

On assessment systems in higher education

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We live in a rapidly changing world, which also causes frequent revisions in the system of higher education. Only recently we introduced substantial changes in connection with transition to the 3 + 2 system in accordance with the Bologna Declaration. Development of technical possibilities led to the display of study information on internet. Now the students may obtain, via internet, a complete summary of the contents of each subject, the work arrangements, objectives and the expected as well as the actual results. Likewise, more or less detailed study materials are available on internet. Such a change has not left untouched the important study aspect of **assessment system**. Leaning on a long-term experience, I should like to describe and compare the different systems.

The first experiences go back half a century when I commenced studies in the department of mathematics at Tartu University. The study plan was fixed, also the number of examinations and tests during a session. Three unsatisfactory marks by the beginning of a new semester meant dismissal from studentship unless a medical certificate was available. In order to be admitted to an examination it was necessary to pass in certain limited or comprehensive tests in the class (their number depended on the teacher) or pass in a pre-examination of problem solving. The examination proper was oral, with time allowed on site for preparation. Usually the mark was based on the impression and sense of justice of the teacher in a dialogue with the candidate. The positive marks were 5 (very good), 4 (good), 3 (satisfactory), the negative results were 2 (insufficient) and (absent).

Under the new circumstances which opened in the nineties, there was a succession of reforms of the university study arrangements. The first was a transition from a 5-year study to a 4 + 2 and later to a 3 + 2 system, with the denotations Bachelor and Master of those who had completed their studies at the appropriate level. The end of the nineties saw the introduction of the assessment system common elsewhere in the world: A (excellent), B (very good), C (good), D (satisfactory), E (poor), F (insufficient). From 1999 only the new assessment system was permitted and the level of knowledge assumed for each grade as well as the corresponding point values (percentages) were clearly enunciated: A (100–91), B (90–81), C (80–71), D (70–61), E (60–51), F (50–0).

I will describe the assessment system, which showed precisely how the marks were decided and also met the aims set for my study course. I am not only thinking of the mastering of essential mathematical knowledge, but also development of a skill which could be termed mathematical reading ability. This system should activate the student to a continuous independent work with study materials throughout the duration of the course.

Within the past few years it had been decided that we must change our educational system from being subject-centred to becoming student-centred. The new system is termed **competence-founded** teaching and requires a statement of the minimal knowledge and skills expected from the student after completion of each course. Now there are also plans at the Tartu University to introduce an **output-centred system of assessment** on September 1, 2010. This would no longer permit the use of the 51-percent boundary between a positive and a negative assessment. The boundary must change from a quantitative to a qualitative one. It seems that this supposedly new system might really be a return to the forgotten old system, where the grade was formed by the impression and sense of justice of the teacher. Time will have to answer this question.