

# Memo



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TO Faculty Boards  
FROM Charles Beach, Chair, Senate Committee on Academic Procedures  
DATE March 6, 2009  
SUBJECT Academic Structure: Official Grading and Credit Units

The Senate Committee on Academic Procedures is reviewing the content of Queen's Official Transcript and in particular is planning to recommend to the Senate a standard method of recording and reporting academic elements, specifically grading and credit units, at Queen's University.

Currently, there is inconsistency among Faculties and Schools when dealing with grading 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.

The University is being 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 the PeopleSoft product. This software product provides an occasion to move forward to a system of reporting student grades and course weights that is universally understood and consistent with the most prevalent practices in Canada, the United States, and Europe.

A review of selected Canadian universities and American universities, and European universities (European Credit Transfer System) has confirmed the following (see Appendix A for specific references):

## Grading

Alphabetical grades with a grade point average (GPA) is the prevalent official grading system in Canada, the U.S., and Europe (ECTS standard). In some institutions, instructors may enter grades as percentages or as alphabetical (letter) grades and the official grade reported is alphabetical. There is some variation among universities in the conversion equivalencies for percentage and letter grades which is determined by individual universities but consistent across programs. Queen's 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 our students. Other non-evaluative grades are also used at the majority of universities canvassed, normally Pass (P), Fail (F), Audit (AU) and Transfer Credit (TR).

## Credit Units

Earned credits are identified by the term "credit hours" or "credit units" (or simply "credits"). These credit units, normally 3.0 per term and 6.0 per two-term session (Fall-Winter) with the normal requirement for a 4-year (honours) degree of 120 credit units, represent best practices in curriculum and student transfer options through the reduction of human resource hours spent in assessing and assigning transfer credits and the ease of communication from students to institution, within the institution, and from institution back to students. 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." Typically, 3.0 credit units represent a one-term course and 6.0 credit units a two-

term 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 credit units. Canadian, American and other international schools surveyed indicate that the 3.0/6.0 scale is universally understood and would not disadvantage Queen's students. Input from Queen's international and exchange offices confirms that the 3.0/6.0 credit scale would benefit our exchange students as well as our partners for ease of transfer credit assessment.

### **Proposal for Queen's**

SCAP considered and approved the following motions at recent meetings to adopt University-wide standard official grading and course weighting systems: (It is important to note that these items constitute how academic structure will be *recorded and reported*, not how academic programs are *structured or delivered*.)

Motion – moved and carried:

That SCAP recommend to Senate that Queen's adopt alphabetical grading with GPAs (the specific letter grading system to be determined); instructors may enter a percentage grade, but the official grade reported will be alphabetical.

Motion – moved and carried

That SCAP recommend to Senate that Queen's adopt a credit unit system that assigns a weight of 3.0 credit units to a one-term course and 6.0 credit units to a two-term course, with provision for variation of assigned weights within that scale.

The changes would become effective concurrent with the transition to the new student system in 2010-2011 or 2011-2012.

I am writing to you at this time to request that this matter be discussed at your Faculty Board in March and/or April and that you provide support and/or feedback (comments, concerns, suggestions) to my attention by April 24, 2009, for SCAP's consideration prior to submitting recommendations for Senate to consider at its May meeting. The University Registrar, Jo-Anne Brady, and I would be pleased to come to your Faculty Board meeting to speak to this matter and answer questions. Please let Rebecca Coupland know if we would be invited to attend ([rebecca.coupland@queensu.ca](mailto:rebecca.coupland@queensu.ca)).

SCAP will be striking a working group to develop a grading system with translation table for alphabetical grades to percentage grades and GPA. In your feedback, please include any considerations for establishing the system (e.g., degree of "granulation A, B, C, versus A+, A, A-, B+ ..., the level of a B or B- grade [65% versus 70%,], etc.) and/or the name of an individual(s) your Faculty/School would like to see consulted by the working group in its deliberations.

SCAP will be reviewing the options for the representation of historical transcripts in the new Student System and will report on the options and its determination at a later date.

I thank you for your attention to this important matter. Queen's University faces a unique opportunity to take advantage of this system change and to amend our Transcript content to reflect more universally understood practices which will provide a direct benefit for our students and graduates as well as simplify administration and reduce the requirement for staff resources in some areas of academic administration.

Sincerely

Charles Beach  
Chair, SCAP



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## Backgrounder

March 26, 2009

### Arts and Science responds to fiscal situation

As part of the effort to address the serious financial challenges it faces, Queen's has asked all academic and administrative units across the University to cut 15 per cent from their budgets over the next three years. A number of other factors increases the cut in the Faculty of Arts and Science to 20 per cent.

Arts and Science comprises approximately half of the University. The Faculty is the largest at Queen's, with 27 departments, 455 permanent full-service faculty members and about 10,000 students.

Currently, there are 160 degree types, leading to over 1,600 possible concentration combinations among the physical sciences, languages, social sciences, humanities and creative arts within Arts and Science. This level of choice is highly valued by students.

There are no plans to close any departments or programs.

One proposal in the Faculty's long-term cost-cutting strategy is to suspend admissions to the degree types that have had fewer than 25 students enrolled over the past several years, and explore ways to restructure the offerings so as to be more efficient, while maintaining the range and excellence of our academic programs.

Approximately 40 degree types have been identified, affecting less than 5 per cent of students.

All students currently enrolled in these concentration combinations will be able to continue their studies in their concentration of choice and complete their degrees as planned.

The concentration combinations within these 40 degree types range across the Faculty. Degree types and concentrations across all disciplines may be affected. These include most Science Medials, including Statistics, Computing and Chemistry, and several Subjects of Specialization; all Special Field concentrations, including Canadian Studies, Medieval Studies, and Spanish and Latin American Studies; and several language concentrations, including the Majors in German and Spanish.

Starting in the next registration cycle, new admissions to the 40 degree types and their concentration combinations would be suspended unless they can be restructured to be sustainable, given current resources. This will require rethinking what courses are required, who would teach them, and when they would be offered. Some departments, including fine arts and linguistics, have already successfully engaged in this process.

All department heads and undergraduate Chairs have been aware of these proposals since January, have been consulted and are working to focus resources to continue providing sustainable high quality programs within the current fiscal environment. The proposed changes in Arts and Science have been presented to the Faculty's Committee of Departments and will be discussed at the next meeting of the Faculty Board on April 3.

All affected degree combinations will continue to be reviewed to determine their future. A more extensive curriculum review will take place within Arts and Science over the next year. The review will confirm or revise the Faculty's pedagogical goals and consider broader reforms, which will be presented to the Curriculum Committee and Faculty Board for approval.

At Queen's, this initiative in Arts and Science has become part of a broader curriculum review. Vice-Principal (Academic) Patrick Deane has recently released a discussion paper that explores the need to reform the curriculum to ensure academic excellence in a fast-changing world.

Many other universities in Ontario and beyond are faced with similar budget cuts, and are also looking at ways to streamline their academic offerings.

## **Related links:**

Principal Tom Williams' February 26<sup>th</sup> Report to the Community on the University's Financial Situation:

<http://www.queensu.ca/principal/news/reporttocommunity09-02-26.html>

Vice-Principal Deane's discussion paper on curriculum renewal:

<http://www.queensu.ca/vpac/curriculumdiscussion.html>

What other universities are doing in this financial context:

<http://www.queensu.ca/principal/financialupdate/otheruniversities.html>

Arts and Science website: <http://queensu.ca/artsci>