

Degree results at Edinburgh 'undermined' by marking strike

James Reinhardt, Helen Puttick

Degree classifications at Edinburgh University have been "undermined" after it circumvented academic regulations to allow graduations to take place this summer.

Hundreds of students are set to graduate with "unclassified" degrees, and in some cases downgraded classifications, after assignments were left unmarked because of an assessment boycott held by members of the University and College Union (UCU). Students have spoken of fears over losing master's offers at universities such as Cambridge and of a risk to getting graduate jobs.

The marking boycott was in response to the university's attempts to push through £140 million in cuts, including a £90 million reduction in staffing fees. The UCU has estimated that as many as 2,000 staff could be made redundant.

The Times spoke to senior academics, all of whom wished to remain anonymous, who sit on exam boards that ensure students' work is graded appropriately. They said the usual rigour around awarding degree classifications had been severely undermined.

They explained that the university had reallocated a significant number of unmarked assignments, particularly dissertations and final projects, to anonymous markers, which, as multiple sources suggested to The Times, were probably external to the university.

Because of this, the boards no longer felt they could vouch for the standard of marking. Issues were spotted in the results, including a surge in higher marks, and the boards have refused to ratify the grades. However, the boards are understood to have been overruled and students given degree results without the usual quality seal. One member said that within his school at the university up to 90 dissertations had been

reallocated to external markers, and another said he was "extremely concerned about the lack of consistency and fairness" this was causing. "The hollowing out of academic standards and disempowering of academic judgment is deeply troubling," he added. "It makes me worried and ... deflated that the institution is willing to compromise in the way it has."

Lindsay Paterson, professor emeritus of education policy at Edinburgh, said each department had its own exam board ensuring the rigour of marking. The groups include two external, independent experts who are sent a random sample of work to verify the standard of feedback and grading. The process, he said, was taken extremely seriously. "If that is being bypassed in any way at all, it is a severe undermining of standards."

In May, the university's academic senate narrowly passed an emergency teaching and assessment regulation to allow students with missing marks to graduate via a procedure known as "credit on aggregate", provided they had passed at least four modules in their final year. This has led the university, in cases when a student is close to a grade boundary and has unmarked assignments, to award students "unclassified" degrees with no grade, which will receive a classification in the future once work has been marked.

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education is conducting a review of awarding systems at institutions around Scotland, including Edinburgh University.

An Edinburgh University spokesman said: "Our students ... have very real concerns about how the marking and assessment boycott will affect them and we are doing everything we can to protect them from disruption. We have robust measures in place to reduce the impact of the boycott."



The Glyndebourne Chorus brought the score to life and the three-tiered set was remarkable in scale and construction

Smooth sailing in refitted Britten classic

Opera Daniel Lewis

Billy Budd

Glyndebourne (255min including dinner interval)

★★★★☆

"I do not write for posterity," Benjamin Britten once said. "I write music, now, in Aldeburgh, for people living there, and further afield, indeed for anyone who cares to play it or listen to it." In the 50 years since Britten's death, that circle of people willing to play and listen seems only to have grown wider, and his music more vital.

To mark the anniversary, Glyndebourne is revisiting Michael Grandage's 2010 production of *Billy Budd*, not seen here for 13 years. Like the 1951 opera, it still feels watertight, with its claustrophobic three-tiered set — a cross-section of an 18th-

century man o' war, curved towards the auditorium as if viewed through a fisheye lens — its attention to nautical detail and to EM Forster's libretto, which was not at all compromised by some surtitle glitches on opening night.

Allan Clayton brought dramatic and vocal subtlety to the role of the tormented Captain Vere. This Vere seems to garner his crew's respect less through stiff-lipped stoicism than his bookish refinement, an all-round gentility, creating an even wider gulf between him and his less enlightened lieutenants, Flint and Redburn — William Thomas and Dingle Yandell, forceful and excellent basses both.

Clayton set a high bar for the other two leads: Sam Carl as the sadistic, repressed Claggart, who seeks to destroy Budd, and, as Budd himself, Thomas Mole. Neither has entirely captured their roles dramatically yet, and they were most striking in scenes with strongly characterised supporting characters, such as Novice

— a memorably tremulous Laurence Kilsby — and Clive Bayley's worn and weary Dansker. But both held their own vocally.

There was pitch-black evil in Carl's lower register and oily diction, and hope in Mole's mature-sounding baritone that bloomed movingly in the moonlit scene before his demise. He'll be a force to be reckoned with by the end of the run, and beyond.

No such qualms about the Glyndebourne Chorus, who persuaded not with sheer force but their more controlled lyricism, and the scrupulous playing of the London Philharmonic, conducted by Nicholas Carter. Besides noticeably crisp brass and fleet woodwind — and the fine tuning and placement of the series of chords after Claggart's demise — what most impressed was how they fully achieved the immersive fluidity of Britten's score. It almost feels cinematic and it played in my mind long after the curtain fell.

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