

**Senate Committee on Academic Procedures**  
Report to Senate – May 20, 2009

**OFFICIAL CREDIT UNIT WEIGHTING AND GRADING  
AT QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY**

**Background**

The University has been presented with an opportunity to review the way it records and reports various academic elements with the advent of the Queen's University Administrative Systems Replacement (QUASR) project and the implementation of a new student information system using the "PeopleSoft" product produced by Oracle.

Currently at Queen's University, there is inconsistency among Faculties and Schools when dealing with grading schemes and course weighting, as the manner of recording and reporting academic elements has developed over time. The result is many disparate formats and conversion tables that are required to achieve common translation for transfer credit assessment, tuition assessment, and government reporting requirements. These dissimilar formats present themselves on the official transcript, making the document difficult to read and assess for professional and graduate schools, employers, and other stakeholders. The Senate Committee on Academic Procedures (SCAP) is taking advantage of the unique opportunity to review the content of Queen's official transcript. The implementation of a new student system provides an occasion to move forward to a system of reporting student grades and course weights that is well understood and consistent with the most prevalent practices in Canada, the United States, and Europe.

**Analysis and Discussion**

In late 2008 and early 2009, research was completed by the Office of the University Registrar regarding credit unit weighting and grading scheme standards at universities across Canada, the United States, and within the European Union. This research demonstrated that the vast majority of universities in the regions use a credit weighting scheme of 3/6 credit units and a letter grading scheme with GPA.

Credit Units

Earned credits are identified by the term "credit hours" or "credit units" (or simply "credits"), normally 3.0 per term and 6.0 per two-term session (Fall/Winter) with the normal requirement for a four-year (honours) degree of 120 credit units. This system represents best practice in course weight and student transfer options. The commonly recognized system reduces human resource hours spent in assessing and assigning transfer credits and eases communication among and between students and institutions. According to the U.S. Department of Education report *Structure of the U.S. Education System: Credit Systems*, "credit hours or units represent a mathematical summarization of all work completed, and are not the same as the actual classroom contact or instructional hours." The weighting scale is flexible in that, typically, 3.0 credit units represent the equivalent of a Queen's 0.5 credit course and 6.0 credit units the equivalent of a 1.0 credit course; additional workload or contribution (e.g., lab courses, substantial additional independent reading) in a one-term course may be weighted at 4.0 credit units and short-duration or lighter academic load courses may be weighted at 1.0 or 2.0 credit units. Canadian, American, and other international schools surveyed indicate that the 3/6 scale is universally understood and would not disadvantage Queen's students. Input from Queen's international and exchange offices confirms that the 3/6 credit scale would benefit our exchange students as well as our international partner institutions for ease of transfer credit assessment.

### Grading

Letter grading with a grade point average (GPA) is the prevalent official grading system in Canada, the U.S., and Europe (European Credit Transfer System standard). In some institutions, instructors enter grades as percentages or as letter grades and the official grade reported is letter. There is some variation among universities in the conversion equivalencies for percentage and letter grades, which are determined by individual universities but consistent across programs. Queen's currently does not calculate a GPA, and a great many requests are received each year to provide a calculation for the purpose of applying for advanced study, either by the student or the university considering the applicant, but there is no standard methodology for calculating a "Queen's GPA" and, therefore, no way to assure fairness or equity for Queen's students. Other non-evaluative grades are also used at the majority of universities researched, normally Pass (P), Fail (F), Audit (AU) and Transfer Credit (TR).

Proposals and research were presented by SCAP to all units' Faculty Boards and Academic Councils for discussion. Extensive consultation of stakeholder groups was completed in the Winter Term of 2009 by the Chair of SCAP, Dr. Charles Beach, and the University Registrar, Jo-Anne Brady, and feedback was brought to SCAP for discussion at its March 17 and April 20, 2009 meetings. The Chair and Registrar attended meetings with the following bodies in addition to one-on-one or small group consultations with faculty, staff, and students:

- Vice-Principal (Academic) and Deans
- Faculty of Arts and Science Undergraduate Chairs
- Faculty of Arts and Science Faculty Board
- School of Business Faculty Forum and Faculty Board
- School of Graduate Studies Graduate Council
- Faculty of Applied Science Operations Committee
- Faculty of Applied Science Faculty Board
- School of Nursing Academic Council
- School of Medicine Associate Dean
- School of Theology Faculty Board
- Student Senate Caucus
- Queen's Career Services and the School of Business Career Centre

Feedback received from faculty members and administrators was generally positive and in favour of the proposal. Faculty members who have taught at institutions using the proposed standards support the assertion that credit units and letter grading schemes offer increased clarity to students, faculty, and staff at institutions of higher learning across North America and Europe, as well as employers.

Feedback received from some students, and the Commerce Society in particular, on the proposed letter grading scheme was not favourable, with specific objections that letter grades would eliminate the granularity apparent in a percentage scale and deserved by those students who obtain a percentage in the higher end of the range of each letter grade, and that employers, who may not be adept at interpreting transcripts, would benefit from the granularity present in a percentage grading scheme. Students in objection to the letter grading scheme proposal requested a "blended system" in which both a percentage and letter grade (along with a GPA) would be used as official grades and reported as such on the official transcript.

To this end, the Chair of SCAP, University Registrar, Secretary of SCAP, and Academic Affairs Commissioner of the Alma Mater Society met with consultants charged with the implementation of the PeopleSoft student information system regarding the feasibility of a "blended system". The consultants reported that to have more than one official grade on the transcript would require extensive customization of the system and would involve three to nine months of work and an increase to the project budget of hundreds of thousands of dollars. The additional cost would be incurred at implementation and every time the vendor upgrades the software, which is approximately every two years. SCAP was presented with no evidence that Queen's students in any program would be disadvantaged by the singular

presentation of letter grades and GPA. There is considerable evidence that the letter grade system is likely to be advantageous to students and, given a dual reporting system is prohibitively expensive, SCAP recommends it as Queen's official grading system.

### **Conclusion/Recommendations**

The proposal regarding credit weighting and grading practices and all feedback received was reviewed by members of SCAP at its meeting of April 2009. After extensive discussion, members of SCAP decided in favour of the proposal for Queen's University to adopt a 3/6 credit unit weighting scheme and a letter grading scheme with GPA. The new practices will take effect in May 2011 with the effective date of the new student information system.

SCAP will be reviewing the options for the representation of historical transcripts and 'in-progress' students in the new student information system and will report on the options and its determination at a later date.

### **Summary**

The Senate Committee on Academic Procedures recommends the following two motions be considered for action at the May 20, 2009 meeting of Senate:

*Be it resolved that Queen's adopt a credit unit system that assigns weights in a scale where normally a 0.5 credit course translates to a weight of 3.0 credit units and a 1.0 credit course translates to a weight of 6.0 credit units, with provision for variation of assigned weights (e.g., 1.0 through 12.0) within the scale.*

*Be it resolved that Queen's adopt an official grading system of letter grades with Grade Point Average (GPA,) as depicted in Appendix 1. Faculties and Schools may choose not to assign all of the grades in the full scale which will be so noted in the legend of the official transcript. A top GPA of 4.0 will correspond to the highest achievable grade of A+, with the accompanying descriptor that A+ denotes exceptional academic achievement.*

### **Membership**

C. Beach, Faculty of Arts and Science (Chair)  
J. Brady, University Registrar  
R. Coupland, Office of the University Registrar (Secretary)  
M. Lombardi, Academic Affairs Commissioner, Alma Mater Society (observer)  
S. E. Matrix, Faculty of Arts and Science  
A. Mercier, Faculty of Arts and Science  
D. Ness, Office of the University Registrar (non-voting)  
R. Stanzel, Faculty of Arts and Science, PhD '10  
K. Vilela, Faculty of Arts and Science  
P. Welsh, Faculty of Law, JD '10

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**Proposed Official Grading System**

	<b>Letter Grade</b>	<b>Grade Point Value</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>	<b>Descriptor</b>
<b>Queen's</b>	A+	4.0	90-100	Exceptional; significantly exceeds the highest expectations for course work.
	A	4.0	85-89	Outstanding; meets the highest standards for the assignment course.
	A-	3.7	80-84	Excellent; meets very high standards for the assignment or course.
	B+	3.3	77-79	Very good; meets high standards for the assignment or course.
	B	3.0	73-76	Good; meets most standards for the assignment or course.
	B-	2.7	70-72	More than adequate; shows some reasonable command of material.
	C+	2.3	67-69	Acceptable; meets basic standards for the assignment or course.
	C	2.0	63-66	Acceptable; meets some of the basic standards for the assignment or course.
	C-	1.7	60-62	Acceptable; while falling short of meeting basic standards in several ways.
	D+	1.3	57-59	Minimally acceptable.
	D	1.0	53-56	Minimally acceptable; passing grade.
	D-	0.7	50-52	Minimally acceptable; lowest passing grade.
	F	0.0	0 -49	Failure
	P			Pass; no grade assigned
	H			Pass with honours; meets the highest standards for the assignment or course.
	AUD			Audit
	TR			Transfer Credit; no grade assigned