



3 February 2016

J R B Parkinson-Wisely
By way of email: fyi-request-3537-6feabb74@requests.fyi.org.nz

Dear J R B Parkinson-Wisely

Re: Official Information Act request for average marks in papers

The University of Otago does not, as a matter of course, produce standard reports containing the information you have requested (average marks in individual papers taught).

Preparing such reports would involve substantial collation, but the main reason such reports are not regularly prepared is that the University does not consider the average mark for a paper to be a useful or meaningful metric. Contrary to the suggestion in your request, the information you seek would not provide “conclusive information” (on the subject of the “strictness” of grading and the “value” of papers) and any attempt to rely on the information for that purpose would be quite misleading.

By way of explanation, variations in the content, admission restrictions and levels of papers, and effects arising from the different student cohorts who study different papers, mean a comparison of average marks provides no useful information about the comparative “strictness” of marking across papers. For example, a high-level paper in a restricted entry course may well have a higher average mark than a more general first year paper – not because of “easier” marking but because the cohort of students studying that paper have only been allowed entry because of the strength of their previous academic achievement. In other cases, papers may produce higher marks because their subject matter tends to be of interest to stronger students or because only stronger students are encouraged into them by Course Advisers. These kinds of effects are apparent to a greater or lesser extent across all papers and render an average mark, without further investigation of contextual factors, to be effectively meaningless.

The University is concerned that, if paper averages were released, it is very likely that many readers would interpret these without reference or access to relevant contextual factors, and this would lead to incorrect assumptions about the academic standards of particular papers. This would have a range of adverse consequences – including misguided paper selection by students (a student believing that a paper was an “easy” one, might in fact find themselves struggling at the bottom of a high-achieving cohort in a paper for which they were not well prepared or suited) and the erroneous overvaluing and/or discounting of achievements by those relying on academic transcripts, such as employers. This latter effect may devalue particular degrees or paper choices to the detriment of graduates, and impact adversely on the interests of the holders of those qualifications, on those responsible for the courses, and ultimately on the University.

Given these consequences, the University is satisfied that it is justified in refusing your request under section 9(2)(b) of the Official Information Act. It is also satisfied that there is no overriding public interest in the information’s release.

I note your right to refer this refusal of your request to an Ombudsman under section 28(3) of the Official Information Act.

Yours sincerely

Chris Stoddart
Manager, Policy and Compliance
Academic Services