

**EDUCATION OR GRADING?  
ARGUMENTS FOR A NON-SUBDIVIDED HONOURS DEGREE**

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**ABSTRACT**

A fundamental difficulty prevents the incorporation of recent HE initiatives ("Enterprise", "Capability", etc) into the basic HE course structure. The new initiatives are based on the explicit description of complex learning outcomes, and therefore require criterion-referenced, pass-fail assessment. The classified honours degree, the centre of the current HE course structure, is (in contrast) a norm-referenced format which requires the comparison of candidates with each other. The full implementation of the new initiatives therefore requires the replacement of the classified honours degree with a Non-Subdivided Honours Degree, awarded on a pass-fail basis. Such a change would be a valuable educational reform, since the existence and continued influence of the classified honours degree is not a consequence of any justifiable curriculum theory but an historical and a cultural phenomenon, explicable in terms of widespread but questionable commonsense practices, by the ambiguities of the university tradition, and by the universities' current role in social selection.

**Introduction: Higher Education Innovations and the Problem of Assessment**

Recent innovations in the work of UK higher education institutions have begun to transform some important conceptions. Course structures are now likely to be modular and to allow credit accumulation and transfer, which has involved rethinking notions of "progression". The move to widen access to higher education has expanded our idea of an undergraduate to include "candidates qualified as much by experience as by examinations" (Ball, 1990, p.36). It is now increasingly proposed that a degree level curriculum may legitimately include knowledge derived from work based learning (Duckenfield and Stirner, 1992) and the accreditation of prior experiential learning (Evans, 1988). Partnership schemes between universities and employers are beginning to suggest that notions of "teaching staff" may need to be expanded to include workplace "mentors" providing support, guidance, and assessment during periods of work-based learning incorporated into sandwich courses and professional degrees (Employment Department, 1990), and even in otherwise academically focused

courses. "Assessment" may include profiling (Assiter and Fenwick, 1992) and even self-assessment by students (Duckenfield and Stirner, 1992, p.33).

But what has *not* changed, in spite of these major developments, is the basic assessment format, the classified honours degree; and it is the main purpose of this paper to argue that the newly flexible conceptions of higher education curriculum structures and definitions of knowledge require a new assessment format at the centre of the higher education system, namely a non-subdivided honours degree, awarded on a pass/fail basis.

The problem which requires the introduction of a non-subdivided honours degree can be presented in the form of a simple contrast. On the one hand, the broader conceptions of curriculum, learning, and knowledge have tended to be associated with assessment formats based on public and detailed specification of criteria and assessment outcomes based on a pass/fail (criterion-referenced) decision. The educational advantages of this format are that it

allows increased precision, clarity, and individualisation, and makes the assessment process both informative and supportive. It also means that a positive assessment outcome is potentially available to *all* candidates, as long as they meet the specified criteria. (See Burke, 1989; UDACE, 1990; Jessup, 1991).

On the other hand (and in marked contrast), the classified honours degree, the central point of reference for English higher education (CNAAC, 1991, p.65), is basically a norm-referenced system: by definition, only a few candidates can be awarded first class honours, namely those who are "outstanding" (CNAAC, 1989a, Regulations 28 & 34); a larger minority will obtain an upper second class degree, those ranked as "above average" (CNAAC, *ibid*); most candidates ("the average") will gain a lower second class degree (CNAAC, *ibid*). Furthermore, there is no public specification of the nature of the criteria in terms of which this comparative assessment is made (CNAAC, 1989b, p.33). In both respects (the lack of specified criteria and the assumption that assessment outcomes will reflect the pattern of a normal distribution curve), the classified honours degree is fundamentally at variance with the educational philosophy and procedures characteristic of the innovations already referred to, which may be summed up as the "New Higher Education" (see Winter, 1991).

In response to this problem, the assessment issue is currently being posed in a way which takes for granted the structures and assumptions of the classified honours degree, namely: how can the New Higher Education modes of learning, knowledge, curriculum progression, and staffing be accommodated within current assessment categories and procedures? More precisely: can work based learning, accreditation of prior learning, portfolios of evidence documenting professional competences, etc be *graded* in such a way that they can play their part in contributing to the final classification of the candidate's degree? For example: can the problem be solved simply by attaching more detailed criteria to classes of honours?

My answer to both these questions is: no. Work-based knowledge, prior experiential learning, professional competences assessed in the workplace, etc are too varied, too individual, too context-dependent, too far outside the control of the university, for assessors to have confidence that judgements beyond pass/fail could be agreed as consensual and accepted as legitimate by those being assessed. The New Higher Education represents a weakening of important boundaries between cultural categories, between academic and non-academic knowledge, between work and learning, between teachers and taught, between the assessors and those being assessed. This creates a shift in the basis of legitimate authority (resembling closely the problems outlined by Bernstein (1971) arising from the introduction of similar flexibilities into the secondary school curriculum in the 1960s) and the new structures are not *strong* enough to bear the authoritative delivery of graded assessments. As a student, I may accept "57%" or "lower second" as your verdict upon my solution to the problem you set in your examination paper; but not upon my portfolio evidencing what I have learned from the last fifteen years of my life. As a student, I may accept (for now) "third

class" as a verdict, at the end of the course, from a university lecturer whose specialist expertise I am in no position to challenge; but not from my workplace mentor, who is basically a colleague rather than a cultural authority, whose limitations in our shared work context are perfectly clear to me, and with whom I must continue to work for the foreseeable future. On the other hand, I *will* accept a suggestion that in this or that area the adequacy of my work requires further evidence in order to be beyond doubt.

What, then, is the nature of the choice? Is the New Higher Education to be rejected as threatening to undermine the procedures and relationships of a fine educational tradition, inspired by a crude definition of the university as a factory producing marketable skills in order to improve the international competitiveness of the national economy? (See DES, 1985, paras 1.2, 1.3; DES, 1991, para 10; Employment Department, 1990, p.5; Jessup, 1991, pp.6-7) Again, my answer is: no. The New Higher Education is not *merely* an attempt to introduce employment values into the academy. Its emphasis upon criterion-referenced assessment and upon the detailed elaboration of required learning outcomes is also part of a serious attempt to embody a number of respectable educational principles: a learner-centred pedagogy, access to educational opportunity for the culturally disadvantaged, precision and justice in assessment, the encouragement of student autonomy, and the integration of theory and practice (Employment Department, 1990, p.88 ff.; Jessup, 1991, pp. 3-5; Winter, 1992). Certainly, the New Higher Education poses a challenge to a number of current higher education practices, but our response must be to distinguish between those current practices whose value requires us to preserve them, and those whose shortcomings are such that they are best abandoned. It is my contention that the classified honours degree falls into this latter category.

In criticising the classified honours degrees one certainly risks unpopularity in some quarters, but one finds oneself nevertheless in academically respectable company (see, for example Oxtoby, 1969; Heywood, 1989; Countryman, 1990). Alison Utley, writing recently in the Times Higher Educational Supplement, quoted a London University professor as saying that the system was "purely arbitrary" (Utley, 1991) and went on to quote no less a figure than the Chair of London University's Academic Council as saying: "the [honours degree] system operates a bit like folklore" (Utley, 1991), which prompted no less a figure than the editor of the Times Higher Educational Supplement, writing the Editorial for the same issue, to go even further: "In fact, degree classifications are a sham" (THES, May 3rd, 1991).

In the next three sections of the paper, I shall attempt to support such criticisms, not by elaborating them, (since the technical arguments concerning the inevitable lack of reliability and validity are well known) but by arguing that any plausibility that the classified honours degree may appear to possess rests on the ambiguities of its history and on social pressures and conventions, rather than on justified educational principles, and that it can

therefore be safely abandoned. The final section presents and justifies a positive alternative, namely the concept of a non-subdivided honours degree.

### **Historical Glimpses: The Origins of Honours Classification and the Ancient Vocational Tradition**

This section is intended to convey two reminders: firstly, that the higher education tradition, although long, is rather ambiguous with respect to notions of "pure scholarship" which tend to be invoked in opposition to the recent vocationally oriented initiatives; secondly, that the classified honours degree, although surrounded by an aura of hallowed tradition, is itself a relatively recent innovation.

#### Origins of the Honours Classification

No-one seems to have written a general history of assessment categories, so the following observations are often rather localised. In the University of Cambridge, at least, the honours degree seems to have been introduced in the eighteenth century as a specific and practical quality assurance strategy to deal with scandalously lax and corrupt procedures for the award of a degree. For example, the rules for the award of a degree at Cambridge in the late 16th century required only attendance at lectures, and since this was not enforced, the basic requirement became merely one of residence for a stated period (Winstanley, 1935, p.43). By the eighteenth century, examinations had become "more of a rite than a test" because the assessment task (disputation in Latin) had become so divorced from the actual capacities of the candidates that "disputation" often "consisted of a parrot-like repetition of a few set sentences" (op cit., p.52). Winstanley describes how a Dr Richard Watson, Regius Professor of Divinity, took charge of the situation by dividing candidates into three groups (the top 25%, the middle 50% and the bottom 25%) on the basis of their previous work and examined them separately (op cit., p.51), which prevented "flagrant acts of partiality" on the part of powerful patrons (op cit., p.56) at the cost of largely predetermining the results of the examination (op cit., p.51).

Another process was also at work. In the nineteenth century, degrees with honours were awarded only to a minority of students, the majority (70%) receiving pass degrees (Tillyard, 1913, p.184). The honours degree emerged as the main category at the expense of the pass degree by the familiar process whereby the relative value of a given qualification gradually declines in the same way as a coinage is gradually devalued and lower denominations are withdrawn (see Dore, 1976). Tillyard quotes the opinion of the Rector of Lincoln College, Oxford, writing in 1866: the pass degree is "a nullity": "the Honours students are the only students who are undergoing any educational process which it can be considered as a function of a University either to impart or to exact . . . .The present standard

of honours must become the qualification for the degree. The BA is superfluous and must be dropped" (Tillyard, 1913, p.184).

The current structure of honours classifications (first, upper and lower second, third) did not become a consensual arrangement until much more recently. Tillyard, writing in 1913, laments the variety of assessment formats then in use at Cambridge, for example: three classes of Honours "qualified by marks of distinction" (Mathematics), three classes each with three divisions (Classics), a rank ordering of *all* candidates (Law) (Tillyard, op cit., p.370). This latter format is an interesting example of the tradition of comparing candidates with each other; the "pass list" was earlier known as the "Ordo Senioritas" (Winstanley, 1935, p.49).

### The Academic and the Sacred

Since the publication of G H Newman's *The Idea of a University* in 1852 (Newman, 1982), university culture has afforded a special value to "pure" academic study ("pure" research, for example, has a higher status than "applied" research), but it is important to remember that universities have an ancient link with *professional* education. The seven "Liberal Arts" (Grammar, Rhetoric, Logic, Arithmetic, Geometry, Astronomy, and Music) were preliminary studies, undertaken prior to entering one of the three "Faculties": Theology, Law, or Medicine (Tillyard, 1913, pp.-3). Hence, medieval universities "were inextricably bound up with utilitarian values. They evolved as institutional responses to the pressures to harness educational forces to the professional, ecclesiastical, and governmental requirements of society" (Cobban, 1975, p.8). So current tensions have a long tradition behind them. Cobban reports the complaints of *thirteenth century* scholars that the study of "humane letters" in the universities was being overtaken by the study, for pecuniary motives, of law and medicine (Cobban, op cit., p.18).

However, it was the ecclesiastical profession which was most influential in shaping the early form and meaning of university education, including the awarding of degrees: "Our college language is derived from the church and monastery . . . In the writings of the apostolic fathers . . . great stress is laid on these distinct orders or degrees . . . the gifts of the Holy Spirit, it is said are sevenfold; and there are seven ranks of ecclesiastical degrees." (Dyer, 1814, pp. 258-9). This serves to remind us that the award of a degree was not, originally, a competition or a comparison between candidates, with the emphasis on differentiated outcomes, but an event with a single outcome, namely the *initiation* of candidates into a new social status with its new set of vocational responsibilities: "Certificates of proficiency were awarded at four stages and were called Degrees or steps, *gradus*, because they marked the point at which a student had arrived" (Tillyard, 1913, p.3). Tillyard, though he wished to bring order and effectiveness to university assessment, was highly suspicious of competitive examinations, commenting that although competition

produced hard-working students, "beneath the brilliant show of College exercises and prizes was concealed a starved and shrivelled understanding" (Tillyard, *op cit.*, p.102).

In an important respect, the terms "competition" and "initiation" sum up the two basic alternative models of selection for privileged status, involving contrasting criteria, procedures, and values. One might indeed suggest that the notorious "corruption" of the eighteenth century universities represented the inevitable confusion as to criteria for competence and authority during the shift from a sacred to a secular culture. But this shift is, of course, only relative; contemporary culture is at the very least haunted by a desire to preserve some remnants of the sacred, and this provides an important (if submerged) influence upon debates about higher education.

In order to understand the operation of this influence, it is important to remember that "the medieval university operated as a teacher-training system: a degree meant a permission to begin to teach" (Daly, 1961, p.122; see also Tillyard, 1913, p.3). This is a further reminder that the award of a degree represented an initiation into a social role, and also that the activities of the university (like other institutions) included a concern to maintain itself in being, as a community of teachers and scholars. In other words, the purpose underlying the award of a university degree was "academic" not in the sense of "knowledge of a discipline as an end in itself" (see Newman, 1982, p.77) but as a display of the sort of competences which would be important in the *vocational* task of *teaching* that discipline, where teaching is conceived as the transmission of knowledge in the continuation of a sacred cultural tradition.

Furthermore, once it is recognised that the academic life is one particular professional role (and one in which higher education institutions have a natural vested interest) the confrontational debate concerning academic and vocational values takes on a different meaning. The claim that academic degrees must select "the best minds" (leading to charges of "elitism") becomes understandable as the self-justification of an institution concerned to recruit the best candidates for its own particular purposes. But these institutional purposes were given a general cultural resonance, in medieval times, by the ecclesiastical dimension of the university: knowledge was essentially a mastery of *holy* texts (Foucault, 1970, p.34), the transmission of knowledge was a *sacred* vocation, the community of scholars was a sort of priesthood, the "ivory tower" a temple. Selection of "the best minds" (for the job) was an initiation into a status of divinely sanctioned and *universal* significance.

To sum up, the higher education tradition of assessment does *not* begin and end with the competitive fourfold honours degree classification system; it must (on the contrary) be seen as a contemporary format, which is no more likely to endure than the variety of formats it has replaced. Furthermore, the New Higher Education initiatives are not, it would appear, wholly alien to the university tradition of assessment, as soon as we are reminded, by these brief historical glimpses, that the tradition also includes, alongside competition for different grades in demonstrating academic knowledge, a contrary emphasis on awarding a simple "pass" in

recognition of a given stage of proficiency and professional competence. We are also alerted, however, to the possibility that current debates about the nature of higher education will still be haunted by an ancient conflict between the rival status of sacred and practical knowledge.

### **Classified Honours Degrees and the Idea of Meritocracy**

The argument of the previous section was that our sense of the sacrosanct quality of the classified honours degree has its origin in the contingencies of history. The argument to be presented in this section and the next is that our conviction of its justifiability, as an assessment format, continues to rest upon a set of general cultural assumptions, rather than upon any rigorously argued educational principles.

Let us begin by reminding ourselves of the basic question. How can we explain why it seems perfectly sensible to assess and report the outcomes of educational processes (in every sphere of activity, from Classics and Geography to Nursing and Engineering) by summarising the enormous volume and variety of evidence provided by students' work into four simple categories, the outstanding, the above average, the average, and the (merely) satisfactory? (CNSA, 1989a, Regulations 28, 34) The question is particularly intriguing since it takes but a cursory inquiry to uncover accusations, by writers with respectable academic credentials, that the classified honours degree is unreliable (Klug, 1977, p.19; Heywood, 1989, pp.51-5), uninformative (Oxtoby, 1969, p.77; Klug, op cit., pp.15-16), secretive (Countryman, 1990), outdated (Oxtoby, op cit., p.68), and arbitrary (Utlely, 1991). How, then, can we explain its continuation? I shall try to provide an explanation by interpreting the classified honours degree as part of a general set of conventional assumptions, whose purpose is to provide a common-sense justification for a particular set of norms, values, and social interests. The classified honours degree, in other words, is part of a common-sense orthodoxy; hence its remarkable capacity to survive (so far) the analytical criticisms of educationalists. Let us then examine the assumptions and values embodied in the assessment categories of the classified honours degree.

#### Classification: Open Competition or The Verdict of Authority?

The essence of the four honours categories is that they create a public comparison among those assessed; students are publicly proclaimed to be better or worse than others. In what way they are better or worse is, in contrast, not publicly proclaimed (in accessible assessment criteria) but is assumed to be generally understood:

"Most assessments in higher education have been conducted by (sic) a *tacit* acceptance of both strategies [norm-referencing and criterion-referencing]. Examiners have tended to *hold in their minds a personal sense* of the course objectives . . .and of the overall performance of

the relevant set of candidates. *In neither sense, though, are the standards . . . normally set down on paper.*" (CNAА, 1989b, p.33 [emphasis added])

But this "personal sense" of appropriate criteria is assumed to be shared not only by experienced assessors but also by newly appointed staff, which (again) suggests that the underlying criteria at work are part of a widely diffused set of values and assumptions.

The mysteriousness of the criteria for comparison is only partially clarified by the fact that they produce assessment outcomes which follow a normal distribution curve: the characteristics of students in the top and the bottom categories are deemed to be relatively rare compared with those in the two middle categories. (CNAА, 1989a, Regulations 28, 34) This means, of course, that any institution or member of staff awarding first class honours to the majority of a substantial group of students would not be congratulated on excellent teaching but ridiculed for misunderstanding the nature of the system. Indeed, *any* increase in the proportion of good degrees leads immediately to the suspicion of falling standards (THES, 1992, September 18th). This problem would not disappear even if detailed descriptions were provided for the meaning of the various honours categories: the essence of the problem lies in using the assumption of a fixed distribution of ability as the basis for assessment decisions.

On the other hand, the normal distribution curve gives only a very rough guide in predicting the assessment outcomes for any given group of students. John Heywood quotes a survey of the proportion of first class honours degrees awarded in different subjects which shows a variation from 3% (social studies) to 14% (mathematics) (Heywood, 1989, p.48), and Brian Klug cites a similar variation between institutions: from Keele University (4.5%) to the University of Kent (17%) (Klug, 1977, p.16).. It would seem, therefore, that the form of the competition between students is ambiguous: being among the best in one's own group is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for success; students are not only being compared with each other but also with staff members' implicit conception of an absolute standard, which they have a wide discretion in applying, albeit within the broad limits of the distribution curve.

On another point, however, there is less ambiguity: students are not being assessed in terms of *skills* or *abilities*, which might improve with further practice or further learning. On the contrary, the assessment category makes a judgement on *qualities* of the individual, which are assumed to be intrinsic and fixed. This interpretation follows inescapably from the fact that the degree classification is by definition a *final* judgement: "No reassessment shall be permitted for a student to improve upon a mark or a grade above the pass level required for the award" (CNAА, 1991, Regulations for the Assessment of Students, p.97). Students who have once been classified as "lower second class" may not aspire to become "upper second class" at some future date. Thus, if a competition is taking place, then it is an opportunity which occurs once only, and its outcome is a categorisation for life. The

educational process is an act of self-revelation on the part of the student, followed by the delivery of the assessor's final, authoritative verdict upon the student's overall worthiness: at one level, a "lower second" in art history and a "lower second" in chemistry proclaim the same general message: "*not* a first class mind". The process may be ambiguous but the upshot is not: a good degree is a lifelong blessing; a poor degree a lifelong stigma.

### Higher Education and the Ambiguous Basis for Meritocracy

Honours degree classifications are an example of the "mental realities" which are an "internal component" of all social relations, which they thus help to produce, to justify, and to perpetuate (Godelier, 1988, p.151). Given the features of the classified honours degree noted above, what is the pattern of values and social relations which they seem to justify? The editor of *The Times Higher Educational Supplement* is in no doubt: "It is just another example of the British (English?) class system." (THES, 1991, May 3rd.) The Editorial continues: "We are constantly trying to invent clubs where none need exist, so that we can savour the satisfaction of excluding some of our fellow citizens." But this, although suggestive, is (at best) incomplete: what is the basis on which exclusions are made, and why do they seem (to so many people) to be justifiable? The following sequence of observations attempts to assemble an answer.

- 1) The finality of the categorisation combined with the absence of any public criteria concerning specific skills, knowledge, or abilities indicates that the assessment is intended to *select* individuals, rather than to indicate what they can do (or have done). Individuals are selected *permanently* for a certain general position in the social structure, on the basis of their overall intrinsic merit.
- 2) The numerical distribution of the categories, whereby a minority of students are selected as "outstanding" or "above average", suggests that the social structure which the assessment process anticipates and promotes is conceptualised as a hierarchy of status positions.
- 3) Classification of honours serves to justify a social hierarchy as "meritocratic" by making the basis of selection appear to be (at one level) a *competition* in which success goes to those with the most merit.
- 4) But the exact nature of this merit (the abilities it summarises) and exactly who possess it remain matters for the discretion of higher education staff; published criteria are not precise

enough to give students a basis for disputing decisions or for careful preparation that might guarantee success.

5) Hence, ambiguity is carefully maintained as to whether the crucial abilities can be learned or whether they represent an innate and thus fundamentally mysterious "talent".

6) This ambiguity serves to justify the extent to which differential educational success in a supposedly meritocratic society nevertheless continues to reproduce differences in *inherited* advantage.

7) In this way, higher education institutions manage a crucial dilemma in the way they conceive of their social functions and responsibilities. On the one hand, they are committed to facilitating a democratic openness of access to positions of high social status, by fostering the widest possible opportunity to *compete* for educational achievement. On the other hand, they continue to be influenced by the assumptions underlying an *aristocratic* social order (government by "the best" people (*aristos*), where the nature of merit can be left undefined since it may not legitimately be challenged. This was, of course, the social order under which the university tradition arose, a social order which is not "open" but "closed", because the differential distribution of merit is not a matter of individual achievement but of divine dispensation, a matter of "birth". From this point of view, ability is not an acquisition, but a "gift".

8) The earlier argument concerning the operation of the ecclesiastical tradition in higher education thus remains of continuing significance. The award of an honours classification is (implicitly) *both* the outcome of a student's personal effort (indicating the contingent result of a competition) *and* an authoritative (priestly) judgement (indicating a particular "degree" of grace).

9) What otherwise seem to be contradictory and even bizarre features of the classified honours degree can thus be explained as a *double* justification of educational outcomes, invoking both competitive and authoritarian forms of legitimacy. The ambiguity underlying this structure of justification corresponds to the ambiguous basis of moral order and cognitive authority in a society which would still wish to equate the differentiation of social status on the basis of secular struggle (the market economy, competitive occupational careers) with the operation of divine justice.

10) A crucial factor in managing this ambiguity is the large discretion of the academic examiner, whose pronouncements upon the differential value of individuals not only have the simplicity of the results of a competition ("first", "second", "third") but also preserve the secrecy, mystery, and unpredictability of oracular judgements made upon sacred matters. We can see, therefore, why the ritual surrounding the award of a degree continues to invoke the tradition of the medieval university. The right of academic assessment procedures to invoke

implicit criteria, which seem like absolute standards if only because they are nowhere laid down and hence open to scrutiny, represents a widespread subconscious scepticism concerning the rational basis for a secular meritocratic society, the cultural residue of a divinely ordained aristocratic social order

### **Grading: The Educator's Prerogative as an Everyday Routine**

The previous section offered a general cultural interpretation of the crucial role played in the classification of honours degrees by the judgmental discretion of examiners. But this interpretation does not really explain a) why inexperienced members of staff are expected to carry out this function without training, nor b) why it seems so widely acceptable, in spite of the obvious and widely noted dangers of arbitrariness and injustice. These are the questions which will be taken up in this section.

The classified honours degree is an example of a widespread assessment format, "grading", in which candidates are compared with each other in order to produce a rank order, either of individuals or of groups. The argument of this section is that grading is not a specialised technique exclusive to professional educators as part of a technical repertoire of skills, but a common-sense activity which is widely used as an everyday routine by the population as a whole. Grading (in this sense of norm-referenced, comparative assessment) is acceptable because it is familiar, and the same is true of the academic examiner's discretion in invoking implicit, taken-for-granted criteria: both are acceptable by virtue of seeming to be "common sense" and thus natural and inevitable.

#### Grading as Gossip

One of the clearest pieces of evidence that grading is a widely practised and widely understood activity is contained in the weekly listings of televised films (in *Radio Times*, *Time Out*, etc.) where each film is given a number of ticks or stars to indicate how highly it is recommended. The pattern is predictable: a very few films are given the highest and the lowest rating, a second category contains a substantial minority, while most are classified in the middle as "moderately recommended". The parallel with honours degree classifications is exact, and a similar pattern emerges from the AA ratings of the hotels of European capital cities.

Expanding our search for analogies with academic grading to include any situation where judges are called upon to assess competitors, we find a vast range of sporting and entertainment events, from skating and gymnastics TV quizzes and talent shows. Each of these activities requires a judge because the activity itself (like educational assessment) does not naturally fit into a competitive format; the criteria are too complex, so the competition has to be artificially arranged. To this extent they are even more interesting (as cultural

phenomena) than the genuinely competitive sports which they attempt to imitate: football, darts, golf, athletics, etc. The latter, it would seem, provide the pattern to which other cultural forms aspire, namely a status hierarchy legitimated through competition, winners and losers, the outstanding and the also-rans. Irrespective of how the outcome is decided (indirectly, by an act of judgement, or directly, by a score of points, goals, etc. or measurement of time or distance) its significance is relentlessly analysed for the benefit of the public by specialist commentators, whose role is to note the fine distinctions between performances which explain the result. Such commentaries provide a model and a cue for general participation in the entertaining pastime of comparing the rival merits of performers: in pubs, schoolyards, or dining rooms, we all join in on the comparative assessment of cricketers, rap-singers, or string quartets. Grading, then, is not the prerogative of professionals (gymnastics commentators, music critics or university academics) but fun for us all, a form of gossip.

### Grading as a Pleasure

Why do we enjoy it? At one level, the elaboration of a comparative assessment is merely a continuation of those expressions of preference which are among the early conversational initiatives of the toddler ("This is my best Teddy"). This serves as a reminder that one of the important side effects of comparative assessment is self-enhancement, a pleasurable way of reinforcing our sense of personal control in a generally recalcitrant world. In comparing the rival merits of eminent footballers or opera singers, we are making an implicitly self-aggrandising claim to understand fully the subtle criteria underpinning a highly complex and esoteric activity.

Similarly, in comparing degree candidates in order to award first or second class honours, we are pleurably reminded of the outstanding qualities of our own intellects which are logically entailed by our apparent ability to do so. (Hence, perhaps, the excess detail of some of our contributions to Assessment Board proceedings.) This oblique pleasure to be derived from making comparative judgements was nicely illustrated by Bernard Levin, who while choosing his records on the radio programme "Desert Island Discs" (October 30th, 1987) introduced a Schubert song as follows: "Schubert knew better than anyone, better even than Mozart, or, at least, as well as Mozart, that (as I once put it): nothing bad matters, and everything good does." Clearly, the act of comparing Mozart and Schubert generated for Levin a momentary sense that he was "above" them.

### Grading as Prediction

The official justification for grading performances is not, of course, that it is entertaining, but that it is a rational basis for predicting future performances in a different role, i.e. for selection processes such as recruitment, promotion, etc. But this is to assume that different roles require the same abilities, which is not, on the face of it, very plausible. For example,

it hardly seems appropriate simply to offer a job in a bank to the candidate with the best class of honours in their economics degree, and there is indeed little evidence to suggest that this how graduate recruitment occurs. (Oxtoby, 1969, p.73; Klug, 1977, p.20; Heywood, 1989, p.42) Neither does it seem sensible to offer a job as, say, a social work manager to the social worker with the highest level of skill as a practitioner. The irrationality of this approach to selection is neatly encapsulated in the well-known Peter Principle and its Corollary: "In a hierarchy, every employee tends to rise to his (sic) level of incompetence; in time every post tends to be occupied by an employee who is incompetent to carry out its duties." (Lawrence J Peter, quoted in Faber, 1980, p.26)

The Peter Principle is not inescapable. There is likely to be an overlap between the abilities required to carry out one role successfully and those required for success in another. Significant evidence *could* be collected from past performances to indicate potential for a future role. But this would necessitate an *analysis* of the various abilities required in both roles, in order to make the judgement. This, of course, is precisely what the grading of performance does not do. It directs attention to the question, "Which candidate has performed *best* in role A", thereby leaving implicit the nature of the abilities involved and hence their relevance or otherwise for role B. Instead, the question should be: "What abilities do these two roles require; and has this candidate demonstrated abilities in role A which are important for role B?" This line of argument is relevant both for promotions within employment and for articulating the relationship between higher education and employment, placing an appropriate onus upon academic institutions to provide a detailed profile of graduates' competences (see, for example, Assiter & Fenwick, 1992) and upon employers to analyse carefully the precise competences required by available employment opportunities.

### Precision through Numbers?

One problem of articulating fine distinctions between very complex phenomena (examination scripts, for example) is the imprecision of language. Hence the widespread use of percentage marks as a way of ensuring that assessments can be compared with each other. This provides an apparently objective and precise basis for the act of comparison by abstracting it from any actual criteria, which are indeed never fully articulated but are "a personal sense" held in examiners' minds (CNA, 1989b, p.33). Nevertheless, although percentage marks are in common use, CNA warns: "Assessment is a matter of judgement, not simply of computation. Marks, grades, and percentages are not absolute values, but symbols used by examiners to communicate their judgement." (CNA, 1991, p.91) But CNA is wrong about this: the function of numbers is indeed to imply the notion of a precise and absolute standard, which is why historians, for example, never give 100%, but mathematicians do, and why it has been suggested that to award 100% for a philosophy essay (other than one written by God) would be a logical absurdity (Klug, 1977, p.19).

This use of numerical forms to give an air of "scientific" precision to complex judgements based on non-explicit criteria is also a widespread everyday activity, partly because of the general dominance of cultural styles derived from science and technology, and also because the whole population has spent formative years receiving and pondering "marks" given by school teachers. Thus, if requested we are all capable of giving a numerical assessment (jocularly, perhaps, but none the less carefully) to a picturesque scene, a piece of confectionery, a fortnight's holiday in Greece, even (regrettably indeed) the attractiveness of a member of the opposite sex (see Braine, 1959, pp.36-8) and so on. Thus, when three political journalists were asked on the radio (Radio 4, October 6th, 1990) to give their assessment of the effectiveness of Margaret Thatcher's closing speech to the Conservative party conference, one said, after a pause, "six out of ten". The others agreed. No further clarification was felt to be necessary.

Grading, then, can be readily explained as the continuation of a common sense cultural routine into professional discourse and professional practice. It is therefore not surprising that staff in higher education do it, can do it, find it quite natural to do it, and wish to continue to do it. But this does not mean that it is grounded in defensible educational principles which could refute the arguments in favour of pass/fail assessments relating to specified learning outcomes advocated by proponents of the New Higher Education initiatives, to which we now turn.

### **Proposals for a Rational Higher Education Assessment Format**

As access to higher education is widened, we shall find that we need to cater for students who, compared with eighteen-year-old ex-A level full-timers, are more experienced, more independent, more mobile, more demanding, and more discerning. They will approach universities not as neophytes but as sceptical consumers, having probably had experience of criterion-referenced assessment at school or at work; and on considering the assessment process which will structure their higher education careers, they are quite likely to be struck by the questionable nature of some of its assumptions and practices. We need, therefore, as a matter of some urgency, to make our procedures defensible on rational educational grounds to students who will consider themselves well able to articulate their own interests and educational requirements.

My general argument has been that the procedures and assumptions surrounding the classified honours degree are only comprehensible in terms of its historical and cultural context, rather than being justifiable on educational grounds. This in turn suggests that although many colleagues will find arguments to defend it, in spite of its faults, such arguments will not seem convincing to students who will perceive that the current arrangements do not serve their interests and who will be increasingly aware of alternatives.

Fortunately many of these alternative procedures have already been worked out, under the impetus of the New Higher Education initiatives already referred to: the inclusion of learning derived from experience outside the university, the involvement of non-university staff in the assessment process, criterion-referenced assessment based on specified competences, an emphasis in assessment outcomes on either "pass" or "insufficient evidence as yet", learning contracts, profiling, self-assessment, degree courses constructed through students' own permutations of modules, etc., etc. (See Employment Department, 1990; Duckenfield and Stirner, 1992). What is necessary in order to incorporate these ideas securely within the basic assessment structure of the university system is the introduction of the non-subdivided honours degree as the central award. This proposal is elaborated and explained below, not as a blueprint (many procedural details would need to be worked out) but as a general concept.

- 1) The non-subdivided honours degree would be an honours degree at the same standard as the current classified honours degree, awarded on a pass-fail basis, like every other award in the higher education system, from the Certificate of Higher Education to the Ph D.
- 2) If assessment is on a pass-fail basis, it can be focused on whether or not a student has demonstrated specified learning outcomes (or course objectives or "competences": such terminological differences are in the end of minor significance) without reference to the proportion of candidates achieving different "standards".
- 3) When course requirements are presented as learning outcomes and are assessed on a pass/fail basis, it becomes relatively straightforward to incorporate into degree programmes the wide variety of evidence of students' learning, e.g. portfolios of individualised documentation (Evans, 1981, p. 76 ff.), and the wide variety of students' learning experiences, e.g. prior experiential learning (Evans, 1988), learning from employment or work placements (Duckenfield & Stirner, 1992), all of which currently pose enormous difficulties over "quality control" when attempts are made to grade them for differential honours..
- 4) Methods for describing non-vocational degree level courses in terms of learning outcomes have been described in general terms (UDACE, 1990; Otter, 1992). Methods for describing vocational degrees in terms of outcomes, together with an epistemological rationale and methods for managing the pedagogical and assessment processes entailed, have been elaborated in considerable procedural detail in the work of the ASSET Programme at Anglia Polytechnic University (see Maisch & Winter, 1991; 1992a; 1992b). Both the UDACE and the ASSET projects demonstrate that the categories describing the learning outcomes of degree level work can be as sophisticated as the processes, understandings, and abilities involved, and need not be simplistic, behaviourist, or mechanical (Winter, 1992).

- 5) Where assessments are made on a pass/fail basis in relation to specified outcomes, irrespective of assumptions concerning the normative distribution of ability, improvements in assessment results will not carry a suspicion of falling standards; instead, it will be possible to raise standards, by changing the specification of the required outcomes.
- 6) When course requirements are presented as learning outcomes and are assessed on a pass-fail basis, support for candidates experiencing difficulty need not be inhibited by fears of being unfair to other candidates receiving less support, since assessments do not compare candidates with each other, but with the task at issue. The period of formative assessment (operating with the categories "pass" / "insufficient evidence as yet") which precedes the final assessment point (pass / fail) will be limited by the period of maximum registration. In this way, the consequences of unduly harsh assessment (never entirely preventable) are minimized: instead of simply receiving an assessment which is unjust but final (as at present) the candidate is required to prolong her/his learning process, which may have positive as well as negative effects.
- 7) Pass/fail assessments in relation to specified learning outcomes are likely to be more rigorous than the current classification system, since there is no "borderline", or "weak" category which enables the examiner to avoid the trauma of failure yet, at the same time, to salve her/his professional conscience.
- 8) The specification of learning outcomes also means that the coverage of assessment procedures can be genuinely comprehensive, rather than sampling a small proportion of course content, as at present, resulting in the dangerous game of "question-spotting", and consequently an unknowable gap between the apparently comprehensive significance of the qualification and the actual competences of any given graduate.
- 9) The public specification of required learning outcomes as the basic course documentation will enable degree certificates to include a "profile" of the various skills, abilities, knowledge, etc. which have been demonstrated (Assiter & Fenwick, 1992). This will mean that degree certificates can be practically informative from the point of view of potential employers, by describing what it is that the holder of the certificate is able to do. This in turn will encourage employers to analyse more precisely the competences which will be required of newly recruited staff.
- 10) In short, the specification of learning outcomes allows the introduction of a measure of accountability into higher education, in a form which is valid from an educational, as opposed to a purely managerial, point of view. But if we are to accept responsibility for the outcomes of our educational processes, it is important that our claims be realistic. The classified honours degree makes a claim to grade inherent qualities of mind, a claim whose grandiloquence is defended only by its vagueness, which prevents its inevitable injustices being open to challenge. A non-subdivided honours degree coupled with a profile of

competences, in contrast, could be the basis for claims which are both more modest and more open to justification: to describe the competences that a given student has demonstrated.

## **Conclusion**

Clearly, a transformation of the assessment process from comparisons based on implicit criteria to descriptions related to explicit criteria will involve higher education staff in considerable work. However, the nature of the task and the procedures required have been clarified to some extent by the published work cited above, and the task itself is not only a worthwhile intellectual challenge but an opportunity for substantial educational reform.

The classified honours degree and the grading process which underpins it is an interesting historical growth whose roots stretch deep into the past and whose branches ramify widely into our current culture, but on educational grounds it is indefensible. Its main beneficiaries are academic staff, whom it protects by allowing the concealment of assessment criteria and by generating extrinsic motivation for learning in the form of a competition between candidates; a competition, however, whose processes have, from the student's point of view, a Kafka-like ambiguity and whose outcomes (therefore) an equally Kafka-like unpredictability.

In contrast, an assessment format based on a pass-fail response to specified learning outcomes would a) empower students, by giving them the information they need in order to plan their own learning, the crucial importance of which is strongly argued in Heron, 1988; b) help employers by giving them the information they need in order to make rational recruitment decisions; c) remove the administrative conundrums otherwise posed by attempts to enable the higher education curriculum process to draw fully upon the variety of students' experience. In other words, the introduction of a non-subdivided honours degree would help higher education institutions become more informative, more equitable, more open, more individualised, more flexible, and more student-centred, which may indeed be a condition for their survival.

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