



OFFICE OF THE PROVOST AND VICE-PRESIDENT, ACADEMIC

8888 University Drive,
Burnaby, BC
Canada V5A 1S6TEL: 778.782.6654
FAX: 778.782.5876avpacad@sfu.ca
www.sfu.ca/vpacademic**MEMORANDUM**

ATTENTION	Senate	DATE	May 3, 2024
FROM	Peter Hall, Chair Senate Committee on Undergraduate Studies	PAGES	1/1
RE:	Elective Grading System update (<i>SCUS 24-58</i>)		

Acting under delegated authority at its meeting of May 2, 2024, the Senate Committee on Undergraduate Studies approved the recommendation to discontinue the exploration of a revised Elective Grading System, based on research findings and the complexities and resource-intensive nature of implementation and maintenance to sustain this initiative.



3200 Maggie Benston Centre TEL 778.782.3108 Sfu.ca/students
8888 University Drive, FAX 778.782.5732
Burnaby, BC
Canada V5A 1S6

MEMORANDUM

ATTENTION SCUS DATE April 29, 2024
FROM Tom Nault
Registrar & Executive Director, Student
Enrolment
RE: Elective Grading System – community consultation and recommendation report

Background

In early 2021, SCUS approved the pilot Elective Grading System (EGS) for the Spring, Summer, and Fall 2021 terms in recognition of how the pandemic and remote learning adversely affected students. The EGS pilot was subsequently extended through to the Summer 2023 term in order to allow for further analysis of the pilot data.

Between March and June 2023, the Registrar’s office conducted a series of interviews and surveys with students and advisors. The result report was submitted to SCUS on June 1, 2023. SCUS decided not to extend the EGS pilot (see [S.23-95 for the detailed EGS pilot report](#)), recommending further study and consultation to determine whether an alternative grading system would be feasible. Subsequently, between July 2023 and December 2023, the Registrar’s office met with the SFSS, students, staff and faculty members within each of the faculties, the UCIL, and IT Services to discuss the future of EGS at SFU.

Key findings of the EGS study

- While the overarching goal of all elective grading systems is to foster academic exploration without the potential for negative CGPA impact, the implementation, specific rules, and history of these policies vary significantly among post-secondary institutions.
- Selected interviews with other post-secondary institutions, demonstrate that each institution has crafted their EGS based on the specific needs of their student population, with support from all their faculties.
- EGS policies are popular among students, but require considerable amount of coordination between faculties and Registrar’s Office to establish a unified framework that supports positive academic impacts for students.

Considerations: *Interviews with McGill, Queens, Dalhousie*

Similarities:

- Purpose: All three universities (McGill, Queens, and Dalhousie) implemented elective grading systems (EGS) to encourage students to explore courses outside their main area of study without negatively impacting their CGPA.

- Instructor Awareness: Instructors at McGill and Queens are not aware of students' elective grading choices, while Dalhousie typically informs instructors.
- Impact on GPA: Elective courses under these systems generally do not count towards CGPA calculation at the three universities (unless the student fails the course).
- Integration in Curriculum: Each university's EGS affects scholarship eligibility and honor roll considerations.

Differences:

- Grading Options: McGill uses a Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory (S/U) option, Queens uses a pass/incomplete (PIC) system, and Dalhousie offers Credit/No Credit (CR/NCR) options.
- Application Process: McGill and Dalhousie allow online selection, while Queens requires a paper application. All require permission in advance through the Registrar's office. Students do not have the option to individually select the EGS option; the Registrar's office verifies that the course is an elective and not required for their individual program.
- Course Limits and Timing: McGill limits students to 10% S/U grades towards completion of their degree, Queens allows a maximum of six units, and Dalhousie permits conversion of up to one term's full-time coursework. Deadlines for decisions vary.
- Faculty and Department Participation: Course eligibility varies across universities, with some departments having more autonomy for participation in the EGS.
- Policy Implementation and Background: Each university has their own unique history and rationale for implementing EGS, with Dalhousie introducing theirs most recently in 2022.

Environmental Scan

Similarities:

- The universities have implemented alternative grading options, such as Credit/D/Fail, Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory (S/U), Credit/No Credit (CR/NCR), Pass/Credit/No Credit (P/CR/NC), and Pass/Fail.
- All universities provide an opt-in/opt-out mechanism for students to choose the alternative grading system during a specific period.
- There is a deadline mentioned for students to opt in or out of the alternative grading system, often associated with the last day of classes for the term.
- Universities specify the maximum number of credits or courses permitted under the alternative grading system, ranging from 1 course to 12 credits.
- In most cases, the alternative grading options are excluded from the calculation of the Grade Point Average (GPA).
- The alternative grading systems typically do not impact eligibility for the Dean's List.

Differences:

- Different universities implemented their alternative grading systems in various years, ranging from as early as 2009 to more recent implementations in 2023.
- The specifics of grading options vary across universities, including percentage thresholds for different grades.
- While some universities specify that the alternative grading options do not impact scholarships, others may not provide explicit information.

- Some universities mention whether the alternative grading system applies to elective classes, while others do not provide this information.
- The requirement for faculty or program permission to opt for the alternative grading system varies among universities.
- Some universities allow undeclared students to opt for alternative grading, while others may not explicitly state this.
- The requirement for students to be in good academic standing to opt for the alternative grading system varies.

Recommendation:

Given the complexities and resource-intensive nature of implementing and maintaining an elective grading system (EGS), and, based on our research findings, we recommend discontinuing the exploration of a revised EGS. While EGS policies may support student academic exploration, the significant coordination required between faculties and Registrar's Office and the lack of available resources (human, technical, financial), make it challenging to implement and sustain this initiative.

Effect of COVID and Temporary Grading Policies on Undergraduate Grades and Student Performance

At the September 2023 meeting of Senate, it was requested that IRP provide some data related to the preparedness of incoming students in COVID vs. pre-COVID times, as well as the effect of various recent grading policies on undergraduate course grades.

Table 1 displays the performance of incoming undergraduate admits from secondary schools in fall terms over the last 7 years. Years 2017-2019 are before COVID, and 2020-2024 are after COVID began. Three different SFU performance measures are included: Term 1 GPA, Retention to Year 2, and Retention to Year 3. Note that recently admitted students have not yet been followed long enough to produce all performance measures.

Table 1: Performance of Incoming Fall Admits from Secondary School

Admission Term	Number of Students	Average Term 1 GPA	Year 1 to Year 2 Retention Rate	Year 1 to Year 3 Retention Rate
Fall 2017	3,268	2.70	88%	81%
Fall 2018	3,448	2.72	88%	81%
Fall 2019	2,961	2.77	90%	83%
COVID → Fall 2020	3,073	2.84	89%	82%
Fall 2021	3,606	2.79	89%	---
Fall 2022	3,812	2.82	---	---
Fall 2023*	3,865	3.01	---	---

* Note that Fall 2023 had a relatively generous grading policy in place in response to the TSSU strike, which accounts for the relatively high Term 1 GPA of incoming students that term.

The Average Term 1 GPA of recent incoming fall secondary admits has generally been slightly higher than the pre-COVID cohorts. To some extent (especially for the Fall 2023 admits), this can be attributed to grading policies in place after COVID started, which generally yielded higher average grades. However, the Fall 2020 admits were not affected by such a grading policy in their first term. Nearly all courses were taught remotely in Fall 2020, and it's possible this affected grading practices.

So far, it appears that retention rates have not decreased since COVID began, although there is currently limited follow-up data for those recent admission cohorts. Again, it's possible that retention rates are being bolstered by the recent grading policies that tend to yield higher average grades.

Table 2 displays undergraduate course grades data since 2017, and splits the terms into different periods based on the grading policies that were in place.

Table 2: Course Grades Associated with Recent Grading Policies

Grading Period	Grading Policy	Average Course Grade	% P/CR/NC	% Fail Grades
1: 2017-2019	No Unusual Policy	2.88	0%	4%
2: Spring 2020	Spring 2020 COVID Policy	3.23	18%	2%
3: Summer - Fall 2020	No Unusual Policy, Remote Courses	3.01	0%	3%
4: Spring 2021 - Summer 2023	Elective Grade Policy	2.98	2%	4%
5: Fall 2023	Special Policy (TSSU Strike)	3.19	17%	4%

The average course grades have the expected pattern based on the grading policies in place during these periods:

- The first grading period (2017-2019) is pre-COVID, and had no special grading policies in place; it can be thought of as a baseline.
- Both Spring 2020 and Fall 2023 (the 2nd and 5th grading periods in the table) have high average course grades. These two terms had relatively generous grading policies in place, which allowed students to wait until they saw their final grade, and then decide whether they wished to switch their grade to the P/CR/NC scale¹. They could make this switch in as many of their courses as they wished. P/CR/NC grades are not included in average course grade calculations, because these grades have no numeric value.
- The 3rd and 4th grading periods have average grades between the baseline and the higher average grades of Spring 2020/Fall 2023.
 - The 3rd period did not have any unusual grading policy in place. However, these were the first terms after the start of COVID, with no in-person teaching. It's possible that the move to remote classes had an effect on grading practices.
 - The 4th period had the Elective Grade Policy in place. This policy did allow students to switch grades to the P/CR/NC scale, which tended to push average grades upward. But the effect is less strong than in Spring 2020 and Fall 2023, because of the details of the policy: students had to make the decision to switch to P/CR/NC *before* seeing their final grade in the course, could only make this switch in a limited number of courses, and could not do so for required courses.

The “% P/CR/NC” column displays the percentage of course grades that were switched to the P/CR/NC scale². In periods 1 and 3, this is necessarily 0%, because the P/CR/NC grade scale was not available during those periods. The option to switch scales was most heavily used in Spring 2020³ and Fall 2023,

¹ or switch any passing grade to P in Spring 2020

² Note that the denominator here is P/CR/NC grades plus grades with a numeric equivalent: A+ to F/ND/N.

³ Note that in Spring 2020, this percentage is an estimate, since the reason for a P grade was not recorded that term.

when students could apply this switch in as many courses as they wanted, and after seeing their final grade in the course.

The last column shows what percentage of undergraduate course grades were fail grades (F/FD/N/NC)². This has been fairly stable over time. There was a decrease in 2020 with the move to remote courses at the start of COVID.

Table Notes and Definitions

Table 1:

1. For each year, the cohort consists of all new undergraduate students in the fall term, admitted on the basis of their secondary school results, who were in an undergraduate degree program in their first term (exchange, visiting and irregular students are excluded).
2. The year 1 to year 2 retention rate is the percentage of these students who either registered in an undergraduate degree program at SFU during year 2 (terms 4, 5 or 6 following admission), or graduated with an SFU undergraduate degree by the end of their second year (term 6 following admission; based on completion term, not convocation date).
3. The year 1 to year 3 retention rate is the percentage of these students who either registered in an undergraduate degree program at SFU during year 3 (terms 7, 8 or 9 following admission), or graduated with an SFU undergraduate degree by the end of their third year (term 9 following admission; based on completion term, not convocation date).
4. GPA data for the student's first term is as of March 7, 2024.
5. Registration data are taken at the official reporting date (generally end-of-week-3) each term.

Table 2:

1. The analysis includes grades with a numeric equivalent (A+ to F/FD/N) and P/CR/NC grades due to various recent grading policies (the Spring 2020 COVID grading policy, the Elective Grade Policy, and the Fall 2023 grading policy in response to the TSSU strike; i.e. – regular P grades are not included, only P grades associated with these recent grading policies). For Spring 2020 only, it was not always possible to differentiate regular P grades from P grades that resulted from the one-time grading policy, but this should have minimal effect on the P statistics.
2. Co-op courses are excluded from this table. Where they could be identified, courses graded as Pass/Fail are also excluded.
3. Average Grades only include grades with a numeric equivalent.
4. Course grades data is as of May 30, 2024.

Source: AH-488