

---

## February 20, 2009

### Could student pressure be behind grade inflation?

By John O' Leary

Grade inflation is one of the most sensitive subjects in education - and not just in Britain. Neither teachers nor parents like to hear that anything but hard work might be responsible for the regular and substantial improvements in results at every stage from GCSE through A level to university. But could it be that student attitudes are playing a part?

That seems to be the conclusion reached by academics in the United States. A snappily-named study called 'Self-Entitled College Students: Contributions of Personality, Parenting, and Motivational Factors' suggests that many of today's students confuse hard work with quality. They think that if they have put a lot of effort into a piece of work, they deserve a high grade - and they complain if they don't get it.

Authors of the study, at the University of California, Irvine, found that a third of students expected B grades just for attending lectures, while four out of ten said they deserved a B for completing the required reading. Ellen Greenberger, the lead researcher, blamed parental pressure, competition among peers and heightened anxieties over levels of achievement.

Other academics interviewed by the New York Times confirmed that student demands were becoming more strident - and less realistic. Professor Marshall Grossman, of the University of Maryland, said: "I tell my classes that if they just do what they are supposed to do and meet the standard requirements, that they will earn a C. [That is the default grade. They see the default grade as an A.](#)"

Academics in Britain have also noted a greater readiness on the part of students to complain about the grades they are given. The section of the National Student Survey dealing with feedback and assessment has produced the lowest satisfaction levels in all four years of its publication. It seems the days of students accepting the judgement of their tutor unquestioningly are well and truly gone.

Of course, student pressure has nothing to do with grade inflation at GCSE or A level. That has more to do with formulaic examining and transparent mark schemes that allow teachers to coach their pupils to higher grades. But it may well be a factor in the equally dramatic rise in degree results.

In universities with modular systems - nearly all of them - grading is a more personal business. Marks that count towards degree classifications are awarded throughout the course, so students are well aware of what they need for that all-important First or Upper

---

Second. The National Student Survey itself may also encourage lecturers to court popularity.

You can't blame students for trying to boost their results, especially when jobs are scarce and degree classifications count more than ever. But academics need to show some backbone if the grading system is not to fall into disrepute.

Read School Gate on:

[Six scary \(but real\) interview questions](#)

[The credit crunch hits: should more students live at home?](#)

[Would you rather be a poem or a novel? Oxbridge interview questions and how to answer them](#)

[Which universities do top employers target?](#)

Posted at 11:54 AM in [exams](#), [students](#) | [Permalink](#)

## TrackBack

TrackBack URL for this entry:

<http://www.typepad.com/t/trackback/297284/40053343>

Listed below are links to weblogs that reference [Could student pressure be behind grade inflation?](#):

## Comments

Students certainly have to work hard to get good grades. My daughter got 4 As by dint of good teaching, continual assessment (ie continual pressure) and very hard work. Thirty years ago I got 2 As and I admit didn't work even half as hard. Could it possibly be that teaching has improved and students work harder?

Posted by: Cathy | [February 22, 2009 at 07:45 PM](#)

Yet another Times article whinging about grade inflation, yet the very same newspaper routinely publishes University ranking tables that include a weighting for proportion of 1sts and 2:1s. As league table position is all important, who is going to jeopardise their jobs by awarding 2:2s and 3rds. Perhaps if you sort out your own house first!

Posted by: JW | [February 21, 2009 at 09:03 PM](#)

---

ur not encouraged to think ie learn the algorithms, pass the exam with good grade; besides with so much to cover in so short time all u can afford is to learn the algorithms only! reasoning, 1st principles derivations, critical thinking etc...maybe later.

Posted by: phys | [February 21, 2009 at 02:28 PM](#)

Continuous assessment means, in effect, students are under continual examination conditions. Then the increase in the number of graduates, not matched by a corresponding increase in graduate jobs, means that a 2:1 becomes the new pass degree. No wonder students are obsessed with marks.

Few students are very academic. Most are not capable of much in the way of original thought, and, despite the rhetoric, often the curriculum doesn't allow for this. So some other means has got to be found to differentiate students, namely facts and presentation. These respond to work, hence students who work get good grades, those who work and don't feel aggrieved.

Posted by: [Malcolm McLean](#) | [February 21, 2009 at 01:51 PM](#)

A comment by my son summed up the main attitude today...."Always complain, you don't lose anything and you might get something"

I guess this is the modern attitude, I find this sad.

Posted by: Mags | [February 21, 2009 at 11:25 AM](#)

Double marking would put paid to a lot of these problems – but the culture of double marking as a part of academic duties doesn't exist in North America – and most universities are too skinflint to finance it.

Posted by: rogerc | [February 21, 2009 at 03:54 AM](#)

Grade inflation starts with HEFCE who posit an 85% pass guideline regardless of UCAS points: it is one thing for 85 or 90% of the students at top tier universities to pass with 3 A's at A Level, quite another to expect the same for a university that takes three C's and then lowers that entry level for clearing. Then there are the problems of non-attendance, failure to do any work or reading, standards of grammar that ought to shame a primary school pupil... and yet, somehow, we find them brick and turn them marble. While I'm not afraid to fail my students, I am aware of just how dire they have to be to get agreement.

Posted by: Mark | [February 21, 2009 at 01:07 AM](#)

Grade inflation starts with HEFCE who posit an 85% pass guideline regardless of UCAS points: it is one thing for 85 or 90% of the students at top tier universities to pass with 3 A's at A Level, quite another to expect the same for a university that takes three C's and then lowers that entry level for clearing. Then there are the problems of non-attendance, failure to do any work or reading, standards of grammar that ought to shame a primary school pupil...

---

and yet, somehow, we find them brick and turn them marble. While I'm not afraid to fail my students, I am aware of just how dire they have to be to get agreement.

Posted by: Mark | [February 21, 2009 at 01:07 AM](#)

The problem with these vague mark schemes is that they do lend themselves to so many interpretations and thus many of the students have an arguable point about where the boundaries lie – my pal who's a teacher has bitterly complained that it makes differentiating between the grade levels incredibly difficult for teachers, let alone pupils.

To use an example... she said the difference between Cs and Ds is often something stupid like "shows understanding" and "shows understanding and comprehension" (not her exact words, but the examples she used were all in the same vein). Given that they're woolly and they offer no guidance as to the actual level of understanding that has to be shown (a smidgen? a moderate amount? knowing the book's title?). That's before you start on what the difference between understanding and comprehension is supposed to be when they're synonyms. It's unsurprising that students may often feel that they've done more than their grade warrants.

But the idea that merely turning up or cracking a few books should earn you credit... nope. You can attend all the classes and read all the books but if you walk out of there still not having a clue... in academia you earn credit for merit, not for trying.

Posted by: Hol | [February 20, 2009 at 05:12 PM](#)

Expectations routinely run high, especially when it comes to parents (yes, parents) applying for their child's university places, without a full grasp of likely grades. Parents often decide on course choice and establishment, and the poor student has to face grade offers way too high.

I have plenty of students at sixth form, diligent but not especially motivated to understand, who have done well at GCSE by simply doing the work and cramming for exams. A levels, they find, are harder.

Some parents, though, expect what worked then to work now – "They work really hard, so why aren't they getting the 'A' grades they need".

I've even had a student disgruntled after getting a grade A, claiming that they had to do extra work outside of lessons because they hadn't mastered the subject in class. Obviously poor teaching, they suggested, if they had to resort to private study!

Incidentally, you suggest that teachers don't want to hear about grade inflation – you are right when it comes to policy makers and management, but most of my teaching colleagues roll their eyes when the annual suggestions are made that we have the hardest working students or the best teachers.