) states: “to make satisfactory progress in a calendar year a student must pass all units in which they remain enrolled after the final date for withdrawal without academic penalty and normally achieve a weighted average mark of 80 or above.”

There would be advantages and disadvantages in retaining these formulations.

Advantages of Option B:

- It is relatively simple to understand, conveying an unequivocal message about the very high expectations placed on BPhil students for all components of their course.

- It avoids certain practical difficulties that would arise when a more complex mechanism is administered (as explained above in considering the disadvantages of Option A).

Disadvantages of Option B:

- In requiring a WAM of 80 or above as the normal threshold, it is discrepant with (and more severe than) a recommendation of the Honours/BPhil Working Party, which Academic Council endorsed: “to remain in the B.Phil (Hons), students normally be required to achieve a Level 1 and Level 2 WAM of 80 or above, and a Level 3 WAM of 75 or above.”

- It is likely to discourage adventurous choices of units for elective or broadening purposes, as students will know that even a single encounter with subject material outside their comfort zone may not secure a sufficiently high grade to keep them in the course.
As indicated in the Statistical Data section above, it would certainly produce a large number of exclusions (probably more than 20%), and would therefore be seen as draconian. It could demoralise not only those excluded but some of those remaining, and would probably lead to a large public relations problem.²

**Further considerations**

Neither Option A nor Option B gives unambiguous guidance on how to construe, for administrative decision-making proposes, the qualifying term “normally” in the BPhil rule and policy (revised or unrevised). Therefore it is proposed that, whichever option is adopted, the following principles should apply:

1. If a student has not reached the WAM threshold but the Academic Coordinator believes that extenuating circumstances may warrant favourable consideration, the matter should be referred to the Chair of the BPhil Board of Studies for discussion and final decision (which may, at the Chair’s discretion, involve some or all of the Board members).³

2. If a student has a WAM slightly below 80 after the first 48 points of study but has a reasonable prospect of attaining a cumulative WAM of 80 after the next 48 points, it should be feasible to reserve judgement regarding satisfactory progress because (according to the original recommendation) students are “normally required to achieve a Level 1 and Level 2 WAM of 80 or above.” The student could then be placed “on probation” with appropriate conditions, which would allow close monitoring of progress with the possibility of eventual transfer to another degree. This would be more palatable than abruptly excluding students and more in keeping with the progress status applied to other bachelor’s degree students, who are placed on probation the first time they make unsatisfactory progress. In the future, the Progress Status rule for the BPhil could be amended accordingly.

3. If in a given calendar year the student has undertaken units whose credit point value exceeds 48 points, and the WAM would reach the threshold for that period if only 48 points were taken into account, it is reasonable to regard the student as having met the progression requirement.

4. If a student’s WAM would have reached the threshold if only the result for one of the broadening units had been slightly higher, a more lenient view of progression can be taken than where there is a sub-threshold result for a unit in the area of knowledge to which a student’s intended major belongs.

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² As a context for estimating the likely scale of exclusions, the following data supplied by the IRU may be illuminating. WAM figures for Year 1 UWA students in 2009, based on their best 6 unit results, show that 38% of those with an ATAR of 99.5 or above were unable to achieve a WAM of 80 or more. It seems probable that some of those would have slipped below the 80 WAM threshold in subsequent years.
³ University policies on Academic Progress, Special Consideration and Show Cause all recognise that mitigating considerations may justify some latitude in particular cases. The Academic Progress policy also provides for intervention strategies for students at risk of not progressing satisfactorily.
### Appendix A

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Appendix B

WAM [Sem1] v ATAR, 38 BPhil students, 2012
Excluding 4 international students with no ATAR (WAMs [Sem1] 73, 83, 87.5, 89.8)
WAM [Best4] v ATAR, 38 BPhil students, 2012
Excluding 4 International students with no ATAR (WAMs [Best4] 73, 85, 87.5, 91)
1. WAM\[Sem1\] is the same as WAM\[Best4\] except for the 6 students who did 5 units in Semester 1. One student who did 5 units in Sem1 withdrew from GRMN1401 in May and was awarded a mark of zero for the unit. The resulting WAM\[Sem1\] is 67 but WAM\[Best4\] for this student is 83.75.

2. Among all 42 BPhil students (the 38 local students plus the 4 International students), the number of students below the threshold of 80 is as follows:
   - WAM\[Sem1\] < 80 9
   - WAM\[Best4\] < 80 8
   - WAM\[Best3\] < 80 6
Appendix C - System capabilities for calculating progression

The University’s system can be configured to measure academic progression in a single teaching period or group of teaching periods. The measurement is constrained in a number of ways:

- First, the measurement only check studies undertaken in teaching periods that are linked to the current academic year;
- Second, the measurement checks all studies undertaken in those teaching periods and cannot selectively examine a subset; and
- Third, progression rules are limited to those that
  o check the achievement or maintenance of a minimum GPA or minimum WAM;\(^4\)
  o check for unit failures; and
  o check that the time taken to complete the course has not exceeded the maximum allowable.

These capabilities allow the following types of progression rule:

- Must not fail more than x% credit points attempted in the current progression period;
- Must not fail any units attempted in the current progression period;
- Must not fail the same unit twice (in any course);
- Must not fall below a Course Weighted Average Mark of x;
- Must not fall below a Grade Point Average of x; and
- Must not exceed maximum time.

Any other types of progression rule that may be devised – including rules which
- calculate a WAM in only a proportion of the studies completed;
- look at unit results across two or more academic years; and
- require the student to achieve a particular type of unit grade
– would have to be tested outside the system, with the outcomes manually recorded.

The variant of the current rule that is proposed as Option A in the foregoing paper would be quite simple to manage for those full-time BPhil students who achieve results in a neat 8 units per year, but rule administration would be more complex for students who achieve results in fewer than 8 units or more than 8 units in a year:

- A part-time student who studies 2 units in each semester would have only a partial assessment at the end of their first year of study to check that they haven’t failed anything; their first full check would be at the end of their second year of study when eight units have been completed (or end of Semester 1 if they went full-time in the second year).
- A student who completes and passes only seven units in their first year would also have only a partial ‘haven’t failed anything’ assessment. Not having accumulated 48 points, they haven’t completed their ‘first academic year’. Six months later, assuming they have passed some more units, one of them would

\(^4\) For BPhil purposes, only the WAM should be used, as GPA and WAM can be inconsistent in ranking students. Near the minimum, where progression is a borderline decision, this inconsistency could get untidy.
need to be selected to form a group of eight out of which the six best are selected for the WAM calculation. This group of units is then set aside and shouldn’t be used in any future calculations. The units selected for this purpose could be those with the lowest marks that allow progression to second year, leaving any higher marks to maximise the chance of progressing to third year.

- A student who completes and passes nine units in their first year can have a full progression check, but one has to be left out of the assessment so that it can be considered when the student has achieved 96 points, satisfying the requirements of their second year, and is ready for another full progression check. It would be prudent to omit the highest scoring unit that still allows progression to second year.

**Explanatory note**

As indicated above, implementing the progression rules gets slightly more complex if a student has more credit points than needed (e.g. the full-time student who does 9 units in a year, or the part-time student who finishes a period with more units than needed for calculation of the WAM). In such cases, the suggested method for determining progression is to find the combination of units that meets the minimum number of credit points for the period (e.g., 48) that results in a WAM that allows progression (e.g. 80) while leaving the student’s best scoring units available for use in the next period. This task would be more complex if a student had undertaken a unit with credit points other than 6. Fortunately, BPhil students will probably only ever be enrolled in 6-point units.