

## Comparing Grades: The Average, the Pass Standard and the Distribution

# HOW-TO

With admission, scholarship, and transfer credit decisions at stake every term, registrars and admission officers must evaluate the academic records of their non-US applicants in a fair and equitable manner. A critical part of the process is grade comparison. For practical purposes it is important to develop a comparative context based on the characteristic assumptions and the actual grading practices in the US and non-US systems under review. Rarely can one simply place two grading scales next to each other and assume corresponding individual grades in a set ranging from highest to lowest represent equal levels of achievement. What follow are three concepts to use in building a basis for fair comparison:

### The Average: Key to the US Grading System

Despite its huge number and variety of educational institutions, the US employs a fairly simple and uniform grading scale. In its most common form, the scale defines excellent and failing academic performance with its highest and lowest grades. Usually there are three other (passing) grades: average, above average, and below average. Underlying this scale is a theory of individual student achievement in relation to the demands of the curriculum and to the widest demographic context. The fact that different academic institutions may be highly selective or employ open admission policies has no direct bearing on the scale itself: in principle, identical grades have the same meaning regardless of where they are earned, thereby allowing institutions to compare student records.

As it exists today, the US grading scale is the product of a mass education system with high levels of enrollment at the tertiary level, a broad commitment to access to higher education and the belief that students can realistically hope to attain the highest grades for outstanding achievement. What holds all the conflicting tendencies in the system together is the concept of the average, the central range of achievement against which the rest of the population is measured. In effect, the average (mid-point) grade functions as a floating national standard that constantly reintegrates the system while ensuring that any effort to raise educational attainment as a whole must do so with reference to what is demanded of the "average" student.

### The Pass Standard: Making the Grade in Selective Systems

In countries where access to higher education is very selective, grading scales are not focused on the idea of what the average student can attain, but rather upon the maintenance of high minimum passing grades to ensure that the best qualified academic students fill university places. Such systems are often characterized by the stream-

ing of students before or during secondary education and/or by a series of nationally set and closely monitored qualifying examinations.

In grading systems organized around a high pass standard, the philosophical assumptions and the demographic backdrop are quite different from those systems organized around averages. It is not expected that grades will be broadly distributed through the full range of passes on a scale; in most cases the highest grades are rarely bestowed. Often the majority of passing grades are concentrated within a narrow range near the minimum.

It is not easy to reconcile grading scales based on averages and on pass standards, although some general comments can be made. Because the "minimum pass" as defined in US-type scales commonly refers to a grade "below average," which *cannot* represent a student's *cumulative grade average* for graduation, it is not advisable to regard a pass-standard scale's minimum passing grade as equivalent to a US "D" or below average grade. In practice, pass-standard scale *minimum passes* can be understood as comparable to average-scale *average* grades.

Beyond this point, however, there is much disagreement. While US admission officers are reasonably cautious about "inflating" the equivalencies of higher grades on a pass-standard scale, they will often find transcripts containing few grades far above the minimum pass and very few "straight A" students. Constructing a scale of equivalent grades to use with pass-standard scales will often be a matter of continuous refinement.

### Grade Distribution: Checking Your Theory Against the Record

In many countries it is possible to get an idea of how to interpret grades by obtaining statistics on their distribution; this information is often the best check against overly conservative assessments. For example, in 1995, the Hong Kong Examinations Authority reported the following distribution of passing grades in the examination for the Hong Certificate of Education:

Letter Score	Number Score	Percentage
A	1 - 2	1%
B	3 - 4	3% (A+B)
C	5 - 6	7% (A+B+C)
D	7 - 8	40% (A+B+C+D)
E	9 - 10	60%

As is clear from this chart, a grading system in which only 7% of passing students receive the three highest grades (out of a total of five possibilities) cannot be read against US type scales in a simple fashion. Whenever possible, therefore, statistics on grade distribution should always be part of the process of developing equivalency scales for comparison.

-Richard Kearney, WES