Assessment Regulations for the Award of Postgraduate Merit and Postgraduate Distinction

The External Examiner for two of our MSc programmes has suggested that the assessment regulations for the award of PG Merit and PG Distinction should be modified to permit a small number of failed courses (e.g. 10 or 20 credits). We fully support this suggestion, for the reasons given in the EE suggestion and School response copied below. Our preference would be to permit 20 credits of failed courses, as the DPTs for our MSc programmes include both 20 credit and 10 credit courses.

The reason for this short paper is to gauge whether there is wider support across Schools in SCE for such a change to the Assessment Regulations, either for the award of PG Merit only, or for both PG Merit and PG Distinction.

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External Examiner's suggestion (MSc in Theoretical Physics / MSc in Mathematical Physics)
I would like to make a specific proposal to modify the regulations for the award of Distinction and Merit in these MSc programmes.

At present, a student is required to pass all 120 credits of taught modules in order to achieve a Distinction or Merit. I propose that this is relaxed, so that one module (either 10 or 20 credits) may be failed without vetoing the Distinction or Merit award, provided of course all other requirements are met.

One of the strengths of this programme is that it allows students to experiment by taking modules outside their "comfort zone", e.g. one of the advanced pure mathematics modules if their background is in physics, and I think this should be strongly encouraged. However, with risk comes the possibility of failure, so I think it is fair that a student is allowed one failed module while still being able to achieve a Distinction or Merit on their overall performance.

As the regulations stand, a student could meet every requirement for a Distinction with marks averaging 90% for the taught modules, and a 90% Dissertation, yet still be denied the award because of one 10 credit module mark slipping just below 40%. Fortunately, this extreme situation has not yet arisen although we have encountered students who would have qualified for a Merit without this "no-fails" regulation. I think this is unfortunate, especially for the reason above which is perhaps a special feature of these MSc programmes. It would also give a false impression to Universities wishing to recruit PhD students from this Masters programme, who would be looking for students with a Distinction or Merit.

Institution response
We agree with your proposal and would support a modification to our regulations to permit students to fail a small number of credits in the taught component of the MSc and still be eligible for Merit or Distinction, provided the other requirements are met. We also agree that our current regulations have the unfortunate side-effect of encouraging students to make conservative course choices rather than considering courses where there may be a higher risk of failure but that interest them academically or that fit with their future career aspirations.