Grade comparison of overseas qualifications

Introduction

The TDA commissioned a grade comparison exercise, carried out by UK NARIC, of all international awards that are considered comparable to British Bachelor (honours) degree standard. The resulting study considered the various data available at the time to establish the dataset. The methodology developed, employed and applied is specific to the context and requirements of establishing eligibility for the postgraduate training bursary.

The dataset has been produced by UK NARIC to support providers of initial teacher training (ITT) in making a judgement about whether an overseas degree is equivalent to a UK first degree with at least second class honours. UK NARIC does not recommend applying the methodology or the resulting dataset in other contexts.

Methodology

This section discusses the methodology to be applied to the grade comparison of international awards comparable to UK Bachelor (Honours) degree standard. Due to the variety of data that is or is not available in the countries included within this study the methodology will need to be flexible in its approach, yet resilient and robust enough to ensure an accurate representation of the grades in each country when compared with the UK. The methodology has been considered by the UK NARIC’s Quality Standards Group (QSG) which comprises a range of key educational stakeholders lending the essential externality element to the project.

1. Establishing comparability of international qualifications

International education is incredibly wide and varied in its structure, approach, content and duration, UK NARIC has over 10 years’ experience in developing a methodology to provide recognition to international education. This experience has culminated in the development of the NARIC Band Framework (appendix I); the framework encompasses the different types and levels of qualifications within the UK system. The core of all our work considers the following indicators in each

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1 The UK NARIC Quality Standards Group comprises representatives from Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), Accreditation Service for International Colleges (ASIC), British Accreditation Council (BAC), The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (OfQual), Vocational Training Charitable Trust (VTCT), Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), Department of Business Innovation and Skills, the UK Inter-Professional Group, the General Medical Council (GMC) and the UK Borders Agency.
consideration of these different factors enables UK NARIC to provide recognition to
overseas qualifications by helping to place the qualifications within the UK system.
This process has been carried out by UK NARIC for over a 180 countries worldwide.

2. UK NARIC data and implications for this study

British Bachelor degree standard

The role of UK NARIC is to assess and compare national levels of overseas
qualifications, in order to determine their standing in the British education system.
The comparability statements provided to individuals and UK NARIC members are
intended to reflect the level of the award in terms of its national standard, rather than
an individual’s own level of achievement.

When comparing overseas qualifications to UK degree standard, UK NARIC has
determined three possible comparability statements which may be used:

- British Bachelor (Honours) degree standard
- British Bachelor (Ordinary) degree standard
- British Bachelor degree standard

The difference between Ordinary and Honours within a UK NARIC context relates to
the type of degree course and the specific outcomes. Students who graduate with an
Honours degree have essentially completed an independent study and research
based degree as a continuation of the specialisation at the GCE Advanced level
stage. By contrast, an Ordinary degree is based around a taught education, often
with a broader range of subjects studied and a greater amount of contact hours.

Due to the generic nature of our comparability statements it is not always possible to
classify degrees in terms of (Ordinary) or (Honours), as this would suggest that every
degree programme from every university in a particular country is structured the
same way, with the same amount of independent study and research. In fact, varying degrees of institutional autonomy mean that in some countries, the style of study, level of research and specialisation are wholly at the discretion of the awarding institution while in others those factors are devised centrally. In those instances where institutional autonomy is prevalent, the statement British Bachelor degree standard is used to encompass the variety of approaches available. By comparing a qualification to British Bachelor degree standard, we are acknowledging the differences that may exist between courses on a national level however the comparability statement does not rule out the possibility of the qualification in a particular subject area or from a particular institution being considered comparable to an Honours degree in the UK.

For the purpose of this study which is concerned with the comparison of grades at Bachelor (Honours) degree standard, all those international awards deemed comparable to British Bachelor degree standard on the UK NARIC International Comparisons database have been identified for further analysis in order to determine their eligibility for comparability with British Bachelor (Honours) degree standard on a national, institutional or subject-specific level where possible.

Postgraduate Qualifications:

A clear demonstration of the complexity of international education, is illustrated by those awards that compare in terms of level i.e. are considered comparable to British Bachelor (Honours) degree standard, but are considered to be a postgraduate qualification in their country of origin. The nature, entry, structure and outcome of these awards suggest that it would be inappropriate to attempt to transfer their grades to the UK degree system. However, it is important to include them in the analysis so as not to exclude individuals who may be of suitable academic standing from funding.

It is important to note however that the grading methods used at postgraduate level often differ greatly to those used at undergraduate level: certain institutions may use broad classifications such as Pass, Merit and Distinction while others simply award students with a Pass or Fail. In order to accommodate the difference in approach and structure of grading systems for a postgraduate course, UK NARIC suggests benchmarking the qualification as a whole to a specific grade at British Bachelor (Honours) degree standard. To provide this judgement UK NARIC will examine the qualifications in a similar way as before, considering initially the same core indicators but bearing in mind the postgraduate nature of the qualifications additional indicators will be acknowledged accordingly:
Entry level requirements – high grades at undergraduate level would indicate that those students entering the course would be capable of a good level of achievement.

Duration\(^2\) – where credit systems are available these will be considered alongside duration, but essentially the length of the course of study can provide indications as to the robustness and resilience of the course.

Content – the breadth of study and the variety of fields encompassed in the programme alongside any identified specialisation and the proportion of study that entails will be considered. Structure – If a larger proportion of independent study is required as opposed to a more taught and directed approach focussing on a particular area of development, there can be further consideration that the candidates involved in the research style course would have skills more appropriate to a British Bachelor (honours) degree standard.

Professional / industry recognition – if a well-established professional body or acknowledged industry standard promotes or sponsors the qualification we can safely assume that certain minimum standards would need to be met by the individual students.

Principally though, consideration will be given to course outcomes / progression. – When compared with the established grade indicators it will be easier to see if the course compares more favourably with one grade over another.

As one can see the emphasis throughout the analysis will be based on a close cross referencing with the defined indicators of each grade level as established through this study. Finally consideration of the minimum standards required for a pass will also be included and a decision will be made on that basis.

Ungraded qualifications

Experience of dealing with international qualifications has highlighted several instances where qualifications may be awarded without an overall classification: students simply pass or fail. Ungraded qualifications deemed comparable to British Bachelor (Honours) degree standard will therefore be benchmarked to a particular grade in the UK.

To achieve this, consideration will be given to entry requirements, progression routes upon graduation both in the home country and the UK, the qualification award requirements and, where available, consideration of pass and fail rates.

\(^2\) It should be noted that duration should only be considered alongside other indicators, to substantiate or endorse information already discovered such as learning outcomes, mode of study and course structure - as opposed to providing a deciding factor.
3. Methodological Process

The first task would be to examine the comparable levels of overseas higher education programmes to determine their suitability for inclusion in the study. This information will be obtained from existing UK NARIC data, as outlined in point 1, held within International Comparisons which has been devised using the core principles of credential evaluation.

Qualifications considered to be below British Bachelor degree standard or Postgraduate Certificate and above will be excluded from the study.

Once comparability to British Bachelor degree standard or British Bachelor (Honours) degree standard has been established, it will be important to consider the standing of the qualification in the context of the system in which it was obtained. Undergraduate qualifications which are considered to be comparable to British Bachelor (Honours) degree standard can be immediately analysed for the purposes of comparing grades, outlined in the sub-section ‘b’ below.

a) Establishing comparability to British Bachelor degree standard / British Bachelor (Honours) degree standard

Initially a consideration of the governance of Higher Education will be undertaken, primarily to identify where there is a consistent approach to quality assurance and accreditation and then to establish if that approach provides any indicators on a national level as to the standard of education being provided for example:

- Accreditation categories: are there any official distinctions made between recognised universities and what effects do these have on the courses of study offered.
• Acknowledged prestigious institutions and any impact that may have on the structure or academic standing of the qualifications awarded.

• Types of institutions offering particular types of awards: Certain countries offer two distinct pathways at higher education level e.g. technical and academic, and as a result the structure of study and outcomes can vary substantially

• Acknowledged distinction between degree programmes. As above many countries offer a professionally oriented route that results in a specific profession alongside an academic route that provides access to postgraduate study\(^3\)

• Acknowledged differentiation within countries, either through provision or particular sectors

• Entry requirements

• Structure and style of studies

• Level of specialisation together with the content of the programme and its focus can provide clear indications of comparability to UK honours degrees

• Progression / outcomes. Does the qualification allow direct access to postgraduate study in the country of origin or are students required to undertake an entrance exam or access programme to determine suitability for admission.

• Review a sample of UK universities to see what they accept from international students for Postgraduate admission.

Consideration of the criteria above will allow for identification of suitable qualifications for inclusion in the rest of the study and will also provide valuable information for the subsequent grading analysis stage.

b) Grade comparisons

The core of the study is to develop a methodology for the comparison of grades 2.2, 2.1, and 1st to be applied to all those awards that compare to British Bachelor (Honours) degree. Due to the inconsistency in data availability for each of the countries concerned it will be necessary to use a combined approach focussing on the quantitative analysis of grading distributions where available supported by more qualitative data such as:

• Overseas grading descriptors

• Analysis of existing international comparisons and conversions of grading systems used by UK and prominent international universities in their admissions procedures

\(^3\) Often in these cases the professional route graduate is required to undertake a bridging course if they wish to progress to postgraduate study
Using grade distribution

UK NARIC, courtesy of HESA, has identified the UK grading distribution for 2010. Considering the grade distribution in the UK since 2005 has only varied by 1% it was felt that using only the 2010 statistics would be sufficient and appropriate for the purposes of this study.

By considering the proportion of students obtaining each grade in a particular international qualification, comparable to British Bachelor (Honours) degree standard, against the proportion of students obtaining a 1st, 2.1 and 2.2 at Bachelor level in the UK will enable broad lines of comparability to be drawn between grades.

It should be noted however that grade distribution provides a valuable indicator of grade comparability rather than a definitive result. The qualification structure, learning and assessment outcomes and progression will also need to be considered to provide a balanced and qualitative judgement.

In the use of grade distribution it should be noted that these can be presented in a different way for each country, either as a national average of institutions and subjects as per the UK or through the provision of a range of percentages for the award of each grade in acknowledgement of the potential differences between institutions and subjects.

Comparative analysis of UK and overseas grading descriptors

To support data on grading distribution or where such information is unavailable, UK NARIC will seek grading descriptors for the relevant qualifications. For some countries these may be available on a national level while for others at institutional level.

To provide an informed decision on how these indicators compare to UK grades it is important to initially establish definitions of what the minimum indicators of a 1st, 2.1; 2.2; and 3rd mean in the UK. As autonomous institutions, UK universities take a variety of stances on this information, the detail provided and the variation in terminology used. Working with this context UK NARIC have reviewed a sample of grade descriptors from a range of UK universities and identified key phrases and terminology used to differentiate between the different grades, to inform our research. This included a sample of institutions from the Russell Group, the ‘94 Group and the University Alliance. The result of this research is reflected in Table 1

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4 HESA, 2010
below, which provided a reference indicator for comparison of the grades available throughout the study. It should be noted that UK NARIC is well aware of the subjective nature of grade descriptors and acknowledges that relying on them in isolation would not be appropriate. For that reason UK NARIC looks to cross reference against the grading distribution and the postgraduate admission requirements both in the home country, and in the UK.

Table 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Key Outcomes and Terms</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
<th>Key Terms</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>*UK Distribution 2010 (includes unclassified results)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>Develop and sustain a personal judgement beyond the limits of the task and the concepts taught. Analysis is clear, coherent, systematic and critical</td>
<td>Independent / novel / articulate / persuasive / exceptional / flair / originality / authoritative / high quality / sharply focused / engage critically / argued logically / extensive / accurate / complete / depth / outstanding / comprehensive / insightful</td>
<td>70% and above</td>
<td>14.4% (13.3%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:1</td>
<td>Sustain a personal judgement coherently. Collation of wide range of sources and critical interpretation of those</td>
<td>High level competence / Confident / Reliable / Critical judgement / sound / consolidated / Relevant / logical / progressive / synthesise clear / comprehensive / appropriate / coherent</td>
<td>60% and above</td>
<td>48.3% (44.7%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:2</td>
<td>Comprehension of the subject and ability to collate a range of sources and opinions</td>
<td>Structured / adequate / derivative relevant / recognition of complexity / competent / narrative / descriptive / general / concise / accurate</td>
<td>50% and above</td>
<td>29.8% (27.6%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>Basic understanding Unsubstantiated</td>
<td>Basic / Safe / limited / adequate / competent /</td>
<td>40% and above</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research and analysis of existing international comparisons and conversions of grading systems used by UK and prominent international universities in their admissions procedures

A considerable number of UK universities have now developed country-specific admissions guides, providing information on which qualifications and grades from a given country may be accepted by the UK institution for admission to postgraduate studies. Consideration of the general requirements set by UK universities for international students will provide a valuable insight into the academic standing attributed to overseas programmes and grades. UK NARIC’s previous and on-going interaction with UK higher education admissions staff has revealed that such admission requirements are commonly determined in direct response to the knowledge and capabilities demonstrated by international students within UK higher education programmes. For example, students from a certain country may be required by many UK universities to have achieved a qualification comparable to British Bachelor degree with a score of 75% or more in their home country in order to be admitted to a Master’s degree programme at the UK institution because experience has shown that students who achieved lower grades at undergraduate level have been unable to meet the demands of a UK Master’s degree.

Typically a Bachelor (Honours) degree with a 2.1 or above is required for admission to postgraduate study in the UK. While admission with a grade of 2.2 is possible, this is more likely to be the case for undersubscribed courses or where the individual has other relevant experience or qualifications to supplement their application. Thus by comparing a sample of UK institutions’ international admissions guides, UK NARIC will gain an insight into the general postgraduate admission requirements for international students by country and be able to draw comparisons against those set for students educated at UK higher education institutions.

Through the combined quantitative and qualitative approach to grade comparison, UK NARIC will be able to provide reliable and objective recommendations on the comparability of grades obtained in different international systems.
To further support the findings through a cross referencing process, and to replace if no evidence presents itself then a consideration of the following can be undertaken:

- International ranking
- National Ranking

The data above would be used to group institutions on the basis of their top grades into three broad categories of ranking: 2.2, 2.1 and 1st focussing on the overall quality of their provision. In this way the differences in quality will be more easily reflected in the grading comparison analysis.