



**What does a degree result mean?
Charting UCL's journey from Honours Degree
Classification to GPA**

History

Honours Degree Classification created at Oxford in the early 19th century – when very few students, all from similar backgrounds and levels of previous education, achieved Honours

- Implied a level of mastery over a standard body of knowledge
- Was intended to give comparability between degrees

History

- The Honours Degree Classification system categorises Honours Degrees as
 - First
 - Upper Second (2.1)
 - Lower Second (2.2)
 - Third Class
 - Pass
 - Fail
- Dominant throughout English Higher Education

Its fitness for purpose as a system has been challenged repeatedly in the last 20 years, but the system has endured

What has changed?

- Expansion (massification) of Higher Education
- Increased diversity of the HE sector and of the range of subjects studied
- Modularisation
- Use of course-work in assessment
- Growing emphasis on non-assessed learning (e.g. Personal Development Plans; the Higher Education Achievement Record – HEAR)

The focus on one end point goes against the ethos of life-long learning expected by governments, employers and students themselves

Transparency

- Universities want ever greater precision in information about the educational achievement of pupils at secondary level, hence, e.g., introduction of the A* to A Levels in 2010
- However, students tend to be ‘bunched’ into just two levels (First and 2.1)

**Degree Classification is therefore a blunt and imprecise ‘headline’
measure of achievement at undergraduate level**

Employers

- Transcripts are now available, detailing all marks for all courses
- The HEAR will give details of any important elements of learning, such as employability skills, extra-curricular activities such as volunteering, sports, music
- However, employers still rely essentially on degree classification (and university attended) when assessing candidates

An increased prevalence of Firsts and especially 2.1s (now c. 50% of each cohort sector-wide in recent years) leads to concerns about standards and the usefulness of degree classification as a means of distinguishing between candidates for either employment or for study

Motivation

- Still relatively challenging to achieve a First
- However, students can assume they will receive a 2.1 and so tend to under-achieve (little motivation to strive for distinction within the 2.1 scale)

Lack of comparability

- The number of Firsts, 2.1s, etc. varies widely between universities and even in disciplines within universities
- A 2.1 in one subject may not be comparable to a 2.1 in another – yet they are often used as a common currency, especially by employers
- An assumption that Degree Classifications are consistent
- Yet an increasing consensus that the diversity of today's HE sector makes such consistency impossible

Waste of talent

- Many employers now automatically reject any application without an achieved or forecast 2.1 degree (44% according to a recent survey)
- This diminishes the achievements of students receiving 2.2s or Thirds – who have nonetheless achieved all the standards needed to achieve an Honours Degree

So employers often reject at the first hurdle students who may have valuable skills

Why has the Honours Degree classification system lasted so long?

Its longevity is due to **familiarity**

It is an 'established currency' that students, employers, parents and the general public understand – within the countries where it is used (though not globally)

It gives a simple result

- Employers and other stake-holders like the single summative measure as a simple and quick way to evaluate applicants
- Options such as the use of transcripts, etc. would be more time-consuming and resource-intensive, as well as requiring a greater level of detailed knowledge
- **Consistency** and **comparability** over time: if a new system is to be introduced, fear that there will be decades of two systems co-existing until those who graduated under the old system left the employment market

The global view

- UK HE remains enormously attractive to students, employers, scholarship funding bodies, etc.
- Little evidence that anyone outside HE desires a change
- The majority of employers were resistant to change in the system (55% in a survey in 2006)

So why change?

Why bother?

Questions for universities

Fundamental questions need to be asked by universities:

- Why do we assess students?
- Who are we assessing for?
- What is the link between assessment and teaching and learning?

The Burgess Reports

The Burgess Reports (2004 and 2007) concluded that the Degree Classification system was no longer fit for purpose

- It argued strongly for the creation of the HEAR, whilst recognising the enduring support for a single summative measure
- Its recommendation was to introduce the HEAR as a first step
- 2008-09: significant concerns raised at the House of Commons Select Committee on Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills
- 2009: the National Union of Students (NUS) voted for a 'radical re-haul' of Degree Classification
- A steady stream of reports and papers released around the topic, most recently by the Higher Education Policy Institute (2010)

Who decides on change?

- Who decides on change?
- Who will be a first mover?
- A group of 7 universities decided last year to work together on exploring a UK form of the GPA
- Now joined by 1 further university; many others wishing to join the group

Why?

- In the UK, students are making much greater financial contributions to undergraduate education
- The final Degree Classification is one of the most tangible and durable outputs of undergraduate education, remaining on CVs and job applications for decades
- However, it is a ‘blunt instrument’, providing insufficiently detailed information
- Inadequate in the context of much higher tuition fees and more demanding student expectations

Employers

Discussions with employers organisations now reveal an appetite for change, as long as this is clearly articulated and explained

Transformative potential

**Universities can transform themselves
through changing the way in which they examine**

Pedagogic transformation is our major reason for our decision:

- Will need whole-institution involvement
- Will involve a re-examining of all of our practices, processes and pre-suppositions regarding teaching, learning and assessment
- Will oblige us to scrutinise every element of our assessment, including our approaches to secondary qualifications and professional accreditation as well as academic degrees

Issues for consideration

- Almost all comparable HE systems use some form of summative assessment
- Short scales provide easily definable assessments – though they lack motivating power
- Long scales can lead to over-emphasis on grades at the cost of learning – as well as providing spurious levels of precision
- Grade inflation will always remain a challenge
- The entire English system should move to the new system, in order to ensure some kind of comparability
- Is the upheaval worth the bother?

My response?

Yes!

- Universities need to re-define themselves not only as teaching and researching institutions but as assessing organisations
- The debates around change will, whatever the pain, whatever the losses, whatever the turbulence, bring greater clarity on what universities are for

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