SEEC GENERAL COUNCIL SEMINAR

20 November 2002 1.45 – 3.00

Discussion Paper

Can compensation and condonation (OED – aka condonement) have a place in an institutional scheme or individual HE programme which is based on credit accumulation?

Rod Coleman
SEEC Chair 2001-03

Let's set aside at the outset the paradox that whilst the QAA and other key players have a fundamental unease about "the two Cs", compensation and condonation, it is nevertheless commonplace in traditional universities – and replicated in some post-1992 universities and other HEIs – to formalise averaging between strengths and weaknesses in a student's performance. This is quite simply one of the consequences of having a sector which has tolerated institutional autonomy to the point where diversity has become confusion, the latter leading to inconsistencies thinly veiled by a QA (TQA/SPR) model which yields judgements based on performance against self-determined aims and objectives.

The fact remains that the two main reasons for the QAA's decision to exclude credit from the HEQF were ostensibly

(a)   the failure of HEIs which claim to operate credit-based schemes and programmes to agree, through the joint credit bodies, a common approach to compensation and condonation.

(b)   the HE sector's reluctance (subsequently exemplified in the Research Intensive Universities' response to the "Credit Guidelines") to sign up as a whole to the principles of credit-based schemes and programmes.

In addition, QAA representatives on at least three occasions (1) have publicly confirmed the Agency's scepticism that the process of determining "volume" of credit (as opposed to "levels", to which recent work on learning outcomes appears to have provided a cogent response) is inconsistent and flawed by confusion over "notional learning time". To be fair to the QAA, however, even recognised credit experts have called this process a "black art".

Since it has not yet been highlighted by the QAA, the third important issue - the re-use of credit - appears to be somewhat removed, both conceptually and in practice, from the two other mainstream considerations; it is, of course, equally important.

Compensation

Using a working definition of compensation as "counterbalancing strength", it is likely that all HEIs allow the outcome of a student's performance in one element (ie assignment/single piece of work) to be averaged by combining it with the outcome for her/his performance in another element. The assessment infrastructure of modules or units in most credit-based HEIs allows for a sub-division into two parts or components (ie groups of elements). Compensation between the two components is automatic in many HEIs provided a minimum threshold is achieved in each one (eg 30% or 35% or appropriate grade). In some HEIs which operate module or unit-based credit accumulation schemes a fail in one or more modules, usually within a limit of X modules/units or Y credits, can be compensated by passes in others.

A cynic might suggest that this has nothing at all to do with consideration for students. Deeming that a student has passed when s/he has not is simply a device to maximise an

institution's spurious completion rates within the initial period of student registration, to meet HEFCE benchmarks. This may seem surprising but compensation is nevertheless common practice in traditional linear-based HEIs which purport to adopt a holistic approach and which hide behind claims that modularity, unitisation and credit accumulation jointly and severally fragment the student learning experience. In reality many, if not most such HEIs simply do not want to provide opportunities for reassessment through a referral process. This is at best dishonest and at worst punitive.

Even where an HEI is (complacently) minimalist, relying exclusively on statements of learning outcomes for whole qualifications (cf QAA) rather than for their constituent parts, it is questionable whether compensation can be justified. If learning outcomes at qualification level can be specified as achievement targets in their own right it is unlikely that success in achieving learning outcomes A-D can compensate for failure to achieve outcomes E and/or F.

Where programmes define learning outcomes at module/unit level (as all programmes should) it is even less likely that compensation can be justified. Where a student passes modules A-D but fails module E and/or F, those who would advocate compensation must answer the following questions:

(a)   if compensation is to be justified on the grounds that the achievement of learning outcomes for modules A-D cover the learning outcomes for modules E and/or F, why are the learning outcomes replicated? (ie is there a problem of programme design?)

(b)   if compensation is to be allowed despite the fact that the learning outcomes for modules E and/or F are quite distinct from those for modules A-D, how can this be permitted without compromising the integrity of the student's programme of study?

Condonation (aka Condonement)

A purist view would be that condonation, defined as "forgiving" (OED) is as inadmissible as compensation, for the reasons explained above. In which case, abolish extenuating circumstances. QED. However, might it be justified in certain circumstances?

Condonation is implicit in compensation at element level (which carries the penalty of a lower aggregate mark which may lead to a failure in the module) except where non-submission of work for assessment is the consequence of extenuating circumstances (see below), Where the lower mark results in a failed module/unit, might the award/programme board be permitted to exercise discretion in the light of extenuating circumstances eg to "uncap" a referral mark/grade for the module and/or to allow an additional referral opportunity?

Provided the student has unquestionably met her/his absolute responsibility to make all reasonable allowances for the unforeseeable, might the concept of "forgiveness" even be acceptable at a higher level where the "transgression"(ie failure to achieve certain learning outcomes) is due to circumstances which were totally beyond the student's control? In this case might there be an argument, not for automatic condonation nor for awarding credit where it has not been earned, but for allowing the award/programme board (ie the forum in which the whole student profile is reviewed) discretion to recommend eligibility for an award despite failure to achieve a (limited) proportion of the learning outcomes for (a) constituent part(s) of the award in question?

If this is acceptable certain caveats are essential, in order to maintain the integrity of the award:

(a)   failure to achieve learning outcomes must be set against extenuating circumstances **which have been considered and accepted before the student's overall profile is considered by the board**

(b)   an institutional-wide maximum proportion of failed modules or credits which can be condoned must be set for all programmes eg 10% of the total credit requirement for the award (or the nearest higher multiple of credits to 10%).

(c)   where the credit shortfall is at or within the maximum allowed but the learning outcomes which have not been met are for modules/units which are compulsory for a named award, the award/programme board would not normally recommend eligibility for the named award (eg an award accredited by a professional or statutory body). The board might, however, offer the student a lower level named award (eg Dip HE or degree) or even an un-named generic award at the same level as the target named award.

(d)   the actual marks or grades for failed modules(s)/unit(s) which have been condoned against extenuating circumstances must be excluded from any calculation of degree classification or other differential outcome.

Comments from colleagues are most welcome, to rod.coleman@uwe.ac.uk.

Rod Coleman
SEEC Chair 2001-2003   19 November 2002

(1)   SEEC Conference 1999; QAA consultation on HEQF 2000; UVAC Conference 2002.