Guidelines on Discretionary Award of Credits: Undergraduate and Postgraduate Taught Programmes

1. Introduction

1.1. This paper provides guidelines for Chairs of Progression/Award Boards, Examinations Officers, Deans and Deans’ Representatives in the use of the Discretionary Award of Credits for students registered on undergraduate and postgraduate taught programmes.

1.2. These guidelines comply with University Regulations and the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework. See “Guidelines on Complying with the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework” (document number 5).

1.3. The policy on Discretionary Award of Credits was implemented for undergraduate programmes in June 2002, and for Postgraduate Taught programmes in May 2006. A number of revisions have since been approved.

1.4. The policy is applicable to all undergraduate and postgraduate/graduate taught programmes.

2. Key Points to Note: Undergraduate and Postgraduate/Graduate Taught Programmes

2.1. University Regulations (specifically the Heriot-Watt Assessment and Progression System) permits Progression and Award Boards to use their discretion in the award of Grade E, particularly in the case of courses that are not pre-requisites. Grade E should continue to be used in this discretionary manner. However, Boards will have occasion to retain the award of a Grade F if, in the opinion of the Course and Progression/Award Boards, the student’s performance was not at the standard required for Grade E.

2.2. The discretionary award of credits was introduced to enable Boards to deal with cases where students have not satisfied the requisite credit points due to achieving a Grade F in a course, but have otherwise satisfied the overall criteria for award (undergraduate and postgraduate), or progression (in the case of undergraduate students only).

2.3. DC is an optional and discretionary device available to Boards to enable students who have satisfied the overall criteria for the programme, yet are ‘credit-light’. Under the grade mapping process within HAPS (Heriot-Watt Assessment and Progression System), Boards have the discretion to award a grade higher than that originally achieved to a student who is not ‘credit-light’ if there are particular circumstances which would merit such a grade; the justification should be recorded in the Minutes of the Board.

2.4. DC should not be used as an alternative to mitigating circumstances; the mitigating circumstances process should be applied and, following the MC process, the Award or Progression Board should determine an appropriate grade (either in the range of A-F or DC).

2.5. An undergraduate student who has not achieved the minimum number of credit points necessary to qualify for consideration of the award of a degree in accordance with the Regulations, or the minimum number of credit points to progress from one stage to another, may be awarded the requisite credit points at the discretion of the Award Board or Progression Board, as appropriate.

2.6. For Postgraduate/Graduate Taught Programmes, the Discretionary Award of Credits shall be applied only when the Award Board is making recommendations for award and shall not be used as a means to facilitate the progression of a student through a programme of study.

2.7. The Dean or representative should monitor the use of DC at Boards to ensure fairness and consistency.

2.8. If the Board is applying discretionary credits the Board shall assure itself of the following:

   a) The standards and learning outcomes of the programme and the award are not being compromised.

   b) The student has satisfied the specified criteria for progression or the award as a whole, in spite of being ‘credit light’.
c) The Student shall have taken all the assessment opportunities in the course in question and have obtained a grade F in the assessment(s). In exceptional circumstances if a student is prevented by illness or other sufficient cause from either presenting themselves for or completing the examinations which form part of a Programme of Study leading to an award, the Award Board may consider applying discretionary credits, assuring itself that the above criteria has been met.

d) The use of DC is transparent, fair, consistent and open to independent scrutiny.

e) The justification for awarding DCs have been recorded in the minutes of the Board.

3. Applying DCs for Progression (Undergraduate only)

3.1. For Postgraduate/Graduate Taught Programmes, the Discretionary Award of Credits shall not be used as a means to facilitate the progression of a student through a programme of study.

3.2. An undergraduate student who has not achieved the minimum number of credit points necessary to progress from one stage to another, may be awarded the requisite credit points at the discretion of the Award Board or Progression Board, as appropriate.

3.3. DCs can be awarded normally for up to two courses or 30 credits (normally up to three courses or 45 credits for Combined Studies degrees) over an entire programme of study. The justification for awarding DCs shall be recorded in the minutes of the Board.

3.4. The Progression Board should be mindful of using DCs for progression in the case of undergraduate students whose performance has been unsatisfactory, since such students may end up using the maximum allowed DC and, therefore, be 'credit light' at a subsequent progression stage or at the point of award.

3.5. If the Progression Board is applying discretionary credits as a means to facilitate progression, the Board shall ensure that:

i. the candidate shall have taken a re-assessment in the course(s) in question and shall have gained a Grade F in the re-assessment
   • For non-final stage courses, the DC can be applied only to a Grade F after unsuccessful re-assessment in those courses neither specified as a pre-requisite nor designated as requiring a minimum of Grade D for progression on the programme. Re-assessment should always be recommended where a Grade F was gained at the first attempt. NB: It must not be suggested to students that they could opt not to take a re-assessment on the basis that their Grade F might be changed to DC at the end of their programme.
   • In the case of final-stage courses, where no re-assessment is permitted, DC is applicable to Grade Fs gained after the first attempt.

ii. the candidate shall have satisfied the specified criteria for progression, in spite of being credit light.

iii. the discretionary credits shall not be applied to courses which are designated as requiring a minimum of Grade D for progression on the programme (and which might be defined as ‘pre-requisite’, ‘core’ or some other terminology).

iv. all alternative options have been considered. For example, where appropriate, and where programme regulations allow, the candidate might be given the opportunity to take alternative courses in order to minimise the possibility of having insufficient credits for the award of a degree.

3.6. Transfer to Combined Studies

a) Under the policy on the Discretionary Award of Credits, DC can be awarded to students only if they have achieved a Grade F in the re-assessment; DC cannot be applied if a decision of absent (ABS) has been returned. Students often transfer to a Combined Studies degree with one or more courses recorded as ABS. This decision of ABS is often used when a student has completed some, but not all, of the assessment; in such cases, technically, a Grade F rather than ABS should have been returned.

b) In cases where an ABS grade is an issue in a transfer to Combined Studies and where the student in question has actually attempted some of the assessment, the Associate Director of Studies
should discuss with the student’s original School the possibility of re-grading such courses as “F” and thereafter awarding discretionary credits for the Grade F. In this way, students transferring to Combined Studies would not fall short of their requisite credits for award (or progression) simply because an incorrect decision of ABS had excluded them from being eligible for discretionary credits.

c) Note: to be eligible for re-grading of ABS to Grade F and for the award of DC, a student must have attempted some of the assessment; DC cannot be awarded to a student who has been absent from the entire course assessment unless the Progression Board has accepted his or her case for extenuating circumstances.

4. Applying DCs for Awards (Undergraduate and Postgraduate/Graduate Taught)

4.1. A Student who has not achieved the minimum number of credits necessary to qualify for consideration of the award of a degree in accordance with the Regulations may be awarded the requisite credits at the discretion of the Award Board, as appropriate.

4.2. The Award Board shall have the discretion to award credits, up to a maximum over the course of the entire programme, for the relevant awards as follows:
   a) In the case of First Degrees, normally up to 30 credits over the course of the entire programme of study;
   b) In the case of Combined Studies up to 45 credits in the case of Combined Studies degrees at the point of award;
   c) In the case of the Higher Degree of Master, normally up to 20 credits.

4.3. The discretionary award of credits shall not be applied to a dissertation, project or any other supervised research work.

4.4. If the Award Board is applying discretionary credits the Board shall assure itself that:
   a) Any discretionary credit previously applied for the purposes of progression, as set out under paragraph 2.5 of Regulation A6, Progression. **NB: This paragraph, which is from Regulation A7 Awards, needs rewording for clarification. It should be highlighting that before an Award Board applies a DC it should check that DCs have not previously been applied for progression purposes (thus ensuring the maximum allowance is not exceeded).**
   b) The standards and learning outcomes of the award shall not be compromised by the discretionary award of credits.
   a) The student has satisfied the specified criteria for the award as a whole, in spite of being ‘credit light’.
   b) The Student shall have taken all the assessment opportunities in the course in question and have obtained a grade F in the assessment(s). In exceptional circumstances if a student is prevented by illness or other sufficient cause from either presenting themselves for or completing the examinations which form part of a Programme of Study leading to an award, the Award Board may consider applying discretionary credits, assuring itself that the above criteria has been met.
   c) The use of DC is transparent, fair, consistent and open to independent scrutiny.
   d) The justification for allocating discretionary credits shall be recorded in the minutes of the Award Board.

5. Discretionary Award of Credits and Calculating an Award

5.1. When averaging courses for the purposes of calculating an award, the courses to which the DC has been applied shall be included. The mark from the re-assessment attempt (leading to the F grade) should be included in the calculation.

6. Recording the use of the Discretionary Award of Credits

6.1. If a Board has chosen to apply DC, justification for its use must be recorded in the minutes or formal record of the relevant Board.

6.2. With regard to recording DC on the Student Administration System, the original mark should be retained against the course and the Grade F should be overwritten with DC in the grades column. **Note:** specific
details on how to add DC records on the Student Administration System and on recording DC on spreadsheets returned to the Academic Registry are provided in the Exam Procedures Guidelines (issued to Schools each session).

6.3. The transcript of assessment results will record the discretionary award of credits in the form of DC, with an explanation – Discretionary Award of Credits - against the appropriate course(s).

7. Examples of Applying Discretionary Credits

7.1. Appendix 1 to this document provides examples of situations when a discretionary credit might be applied at the award stage.

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Appendix 1:  
Examples of Applying Discretionary Credits at the Award Stage

Postgraduate Taught

A postgraduate taught student, for exceptional reasons has been allowed to progress to the dissertation stage carrying a resit course. Due to exceptional circumstances the student fails the course. The Award Board is confident that the student has fully met the programme’s learning outcomes. The Board has the discretion to award the DC if it is content that there is full justification to do so.  
This was Fiona’s example

Undergraduate

An undergraduate student is being considered for the award of ordinary degree but is 15 credits light. The Award Board is confident that the student has fully met the programme’s learning outcomes. The student has no courses with a grade F against which a DC can be awarded as they have taken one course less than required in their earlier years. The Board has the discretion to award the DC if it is content that there is full justification to do so.