

# The Royal Society of Edinburgh

## **The UK Honours Degree: Provision of Information**

The Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE) is pleased to respond to the Universities UK consultation on the provision of information in UK honours degree classification system. This response has been compiled by the General Secretary, Professor Gavin McCrone 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. It may, therefore, be sensible to wait until the new transcript provisions have embedded themselves in the examination process before seeking further modifications.

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

### **Do you agree with the need to replace the UK 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.

### **In which areas or activities would it be useful to capture additional information about student performance in the core elements of the transcript?**

Transcripts are likely to become more important in the future, as they become more widely understood within the UK and across Europe as part of the EU Bologna requirements. Whether and how the detailed information on transcripts is best summarised is likely to vary according to particular needs and situations. It is therefore appropriate to respect institutional autonomy and leave individual Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to operate whatever system of transcript is best suited in the circumstances, in the knowledge that all institutions will be introducing the European diploma supplement, with its emphasis on the transcript. There is also progress being made in the sector with Personal Development Planning and Programme Specifications (with their detail on learning outcomes), and this information, previously perhaps less well articulated, will also assist students in communicating their learning achievements to prospective employers.

### **Do you consider that moving to a three-point scale as outlined would address the concerns raised about the summative judgement and the increased importance of engaging with the wider additional information contained in the transcript?**

The adoption of the proposed three-point scale will not, by itself, address concerns about summative judgments, in terms of the existence of one over-large band in which the majority of students are grouped, and the need for greater recognition of transcripts. In addition, recognition would need to be given to the motivational impact of reducing summative assessment to a three point scale. Students may feel that their achievement would seem relatively unrecognised and unrewarded if it was mostly clustered together in the category of "Pass". What seems to be needed is additional information, perhaps by providing 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.

In this context, one alternative would be to move entirely away from a system whereby students receive a single overall summative judgment for all their work, but instead, each module they undertake should be classified as A to E (as outlined in the consultation paper) with the result that a student would leave university with their results presented as a profile.

We agree, however, that where a differentiation between pass grades and fail grades is needed, there should only be one fail grade and that by creating an unjustified feeling of "failure" for those who do not achieve an Upper Second, the present system creates an environment in which students are encouraged to appeal gradings, to consequent waste of academic time and effort.

**Do you agree that the category of 'Distinction' should be reserved for a very small number of excellent candidates?**

We should be wary of providing fixed limits. 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.

**Do you agree that the Group should consider and develop in detail a model in which each institution would use its own grading scheme, the transcript would record all grades, and the summative judgement of Distinction/Pass/Fail would be derived according to the institution's own rules?**

Universities are wholly autonomous in regard to their degree-awarding powers: indeed, such powers go to the heart of what autonomy actually means. It will not be possible, therefore, to compel universities to introduce any system. In this context, 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 Quality Assurance Agency (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.

**In principle, would you welcome information on the relative performance of students within a cohort?**

There may be enthusiasm amongst employers, and students to a lesser extent, in indicating the relative performance of students within a cohort. This would, however, involve replacing Criterion Referencing with Norm Referencing, even though the QAA Benchmarking process has already established criterion referenced standards for class demarcation at each boundary in each subject, and be at odds with the criterion referenced systems of classification operated by most UK institutions. It would also need to be recognised that performance would only be meaningful in the context of one course at one University. It will not be possible to compare a top 30% performance between different Universities. Nor will it be possible, without the use of criterion referencing at some level, to compare, a top 30% in Chemistry with a top 30% in Physics at the same University.

**Are there any additional comments/observations you would like to make?**

It is important to recognise that Scotland has a four years honours degree in which, typically, honours classes are more advanced than Ordinary or "pass" degree classes. Unlike in England, a positive choice is made by students

at Scottish universities to take their studies to a more advanced level by undertaking a further, honours year, but a three year Ordinary degree also represents a valid goal in its own right. This Scottish position, therefore, needs to be represented if the outcome is to be implemented on a UK wide basis.

***Additional Information***

In responding to this consultation the Society would like to draw attention to the following Royal Society of Edinburgh publication which is of relevance to this subject: *The UK Honours Degree Classification System* (December 2004). Copies of this response and of the above publication are available from the Policy Officer, Dr Marc Rands (email: [evidenceadvice@royalsoced.org.uk](mailto:evidenceadvice@royalsoced.org.uk)) or from the RSE web site: [www.royalsoced.org.uk](http://www.royalsoced.org.uk).

November 2005