**Summarising Student Attainment through a Grade Point Average**

**Introduction**

A group of Pro-Vice-Chancellors from a number of Russell Group universities - Birmingham, LSE, Nottingham, Sheffield, UCL, Warwick, and York – began work in 2011 on a proposal for a Grade Point Average (GPA) model that could be introduced into UK higher education to replace the current degree classification system. The aim of this model is to provide a means of summarising attainment at undergraduate level that is:

* More transparent and better able to reflect different levels of attainment (of particular benefit to graduate recruiters), while still maintaining current threshold standards,
* Globally understood, and

* Reflective of and compatible with the culture and norms of marking in UK higher education.

It is also envisaged that a move to GPA can provide the opportunity to overhaul assessment practices more generally and making them supportive of widespread improvements in teaching and learning.

**The proposed model**

The following principles were adopted by the working group in selecting a GPA model:

* The US approach of grading at unit/sub-unit level using letter grades A+ to F would be introduced. The details of marking practice would be up to each institution and its external examiners, as is the case now. The shorter GPA scale should enhance comparability between disciplines currently characterised by quite divergent disciplinary marking traditions.
* UK graduates competing internationally for jobs, postgraduate study, or funding would not be disadvantaged. Although, in principle, the group wanted to avoid "conversion charts", it was agreed to define the bottom of 2:1 as equivalent to 3.00. This point can serve as a key "hinge" between degree classifications and GPA. However, what GPA allows which degree classifications do not is an understanding that many graduates currently in the 2:1 range will do considerably better than 3.00, whilst many people currently in the 2:2 range will have performed only marginally more poorly than their 2:1 peers.
* Spreading the GPA scale differently across the letter grades led to the conclusion that the 0.33 (or 0.3/0.4) steps universally used between each grade point in the US were not appropriate. The group proposed a 0.25 step between each grading point except at the lower end, where some bunching is inevitable to avoid a meaninglessly long scale.
* One initial attraction of GPA for the group was its ability to recognise very high achievement. With this in mind, the group decided to adopt the practice of a minority of US institutions and recognise A+ with more points than A. Hong Kong universities have also taken this step.
* The UK concept of “marginal fail” was added to the bottom of the marking scale and called D-. Many US universities do not anyway award credit for D- grades.

The model that was proposed by the group in early 2012 as a result of these deliberations is as follows:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Grade | Standard | Grade Point | UK current descriptor |
| **A+** | Excellent | 4.25 | Top 1st |
| **A** | Excellent | 4.00 | Good 1st |
| **A-** | Excellent | 3.75 | Low 1st |
| **B+** | Good | 3.50 | High 2-1 |
| **B** | Good | 3.25 | Mid 2-1 |
| **B-** | Good/Satisfactory | 3.00 | Low 2-1 |
| **C+** | Satisfactory | 2.75 | High 2-2 |
| **C** | Satisfactory | 2.50 | Mid 2-2 |
| **C-** | Satisfactory | 2.25 | Low 2-2 |
| **D+** | Adequate | 2.00 | 3rd |
| **D** | Pass | 1.00 | Low 3rd or pass |
| **D-** | Marginal Fail | 0.50 | Marginal Fail |
| **F** | Fail | 0.00 | Fail |

*Proposed UK GPA scale*

Statistical analysis undertaken by Nottingham and Birmingham of the application of the National Model to marks obtained by graduating students suggested that, for the most part, the GPA scores students would have gained reflected their actual degree class according to the above translation.

**Current Progress**

Members of the group have been holding discussions within their own institutions regarding a move to the agreed model. UCL had already, in later 2011, made public its intention, subject to deliberations within the College, to adopt a GPA system. The University of Nottingham agreed, in principle, the adoption of the above GPA model at the meeting of its Senate in June 2012; subject to a wider move to GPA within its mission group and future ratification by Senate. In the same month, the senates of both Birmingham and Sheffield approved further discussions and work on the adoption of GPA. Other universities involved in the working group have been continuing their internal deliberations. In addition, the universities of Bristol, Leeds, Manchester and Southampton, along with Kings College London and Oxford Brookes University, have expressed a strong interest in the work of the group.

In order to inform the discussion at Nottingham, consultation was undertaken with students and employers, both in the UK and in China and Malaysia through its campuses in those countries. Students are generally accepting of the arguments for change, though are keen for a number of UK universities to make the move together, rather than to see Nottingham switching to a GPA system by itself. They would also wish to see GPA scores being mapped against traditional degree classes for a transitional period (an implementation principle accepted by Nottingham’s Senate). Employers equally emphasise the importance of a broad move by universities to GPA in order to allow for comparisons between graduates; with this proviso, employers generally feel that their recruitment activities would not be significantly compromised by a shift to GPA.