

Some thoughts on university grading systems

MM SHAHIDUL HASSAN

GRADING is an integral part of a student's life. Grades or marks are the primary means of evaluating a student's academic performance. There is no single, uniform grading system followed in the world as different levels and institutions of education use different grading systems. We can also see this difference in the institutions in Bangladesh.

There are different GPA and CGPA systems for school, college and university. We follow the 5-grade point system at SSC and HSC levels and 4-grade point at the university level. The University Grants Commission (UGC) of Bangladesh has approved a scheme for universities. A+ (A plus) is the highest grade, associated with 80 percent accuracy or higher, B+ with 65-69 and so on. F grade is given for a performance with 40 percent accuracy or less.

On the other hand, A (not A+) is the highest grade at the Institute of Business Administration (IBA) whereas A+ is the highest grade used by Dhaka University (DU). UGC is favouring a uniform grading system for universities. Almost all private universities, however, practice a grading system different from UGC's. I know one private university that follows a system where grade point is 4 for both letter grades A and A+. Letter grade A+ is for 97-100 numerical scores, and an A is for 90-below 97.

The issues of grading continue to challenge educators, but today we know more than ever before about the

complexities involved and how certain practices can influence teaching and learning. Before bringing the issue of adopting a uniform grading system into discussion, perhaps it is important for us to know what grade really means and which practices benefit students and encourage learning.

Although student assessment has been a part of teaching and learning for centuries, grading is a relatively recent phenomenon. The ancient Greeks used assessments as formative, not evaluative, tools. Students demonstrated, usually orally, what they had learned, giving teachers a clear indication of which topics required more work or instruction. In the United States, Yale University first used the numerical scales in 1813 and employed a scale of 4 which is used in universities today. It was in 1897 at Mount Holyoke College that letter grades tied to a numerical or percentage scale were first used. The college awarded students in percentages 95 to 100 an A, 85 to 94 a B, 76 to 84 a C, 75 a D—the lowest passing grade—and anything below 75 an E, which indicated a failing grade. Our modern F grade was not used, but this system was the beginning of the relatively standard grades we see today.

At most colleges and universities, the letter grades also denote the point scale: A for 4.0, B for 3.0, C for 2.0, and D for 1.0. At present, a variety of grading systems are used in US education. The decision on what grading system to use is a matter within the exclusive authority of the individual school or

higher education institution. For example, norm-referenced grading systems are based on a pre-established formula regarding the percentage or ratio of students within a whole class who will be assigned each grade or mark. A norm-referenced grading system might look like (USNEI, Feb 2008): A (Excellent) = top 10 percent of class, B (Good) = next 20 percent of

there might be no one or any number of students who score high enough to achieve a grade of excellent, or who fail. Criterion-referenced systems might look like: A (Excellent) = 95-100 or 90-100, B (Good) = 85-95 or 80-90, C (Fair) = 75-85 or 70-80, D (Poor) = 65-75 or 60-70, and F (Failure) = -65 or -60.

The British Undergraduate Honours Degree Classification System is different

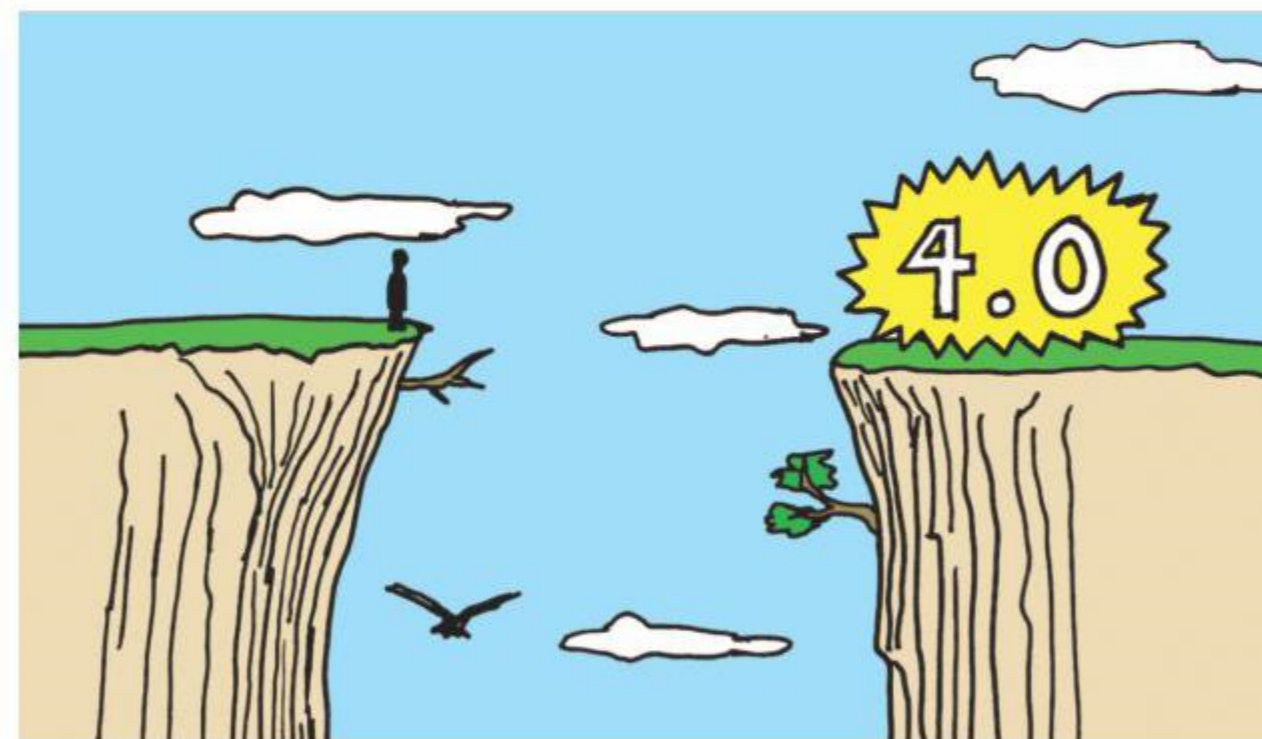


ILLUSTRATION: JOAQUIN KUNKEL

class, C (Average, Fair) = next 30 percent of class, D (Poor, Pass) = next 20 percent of class, F (Failure) = bottom 20 percent of class.

Criterion-referenced grading systems are based on a fixed numeric scale, usually equated to a letter mark. The scale does not change regardless of the quality, or lack thereof, of the students. For example, in a class of 100 students,

from that of the United States. Degree evaluation is done with "class" in university (e.g., First Class, Second Class, Third Class, Pass). Recently, many universities have started to believe that the honours degree classification system (HDC) is no longer fit for purpose. Following the recommendation of the Burgess report about the honours degree classification system in 2007, a

GPA scale, tied to percentage marks and letter grades, was recommended for use nationally, to run in parallel with the honours degree classification system.

Like the British marks-based grading system, Secondary School Certificate (SSC) and Higher School Certificate (HSC) results in Bangladesh were given on the basis of total marks. The GPA system was introduced in SSC in 2001 and in HSC in 2003. For universities, the UGC grading scale reflects a 10-point increment scale. But private universities practice a point increment scale varying from 11 to 13. Public universities evaluate students' learning ability by class tests and a final exam with 70 percent marks. With 70 percent marks in the final exam, it is quite hard even for good students to score 90 percent marks. If public universities assess students' performance by three exams, class tests and assignments or projects, then they can use the North American grading standards. Grades should be such that they benefit education in the best possible manner and the students' learning ability.

Each letter grade generalises a certain percentile range. The letter grade C with 70-75 and D with 60-65, practiced by private universities, seem to be high. If private universities award students in percentages of 65 to 70 instead of 70-75 a C, and 55 to 60 a D, this percentile distribution will give more students an opportunity to achieve better grades.

MM Shahidul Hassan is Vice Chancellor, East West University.
Email: vc@ewubd.edu