GPA Programme Outline

1. Introduction

1.1 The Higher Education Academy (HEA) welcomes expressions of interest from higher education providers from across the UK to participate in a pilot implementation of Grade Point Average (GPA) as a cumulative and summative judgement for student academic achievement. The pilot offers an opportunity to take part at the forefront of an emerging development for UK higher education, with the potential to enhance the student learning experience. Participating institutions will play a pivotal role in evaluating a proposed national GPA system that could be implemented in institutions alongside, or ultimately in replacement of, the current honours degree classification system. They will benefit from opportunities to share learning and experience with other piloting institutions across the higher education sector and gain fuller understanding of student, staff and employer perspectives. The pilot will be a significant part of a two-year programme of GPA debate and development to be facilitated by the HEA during 2013-14 and 2014-15.

1.2 Anticipated outcomes and outputs of the pilot include:

- For the sector: a) a recommended national GPA system that provides a consistent and transparent approach for the benefit of key stakeholders; and, b) enhanced awareness and understanding of issues relating to its introduction and use, and associated resources.
- For piloting institutions: informed decision-making and planning in relation to full institutional implementation, potentially from academic year 2014-15 for some.

2. Background

2.1 Over the last decade, there has been extensive consideration of the issues relating to effectively assessing and representing student achievement in UK higher education. In 2004 the Measuring and Recording Student Achievement Scoping Group ‘established the case for fundamentally reviewing the current system for classifying UK honours degrees, which it considered was no longer fit for purpose’.

2.2 David Willetts, Minister for Universities and Science in England, has accepted the offer from the HEA to lead and facilitate a national discussion on the concept of introducing a GPA system into higher education. This discussion will build on and extend:

- research undertaken for the Burgess Implementation Steering Group, which investigated the background and use of GPA systems internationally;
- discussion at a roundtable event in 2012 and development work undertaken by a group of UK universities to explore the use of a GPA system as a potential addition or alternative to the honours degree classification system.

2.3 The HEA has undertaken scoping work to develop plans to facilitate national discussion. This included a scoping event in June 2013, involving representatives from universities, graduate employer organisations and the National Union of Students (NUS), which further explored rationales, perspectives and issues relating to adopting GPA in higher education. Based on this scoping phase, it was established that the HEA would initiate and support a collaborative pilot to engage a number of higher education providers across the UK to examine the introduction and use of a national GPA scale, so that a variety of issues are explored that might emerge through the implementation of such a scale.
2.4 A national GPA Advisory Group, chaired by Professor Sir Robert Burgess, is providing expert guidance to inform the planning and implementation of the HEA’s programme including the pilot implementation. The Advisory Group has been set up to ensure the participation and input of senior representatives of key stakeholder groups from across the UK higher education sector, including students, institutions, employer bodies and other agencies.

2.5 The HEA takes a neutral position on the use of GPA and recognises that the adoption of a GPA system should not be viewed as a solution to all concerns associated with the honours degree classification system, or all concerns relating to institutional assessment policy and practice. However, the HEA recognises the range of perceived benefits of GPA and the potential for the adoption of GPA to provide an opportunity for institutions to consider wider changes to assessment policy and practice. The HEA already has in place a pilot on transforming assessment in higher education, linked with its publication A Marked Improvement, which is designed to enable change in institutional assessment strategy, policy and practice.

2.6 Reasons for considering the introduction of a GPA system include perceived finer granularity of detail in a GPA scale; engagement and motivation of students throughout their degree programme; and, international comparability with grading systems used particularly in the USA and China.

2.7 The Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) has been developed to encompass the degree transcript and degree classification. The HEAR record can, in principle, include any summative judgement of student academic achievement including either a degree classification or a GPA, or both of these.

Further information
2.8 The HEA is holding three events in England, Scotland and Wales so that institutions can find out more about the HEA’s plans. These take place on:

- Wednesday 25 September, Cardiff.
- Wednesday 2 October, London.
- Tuesday 8 October, Edinburgh.

3. Pilot

3.1 It is planned that between 20 and 25 higher education providers from across the UK (including further education colleges and private providers) will participate in the pilot, during which they will be supported to explore the introduction and use of a GPA scale within their current context. Invitations to participate in the GPA pilot are being extended to a representative sample of institutions known to be planning the implementation of GPA or exploring potential implementation. Additionally, an invitation to express interest in joining the pilot group will be extended to the sector as a whole. The final selection of the full pilot group will be based on the criteria outlined below. The pilot will enable the higher education sector to explore the implications of introducing a GPA scale, including how it might stimulate wider changes in assessment policy and practice. Pilot activities 2013-14 will take place between November 2013 and June 2014.

3.2 To participate in the pilot, institutions will be asked to identify a working group of around five people to include a student and/or student representative, senior manager and members of academic staff amongst other relevant members, such as an employer representative. Each HEA-facilitated meeting for the pilot must be attended by two members of the working group (one of whom is a student and/or student representative).
3.3 Work has already been undertaken by UK institutions that have been exploring the introduction of a GPA system to replace or run alongside the use of the higher degree classification system. Building on this work, participating institutions will be provided with a proposed national GPA scale (as below) to introduce across their institution, and will be asked to explore and report back on a series of specific questions and issues relating to its implementation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Standard</th>
<th>Grade Point</th>
<th>UK current descriptor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A+</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>Top 1st</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>Good 1st</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>Low 1st</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B+</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>High 2-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>Mid 2-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B-</td>
<td>Good/Satisfactory</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>Low 2-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C+</td>
<td>Satisfactory</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>High 2-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Satisfactory</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>Mid 2-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C-</td>
<td>Satisfactory</td>
<td>2.25</td>
<td>Low 2-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D+</td>
<td>Adequate</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>3rd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Pass</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>Low 3rd or pass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D-</td>
<td>Marginal Fail</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>Marginal Fail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Fail</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>Fail</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.4 Specific questions piloting institutions will be asked to explore and report back on will be in the following areas:

a) Acceptability of the proposed scale in relation to institutional provision and its robustness in comparison with the current system;
b) Implications for marking practice in qualitative and quantitative subjects;
c) Preferred institutional approaches to progression weighting with GPA;
d) Operational issues relating to marking, moderation, exam boards, appeals and systems requirements for reporting of student results, and dual running of GPA alongside degree classification; and
e) Issues arising that relate to institutional assessment policy and practice.

Piloting institutions will be provided with guidance on the conduct of the pilot, including on addressing questions in these areas, by the HEA.

3.5 In exploring these areas, institutions will be able to look at the issues associated with the conversion of current module grades/percentages to the GPA scale. They also will be asked to model the use of the GPA scale retrospectively in comparison with the degree classification system, by converting achieved grades and degree classifications from previous academic years to the GPA scale.

3.6 There could be variation across institutions (as in the example below) as to whether a GPA system is weighted to reflect student performance in the latter stages of students’ degree (exit velocity), or performance throughout their degree. The pilot is not designed to prescribe a particular approach to progression weighting, but to provide an opportunity to investigate issues relating to adopting different approaches, or alternatively a unified approach, to progression weighting for UK higher education.

First year not counted
Second, third, fourth years equally weighted
All years equally weighted

3.7 In addition to exploration of specific questions in the above areas, there will be opportunity for institutions to examine particular issues of relevance to their interests and context.
4. HEA Support for Pilot

4.1 During the 2013-14 pilot, the HEA will hold a series of four facilitated meetings to enable participating institutions to exchange learning and experiences in introducing the GPA scale. These meetings will be designed so that participants in the pilot can share experience, and so that the HEA can capture and report on learning. Throughout the pilot the HEA will also facilitate support and knowledge exchange among pilot institutions through the use of online tools, such as a forum and/or blog.

4.2 The HEA will ask institutions to prepare and present update reports on their experience and learning for input to the facilitated meetings, and to provide a short report of their participation in the 2013-14 pilot for July 2014. The HEA will support feedback and reporting by providing templates and guidance. Institutions participating in the pilot will be asked to share lessons learned and their experiences for the HEA’s dissemination activities.

4.3 The HEA will co-ordinate a structured approach to evaluation and dissemination activities. Through collaboration with participating institutions, the HEA will develop recommendations based on the pilot work and related research on GPA, which will be reported to the higher education sector from autumn 2014.

5. Timescales

5.1 Once selected, institutions will be expected to engage in all activities of the 2013-14 pilot. The timetable of key dates to note is below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monday 21 October 2013</td>
<td>Call closes (deadline for expressions of interest).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monday 28 October 2013</td>
<td>Institutions informed of outcomes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friday 15 November 2013</td>
<td>Start-up facilitated meeting at Aston Business School Conference Centre, Aston University, Birmingham.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wednesday 22 January 2014 (tbc)</td>
<td>Facilitated meeting at Aston Business School Conference Centre, Aston University, Birmingham.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wednesday 26 March 2014 (tbc)</td>
<td>Facilitated meeting at Aston Business School Conference Centre, Aston University, Birmingham.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wednesday 18 June 2014 (tbc)</td>
<td>Facilitated meeting at Aston Business School Conference Centre, Aston University, Birmingham.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2014 - 15</td>
<td>Dissemination activities and on-going support for UK-wide development and debate about GPA implementation</td>
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6. Selection criteria

6.1 To support the selection process for the pilot we are asking institutions to complete an Acceptance or Expression of Interest form. The acceptance of invitation (Form A) or expression of interest (Form B) should be supported by the Vice-Chancellor of the institution, and signed and dated accordingly.
6.2 The following criteria will be used to aid selection:

- Institutional commitment and capacity to conduct the proposed institution-wide pilot activities during 2013-14 (it is recognised that the subsequent timescale for follow-on implementation, if taken forward, may differ among participating institutions).
- Diversity of institutional contexts. We seek to ensure the institutions participating in the pilot are, if possible, representative of the range of higher education providers in the UK sector, with regard to diversity of mission, size and student body.
- Strong leadership. The institutions will be selected on the basis of their clearly articulated rationale for participating in the pilot and demonstration of commitment at a senior level and of a number of key staff to work on the pilot. There should also be a commitment to engaging with students as partners throughout the process.

6.3 Once the HEA has determined the pilot group of participating institutions, the HEA will contact institutions that have agreed to join the pilot, or have expressed interest in joining, by email on Monday 28 October 2013.

7. How to apply

7.1 If your institution has been invited to join the pilot, please complete Form A which can be found on the HEA website at: www.heacademy.ac.uk/gpa and submit this to: gpa@heacademy.ac.uk.

7.2 If your institution has been invited to express interest in joining the pilot, from among all higher education providers in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, please complete Form B which can be found on the HEA website at: www.heacademy.ac.uk/gpa and submit this to: gpa@heacademy.ac.uk.

7.3 In completing either Form A or Form B (as appropriate), institutions should pay particular attention to the criteria for selection, adhering to word limits. Please do not send additional documentation, as we are not able to take this into account in deciding which institutions are to participate in the pilot.

7.4 Only one application will be accepted per institution.

7.5 By applying to participate in the pilot, institutions are demonstrating their agreement, if accepted, to participate in all parts of the pilot in 2013-14, including the facilitated meetings, developing and presenting update reports for these meetings, and producing a report for July 2014.

7.6 The deadline for submission of expressions of interest is: 17:00 on Monday 21 October 2013.

7.7 Please address any enquiries about participation in the pilot to: gpa@heacademy.ac.uk or by telephone +44(0)1904 717500.

8. The wider programme

8.1 In addition to the pilot, in order to facilitate a wider and informed debate around GPA and to support developments in institutions beyond the pilot group, the HEA will co-ordinate a broader programme of work. This will include engagement with a larger group of higher education providers that are interested in, or considering implementing, GPA, as well as other higher education stakeholders including employers. For example, we envisage that some institutions may wish to take forward aspects of GPA discussion and development at institutional level during 2013-14. This might include institutional consultation around GPA, or conduct of smaller-scale local pilot implementations in specific faculties or
departments. The HEA will provide information and events, such as seminars that will support these types of activity, and provide for discussion and exchange of experience of stakeholders within and beyond institutions.

8.2 This wider programme of activity will extend throughout 2014-15 in order to provide further, on-going support for UK-wide development and debate regarding GPA implementation.

8.3 To express an initial interest in participating in this wider programme, please email gpa@heacademy.ac.uk

9. Research

9.1 The HEA will carry out research to complement the pilot and inform the work that will extend beyond it; it is anticipated that this will include research on employers’ students’ and institutions’ perceptions of the honours degree classification system, both in the UK and internationally, as well as of GPA.

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2 A roundtable event was held at the BIS Offices in December 2012.


4 Holland, J. (15 February 2012) Grade Point Average. Paper submitted to the Burgess Implementation Steering Group on behalf of the HEA.