

GRADING SYSTEMS IN THE NETHERLANDS, THE UNITED STATES AND THE UNITED KINGDOM

SUGGESTIONS FOR GRADE CONVERSION

Grading scales in different education systems are often misinterpreted and grading practises in other countries are easily misunderstood. The world of international student mobility is full of examples of students who applied for admission to a university in another country and who were refused on the grounds that their grades were not good enough, even if they had high grades by the standards in their own system. In most cases it is simply lack of information that causes the problem. Experience shows that it helps enormously when institutions provide degree and diploma supplements, explaining the grading scale used. Ideally, these supplements should include the percentages in which grades are awarded at the institution so that the grades of the student concerned may be seen in the perspective of high and low grades.

In this article some of the main differences between the Dutch grading system, which is based on a numeric scale of 1 to 10, and the letter grades used in the United States and the United Kingdom are identified. The article concludes with a grade conversion table for these three countries.

The grading scale in the Netherlands

In the Netherlands, the traditional grading scale is from 1 to 10, where 1 is the lowest and 10 the highest grade. The pass mark for a single subject is 6, but for school leaving examinations, where 6 or more subjects are examined, one 5 or one 4 may be condoned if compensated for by high grades in other subjects. Grades 1 to 3 are very rarely given, and the same is true for grades 9 and 10. The most common grades in both secondary and higher education are 6 and 7.

Grading in secondary and higher education differs to the extent that high grades are slightly less frequent in secondary education than in higher education. Based on data from 2006 regarding secondary school examinations, the percentages of grades were as follows:

| | |
|------|--------|
| 10 = | 0.50% |
| 9 = | 2.70% |
| 8 = | 14.00% |
| 7 = | 40.00% |
| 6 = | 35.00% |
| 5 = | 6.80% |
| 4 = | 0.08% |
| 3 = | 0.03% |
| 2 = | - |
| 1 = | - |

Grading culture

Grading practise in the Netherlands differs from that in the US and the UK inasmuch as the really high grades (10 and 9) are rarely awarded, regardless of the achievements of a given group of students. It is part of the grading culture in the Netherlands, dating back to the late 19th century when the scale from 10 to 1 was officially introduced. At the time, it was decided that a 10 should only be awarded in the case of absolute perfection. But as it was felt to be almost blasphemous for mere mortals to be the judge of absolute perfection, a 10 was hardly ever awarded. Instead, the 9 was considered to be a slightly less impossible goal to reach. With the advent of multiple choice testing and the yes/no type of questions, 10s and 9s came within reach of ambitious students. To this day, however, these grades are still very rarely given in oral examinations or open question testing, such as essays, presentations, project reports or dissertations.

This tradition is different from the one in the US, where high grades are awarded to reward and encourage rather than to single out absolute perfection. Statistics show that educators in the New World have always been more generous in the award of a grade A than those in Europe. The danger in this is that it may lead to grade inflation, which, in fact, has developed into a trend in American higher education over the past 30 years. Grade inflation may well be linked to a more competitive attitude in American higher education, where it is far more common for students to compete for scholarships and where admission to the best universities depends on having the best grades. By contrast, university admission in the Netherlands, as in most Continental European countries, was not based on high grades so much as on having the relevant school leaving certificate. The type of secondary school, and the type of examination subjects were considered to be more important than the grades obtained. In other words, selection of the best students was seen to be the responsibility of secondary education, which was divided into different academic streams. Of these, the pre-university stream has always been very selective indeed. Besides, universities in the Netherlands are considered to represent the same level of teaching and research, and, by and large, they set the same entry requirements. This is clearly different from both the US and the UK, where high grades will increase the student's chances of being admitted to the more selective universities.

The wrong approach

In grade conversion, differences such as these must be taken into account. If grading scales are simply placed side by side, and, starting from the top, each grade in one scale is equated to the grade in the same position in the other scale, serious mismatches would be the result. In the example of the Dutch numeric scale and the American and British letter scales, it would mean that a 10 is equated to an A, a 9 to a B, an 8 to a C and so on. It may seem unlikely that anyone should adopt this kind of approach, but conversions like these are known to have happened. There are examples of foreign universities requiring a 10 in all seven examination subjects of the Dutch VWO diploma, which is the diploma of the pre-university stream in secondary education. Apparently, the reasoning in these cases is that if 10 is the top grade, a top student will have to show a 10 in each subject. However, statistically, the chance of attaining a 10 in all seven subjects is close to nil.

Frequency distribution

Clearly, this is not a realistic approach. Instead, grade conversion should be based on the frequency distribution of grades if they are to be compared fairly. Only when the percentages are known in which grades are awarded can grades from different systems be matched. For example, in Dutch higher education the grade 8 is awarded in the top 15 to 25% of cases, depending on the field of study. Therefore, in order to convert this into the grading system of another country one needs to know which grade, or grades, are given in the top 15 to 25% of cases in that system. The problem is that statistics are grouped differently in different countries so that it may be difficult to match them accurately. Sometimes the percentages for each grade are available (e.g. for a 7, or an 8), sometimes they are given for the band between 2 grades (e.g. from 7-8, or 6.5-7.5).

For the purposes of this article the grading statistics from ten universities in the Netherlands and a number of universities in the US and the UK were collected. Most of these data are available on the internet. We then checked these with the academic transcripts in a sample of 200 files from Dutch, American and British students who applied for university admission or for a general assessment of their qualifications.

Patterns

When analyzing the frequency distribution of passes in the Dutch, American and British grading systems, the pattern that emerges is that the two most common grades in the Dutch system are at the lower end of the scale (6 and 7), while the two most common grades in the American and British systems are to be found at the higher end (A and B). The 6 and the 7 are awarded in 33% and 37% of cases respectively. In the American system, the occurrence of A and B in undergraduate studies is about 37% and 41% respectively, and even higher at postgraduate level.

For the United Kingdom, only the statistics for undergraduate study are included in the table. These are based on the distribution of classes that are awarded to honours bachelor's degrees from British universities. Classes are divided into first class, upper second class, lower second class and third class, and these indicate a student's overall performance during the whole programme. The class is determined on the basis of the letter grades that were given for individual tests during the programme. A first class degree, for instance, is awarded when the student consistently scored As (usually with some Bs allowed) throughout the entire programme. In the United Kingdom, first and upper second class degrees comprise some 60% of cases, against 40% for the lower second and third class degrees.

Conversion table

The following table is based on the data available to Nuffic in 2006 and 2009. In 2006, an article in Dutch was published on Nuffic's website, with the title *Cijfers Ontcijferd* (www.nuffic.nl/nederlandse-organisaties/informatie/publicaties). The present article is a summary and update in English of that article. The table reflects the opinion of Nuffic.

| NL | USA | UK | |
|-----|------|------|-----------|
| 10 | A+ | A+ | first |
| 9.5 | A+ | A+ | first |
| 9 | A+ | A+ | first |
| 8.5 | A+ | A | first |
| 8 | A | A/A- | first |
| 7.5 | A/A- | B+ | upper 2nd |
| 7 | B+ | B | upper 2nd |
| 6.5 | B | C+ | lower 2nd |
| 6 | B-/C | C/D | lower 2nd |
| 5.5 | D | D | third |
| 5 | F | F | |
| 4 | F | F | |
| 3 | F | F | |
| 2 | F | F | |
| 1 | F | F | |

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