

Assessment of Period of Study Abroad

MMath/BSc with Study in Europe; MMath under Erasmus/Socrates exchange agreement.

Introduction: Students taking MMath four-year courses may spend one or two semesters studying in a European University outside the UK. For those taking the MMath or BSc with Study in Europe degrees it is a requirement that they spend the complete academic year abroad; those on MMath courses may optionally spend either one or two semesters during their third year at a European University outside the UK. This document gives guidelines for the assessment of the period abroad for students in both of these categories.

General: Usually, students will take examinations whilst away and be provided with a mark or set of marks. Translation of these marks onto the Sheffield scale is not a straightforward matter. Few of our partners use the ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) and even for those that do there is a complete lack of international consistency in interpretation of grades under that system. We have some accumulated experience of translating Sheffield marks into other national systems of our partner Universities based on criteria such as the necessary level of qualifications for various levels of postgraduate work and which parts of the scale are conventionally 'never' used.

Often no mark is available from the host institution for the student's period abroad. Reasons for this may be:

- No examinations were available while the student was at the institution (i.e. incompatibility of semester dates). This applies particularly to students away for less than an academic year.
- Students have taken examinations but no mark has been provided by the host institution (despite all efforts and pressures to obtain a response).
- Students have taken inappropriate courses and marks awarded by the host institution are not a true reflection of the student's work and ability.

Sometimes the host institution provides statements (formal or informal) on the student's work without providing any numerical examination mark.

Assessment: For each student spending a period abroad, the MMath with Study in Europe Tutor(s) or Erasmus/Socrates Co-ordinator(s) should provide a statement on the student's period abroad. Where possible this should give a mark on the Sheffield percentage scale based on all available information, including any marks obtained abroad. Where this is impossible the statement should explain the reasons for this. These statements should be considered by the various examiners' committees and they should make recommendations as appropriate.

Additionally, the student should provide a written account of the academic aspects of the period spent abroad. This should include a detailed description of each course taken (~300 words per course) describing the mathematical and statistical topics covered.

This report should be submitted by the end of Week 7 (Reading Week) of the first semester.

Where no mark is available then a mark should be imputed for the period. For those spending a complete year abroad this should be the maximum of (a) the average mark obtained in year 4, (b) the average of year 2 and year 4 marks, with year 4 marks having double the weight of year 2. For those spending one semester then the imputed mark should be the maximum of (a) the mark obtained in the semester spent in Sheffield in year 3, (b) the average of the mark obtained in the semester spent in Sheffield and the year 2 mark, these to have equal weight.

Notes

- In future, MMath with Study in Europe and outgoing MMath Erasmus/Socrates students will be given a copy of the document attached. Current students being considered this year have been told that the examiners will consider their cases carefully and maintain their usual level of integrity and that some scheme such as that outlined would be likely.
- This scheme closely parallels the procedure at the University of Leeds who have long experience in students returning from a period abroad. Leeds is the only comparable university with any substantial experience of mathematics students spending periods abroad. I understand that their experience is that often there is no viable mark from the partner university. Other informal anecdotal evidence (e.g. from Bristol) suggests that this is a common problem. Leeds actually go a little further and downweight any mark that is obtained abroad (likewise Bristol) and upweight the later mark obtained in Leeds after returning. I would trust that the Examiners' Meeting would be wary in borderline cases of disadvantaging a student with a low mark from a non-UK University.
- The term *Europe outside the UK* is not very satisfactory (c.f. Fog in Channel: — Continent Cut Off) but it needs to cover students going to Ireland (two links), Iceland (proposed link), the Canary Islands (one link) and the French Overseas Territories (no links [yet]), all of whom are eligible for the MMath with Study in Europe programme. Thus *Continental Europe* is not adequate and replacing *outside* with *other than in* is cumbersome. I would prefer just *Europe*, since the degree is *MMath with Study in Europe* and we don't want to have to change the title of that for consistency (I assume we would refuse permission for students to spend year 3 in Sheffield Hallam under the degree).
- The proposed imputation of a year 3 mark as the maximum of the two formulae given is of course equivalent to ignoring year 3 and basing the degree classification on the maximum of (a) $(\text{year 2} + 4 \times \text{year 4})/5$ (b) $(\text{year 2} + 2 \times \text{year 4})/3$. Option (b) is equivalent to the formula for the 3-year BSc.
- I think it simpler to impute a year 3 mark (rather than use end formulae above) because this allows us to use a genuine year 3 mark from abroad when one is available.
- I think it would be unfair to apply the BSc formula (b) universally (i.e. even when it is not in the student's interests) since it involves a retrospective increase in weighting of the year 2 mark from the expected 20% to 33% — the student would only discover that the second year mark is more important than thought at the time of taking it when arriving at the end of year 3 and no mark becomes available from the year abroad.
- Both Leeds and Bristol make the returning students write a substantial report (very substantial, more a dissertation in the case of Bristol) on the courses they do abroad. I think this is a good idea but too late to implement for the current students. We might introduce it for those just about to go away if we can agree on a protocol. I would suggest something of about 5,000 words (~10 pages) summarizing critically each course attended, perhaps with sample examination or tutorial questions (not necessarily with solutions). This would be particularly useful in cases where we have no examination mark nor any documentation from the host University.