

## **Grade Point Average-Round 2**

*A paper by Natalie Kempston, Deputy President (Education)*

### **Background:**

Last year Union Council passed a paper stating **Imperial College Union** is against the introduction of GPA. Imperial College have now decided that they want to pilot the scheme, but before they do this they are holding a debate at College Senate. As one of the two student members of Senate I will be expected to put the student's

### **Discussion points:**

- Do we still hold the same point of view?
- Are there any new arguments to strengthen our case?
- If Imperial College do go ahead with GPA are there any safeguards that are necessary or that we should make staff aware of?

### **Appendix A- Union Stance on GPA**

Grade Point Average is a grading system mainly used in the USA, where a given number represents the average of a student's grades during their time at an institution and is usually weighted by the number of credits given for their enrolled course. Most American universities use a four-point system, where the maximum grade point is 4.0)

A group of Russell Group universities (Birmingham, Nottingham, LSE, Sheffield, Warwick, UCL, York and Bristol) considered alternatives to the existing degree classification system. The group determined its preferences for introducing a form of the Grade Point Average (GPA) system.<sup>1</sup>

After the group contacted other universities, the initial group expanded to the universities shown below by September 2012:

- Birmingham
- Bristol
- King's College London
- Leeds
- LSE (they are now against GPA)
- Manchester
- Nottingham
- Oxford Brookes
- Sheffield
- Southampton
- Warwick
- UCL
- York

#### **Arguments for the GPA scheme**

- In your final year a student will work harder, regardless if they are near a borderline, which provides an incentive to students to maximise their performance
- More transparent and more able to reflect different levels of attainment, so a graduate company will know straight away if you just missed out on a 2.1 or a 1<sup>st</sup>
- It is an internationally understood grading system

#### **Arguments against the GPA scheme**

- The emphasis on a student trying to improve their grade, may lead to grade inflation and more students will pick the "easier" elective modules. This takes place in the USA and because of this LSE now don't want to use the GPA system.

- The American higher education (HE) system is not the same as the British, so should we use the same grading system? If we do, we still need to convert British GPA to US GPA, since our HE system is totally different.
- The proposed GPA scheme goes up to 4.25 (not 4.0) and different GPAs correspond to different percentages for different subjects. This is more confusing than the current grading system we have.
- The GPA grading system doesn't align itself with the one for A-levels, which is letter grade and percentages.
- Graduate companies can already ask for transcripts and do at assessment centres, if they wish to know your exact grades.
- Graduate companies may start asking for more than 3.00 (equiv. to 60% - a 2.1) to get less students applying and having to pay less for their HR department.
- Students may experience more stress if they are worrying over every mark and may make the student body more competitive.
- Changing from our current grading system to GPA will require a considerable amount of work and College resources. Is it really worth the effort?

#### **Suggested Beliefs**

1. Imperial College London should keep the traditional British degree class marking system.
2. The student body opposes the introduction of a GPA marking system.
3. Switching to a GPA marking system would be a misuse of College resources.

#### **Suggested Resolves**

1. To inform the College that the student body opposes a GPA marking system.
2. To inform the Russell Group that Imperial College Union does not favour a GPA marking system.

## **Appendix B- Russell Group opinion on GPA**

### **GPA Advisory Group Meeting 5 September 2013**

## **The value of the Grade Point Average for the student learning experience and beyond – a discussion paper**

### **I. Introduction**

- 1.1 The Higher Education Academy (HEA) has been asked by David Willetts MP, Minister of State for Universities and Science, to facilitate a national debate on assessment and the potential use of a Grade Point Average (GPA) system. The Minister noted that the GPA ‘appears to offer added transparency and focus for both students and employers’. He added that he would welcome a national debate as a means of avoiding the confusion that would be caused through the introduction of multiple GPA systems.
- 1.2 The HEA adopts a neutral position on GPA and it is not intended that a recommendation will be made at this stage to the Minister or the sector. In order to inform planning for a national debate, the scoping exercise for which this paper is produced seeks to:
  - gain expert input from institutional, student and graduate recruitment perspectives on current developments and progress relating to GPA in UK universities;
  - identify issues and challenges that would be faced in the implementation of GPA nationally including implications for assessment;
  - inform HEA support for the debate surrounding GPA in and beyond the HE sector.
- 1.3 The paper provides a brief overview of GPA systems around the globe, the relationship of the GPA with the recently introduced Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR), the case for change, and issues and challenges relating to a shift from the current honours degree classification system to a GPA system. Finally, it offers prompts for discussion.

### **2. Background**

- 2.1 ‘ The relationship of the degree classification system to the curriculum and the student experience is now akin to the tail wagging the dog... The Scoping Group therefore concludes that the current system of degree classification is not sufficiently fit for purpose.’
- 2.2 So concluded the 2004 report of the *Measuring and Recording Student Achievement Scoping Group*, which had been established following calls in the 2003 Higher Education White Paper to ensure that student achievement was being effectively measured, recorded and reported.
- 2.3 Following the 2004 report, the Burgess Group considered a range of possible replacements for the honours degree classification system, include the GPA. The Burgess Group’s final report in 2007 *Beyond the Honours Degree Classification* ‘found that the main issues associated with our existing system continued to prevail in one form or another’ in alternative summative systems to the degree classification system, but also recommended that ‘the GPA should receive more detailed consideration alongside other options’ should a summative judgement remain.

### 3. GPA systems

- 3.1 Whilst frequently presented in media reports as ‘an alternative system’, GPA is in fact a catch-all title for a variety of models that produce an average grade from a series of other grades. It is not a single, homogenous ‘system’ – internationally a range of scales and ways of presenting the final grade exist. For example, Denmark uses a 13 point scale (where 13 is best) and Singapore a 5 point scale (where 1 is best). Furthermore, as the 2007 Burgess Group report noted, many UK institutions already show a grade point average, or average mark, on their degree transcripts.
- 3.2 The most commonly discussed model is that used in the North American Higher Education system. In this system a student’s performance is assessed and a grade assigned at the end of each semester from A (the highest grade) to D (the lowest passing grade) or F (a fail) for each course/module taken. The GPA is then calculated by converting the letter grade into a descending numerical scale (where A = 4.00 and D = 1.00) and calculating an average score across all courses. Progression from year to year is generally based upon maintaining a ‘good standing’ of at least 2.00, although different universities have different requirements for progression, moving from minor into major studies, and graduating. In many North American universities the four initial letter grades are qualified using a plus or minus (converting to an additional 0.3 above or below the numerical grade point). This allows for greater granularity to emerge.
- 3.3 It was on the North American model that the group of Pro-Vice-Chancellors from eight Russell Group universities based their GPA model. Their model, presented to the Universities Minister in December 2012, proposed using the letter grades A+ to F, including the use of D- to reflect the UK concept of ‘marginal fail’. A 0.25 step between grading points was adopted, except at the lower end of the scale where it was accepted that bunching would take place in order to avoid ‘a meaninglessly long scale’. This resulted in a grade point scale in which A+ was 4.25 and D- 0.50. Whilst the group wanted to avoid the development of absolute ‘conversion charts’, GPA scores would be mapped against the degree classification for a transitional period with a 2:1 classification mapped to 3.0 in the GPA.
- 3.4 A number of other UK institutions have shown interest, and some have already adopted, their own GPA models. For example:
  - Oxford Brookes University is planning to issue, for students starting in 2013-14, a HEAR containing a GPA as well as an honours degree classification. Brookes will use an 11 pointscale in order to produce its GPA, with each module graded from F up to A+ mapping to a point on a grade scale from 0.0 to 4.5 and also an overall percentage. Final GPA will include grades from the start of undergraduate study. However, degree classification will continue to be weighted to reflect the performance of students at the later stages of their learning, thus maintaining recognition of ‘exit velocity’.
  - The University of St Andrews uses a 20 point Common Reporting Scale to calculate a GPA. Whilst pieces of assessed work are frequently marked using the 20 point scale, other marking scales are acceptable with marks being converted to the Common Reporting Scale for all credit bearing modules. The GPA can either be used as a summary statistic of student achievement or it can be used as the basis for calculating the honours degree classification.

## 4.GPA and the HEAR

- 4.1 The HEAR will provide wider information contextualising any summative judgement. The introduction of a grade point average system (GPA), or any other approach, by institutions would be compatible with the HEAR, which will provide a common, sector wide framework for containing alternative recording methods.’  
*Bringing It All Together: introducing the HEAR* (Burgess Implementation Steering Group, 2012)
- 4.2 The HEAR has been developed to encompass the degree transcript and final degree classification. As such, it is capable of containing any summative judgement of a student’s academic achievement. Whilst there is no evidence that any university is currently issuing HEARs to its students with a GPA, there should be no difficulty in entering a GPA score, as well as full details of the assessments that made up the final summative judgement, in section 4 of the HEAR.
- 4.3 Questions not uncommonly are asked, particularly in the media, about whether the introduction of a GPA system would render the HEAR irrelevant. However, there is no GPA system that provides a verified record of wider student progression and experience, as provided by the HEAR. Many employers seek to take wider student progression and experience into account as part of their recruitment processes.

## 5.The case for change

- 5.1 The following reasons for exploring the GPA as an alternative to the degree classification system are commonly emphasised:
- Potential to ensure that students remain challenged and engaged throughout their course;
  - Increased granularity and transparency in degree classifications;
  - Greater international comparability of grades, in particular with those used in the USA and China;
  - Potential to reduce student appeals from those near the top of an existing classification boundary.
- 5.2 A report produced for the Burgess Implementation Steering Group (BISG) in early 2012 interviewed a non-representative sample of members of UK universities to gauge the sector’s response to the progression to a GPA then being mooted. This report noted that ‘even among institutions not looking at GPA currently, the argument for a system with greater granularity holds water’. Well over half of students graduating in 2010 received either a First or a 2.i, and it could be argued that there is a difference in achievement between those who are graded at 68% and those at 62%. It is argued that there is considerable merit in using a system that would give an opportunity to distinguish in a more fine-grained way than within each degree classification.
- 5.3 Related to the ability to distinguish within degree classifications is the issue of the ‘cliff edge’ between degree classifications – particularly between a 2.i and a 2.ii, a boundary which is held to be significant by students and employers. The 2012 BISG report noted that institutions actively considering using GPA highlighted an increase in student appeals and a sense that introducing a GPA would significantly reduce these, providing longer term savings in staff time and, presumably, student stress. There must be some doubt, however, as to how long such a saving would last if employers were to set GPA cut-off

- points as they do with the honours degree classification and if students appeal against results in the GPA.
- 5.4 And with rising appeals as students push for a 2.i to meet minimum employer requirements, some argue, comes grade inflation. Whilst the grade inflation debate has been on-going for at least a century in North America and continues to be debated in that GPA context, it may be possible to design assessment and grading models that are less susceptible to such inflationary pressures.
  - 5.5 By virtue of the fact that each piece of assessed work contributes to a GPA, advocates argue that students will remain challenged and engaged throughout their course. Whilst there appears to be logic to this argument, experience from North America suggests that some students may choose courses or tutors that are considered 'easier' rather than pursue a more challenging education. However, there would seem to be greater transparency for the student, and to some extent for employers, in knowing that every piece of assessed work contributes to the GPA.
  - 5.6 In a world in which both higher education and employment are increasingly globalised, there is considerable appeal to the idea that a GPA provides a more transferable degree with greater comparability with overseas systems. It would certainly seem evident that overseas employers, in particular those in the USA and China, would be more familiar with a GPA than with the older honours degree classification grade used almost exclusively in the UK and some Commonwealth countries.

## **6. Issues and challenges**

- 6.1 As with radical reform of any long-established system, a number of issues and challenges must be addressed. It has been argued that, with the recent introduction of the HEAR, it may be beneficial to allow that to bed down before introducing another radical change to the recording of student achievement. Concern has been raised that introducing a GPA system may lead to confusion amongst students and employers. Whilst, this argument does not fit with the consultation with students and employers undertaken by the University of Nottingham, it was advanced by the NUS representative at a recent Westminster Higher Education Forum Keynote Seminar who noted that it is too early to expect that the nature and value of the HEAR has been fully realised by students or employers.
- 6.2 The development and implementation of the HEAR took a very inclusive, sector-wide approach – one reason why its roll-out across the sector took longer than initially expected. It was tested systematically by institutions and a considerable amount of work was carried out with key stakeholders, in particular students and employers, during the trial period. Employers, students and higher education providers have all emphasised the need for a broad, sector-wide, move to GPA to ensure comparisons between graduates can still be made. This presents a significant challenge to the implementation of a GPA in the UK and also tends towards the use of a single 'UK GPA model'.
- 6.3 The BISG report also drew on experience from North America that suggested that anticipated savings in relation to student appeals might not last long if employers set GPA thresholds in the way that they do currently with the honours degree classification. A target of around 3.0, 3.1 or 3.2 might simply replace the current 2.i target. And if, as some have argued, a change to a GPA system would be confusing for students, it is not unreasonable to assume that they would catch on rapidly to any new employer-set target.
- 6.4 Given the wide range of GPA systems in use in North America alone, there has to be some doubt about whether the argument around international comparability really holds water.

This doubt is supported by research carried out in Singapore that suggested that differences in numeric grades mapped to pass and fail render superficial comparisons invalid. The argument around international comparability tends to assume that there is widespread confusion amongst international employers regarding the UK honours degree classification system that puts UK students at a disadvantage in the global jobs market.

1. Soh, Cheng Kay (2011) 'Grade Point Average: what's wrong and what's the alternative?' Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, 33 (1) pp. 27-36.

## 7. GPA and assessment

- 7.1 One difficulty in terms of the comparability of any summative judgement of a student's academic achievement is that there is no single grading scale used across the UK. Whilst many institutions mark using a percentage scale and translate this into a final degree classification, some institutions use other institution-wide marking schemes. For example, Middlesex University has used a non-linear 20 point scale since the mid-1990s. And in a move unrelated to the GPA, the University of Wolverhampton is moving from a letter grade marking system to a percentage based system with 'performance descriptors' mapping to each 10 percentage point band. This change was made in response to student demand for improved, more transparent assessment criteria.
- 7.2 It is essential that the full implications of GPA for assessment are explored. This will include consideration of its impact on both formative and summative assessment task design, and on the associated marking and grading criteria.

## 8. Prompts for discussion

- How robust is the case for change to the honours degree classification system?
- Does the GPA represent the best solution to the issues identified with the honours degree classification system?
- What issues and challenges are involved in introducing GPA? How best might these be overcome?
- What might the scope and process be for sector-wide discussion of GPA?

## GPA scale for Pilot

Grade	Standard	Grade Point	UK current descriptor
<b>A+</b>	Excellent	4.25	Top 1 <sup>st</sup>
<b>A</b>	Excellent	4.00	Good 1 <sup>st</sup>
<b>A-</b>	Excellent	3.75	Low 1 <sup>st</sup>
<b>B+</b>	Good	3.50	High 2-1
<b>B</b>	Good	3.25	Mid 2-1
<b>B-</b>	Good/Satisfactory	3.00	Low 2-1
<b>C+</b>	Satisfactory	2.75	High 2-2
<b>C</b>	Satisfactory	2.50	Mid 2-2
<b>C-</b>	Satisfactory	2.25	Low 2-2

<b>D+</b>	Adequate	2.00	3 <sup>rd</sup>
<b>D</b>	Pass	1.00	Low 3 <sup>rd</sup> or pass
<b>D-</b>	Marginal Fail	0.50	Marginal Fail
<b>F</b>	Fail	0.00	Fail