

Understanding international grading scales: More translation than conversion

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Abstract

In granting or withholding academic credits, educational institutions rely on norm-referenced, percentage or criterion-based grading scales to communicate evaluation results to students, parents, employers and other schools. As admission into a new school, transfer between schools, job recruitment, scholarships and financial aid funding may be conditional on grades, it is worth increasing general understanding about the opportunities and limitations of conversion protocol used between international grading scales. This is especially so as more and more students are mobile during their formative years and have transcript histories with foreign exchange credits expressed in different national grading language. As student motivation and achievement may differ across cultures, and lecturers may set exams and practice grading strategies that vary within and between disciplines and institutions (implicit features of grading), the explicit conversion of one grading system to another presents a statistical, cultural and educational dilemma. This article investigates some of the implicit features of explicit grading scales to highlight some of the variables in using, transferring and interpreting grades across cultures to a readership of lecturers, students, recruiters and academic administrators.

Keywords: cross cultural assessment, international education, international admissions, grading

Grading: More cultural habit than science

People reared in different cultures learn to learn differently and go about the process of acquiring culture in their own way. Some do so by memory and rote without reference to "logic" as we think of it, while some learn by demonstration but without the teacher requiring the student himself while learning. Some cultures, like the American, stress doing as a principle of learning, while others have very little of the pragmatic. The Japanese even guide the hand of the pupil, while our teachers usually aren't permitted to touch the other person. Education and educational systems are about as laden with emotion and as characteristic of a given culture as its language. It should not come as a surprise that we encounter real opposition to our educational system when we make attempts to transfer it overseas. (Hall, 1959, p. 47)

For the purposes of this article, culture is defined as enduring features of collectivities (Rokeach, 1972), including attitudes, ideas and behaviours, and a specific set of preferred "territorial, historical, ethnic, political or religious abstractions" (Witte, 2010a, p. 6). Culture especially concerns "learned behavior" and "mental phenomena" that are local, subjective and "internally coherent" (Geertz, 1973, p. 17). As a set of learned routines, it encompasses the material and immaterial products that distinguish one group of people from another (Brumann, 1999). The organisational specialist Geert Hofstede referred to culture as the software of the mind or the collective programming of groups (Hofstede, 1980, 1991), while Francis Fukuyama qualified culture as inherited ethical habit or the a-rational choice that governs the perception of good and evil regulating social behaviour (Fukuyama, 1995). For Ulf Hannerz (1992), culture is not only ideas and modes of thought, but also the way in which these processes of the mind are made accessible to others including inventories of meaning spread over a population to create a coordinated network of perspectives or ground rules for action, resulting in an asymmetry of the distribution of power and resources. All of these definitions reveal how culture and education are embedded concepts and that gender, generation, occupation, geography and historical cultures influence knowledge and knowledge transmission. As teaching and learning is vital for all cultures, educational processes are situational responses to ecological factors that constrain or support collective cultural goals. In other words, all education and all educational tools are likely to have a strongly cultural component. Grade scales are, in fact, cultural artefacts.

National grading scales are likely to be consistent throughout accredited national institutions from elementary to higher education (HE), codifying the language of educational achievement. Like any

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communication tool, a grading system is learned and internalised by cultural habit and it is instructed by context, discipline and educational philosophy more than it is a science contingent on empirical and objective data that outsiders can readily ascertain, but exceptions may apply. Although some grades may be perfect mathematical tallies of knowledge inventories (norm-referenced), the qualitative meaning of any grade (criterion-reference) is actually contingent on traditional attitudes towards the goals and outcomes of schooling, assessment choices, faculty personalities, institutional policies, disciplinary norms and idiosyncratic conditions taking place in classes throughout the world.

The predominant grading system used within any national educational system may actually reflect a variety of different practices and philosophies at the individual, institutional and disciplinary levels and these may change over time and generations. As assessment norms vary widely depending on discipline, level, cohort size and programme learning outcomes, grading scales and grade attribution trends are difficult to harmonise, even in the same discipline in the same school with homogenous student and teacher profiles. Grading philosophy is a familiar dispute within and between disciplines and institutions with caricatures of lecturers who “grade up” and those who “grade down”, and from those disciplines practicing grade inflation to others that spread grade demoralisation. These tensions are exacerbated by testing features that prompt norm-referenced numerical grades (e.g., true/false questions, multiple choice, mathematics equations, accounting exercises, general knowledge fill-ins) or rather emphasise qualitative assessment types which elicit communicative and thinking skills, and require more subjective interpretation on the part of the evaluator (e.g., writing assignments, application of legal code to critical incidents, problem-solving, creativity).

These messy features of grading, where explicit grade scales are used to communicate a wide variety of implicit evaluation purposes, compromise any attempt to establish absolute exchange value for evaluation scales, making grades, grade point average and class ranking mechanisms problematical points of comparison between students and schools. Yet grades are still used for recruitment purposes, for institutional credit transfers and as reliable indicators of student eligibility for admission to graduate schools, and a growing constituency of schools and companies recruiting internationally base decisions on transcript data that has been converted between international institutions.

The revised ECTS grading table (Directorate Generale for Education and Culture, 2009) has resolved a great number of these between-system conversion inconveniences by recommending that institutions should maintain the local system and issue more statistical information about local grade distribution, rather than convert grades to the former recommended European device based on the grades ABCDE and the universal fail, designated as F. This approach resolves the problem of numerical communication between cultural systems by introducing a methodology for expressing a local grading scale in practical implementation terms. However, it does not inform users of some of the idiosyncratic features of many national grading systems which remain potential pitfalls in the international exchange of grading documents and, more importantly, in understanding some of the evaluation specificities that may appear in one cultural context or another.

The aim of this article is to bring attention to the unique combination of statistical knowledge, comparative educational scope and cultural insight required in exchanging grades internationally, focusing on why numerical data is insufficient to fully grasp evaluation assumptions, grading norms and assessment choices in different cultural contexts.

Literature review

Two early studies inform contemporary educators about some of the cultural, local and national character of education, grading and assessment. The first is a collection of articles, edited by Angela Little and Alison Wolf (1996), which calls for educational institutions to lend greater attention to the economic, political and cultural environments that influence assessment at the primary and secondary levels. The second book, focussing on assessment trends and its impact on corporate promotion across the eight wealthiest nations (Bass & Burger, 1979), made no claims about international education per se, but revealed that human resources policies throughout the world tend to promote employees based on a subjective set of nation-specific cultural a priori, suggesting that employee recruitment and promotion is based on values, communicative abilities and psycho-social skills fostered within a particular nation’s academic setting.

Another scholar emphasised the link between “assessment goals, assumptions, policies and practices which are inextricably bound to . . . the educational, employment and general social framework of each country” (Noah, 1996, p. 88). A more recent study on assessment pointed out that evaluation used in the workplace often mirrors a particular sociology of local education (Segalla, Sauquet, & Turati, 2001). It has also been noted that national grading trends have been steadfast despite E.U. directives to harmonise practices (Yorke *et al.*, 2002), leading many European schools to maintain a home grading scale at the same time as the ECTS conversion guide (Dahlgren *et al.*, 2009). For example, Swedish grading scales require specially designed statistical algorithms to accurately calculate ECTS equivalencies (Warfvinge, 2008). All of these studies

establish how local culture shapes grading and assessment practices and assumptions in academic as well as professional settings, and they have repercussions on learning strategies and outcomes (Merva, 2003; Dahlgren, Fejes, Abrandt-Dahlgren, & Trowald, 2009).

A survey of recent articles and books revealed that critical analysis of grading and grading scales are almost always country and discipline-specific, and rarely comparative or international in scope. Scholarship has been focused on assessment practices and their implications (implicit features) more than on the material scale or communication tool used for grading (explicit feature). Many books and articles listed through the Education Resources Information Center (2009) using “grading” as a key word derived from the English-speaking countries and reflect socio-political and nation-specific concerns about academic fairness particularly with regard to minority populations. The question of grade inflation within the U.S. has solicited much scholarly debate in the interests of cross-institutional analysis (Shoichet, 2002) and the question of how minorities are graded within the U.S., the UK and Australia has also been given considerable attention, reflecting the last century’s intense concern with affirmative action and academic fairness. However, no systematic study has compared grading scales across national cultures to filter for possible bias in the international classroom despite the growing emphasis on the internationalisation of education and the implementation of conversion practices worldwide.

The specific case of international students, companies and lecturers using and understanding foreign grading systems seems to have received only minor attention and primarily in Europe subsequent to the Bologna reforms which called for a certain number of standardised features in documents and programme delivery to simplify mobility. Surprisingly few academic studies have been conducted into grading practices, specifically in business education, despite large numbers of mobile students seeking cross-national qualifications in business (OECD, 2008; UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2009). Although many recent publications concentrate on assessment, evaluation and the importance of qualitative and quantitative feedback on student’s responsiveness to courses; the concern about grades, grade spread and the meaning and exploitation of grade reports has been discrete.

Methodology

The initial aim, to investigate the cultural implications of different national grading scales, was inspired by legions of exchange students struggling to understand French grading scales in a French *Grand Ecole*, and their disappointment and alarm at not being able to earn higher grades despite much effort and application. When some of my best French students were refused entry to MBA programmes and law school in the U.S., I began to investigate the communication materials used for transitioning students between systems and noticed that there were sources of bias in many admissions procedures, and the accurate interpretation of grade transcripts was often a bone of contention.

Drawing from materials available in my own school, extensive experience transferring incoming and outgoing credits for mobile management students; and tapping into a knowledge framework issued by the World Education Service (www.wes.org) operating from the U.S. (for global purposes) and the European Network of Information Centres and National Academic Recognition Information Centres (www.enic-naric.net) founded for the E.U.; I set out to identify some of the ways in which converting grading scales creates ambiguity, particularly for international readership in the corporate sector and in the admissions processes to graduate schools.

In the absence of published articles and books on comparative grading, cross-national evaluation norms and cross-cultural assessment particularly in business education; and a monopoly on the subject conditioned by ECTS guidelines in almost all administrative documentation; anecdotal information about grading procedures, philosophies and practices through was gathered qualitative interviews with lecturers, students and international participants at British, German and French business schools. These interviews were framed in an open question format and included detailed exchanges on:

- home and host grading scales and particularly the grades used to reward the very best students and those that establish the pass/fail mark
- perceptions concerning the overall skills that were assessed and the use of particular testing formats
- opinions on the distribution of grades within classes in terms of percentage affectations
- comparisons between domestic and international participants learning strategies

These interviews, conducted with an international panel of business lecturers and students, revealed that mathematical and statistical conversions of grades could not be a reliable source of cross-national educational information and that the transition between grading systems created communication difficulties for lecturers, students and institutions. This preliminary research led to the conclusion that lecturers with international classrooms, recruiters interested in using transcripts from around the world for recruitment purposes and academic leadership in business schools might gain from a fresh look at grading scales and

conversion procedures used internationally.

A comparative view of some grading scales used around the world

Currently, foreign transcript data transferred between host and home institutions worldwide is a technical concern of admissions officers, who scrutinise secondary and tertiary education credentials for undergraduate and graduate admissions, transfers and exchanges. Although straight line numerical conversions between national grading scales have been strongly criticised in two ground-breaking articles by Haug (1997) and Haug & Kirstein (1999) which feature on the World Education Service website, many schools practicing international admissions, Law School and MBA programmes in particular, resort to data equivalency practices to rank incoming admissions, with many transcripts only indicating a student’s grades without information about grade spread within a cohort or evaluation practices. Large numbers of applicants for jobs and admissions to graduate school tend to make such practices convenient and almost unavoidable given time and budgetary constraints. The Bologna agreement, which was implemented to facilitate student mobility between European institutions, has been monitoring these transition procedures between schools through transcript reform and harmonisation at the European level by imposing norms on the length of degrees, credit hours and credit value. The aim is to make European degrees more comparable and the transfer of credits and student exchange smoother. The Dublin Level Descriptors complement this system by emphasising the learning outcomes expected at each general programme level addressing goals in cross-disciplinary terms.

In the absence of a standardised pan-European, pan-American or pan-Asian grading template used by institutions conferring similar degrees, or any formal guidelines published by accreditation agencies such as EQUIS or AACSB in the case of international business schools, administrators handling transfer and exchange students between institutions use grade conversion charts to process credits and evaluate students. These charts are usually presented as numerical conversion grids generated by statistical survey and configured to compare two national grading systems. Some schools and companies rely on these standardised conversion charts issued by international education services to evaluate students, whereas others process only credits. Some programmes do not convert grades but rather declare equivalencies, while others have institutional specialists who are transcript experts and use combinations of grade and credit conversions to establish equivalences, make transfers, validate study abroad or evaluate job candidates. Other idiosyncratic practices regarding the transfer and intelligibility of foreign grades undoubtedly exist. Based on these different practices, Table 1 was devised to illustrate how a conversion chart might summarise typical grading scales used internationally.

Criterion	France 1 - 20	Spain 1 - 10	Ireland 1 - 100%	Italy 1 - 30	USA A - F	Germany 1 - 5	Great Britain ranking system	ECTS
Excellent	18 -20 excellent	10 matricula de honor	90 - 100% A1	30 e lode ottimo	A+	1.0 - 1.5	80 - 85% 1st class	A 10%
Very good	17 très bien	9 sobrasaliente	85 - 90% A2	29 buono	A	1.6 - 2.0	75 - 79% 1st class	B 25%
Very good	16 très bien	8.5 sobrasaliente	80 - 84% B1	28 buono	A-		70 - 74% 1st class	
Good +	15 bien	8 sobrasaliente	75 - 79% B2	27 buono	B+		65 - 69% 2nd class upper	
Good	14 bien	7.5 notable	70 - 74% B3	26 discreto	B	2.1 - 3.0 3.1 - 3.5	60 - 64% 2nd class upper	C 30%
Good	13 assez bien	7 notable	65 - 69% C1	25 discreto	B-		55 - 59% 2nd class lower	
Good	12 assez bien	6.5 notable	55 - 64% C2 - C3	24 discreto	C+	50 - 54% 2nd class lower		
Satisfactory	11 moyen	6 apropado	45 - 54% D1 - D2	23 discreto	C	3.6 - 4.0	45 - 49% 3rd class	D 25%
Passing	10 moyen	5 - 5.5 apropado	40 - 44% D3	18 - 22 sufficiente	C-		40 - 44% Pass	E 10%
Fail	0 - 9 insuffisant	0 - 4.75 suspenso	0 - 39% E- F	0 - 17 respinto	D, E, F (FX)	4.1 - 5.0	0 - 39% Fail	No credit

Table 1: Grade equivalencies commonly used in HE internationally

The table is not to be used as an official or recommended conversion chart. Many discrepancies may appear within and between institutions. This model does not factor for group size, historical patterns of achievement for individual courses or differences in percentiles of registered students in any discipline. The suggested equivalences between norm-based references (expressed numerically) and criterion based (expressed

verbally) are imperfect and context-sensitive.

The conversion table aligns national scales in such a way that grades from one system can be understood in terms of another system. At first view, it may seem practical to use such a conversion chart when interpreting foreign transcripts. The purpose of this article is to emphasise that simple straight line conversion should never be the only means by which lecturers, administration, students and recruiters consider these data. A few examples will help demonstrate why such conversion tables are problematical and misleading.

In all the cases included in the table, a higher number is associated with a better grade except for Germany. Germany employs a highly unique grading scale which ranges from 1 to 5. The number 5 is a failing grade and the number 1 is the best grade (the lowest is the best). Additionally, four of the five possible grades are passing grades and the grade 5 leads to a no credit. In Sweden, four different grades are used, but business schools are likely to use only three (fail/pass/pass with honours or 3, 4, 5), collapsing numerical assignment into three categories of achievement without distinguishing between students within the category. Compare this to Italy's system which has a range of 1 to 30 where the grades 1 to 17 represent different degrees of failing, the grade of 30 corresponds to an A, and the grades of 27 to 29 generally correspond to a B when conversion practices take into consideration the recommended ECTS percentages of students earning these grades (Karran, 2004).

In Germany, five general categories indicate broad learning outcome distinctions on transcripts. Therefore, students are measured against fixed institutional thresholds that allow for many learning, teaching and assessment situations to be handled administratively with as little distinctions as possible. The German scale allows for decimals to be used (1.4; 2.3), but the use of a limited number of integrals establishes an easily recognisable relationship with the criterion they represent (excellent, very good, good, passing, fail). In Italy, the scale of 30 with passing grades ranging from 17 to 30 expands the evaluation message requiring more discursive explanation about where excellent, very good, good, pass and fail are clustered. While the German and Swedish systems use convenient numerical distinctions that recall broad qualitative messages, the Italian system contains no obvious connection between its use of integrals and the same basic range of pedagogical messages. It is likely that a Swede using the Italian grading system might require more practice and discursive advice than an Italian using the Swedish system.

Edward T. Hall, the anthropologist, might have qualified the Nordic scales as "low context", egalitarian, pragmatic and concerned with efficiency in communication where an attempt is made to be as unambiguous and empirical as possible, using a limited number of integrals to communicate basic degrees of achievement such as excellent, very good, good, pass, fail). The Italian scale would be best described as "high context", nuanced and concerned with ranking distinctions as it relies on subtle local "insider" information captured in number associations distributed in uneven patterns that require greater verbal explanation when transferred outside the local readership. These communication habits recall context-specific organisational norms that have been studied in business culture (Hall & Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 1980; Trompenaars, 1993). Such operational realities and cultural habits cannot easily be compared cross-nationally because of incompatible uses in numerical representation, different incremental values that may not be symmetrical within the scale, and culture-based assumptions about the goals of education and the types of messages sent to cohorts earning given grades. Consequently, grades cannot be represented accurately in another grading scale using simple numerical conversion procedures because grading scales are actually qualitative, cultural and criterion-based messages; revealing information about attitudes to education and individual and class achievement that directs the number and the percentage of students likely to obtain any grade. Translation (conveying meaning between language systems), rather than conversion (establishing numerical equivalencies) is likely to be more appropriate in comparing these separate cultural realities.

When failing corresponds to a large range of grades, rather than one absolute fail category, it is likely that students having a "high fail" are eligible for a make-up final exam rather than retaking an entire course. These compensation practices cannot be assumed and are generally specified in a diploma supplement (required in the E.U.) or transcript information sheet accompanying grades which is, unfortunately, not yet a standardised practice worldwide. The case in point of an Italian fail labelled as 17 is not likely to prompt the same compensation opportunities as an Italian failure earning 5. A failed course must be taken again, but a failed final exam resulting in a "high fail" might be eligible for a re-sit, "condonement" or other form of compensation. These borderline situations are encountered in every grading culture, but are likely to be resolved with local arrangements that deserve to be known. In other words, some international failing grades are equivalent to a non-credited course, but all scales of failure cannot be assumed to represent this same operational decision. Only by knowing what compensation practice is prescribed in a local institutional policy and the diverse methods of compensation made available, as well as the statistical distribution of grades among the cohort of learners, would help clarify low pass and fail grades communicated across systems. These situational realities often condition the lecturer's decision to use one or another fail grade because it prompts other educational decisions such as re-sit or curve procedures, encouragement or discouragement of a student.

Class size, programme requirements and size of institutions will generally influence how pass/fail and compensation policies for individual courses are implemented. Different evaluation policies exist even within nations, between institutions and inside the same programme. In a large university, the availability of many sections of the same course will allow students at different levels of the programme to take courses again and mix programme sequences. In these circumstances, students fail or credit courses rather than entire semesters and certain sequences can be interspersed over several semesters. In small programmes, with few students pursuing a degree, it is likely that semesters or yearly programme units are validated in lieu of courses because it is difficult to hold a student back within a programme sequence because of one failed course. Compensation and re-sit exam practices facilitate the management of such cases.

It follows, but cannot be empirically proven in the context of this paper, that institutions with compensation opportunities for courses in fixed yearly programme sequences may practice greater constraint in using an absolute fail feature than institutions which can enable students to retake failed courses without compromising a semester or yearly sequence. Here it is less culture than cohort size and institutional context that conditions grading trends, and undoubtedly assessment practices. These local features of grading and pass/fail protocol are not transparent on most transcripts. More importantly, international and mobile students and lecturers may not understand the repercussions of these local conditions. Test-taking strategies and interpretation of grade data may be based on erroneous assumptions.

Turning to the British percentage and “class” system outlined in the mock conversion table, it is noted that some British institutions choose to measure performance in terms of rank within the group rather than with a fixed incremental scale expressed in integrals: the higher the rank within a set group, the lower the number of students admitted in the range. In practice, the percentage of students awarded first class honours is not likely to be stable (5%? 2%? 10%?) and the percentage of declared first class honours has been proven to vary between subjects and for the same subject between universities (Chapman, 1997; Yorke *et al.*, 2002). Although the ranking mechanism is used in a number of different British business programmes, not all British institutions use them and practices vary widely across the UK.

The class system is a circumstantial mechanism, independent of any fixed grading theory, cohort size, norm-referenced curve or assessment policy. The actual percentage of first class honours beneficiaries may vary from year to year, from subject to subject, and from school to school. Such ranking systems situate students with respect to the performance of their current peers, not the set of all students taking a course over a period of many years, allowing educators to identify the outstanding students in a given teaching context, even in which everyone might fail. Class systems can be disadvantageous, especially in an international conversion process, because there are no fixed percentage requirements between echelons and there are no norm-referenced historical patterns that isolate basic institutional practices. The national, institutional, local or historical assumptions that can be made by participants within these systems become problematical to convey when transferred to other systems because the outside reader has no idea of how difficult or rare it is to achieve certain grades, nor can they assume that institutional grading policies resemble home practices.

The new recommendations for ECTS improve on class distinctions by requiring institutions to declare echelon percentages, size of reference group and distribution scales; pinning grading policy to international fairness standards, and emphasising the field and practical realities of grade distribution rather than attempting to convert one numerical system to another. This grade spread information helps to contextualise achievement in local terms, although other local learning features including the difficulty and level of courses, the ability of teachers and the validity of the learning measures, are to be sought elsewhere.

The 100 point grading scale is used in China, Japan, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Latin America and all the English-speaking countries, but local uses vary and the pass/fail mark should never be assumed. The U.S. 100 point grading scale requires a student to successfully complete 60 to 65% of an exam’s 100 points in order to pass (pass is a grade of C- or more). However, in the UK and in the Republic of Ireland a passing grade can be obtained at 40%. In Australia and Canada, 65% usually means very good and gets a B, 50 to 64% gets a satisfactory grade of C and less than 50% is failing. Pass marks situated between 40% to 65% were reported in the interviews as common in institutions across Asia and the Middle East and can often be traced to educational practices used by former colonial ties. These differences in the passing mark used for the same 100 point scale also prompt testing strategies, as a student in Ireland can pass an exam by only answering half of the questions correctly whereas in the U.S. they would need to correctly answer at least one third more. Before concluding that the 65% grade scale pushes for higher evaluation standards, it is necessary to point out that the pass/fail grade will influence how lecturers position exam questions, and define the purpose of the testing and weighting policies. When students and lecturers move across cultures, these assumptions in weighting for testing and evaluation can be confusing.

The French grading device involves a 20-point system in which 0 to 9 is considered unsatisfactory (also the case in Belgium and Portugal). Typically, university level courses have class averages ranging from 9 through 13, because tests are devised so that the grades of 18, 19 and 20 are virtually unattainable and local habit

leads teachers to avoid awarding 18 to 20 grades. Teachers offering testing devices that students easily master can be perceived as too easy, especially in HE where a lecturer's reputation is enhanced by low class averages and difficult exams. In this setting, low student performance equates to high teacher intellect, creating a culture of competition between students and an adversarial mood between motivated students and teachers. As a grade of 9 often allows students to take compensation exams to earn course credit, an absolute non-credit fail mark is in operational terms better converted at 8 or below. An excellent grade in France, given that the top range of grades on the scale is practically unattainable, amounts to 14, 15 and 16, which when mathematically converted into other grading systems places the 10% best French students in the international B category, which is inherently unfair. Many French students discover this inconvenience when applying to reputable MBA institutions in the U.S. which recruit partially based on GPA and undergraduate transcripts.

In the new European directive which prescribes grade conversion as a matter of cohort percentages, the top 10% of any class gets an A in the ECTS system, correcting this imbalance by factoring institutional and cohort achievement. Unfortunately, this conversion information is rarely available on European transcripts issued before 2009 and may still be converted based on mathematical computations when transferred outside of Europe. The use of percentages of grades earned still does not take into account the percentages of students likely to earn that grade, which will be lower in France the higher the level because cultural habit leads teachers to grade down. Grades of unachievable perfection, such as the 13 in Denmark or 10 in the Netherlands, may recall these practices. An attitude which can be described as "high power distance" may naturally emerge in some HE settings cross-nationally, where teachers and those in positions of perceived knowledge authority are expected to assert their dominance and be brilliant, and this is especially true of French universities and has been noted not only in academia, but also in the domains of science and business (Hofstede, 1980).

Evaluation scales containing unattainable grades reveal a knowledge community that considers learning within an indefinite achievement continuum, rather than a project with identifiable and finite outcomes. Evaluation policies with de-facto unattainable grades underline that the communication priority is placed with the reputation of the learning institution rather than with individual student records, career placement or international admissions concerns. Without prior understanding of these institution specific implicits, the straight mathematical conversions between France and the U.S. will systematically overrate American students going to France (because U.S. grades are likely to be issued to address the pragmatic concerns of career) and underrate French students going to the U.S. (the French grades are likely to be issued with the philosophical resolution that all knowledge is imperfect). Some institutions, realising the drawbacks of these conflicting policies, have been working to make their students more competitive by adjusting their grading scales, flying in the face of ECTS guidelines which have always emphasised the importance of maintaining the local system.

In the case of French business schools, it is unlikely that a complete revision of the grading apparatus is feasible given that the *Grandes Ecoles* recruit by competitive exam within France based on secondary school evaluation practices also employed in the *classes préparatoires* (undergraduate preparatory schools for engineering and business). As French grading scales are used to rank students for admission into other French schools and are contingent on habits of French teachers, French companies are likely to continue using a French analysis and understanding of transcripts and grades for a long time. The grading features specific to France may serve other embedded organisational practices and habits documented in cross cultural studies and in particular strong power distance, individualism, hierarchy and class concerns (Hofstede, 1980; Laurent, 1981, 1983, 1986). In the particular case of French business schools, these quirks are further exacerbated by the fact that French testing strategies pit students' course preparation against disciplinary theory and the mathematical disciplines are widely accepted as objective measures of student learning potential. Exams may emphasise a rationalisation process rather than test for any particular answer (a Cartesian approach), emphasising theoretical material and the acquisition of empirical data. The assessment trends are likely to emphasise mathematics and hard data acquisition because numerical tools are likely to be used preferentially in managerial decision-making processes (Paucar-Caceres, 2009).

As French institutions integrate more international students, hire international lecturers and send students abroad (OECD, 2008); the grading and evaluation practices will inevitably be affected by contact with other cultural norms. Many French business schools now employ multiple choice questionnaires, case studies, behavioural observation and other field evaluation methods. This makes it possible for lecturers to evaluate other forms of knowledge and students to earn higher grades, question assessment and take full stock of the subjectivity of the evaluation process. In personal interviews with French practitioners in the business schools, it became clear that these assessment alternatives might still be considered as less valid than final exams and comprehensive tasks relying on deduction, mathematics, quantitative mastery and conceptual knowledge. There was also substantial resistance to relinquishing the power teachers have over evaluation, with student self-evaluation and peer evaluation considered sub-standard. The attempts to normalise assessment and disciplinary contents in international business programmes have not yet effaced the

intellectual history and cultural learning habits typical of France, which place greater emphasis on the role of the teacher, the importance of thinking processes and the credit given to numerical creativity in problem-solving, rather than efficiency in problem solving. These idiosyncrasies of local grading habits are not at all obvious when converted to other fixed number scales.

In comparative studies of French, Greek, Italian and Dutch use of ECTS guidelines, differences in converting home grades to the ECTS have been found (Karran, 2005), despite prescriptive measures to alleviate national discrepancies outlined by the E.U. Other states have found internal means to mitigate the inconvenience and ambiguities created by conversions (Grosge & Barchiesi, 2007). This has led to recent recommendations to abandon the ECTS scales, which pose equivalency problems and communicate the criterion-referenced local scale along with a numerical explanation of grade distribution. Even within nations, indecision about the proper conversion techniques between a local scale and ECTS have been flagged, and point to an imperfect and subjective understanding of the limits and applications of conversion guidelines (Karran, 2004). In fact, any grading scale within and between nations can reflect different challenges for students and assumptions on the part of lecturers. Consequently, it is not the grading scale, but rather the culture, philosophy and educational practices of a given teacher, programme, institution or national education system that requires translation and interpretation rather than conversion of grading scales.

As educational policies, culture and idiosyncratic programme philosophies are not generally declared on a transcript; only grades published with an explanation of the grading scale and particularly the pass/fail mark, grade spread, cohort size and detailed assessment information with some historical perspective yield a fair picture of educational experience. Helpful details contextualising a student's grades might include information about class performance (mean grade average or grade spread) and criterion-based assessment sheets that describe what students have achieved in terms of knowledge, competency and critical skills in terms recalling the Dublin Level Descriptors, and going even further to include disciplinary information. A statement regarding educational and assessment philosophy (use of curves, sliding scales, disciplinary quirks, evaluation policies) is often warranted. Currently, these learning outcomes and local cultural habits are left undeclared, assumed and unquestioned; creating a difficult learning environment for international students and leading to unintentional but unfair recruitment and transfer practices.

The cultural implications of this broad review on international grading and assessment are worthy of further analysis. While the Germanic speaking countries such as Germany, Denmark and Sweden use grading systems with few levels of achievement (1 to 5 or 3, 4, 5), pitting a student's efforts to few but clear institutional assessment norms; other nations measure students' efforts against other students so that class grades are established by placing students within a hierarchical scale (based on 20 in France, Portugal, Belgium; 30 in Italy; 10 in Spain and Mexico). These features may recall patterns of rank made familiar and perhaps more acceptable by other historical, political and religious arrangements. Again, it is possible to express more nuances in Germanic systems by using decimals, but it is clear that each integral has a set relationship with broad criterion references (excellent, very good, good, pass). The British percentage system is pinned to circumstances in classrooms, allowing for a great deal of on-the-spot, even ad hoc interpretation and decision-making. These cultural characteristics place particular emphasis on personal liberty, value weak systems of institutional control, and trust in the ability of groups to work out problems according to local context.

In summary, the philosophy which governs the grading tool reveals important local educational assumptions; reflecting personal, institutional and historical problem-solving modes that are inherently cultural. Rather than efface these features using "infallible" conversion practices, it would seem an educational priority to preserve them so that international students are truly socialised into the subjective features that govern local teaching and learning situations (Witte, 2010b). These parameters are likely to re-surface in the foreign workplace and in social situations where evaluation and assessment continue to shape perceptions about thinking, being and doing.

In this overview of grading scales used internationally, and the conversion methods that allow for mobility between nations and cultures, it has been demonstrated that norm-based numerical systems are often disguised criterion-referenced tools, ill-adapted to mathematical conversion. This is already true within cultures and is even more apparent when moving between cultures. Like other conversion procedures that seek to integrate vastly different numerical systems such as monetary exchange rates, conversion is an imperfect and unstable variable that fluctuates with time and circumstance. Students, lecturers and institutions working between grading systems need translation/interpretation rather than conversion in order to heighten awareness and eliminate bias, as no standardised grading scale can be entirely independent of the educational assumptions that govern the methods, tools and outcomes associated with learning and teaching.

Methodological limitations

This paper draws primarily from first-hand experience, desk research, anecdotal data, and a panel of interviews conducted across cultures with those who grade and those who are graded. One major drawback is the absence of cross-institutional, cross-national, cross-disciplinary statistical data on grade attribution, grade spread, assessment practices and grading policies to take stock of the different operational realities of grading scales worldwide. This would require access to ample statistical sampling that most institutions consider as confidential. It would take years to process and undoubtedly require a team of coordinators working from distant sites. Devising the cartography of grading would be contingent on obtaining substantial statistical samples factoring for the differing sizes of institutions, national education sequences, local assessment philosophies, and external aggregates such as primary and secondary school grading norms, disciplinary quirks, and institutional particularities. The biggest risk in undertaking such a monumental task would be accumulating data that has no statistical significance at the end of the survey because grading, grading scales and evaluation policies are more art than science, and subject to the changing dispositions of people, contexts and cultures in a globalising world.

The internationalisation of programmes, and competition for students and accreditations, may be pushing institutions to use “international” grading scales (ABCDE) to efface local forms of assessment, and facilitate foreign enrolments and more study abroad students. It is difficult to assess how these scales are actually used from one institution or nation to another, and imitation between schools and the presence of international faculty and students might lead to yet new local applications and features of these international scales. However, techniques for converting grades are less important than an informed user community (lecturers, students, recruiters, institutions). Ambiguities created in cross-cultural grading create barriers to learning as students and lecturers struggle to express local notions of progress, achievement, failure and excellence. In addition to recognising conversion recommendations, it is crucial that international users of foreign transcripts should deepen their knowledge of the practices associated with national scales and local assessment perspectives because cultural and local features direct the unique circumstances and standpoint of teaching and learning around the world. By preserving the integrity of knowledge transmission systems as they have developed over time and circumstance, the educational community recognises that standardisation of grading norms is only a tool for global communication and not a substitute for the wealth of grading policies and practices that enrich teaching and learning exchanges taking place around the world today.

Recommendations

In spite of some methodological limitations, this field research opens new areas of investigation and allows some recommendations for schools faced with increasing mobility of students and a responsibility to employers and the community.

Converting grades from one national system to another requires substantial country specific knowledge, institutional familiarity, educational savvy and intercultural insight. Processing grade data cannot be reduced to mathematical conversion and statistical adjustment, although the ECTS 2009 guidelines bring substantial clarity in comparison to earlier practices. Only conversion practices that consider qualitative, norm referenced and percentage scales factoring for cohort size (reference group), class performance, historical records on a given course, and other idiosyncratic features of local systems, can be effective and fair means to evaluate students. These practices could be enhanced with more qualitative information about educational and assessment philosophies practiced around the world. Lecturers, students, administrators and recruiters should be more mindful of the context-specific use of grades across cultures. These are, in fact, the general guidelines now issued by ECTS, but documents published before 2009 are unlikely to carry this level of detail, and will require greater cultural competency to publish and understand.

As business and engineering schools have the highest number of mobile students worldwide (OECD, 2008; UNESCO, 2009), they should be more proactive in promoting grading excellence and taking advantage of the learning involved in grading across cultures. In the wake of rising student mobility, grading and assessment should be reflected more thoroughly and critically into AACSB and EQUIS concerns. Rather than setting an objective for international grading norms, a recommendation for multiple systems of grading and evaluation, with explicit emphasis on learning outcomes as well as familiarity with multiple scales of assessment, might be a more authentic tool for business school given that the academic experience generally prepares students for professional realities that are likely to be based on local assessment work place practices, far removed from the normative contexts prescribed by the E.U.

Transcripts must always be accompanied with a detailed diploma supplement (now a requirement for E.U. institutions) or transcript guide outlining institutional policies about how grades are issued, degree requirements, credit norms etc. In particular, several different expressions of performance relying on different types of national grading scales would be helpful in communicating educational data across cultures.

The simple pass/fail mechanism sometimes substituting for a letter or number grade used to transfer credit for study abroad students effaces an important learning component of foreign immersion, which is to participate and adapt to a new environment and new social and learning norms. Relying on pass/fail mechanisms for transfer and study abroad credit, and avoiding foreign grade transfer, effaces an important piece of a given student's performance, behaviour and adaptation in a different context. Exchange students should be graded in the language of their host institutions and the criterion value of that grade should count towards their home degrees. This is an argument for the value of international education experienced in the same way as domestic nationals with acute realisation of how thinking, being and doing are evaluated in a local context.

Transcripts or grading devices best serve academic and professional purposes by integrating at least two grading schemes; the first referring to the individual student's results expressed in a home grading scale and the second a comparative table using class percentages and grade spread, supplemented with a learning outcomes data sheet tailored for an international readership. National and international scales each have specific uses and pedagogical interest, especially when supported by a brief statement of situational, national or institutional evaluation and assessment orientations: translating and interpreting local realities so that distant others can fully grasp their meaning.

Conclusion

Translating one student's educational history and achievement into a foreign educational norm proves challenging. International students trying to perform academically within new assessment contexts will undoubtedly experience differences in skills emphasis, motivation prompts and learning expectations. Lecturers teaching abroad may be surprised by different motivation strategies linked to the use of grading scales that have local meaning and application. Implicit factors in educational philosophies need to be taken into account in order to issue grades, transfer credits or interpret data on a transcript. Such factors may include the number of degrees awarded in a given discipline as a percentage of the number of candidates for that degree; official grading and curve policies; admission standards; domestic employment opportunities; degree requirements; differences between public and private institutions; assessment norms within certain disciplines; faculty recruitment and training; etc. As educational policy and practice is contingent on many aggregates of culture, implicit features must be assumed in any explicit grading system. Furthermore, it has often been assumed that numbers are a-cultural, unlike words, which are pinned to subjective life experiences. This paper demonstrates some of the cultural uses of numbers and runs counter to widespread thinking that numbers represent universal values.

As the job market evolves and companies diversify their personnel, recruitment standards will need to be systematically redefined so as to question all of the assumptions made concerning the hiring of diverse personnel, and assessing degree equivalencies and academic achievement. Some universities and recruiters are missing admissions opportunities by eliminating students based on diploma equivalencies, relying too heavily on standardised exams such as GMAT/TOEFL, or using grade point averages and conversion tables without understanding the cultural specificity of certain educational systems and the ways in which grades are attributed. Greater awareness about grading systems and philosophies used around the world is needed if transcript interpretation is to be ethical, effective and fair. Establishing an international standard that successfully and fairly allows institutions to situate international candidates on a comparative scale, while respecting cultural diversity and disciplinary particularities, will be a challenge faced by the educational and professional community in the coming years.

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