

Appendix 3 – UW Assessment Policy

Guidance on using numeric marks for undergraduate work

The generic undergraduate grade descriptors apply to all summatively assessed work within the University of Worcester Undergraduate Regulatory Framework. They are set out according to the grade system used at University of Worcester, and mapped on to the conventional categories or sub-divisions of the honours degree in UK Higher Education. It should be noted that the grade system is represented by letters rather than numbers and that no numbers are mentioned in the grade descriptors or used in the system. This is intentional and was adopted for two reasons.

1. The introduction to the grade descriptors clearly set out that the distinctions between grade bands in the descriptors are qualitative not quantitative. The theoretical frameworks underpinning them rest on students moving through a number of conceptual levels, in their approach to learning and understanding of the nature of knowledge, to achieve improved grades. In fact the grade system is built on these theories in order to explicitly reward higher order thinking about learning and knowledge. It is therefore not possible to get a C grade by doing a larger quantity of D band work, nor do two pieces of work at C band add up to give a result at a higher band. Therefore it would carry erroneous implications to use quantitative numeric labels [which imply psychometric qualities such as the ability to add them up or that the gap between each number is equal] to reflect qualitative data [where grades cannot just be summed and the distinction between a D- and an E might be considered greater than the distinction between a D and a D-].
2. The undergraduate grade descriptors are also built on the acknowledgement that grading student work is not an exact science. It is a matter for professional academic judgment. 'The complex nature of work at this academic level cannot be reduced to a clear-cut series of mutually exclusive categories and grade descriptors cannot be interpreted as such. The category descriptions indicate the general characteristics of different types of work which lead to their assignment to particular categories.' [GUGD, p. 2] There is a reasonable argument, therefore, that it is not realistic to indicate that such fine grained decisions as those between awarding 67 or 68 percent are objectively defensible but that broad descriptive bands of B+, B and B- are as specific as it is appropriate to operate.

The implication of these points is that, in most circumstances it is inappropriate to use numerical grading on undergraduate work. The grade descriptors encourage staff to assess learning and development processes as well as the more traditional focus on outputs and artifacts. Colleagues may still find it appropriate and helpful as part of their assessment diet, to use assessment approaches which have traditionally used numeric grading, such as multiple question exams, multiple choice tests and computer based tests. The use of numerical grades in these cases is largely to arrive at an overall grade based on numerous small answers. Staff may also wish to allocate percentages to each individual sub-question to indicate their relative importance or value. The question then is whether the use of numerical grading can be avoided for these assessment types or, if not, how these numbers should be related to the generic undergraduate grade descriptors. Three examples may be helpful to illustrate different approaches:

1. Make a qualitative judgment on the overall work rather than the individual pieces – In Ecology a traditional exam is set with a number of individual questions. However, rather than awarding individual percentage points for each question and then adding them together, a qualitative judgment is made against the learning outcomes and criteria on the overall set of responses and an appropriate alphabetic grade awarded.
2. Structure the test to work through the grade descriptors – Biggs & Tang (2007) suggest the possibility of setting a multiple question test which builds through the levels of grade descriptors. So, for example, some data is provided and the first group of questions ask for a factual or descriptive responses [grade D], the next group of questions require some analysis and grouping of the data [grade band C], the next questions asks for synthesis and evaluation of the data [grade B] and the final question(s) ask the student to relate this evaluation to external themes and make recommendations for policy and practice [grade band A]. Again an overall decision can be taken on the grade based on how well the student performs at the different levels. A similar approach could be adopted by combining multiple choice questions to identify knowledge in grade bands C & D with more evaluative open questions which allow students to demonstrate performance at grade bands B & A.
3. Establish numerical equivalents to the alphabetic grades - It is important to note that this has to be done on a case-by-case basis and appropriate guidance to students included in the module outline as there is no assumption in the generic undergraduate grade descriptors that they represent any particular numeric or percentage figure and there is no University accepted table of percentage equivalents. For example on the FD in pre-hospital unscheduled emergency care the professional body requires student to achieve 70% on a factual examination. It is clear that this requirement for factual knowledge only equates to our broad D grade descriptor. Therefore 70% is set as equivalent to a pass for this piece of work. A similar approach is used in the new Nursing programme where practice assessment is graded by percentages and 80% is a pass. Both these examples operate on a purely pass/fail basis.

For further guidance on these matters please feel free to contact the Academic Development and Practice Unit <http://www.worcester.ac.uk/adpu/index.htm> .

The Generic Undergraduate Grade Descriptors

<http://www.worc.ac.uk/aqu/documents/GenericUndergraduateGradeDescriptors.pdf>.

The Undergraduate Regulatory Framework

<http://www.worcester.ac.uk/registryservices/documents/UndergraduateRegulatoryFramework2007entry.pdf>.

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