GRADED ASSESSMENT

Bernard O'Rourke
Educational Research Centre
St Patrick's College, Dublin

This paper provides an introduction to the concept of graded assessment a recently developed and influential area relating to assessment and certification The notions of graded assessment are described Pertinent features of the examination system in Ireland are reviewed to highlight graded or graduated aspects of current assessment provision and to provide a context for understanding the attractions potential and problems of graded assessment The policy options opened up by graded assessment are examined and as far as can be ascertained from the scope of pilot projects in Great Britain the directions in which policy seems to be headed are noted The paper concludes with an outline of a number of evaluation issues relating to graded assessment drawing on material on graded assessment and on more general material in the fields of educational psychology and assessment

The intuitively-simple idea of progression in teaching and learning underlies one of the more recent and influential developmental areas in assessment and certification, that of graded assessment. Graded assessment has attracted immense interest, particularly in Great Britain The concept has received endorsement in major reports on teaching (e g , 18) and the support of critics of traditional external terminal-examination systems (e g , 20) Encouraged by an established history of use of graded or staged assessments within sport, music, and other performance domains (e g , 15), the interest in graded assessment has stimulated a large volume of research and development work A significant proportion of this work has focused specifically on modern-language subjects (e g , 4) Considered as much, if not more, as a curriculum initiative, work in this area has been undertaken often under the heading of *graded objectives* (e g , 14) Indeed in many instances, assessment is but one dimension within a framework of largely curriculum concerns (cf 7)

PRINCIPLES OF GRADED ASSESSMENT

Motivated often by a desire to allow a greater proportion of each student cohort to obtain recognition for what they have achieved, developers of graded-assessment schemes have tended to address the assessment needs of lower attainers and of those pupils not remaining in the system long enough to

sit traditional terminal examinations (e g , 14) In England, for example, the long-standing practice of defining in very restrictive terms the target populations for public examinations has focused attention on a group of students who were not catered for by either of the 16-plus examinations existing at the time and whose achievements would not be publicly evaluated or recognized This group has been viewed as comprising the lowest 40% of the ability distribution of the full pupil cohort In addition, simple failure to persist in school until examination time operates as a further restrictive influence on the effective target populations for traditional examinations

It is within the context of a measure of disillusionment with the implications of an assessment system which is not only terminal and non-formative but also restrictive in the ways described above that interest has developed in designing assessment systems which would not be unnecessarily restrictive in definition, would be more geared towards the evaluation of specific attainments, and more structured and flexible in respect of timing and sequencing of assessments The end product would be an assessment system which would allow all pupils to have attainment monitored in ways which would be both instructionally useful (signifying readiness to progress) and practically valuable (providing a *surrender value* to attained skills) (8) The system would be organized to provide for evaluations to take place after shorter time intervals and for 'bottom-up', stage-by-stage progress monitoring within the framework of a very structured syllabus

Based on his review of schemes of *Graded objectives in modern languages* (GOML schemes), Harrison (15) identified three generalizable aspects of such schemes which have been taken as principles of graded assessment progression, task-orientation, and linkage with the learning process In the context of assessment tied to a structured set of instructional or behavioural objectives, progression means that assessment is sequenced (graded or graduated), typically in terms of difficulty (22) The fact that schemes of graded assessment are task-oriented reflects a curriculum orientation towards practical applications of what is being learned (e g , communication with language) Lastly, linking assessment more closely with the learning process represents a promotion of the potential formative function of assessment In addition to promoting instructional validity in assessment, closer linkage implies a rethink of the existing administrative and logistical frameworks for assessment, particularly of the teacher's role in and uses of assessment information (cf 29)

The three principles of progression, task-orientation, and linkage with the learning process are often cited in reviews of graded assessment (e g , 22) and, even though deduced from language-learning schemes, in some quarters have become accepted as characterizing the essential aspects of schemes of graded assessment (e g , see 32) Accepting for the present the evident variation in the extent to which these principles have been implemented in actual practice, the concern here is to note two points Firstly, consistent with an identification of graded assessment and graded objectives, such principles inform as much about curriculum and its organization and implementation as they do about assessment Secondly, each of the principles advanced represents a specification for assessment, particularly in respect of that with which it is to be concerned, how it is to be scheduled, and what functions it is to serve

On the assumption that a graded-assessment approach has positive effects on pupil motivation interest, and persistence (e g , 1, 2, 3, 11, 13), the approach reflects additional principles of 'attainability' of goals (e g , 5) and of readiness for assessment (e g , 4, 14) Closely linking learning with assessment has been taken as implying that assessment is most appropriately undertaken when the pupil has completed learning This should not be taken to mean when 'instruction' is complete, but rather when learning has taken place, when the probability of success in the assessment is high, and when the pupil is unlikely to experience unnecessary failure (e g , 1) However, reflecting apparently radical organizational or administrative requirements (cf 25), the operational implementation in graded-assessment schemes of a readiness principle has proved difficult in practice, with the result that it is less than apparent across a wide range of schemes (12, 15)

The principles of graded assessment outlined here can be taken as providing a framework within which assessment and certification and their functions in relation to curriculum and instruction might be considered As with other generic ideas in assessment and certification (e g , profiles or records of achievement), the concept of graded assessment is open-ended and particularly so with respect to the questions of when and how to assess and who should carry out the assessment Viewed in this way, it is possible to appreciate that graded assessment has been interpreted differently by advocates and implemented differently in assessment schemes In some cases, assessment has involved teachers' judgments (continuous monitoring and recording) and, in others, it has consisted of the regular, if flexibly scheduled, use of tests This divergence of interpretation gives rise to different sets of problems and issues (e g , the

readiness question) and to ambiguity if the distinction between interpretations is not recognized The adoption of an open-ended perspective also allows one to recognize the limited and limiting graduated aspects of the traditional examination system and to appreciate better why many people seem to be inclined towards a different image of grading in assessment and certification

Discussion so far has dwelt on general principles There remains the question of what in fact a scheme of graded assessment might look like and how general principles might be translated into practice Both these questions are addressed now Two strategies are used Firstly, a number of general aspects of graded assessment schemes are outlined Secondly, four illustrative graded assessment schemes are described

ASPECTS OF GRADED ASSESSMENT SCHEMES

The general aspects of schemes of graded assessment are considered under several headings for present purposes typical target populations, subjects involved, number of graduated points or stages, modes and standards of assessment, and certification of assessments These categories are used to inform as to both the logic and operation of graded-assessment schemes The information presented is drawn from a wider base than the illustrations examined subsequently and is designed to provide a broader framework within which to consider the specific illustrations which are presented

Typical Target Populations

While graded assessment is applicable in principle across pupil ability and achievement distributions, such across-the-band application has not proved universally, or even widely, attractive (22) For example, a major report on the teaching of mathematics advocates graded assessment, but limits its application to the lower-attaining/shorter-persisting pupils for whom the standards required in or the schedules typical of traditional examinations are regarded as inappropriate (18) Harrison (15) notes that mathematics graded-assessment schemes, in contrast to schemes in subjects such as science, seem characteristically aimed at lower-ability pupils, and focus on the certification of basic numeracy skills Even in schemes not expressly tied to a restricted target population, an element of restriction is introduced by virtue of the fact that assessment is confined to achievement up to a relatively low ceiling (e g , average performance in traditional 16-plus examinations) In addition, some schemes intended for eventual use with the full ability range, were developed

initially more with the needs of less-able learners in mind (14) As noted earlier, the development of graded assessments has been motivated often by a recognized need to address the assessment/certification needs of lower attainers and those who do not take traditional examinations

Subjects Involved

A wide and growing range of subjects is covered by schemes of graded assessment The majority of subjects are language subjects English and modern continental languages (French, German, Spanish, Italian) have been covered as have some less-commonly taught languages such as Russian and Chinese (e g , 11) Non-language subjects covered include mathematics, science, and a subject known as Craft, Design, and Technology (e g , 33)

Number of Graduated Points or Stages

The most striking feature regarding the number of graduated points or stages is the lack of consensus evident among those developing schemes For example, as indicated during a conference on the practical issues involved, arguments for a large number of levels have 'rested on the need to provide a substantial element of progression through the curriculum for lower attaining students and to facilitate links with GCSE [General Certificate of Secondary Education]' (26, p 7) Arguments for a small number of levels have been made on the basis of simplicity and likely cost effectiveness Within the context of an assessment system covering a range of subjects, the issue of comparability of number of levels across subjects also arises, at the same conference, consensus on this issue was similarly absent Given that the conference was sponsored by a group of examination boards, it may be that the absence of consensus on this issue reflects administrative considerations (towards small numbers of comparable assessments) on the one hand and more principle-based arguments (towards larger subject-specific numbers) on the other (cf 39)

In working out details of the number of levels or stages, issues arising from the relationship between levels or stages have to be addressed The content relationship between each level has to be specified Administrative decisions have to be taken on matters such as whether pupils will need to be assessed at each and every level and whether pupils will be allowed discretion in the level at which they are to be assessed at any given time (e g , whether there should be restrictions based on age, standard, or class) The tendency has been to provide structure and detail in content-specification (e g , curriculum units of

behavioural objectives) and flexibility in the administrative framework of operating guidelines (e g , see 1)

Modes and Standards of Assessment
Curiously enough perhaps, details of the 'nuts and bolts' of assessment in schemes of graded assessment are not readily available in the published literature The actual task of assessment can be characterized often as continuous assessment by teachers and as tending towards being criterion-referenced (see Illustration #IV) Often, however, graded assessment involves more formal testing It is in respect of this latter model of graded assessment that available information is particularly poor Where measurement details of testing are outlined, attention focuses typically on structure, content, and pass standards A good example is the York French scheme (1, pp 90-92) The Level Two stage test in this scheme (the first to be developed and, in the early 1980s, the most widely used within the scheme) includes reading, listening, and speaking components The reading comprehension component consists of multiple-choice items and passages of test, 45% of the overall marks are awarded on the basis of this component The listening comprehension component (35% of overall marks) consists of short dialogues, with two questions (multiple-choice or open-ended) on each The oral component (20% of overall marks) consists of two role-playing situations and five personal questions, the test being recorded on tape Reading and listening comprehension tests are designed to be administered within 30-minute class periods (Level Three and Four tests are also described and are similar in structure, the main difference being the inclusion of a written paper in the Level Four test) While pass standards are typically set high (e g , 70%), the expectation is that the curriculum/teaching/ assessment framework would provide for equally high success rates (e g , 80% or 90%), as noted earlier, readiness is one of the pedagogical principles underpinning this approach to assessment

In contrast to Bolton's (1) account of the York scheme and some notable cases (e g , 12), details about the design, administration, and scoring of tests within other schemes are typically absent That the Mode III provision of the Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE) and the General Certificate of Education (GCE) was often brought up in this context suggests that the tests might reasonably be expected to conform to the Mode III model, where responsibility for the majority of the assessment tasks rests at the school level However, some schemes were administered by non-examination board groups such as language centres, which assumed the administrative character of examination boards Such centres

operated as external agencies and handled most assessment tasks from design
to reporting, an example is the Leeds Language Teaching Information Centre
(described in 12)

Whether considered as involving teachers' judgments or tests, perhaps the
single most important observation about assessment in the context of the
development of graded assessment relates to what it is that can be considered
innovatory The core idea in graded assessment relates more to the functional
development of organizational, instructional, and administrative frameworks for
assessment than to the development of new assessment tools per se In fact, the
schemes tend to make use of fairly traditional assessment procedures

Certification of Assessments
Graded assessment can be regarded as a reaction against restrictive aspects
of existing examination assessment and certification Given this consideration,
one of the most interesting features of ongoing development work is the
involvement of many of the examination boards as partners if not promoters
(e g , see 39) Apart from looking to graded assessment as a potential avenue for
the future (especially linked with profiles/records of achievement), some
examination boards have promoted the cause of graded assessment by allowing
for Mode III recognition of the upper levels of some schemes For example, this
link was established for the York French scheme, its fourth stage or level being
accepted for CSE Mode III (14) The University of Oxford Delegacy of Local
Examinations introduced an Oxford Certificate of Educational Achievement in
which a graded assessment component based on teachers' judgments was one
of three parts (see Illustration #IV) With an estimated 80 graded assessment
schemes existing in 1984-85 and offering for assessment an increasing range of
subjects and levels (12), the proportion of second-level pupils experiencing this
type of assessment has been growing steadily since the mid-1970s (see 15)

ILLUSTRATIONS OF GRADED ASSESSMENT SCHEMES

The schemes presented as illustrations are chosen on the basis of how they
inform as to the tasks and issues involved in graded assessment Presented in
some detail, the first illustration is of a fairly typical scheme of some years
standing The second illustration is of a mathematics scheme and is specifically
included on account of a recognizable similarity with some of the existing
certificate examination provisions in Ireland (particularly the Technical Schools
Examinations) (see 23) The third illustration is of a scheme in

mid-development, with many of the design features being debated as yet The fourth and final illustration is a scheme which maintains perhaps the clearest and most developed conception of assessment within the graded framework

Illustration #1 Graded Levels of Achievement in Languages
      The theme of graded assessment in modern-language learning has been taken up in Scotland The Lothian Region's project on graded levels of achievement in foreign-language learning (7,8) produced a scheme which attempted to integrate different assessment functions (e g , classroom diagnosis, certification) within a unified framework This scheme is worth considering for its illustration of commonly-cited principles of graded assessment An additional reason for considering this scheme is the perspective it gives on the curriculum-development framework into which assessment tasks fit, it is clear that the Lothian scheme was seen as predominantly an exercise in curriculum development within a period of reappraisal for modern-language teaching (see 1,7) Emphasis is on developing communicative competence through staged syllabi and with assistance from assessment feedback The objective is to provide learners with readily appreciable and usable competencies in return for their efforts throughout their period of instruction, in outlining this function, Clarke (8) coins the term 'surrender-value' Details of the scheme will now be presented

      Organization Clarke (8) describes the operation of the project as involving contributions from three sources At a regional level, decisions are made about the definition of stages, the number of stages, and the relationship between stages At the school level, each school is given the option to define substages or waystages Waystages are to serve as intermediate points between stages, no limit on the number of waystages is set The third level is the classroom level where the pupil and teacher are together involved in monitoring progress through the waystages

      Up to the early 1980s, the Lothian scheme consisted of five stages Stages One, Two, and Three were linked to the first two years of second level, while Stages Three, Four, and Five were linked to the second two years Each stage functioned as both a transitional or terminal point, depending on the pupils' continued persistence with the subject As has been the case with other schemes, linkage of stages with points in the traditional examination framework (e g , Certificate of Secondary Education or CSE Mode III) has been a subject of negotiation

Assessment Framework The assessment framework is outlined in Table 1 (8, pp 66-69) This scheme specifies the organization or schedule of testing in an ascending order of generality, the most specific tests are diagnostic tests and the most general are stage tests, with waystage tests forming intermediate points In addition, the scheme specifies test content, users, and functions for each type of testing Diagnostic testing focuses on mastery of 'discrete functions and forms' (8, p 66) which are evaluated as acquired by the learner Waystage tests refer to blocks of curriculum units or lessons, grouped to suit the individual school Stage tests (or summative stage tests) are more global in orientation and 'aim at measuring the language resource of the learner in his ability to cope with authentic language use' (p 66) (although the exact character of these tests has been revised during the development work)

TABLE 1

TEST TYPE CONTENTS USERS, AND FUNCTIONS OF
THE LOTHIAN ASSESSMENT SCHEME

Test type	Contents	Users	Functions
Diagnostic	Communicative functions Forms	Pupil Teacher	Part of continuous assessment and of *Pupil Profile*
Waystage	Communicative functions Forms Language activities	Pupil Teacher Parent	Part of continuous assessment and of *Pupil Profile*
Stage	Authentic Language Activities	Pupil Teacher Parent Guidance staff Future employer	Indicates state of language development When added to results of Pupil Profile the total result can be marked on the *Regional Achievement Card*

Source From a description of the Lothian Region s project on Graded Levels of Achievement in Foreign Language Learning (GLAFLL) presented by Clark (8 p 69)

In the sense used here, *test* typically means an informal check by the teacher that the pupil can do something, although it does seem that stage tests may also be more formal or traditional (available documentation is unclear on this) Assessment is thus characteristically school-based and continuous in its mode and cumulative in its report of results

Each pupil receives a *Waystage Progress Card* which lists communicative language activities (e g , say goodbye, thank someone) which the pupil is expected to be able to perform and in which he/she needs to demonstrate competence to be awarded credit The pupil is required to monitor his/her progress with the language activities listed, to indicate or mark his/her own progress on the *Waystage Progress Card* and to get the teacher to countersign the card when he/she has proven competence to the teacher (8) In this manner, pupils build up records of their achievements through waystages and stages

The Lothian Regional Council Department of Education agreed to provide certification in the form of a record of achievement, the certificate is known as the *Modern Languages Achievement Card* and indicates and explains the attained stages

Illustration #11 A Graduated Scheme of Assessment
The Oxford and Cambridge Schools Examination Board (24) provides graded assessment and certification of achievement under *A Graduated Scheme of Assessment* This scheme was targeted at students in the fourth and fifth years of second-level education for whom the General Certificate of Education (GCE) O-level and CSE examinations might be judged inappropriate The scheme related only to mathematics (being developed in association with the School Mathematics Project of the University of Southampton)

There are three stages and seven assessment areas in the scheme The assessments consist of written tests in four areas (Using Arithmetic, Interpreting Data, Applying Spatial Skills, Interpreting Three Dimensions), in addition, non-written assessment modes are used for three areas Mental Mathematics and Estimation Tests, Practical Tests, and Oral Tests of Spoken Communication For each assessment area at each stage, the standard required for a pass is 70 percent To obtain a Stage Certificate, a candidate must obtain passes in each of the seven appropriate assessment areas

When the student leaves school, a Final Certificate is issued giving information on the highest stage reached in each of the seven areas and an indication of performance on up to four pieces of completed individual topic work Stage Certificates provide descriptions of the curricula (listing the skills) for each of the areas assessed Students can retake any of the assessments any number of times, the only limitation being that at least two weeks of revision be undertaken before retesting

Illustration #III   Graded Assessments
The University of London School Examinations Board has undertaken a development programme on schemes of graded assessments for four subjects (English, Mathematics, Science, Craft, Design, and Technology) and for modern language This work was carried out in association with the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) and within the framework of a more general development programme on a *London Record of Achievement* It was expected that the results of graded assessments, validated and certified by the examination board, would form part of the record of achievement (or profile) which it was planned to provide for all second-level students in the ILEA catchment area In addition, the development programme was aimed at linking the standards of the higher levels of the graded assessments with specific grades in the 16-plus examinations, identified as Grade C in the GCE O-level examination and Grade 1 in the CSE, this linkage in standards was to be maintained when the GCE and CSE were unified in the form of the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) The scope of the development programme is considered here using the work on English as an illustration, particularly in the context of difficulties with and resistance to the notion of levels/stages in schemes of graded assessment

English The aim of this part of the development programme is to define an assessment framework for English Early on it was decided by the Working Group responsible for English that pupil achievements would be reported in 'statements of what the student can do in well-defined aspects of language use in writing, speaking, reading, and listening' (29, p 5) Such statements, expressed in 'functional terms' (p 5), would be used to monitor and record a pupil's progress, providing a 'cumulative record' (p 5) While some progress has been made in deciding on the functional terms to be used (e g , language user's role, purpose, content, context, and audience), the issues of stages in graded assessments has all but been abandoned (see also 39) The position taken is that no well-defined stages exist which are applicable to all students in English

and that, as a result, no overall levels or stages of assessment should be established (see 30) The statements of achievements are regarded as the units of measurement and these are to be grouped into areas (33) What are called 'unit assessments', which relate to particular tasks or units of work, have been produced by collecting selections of statements from different areas Areas being considered on a provisional basis include the following narrative, poetry/drama, understanding (media), understanding and use of information, selecting, arranging and re-presenting material, and language (variety and use) (31)

Illustration #IV Oxford Certificate of Educational Achievement

Graded assessment is one of three elements within the record-of-achievement system known as the *Oxford Certificate of Educational Achievement* (OCEA) Within OCEA, graded assessment represents continuous assessment of coursework by teachers, pupils' attainment being judged against pre-established sets of criteria Both an individual assessment framework and a set of criteria have been developed, initially for English, mathematics, science, and modern languages (French to start) Although the assessment frameworks and criteria are tailored to subject areas, the assessment frameworks reflect the same underlying principles For present purposes, graded assessment in OCEA is illustrated with a description of the principles underlying the assessment frameworks and a review of how these principles are implemented and combined with specific criteria for one particular subject Science is the subject chosen

Principles Underlying OCEA Assessment Frameworks The fundamental principle is that 'assessment, learning and teaching are all aspects of the same thing and are not separable' (37, p 19) This principle, together with commitments to coursework assessment and criterion-referencing, supports the OCEA assessment framework assessment is identified with teacher judgment of coursework achievement for the individual pupil, but not with the use of formal tests, the adoption of criterion-referencing serves to identify achievements and to define and structure them explicitly, assessment, being continuous and criterion-referenced, provides teachers with performance-based diagnostic information on pupils' strengths and weaknesses and is thereby thought to facilitate teaching and to help secure pupil commitment to further progress

Being concerned with processes and skills rather than content, each subject assessment framework is intended to be generalizable across specific curricula and suitable for the full ability range (but without being age-related) The full

details of the OCEA assessment framework are presented in a handbook for the
pilot phase of the OCEA project (35) and in teacher guides developed for each
of the four subjects involved (e g , 37)

Graded Assessment in OCEA Science   Graded assessment in OCEA Science
is focused on four processes (planning, performing, interpreting,
communicating) which are identified as elements of 'an empirical approach to
problem solving' (37, p 15) Each process is deemed to involve a number (two
or three) of generalizable skills, each skill being defined for assessment purposes
by a number of criteria Each criterion specifies a particular competence (e g ,
'the student can suggest a testable hypothesis'), but does not include any
specification as to curriculum content It is these criteria which form the basis
for assessment Pupils' achievements are defined by and judged against the
criteria The teacher's role is to make judgments on whether each individual
pupil meets each criterion, using evidence on coursework, obtained in a variety
of ways Observation of practical work, discussion and listening, and marking
of written work are identified as likely modes of evidence collection (37) In
compiling evidence regarding pupils' achievements, the guiding principle in
assessment is that 'when, in the teacher's judgement, competence in meeting a
criterion has been *regularly* demonstrated and can be *confidently* expected, then
a student has satisfied the criterion in question' (36, p 15)

An initial structuring of the criteria to accommodate the provision of levels
or stages (four in number) was dropped after the first year of pilot work 'to allow
greater flexibility and variation by avoiding the need to force the criteria for each
process into four steps' (38, p 5) Achievement reporting is in terms of criteria
attained (or partially attained) (38)

Contrasting the Illustrations
In introducing the illustrations, it is noted that the schemes selected for
illustration are chosen on the basis of how they inform as to the tasks and issues
involved in graded assessment From earlier discussion of the principles of
graded assessment, the main tasks include the following serving all students in
bottom-up achievement monitoring, evaluating specific achievements, and
providing structure and flexibility in timing and sequencing of assessments In
respect of the illustrations presented, the main issues relate to whether the
schemes are geared to overcome the difficulties (terminal external assessment)
which prompted interest in graded assessment, how graded is graded

assessment, and whether the variety of approaches is in line with the principles deduced elsewhere

One of the more interesting aspects of the illustrations presented is the initiation of attempts to develop assessment frameworks for individual subjects This reflects a strong emphasis on curriculum development, combined with an interest in coming to terms with the assessment implications of adopted curriculum specifications Of particular significance is the shift away from content towards process, a shift which is particularly in evidence with the Oxford Certificate of Educational Achievement Similarly, for language teaching, the shift is towards the adoption of communicative competence as the guiding principle and goal of language teaching Couched typically in functional or situational terms (4, 15), this approach has been implemented through a curriculum-specification strategy known generically as behavioural objectives, with the assessment framework characterized in mastery or criterion- referenced terms (8, 14)

That there is evidence of resistance within groups involved in developing schemes of graded assessment to the very notion of stages in assessment suggests that some subjects might be more amenable to the approach than others Certainly the direction being taken by the University of London School Examinations Board (areas instead of stages) and in the Oxford Certificate of Educational Achievement (graded objectives without stages) suggests that this is the case Experience with OCEA suggests also that graded assessment need not be thought of as involving formal stages, but may only require the establishment of graded series of fairly specific objectives In this way, problems of aggregation are avoided at the expense of being required to maintain a level of detail both in the operation of the assessments and in their reporting in terms of certification A different approach to deciding on levels/stages is evident in the Lothian Region's scheme While the notion of a stage is accepted and provides an overall framework, discretion about the utility of more than the five pre-defined stages is left to the individual school Overall, the impression given is of quite varied approaches to conception and implementation of graduation in the schemes of graded assessment illustrated In terms of conformity with expectations, perhaps that of the Oxford and Cambridge Schools Examination Board conforms most In contrast, a much more liberal interpretation is taken with the Oxford Certificate of Educational Achievement scheme

The practical commitment to criterion-referencing is another aspect of a dual curriculum/assessment focus In the use of can-do statements about communicative competencies in language, criterion-referencing serves both curriculum objectives and assessment objectives It can be used as a strategy for curriculum specification In addition, in providing pre-established sets of criteria, it serves as the basis for assessment, whether considered as testing or as teachers' judgments Perhaps, its further use in attempting to provide better information for diagnosis and certification can be regarded as a bonus (cf 16)

Assessment in the schemes of graded assessment considered possesses features other than criterion-referencing Within the framework of *graded* assessment, the scheduling of assessment is of particular significance Each of the illustrations represents an attempt to provide assessment that is available to pupils more regularly than traditional examinations The divergence in strategies is of interest There is an attempt to make the scheduling more responsive to schedules of instruction and learning, but while retaining a framework of testing at intervals (Illustration #II) Conversely, there is an attempt to effect graded assessment through the promotion of teacher assessment on a continuous basis, where the teacher draws on any and all sources of relevant evidence to arrive at judgments, the trade-off, however, seems to be an abandonment of the notion of stages or levels as being too inflexible (Illustration #IV) In another scheme, responsiveness to the progress of learning is effected through a system whereby pupils initiate the assessment, indicating to the teacher that a criterion has been attained and seeking validation from the teacher (Illustration #I)

A further aspect of the assessment strategies is the shift towards greater involvement of teachers and away from an external model of assessment Even so, an example such as OCEA retains an administrative contribution from an examination board, but within a framework which provides for contributions from teachers and pupils, in addition to traditional examination provisions In the OCEA scheme, the graded assessment (or G-Component) complements two other components, one relating to traditional external examination results (E-Component) and one providing for pupil contributions (P-Component) Within this framework, no attempt is made to link the assessments from the G-Component to points in the traditional examination cycle This contrasts with other schemes (e g Lothian Region University of London School Examinations Board) which endeavoured to establish links with the existing examination system through the Mode III (school-based assessment) provisions It is also interesting to note that graded assessments are increasingly being

thought of as components within records of achievement In the illustrations examined, this applies not just to the OCEA scheme, but to the schemes of the Lothian Region and of the University of London School Examinations Board

A shift away from assessment as testing to assessment as teachers' judgments (based on observation or even the results of tests) is indicative also of attempts to provide for differentiation in the functions served by assessment Both the Lothian Region's scheme and the tripartite OCEA framework seek to provide such differentiation In addition to certification, functions of importance are pupil motivation and classroom diagnostics, both of these functions are likely beneficiaries of the feedback provided by more regular and perhaps more informal assessment

A CONTEXTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR GRADED ASSESSMENT

There exists a great deal of administrative flexibility in how graded assessment schemes might be conceived and implemented Both school-based and external administration frameworks are independent options, with degrees of combination being possible also The adoption for certification purposes of a system of graded assessment has particularly important implications for an examination system retaining an element of external control Decisions have to be made about the arrangements for assessment (e g , design, administration, reporting, certification) and about the respective contribution of the school and of the administrative agency in charge of the examination system

To provide context and to help clarify the possibilities for graded assessment within the examination system which currently exists in Ireland, reference to pertinent aspects of the existing examination system is made here In particular, its external terminal character is noted and its already-existing graduated features are outlined

External Terminal Character of Existing Examinations
The three existing certificate examinations at second level are offered as external terminal examinations in subject areas The two significant terms here are *external* and *terminal* The external aspect of the examinations is that they are designed, constructed, administered, corrected, and reported by an agency (Department of Education) which operates independently of schools That the examination system is characterized as terminal indicates that the assessments are made at the end of prescribed periods of schooling, measured in whole school

years The fixed terminal timing of traditional external examinations constitutes a structural inflexibility in the system, the factor which in Great Britain has fostered the attractiveness of principles of progression and readiness within frameworks of graded assessment The instructional value of the results of terminal assessments is regarded as very limited and is further reduced by the typically uninformative grading systems used (e g , see 19)

Graduated Assessment in the Existing Examination System
The examination system which exists presently at second level in Ireland might seem to exhibit some characteristics of a graded system of assessment. (A system of Technical Schools Examinations exists also and features definite graduated characteristics, but it is targeted at apprentices and other groups seeking qualifications in trade and technological subjects, see 23) Firstly, there are a number of certificate examinations Day-Vocational Certificate Examination (DVCE), Intermediate Certificate Examination (ICE), and Leaving Certificate Examination (LCE) These certificate examinations would seem to stand in relation to each other much as one level of a graded assessment system stands in relation to another For example, some subjects are offered for examination in the DVCE (after two years of post-primary education), in the ICE (after three years), and in the LCE (after five years) Secondly, in the latter two certificate examinations, it is possible to distinguish further between examinations levels At the ICE level, three subjects are offered at Higher and Lower levels, while at the LCE level, all subjects are offered at Higher and Ordinary levels Thirdly, performance in every subject in each of the three certificate examinations is reported on a seven-point scale or graduation (A to G)

The three aspects of grading evident in the system of certificate examinations suggest a rough-and-ready ordering of performance in some subjects (e g , English, Mathematics) which is at its lowest point at a DVCE Grade G and at its highest point at a LCE Higher-Grade A Counting the points on a hypothetical full scale yields an ordering consisting of 35 points (five ordered scales by seven grades per scale), although this number would be reduced somewhat since some of the constituent ordered scales are held to overlap (e g , DVCE and ICE syllabi overlap, LCE Higher- and Ordinary- level grading scales overlap for third-level matriculation points purposes)

Compared with the principles of graded assessment described in the literature, however, this contrived graduation in certificate examinations is not

as analogous as it might seem, since there is one major difference between it and
the typical graduation in systems of graded assessment the certificate
examinations do not provide for a linear-type progression from the lowest or
simplest level to the highest or most difficult level For example, with subjects
for which Higher and Lower examination levels are offered (e g , ICE English),
there is a choice to make between alternatives It would be regarded as virtually
impossible, given syllabus differences, for a student preparing for the
Lower-level examination to opt to take the Higher one, although it has been
known for the converse to happen (though usually inadvisable given the syllabus
differences) To pursue the example of ICE English, it would seem to follow
that the choice of the lower level acts also to constrain the options available for
LCE English (Higher vs Ordinary levels)

POLICY OPTIONS AND DIRECTIONS

In theory, a system of graded assessment could be designed so that the
external, terminal, and graduated aspects of existing assessments would be
changed quite radically Teachers and schools could be involved in, or
responsible for, developing curricula and for designing, administering,
correcting, and reporting assessments, thus characterizing the assessment system
in more school-based terms Teachers and schools could be allowed discretion
as to when to make assessments and how to schedule them in relation to
instruction, by implication, discretion of this form might be regarded as more
facilitative of the management of instruction and of learning than the traditional
post-course terminal examination

So far, care has been taken to introduce graded assessment against the
backdrop of the organizational/administrative framework of the existing
examination system In highlighting the latter's external, terminal, and
graduated aspects, the intention has been to acknowledge that the interest in
schemes of graded assessment has to a large extent grown out of difficulties
attributed to the existing organization/administrative framework Against the
host of problems associated with traditional examinations (e g , 21), there are
obvious attractions in an assessment development which promotes closer links
between curriculum, teaching, learning, assessment, and certification

In the context of developments within existing external-examination systems,
however, the kind of flexibility which a development such as graded assessment
seems to imply must be moderated somewhat It seems unlikely that the

organizational/administrative framework for examinations is about to undergo
fundamental changes in respect of its external position in relation to schools and
of the constraints (e g , need for moderation) which seem to follow For example,
the flexibility in timing of testing required by some models has practical limits
within the context of external administrative frameworks (e g , related to how
often external graded assessments can be offered) Moreover, it cannot be
assumed that a fully school-based graded assessment provision involving the
use of tests would result in dramatic alterations in the terminal or end-of- year
timing of testing (e g , see 22)

In practice, the direction in which graded assessment is developing falls
somewhere between a fully school-based system and the external terminal
system Given some of the pedagogical principles (e g , linking teaching and
learning) associated with graded assessment, it might be expected that graded
assessment should most properly be equated with school-based assessment The
OCEA model provides one such example However, there are no necessary
grounds why this should be so A look at experience to date with existing
schemes of graded assessment shows that some of them (e g , that associated
with the Leeds Language Teaching Information Centre) are administered by
external agencies More importantly, perhaps, established examination boards
(e g , University of Oxford Delegacy of Local Examinations, University of
London School Examinations Board) have become involved in development
projects, essentially, these projects are examining how the principles of graded
assessment might be incorporated into a system of assessment which would
retain an influence from agencies such as examination boards operating
independently of schools (see Illustrations #III and #IV)

A long-standing provision for school-based syllabus/assessment design and
implementation in the CSE and GCE examinations provides one model for the
direction being taken by the examination boards in this area The relevant
features of this provision, known as Mode III, were that schools (or groups of
schools) devise syllabi, set examinations, and mark examinations in the school
itself The role of the examination board was reduced in the case of the CSE to
an informal advisory role and a formal examination moderation role, in contrast,
the role of the GCE examination boards involved more control over
acceptance/rejection of Mode III proposals by schools (27) Modes I and II were
different from Mode III, largely in the relative involvements of the examination
board and the school Mode I represented the traditional model of external
examinations, there was an external syllabus and an externally-set and -marked

examination Mode II was the same as Mode I except that the school provided the syllabus, all other roles within the process (e g , setting and marking of examinations) were assumed by an external examination board The distinction between the modes were not always clear in operation and 'mixed-mode' assessment seems to have been common (27,28)

A slightly different model sees schools beginning to be thought of as institutions much like university and non-university higher-education institutions, which traditionally have had varying amounts of discretion in what courses to run, how to run them, and how to manage assessment and certification tasks Any measure of discretion exercised by these institutions has been tempered typically by responsibilities to have courses validated or accredited by outside agencies or to have assessment and certification undertaken or overseen by external examiners (6) It is noteworthy that the concepts, functions, and terms associated with this type of role (e g , accreditation) are being introduced by examination boards (e g , by University of Oxford Delegacy of Local Examination for OCEA) in the context of schemes of graded assessments (and records of achievement), involving an expansion of the school's role, not just in assessment, but in curriculum design (e g , 26, 35)

The most important policy question in relation to graded assessment is whether as an innovation it provides options for the development of the examination system Graded assessment has appeared both as an alternative to the existing examination system and as an innovation which could be introduced into the existing examination system Considered as complementary to the records-of-achievement initiatives, graded assessment does represent an attempt to come to terms with recognized problems in the established assessment and certification provisions By bringing assessment closer to curriculum and instruction, it is easy to view graded assessment as facilitating the integration of curriculum instruction, assessment, and certification and the targeting of these at every pupil passing through the system Graded assessment clearly implies organizational change, involving both curriculum (e g , towards more modular-type units) and administrative (e g , towards more frequency) aspects of the examination system If the core ideas are attractive in the Irish context, experience with the long-established system of Technical Schools Examinations (23) should facilitate the evaluation of realistic resource implications

EVALUATION ISSUES AND THEMES

The remainder of the paper is devoted to considering a number of issues and themes which bear on the evaluation of graded assessment

Rhetoric and Evaluation

It is perhaps inevitable that some of the advocacy for graded assessment has been uncritical and rhetorical Both as concept and practice, graded assessment is regarded as having received little of the kind of empirical evaluative attention which would satisfy reviewers interested in 'dispassionate evaluation' (22, p 11) Since assessment and curriculum innovations are typically confounded in graded-assessment schemes, the absence of evaluation acts further to discount the possibility of separating out effects due to innovations in assessment (e g , assessment when the student is ready) and those due to innovations in curriculum (e g , behaviourally-stated objectives)

Given advocacy arguments of a largely process-oriented nature (e g , facility in managing instruction and monitoring learning, promotion of pupil motivation and learning), evaluation criteria for graded assessment can be based readily on principles invoked For example, an apparent low level of pupil interest in modern languages (evidenced by low persistence beyond option points), tied to the absence of achievement benchmarks for the majority of students learning modern languages and the perceived inappropriateness of existing language examinations for the majority of pupils, were together major contributory factors in motivating the development of graded frameworks such as the Graded Objectives in Modern Language (GOML) schemes Evidence to the effect that the introduction and use of schemes of graded objectives or graded assessment has positively influenced pupils' attitudes towards subjects and pupils' continuation with subjects has been presented and taken as providing support for the developmental principles invoked (e g , 4) Such work aside, the continued absence of a central empirical evaluation dimension to the graded-assessment debate needs to be noted In addition to being important in itself, an evaluation dimension would be likely to promote links with existing bodies of educational literature on, for example, the effects of varying curriculum approaches (e g , the use of behavioural objectives) or the effects of varying schedules of assessment and feedback

Principles, Practice, and Variation

Although it is not difficult to appreciate the attraction of the small number of relatively intuitive principles associated with the concept of graded assessment, actual practice exhibits a level of variability which inhibits generalization across schemes about issues and implications Variation exists in most aspects of such schemes It is apparent in respect of general issues such as approaches to curriculum design and specification (e g , functional, situational, notional, lexical approaches in modern language teaching) It exists for more operational matters such as how to define grades or stages and for practical issues such as what to report on certificates Most importantly, varying conceptualizations of assessment (teachers' judgments vs testing) abound Moreover, the level of locally-initiated development work in graded assessment - an estimated 80+ British schemes as of 1984-85 (12) - has meant that variation across a whole range of issues has been evident even within the confines of specific subject areas (e g , French) The survey of graded-assessment schemes conducted by Harrison (15) documents such variation

Linking Curriculum and Assessment

Within many schemes of graded assessment, the emphasis on graded objectives concentrates attention on the what and how of teaching what to teach and, by extension, how to teach it

Within a scheme purposely designed around objectives and their attainment, implications for assessment seem to follow quite naturally However, the ability to specify objectives can be distinguished from the ability to manage the process of attaining these objectives For example, it is relatively easy to specify that learners of foreign languages need to be able to communicate in ordinary situations, slightly more difficult to specify what learners need to learn in terms of knowledge and skills to communicate effectively, but considerably more difficult to specify how to bring about the required learning The Lothian scheme of graded assessment provides a good example of a practical distinction being made between the specification of the *learner's syllabus* (as an explicit understandable-to-the-pupil specification of outcomes of teaching and learning) and the *teaching syllabus* (as a specification of the teaching input to the learning process) (8) Of course, it is overstating the obvious to note that these two syllabi are different not just in what they specify but in the difficulty of their specification, the former being the less difficult and perhaps the one more likely to be attempted first (e g , 8)

If a curriculum design using graded objectives were to be followed, there would be an implicit concern with assessment Attainment of objectives would ideally determine the rate of progression through the curriculum Even in the absence of nominal testing, the implication of a graded-objectives approach seems practically to commit a teacher to taking into account performance in relation to given objectives A conscientious adoption of objectives involves an implicit element of testing, the objectives themselves serving as criteria against which to judge performance

Transition from concern with individual and specific objectives to concern with defined aggregates (stages, perhaps) introduces demands relating to sampling of objectives and relating to the setting of meaningful and acceptable pass (mastery) standards (17) Such demands arise equally for assessment as testing and for assessment as teachers' judgment The practical difference is that the testing rubric is concerned with explicitly structuring for implementation the chosen strategies in sampling and standard setting, whereas only guidelines can be issued in respect of assessment as teachers' judgment

Assessment and Curriculum Organization

Schemes involving graded objectives and graded assessment can be regarded as special cases of modular curriculum organization, where the relationship between elements is characteristically organized in stages or levels (19,22) This characteristic organization is determined by factors such as difficulty and/or quantity of information It is possible that the ordering of stages might be designed or may be found to reflect an underlying hierarchical organization of ability or pattern of achievement (e g , 9) Far from being a theoretical consideration, a demonstrable hierarchical organization of curriculum and of stages of assessment would indicate much about achievement at particular stages, particularly in regard to what achievement at later stages implies about achievement at earlier ones and what sense is to be attached to the notion of credit accumulation A more general issue is the extent to which curriculum can be sequenced (graded) in ways which are meaningful, in this context, the interpretability of graded assessments can readily be seen to reflect the meaningfulness achieved

Reporting Assessment Results

How to report the results of graded assessments poses a problem for the developers of schemes Where stages are defined, reporting the stage reached on its own would be about as informative as the traditional examination grading

system Reporting the stage reached along with a statement of the stage
objectives or syllabus might be regarded as informative of the syllabus, but some
doubt exists as to whether the award of a stage should be made on the basis of
mastery of some or all objectives If only some, how is the distinction between
mastered and unmastered objectives to be reported and how does one handle the
likelihood that different pupils will obtain a stage award through mastery of
different subsets of objectives? In fact, there seems to be a practical conflict
between the specificity of criterion-referencing and the mastery/non-mastery
distinction for the award of a stage For schemes of graded assessment, the crux
of this problem is how to handle certification The detail and level of explanation
required depends on whether stages are defined or whether definition is
restricted to specific objectives without aggregation to stages (as with OCEA's
graded assessment) As one source notes, 'the use of levels [stages] could
undermine the interest in and possibilities of a system of criterion-referenced
assessment established to provide in a systematic way useful curriculum-based
information' (34, p 32)

Age and Achievement as Criteria for Pupil Promotion

Graded assessment implies attention to methods of classroom and school
organization rather than a system based almost wholly on age (25) A provision
for graded assessment allows for the possibility that pupils could be assessed
according to their progress with subjects (22) This possibility impacts on the
issue of school organization in a variety of ways, most notably by legitimating
achievement independent of age as a valid means of pupil promotion through
second-level education Developers of graded-assessment schemes have been
quick to recognize 'the variability of pupils' capabilities in relation to age' (29,
p 4) (The implications for the traditional class and school-year arrangements
are as important and obvious, but are not taken up here) It is of interest that
assessment schemes comprising stages or levels, which in effect divorce
achievement and age (2), facilitate transferability to use with adults

Readiness Practicality and Testing on Demand

One effect of a tendency to identify graded assessment with the use of tests
has been criticism of the potential for implementing a readiness principle in
assessment As noted earlier, the principle that assessment should be tied to
learning, and occur when pupils are ready, has been associated with the concept
of graded assessment When graded assessment is considered to involve the use
of tests rather than other types of assessment (e g , teachers' judgment), this
principle can be seen readily to have practical problems Within an

external-examination system and in the absence of a dominant individualization
in teaching practice, matching assessment (as testing) to individual rates of
progress through curriculum objectives represents a definite practical problem,
one which seems to be evident in some examples of actual use (e g , 12) Nuttall
and Goldstein (22) suggest that teachers, by using graded *tests* with all pupils at
the same time, would be effectively opting out of tackling 'the organizational
problems posed by individual rates of progress' (p 11) They go on to suggest
that such problems are evident more in school-instructional settings than in the
sporting, art, and music settings within which the idea of graded assessment
originally gained currency

Item Banking and Supporting Instrument Construction

Since schemes of graded assessment often focus on the involvement of
individual teachers, there has been some recognition of a need for providing
teachers with assistance in assessment The provision of item banks is one form
of assistance which has been offered (e g , 11), though the attractiveness of item
banking in the context of school-based assessment has been recognized at least
since the mid-1960s (40) The aim of item banking is to provide a collection of
test items with documented characteristics (e g , difficulty indices and other
psychometric data) Though not as evident in practice today as might have been
expected from the optimism of the 1960s, item banking is an idea which is of
practical relevance to examination boards as much as to individual teachers and
schools, given, for example, the potential need within some models of graded
assessment for parallel tests to facilitate repeated testing, particularly for
certification purposes (10,22)

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