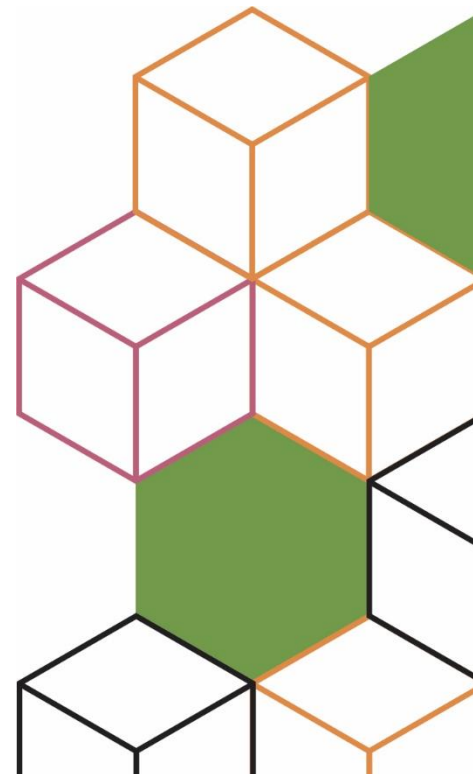


December

2021

Graduate Student
Association

**Submission to the
Amendments to
Assessment and
Results Policy**



Submission developed by Cara Margetts (GSA Graduate Policy & Advocacy Officer), Natasha Abrahams (GSA Manager – Policy & Advocacy), and Rachna Muddagouni (GSA CEO) with assistance from Jeremy Waite (GSA President), Brendan Laws (GSA Education (Coursework) Officer) and Monica Sestito (GSA Education (Research) Officer)

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Background

The Graduate Student Association (GSA) is the independent representative organisation for all graduate coursework and research students at the University of Melbourne. We are led by 8 GSA Board members and 10 Representative Council members who are all elected University of Melbourne graduate students. On behalf of over 29,000 constituents, we represent graduate student interests to the University and wider community, provide student engagement events, activities, and information to the graduate student community, and support 160 affiliated graduate student groups.

GSA's vision is for inclusive, empowered graduate student communities that achieve meaningful and holistic university experiences. Our objectives are to achieve and support representation, academic support, transition to work, engaged and healthy communities, and organisational sustainability.

GSA welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the University of Melbourne Academic Board on proposed amendments to the Assessment and Results Policy.

Summary

The University has proposed changes to the grading scheme and how grades are recorded:

- Adopting the "High Distinction/Distinction/Credit/Pass" grading scale, and adjusting cut-off grades accordingly, in line with other Australian universities.
- On students' transcripts, record the median score and number of students for each subject (for subjects with a minimum of ten students).

To facilitate graduate student input to the proposed policy change, GSA conducted a survey. Based on the findings, we make the following recommendations to the University of Melbourne Academic Board:

- The University should adopt the "High Distinction/Distinction/Credit/Pass" grading scale.
- The University of Melbourne should provide information on median scoring in an alternative manner and not include the medians on academic transcripts.
- The University should establish and communicate a timeline to implement the proposed grading system and consult with students on retrospective application of the system.
- The University of Melbourne should undertake regular consultations which are student-centric, inclusive and in a timely manner for all decision-making related to student outcomes.

Survey method

Initial feedback was provided by graduate representatives from Teaching and Learning Quality Assurance Committee, Selection Procedures Committee, and Academic Programs Committee.

GSA conducted broader consultation on these changes through a short survey, with the assistance of the GSA Education (Research) Officer and Education (Coursework) Officer. The survey asked students if they understood the changes, whether they agree, and why. The survey also asked students if they would have

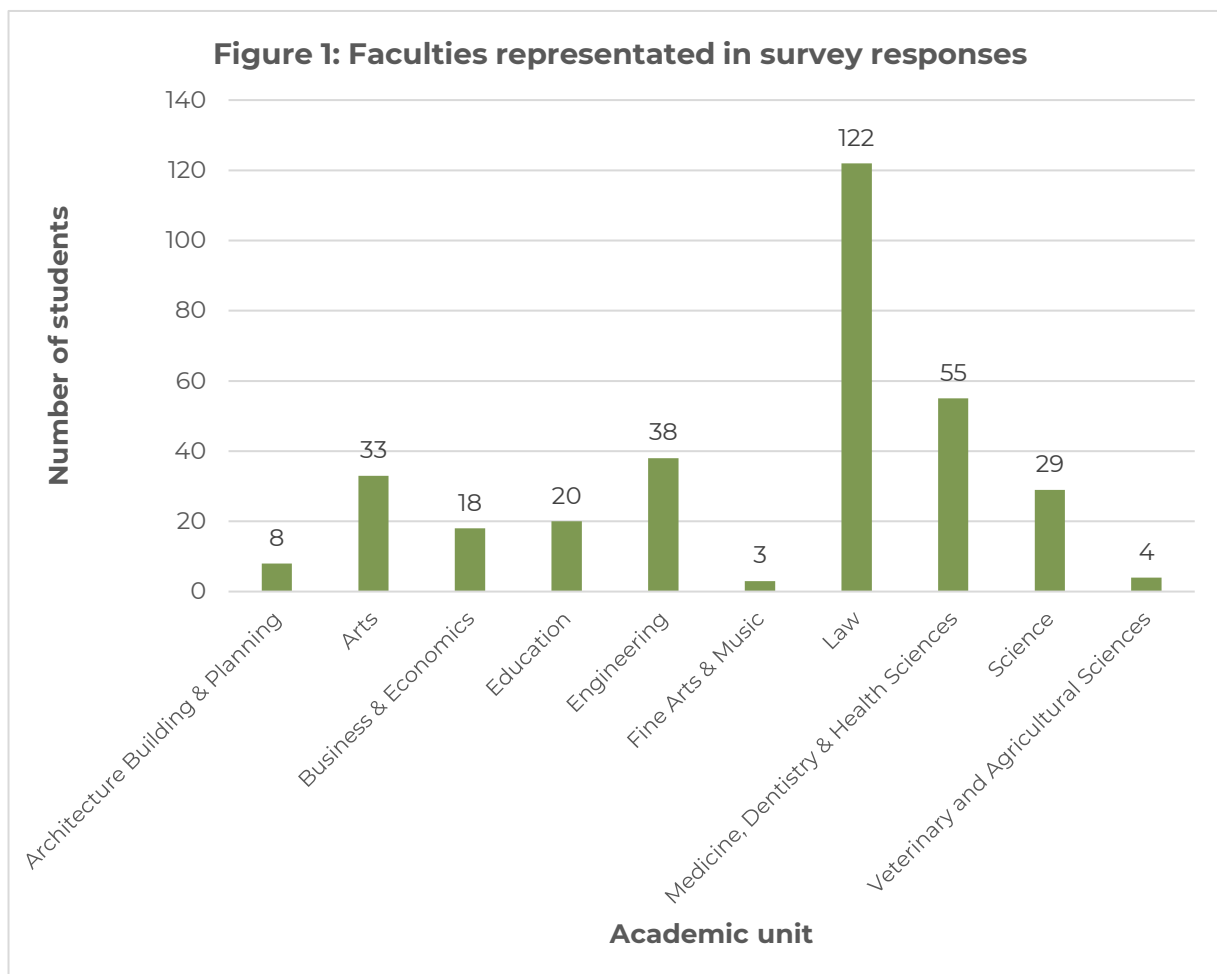
preferred more consultation or information from the University about the proposed changes.

The survey was open from 12 November to 6 December 2021 with an incentive of \$25 vouchers provided to the first 200 students to complete the survey. A targeted promotion strategy was applied, with the survey sent out to GSA's networks of student representatives, office bearers, grad group leaders, and recent event attendees. Participants were also encouraged to share the survey in their networks.

Profile of participants

The survey received 334 responses, representing 1% of the enrolled graduate student population. Of those:

- 69% (n = 230) were domestic, and 31% (n = 104) were international students.
- 88% (n = 294) were graduate coursework students, and 12% (n = 39) were graduate research students (one student did not specify). While the policy change will not impact graduate research students, they were included in the survey as they may have opinions based on their prior study and admission to research degrees.
- As shown in Figure 1, responses were received from all faculties, with the strongest response rate from Melbourne Law School (37%, n = 122). An additional four students indicated dual enrolments (not represented on Figure 1).

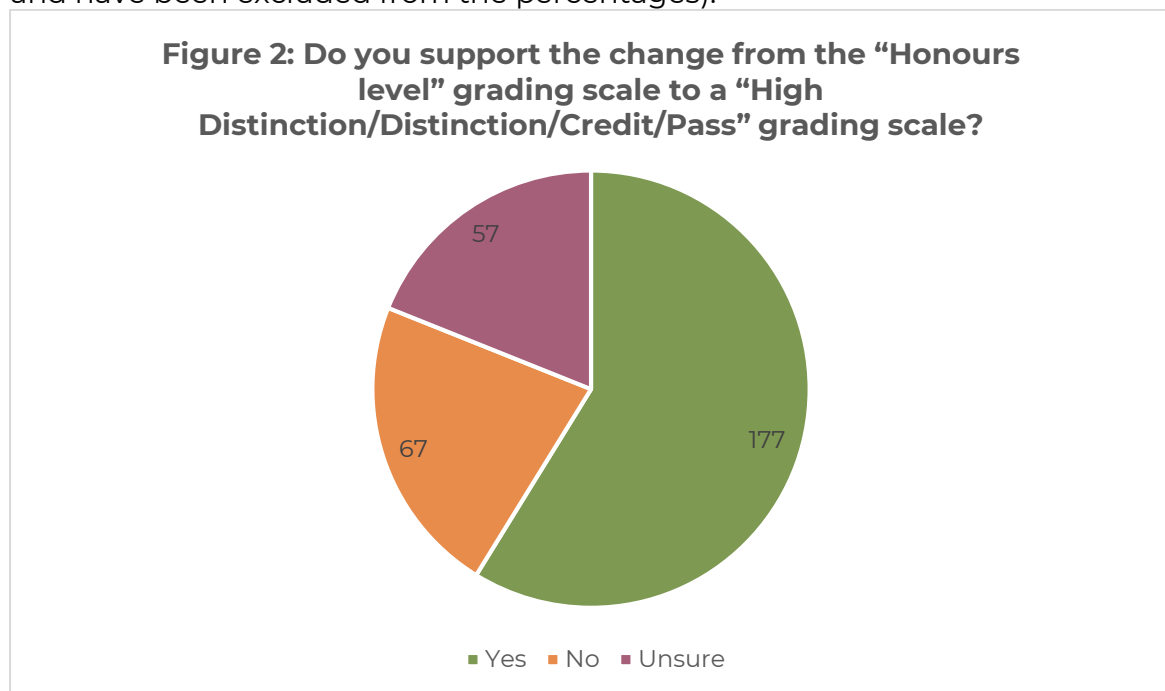


A consistent grading scale

One of the proposed changes is to replace the current Honours grading scale to the "High Distinction/Distinction/Credit/Pass" grading scale. This would bring the University of Melbourne's grading scale into line with other Australian universities.

75% (n = 249) of students surveyed reported that they understood the proposed change well. Only 25% (n = 85) said they did not understand the proposed change to the grading scale. We included information about the proposed grading scale as part of the survey to support participants to provide informed responses.

59% (n = 177) students agreed with the proposed change to the grading scale, and 22% (n = 67) did not. 19% (n = 57) were unsure (34 did not respond to this question and have been excluded from the percentages).



We received 189 written comments explaining why they did or did not support the proposed change to the grading scheme.

Almost all of the 120 students who wrote comments in favour referred to consistency across universities. Students expressed that the proposed system is easier for potential employers to interpret, and even that the current system puts them at a disadvantage for employment opportunities. Some noted that employers may confuse the current system with the concept of the honours year.

“Unimelb has an unnecessarily unique (and complex) grading scheme that those who don't attend Unimelb or who do not work full-time in graduate recruitment often struggle to understand and compare to other universities. I have heard multiple (anecdotal) reports of graduates from other universities who have been successful over Unimelb grads in competitive applications by virtue of the fact that the relevant interviewer/recruiter instinctively understood and preferred a 'distinction' to a 'H2A/second class honours A' (despite the unimelb

student having a higher WAM). I've heard these stories from both Unimelb and non-Unimelb students."

Students were also concerned about portability across education providers. Students who are interested in future study elsewhere, including at overseas institutions, believed that a consistent approach to grading would assist with their entry applications.

Students who had previously studied at other institutions expressed their difficulty in adapting to a new grading system that their peers were already familiar with. Adopting the same grading scheme as other Australian universities would ensure that the University of Melbourne is more inclusive of the diverse experiences of students.

"Prior to studying my Masters at UniMelb, I studied my Bachelor degree at a different university that implemented the HD/D/C/P grading scale. It was very easy to follow and understand. After completing my first semester at UniMelb, I kept hearing from friends and fellow classmates about getting a H1 or H2A and I'd be thinking 'what the hell kind of thing is that?' Then finding out that is how the grading is at UniMelb. To someone who did not study at UniMelb, this grading scale can be very confusing and brings a level of competitiveness that puts a lot of pressure on students to do well if they do not achieve a H1."

While most feedback on the proposed grading scale was positive, there were 40 comments from students articulating their opposition or concerns, and an additional 29 comments from students who were unsure about the changes. Ten students wrote that they preferred the prestige of the current system and that it reflects an academically rigorous culture with British heritage. Some also noted this is an advantage when applying to British universities. We believe that student concerns about retaining the unique culture of the University of Melbourne should be addressed through other means, such as by retaining a wide subject selection and a robust research program.

Nine students expressed concerns regarding the current H2A and H2B grades being converted into a single Distinction grade, disadvantaging students who have an average H2A grade. Similarly, some students believed an H3 appears better than a Credit on their transcript. Several students also noted that the current grading scheme works well and there is no need to change it.

"The current system is satisfactory and UniMelb needs to stop Americanising the place (Melbourne Model, \$\$\$ fees)."

Some students who did not agree with the change expressed concerns around implementation in relation to retrospective grade changes and how research scholarship applications would be affected. The question of retrospective application is discussed below.

Based on the analysis above, GSA makes the following recommendation in relation to this issue:

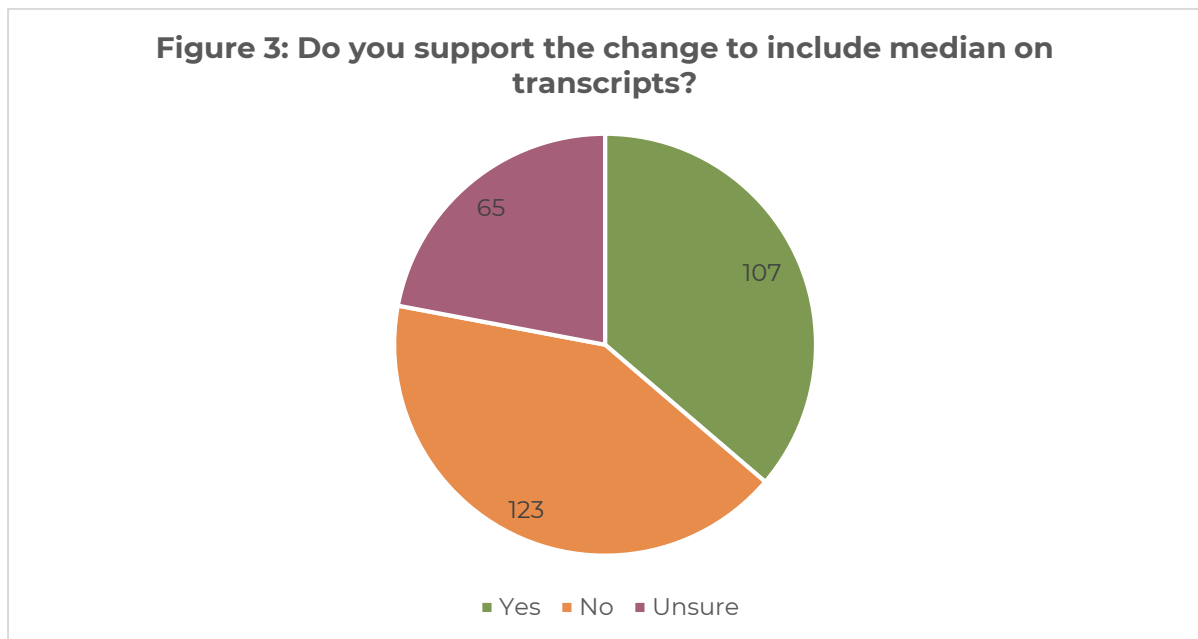
Recommendation 1: The University of Melbourne should adopt the "High Distinction/Distinction/Credit/Pass" grading scale.

Representing the median

The second proposed change is including the median score for each subject on a student's academic transcript (for subjects with more than ten students). The University discussion paper noted that providing students with a median score for each subject would assist external parties to interpret how a student performs relative to the entire class.

75% (n = 224) of students surveyed reported that they understood the proposed introduction of a median score. Only 25% (n = 73) said they did not understand the concept of introducing a median score. We provided information about the proposed median score within the survey to strengthen students' understanding before expressing their views.

42% (n = 123) are opposed to the inclusion of medians on academic transcripts, while 36% (n = 107) support the change (the remaining 22% (n = 65) being unsure).



We received 78 comments from students who opposed the change.

Many students found that receiving a median score for each subject would impose greater stress upon students. Some students found that subject grades and the Weighted Average Mark (WAM) already apply immense pressure to perform well. Students expressed that a median score unreasonably places students in competition with each other and promotes an unfriendly atmosphere.

“The point of an educational institution is to educate, not to pit students against each other.”

“This policy is weaponising the neoliberal university against us. All this policy will do is engender a toxic culture of competition based on grades without investing in our learning, knowledge and the academic pursuit.”

Isolating us in our failures and forcing us to compare ourselves does not make us 'job ready', it gives us mental health conditions."

Some students also expressed that the median scoring system would place lower-scoring students at a disadvantage despite their successful demonstration of learning outcomes.

"One thing I really like about university is that unlike high school and the ATAR, you are not judged based on your peers but rather your own work."

In addition, some students were concerned that median scoring could negatively impact their employability. Students noted that the median scoring is a crude metric that does not consider other factors in a students' journey, such as quality of teaching, challenges related to Covid-19, and other considerations.

"I feel as though prospective hirers are much more likely to focus on these numbers if they disadvantage your application (i.e. you received a mark that was lower than the median) than advantage (you received a mark higher than the median) which could severely jeopardise your job prospects."

Some students expressed that University of Melbourne grading is harsher than grading at other institutions. Students commented that this issue would be exacerbated by including the median due to the high-performing University of Melbourne cohort. This could be a disadvantage in job and study applications, as a University of Melbourne student would appear to be a lower performer than another student with higher grades at a less competitive institution.

While most feedback opposed the inclusion of medians, we also received 66 comments from the 36% of students who were in favour of including medians on academic transcripts. These comments largely communicated students' interest in knowing how they are ranked in their subject cohort. Students noted that being aware of their ranking would affirm their hard work and incentivise them to perform well. These students noted that this information would be beneficial for job applications, particularly for high-scoring students.

"This will allow employers to see the reality of our marks. If it was a tough exam, if it was a tough semester due to things like COVID, and puts poor marks into perspective if the majority failed etc."

A few students also commented that a median score would show how certain faculties are more challenging to achieve high grades in, increasing consistency across the University. We contend that while this information may be of interest to students, it should be communicated outside of academic transcripts due to the potential consequences for students' employment or further study applications.

We also received 34 comments from students who were unsure if they support the proposed median score. Some students focused on how the median score would benefit high-scoring students, but disadvantage students who perform poorly. These students expressed that this disparity in who benefits from the proposed

change creates an equity gap that conflicts with the University's aim to ensure an inclusive and supportive environment.

The student quote below shows how another Victorian university implemented a median score but quickly removed the change due to negative impacts.

"I have completed my Bachelor at RMIT and we used to have access to the median score of each assignment. However, I think it causes anxiety and negative comparisons between students to some extent. It was removed around Semester 1 in 2019. I believe cautious decisions need to be made under the careful consideration of the aims of presenting the median on transcripts."

Based on the above analysis, GSA recommends the following:

Recommendation 2:

The University of Melbourne should provide information on median scoring in an alternative manner and not include the medians on academic transcripts.

Retrospective application

We received many comments from students who questioned when the proposed grading scale would be implemented, and if it would be applied retrospectively to completed subjects or degrees. These students indicated concern around the lack of consistency offered to current students if the grading scale were to be implemented partway through their degree.

"I have real concerns as to what the approach will be to students mid-degree if/when the change is brought into effect. There needs to be a considered approach by the university to ensure that no such student is worse off than those graduating before or after them (whether or not that involves some kind of 'grandfathering' or something else)."

Based on this feedback, GSA recommends the following:

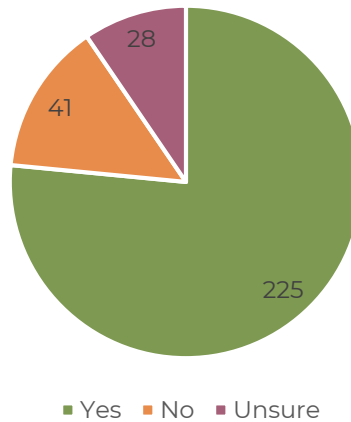
Recommendation 3: The University of Melbourne should establish and communicate a timeline to implement the proposed grading system and consult with students on retrospective application of the system.

Consultation processes

We asked students if they would have preferred to be more informed and consulted on the proposed changes to the Assessment and Results Policy.

77% (n = 225) of students surveyed reported that they would have liked to be more consulted/informed. Only 14% (n = 41) said they did not require further consultation, and 10% (n = 28) were unsure.

Figure 4: Would you have wanted to be informed or consulted more by the University on the results policy changes?



In the comments provided, many students expressed that more consultation was required for proposed changes that will impact all students' educational experience. Some respondents felt that future consultation processes should include students earlier in the decision-making process to shape more meaningful outcomes. Further, a few students found the working group report insufficient in explaining and justifying the proposed changes.

"I don't have any concerns about the proposed changes. However, I am concerned about how little the university consults with the student body about these policies. Results are fundamental to the job-seeking process and a student's future. As such, I do think that we should be a part of the conversation when we are affected the most."

"Thanks to GSA for conducting this survey. I have not seen any comms from the uni about this proposed change, which is very unfair."

Based on the above feedback, GSA recommends that:

Recommendation 4: The University of Melbourne should undertake regular consultations which are student-centric, inclusive and in a timely manner for all decision-making related to student outcomes.