

The Council for Industry and Higher Education



response to the

**Proposals from Universities UK
and Standing Conference Of Principals:**

**“The UK Honours Degree:
Provision of information”**

November 2005

The UK Honours Degree: Provision of information

A Response from the Policy Forum of the Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE)

The Policy Forum

The Policy Forum of the Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE) is composed of managers from the broad range of our member businesses together with a few academics who are knowledgeable on the issue of business-higher education relations.

We have considered the proposals set out in the Universities UK consultation document on this issue. We have also ensured that wherever possible the views represent those of the senior HR management in our businesses.

The Current System

We agree with the review group that employers need to consider a wide range of information on the capabilities, competencies and experiences of the graduates who apply to them for jobs. For the major employers of graduates represented on the Policy Forum this is already the case. They consider the reflective capabilities developed via work placements and team projects, on work experience and other activities undertaken outside the curriculum and a range of other details appropriate to the company.

We note that this information is becoming available via Progress Files covering both the academic transcript and a student's personal development plan. We note that the information increasingly conforms to what is required under the Diploma Supplement. A European-wide approach and consistency is increasingly helpful to multinational employers who recruit through the web and receive applications from a range of countries. Information on the extra-curricula activities undertaken can be particularly informative given the importance of the development of employability capabilities. Indeed some recruiters go straight to the end of a CV once they are satisfied that an acceptable level of academic achievement has been demonstrated. Others are increasingly recruiting on the basis of competencies. Some will however want to continue to sift initially on the basis of degree classification to identify those graduates who have the intellectual talent and powers of analysis and problem-solving.

All recruiters have to sift as they are inundated with multiple applications. The larger recruiters adopt often sophisticated tests via assessment centres, team based projects and interviews. Smaller businesses (including those in the supply chains of larger member companies) do not have such methods and will rely increasingly on the information that the student offers. While we may want them to be more sophisticated than currently, their resources are limited and we must be realistic about what they can analyse.

We have earlier suggested that a simple percentage figure on achievement with additional details on the percentages achieved in key modules could replace a summative assessment. This would

achieve what the group desire. However we appreciate that this is unlikely to appeal to students either in the UK or from overseas who are used to summative grades in all awards.

It is important that the messages on the broad range of capabilities and experiences that employers seek are transmitted to all students, careers services and academics so students can aim for the widest possible higher education experience. An academic transcript can never capture the wide range of capabilities and trying to encompass too much could be confusing for the smaller employer. All employers should be encouraged to elicit from students themselves what they can bring to the job on offer. A personal development plan can be the important a mine into which graduates can delve to draw out relevant experiences and the lessons learned. This is why the broadly based Diploma Supplement is so useful and should have primacy over what individual country systems provide. Information on academic achievement is just one element and one piece of evidence in the recruitment process.

We appreciate that the Group is responding to an invitation in the Government's White Paper *The Future of Higher Education* to review the degree classification system but such evidence as we have from employers on their dissatisfaction with the current summative system relates to their concern about apparent grade inflation - some 50% of students are now awarded a first or upper second. Employers would tend to see the remedy to this lack of differentiation as lying with higher education institutions themselves. The Group has not itself adduced evidence from employers or students for the change proposed.

We consider that the 3 point classification that is being proposed would not address but would instead worsen this lack of differentiation. Since hopefully few would Fail and the category of Distinction would rightly be limited to a few excellent graduates, this would result in the overwhelming number of graduates being classed into the single category of Pass. This would not enable employers to identify the above average graduate. It would add to the administrative challenge for organizations that would have to sift applications from the 1,000s that apply. It would be particularly unhelpful to smaller organizations that do not have sophisticated recruitment processes. It would fail the criteria the group itself established on the following grounds:

- **equity/fairness:** the overwhelming majority of students would be in a single category of Pass that would not distinguish between the border line Distinction and the borderline Fail; this would be inequitable to students and totally unhelpful to employers;
- **transparency:** transparency would be lost with such a single all-dominant category;
- **information:** the classification would obscure rather than illuminate;
- **acceptability:** the proposal is unacceptable to the major employers represented on the CIHE;
- **motivation:** setting the Distinction hurdle inevitably high could de-motivate the vast majority of students and especially those from non-traditional backgrounds who may be on a rising trajectory and can currently aspire to a 2:1. (Our members who have experienced both the current honours and a 3 point scale have confirmed the disincentive and lower effort that the latter can engender in those who realize early on that they will not achieve Distinction.

A classification that is unhelpful in identifying the above average performer would encourage employers to rely still more than at present on A-level scores. This would undermine the thrust to

encourage a widening in participation and ignore the added value that higher education brings. Equally, as a Vice-Chancellor member of the CIHE has written:

"At present, some of our students can say with pride "I got a first (or a 2.1)". If in the future everyone just gets a pass, it will be their alma mater which counts."

A system that was effectively reduced to a two-fold classification of Distinction and Pass would increase arbitrariness and would be unlikely to reduce appeals as the significance of the Distinction/Pass divide would be heightened.

We note that across Europe the vast majority of states offer at least 5 categories of summative achievement. The UK is currently in line with this. We also note the Diploma Supplement can include information on the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) which grades performance at module level as follows:

A= the top 10%
B=the next 25%
C=the next 30%
D=the next 25%
E=the remaining 10%

This approach by decile appears to offer a more consistent rationale than the sometimes apparently rather arbitrary and hardly transparent basis of current individual institution based decision making. While some employers would like national consistency so that a 2:1 from one institution can be related to an award from another institution, we appreciate that this would require a national system of assessment and would undermine institutional autonomy. The next best thing would be to adopt the ECTS categorization as this would offer consistency across individual institutions that should improve transparency and understanding for both students and employers.

We therefore conclude that:

- employers should have and welcome a range of information on the graduates who apply to them;
- this will encompass academic achievement and the wider experiences gained both in the curriculum and outside on which graduates should have reflected and be able to articulate;
- to help them identify the range of academic talent on offer, there must be a range of summative classifications that can illuminate and not obscure;
- there is advantage in the system in the UK bearing a relationship to the systems used in other European countries;
- no adequate reasons have been advanced for the abandonment of a 5 point classification system in the UK and its replacement by a 3 point one that would not adequately identify academic achievement and could have unintended consequences for widening participation in particular;
- there are benefits in adopting the ECTS 5 point classification to bring greater consistency, transparency and logic to, as the group admits, is currently a rather arbitrary process.

Our answers to the questions are therefore:

Q1 Do you agree with the need to replace the UK honours degree classification system?

A1 Not in the way proposed.

Q2 In which areas or activities would it be useful to capture additional information about student performance in the core element of the transcript?

A2 Information on how the process of learning helps develop employability could usefully augment information on academic achievement by module. The European Diploma Supplement should be the standard reference document. If a preliminary Diploma Supplement could be available when students apply to companies this would be particularly helpful as at the application stage degree classifications are of course only predicted (though some use 2nd year credits).

Q3 Do you consider that moving to a 3 point scale would address the concerns raised about the summative judgement?

A3 A 3 point scale would worsen the problems and not meet the criteria the Group has set.

Q4 Do you agree that the category of Distinction should be reserved for a very small number of excellent candidates?

A4 N/A as we disagree with the 3 point proposal.

Q5 Should institutions use their own grading scheme?

A5 We see merits in using the ECTS system and this would bring greater consistency and transparency which would assist small as well as large employers.

Q6 Would you welcome information on the relative performance of students?

A6 The ECTS approach would provide this and offer a consistency across Europe that will be increasingly helpful to a range of employers as the recruitment process moves solely to on-line applications (already the practice for some major businesses).

Q7 Are there any additional comments you would like to make?

A7 Please see the body of our response.

CIHE
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