

Understanding Grades from other Countries¹

Overview

Grading systems differ widely in philosophy and practice from one country to another, and the fair interpretation of foreign grades into national ones is a major issue, both for students returning after a study period abroad and for university staff required to assess the credentials of foreign applicants.

Credential evaluation, credit transfer and grade translation are among the most widely debated and highly sensitive issues in international education, and numerous approaches, solutions, models and formulas have been proposed over the years both in the United States and in Europe.

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Mathematical Formulas Fail to Capture the Message

Both in Europe and in the United States, there have been numerous recent attempts to put together automatic, mathematical formulas that "calculate" foreign grades in the national grading system of the user...these formulas do not produce figures that are a reliable and fair reflection of the message conveyed by the original grade. Their main shortfall is that they cannot adequately deal with certain key characteristics of grading systems:

- Grading systems are not linear and are often characterized by a strongly skewed distribution of grades actually given to students. While American...teachers would use the upper part of their grading scales (albeit in different ways), others (e.g., French and British) in practice hardly ever use the top 20% of their scale. For this reason, proposals based on linear formulas can produce devastating results.
- Many grading systems are not continuous, but divided into several "classes" or "categories" which correspond to broad levels of performance. This means that a small difference in numbers may conceal a substantial difference in meaning when a "class" limit is crossed: in the United Kingdom, a grade of 70 classified as "First Class" is very different from a 69 ("Second Class"), while the same small difference of 1 point is irrelevant between the grades of 54 and 55 (both "Lower Second Class").
- Grading differs not only between countries, but there are, as well, marked differences in grading traditions and policies depending on the type and level of the grading institution, the field of study, or even the type of grade (final examination, mid-term, paper, or average computed from various grade items).
- The distribution of grades tends to be different between certain quantitative fields (with grades distributed over the whole range) and the non-quantitative fields (where grades are more concentrated in the middle, and the upper part of the scale is seldom used).

Thus... foreign grades are not just numbers that can be calculated by applying a mathematical formula, but a message that needs first to be understood in the original system and in a second stage interpreted by users in their own system. Simple mathematical formulas with their claim to universality are nothing but a fallacious over-simplification of a reality they fail to capture.

¹ Excerpted from *Capturing the Message Conveyed by Grades: Interpreting Foreign Grades* by Guy Haug in *World Education News & Reviews*, Vol. 10, No. 2, Spring 1997.

Principles for Handling Foreign Grades

- 1. Grade interpretation is no more an exact, objective, universal science than grading itself.**

- 2. Fairness is more important than accuracy**

The general attitude towards grade interpretation should be guided by the desire to be fair to students rather than by a vain search for accuracy. In an area marked by subjectivity and diversity, the choice is usually between approximately right and accurately wrong.

- 3. Grade categories/classes convey core information**

The meaning of these labels in their own context is tainted by culture and tradition. Thus, a British "Third Class" (a pass mark, but usually given only to a relatively small number of very borderline students) is very different from a French Passable (a widely-used label that normally applies to the vast majority of pass grades). However tempting it may be, equating passable with "Third Class" because they both correspond to the lowest label of "pass grades" would fail to take into account their real meaning.

- 4. Average grades mean more than individual grades, and should be computed in the original system before they are converted into another system.**

This simple mathematical reality seems confusing to many professionals in international circles...the vain search for a model without this bewildering characteristic brings about deceiving but reassuring proposals based on the simple but wrong assumption of linearity.

- 5. Reliable conversion scales are transitive**

The ultimate test of the reliability of equivalence charts is when they are transitive. Transitivity means that the following two exercises produce the same converted grade: (1) a grade from country A is converted into a grade for country B and the grade obtained for country B is converted into a grade for country C; and (2) the same grade from country A is converted directly into a grade for country C.

- 6. Grade interpretation should be done by users**

The final interpretation of grades from abroad should be left to the institution that uses them as input for decision making (e.g., to award credits or accept a foreign applicant). In the absence of a universal model for grade interpretation -- even for grades from a particular foreign country -- this is the only way in which the autonomy of each institution can be guaranteed.