

Quality of Graduates/Grade Inflation

1. Purpose of Paper

This paper summarises some of the issues that arise in the debate in relation to grade inflation and the quality of Irish graduates.

The paper outlines some of the research/evidence that has been conducted around this issue and summarises some of the arguments put forward in the research for and against a drift towards grade inflation. It then outlines some of the policy considerations that arise.

2. What are the trends in award classification?

In response to a request from the Department, HETAC has submitted an informal draft of an internal discussion paper on the issues, trends and policy around award classification (HETAC is the qualifications awarding body for third-level educational and training institutions outside the university sector i.e. IoTs and private colleges). The HETAC paper, which is attached at Appendix 3, shows a trend of increasing percentages of graduates achieving higher classifications between 1998 and 2008. Data from the HETAC paper, supplemented by analysis of data performed by the Department, is set out in the tables below.

The percentages of HETAC graduates earning the top classification increased significantly at each of the three NFQ levels. There has also been a significant decrease in the share of awards at Level 6 and a significant increase at level 8:

Percentages of HETAC graduates achieving the top classification by NFQ award Level			
	Level 6	Level 7	Level 8*
1998	14%	12%	11.2%
2002	19%	18%	14.2%
2008	22%	23%	16.6%

*Institutes of Technology (excluding DIT) only

Percentages awards at NFQ Levels 6-8 as a percentage of total at these levels			
	Level 6	Level 7	Level 8
1998	42%	37%	21%
2002	37%	36%	27%
2008	16%	40%	44%

Significant increases are also evident in the universities:

Percentages of university graduates achieving the top classification by NFQ award Level			
	Level 6	Level 7	Level 8
1997	-	-	8.3%
2000	-	-	9.5%
2008	-	-	16.2%

By comparison, data from the UK indicates that the proportion of students achieving first class honours increased from 8.4% in 1999 to 13.3% in 2008.

In looking at award classifications across the higher education sector, it is important to note that common standards are not universally applied. While there are common approaches within the HETAC sector and within the NUI universities, there is not a single system of common standards that applies generally. HEIs have relied upon a tacit understanding of the standard required to gain a particular award classification, supported by the use of external examiners.

A series of tables are attached at Appendix 1:

[Table 1a 2008 Awards by Institution and Discipline \(including summary data on first class honours\)](#)

[Table 1b 2008 Summary data on first class honours by institution](#)

[Table 1c 2008 Summary data on first class honours by discipline](#)

[Table 1d Summary data on first class honours by university 1997, 2000 and 2008](#)

[Table 1e Summary data on first class honours by institute of technology 1998, 2002 and 2008](#)

3. What are the possible reasons for the trend of increasing results?

The trend of increasing award classifications could be caused by a number of factors and is not necessarily direct evidence of grade inflation.

Summaries of two presentations to the Second Annual Conference of the National Academy for the Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning, held November 2009, are contained at Appendix 4. At this conference Professor Áine Hyland argued that improved student grades are a valid reflection of improvements in teaching and learning. She also pointed to a decision of the Senate of the NUI about 10 years ago to use the full 100% range in assessment. Prior to then examiners limited themselves to using a range of between 30% and 75%, which would have made it difficult for a student to get a first class honours mark when the upper range of marks is not used. Mr Martin O'Grady, co-founder of the Network for Irish Educational Standards (see

below), asserted that improved grades were a result of grade inflation and pointed to data showing an increase in the grades being awarded to graduates at the same time as entry requirements for courses were falling.

The informal HETAC paper on award classifications (Appendix 3) noted that there is a lack of compelling evidence about the causative factors for the trend of increasing award classifications, but put forward the following list potential causes, both positive and negative:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better teaching methods • More flexible assessment instruments including continual assessment • Harder working more highly motivated learners • The use of explicit intended learning outcomes making learning objectives clearer for teachers and students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The attractiveness of a programme to learners is influenced by percentage of high classifications awarded—this can motivate the award of more high classifications when competition for learners increases • Downward migration of intended learning outcomes (i.e. relaxing standards) • Unreliable or invalid assessment procedures
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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 maintains that grade inflation has been driven by institutions prioritising student numbers and growth¹ at the expense of educational standards and that weaknesses in the assessment process at third level have enabled an increasing divergence between academic performance and grades awarded. The network has conducted a number of research papers analysing the existence, causes and implications of grade inflation in Ireland. The Network’s summary of five of their research papers on grade inflation is attached at Appendix 5.

Other possible causes for the trend of increasing results include:

- Institutional ambition/competition (concern with league tables and the reform agenda in the universities and concern with achieving parity of esteem/university status in the IoTs)
- The extent to which the desire to develop 4th level education has a knock on effect on grades
- The extent to which education and the associated qualifications are now seen by some learners as rights/entitlements and as commodities

It should also be noted that the upward trend in the level of undergraduate awards is not just an Irish issue and that national and international studies seem to suggest that increased investment in teaching and learning along with an enhanced focus on learning outcomes has contributed to students’ preparedness for examination. The

¹ Growth in the overall number of full-time students in DES aided higher education institutions between 1998/99 and 2009/10 is shown in the table at Appendix 2

setting of targets and specified milestones which are then assessed against stated criteria seems to allow students to prepare and perform better.

4. Should we be concerned about the trends?

While there is no conclusive evidence on the reasons for increases in award classifications, the quality of graduates is of strategic importance in the context of national development and Ireland cannot afford to be complacent about the issue.

There is an absence of objective measures against which the quality of Irish graduates can be benchmarked against international peers. In so far as there is limited available evidence, this shows Irish graduates performing well. A 2007 HEA/Forfas study on the quality of Irish graduates² surveyed employers for feedback on the suitability for employment of Irish graduates, compared to their international counterparts. The overall conclusion was that there were relatively few important differences in employer perceptions between Irish and non-Irish graduates. Irish graduates appear to compare favourably in “Soft/Generic” skills, while foreign graduates are considered more eager and hungry in the working environment. In addition, the World Economic Forum’s (WEF) 2009-2010 Global Competitiveness Report ranked the quality of Ireland’s secondary and tertiary educational system, as assessed by the business community, as 8th out of 133 economies.

However, a number of influential voices within the employer community have voiced concern on graduate quality, and it is important that their concerns are given appropriate consideration.

5. What steps are being taken?

Assessment Criteria Based on Learning Outcomes

The establishment of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) in 2003 provided an objective basis for comparing qualifications awarded at all levels of education and training in Ireland. The NFQ contains a wide range of major and minor awards arranged across ten levels, based on learning outcomes. Learning outcomes are defined as:

“statements of what a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after completion of a process of learning”

The vast bulk of third level awards, from Higher Certificate up to Doctorate, have been placed on the Framework and are situated between levels 6 and 10. This provides a useful basis for comparing the value of awards offered across institutions and facilitates progression opportunities for students between institutions. However, the presence of an award type on the Framework (eg Bachelors Degree) does not

² *Survey of Selected Multi-National Employers’ Perceptions of Certain Graduates from Irish Higher Education, A Study for the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, the Higher Education Authority and Forfás, December 2007*

mean that all programmes offered in higher education institutions leading to that award type are designed or assessed by reference to learning outcomes. This deeper level of implementation of the learning outcomes approach is a work in progress but it offers significant scope for developing a shared understanding of assessment and classifications.

The HETAC paper (Appendix 3) maintains that the most sensible way to address concerns about the credibility of awards classifications is to address assessment. While it notes that this is challenging in HE because of the enormous diversity of disciplines, programmes and providers, a series of policy responses by the NQAI and HETAC are tackling the issue systematically. These include development of programme learning outcome statements for all programmes in the HETAC sector in 2004; publishing a set of Awards Standards in five broad fields of learning in 2005; publishing a policy document on the regulation and quality assurance of assessment in May 2009 and; publishing 'Effective Practice Guideline for External Examining' in November 2009.

A shift in the direction of the learning outcomes-based approach is also happening in the university sector. The university sector Framework Implementation Network (essentially a collaboration between the university Presidents, the Irish Universities Association and the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland) has just produced a document entitled University Awards and the National Framework of Qualifications: Issues around the Design of Programmes and the Use and Assessment of Learning Outcomes. This acts as a handbook for those in universities designing programmes and assessment models and places the Framework and learning outcomes at its heart.

Amalgamation of Quality Assurance Agencies

Another method of tackling grade inflation is through internal quality assurance in institutions and external quality review, currently undertaken by three separate bodies – HETAC, NQAI and the Irish Universities Quality Board. The amalgamation of these three agencies will bring a unified focus to the issue in the higher education sector and also links Framework Implementation more clearly to quality assurance. The establishment legislation for the new body also enhances statutory powers in the area. The Bill, currently being drafted, provides that all institutions must act upon the recommendations of an external quality review and the new Agency is also empowered to undertake reviews at a thematic or cross-institutional level. This could include, for example, examinations of standards across institutions in a particular subject area or a cross-institutional review of the effectiveness of external examining.

National Strategy for Higher Education

The process to develop a new national strategy for higher education is currently underway. Issues around the quality of teaching and learning, the responsiveness of the higher education sector to broader economic and social needs, and the development of a resourcing base for meeting future demand in a manner that safeguards graduate quality are being considered by the National Strategy Group. The report of the Strategy Group is expected before the summer.

Ongoing Research

Some examples of ongoing research are as follows:

- HETAC is nearing completion on a research project involving comparisons between institutions, in which they are collaborating with HEIs on a pilot study of the change in learners' generic skills which occurs between the first and final year of the degree programme and the variation in this change that can be linked to influencing factors.
- HETAC is co-funding research with the IoTs on the perceptions of Level 8 Engineering graduates and their employers on the quality of qualifications, which is due to report by summer 2010.
- The Carlow IT-led SIF project, Repositioning Learner Assessment, aims to reposition the processes and practices of assessment and to develop new models of practice and a range of resources to assist the institutes in responding to emerging assessment issues.

6. Conclusion

The available data shows a trend of increasing award classifications over the last decade. However, as described above, there are a number of potential causes for the increases. Developments in terms of advancing the framework of qualifications and assessment based learning outcomes will enhance the transparency of awards, and the establishment of the new qualifications and quality assurance agency will improve structural capacity of the system to oversee this. The more fundamental questions about the quality of graduates in terms of the quality of teaching and learning, resourcing of the system and responding to the needs of enterprise and wider society go to the heart of the development of the National Strategy for Higher Education.

3 March 2010

[Appendix 2 – Higher Education Enrolment 1999-2010](#)

[Appendix 3 – Informal Note \(Award Classification: Issues, Trends and Policy\)](#)

[Appendix 4 – Summaries of presentations to the Second Annual Conference of the National Academy for the Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning, November 2009](#)

[Appendix 5 – Network for Irish Educational Standards](#)