

REFORMING ASSESSMENT PROCEDURES THE CASE OF LETTER GRADES AT UWI'S (ST. AUGUSTINE) SOCIAL SCIENCES FACULTY¹

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This paper's use of the word 'assessment' relates to the routine academic exercise whereby student work of differing quality is awarded a different letter grade. The paper argues that the system currently in use at much of UWI, and the Social Sciences Faculty in particular, is outmoded. Given the inherent deficiencies in the present system, the paper argues for the introduction of a more quality-sensitive marking scheme similar to what is practiced in many North American colleges and universities. Four possible alternatives are discussed and the implications for the awarding of degrees of different classification outlined. Whilst University-wide proposals are not offered, it is certainly implied that much of the recommendations suggested for the Social Science Faculty do have wider applicability. A by-product of any of the suggested reforms, once implemented, is thought to be the widening of opportunities for interaction with UWI's North American counterparts, specifically the attraction of more visiting students to the Faculty's varied programmes.

¹ This paper is based on a short discussion document circulated at the February 1995 meeting of the Faculty Board of Social Sciences. That document received the support of many colleagues. In particular I am appreciative of encouragement provided by Dhanayshar Mahabir, Charles de Matas, Shelton Nicholls, Dennis Pantin and Patrick Watson. I am also very much indebted to Bill Fox who re-familiarised me with several aspects of the North American system of grading. Errol Simms' and Karl Theodore's enthusiasm and support must also be acknowledged as it provided the spur for the eventual write up. Last but not least, the comments of the two anonymous referees were particularly insightful; I am grateful for these. With respect to these comments I would like to especially acknowledge the recommendation that I should include Appendix Table 1. Naturally, none of the individuals mentioned bears any responsibility for any remaining errors.

Introduction and Background

The phrase 'assessment procedure' in this paper, refers to the normal academic routine of awarding students grades for course-work of different quality. Debate within the area of curricular reform has rarely touched upon the merits of one particular grading system as against another (research by Cross, 1993; Kane, 1994; Nespor, 1990 and Rozakis, 1988 provide some of the exceptions). At the same time, much research effort has been focused on matters dealing with course content, their contextual relevance and, increasingly, pedagogical issues. Clearly one would not wish to detract from the importance of discussion in these areas. After all, without that form of endeavour many interesting developments within curriculum research would simply not have come about.

Neglect of research within the area of performance assessment, as defined here, is all the more surprising given the sharp differences in practice one encounters across institutions world-wide. Is it that educational systems have evolved along the lines of geo-politically determined spheres of influence? And, has this 'educational infiltration' been so strong that it is accepted without much fuss by the 'host' nations? Within the context of an institution such as The University of the West Indies (UWI) one would probably answer both questions in the affirmative.

Interesting as they may be, these issues are really only of marginal value to the main purpose of this paper. However, in an effort to achieve some measure of completeness, the following few words on the extent of UWI's 'Britishness' are offered for the interested reader.

At least in the early part of its life, UWI looked to the British model of university administration. This British tradition is in evidence right across UWI's administrative hierarchy as well as the organisational structure of its various programmes. For example, at the most senior administrative level, UWI benefits from the stewardship of a Chancellor and a Vice Chancellor. Positions of Pro-Vice Chancellor, Principal and Registrar contribute to the maintenance of the so called British tradition. Inevitably, the system of performance assessment of students across the various faculties and campuses has had a distinctly British feel too. It is only fairly recently that some of the faculties have been looking to the

implementation of alternative systems. For example, the Social Sciences Faculty discussed the issue of grade reform around 1990 but no further action was taken.

Whilst, generally, the so called British model has served UWI well, in matters such as performance assessment it has, at least in a retrospective sense, clearly let it down. However, little is gained through excessive pondering over past mistakes. What is required now is to be positively proactive with respect to the need for reform. To this end, the next section outlines the scope of the paper and provides some pointers to the discussion offered in later sections.

Scope

This paper has two closely related objectives. The first can be stated quite generally. This is to raise interest in the need for a University-wide attempt at reforming the system of student assessment. The second objective is to look more closely at how assessment procedures, through the allocation of undergraduate student grades, may be usefully put through a reform process in one faculty and on one campus.² Ultimately, it is hoped that discussion of this second objective will inform opinion on the first.

The paper draws on the immediate need to address the second objective just outlined and, hence, that provides the analytical frame. In undertaking our task a set of proposals for refining the existing system is offered. The implications of the proposed changes for degree classification are also discussed. Further, the paper claims that changes, along the lines of what is proposed, are likely to have one or two positive side-effects in the medium to long term. Of these benefits, the most

² Given the resource implications, it was felt that the more ambitious task of analyzing opportunities for grade reform across all faculties, and on all campuses, would best be left for a future study. However, for the interested reader, the Appendix contains tabulated information on the current system of undergraduate student grade assignments in the faculties of Agriculture, Arts & General Studies, Education and Natural Sciences at the St. Augustine campus of the University.

visible is likely to be the greater degree of cross-fertilisation that will flow with North American colleges and universities.

The Current System

Teaching staff within the Faculty of Social Sciences currently rank student performance according to the letter grades **A**, **B+**, **B**, **C** and **F**. The equivalent numerical scale ranges between 40 (for the weakest, **C**) to 70 and above (for an **A**). Table 1 provides the full list:

Table 1

Letter Grades in Use, Their Raw Score Assignments and Equivalent Descriptive Reference Points³

A = 70+ B+ = 60-69 B = 50-59 C = 40-49 F < 40

Source: Adapted from *Regulations & Syllabuses (1995/7)*, Faculty of Social Sciences, UWI, St. Augustine, p. 27

In adopting this scale the Faculty has accepted, albeit on a course by course basis, a system similar to the British 4-point scale of awarding the equivalent of First, Upper Second and Lower Second grades, as well as the classification known as a Pass. Clearly, four passing grades do not allow staff members to fully reflect the range of abilities they encounter in their assessment exercises. For example, as shown in Table 1, scores of 69 and 60 percent both represent the letter grade of **B+**. Furthermore, note that as many as 20 percentage points may separate two pieces of work assessed as **C** and as **B** (40 and 59, respectively). Similar levels of 'uneven-handedness' occur with the other letter grades as well.

³ For the descriptive references associated with each grade, please refer to Appendix Table A.1 where a suggested generalised listing is provided.

Is Reform Necessary?

That one needs cut-offs is not an issue, but the present position is both distortionary and inefficient in terms of reflecting ability. For both these reasons the current system of performance assessment can only be described as unfair and, therefore, in need of improvement.

Quite simply, the existing system of assigning course grades is not sufficiently quality-sensitive. As an analogous example, consider how unworkable a system of measuring lengths/heights would be if we were to ignore centimeters and just used meters! Ignoring centimeters may not be a problem when one measures the height of a mountain peak but the same cannot be true when one is seeking to gauge, say, the wing-span of an humming-bird or that of a falcon.

The need for reform is not only necessary but, in the author's opinion, quite urgent. But, if reform is needed, what form should any alternative system take?

To build an improved system one should be aware of the present system's shortcomings. The most glaring shortcoming, as already mentioned, is the lack of a sufficient number of reference points against which ability can be measured. As such, any preferred alternative must be able to capture a wider level of student ability than is possible within the confines of the existing system.

Grading systems similar to the ones proposed below are currently in use across the vast majority of universities and colleges in North America. There, passing grades range between A and D, appropriately interspersed with "+"s and "-"s. So, for example, one sees C+, C and C- grades. In comparison, the UWI equivalent of a C seems very restricting, both for the student and the member of staff involved in the assessment exercise. It must be said that the North American system of grading has often been described as being too heavily goal- and test-oriented (see, for example, Barnes, 1984). Relatedly, an alleged side-effect of the grading system has been the wide reporting of the phenomena of grade inflation. This researcher's personal experience of the North American system of education only partially supports this claim. Rather than blaming the grading system for grade inflation, a more rational view might take

account of those factors influencing the socialisation process, and the process of socialisation, of the main actors. Phenomena such as grade-bargaining, rife on many a North American campus, are more likely to become part of the accepted norm in environments in which quality is judged in terms of a 'price.' This perception has nothing to do with the grading system per se.

Such issues notwithstanding, contemplating a change along the lines of what is proposed here raises several important questions. For example, assuming that the overall system of classification of degrees remains as at present, one needs to consider how any new grading system will impact on this. The current position is represented in Table 2:

Table 2

**Minimum Grade Requirements for Degree Classification
Purposes Currently in Use**

Classification	Minimum requirements
First	Either: 13 grade As or: 12 grade As with 'good supporting grades'*
Upper Second	Either: 13 grade B+s or: 12 grade B+s with 'good supporting grades'*
Lower Second	or: 13 grade Bs 12 grade B's with 'good supporting grades'*
Pass	Passes in all subjects

* 'good supporting grades' is interpreted as obtaining at least half of the remaining grades as B+s (for a First) or Bs (for an Upper Second) or Cs that average out at a minimum of 45% (for a Lower Second).

Source: Adapted from *Regulations & Syllabuses (1995/7)*, Faculty of Social Sciences, UWI, St. Augustine, p. 26.

The Beginnings of a New System

Tables 1 and 2, above, capture the current situation. So, back to our earlier question: Given the deficiencies of the present system what should any 'new' system look like and how will this affect the issue of degree classification?

There are, potentially, a large number of answers to the first part of this question. However, the four models presented in Table 3 capture the essence of what may be a feasible set of alternatives:

Table 3

An Alternative Grading Systems to What is Currently Practiced

Model I	Model II	Model III	Model IV
A = 70+	A = 70+	A = 75+	A = 80+
A- = 68-69	A- = 68-69	A- = 72-74	A- = 77-80
B+ = 63-67	B+ = 66-67	B+ = 69-71	B = 73-76
B = 58-62	B = 63-65	B = 66-68	B = 69-72
B- = 52-57	B- = 59-62	B- = 62-65	B- = 65-68
C+ = 48-51	C+ = 56-58	C+ = 58-61	C+ = 61-64
C = 44-47	C = 53-55	C = 55-57	C = 57-60
C- = 40-43	C- = 49-52	C- = 51-54	C- = 51-56
	D+ = 46-48	D+ = 48-50	D+ = 47-50
	D = 44-45	D = 44-47	D = 44-46
	D- = 40-43	D- = 40-43	D- = 40-43
F < 40	F < 40	F < 40	F < 40

Model I is most true to what is in place at present in that it retains the 40-70 percent range with existing passing grades ranging between A and C-. Model II also adheres to the 40-70 percentage range but adds a passing grade of D to the existing passing grades of A to C used by the Social Sciences Faculty. Models III and IV simply stretch the upper

percentage range to 75+ and 80+ respectively, for the grade of A and alter the remaining cut off-points accordingly.

The issue of identifying strengths or weaknesses does not really arise as each one of the outlined models serves a particular purpose. For example, given the University's possible interest in introducing a grade point average (GPA) system of assessing student work, the relevant issue might include looking for the advantages of creating something akin to the North American system. If the introduction of a GPA is intended, then Model IV might provide the Faculty with the best alternative as North American GPAs incorporate the passing grade of D into their assessments. Thus, Model IV will enable the Faculty to present a more unified structure of student assessment along with institutions across North America, and contribute to the type of cross-fertilisation briefly mentioned earlier.

If the Faculty is intent on maintaining the 40-70 passing range, then Models I and II would be of interest. The main benefit associated with these two models is that no noticeable change to the actual process of marking scripts will be necessary. A student scoring, say, 57 on a course previously and earning a B will still earn 57 under the new system. Naturally, the student's relative ranking will now change: earning a B- under Model I and only a C+ under Model II. The student might feel somewhat aggrieved as a result. On the positive side it must be remembered that the current system does not distinguish between, say, a 50 and a 59 whereas any one of the new models delivers precisely that. As such, and despite the affected marginal students' complaints, the proposal does provide a globally fairer picture of performance.

A summary of the benefits and costs associated with the adoption of any one of the outlined models is now presented. First, the benefits:

1. Adopting a sharper measure of performance hence greater fairness to students as a whole.
2. Agonising experienced by some in having to decide whether, say, a raw score of 69 should be left as B+ or pushed to make an A will become rare. All four proposed models have been designed so as to allow for a finer measurement of performance compared to the existing system.

3. The cross-fertilisation mentioned earlier will be facilitated through:
- (a) Ease of transferability of degree results for graduate work in North America.
 - (b) Being able to engage in short-term student transfers. The Faculty will thus be able to participate in any one of the up and running Junior Year Abroad (JYA) schemes currently promoted by many North American colleges and universities and enjoyed by many European universities.
 - (c) Strengthening of existing links with, amongst others, Concordia, McGill, and Pennsylvania State universities.

Through attracting non-territory students paying the full economic costs of their work at UWI, item 3(b) will help the current drive towards creating financially accountable academic units.

What costs there are will be associated with 'learning' a new system. In fact, in the case of Models I and II these costs are virtually non-existent, as the percentage range, associated with the new grades remains unchanged. In the case of Models III and IV some short-run learning costs, mainly to do with re-scaling techniques, are likely to be involved. It is also important to note that some administrative costs may not be avoidable either, no matter which Model wins favour. These will include learning costs on the part of the administrative personnel, as well as the creation and production of complementary documentation intended to accommodate the switch-over. Given the inefficiencies associated with the existing arrangements, it is the author's belief that such administrative costs are well worth the potential benefits that will flow to the Faculty and, ultimately, to the University as a whole.

Degree Classification

As already outlined, the introduction of a new system of grading implies the need for having to re-think the whole question of degree classification. Continuing the tradition of requiring a student to earn a minimum of 65% of his grades (that is, 13 out of 20) in a particular

grade/percentage band before the award of the relevant degree suggests the following as a useful proposal:

Table 4

Proposed Minimum Grade Requirements for Degree Classification Purposes

	First*	Upper Second *	Lower Second*	Pass
Model I	10 A, 3 A-	10 B, 3 B-	10 B-, 3 C+	Passes in all courses
Model II	10 A, 3 A-	10 B, 3 B-	10 C, 3 C-	Passes in all courses
Model III	1 A, 8 A- 4 B+	2 B+, 7 B 4 B-	3 B-, 7 C+ 3 C	Passes in all courses
Model IV	1 A, 1 A-, 3 B+, 4 B, 3 B-, 1 C+	1 B+, 4 B 4 B-, 4 C+	2 B, 2 B- 4 C+, 5C	Passes in all courses

* Apart from the 13 course grades listed, the student would be required to earn passes in his/her remaining 7 courses.

Of course, one could always argue about the relevance of the '65% rule,' particularly within an environment in which the introduction of the GPA has been seriously discussed. For example, it is possible to demonstrate that the 65% rule can lead to some anomalies in the assignment of degree classifications.⁴ However, and as just outlined, the attraction of the new set of proposed 'minimums' in Table 4 is that they leave the overall distribution of degree classification largely intact as compared to the current system. The price we pay for retaining some of the current

⁴ This issue is currently under research and will be outlined in a forthcoming paper.

system's characteristics, such as the continued upholding of the 65% rule, is having to accept some of the inequities hinted at above.

One argument that may be advanced for maintaining some version of the 65% rule is that it should help preserve existing standards. In fact, the proposed new 'minimums' may be seen, in the case of Models III and IV, as being more demanding at the higher levels. For example, with Model III a First Class degree requires one raw score of 75, eight raw scores of 72 to 74, and four raw scores of 69 to 71. Compared to the current requirements of 13 grade As (currently an A being equivalent to a raw score of 70), Model III presents a stiffer challenge to the ambitious student.

Needless to say, once the GPA is introduced this whole issue of how degree classification should occur will have to be re-examined almost from scratch.

Summary and Conclusions

The existing system of awarding grades is unfair as it is not sufficiently responsive to the levels of ability one encounters amongst students. For this reason alone, and given the low costs, the need for reform is self-evident. Additional benefits of introducing a reform process along the lines suggested include the very real possibility of attracting students (and hence resources) from amongst UWI's North American counterparts. Further, existing links can only benefit from the introduction of any of the reforms.

This paper has outlined several alternatives to the letter grading scheme currently in use by the Social Science Faculty at UWI. The implications for the classification of degrees by the Faculty have also been discussed. Any one of the four models presented can be regarded as an improvement to what is currently in place, if for no other reason than the fact that they each introduce a larger number of reference points. We have also seen that this particular form of 'Americanisation' does not dilute standards nor necessarily encourage grade inflation. The requirements for the various classes of degree are just as challenging as what is in place at present.

The Faculty's choice of a new grading structure must be determined on the basis of meeting both Faculty and institutional needs. These are fairly straightforward to visualise, and some discussion has been offered already.

At the very minimum it is hoped that the deliberations outlined here will revive debate in this important area. And, ideally, they will also lead to some long over-due action for both the Faculty of Social Sciences and for UWI as a whole.

Appendix Table 1**A Generalised System of Descriptive Reference Points**

Grades Descriptive References

- A+ The candidate has demonstrated that she has mastery over the skills and knowledge set out for the course of study. She is proficient in at least 85% of her coursework. She has the ability to apply meaningfully the skills and knowledge to problems, and related issues, as these relate to a wide range of settings.
- A The candidate has demonstrated that she has an excellent grasp of the skills and knowledge set out for the course of study. She has the ability to apply her skills to a wide range of issues. She ought to be able to critically evaluate issues. She is proficient in about 82% of her coursework.
- A- The candidate has demonstrated her ability to grasp complex material. She can analyse independently and has a very good ability at applying her knowledge and skills to well-defined problem sets. She is proficient in about 78% of her coursework.
- B+ The candidate has demonstrated her ability to grasp material well beyond the reach of the average candidate. She can articulate a case very well and has good problem-solving skills for well-defined problem sets. She is capable of independent work. She is proficient in about 74% of her coursework.
- B The candidate has reached a good overall standard. Her skills and knowledge set permit her to conduct an adequate analysis of many difficult problems within her field of study. She has demonstrated her potential for some independent work. She is proficient in about 70% of her coursework.
- B- The candidate displays some ability to do good work. Only with some direction and supervision is it possible for her to make a good contribution to her field. Her skills and knowledge set are

just adequate to allow her to do some independent work in her field. She is proficient in about 66% of her coursework.

- C+ The candidate's skills and knowledge set are sufficient to allow her the opportunity of performing work in her field which meets minimum acceptable standards. Ability to perform independent work is limited. She is proficient in about 62% of her coursework.
- C The candidate's skills and knowledge set are only sufficient to permit work in her field. Her ability to perform independent work is very limited. She is proficient in about 58% of her coursework.
- C- The candidate's skills and knowledge set are barely sufficient to permit work of average quality in her field. Ability to perform independent work is very limited. She is proficient in about 53% of her coursework.
- D+ Whilst quite weak, the candidate has demonstrated potential to do work of only average quality. No basis for working independently at a good level. On average, she is proficient in about 48% of her coursework.
- D The candidate is too weak to make a meaningful contribution other than under the closest of supervision. Problem-solving skills are not well developed at all. She has demonstrated proficiency in about 45% of her coursework.
- D- Really indistinguishable from a failing grade. The candidate has shown just a trace of a relevant skill set thought of as minimum requirements for the field of study. She has demonstrated proficiency in about 41% of her coursework.
- E/F The candidate has failed to reach minimum passing standards. Her demonstrated proficiency in her field is less than 40% of her coursework.

Appendix Table 2

**Faculty of Agriculture - Letter Grades in Use
and Their Raw Score Assignments Points**

A = 70+ B+ = 60-69 B = 50-59 C = 40-49 F < 40

Source: *Regulations & Syllabuses (1994/5), Faculty of Agriculture, UWI, St. Augustine, p. 56.*

Appendix Table 3

**Faculty of Arts & General Studies - Letter Grades in Use,
Their Raw Score Assignments Points, Descriptive References
in Use and Weightings Used for Degree Classification Purposes**

Grades	Percent	Description	Weight
A	86+	Brilliant	16
A	76-85	Clear A	14
A	70-75	Low A	13
B+	68-69	Good B+	10
B+	64-67	Clear B+	9
B+	60-63	Low B+	7
B	58-59	Good B	6
B	54-57	Clear B	5
B	50-53	Low B	4
C	48-49	Good C	3
C	44-47	Clear C	2
C	40-43	Low C	1

Source: *Regulations & Syllabuses (1994/5), Faculty of Arts and General Studies, UWI, St. Augustine, p. 21.*

Appendix Table 4

Faculty of Education - Letter Grades in use,
 Their Raw Score Assignments Points, Weightings
 Used for Degree Classification Purposes

Grades	Percentage	Weights
A	86+	16
A	76-85	14
A	70-75	13
B+	68-69	10
B+	64-67	9
B+	60-63	7
B	58-59	6
B	54-57	5
B	50-53	4
C	48-49	3
C	44-47	2
C	40-43	1
D	35-39	
E	0-34	

Source: *Regulations & Syllabuses (1995/6), Faculty of Education, UWI, St. Augustine, p .14.*

Appendix Table 5

Faculty of Natural Sciences - Letter Grades in Use,
Their Raw Score Assignments, Classification

Grades	Percentage	Classification
A+	86+	First
A	76-85	First
A-	70-75	First
B+	60-69	Second (Upper)
B	55-59	Second (Lower)
B-	50-54	Second (Lower)
C+	47-49	Pass
C	43-46	Pass
C-	40-42	Pass
E	0-39	Fail

Source: *Regulations & Syllabuses (1994/5), Faculty of Natural Sciences, UWI, St. Augustine, p. 17.*

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