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TO	Academic Board
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SUBJECT	Student Views on Proposal for Revision of Grade Divisions and Restricted Passes

Over the past two weeks, VUWSA has been seeking student perspectives on both the proposed revision of the University's grade divisions and the introduction of a Restricted Pass (RP) grade. In order to gather student opinion, an online submission form was prepared and, subsequently, distributed to Class Representatives, various student representative groups in the University and, where the submission link was passed on, to general students. The following report is based on 403 individual student submissions.

Is there student support for the proposed revision of grade divisions?

Of the 403 students submitting their views on the introduction of the C- grade and the subsequent adjustment upwards of other grades, 60% were opposed with 29% in support and the remainder unsure. While, on the whole, student opinion can be seen as mixed, given the numbers opposed, students can also be seen as having some reservations over the proposed revision of grade divisions. To this effect 64% of respondents thought that the change, if implemented, would have major implications for students. The remainder either did not see major implications or were unsure.

As indicated by student comments, where students supported the change, this usually coincided with "coming into line" with other universities:

I think this would be a good idea in that it would align our Vic with universities like Auckland and Otago to make comparison easier (rather than a Vic student getting an A+ which would only be an A elsewhere). I also agree that it would make sense to have the A+ bracket the same size as all other marks. As long as the marks students had got before this is introduced remained completely the same (including not having any kind of mark next to the grade referring to the fact it was under the old marking system, in other words an A pre the change is as good as an A

post change) then I believe this would work. I think it could also be a good look for Victoria overall, for example for prospective students who may take the 'more lenient' marking as a sign that Victoria is not as desirable or prestigious university as those mentioned before.

The fact that a+ is so easy to get undermines the value of the grade. We should certainly be in line with the rest of the country's universities.

It would be good to be brought into line with other universities. People always tend to cast aspersions on VUW grades because we don't mark to the same standard. The benefit of getting rid of this will outweigh any harm created by making grades marginally harder to attain.

I think a C- is a great idea to implement as it ensures that our marking system is in line with other universities.

On the other hand, concerns appeared where students perceived an increased difficulty in attaining higher grades and, subsequently, maintaining the necessary grade averages to progress in their studies:

For some subjects such as Law it is already difficult enough to maintain a good average, this would just be another burden to try and attain grades that are impossibly high to reach!

In subjects such as English where marks above 90% are very rarely awarded, I see a major disadvantage to talented students chasing A+ grades.

I am currently taking a 300-level biomedical science paper. In some tests we take, A grades (80%) aren't even being achieved. (our class all got marked up 7%!!! so that 2 people could get an A). These grades should not be implemented for those students who are in their 2nd, 3rd or last year of study for their undergraduate degree as it is likely that it could effect entry to postgraduate courses at other universities while professors work out how much to increase biomedical science course tests course so that students can actually pass. In a 200-level course with 160 students, 100 students failed the test. so increasing the grade boundaries is only going to make victoria university look worse than it already is. Other universities (otago and auckland particularly) get more contact time for science courses, e.g. more tutorials, lectures available online, more lab staff, tutors and teaching assistants which are contactable. These all help with learning and getting better grades. It would be helpful to find out the final percentage grade for a course, so that you actually know where stand and for reference when applying to overseas universities (which i have done so myself with a lot of difficulty).

This change will affect students in only one way - by causing them to receive lower letter grades. Where a student would have received a C, they will now receive a C-. Where they would have received an A, they will now receive an A-. The only students unaffected will be those who consistently score in the 90%+ bracket (and thus whose grades will remain A+s).

I can see how grades seem harder to achieve having been moved forward but support the changes. This makes the higher grades even more outstanding. And students with lower motivations may feel a grade is more achievable with introduction of C-.

I think the A+ - 90% threshold is fine, good to keep in line with other universities. My concern would only be that it is harder to get 90% in essay based assessment, however, I am going to assume that they will still mark to the curve, and thus a student who previously would have got 85% will get 90%. Thus my "concern" is not longer a concern, should this assumption be satisfied. I think the bigger problem is how essay based assessment often seems to be marked more harshly in general than mathematical/definitional assessment. But that is a separate issue to the grading. Ultimately, there should be no major impact w.r.t. the C- to A+ changes.

My primary concern is that the change upwards in grades impacts students across different subjects. Consider how a maths assignment is quantitative, and might mark a test at, say, 16/20. That is 80%, which currently corresponds to an A. If a student does just as well and gets 16/20 under the grade changes, this is now an A-. This effect would not be replicated in the humanities and social sciences, and possibly elsewhere, where markers often think about assignments in terms of grades first, and marks second. A student who a marker believes deserves an A under the current system will receive a grade of 80-84. Under the changes, that same student's assessment would very likely still be considered at the A-grade level—and so that student would be awarded a mark of 85-89. This is not fair as it impacts students in quantitatively assessed disciplines more heavily than those in qualitatively assessed ones. Moreover, I believe the changes shouldn't be implemented on students currently in University, as it is confusing for grade sheets and GPAs. I would recommend a staggered implementation, where these grades come in at 100-level next year, and then 200-level the year after that, so new students (generally—we know many students at higher levels take lower level courses for filler) begin their studies with the new structure.

It is perhaps significant that such concerns are shared alike by those who otherwise support the change in terms of aligning Victoria's grades with those of other universities. In any event, these comments, where they are taken together, raise questions as to what is the actual underlying substance of a given grade: is it indicative of a specific standard of work or does it represent an actual quantity of "marks"? To be sure, the new assessment handbook would seem to advocate towards the latter but, as the proposal makes clear, this might not always be the case. Furthermore is there a consistent understanding of grades, in terms of their composition and meaning across faculties? The importance of these questions lies in where they underpin the meaning of the significance of any change to grade divisions. As such, does this change coincide with actual changes in standards, or simply the way in which specific standards are recorded? Some comments confront this issue directly, questioning, in some cases, the validity of comparisons between Victoria other New Zealand Universities in this area:

My biggest concern is underlying this change is a shift in thinking from a grade range to an absolute grade. While this may work for the more scientific or mathematical subjects, it poses a range of difficulties in subjects such as architecture and design - where the markers decision is

more subjective and therefore a grade range is a more appropriate method of assessment. In these subjects, it is better to assess using a percental range, rather than an absolute percental, due to the interpretation of the assessor. Secondly, it is implicit that an A+ in VUW is currently to a lesser standard than an A+ in, say, Otago. Although the percental values do not align, does this necessarily mean that VUW work is overall to a lesser quality than that of other universities? If this assumption is perpetuated, it will become more difficult for high achieving students to achieve top grades, despite their work being of equal or greater quality to other universities. In other words, what mechanisms will be in place to ensure the perception of the best work is not reduced by revising the grades. A way in which these potential concerns could be addressed is to ensure the motivations of the university are that of providing high quality tertiary education for students, NOT focusing on the rankings of the university in relation to other universities in New Zealand. While they may appear to be similar in intent, a high university rating does not directly translate to the best learning environment and quality of experience for the student.

I don't understand the point of it. Why do we need to move the grade scale like this? Why did the other universities do it? Are there any reasons that Vic is doing this other than being consistent? I am always cautious when the only justification is essentially "to be a sheep". And besides, wouldn't some of the course coordinators just mark slightly more softly in order to compensate for the harsher grading scale? (Not all of them are evil!) I'd be curious to know how on earth they actually try and regulate the whole thing anyway. From my experience as an undergrad (I am a thesis student now), then doing postgrad courses, and then being a tutor of first year students, my observation has been that lecturers tend to base marking schemes at least vaguely on the underlying qualitative letter scale. i.e. they think "if you can do this much you deserve a B, or for this much you deserve an A+". I reckon some will modify their marking schemes, some won't, and it will just cause problems and inconsistencies between years. I would expect this issue to be taken into account though. And I probably don't fully understand the system, i.e. perhaps it would impact scaling more than anything else, and the uni could expect all courses to be reflecting the new grade distribution rather than the old one. It just seems that it adds confusion to grades that cannot be justified by the gains (I can't figure out what the gains even are). Was the current system broken? Why fix what isn't broken? I think we ALL need to be given more information about the finer details of the impact this will have.

First: Would it actually make any difference? If, for example the percentage required for an A+ was moved up to 90%, would there actually be fewer students receiving A+ marks, or would there simply be more scaling or marks so that the number of A+'s still corresponded with a grade curve? I know that is how grades are worked out at some other NZ universities. Second: At some other universities there are a greater number of courses that are double-chance than at VUW. For example, many of the compulsory 200- level law papers at the University of Auckland are double-chance which in some ways mitigates the higher grade thresholds. Perhaps VUW might need to look at doing a similar thing if the grades are revised as per the proposal.

Indeed, we might also consider here the issue of consistency in the wake of these changes.

Conclusions:

On the whole, students can be seen to hold some reservations as to the proposed revision of grade divisions. However, this feeling is informed by an understanding of grades and grade divisions that might or might not be entirely accurate.

As such, there appears, at this point, a need for individual faculties to clearly communicate to students their own comprehensions of grades and grade divisions, along with what the proposed changes actually mean at an operational level. Also, looking further ahead, there would also appear a need, within the classroom setting, for a proper explanation and discussion of grades and assessment criteria.

Is their student support for Restricted Passes?

Of the 403 students submitting their views on the introduction of Restricted Passes as proposed, 44% were opposed with 39% in support and the remainder unsure, indicating considerable variance in opinion. Respondents held similar views on the general idea of a restricted pass with 45% expressing a favourable response, 43% unfavourable and the remainder unsure.

Comments in support of the Restricted Pass focussed mainly on convenience and the value of learning in courses that students had only marginally failed. Comments of this type usually commended the restrictions placed on the number and type of passes eligible for credit to a given degree:

I think under certain conditions people can struggle with a paper, but given that the restricted pass will be case by case and that only 2 can count I think their implementation has been considered well and that it will not affect most people, but will be of benefit to people who were close/at the required standard, but maybe had some unlucky circumstances or difficulties

I think the restricted pass is a great idea - will potentially help the repeating of courses where previously they have only failed at the margin. Saving students a lot of time and money, while still requiring the same 50% standard if they wish to proceed with that subject. I believe the provisional passing grade will have a positive effect.

I'm VERY supportive of the non progressing pass, as a tutor of courses such as COMP102 and COMP103 (computer programming, courses within the school of engineering and computer science), I have seen students who have demonstrated some understanding of programming to the point that it seems only fair to let them count it towards their degree, especially if engineering wasn't actually their major (some knowledge of programming is useful for many degrees, such as design, and just being able to read other peoples programs and knowing how to write very simple programs can be a useful skill in itself in these cases!), but then they haven't understood the material nearly well enough to cope with the more advanced COMP103 and they just end up struggling like crazy (and probably failing), because COMP103 builds so heavily

on COMP102 and those with the low passes just simply haven't learnt enough to cope. All that is accomplished is wasted time, and a bigger student loan. I think that it is helpful for students, as it allows a level of honesty about whether or not you'll cope in the next course (and students who really don't stand a chance won't have false hope), but still gives lecturers the option to give you credit for the course towards your degree, as you have at least learnt something valuable from it even if you simply don't have what it takes to continue in that particular area. The alternative could have been a fail grade. I think it is fair enough that you can only count 2 of them towards a degree. It would raise a lot of eyebrows if somebody could get a degree with a lot of them.

I see this as mainly affecting elective papers a student may do, as any prerequisite papers would still need to be repeated for a student to progress in the degree. I think this is a good idea, as it stops students from needing to retake a paper they are doing out of interest, when they have effectively gained enough material from the course to be near-enough to passing it

Concerns here usually involved the actual value of the Restricted Pass, its implications for the status of other passing grades, and the consistency with which it might be applied:

If it is on a case by case basis across departments there will be no fairness or equal outcomes and makes it hard to determine if you can/should apply for a RP grade.

The restricted grade pass appears to be a solution for those students who are underachieving to gain their degree in the same amount of time as passing the course. (Possibly this could be read as a cost cutting measure by the university as students repeating courses will inevitably cost more \$\$\$). Instead the emphasis should be on the student learning experience, where the university provides an environment in which students want to learn and achieve highly - not an environment where students can fail and still gain points towards their degree. For students to be awarded a degree this way diminishes the value of all of the degrees that VUW presents. Is it fair that the value of a degree awarded to a straight A student has the same perceived value as a student who fails several papers but still got the points? It simply replicates the "C's get degrees" mentality (although it will now be "C's get degrees") and detracts from the real value of university education - which is actually doing the work.

If the university is genuinely interested in the impact on students' welfare of failing a course, they should not charge fees when a student retakes a course after failing. They could also link second time round students in with student learning support. For the integrity of Victoria's degrees though, students who do not meet the minimum standard of a course should not be awarded points for it. I'm a tutor at 100 level, and to receive a fail on an essay students have to not even write at all to the question, or to not include a bibliography or references. I usually still give them 47 or 48, if it partially makes sense and is long enough. That is the standard of a first year essay at the level you are suggesting should be awarded points.

I think someone needs to pass a course properly in order to continue. A fail grade indicates that they have inadequate understanding of the course. It's illogical that they then be allowed to still

pass that course and continue on to higher level papers. The grading shouldn't be geared at making people pass, it should be geared at ensuring they understand the content of the degree they have chosen to undertake. While it would be 'nice' to allowed those who are borderline to pass on a case-by-case basis, it undermines the whole point of doing the course. If their work hasn't meet at least 50% of the standard expected, they shouldn't pass. Simple as that. Aegrotat passes are still available for those who have legitimate reasons. The Restricted Pass is unnecessary and undermines the purpose of higher education.

Restricted passes as they are currently represented seem like a bad idea. With 50% having been set as the minimum acceptable level of knowledge/understanding, questions are raised regarding whether passes for courses that only count for degree credit should indeed have a more lenient pass than those required for majors, as prerequisites, etc – this depends on the purpose of requiring a certain number of credits for a degree - if it is to ensure sufficient general effort, skill, or knowledge, I see no reason why only such courses should have the lenience of restricted passses. Secondly, the ambiguity of "high D's" and "examiner discretion" seems to undermine the benefits of clear and consistent achievement goals and policy (with aegrotats already in place for extreme personal circumstances).

Conclusions

On the whole student opinion on Restricted Passes is mixed. However, there appears the need for a better articulation of the actual process involved in awarding the Restricted Pass grade for purposes of consistency both within and across faculties.

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