

Grade Inflation in Irish Second and Third Level Education

By Brendan Guilfoyle
November 22nd 2008

During the last year evidence has emerged that substantial grade inflation has been occurring in the Irish education system over the last decade. This phenomenon, whereby higher and higher awards are being given without any real improvements in learning, is of critical importance to Irish education, and requires serious consideration beyond the pejorative “dumbing down” rhetoric favoured by the media.

As trade union members working in education, grade inflation doubly affects us: firstly as citizens (particularly if we have, or will have, children) and secondly, as professionals, upon whom society depends for the integrity of our educational system.

In grappling with this issue, we must consider exactly what is happening, why it is happening, what the implications are and what steps need to be taken.

What is happening?

At third level, the percentage of higher awards has rocketed over the last decade and a half. For example, in 1994 the percentage of first class honours awarded across Irish Universities was 7%. By 2005 that figure had jumped to 17%. In the Institutes of Technology over the same period there was a 52% increase in the award of first class honours degrees. While there has been variation in these increases between institutions, the trend has been the same - inexorably upwards.

At second level, a similar trend appears: the percentage of higher awards has soared. The accompanying table contains a comparison of the percentage of students obtaining either an A or B in the Leaving Certificate in 1991 and 2006 at Higher and Ordinary level in the most popular subjects.

Of course, a simplistic explanation of these increases could be that the abilities of our students and graduates are improving. Unfortunately, such an explanation does not bear up under any kind of scrutiny. At second level, in the most recent European-wide PISA study, there has been no detectable improvement in mathematics, reading and science in Irish 15 year olds between 2000 and 2006 and so such an explanation of the increased Leaving Certificate results does not hold up.

At third level, it has been shown that there is no correlation between the CAO points of entrants and the level of awards being given by institutions. Indeed, in the Institutes of Technology, CAO entry points have fallen steeply while the level of final awards has been increasing.

The inevitable conclusion is that, at both levels, standards are declining.

Why is it happening?

Understanding why grade inflation is occurring so rapidly and in every area requires careful consideration and has no simple answer. Indeed, the reasons why it is happening at second level may well be different from those at third level.

However, one common thread has been the move towards universal educational access at third level – up from 25% of school leavers in 1986 to 54% in 2003 - and this

has had ramifications at both levels. In the first instance, third level education has become the norm, and failure to attain this level of education is likely to have negative repercussions throughout a person's life. This has been exacerbated by the academisation of hitherto professional qualifications.

This has led to the proliferation of grind schools, increased examination scrutiny and endless pressure on Leaving Certificate examiners to set predictable exams. The result has been a small drop in the percentage of failures in most subjects of the Leaving Certificate and a massive increase in the percentage of students achieving grades at the top of the scale. In addition, the percentage taking Higher level subjects has increased dramatically and added to inflation in CAO points.

Against this background, third level institutions have set institutional expansion as their primary goal, and failed to deal with the fact that continuing growth can only be achieved by drawing academically weak and unmotivated students into third level courses. Moreover, the procedures for examining students and arriving at grades in third level educational institutions have proven to be remarkably susceptible to pressure to degrade standards.

In this context, the educational regulatory authorities must accept a large proportion of the responsibility for the outcome. For example, between 1990 and the present, HETAC and its predecessor the NCEA oversaw 20 different regulation changes in the IoT sector whereby the academic demands made on students were lowered for qualifications.

The final result has been the paradoxical situation where weaker and weaker students have been entering third level education and somehow obtaining higher and higher awards.

What are the implications?

There is a wide variety of negative impacts of grade inflation. Fundamentally, it 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, and formulators of educational policy may be misled about what is being achieved in the education system.

Moreover, both teachers and students grow less motivated to achieve, since apparent success can be attained with less effort. This particularly affects the better students, whose efforts and abilities are not rewarded. Indeed, one could argue on a purely pragmatic basis that the benefit bestowed upon the small number of weaker students who are being allowed to "squeeze through" is completely out-weighed by the disadvantage being experienced by the brightest students who find themselves undifferentiated from their medium-ability peers.

Finally, 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.

What needs to be done?

Grade inflation is a complex problem with many facets: societal factors, student expectations, educational policy, quality assurance mechanisms and institutional

priorities. In the US and UK, where it has been recognised as a serious threat to educational quality, there have been a number of different attempts to address the issue.

Three years ago in Princeton, one of the more prestigious US universities, a policy of capping the proportion of higher grades was adopted as a direct attempt to halt grade inflation. More recently, due to grade inflation in the A-levels, Imperial College, London, announced that it is establishing its own entrance exams to differentiate between applicants.

Should grade inflation not be addressed in Ireland, such unilateral actions will become necessary for institutions here. Indeed, we may well see the reintroduction of the matriculation examination. In the examples above, both institutions are in the elite category of their respective countries, and it is precisely this aspect of the problem where the most negative impact on our education system may lie. In the future, it may not be the educational qualification itself that will be used as a selection criteria – but which institution awarded it. Thus we will have the irony of a false educational egalitarianism leading to a new elitism.

The first step in combating grade inflation is to ensure that the level of educational awards is independently monitored. Indeed, the very fact that it has been left to individual academics to collect, analyse and publicise data on such a crucial issue highlights a serious short-coming in the Irish educational system.

Such short-comings are easily exploited by institutions seeking to avoid scrutiny. Most recently, many IoT's have refused to release grade data for a variety of concocted reasons: lack of resources (IT Blanchardstown), questions about objectivity (Limerick IT), ethical issues (Dundalk IT), fear of undermining confidence in the sector (Athlone IT), or for no reason at all (IADT).

Secondly, a broad consensus must emerge amongst academics, institutions and policy-makers that grade inflation is a serious threat to the integrity of Irish educational awards. As a part of this, third level institutions must restore priority to the maintenance of educational standards. Individual academics must also shoulder their professional responsibilities to resist the pressures that erode the quality of academic awards.

At second level, the current emphasis on regurgitation and rote learning must be abolished. Examinations and marking schemes must be more specifically designed to reward the better students and decompress the top grades. In the same vein, the Leaving Certificate must adapt to the changing student ethos and become less predictable.

Finally, academics must demand, and take steps to ensure, that educational institutions live up to their public duty of ensuring standards that are fair both to the weaker and the stronger students.

Subject	Level	1991	2006
IRISH	H	28	48.8
	O	15.2	34.5
ENGLISH	H	18.7	38.1
	O	9.8	40.7
MATHEMATICS	H	29.1	49.1

	O	29.6	38.5
HISTORY	H	25.4	42.7
	O	34.4	49.1
GEOGRAPHY	H	20.2	41.4
	O	23.7	30.3
FRENCH	H	28.2	40.1
	O	8.6	21.5
ART	H	20.1	37.8
	O	15	23
PHYSICS	H	31.8	47
	O	23.2	45.7
BIOLOGY	H	27.3	43.9
	O	20.9	30.5
ACCOUNTING	H	31	52.6
	O	30.4	43.2
BUSINESS	H	20	39.8
	O	22.2	40.7

**Comparison of the percentage of students obtaining either an A or B
in the Leaving Certificate in 1991 and 2006**

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