

University of Birmingham

Purpose of Paper

1. APRC is invited to **consider**, and if thought appropriate, **approve** the implementation of two internal hurdles in the MSc Biosciences programmes (MSci Biochemistry, MSci Biological sciences, and MSci Human Biology) in the School of Life and Environmental Sciences. This paper proposes a discussion as to whether the Regulations should be amended, or whether, if granted, this proposal be considered as an exemption from the Regulations. The timing of this proposal is from 2012/13 onwards.

Proposal

2. That the hurdle for progression from Stage 2 to Stage 3 be set at 60%, as opposed to 55%.
3. That a mid-stage hurdle be implemented part way through Stage 3, at the end of Year 3, which would require a weighted mean mark of at least 55% to be achieved in order to progress onto Year 4.

Background/Consultation

4. The MSci programmes in Biosciences (MSci Biochemistry, MSci Biological Sciences, and MSci Human Biology) all started in 2009, with the first three cohorts being recruited from students registered for BSc and converting to MSci in their second or third year, having achieved a second year mark of above 55%. At the same time, the first cohort of students enrolled as MSci rather than BSc was recruited. This cohort will start their fourth year in 2012/2013. It is marketed as a course for high achieving students, with a higher entrance requirement than for BSc programme.
5. At the time of inaugurating the programme, we requested that only students who achieved more than 60% a in the second year should be allowed to progress to the MSci year. At the time, we were told that the University regulations for MSci allowed students to progress to the MSci year with 55% year mark in the second year. However, we have found that other Schools appear to operate MSci courses with a higher second year mark as a prerequisite. We have now run the course for 3 years with increasing numbers of students each year and find that the 55% year mark in second year has allowed some very weak students into the course. The issue was debated in the School of Biosciences Learning and Teaching committee in March 2012. This was an open meeting attended by twenty members of staff. Additional comments were obtained from 2 other members of staff by email. It was agreed that we would request APRC to allow the second year mark to be raised to 60% for progression into the MSci course and also to allow a minimum third year mark to be stipulated.

Arguments to Support Proposal

6. The course is marketed as a prestigious course to attract candidates with high 'A' level grades to the School. This is incompatible with the current regulations that allow students with a second year mark of only 55% to

remain in the course or to enter the course after their second year exams. The MSci Biochemistry degree has recently been accredited by the Society for Biology, as one of only three courses nationally accredited in the first year of the accreditation scheme. This enhances the reputation of the course and its attraction for strong 'A' level candidates and good students; the presence of students who are less likely to make satisfactory progress devalues this.

7. Some of the students who have proceeded into the course have required extensive supervision, in particular in the research project component of the course. This places an excessive burden on the resources for the research laboratories concerned and makes supervisors unwilling to take MSci students. Some of the weakest students are likely to fail the MSci and/or get worse grades after this course than if they had left after three years. We have tried to discourage these students from continuing in the course, as we feel it is not in their best interests, we but cannot currently bar them from doing so.
8. The student numbers for this course for 2012/2013 have soared. The increase in numbers this year may, in part, be due to students seeing this as a default option if they don't find employment, rather than being, as intended, an opportunity for enthusiastic students to study further and, in particular, to experience an extended research project. These students are less motivated to study this course and are less likely to achieve good marks. The increase in student numbers means that it is difficult to offer all the students projects in their stated area of interest. This is unfortunate and may further discourage the students.
9. A requirement for a second year mark of 60% rather than 55% would reduce some of these problems. However, a few students have entered the MSci course with high second year marks but low third year marks and these would not be excluded by a requirement for 60% second year mark. The third year mark reflects some of the higher level skills students need for the MSci course, so a prerequisite mark at this stage would remove most of the problems. A hurdle in the third year would also decrease the number of students taking this as an easy, default option. In light of our experience of the students over the first three years, we propose that students should require a year mark of at least 55% in their third year to progress to the MSci course. Students not achieving this third year mark would graduate with a BSc. Although students would face some uncertainty about passing a third year hurdle and so progressing into the masters' year, this is no different in principle from the barriers to progression in first and second years.