

## **The UK Honours Degree Classification System**

The Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE) is pleased to respond to the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education review of the UK honours degree classification system. This response has been compiled by the General Secretary, Professor Andrew Miller and the Policy Officer, Dr Marc Rands, with the assistance of a number of Fellows with considerable experience in this area.

There is a need for a review of the UK honours degree classification system, however, the fact that recent investigations of the kinds of systems used in other countries have not uncovered any 'gold standard' means that an ideal solution applicable everyone is not likely to be forthcoming.

This purpose of classifying the degree is to differentiate between students with differing levels of achievement. This differentiation is important for those students who may be applying for jobs in industry or elsewhere and for those who wish to proceed to research within Universities. In the latter case, entry onto a research studentship may be dependent on the level of achievement, both in terms of relative performance (i.e. one student rather than another gaining a place) and also in relation to whether there is an absolute figure below which no student would be able to gain a research studentship, with traditionally 2-1 or better being required.

The specific questions identified in the review paper are now addressed below:

### **Change**

#### ***Is there a need for change to the existing honours degree classification system?***

There are weaknesses in the existing UK system, which it can be argued no longer provides sufficient distinction between candidates of different calibre and causes considerable problems in the stepped level of assessment where career prospects and future prestige hang on decisions at the margin. Employers are also increasingly, devising their own systems and criteria, for example by using only 'approved lists' of institutions and by setting their own tests.

However, Scottish honours degrees are not merely classified degrees but are specialised degrees involving a progression of study towards more advanced study. Entry to honours level degrees is commonly selective which must affect the distribution of the various possible classes.

At face value, a more detailed profile of a student's achievements and abilities might well be more meaningful, if such a profile could be accurately, consistently and efficiently obtained. Nevertheless, there will be little sympathy for a system that looked complex and unreliable and involved significant, new commitments of staff time. The information regarding the outcomes of learning will also need to fully meet, not only the students needs but also the interests of employers and the wider public.

#### ***Could it be incremental?***

It would seem to be unlikely that it would be possible to move to any alternative model without a prolonged transition period and in order to gain experience of alternative models, it may require some period of experimentation. However, the main thing will be for the process to get started and that, whatever system is chosen, it should be widely accepted.

#### ***How does it compare to other systems?***

Many systems of 'classification' found throughout the world produce a discrete set of three, four or five categories, with the exception of systems that operate entirely on a binary pass-fail basis. Therefore, the actual number of categories in the UK classification system is in no way extraordinary. Moreover, a summative evaluation of a student's career using a simple numerical or alphabetical scale is also experienced by students at A-levels and Highers.

#### ***Is it desirable that the key elements of a higher education classification system apply nationally?***

It will be desirable for key elements to apply across the whole of the UK, as applicants and graduates are mobile and it will be important to ensure that Scottish degrees are meaningful and recognised throughout the UK and beyond. In this respect, there may be merit in having regard to what is done in Europe, although this adds considerable difficulties to the task of developing a new scheme.

#### ***Is the pursuit of a UK approach (as opposed to a Scottish approach) the right way?***

The Scottish education system has developed for reasons that have been well thought through and it will be very important that the Scottish position is represented if the outcome is to be implemented on a UK wide basis.

## Criteria

### ***Are the criteria of equity, simplicity, transparency, reliability, validity, fitness for purpose, efficiency and acceptability appropriate?***

We broadly agree with the criteria for a replacement system with a couple of additional comments. Any alternative should motivate student learning and enable honours students to graduate with a sense of achievement. It should also not add to the current administrative burden associated with the assessment process.

In terms of equity/fairness, there will be difficulties in seeking to classify similar levels of performance in a similar way across subjects, institutions and over time. If time is a constraint on assessment, it will inhibit development and change will be confused with lowering standards and attempts to create a national spectrum will be problematic. One of the benefits of university education is that it allows institutions to match the educational experience to the students they are taking in. If the institution sets acceptable learning outcomes and students achieve those outcomes, they should be able to gain the best results on offer at that institution.

There are similar difficulties with the interpretation of reliability/consistency as a 'one size fits all approach' as opposed to matching assessment to outcome in a flexible manner. The most fundamental issues are that awarding practices must protect the academic standards in terms of consistency and validity while, at the same time, meeting the needs of learners and other stakeholders, such as employers.

## Assessment method

### ***Are the main issues about the honours degree classification more concerned with method than scale?***

The need to provide a single summative classification at the end of a student's career raises a host of problems about how to reduce a range of grades and assessments down to a single classification, but in reality most systems produce rather similar results. The big problems stem from deeper differences in how grading procedures can measure ability, and inter-subject differences in belief about how this should be done. The sector has been unable to articulate with any consensus how this should be dealt with despite the number of years the system has been in place.

There are other justifiable concerns too about the current classification system. It is an observable fact that in many subjects there is a clustering of results in the Upper Second Class category. Although the framework of the classification system has the capability of discriminating between four standards of performance (Third Class, Lower Second Class, Upper Second Class, First Class), the preponderance of results falls in a single category. There may be many cases when a tiny difference in a numerical calculation places a student either within or outside this band.

### ***Can and should the method be improved, if so in what way?***

What seems to be needed is additional information, perhaps by providing a transcript by subject studied, with a subject grade and weighting, a grade point average (GPA) for each year/stage of study and an overall GPA, to supplement the basic classification, but people will still want to know the quality of degree obtained however it is labelled.

### ***Is it desirable and possible to ensure comparability of standards of degree classifications awarded for different subjects within institutions?***

We should be wary of over standardisation. Trying to standardize the proportion of students awarded each grade between departments (let alone between universities) could be unfair. It is well known that some universities are able to draw on a pool of better qualified entrant students than are others and that within universities some departments are able to attract better qualified students than others and that the teaching in some departments is better than that in others. One should expect, therefore, that such factors would be reflected in the proportions in the various grades of any classification system, and students in some departments being able to achieve higher grades than in others.

While it is possible to introduce a university-wide algorithm for calculating Honours classifications, consistency between subject areas (except in proportion achieving a grade) will be hard to secure, given that (a) there are very small numbers in some subjects and (b) that gifted mathematicians will score full marks, but historians rarely will. Would we want a Maths graduate with 99% to get an Upper Second because 10% of all candidates got 100, and 10% of historians got over 70? There is also evidence that in qualitatively-marked subjects, markers unconsciously map their grades 'onto a curve', taking account of differences in difficulty between particular papers, whereas in quantitatively-marked subjects, markers tend to assume percentage grades have reality regardless of the particular examination. The former may be a better procedure, but appears to contribute to the growing ubiquity of Upper Second class degrees; the latter produces spurious precision and often high numbers of Firsts and sometimes Thirds that are difficult to justify. Most universities, therefore, show evidence of a lack of comparability across subjects in classification results.

### ***Is it desirable and possible to ensure comparability of standards of degree classifications awarded between institutions?***

Even though there appears to be a nationwide system, each University reaches its Honours Classification results in its own way. In some cases, different criteria or methods of calculation are used within a given university.

External Examiners are said to moderate all results, but in practice this is not enough to achieve consistency across a university or across the sector.

While there can be comparability in the sense of understanding that the student is in the top 10% of the cohort, there is not comparability in saying that a mark of 75% represents the same knowledge and skills across all institutions. If the QAA continues to emphasise disclosure of objectives, learning outcomes and methods of assessment, the information is there for those who wish to know more about the achievement. Diversity is important and would be strangled by standardisation and infringe academic autonomy.

#### **Differentiation or Pass/Fail**

***Does this suggest that the four-point honours degree classification system (however it is described) is a useful and enduring archetype?***

Given the percentage of students now achieving Upper Seconds and above, the use of transcripts information and similar information, will enable fair selection procedures. However, those who employ our graduates, in whatever sphere, will wish to have some measure of performance relative to other students. On that basis the sharp cut off points in the current system are difficult to justify and an approach which uses something more akin to a grade point average is likely to be fairer in the long term. However, standards of marking between different disciplines are very diverse and there will be no way of guaranteeing, despite the external examiner system, that the grade point average in University A will be directly comparable to that in University B within the same discipline area.

In short there is no simple answer to the issue and therefore putting together a portfolio of information which could include the transcript of a student's performance, grade point averages and a percentile rating perhaps aggregated somewhat in cases of a small number of graduating students in a discipline to a Faculty level would be of value.

***What are the benefits of differentiation and do they outweigh the disadvantages?***

It has to be recognised that a majority of students now get a Upper Seconds, meaning that universities make substantial efforts at assessment only to end up giving most students the same degree class. Transcripts might help, but a GPA would help to make some discrimination among the large group of people with Upper Seconds, a class which now contains a large range of attainments. Many UK universities operate a 20-point scale already for Honours marking (e.g. St Andrews University).

***Is there a case for differentiating only the absolutely excellent from everyone else who achieves a degree?***

This would not be feasible in a system which educates half the entire ability range, and it would not motivate able or even reasonably able students.

***Will initiatives such as transcripts, PDP and the EDS address some of the disadvantages of the current classification system?***

Care would need to be taken over the inclusion of transcripts, which tend to place a strong weight on the relationship between tutor and student, and are open to manipulation on both sides. In a climate of rising complaints and litigation they could present a potential risk.

#### **Additional Information**

Copies of this response are available from the Policy Officer, Dr Marc Rands (email: [mrands@royalsoced.org.uk](mailto:mrands@royalsoced.org.uk)) and from the RSE web site ([www.royalsoced.org.uk](http://www.royalsoced.org.uk)).

December 2004