Weaving a Bridge of Sense: students’ narrative constructions as a lens for understanding students’ coping with the gap between expectancies and experiences when entering higher education

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ABSTRACT This article shows how the application of narrative methodology brings new insights into understanding students’ choices and their experiences upon entering a higher education programme. The point of departure is a study of a cohort of 38 students followed over a three-year period from when they were about to finish upper-secondary school in 2009 and into higher education. Firstly, the use of a narrative methodology gives access to understanding the students’ choice of study as a continuous process of meaning making that involves both changes in perspectives concerning future plans and in interpretation of past experiences. This process continues when the students’ expectations of their new programme interact with their first-year experiences, and they continuously work on their identities in order to feel they belong to their higher education programme. Secondly, by using this methodology, the authors gain access to how this meaning-making process through a three-year period of time reflects the students’ negotiations of belonging to their higher education study programme. Finally, the methodology highlights the complexity of the students’ choices, as well as the factors and contexts influencing these choices.

Ann: Tell me why, Graham, why? ...
Graham: Am I supposed to recount all the points in my life leading up to this moment and then just hope that it’s coherent, that it makes some sort of sense to you? It doesn’t make any sense to me. You know, I was there. (soderbergh, 1989, 1:22)

In Steven Soderbergh’s film, Sex, Lies, and Videotapes, from 1989, the character Graham records women talking about sex. This upsets his new acquaintance, Ann, but when she asks him to explain why he makes the tapes, he responds as quoted above. What he had experienced in his life had not made any sense to him, even though he was there.

The experience expressed by Graham does not fully reflect the results of research based on a narrative methodology. Indeed, this kind of research challenges the quote in two ways. Firstly, using narrative inquiry reveals that even though experiences and incidents may not make sense to the person involved, a careful analysis of the narrative can unveil the sense or at least sociological and/or personal rationale behind some of the occurrences. Secondly, as we shall discuss in this article, an important way to cope with the challenges is the construction of narratives that are sensible to themselves as well as to their surroundings. Before coming to this, we will present the background of our study and the methodology. In the presentation of the results we will focus on the use of narratives as both a research method and as a way of coping with the experiences when entering higher education.
Background and Methodological Considerations

The article builds on research carried out within the EU 7th Framework Programme: the IRIS project – Interests and Recruitment in Science Education.[1] The focus of the project was to study the educational choices of young people and particularly their inclination to study within the field of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). Further, there was a focus on the retention of students within STEM higher education programmes. The project was rooted in a call for more graduates within STEM (cf. European Commission, 2004; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2008). This is a particular challenge for the European region, but also for other parts of the industrialised world, as students in these regions appear to be less inclined to pursue a STEM-related study path and career (Schreiner & Sjøberg, 2007). Although the claim of a general shortage of scientists and engineers is contestable (Osborne & Dillon, 2008) and at least differs between different fields of science, increasing the number of STEM graduates is still a concern throughout the European region. Consequently, it seems important to broaden our understanding of European young people’s STEM choices. Furthermore, there has been a call to move towards more qualitative research methods to deepen our understanding of how students handle their choices of and meeting with higher education (Bergerson, 2009).

Previous research in science education suggested that the issue of identity was important, both when students choose their course of study (Illeris et al, 2002; Schreiner & Sjøberg, 2007; Bøe et al, 2011) and when they decide whether to stay in or leave the study programme they have entered (Ulriksen et al, 2010). Such research combining social psychological, e.g. Ziehe (1991), and sociological, e.g. Beck & Beck-Gernsheim (2002), approaches to modernity is a particular Scandinavian and European tradition that has drawn a focus on young people’s ways of handling late modernity and put the question of identity in the foreground. This emphasis on identity suggested a qualitative approach to the study to allow for an understanding of how different components interacted in the students’ considerations when choosing a science education. In the study, we adopted an approach that combined this tradition with narrative psychology.

A fundamental element in narrative psychology is that we perceive ourselves as living within a progressive story. As Polkinghorne puts it, ‘narrative is a meaning structure that organizes events and human actions into a whole, thereby attributing significance to individual actions and events according to their effect on the whole’ (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 18). Making meaning, therefore, is an essential part of the stories we construct around our lives and experiences. Our stories are constructed within particular social and cultural contexts and they need to refer to shared cultural interpretations in order to be understood as sensible by our social environments. The narratives of our selves are therefore also negotiations with ourselves and our surroundings concerning who we are and who we wish to become. This also includes a negotiation of who we have been, who we conceive ourselves to be and who we conceive ourselves to become (Bruner, 2004). The narrative inquirer therefore always enters the participants’ stories in the midst and leaves them in the midst (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Within narrative psychology, theoretical positions can be positioned on a spectrum based upon the relation between the social context and the individual. At one end of the spectrum are theories that perceive identities and selves as situated in the individual and hence narratives are expressions of a relatively coherent story. At the other end the social context is emphasised, focusing on identity as something performed (Smith & Sparkes, 2008). We position ourselves in the middle. We agree that the stories and understandings of selves an individual can construct are situated in a particular context (both spatial, cultural and temporal) that make some positions and narratives available while excluding others. However, we also posit that there is some continuity and coherence in the identities, both because the individual makes use of previous experiences and narratives in constructing new narratives in new contexts and because there is a strong social expectation of coherent selves.

A narrative psychological approach presents itself as particularly fruitful for the studying of students’ choices of what higher education programme to enter. This choice in essence contains an imagined future because the students need to consider which path to follow into a study programme and onwards. In a Danish context, the choice of a study programme in most cases also implies particular probable futures in terms of careers and jobs. Finally, the choice is rooted in the students’ present practice as upper-secondary students and how they interpret themselves as
students and studying. Hence, it appears reasonable to approach a scrutiny of students’ choice of study and of staying or leaving the programme applying a narrative psychological method.

**Method and Sample**

A brief note on the sample and the method: six non-vocational upper-secondary school classes (in total 134 students) were contacted three months before their graduation. Four classes were general upper-secondary school classes (stx) that had science and mathematics at A-level. Two classes were from htx, a branch of the non-vocational upper-secondary schools that focuses on science and technology. Questionnaires were distributed in the six classes containing questions concerning, inter alia, their experiences with science disciplines in upper-secondary school, their ideas about their future study, and background information such as their parents’ educational background and whether they were willing to be interviewed. Based on the questionnaires, 38 students were selected for interview. They were selected to obtain a mixed group of students according to social and ethnic backgrounds and gender. Further, the students were selected so that most students were considering continuing to higher education at bachelor’s level, most of them had an interest in STEM subjects, and among these students, some were considering studying a STEM higher education programme, others were not, and yet other students were undecided. The students were not selected to form a representative sample compared to the population of science-oriented students as a whole. The aim was to create a maximum variation case (Flyvbjerg, 2011).

Of the 38 students who were interviewed (19 in groups, 19 individually), in particular 20 were followed into their STEM higher education programme. The 20 students were interviewed from one to five times after entering higher education and some of the students taking a gap year before entering were interviewed during that also. This longitudinal design allowed us to follow the experiences and decisions over time, as they occurred, so to speak, rather than just in retrospect. In total, 86 interviews were conducted as semi-structured narrative interviews (see Holmegaard, Ulriksen et al [2012] for further elaboration of the methodology).

In the following, we will present two examples to illustrate the potential of a longitudinal and narrative inquiry in understanding students’ choice of study. The first example concerns the complexity of the choice after upper-secondary school. The second concerns the students’ use of renegotiating their narratives in order to cope with their higher education experiences. After those two examples, we will discuss the negotiation strategies used by the students to cope with the transition into higher education.

**Choosing What to Study**

In the upper-secondary school interviews an emerging theme was the students’ thoughts concerning their future course of study. For many of the students the choice of future study was related to a sense of ambivalence. On the one hand, they were looking forward to being able to choose a course of study they were truly interested in and as such there was a sense of opportunities. On the other hand, the students experienced the choice as difficult and scary because of the importance they ascribed to it and because they needed to be sure that the choice they made really matched their interests – not just in the present, but also in that it pointed towards a future life they could imagine living.

A female student said that the three most important elements of her choice were:

What would I like [in terms of interests], can I spend my entire life doing it, and what am I good at?‘ (Barbara [2])

In essence, this statement illustrates the simultaneous presence of three periods of life: the present (what are my interests?), the future (could I spend my life doing it?), and the past (what have I learned?). When choosing what to study, the students had to be able to construct a narrative that presented meaningful responses to these questions, and through this combining the three temporal positions (Holmegaard, Madsen et al, 2012). Another female student (Freja) was facing a dilemma in this respect: she wished to become a medical doctor, but did not find the study programme attractive. She would like to study literature, but could not imagine herself working as a teacher, which she found to be the only viable career track if studying literature.
The challenge for the students, however, also included being able to construct a narrative that could serve as a viable response to the question, ‘what will you study?’ and that clearly presented the choice as one they had made themselves. In a group interview, two male students spoke about how the interest of others needed to be handled in particular ways:

Aksel: I always give the same answer every time. That I don’t really know yet. First, I’ll join the army [3], and then we’ll see about it, and so on. I think it’s really difficult. Also, I’m afraid of setting my mind on one thing. Not to people asking, but to myself, too. Because, if I happen to say something that I’m thinking about precisely at that time, and have told it to everybody and even believe it myself, too, and then find out that it’s not really the thing ...

Asger: That’s what I think, too. It creates an expectation if you say: I am going to become ...

The two students needed to have a response when asked about what they were to do, but the construction of a particular narrative containing a plan can actually lure them into making the wrong choice because having constructed the narrative, they may themselves be formed by it.

A female student reflected on her thoughts about her future study. She considered studying medicine because she found it interesting, and based on a work-placement during lower-secondary school she liked the hospital environment. She found it interesting and exciting. At the same time, she had doubts:

It just seems like such a cliché to choose medical school.

Interviewer: Why?

I don’t know [laughing]. It’s just because it’s special to study something slightly different. It’s pretty much ... It doesn’t seem so different. It seems like. I don’t know. It seems a bit stupid, too, but that’s kind of how I feel. I think, maybe it’s because my father is a doctor. But it’s because I think ... I’m sure it’s because it has been like that. I just think it’s really exciting. And now my older sister has begun studying medicine, but she studied something else first, but now she’s studying that. And it’s just so – it just seems so much by the book, that I’ll do it, too. It just seems so stupid, but it’s mainly me, that I think it could be interesting. But it could be cool if my family wasn’t that [medical doctors], too. (Frederikke)

While reflecting on the dilemma of walking in her father’s and sister’s footsteps, Frederikke interrupted herself, weighed the pros and cons, used words such as ‘just’, ‘maybe’, etc. to express doubts regarding her own thoughts. What she was struggling with was how to make a choice that could combine her interests with what would be considered a legitimate choice with legitimate reasons. She had no doubts that she was interested in medicine and her work-placement experiences had convinced her that she would like the job as well. The challenge was that she also required of a proper choice that it should be unconventional (‘slightly different’, not ‘so much by the book’) and that it should reflect her own interests and not merely reproduce the choices and social position of her family.

In the quote she both argues that she has a genuine interest in medicine (‘I just think it’s really exciting’) and that all the doubts just stemmed from her own ideas (‘It seems a bit stupid, too, but that’s kind of how I feel’). However, she had those ideas because they exist as norms, values, and expectations in the social environment. Frederikke was not the only student who expressed that the choice should be unique, rooted in personal interests, and not made because others told one so. Frederikke’s problem was that her genuine interest complicated the construction of a narrative about the choice that could present her authentic (and, hence, legitimate) choice in a way that clearly presented it as authentic and uninfluenced.

The reflections of Aksel, Asger, and Frederikke show that students are not only required to choose a course of study; they should also be able to construct a narrative around the choice that is acceptable and understandable to their peers, families, and the social expectations of their environments. The requirements of this narrative can prevent the students from articulating their thoughts and concerns (as stated by Aksel) and it can cause the students to consider not choosing what they wish because it appears wrong (Frederikke).

Hence, the analysis shows that the students’ choices operate at both the decision and the narrative level and that these levels interact. The narrative and the decision are closely linked with each other, and the students need to construct narratives that can lead them to the decision. On the
other hand, there may be circumstances where the students are forced by external factors to make another decision than the one they expected, and then they need to construct a narrative that fits this decision. Therefore, even though decisions and narratives are not independent of each other, neither are they identical or inseparable.

This complexity and interrelation in the choice of study require a methodological approach that allows for the researcher to include different elements at one time and to include factors at both the individual and at the social level. A qualitative approach allows the simultaneous inclusion of more elements and the study of how they interrelate. Adopting a narrative psychological approach furthermore offers an understanding of how the choice of study is both an individual and a social process where the personal interests are integrated in a social context.

A narrative approach emphasises the choice as a process because a narrative always relates to time, something occurring between the beginning and the end. It highlights the individual and the social in that the individual narratives are constructed in relation to socially acceptable ways of telling and interpreting narratives of choice, and they should be understandable by others as well as the individual concerned. The narratives of the students provide a way into the intersection of the different levels – both through what they tell and what they have difficulties expressing or including in the narrative.

**Coping with the Gap between Expectancies and Experiences**

The students entered the higher-education programmes with expectancies of what it would be like studying the particular programme. The expectancies could be about the content or the form of the teaching, but also the experience of being a student. The expectations of the students differed, ranging from the student who in the interview during upper-secondary school said that he expected that studying would be like a hobby where he would prefer to be studying rather than watching television when he came home, to the student who right after having entered university expressed that she really did not expect to meet anything interesting during the first year.

All 20 students had the one thing in common when entering their higher-education programme, that there was a gap between their expectancies and their experiences. Although it was just a minor gap for a couple of the students, most of them experienced that they had to cope with the discrepancy between what they expected and what they met with. Through the narrative interviews conducted through the first year of study we could study the students’ endeavours to bridge this gap.

For some students the gap had to do with the content of the teaching, which turned out to be different from what they expected. This, not least, had to do with auxiliary subjects like mathematics where the students could not see the use of the courses. Some of the students had been told by older students that they would actually not need the first-year mathematics later in their study. This, for instance, was the case for one engineering student who had a course in mathematics in the first term. When the interviewer asked why they should learn mathematics the student replied:

> I don’t know. I’ve tried to ask, but nobody really seems to know it. They say all engineers just need maths…. They just say: You just need to have maths because it’s so basic in our world, our technology. You need maths in everything, so they just want you to take it in case you are going to use it someday. (Deniz, second interview, studying biotech engineering)

This student accepted that mathematics could be useful for engineers, but he failed to see the use of it in his present situation. It was a nice-to-know subject, but the sense of the course was postponed to a future context where it might become relevant. For other students even this future meaning was difficult to see. Other students were surprised about the balance between different types of courses (e.g. that laboratory courses were almost absent during the first year or that there was very little programming in computer science), and some, more generally, had to adjust themselves to the teaching methods at university, especially the lectures and the fact that students were left to themselves.

For some students the gap was related to their self-conceptions compared to the study context. In several cases this related to their sense of academic competence – how ‘good’ they felt and how they achieved. For some students the sense of gap relating to their sense of how
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competent they felt presented itself in relation to their having difficulties with passing the exams, but it also emerged in relation to the experience of studying in a very competitive study environment. One of the students (Amalie) was studying in a programme that was defined as an elite programme and both the teachers and the head of programme implicitly and explicitly expressed the expectation that the students would continue to PhD level. At the same time all the students in the programme were high achievers in upper-secondary school: that particular programme was the tenth most difficult to enter in 2010 when this particular student was admitted.[4]

In the second interview, three months after having entered the programme, Amalie spoke about one of the courses that she found interesting. Sometimes she had experienced difficulties in understanding, which in a way was all right because it was a new field for her, but at the same time it appeared as something she should adjust to:

When you usually are one of the clever ones in the class – but here everybody is clever. And I think there are a lot who have had difficulties because now you are not that any more. Now you are just one in the crowd. (Amalie, second interview)

At the end of the first year, in the third interview, she touched upon the same theme, but more in a third-person description. By the time of the interview she had just attended a reunion with some people she had spent time with during her gap year doing mainly creative stuff. It was nice, she said, to step out of the bubble of the study programme:

Just hearing from other people that it’s all right to enjoy life and not just going for the grades, because sometimes that becomes ... I mean, people in this programme are really, really nice, but there really are a lot of girls who would like to be very, very clever and who puts lots and lots of effort into it. And it’s great for them that they wish to be clever, but it also makes a lot of people feel stressed sometimes, and people consider dropping out because they cannot keep up. Even if they can expect the grade 7 or something, suddenly it’s not good enough because you think you should get 12 every time and that stresses people.[5] (Amalie, third interview)

Throughout the three first-year interviews, Amalie emphasised the social life in the programme as particularly important to her. She did well in the first exams because the content matched her A-levels from upper-secondary school, but was more challenged in the subsequent courses. This, combined with the attitudes of the other students, the culture of the programme, and the expectations from the programme leader and teachers that the students would perform according to an elite programme aiming at PhD studies, created a sense of stress. More importantly, it forced her to reconsider her idea of herself as a student. During that first year she had to reconstruct the way in which she could be ‘a good student’ and reflect on the status of being ‘clever’. It appears as if Amalie’s reconstruction of herself as a student to some extent distanced her slightly from the mainstream of the programme culture and the kind of student the programme implies the students to be (Ulriksen, 2009). The reconstruction both concerned her idea of her ‘cleverness’ compared to the other students and (perhaps more importantly) her interpretation of what should be considered important and how different parts of her life should be balanced. Her thoughts about that balance had made her ‘become a bit more relaxed, that it’s not so important and you’ll get through it all right’ (Amalie, third interview). At the same time she expected that it would be a challenge for her to ‘pull herself together’ again. The renegotiation of how to be (and survive as) a student in that particular programme, hence, could cause her new difficulties.

Negotiation Strategies: weaving a bridge

Through the analysis of the students’ narratives concerning their experiences during their first year at university, we found that a key feature in the students’ coping process was that they developed negotiation strategies that could bridge the gap they experienced (for a more extensive analysis see Holmegaard et al, in press). As previously mentioned, all students experienced a gap between their expectancies and their experiences, albeit gaps of different sizes. Consequently, all students to a smaller or a larger extent needed to cope with the gap they experienced.

From a narrative psychological perspective the coping involved changes in the narratives the students constructed for understanding and interpreting their experiences. As the first-year
experiences affected the narrative they entered the programme with, they needed to reconstruct it to be able to include different experiences and to reinterpret them. This involved both retrospective changes, that is, changes in the interpretation of the past, and changes in anticipation. Metaphorically speaking, what changes when a car turns around a corner is not just what can be seen through the windscreen. It also changes the vision in the rear-view mirror. The students' renegotiation related to how they conceived themselves (e.g. as being clever or not), how they perceived the study programme (e.g. what reason could be given for taking a course in mathematics), or where they imagined the programme would take them in the future (e.g. which career prospects). The task in the coping process was to relate those different elements to each other in a way that appeared balanced for the student and that could also be presented in a legitimate way to their social environments.

The students' coping processes were differently shaped. Some students went through a process where they continuously reflected on, reinterpreted, and changed their conceptualisation of their experiences. Other students made few adjustments to their narratives and understandings and then adopted a different approach and understanding of the study and of themselves as students. However, even though the number of revisions of the narratives was few they could nonetheless be considerable. The difference between those students who negotiated their narratives several times and those who did it fewer times was primarily related to whether the students managed to construct an understanding and a narrative that made sense to them, or if they were required to revise it.

Of the 20 students in the analysis, eight experienced a larger gap, and of these, three developed a strategy with many renegotiations whereas five developed a strategy with few adjustments. The seven students who experienced minor (or at least smaller) gaps had less need for frequent renegotiation of their narratives. All the same, some of them did make more than one renegotiation and for some the change in the narrative was substantial. For instance, one of the students changed his intended career path, but managed to do so in such a convincing way that he, at the beginning of the second year, had forgotten his initial idea. We were not able to identify the strategies of five of the 20 students because we only succeeded in interviewing them once during their first year.

The difference in the negotiation strategies used by the students stemmed from a combination of what they met (course content, teaching methods, fellow students, etc.) and how submissive they were to the experiences. For instance, in the case of the student that in upper-secondary school expressed that he expected studying at university to be like having a hobby, the experience he expressed in the interviews during the first year was stunningly different and he said that had he known what he would meet he would probably have chosen differently. However, he resigned himself to the programme, accepting that it was less interesting and that some of the content was meaningless. As such, he renegotiated the narrative of himself as a university student.

Another student, in contrast, through the entire first six months at university in different ways tried to come to terms with the programme, the teaching, and her own achievements. Over the months, she reconstructed her narrative in different ways, sometimes changing her perception of the teachers and the teaching, sometimes changing her notion of herself, and yet other times turning to the social environment in the programme. Finally, she opted out of the programme because she was unable to construct a narrative that could include both her experiences of the programme and a sense of coherent identity.

What is common across the differences between the students regarding the size of the gap and the pattern of the negotiation strategy is that they need to construct something to bridge the gap. This something is, inter alia, a sense-making narrative, a renegotiation that weaves a bridge for the students to walk upon.

Discussion and Conclusion

The narrative approach adopted in this research allowed us to understand the complexity of the students' choice of study after leaving upper-secondary school and how the students needed to reflect on and balance the different elements that were part of this choice process. Further, it made it possible to explore the way students dealt with their first-year experiences and how they decided
whether to stay or leave. The longitudinal design of the study further added to the insight into the students’ process of either establishing a sense of belonging to the programme they had entered, deciding whether to take on a peripheral position in the programme in order to get by, or to eventually leave the programme.

The negotiation strategies are both the results of the research and an analytical device that can be used in future studies of students’ choices and experiences, offering a lens through which students’ narratives may be analysed.

Returning to the quote from the film *Sex, Lies, and Videotapes* cited at the beginning of the article, our research apparently contradicts Graham’s statement: we claim that students in fact do what the character Ann in the film asks of Graham, namely produce a narrative that may provide a reason or an answer to the questions of who one is and what one is doing here. The narrative psychological approach and the narrative methodology presuppose this. Students and other people construct narratives to make sense of their experiences and they use them in order to overcome discrepancies. Students may, so to speak, create coherence and sense even when it may not be there.

However, there are two points in Graham’s statements that it is worthwhile having in mind. Firstly, being part of a process or occurrence does not mean that it presents itself as sensible to the individual. The experiences can be contradictory, confusing, or merely incomprehensible because they differ too much from what was expected or from previous experiences, and therefore the individual may be in want of ways to interpret and act on them. Secondly, not everyone may be able to construct a sensible narrative that can level disparate elements in the experiences. The experiences may be too different from the expectancies, from the sense of self or identity, from what the student imagines should happen, etc. In some cases, not being able to construct a sensible narrative will lead to the student leaving the programme. In others, the student may try to keep going even if the sense making is incomplete. Therefore, Graham may be right to have his doubts.

This brings us to our final point. From a research point of view the incomplete, not-so-smooth narratives may be just as interesting as the successfully renegotiated narratives because they make it possible to identify and study the points where the students only with difficulty, if at all, manage to establish a sense of coherence. What we as educational researchers should be looking for, therefore, is not the smooth and well-arranged narrative, but just as much the incomplete narrative, with loose ends and contradictions, because this provides access to the difficulties in constructing the narrative.

The strength of this kind of research is that it provides a way of probing beneath the surface of actions and of understanding the different dimensions of the choices of students and the way the different elements intersect and interact. Conducting narrative research could therefore contribute to an increased understanding of differences and similarities between students’ experiences across Europe. For instance, a survey that was carried out across the participating countries in the IRIS project showed that more students in Italy responded that the overall experience of their STEM programme had matched what they expected than did the students in Denmark, Norway and England. A narrative study of the negotiations, expectations, and experiences of students in the different countries could shed light on differences and similarities in the students’ expectancies, experiences and negotiation strategies. This could enlighten the aspects where European countries could learn from each other.

Notes

[1] The project was managed and coordinated by the University of Oslo (Norway), and in addition to the authors’ institution had participating partners from England (King’s College and the University of Leeds), Italy (Observa) and Slovenia (University of Ljubljana). The project period was from May 2009 to May 2012.

[2] All the students’ names are pseudonyms.

[3] In Denmark, you can serve in the army for four months without any further obligations.

[4] In Denmark, the admission to higher education is administered by a national coordinating body. Each institution decides how many new students they can admit to each programme. If there are more applicants than study places the students are with few exceptions selected based on their grade point.
average (GPA) from upper-secondary school: the highest GPAs get accepted first. Very popular programmes and/or programmes with few places therefore require the students to achieve very high GPAs from upper-secondary school.

[5] The grading system has seven grades; 7 is the third highest mark while 12 is the highest.

References


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