

March 1, 2010

The 8th Symposium: Standards Based Assessment and Honours Classification

Keynote Speech

The UK Debate over Honours Classification: Thoughts on the Burgess Group Report 3 years on

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Professor Michael Worton, UCL Vice-Provost

Why do we examine our students? For whom?

For them?

For employers?

For our own academic purposes?

Assessment must be fit for purpose, but ...
...what pedagogical or employment or other purpose does classification serve?

It is (or should be):

- an important part of the learning experience
- valued by students, teachers and employers
- determined and managed by individual universities, with national standards maintained through the External Examiner system (in the UK)

Context

The UK Honours degree is a robust and highly-valued qualification;
the core product of the UK higher education system

Is it still fit for purpose? Why do we classify the Honours degree results?

- 2004** First Burgess Report from the Measuring and Recording Student Achievement **Scoping** Group
- 2005** Measuring and Recording Student Achievement **Steering** Group established
- met 18 times
 - 2 written consultation exercises with HE sector and stakeholders
 - 5 consultation conferences around the UK
 - meetings and focus groups with employers and graduate recruiters
- 2007** Final Burgess Group Report:
Beyond the Honours Degree Classification (2007)

Context

Why were the Groups set up and necessary?

NOT because of concerns about 'grade inflation', but because of:

- Ongoing changes to teaching, learning and, indeed, assessment practices
- An increasing focus on skills acquisition and development
- The 'whole person' / global citizen agenda
- Increasing emphasis on widening participation
- More international students, from different cultural / methodological backgrounds
- More research projects included in undergraduate education
- The transformation of the higher education experience
- Changing student perceptions of what a 'worthwhile' degree is
- Changes to the labour market
- Changes in national and international higher education policy
- The impact of new and emerging technologies

Can the diverse and complex achievements of honours graduates be appropriately summarised and represented by a single judgement or number, drawn from a small classificatory scale?

A summative assessment system

- Involves a single, overall judgement being made about a student's performance
- Gives the appearance of 'signing-off' and therefore defining a person's education with a simple numerical indicator
- Is thus at odds with lifelong learning as an ongoing process
- Encourages both students and employers to focus on one final outcome and perceived 'end point'
- Distracts and detracts from information which conveys a fuller understanding of the complex web of knowledge and skills acquired by the student

The UK system

All UK higher education institutions use the same classification nomenclature, which is almost universally applied to honours degrees

Maximum of six points on the scale:

- First
- Upper Second (2: 1)
- Lower Second (2: 2)
- Third class
- Pass (does not carry honours)
- Fail

OR

Arguably, only 2 categories:

- First / Upper Second Class (2: 1)
- 'The Rest'

This system has been in existence for 200 years.

It was first introduced in Oxford at the beginning of the 19th century, when only a small minority of students were studying for honours.

The UK system

The system has proved itself over time.

However, the HE sector has been radically expanded and transformed:

- mass HE has replaced HE for a tiny elite
- new technologies are changing the ways in which we teach and students learn
- relationships between HE and business / industry are much closer
- employability is at the top of student agendas
- internationalisation of the student experience and transnational education have revolutionised curricula and the management of universities and degree programmes

The UK system

- Influenced Australia, Hong Kong, Ireland, Malta and New Zealand historically to use the honours system of classification
- Most other countries seem to accept the need for simple and straightforward summative information

HOWEVER

- The Burgess Group could not find a suitable alternative to the honours classification

It concluded that the summative judgement itself is the problem.

The culture of ‘the essential 2: 1’

- Nearly 60% of students in all subjects get a First or an Upper Second (2: 1)
- Students believe that a 2: 1 or above is essential if they are to gain a high level job
- A 2: 1 or above is normally required to progress to further study (a Masters)
- The focus on the top two degree classes wrongly suggests that a Lower Second (2: 2) or a Third Class degree is not an achievement
- Most employers sift initially on the basis of the degree classification – missing out on the skills and experience of potential recruits without a First or 2: 2

**A different assessment system could assist such employers
to reconsider their recruitment practices**

Burgess Group proposals

- Assessment should be radically reformed
- The summative judgement should be replaced with a wider, more detailed range of information than currently given
- This will capture more fully the strengths and weaknesses of a student's performance
- It will build on what is contained in the academic transcript and the European Diploma Supplement

The HEAR (Higher Education Achievement Record)

- Single document, based on, and developed from, the current academic transcript and incorporating the European Diploma Supplement
- Core content common to all institutions, with universities free to add additional information
- Contains information which the institution is prepared to verify
- Complemented by a student-generated record of skills and achievements gained through non-formal learning
- In the short / medium term, the HEAR will continue to contain an overall summative judgement, verified by the institution. During this period, this will undoubtedly remain the existing honours degree classification.
- It is hoped that the need for an overall summative judgement will eventually wither away, but the honours degree classification could possibly be replaced with another form of summative judgement.

The HEAR

Four elements will be merged as seamlessly as possible into the HEAR:

1. The Diploma Supplement
2. Current transcript information
3. Sector-agreed information

(This will form the new core of the HEAR)

4. Any additional information that institutions wish to add

The HEAR

- A pilot group of 18 institutions (including UCL) taking forward the development of the HEAR
- Currently in the second phase
- All incoming undergraduate students from 2011 will be issued with the HEAR when they leave or graduate
- Two main additional elements included in the HEAR over and above the current European Diploma Supplement:
 - more detailed information about modules and their assessment
 - information on student skills and achievements gained by being a member of the university rather than via the student's degree programme.

The HEAR

Examples of information about non-degree activity which could be included (UCL examples):

- Any sabbatical officer or other UCL Union representative roles;
- Mentoring and other volunteering activity organised through UCL;
- Study abroad;
- Foreign language learning through the UCL Language Centre;
- Significant participation in UCL Union Clubs and Societies

Issues

Decision making

A tension between institutional autonomy and the need for some national consensus on what must or must not be included

Uniformity

If each institution determines its own HEAR, how is clarity and consistency assured across the UK HE sector?

There is a need to avoid a ranking of which institution has the best HEAR

Transferability

Will institutions be prepared to verify the HEAR from another organisation?

Usefulness

Will the HEARs be too detailed and/or too diverse for employers?

Criteria for a new assessment system

- **Acceptability:** should be acceptable to all stakeholders
- **Administrative efficiency:** the process should be as efficient as possible and not increase the administrative burden on staff
- **Equity / Fairness:** similar levels of performance should be recorded in a similar way
- **Information:** should provide appropriate information to meet a range of different needs
- **Motivation:** should encourage learners to achieve their full potential
- **Reliability / Consistency:** should produce reliable and consistent results regardless of time, subject or institution
- **Simplicity:** should be as simple as possible for stakeholders, particularly external stakeholders, to understand;
- **Transparency:** the record of how a learner's achievement is arrived at should be clear and transparent to all stakeholders
- **Validity:** should be robust and credible in academic terms
- **Verification:** should be verifiable

Challenges

- The information contained in the HEAR must not lend itself to generating informal or ad hoc summative judgements
- This issue point must be fully addressed before the summative judgement is removed
- No single system will fully meet all the criteria. Indeed, they are not all compatible with each other
- Different stakeholders may give different criteria different weightings
- There are tensions between the different criteria (e.g. between information needs and administrative efficiency)

Challenges: Employers

- The layout of the HEAR will be especially important to employers who will need to compare HEARs from different institutions
- Employers' main demand is simplicity
- The need for a concise, clear and simple HEAR could be in tension with the desire to include as much relevant information as possible

A balance will have to be achieved

Challenges: Students

- The Burgess Group focused especially on the views and needs of the students whose performance and achievement is being assessed and described
- Students require a system that they can understand and that is seen to be fair
- The need for student achievement to be accurately and fairly recognised, regardless of the subject, institution, subject culture or assessment process makes **transparency**, **validity** and **fairness** key criteria.

Conclusions

- The honours degree classification system does not recognise the full range of different types of achievement required of an honours graduate in the 21st century
- It 'wastes' a vast amount of valuable information generated by existing assessment processes
- It may also impede pedagogic developments that need achievement to be expressed in different ways than a single, summative number
- The summative judgement approach encourages a focus on thresholds, rather than on the complex information that recognises all the skills and knowledge that the student has acquired
- It should therefore be replaced with a more sophisticated approach that better represents the outcomes of student learning – and encourages personal development in the context of lifelong learning
- By its nature, an academic transcript shows the steps that build an award and thus potentially places the final award within the context of a bigger picture of the student's learning

Conclusions

A new approach (rather than a mere system) is needed which will:

- capture a blend of knowledge, skills and experience acquired through a wide range of HE activities and experiences;
- measure, record and provide students with a much broader picture of their achievements;
- ensure that employers have better information about the distinguishing qualities of different graduates;
- promote a culture of lifelong learning by appearing to be less of an abrupt 'end point'
- be practical to implement, useful – and used!

Conclusions

Replacing the current honours degree classification system will involve a major upheaval for the sector and other stakeholders

A developmental approach must therefore be taken to replacing the honours classification

It is vital for our students, for employers and for universities themselves that we find and use a new way of both measuring and recognising the achievements of our students

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