ECTS Users' Guide

4.3. Grade distribution

Due to different cultural and academic traditions, European educational systems have developed not only different national grading scales but also different ways of using them within the same country, in different subject areas or institutions. While it is essential to acknowledge these differences, it is also important to make them transparent within the European Higher Education Area, so that grades awarded in all countries, subject areas or institutions can be properly understood and correctly compared.

Mobile students have the right to fair treatment and to transparency of their grades when credits are transferred from one institution to another, as access to further studies, grants or other benefits may depend on their level of performance. Transparency of performance levels is equally important for graduates applying for a job in their own or in another country.

To ensure transparent and coherent information on the performance of the individual student, each HEI should provide – in addition to their national/institutional grading scale and an explanation of the scale – a statistical distribution table of the passing grades awarded in the programme or field of study attended by the student (grade distribution table) showing how the grading scale is actually used in that programme. The grade distribution table was first introduced in the ECTS Users' Guide in 2009, as a replacement for the previous ECTS grading scales (A, B, C, D, E), which are not used anymore.

Even in cases when transferring the grades is not necessary in the local academic tradition of receiving institutions, calculating a grade distribution table will facilitate fair treatment of the incoming students on their return to the sending institution. It should be noted that it is also good practice to provide internal boards of examiners with detailed statistical data on examination grading in order to make the process more transparent and indicate any disparities which may indicate issues for further consideration.

Partners in joint degree programmes should agree in advance within their consortium how they will deal with grading and transfer of grades.

Grade distribution tables show how the existing national or institutional scale is being used in the institution – whether in open access or selective systems – and allow for comparison with the statistical distribution of grades in a parallel reference group of another institution. They represent the statistical distribution of positive grades (pass and above) awarded in each field of study in a specific institution. It is important to provide additional information on success rates at the same level of aggregation, but these should not be used for transfer.

Grade distribution tables have to be developed in a *standardised* format for reference groups of students enrolled in degree programmes belonging to the same field of studies. Such groups should be of reliable size in terms of number of students and number of years considered.

Calculating the grade distribution tables is a task that in many institutions will be undertaken at centralised level. The production of distribution tables should not cause undue difficulties in institutions as the required data are generally available in institutional information systems and the calculation of percentages is easily done with simple software. It only requires the following steps:

1. Identify the reference groups within your institution by using objective and transparent criteria which should be attached to the grade distribution tables produced. In the absence of methods based on comparable learning outcomes, it is recommended to use the ISCED-F classification which offers a standardised and hierarchical classification of fields of study. In order to have reference groups that are large enough for a statistically relevant comparison, it is recommended to use an ISCED code at the 'narrow' or 'detailed' levels (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2014).

2. Calculate the absolute number of passing grades awarded to each reference group identified in at least the last two years. Remember that information on success rates may be provided in general terms but not in this calculation.

3. Calculate the grade distribution in terms of percentages of the passing grades awarded to the reference group and develop cumulative percentages. As a result, there will be a grade distribution table with percentages and cumulative percentages for each reference group identified.

The following is an illustrative example of a grading table:

Grades used in institution (from highest to lowest passing grade)*	Number of passing grades awarded to the reference group	Percentage of each grade with respect to the total passing grades awarded	Cumulative percentage of passing grades awarded
10	50	5%	5%
9	100	10%	15%
8	350	35%	50%
7	300	30%	80%
6	200	20%	100%
Total:	1,000	100%	

* Grading systems/approaches may be established at national level.

When included in a student's Transcript of Records and Diploma Supplement, the table will facilitate the interpretation of each grade awarded and will not require any further calculation. The on-going European Grade Conversion System project (EGRACONS) is developing examples for the visual presentation of a grading table.

4.4 Grade conversion

When institutions decide to transfer their mobile students' grades, the academic responsible for credit transfer should compare the grade distribution table from his/her reference group with the one developed by the other institution for the parallel reference group. The position of each grade within the two tables can be compared and, on the basis of this comparison, individual grades are converted.

Typically, the percentage ranges of the grades overlap. The objective of the exercise is transparency. Therefore, the receiving institution should decide in advance whether they will take the minimum, average or maximum comparable grade of overlapping ranges.

Annex 2 includes examples of how grade conversion can be put into practice.

Annex 2
Examples: grade conversion
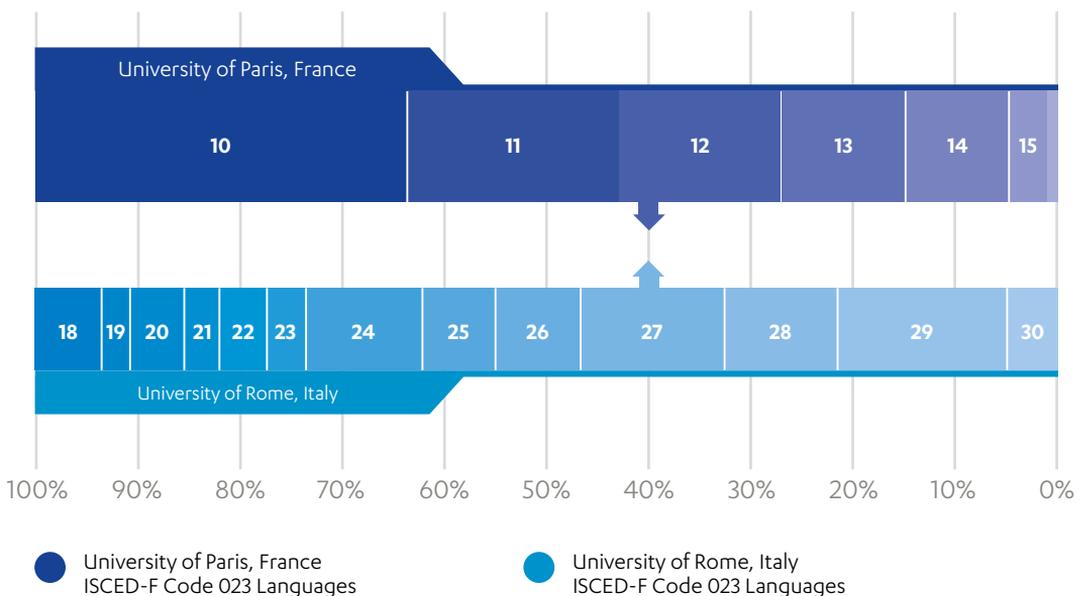
Examples for grade conversion[5]:

1 Grade conversion based on two grade distribution tables from two reference groups belonging to different national grading systems:

Reference group A in Italy (*Passing grades ranging from 18 to 30 cum laude*)
Reference group/Field of study: ISCED Code 023 Languages

Reference group B in France (*Passing grades ranging from 10 to 20*)
Reference group/Field of study: ISCED Code 023 Languages

University of Paris, France
ISCED-F Code 023 Languages

University of Rome, Italy
ISCED-F Code 023 Languages

In this case, the percentage ranges of the grades overlap. The receiving institution should have decided in advance whether they will take the minimum, average or maximum comparable grade of overlapping ranges. Therefore, if the University of Rome had decided in advance that they would use the minimum or the average, the student's grade would be 27 and if they had decided that they would use the maximum, the student's grade would be 28.

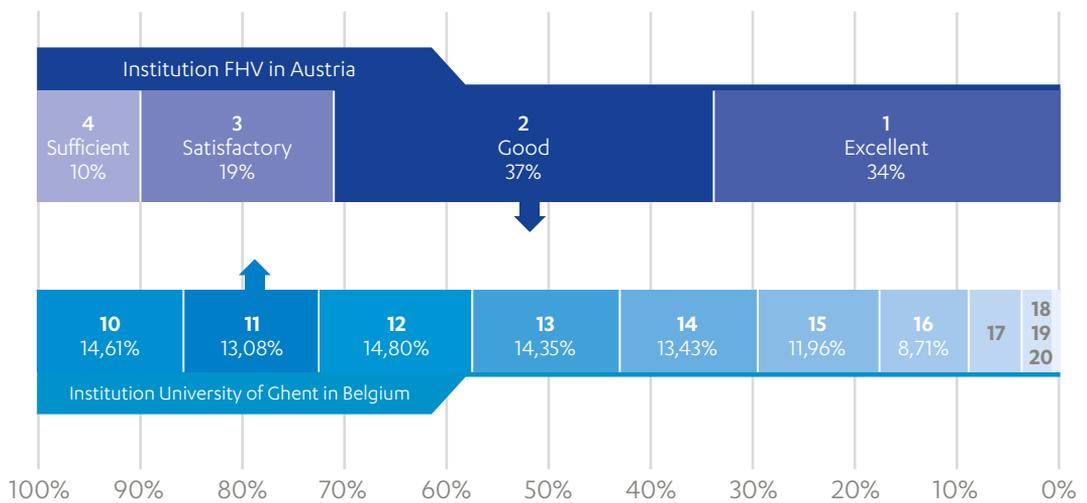| [5] Please refer to the ECTS Guide website for further examples added.

2 Grade conversion based on two grade distribution tables from two reference groups belonging to different national grading systems:

Institution FHV in Austria[6] (*Passing grades ranging from 1 to 4*)
Reference group/Field of study: ISCED Code 071 Engineering and engineering trades

Institution University of Ghent in Belgium (*Passing grades ranging from 10 to 20*)
Reference group/Field of study: ISCED Code 071 Engineering and engineering trades

In this example a grade 2 (Good) from the institution in Austria would be transferred into a grade 13 in the institution in Belgium. A grade 11 from the institution in Belgium would be transferred into a grade 3 (Satisfactory) in Austria. In this case both institutions have decided to use the average in case of overlapping percentage ranges.

| **6** University of Applied Sciences Vorarlberg (Fachhochschule Vorarlberg - FHV)

Printed in the UK

***Europe Direct is a service to help you find answers
to your questions about the European Union.***

Freephone number (*):

00 800 6 7 8 9 10 11

(*) The information given is free, as are most calls (though some operators, phone boxes or hotels may charge you).

HOW TO OBTAIN EU PUBLICATIONS

Free publications:

- one copy:
  via EU Bookshop (http://bookshop.europa.eu);

- more than one copy or posters/maps:
  from the European Union's representations (http://ec.europa.eu/represent_en.htm);
  from the delegations in non-EU countries (http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/index_en.htm);
  by contacting the Europe Direct service (http://europa.eu/europedirect/index_en.htm) or
  calling 00 800 6 7 8 9 10 11 (freephone number from anywhere in the EU) (*).

  (*) The information given is free, as are most calls (though some operators, phone boxes or hotels may charge you).

Priced publications:

- via EU Bookshop (http://bookshop.europa.eu).