

Grading systems in the Netherlands, the United States and the United Kingdom

Suggestions for grade conversion

Grading scales in different education systems are often misinterpreted and grading practices in other countries are easily misunderstood. The world of international student mobility is full of examples of students applying for admission to a university in another country and being refused on the grounds that their grades are not good enough, even if their grades are considered high by the standards in their own country's system. In most cases the problem simply comes down to a lack of information. Experience shows that this problem is significantly mitigated when institutions provide degree and diploma supplements, explaining the grading scale used. Ideally, these supplements should include the percentages for which grades are awarded at the institution so that the grades of the student concerned may be clearly understood.

This article identifies some of the main differences between the Dutch grading system, which is based on a numeric scale of 1 through to 10, and the letter grades used in the United States and the United Kingdom. The article concludes with a grade conversion table for these three countries.

The grading scale in the Netherlands

In the Netherlands, the traditional grading scale is from 1 through to 10, where 1 is the lowest and 10 the highest grade. The pass mark for a single subject is 6, but for school leaving examinations, where six or more subjects are examined, two 5s or one 4 may be condoned if compensated by high grades in other subjects. Grades 1 through to 4 are very rarely given, and the same is true for grades 9 and 10. The most common grades in both secondary and higher education are 6 and 7. Grading in secondary and higher education differs to the extent that high grades are slightly less frequent in secondary education than in higher education.

Data from 2010 on examination results for the pre-university stream (VWO¹) reveal the following distribution (in percentages) of the grades awarded:

10 =	0.1
9 =	2.4
8 =	12.5
7 =	34.3
6 =	38.5
5 =	10.7
4 =	1.4
3 =	0.08
2 =	0.01
1 =	0.0

¹ VWO = Voorbereidend Wetenschappelijk Onderwijs, or preparatory university education. This is the most selective of the three main streams in general secondary education in the Netherlands. The VWO diploma grants access to university education.

Grading culture

Grading practice in the Netherlands differs from that in the US and the UK inasmuch as the top grades (10 and 9) are rarely awarded, regardless of the actual achievements of a given group of students. This is part of the grading culture in the Netherlands. When the 1 through to 10 scale was officially introduced back to the late 19th century, it was decided that a 10 should only be awarded in cases of absolute perfection. Furthermore, as at the time it was felt to be almost blasphemous for mere mortals to be judging what constituted absolute perfection, a 10 was hardly ever awarded. A 9 was considered to be only a slightly less impossible goal to reach. With the advent of multiple choice testing and yes/no answers to questions, 10s and 9s actually came within reach of ambitious students. To this day, however, these grades are still very rarely awarded in oral examinations or open question testing, such as essays, presentations, project reports or dissertations.

This tradition is different from what is customary in the US, where high grades are awarded to reward and encourage rather than single out absolute perfection. Statistics show that North American educators have always been more generous in the awarding of grade As than their European counterparts. The danger in this practice is that it may lead to grade inflation, which in fact, has become a trend in American higher education over the past 30 years. Grade inflation may well be linked to a more competitive attitude in American higher education, where it is far more common for students to compete for scholarships and where admission to the best universities depends on having the best grades. By contrast, university admission in the Netherlands, as in most continental European countries, is not so much based on high grades as on having the right school leaving certificate. The type of secondary school attended and the type of examination subjects taken are accorded more importance than the individual grades obtained. In the Netherlands, secondary education is divided into different academic and vocational streams with differing educational aims. Of these, the pre-university stream (VWO) is the most selective, accounting for just 17% of the entire student population in secondary education. Consequently, the pre-university stream has always served as a selection mechanism in itself, and the examination results of individual students are considered to be less important than possession of the VWO diploma.

The wrong approach

When thinking about grade conversion, differences in culture and education systems as described above must be taken into account. If grading scales are simply placed side by side, and, starting from the top, each grade in one scale is equated to the grade in the corresponding position in the other scale, serious mismatches will be the result. If, for example, we placed the Dutch numeric scale side by side either the American or the British letter scale, a Dutch 10 would be equated to an American or British A, a 9 to a B, an 8 to a C and so on. While it may seem unlikely that anyone would take such an approach, conversions like these have been known to happen. There are examples of foreign universities requiring a 10 in all seven examination subjects on the Dutch VWO diploma, where it was apparently reasoned that, if 10 is the top grade awarded in the Netherlands, a top student from the Netherlands should have a 10 in each subject. In reality, the chance of attaining a 10 in all seven subjects is close to nil.

Frequency distribution

Clearly, this is not a realistic approach. If grades are to be compared fairly, grade conversion should instead be based on the frequency distribution of grades. Only when the percentages are known for the various grades awarded can grades from different systems be matched. Looking at the 2010 data on the highest-achieving VWO graduates for example, we know 12.5% were awarded a grade 8 (2.4% a grade 9 and 0.1% a grade 10). Therefore, in order to convert this properly to a grade under another country's grading system, we need to know which grade was awarded to the lower 12.5% of the top 15% of students in that system.

When analysing the frequency distribution of passes in the Dutch, American and British grading systems, the

pattern that emerges is that the two most common grades in the Dutch system are at the lower end of the scale of pass grades (6 and 7), while the two most common grades in the American and British systems are to be found at the higher end (A and B). In Dutch secondary education, grades 6 and 7 are awarded in 39% and 34% of cases respectively. In the UK, A* and A are awarded in 27% of cases and the B in 26%.² National percentages for high school examination grades in the US are not available, but the occurrence of A and B in undergraduate studies at American universities is about 40% (and even higher in postgraduate education).³

Conversion table

The following table is based on the data available for secondary education examinations in the Netherlands and the UK. For the US, the grades are taken from academic transcripts of undergraduate programmes issued by American universities.

Note: In pre-university education (*General Certificate of Education*) in the UK, grades run from A*, A, B, C, D to E. In the US, pass grades normally only include A, B, C and D. In the British system the asterisk (*) is only used in relation to a grade A, as the highest grade possible. In the US system, the * is not used, but schools and universities may use + or - to differentiate grades.

NL	UK	US
10	A*	A+
9.5	A*	A+
9	A*	A+
8.5	A*	A+
8	A	A
7.5	A-	A
7	B	B+
6.5	C	B
6	D	C
5.5	E	D
5	F	F
4	F	F
3	F	F
2	F	F
1	F	F

² The distribution of grades obtained by GCE A-level graduates in 2011 is as follows:
A* = 8.2% B = 25.6% D = 15.1%
A = 18.8% C = 23.6% E = 6.5% U (unclassified) = 2.2%.
(source: Joint Council for Qualifications).

³ These percentages are taken from a sample of 50 academic transcripts issued by American universities and submitted to Nuffic.

In the UK, honours bachelor's degrees are awarded with a class, indicating the overall performance of the graduate during the programme and at examinations. Classes are normally divided into four categories: first class honours (1), second class honours, upper division (2.i), second class honours, lower division (2.ii), and third class honours (3rd). In the following table lists the classes and the percentages of graduates awarded each class, next to the grades to which they correspond in the Dutch grading system (the class percentages are rounded off to the nearest multiple of 5).⁴

UK honours bachelor's degree	corresponding Dutch grade
First class (ca. 15%)	grades 8, 9 and 10
Second class, upper division (ca. 50%)	7 to 8
Second class, lower division (ca. 30%)	6 to 7
Third class (ca. 5%)	5.5 to 6

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⁴ Statistics are taken from the Higher Education Statistics Agency in the UK.

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