Assessing First Class Honours Equivalence

1. Background

DEEWR advises that amongst the criteria that must be met for an applicant to be eligible for an Australian Postgraduate Award (APA) is a requirement that they must ‘have completed a Bachelor Degree with First Class Honours, or be regarded by the Higher Education Provider (HEP) as having an equivalent level of attainment’. In determining an equivalent level of academic attainment a HEP ‘may consider previous study, relevant work experience, research publications, referees’ reports and other research experience’ (para. 3.10.5, Guidelines for Commonwealth Scholarships, 2007).

Applicants presenting other qualifications and/or employment experience for the purpose of First Class Honours equivalence assessment may be ranked for an APA provided the DEEWR Guidelines are followed and justification for the ranking is provided. It is a DEEWR requirement that universities are able to demonstrate that equivalence to First Class Honours has been clearly established through formal auditable processes and as such the University must document such processes.

Once First Class Honours equivalence is established, the applicant is eligible for inclusion in the scholarship ranking process. Appropriate adjustments can then be made to the RMIT APA ranking score using the School Recommended Score. (See Notes for the Ranking Process of Australian Postgraduate Awards – APA Ranking Scores)

2. Process

Qualifications that may be assessed for First Class Honours equivalence include advanced postgraduate diplomas, Masters by Coursework and Research and some Masters qualifying programs. Publications, relevant work experience, referee’s reports and other research experience may also be taken into account.

2.1 Where the APA applicant does not possess the required Bachelor Degree with First class Honours, then an argument for First Class Honours equivalence must be prepared and submitted. It is the responsibility of Heads of Schools (or equivalent) to identify applicants requiring First Class Honours equivalence assessment and to have appropriate documentation available for the School and Portfolio ranking committees. The School shall then attach this documentation to the APA application, for the information of the Portfolio and University ranking committees. Factors such as the following should normally be evaluated as part of such assessment:

- Previous program results – particularly those at 4th year and above. It would be expected that such results would need to be at least at an average Distinction level. (Conversely, it is unlikely that a First Class Honours equivalence argument could be successfully mounted if such a high level of achievement is not demonstrated.)
- Examiners’ reports from completed research degrees with ungraded passes.
- Demonstrated research experience through refereed publications and/or exhibitions, achievements/awards/grants from major research projects etc.
- Amount of previous study devoted to research training.
- Referees’ reports.
• Relevant work/professional experience.

2.2 Where the required four (or more) years of tertiary education has resulted in an outcome such as an incomplete research degree or programs with ungraded passes, it would be expected that full appropriate evidence of the level of achievement would need to be produced by the applicant for scrutiny and assessment. Evidence that is used for establishing First Class Honours equivalence should not be used again for other assessment criteria in the assessment process.

2.3 An applicant who has previously been awarded a Bachelor Degree ‘with Distinction’ or ‘with Honours’ on the basis of strong results in a three-year undergraduate program is not deemed to hold First Class Honours equivalence and is not eligible to be assessed for First Class Honours equivalence unless they have undertaken at least one further year of tertiary education at a high level of achievement.