



Network for Irish Educational Standards

Grade Inflation: Summary of Papers 1-5

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www.stopgradeinflation.ie

Grade Inflation in Ireland

Grade inflation is a trend over time of better grades being awarded in educational qualifications that is not matched by real improvements in learning. Grade inflation is a direct function of declining educational standards.

Extensive research conducted and published on the website of the Network for Irish Educational Standards shows that there has been significant grade inflation in both the University and Institute of Technology sectors in Ireland. In 1994 the percentage of first class honours awarded across the Universities was 7%. By 2005 that figure had jumped to 17%.

In the Institutes of Technology over the same period, despite a steep decline in the CAO points of entrants, based on a conservative calculation, there was a 52% increase in the award of first class honours degrees. Thus, weaker and weaker students have been entering the sector, only to receive ever improving grades.

Grade inflation in Irish higher education has been driven by institutions prioritising student numbers and growth at the expense of educational standards. Weaknesses inherent in the assessment process at third level have enabled an increasing divergence between academic performance and grades awarded.

Grade inflation undermines the status of qualifications and misleads the stakeholders in education, such as employers and policy-makers. It inevitably results in a continuing decline in the quality of education, with serious long-term implications for the competitiveness of the Irish economy.

The Network for Irish Educational Standards is a web based forum founded in response to this growing threat to the quality of our educational qualifications and the educational system as a whole. The Network has published five papers analysing the existence, causes and implications of grade inflation in Ireland and setting it within the context of similar developments in the US and the UK.

Paper 1 is entitled *Evidence of Grade Inflation 1994 - 2004 in the Institute of Technology Sector in Ireland*. It quantifies the higher grades obtained in National Certificates (now Higher Certificates), National Diplomas (now Ordinary Degrees) and Honour's Degrees in the combined Institutes of Technology (excluding DIT) over the period. A consistent trend of grade increase is identified. For example, there was a 38% increase in the award of distinctions in National Certificates and a 42% increase in National Diplomas, while for Honours Degrees there was a 52% increase in the rate of first class awards over the eleven year period. These figures are based on conservative calculations designed to exclude potentially random year to year variations.

At the same time as grades were increasing, academic ability among Institute of Technology entrants, as indicated by their CAO entry points, was in sharp decline. This was despite the fact that the average CAO points obtained by school leavers improved constantly over that time span. In addition, changes in society such as the availability of part-time work for students, increased expenditure on alcohol and entertainment and diminished competition for jobs after graduation suggest that students were, in all probability, less motivated to devote time and

effort to study. That in spite of all this, they continued to receive improved grades at graduation is taken as convincing evidence of very significant grade inflation in the Institute of Technology sector.

Paper 2 is entitled *Grade Inflation in Irish Universities (1994 – 2004)*. It reports on a similar analysis across the seven Irish universities to that described above for the Institute of Technology sector. The focus is entirely on undergraduate degrees.

Again, a pattern of very significant grade improvement was identified. Based on an analysis designed to exclude potentially random year to year variations, over the period the proportion of first class degrees increased by over three quarters and that of second class, grade one degrees by over a fifth. Some improvement in CAO points among entrants was in evidence but not of a scale anything like sufficient to explain the level of grade increase. In addition, it is pointed out in the paper that grade improvement in the Leaving Certificate examination is likely to have been a function of grade inflation at that level and not of improved learning. This more than negates any implication of improved academic ability that might have been drawn from the improved CAO points. The same social and economic developments as addressed with respect to the Institute of Technology sector, suggest a similar decline in motivation among University students. It is concluded that the University sector in Ireland has been afflicted by considerable grade inflation since the early 1990s.

Grades awarded through either third level system in Ireland do not now represent the standard of ability or achievement that they did in the past.

Paper 3 is entitled *Regulation Changes Contributing to Grade Inflation: The NCEA/HETAC Case Study*. This paper describes the manner in which the National Council for Educational Awards and its successor organisation, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council, consistently altered its quality assurance regulations over the last two decades so as to make it easier for students to obtain its qualifications and to obtain better grades. Twenty separate changes are identified since 1990, each one subtly or less subtly leading to a diminution in academic demands on students. It is suggested that the organisation which had primary responsibility for safeguarding the integrity of qualifications in the Institute of Technology sector was 'captured' by those in charge of the Institutes and, in consequence, facilitated the grade inflation process so as to allow the sector to grow unimpeded by the declining academic standard of students.

Paper 4, entitled *The Causes of Grade Inflation in Ireland: An Exploration of Social and Institutional Pressures and Policy Choices*, explores the factors likely to have led to the grade inflationary trend in Irish higher education.

Three sets of influences are suggested. Firstly, sociological and economic changes have led to a move towards universal educational access even at third level. It is argued that the same changes have produced a decline in social distance between students and lecturers. Declining social distance has in turn created a climate where there is a discomfort among academics in disappointing students by giving them poor grades. Students too are much better placed than formerly to exert pressure on lecturers to award them better grades. This has occurred at a time

when a growing proportion of academically weaker students are entering third level education due to the participation of higher proportions of the relevant age cohort.

Secondly, it is argued that Universities and Institutes of Technology have long set institutional expansion as their primary goal, ignoring the fact that continuing growth could only be achieved by drawing academically weak and unmotivated students into third level courses. This should have led to declining grades and sharply increased failure rates. Educational institutions, focused primarily on growth, have instead fostered a climate conducive to lowering standards so as to attract and maintain student numbers under increasingly competitive circumstances. Finally, it is explained how the procedures for examining students and arriving at grades in third level educational institutions are remarkably susceptible to the pressures to degrade standards and inflate grades and how grade inflation once initiated becomes a self sustaining process.

Paper 5 is entitled *The Consequences of Grade Inflation*. It analyses the deleterious impact that grade inflation has, not only on educational standards but also on the economy and society in general. A wide variety of negative impacts are described. Grade Inflation undermines the delivery of quality education. Because grades are no longer a faithful representation of actual performance, the value of examinations as a quality control mechanism on educational standards is undermined. Both teachers and students grow less motivated to achieve since apparent success can be attained with less effort. The formulators of educational policy may be misled about what is achievable in the education system.

Grade inflation presents serious difficulties for employers who are faced with the challenge of differentiating between those whose qualifications and grades are backed up by actual learning and the great many whose grades are deeply misleading.

Grade inflation left unchecked for long enough is likely to seriously damage our international competitiveness and our economy as a whole.