Network for Irish Educational Standards

Paper 4

The Causes of Grade Inflation: An Exploration of Social and Institutional Pressures and Policy Choices

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ABSTRACT

Grade Inflation occurs when there is an upward trend over a period of time in examination grades awarded in the absence of a matching improvement in learning or achievement. This paper explores the causes of the grade inflationary trend in Irish higher education that has been described by O'Grady and Guilfoyle, 2007a, 2007b. Three sets of influences and policy choices that drive the grade inflation process are suggested: the impact of social and economic changes, institutional choices about educational policies and the operation of the educational awards process.

Firstly, social and economic changes have prompted a transition to universal educational access at third level. As the proportion of the population admitted to third level education has expanded, more academically weaker students were admitted and retained. Social changes have also led to a significant decline in social distance between lecturers and students and in turn created a climate where there is a discomfort among academics in disappointing students by giving them poor grades. Students are also much better placed than formerly to exert pressure on lecturers to award them better grades.

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 can only be achieved by drawing academically weak and unmotivated students into third level courses. This should have already led to declining grades and sharply increased failure rates or alternatively to a major growth in less academic third level courses designed to suit weaker students. With respect to both alternatives, the opposite has happened. Degree level courses have replaced Certificate and Diploma courses and grades have risen rapidly throughout the whole third level system. This has only been achievable by educational institutions, focused exclusively on growth, fostering a climate conducive to lowering standards so as to attract and maintain student numbers under increasingly competitive circumstances.

Finally, an examination of the operation of the third level grading process itself explains how grade inflation actually emerged and evolved within the parameters of the grading system. It is explained how the procedures for examining students in third level educational institutions are such that grades are not anchored to objective standards. In consequence, the process is remarkably susceptible to pressures to degrade standards and inflate grades. Once initiated, grade inflation becomes a self sustaining process particularly where the dominant institutional imperative is to expand student numbers at any cost.

The paper concludes with a discussion about how little concern there has been within Irish education about the reality of grade inflation, a phenomenon which if allowed to continue unchecked, will progressively and inexorably undermine the meaning of qualifications and degrade the whole educational system.

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1. Introduction

Grade Inflation occurs when there is an upward trend over a period of time in grades awarded to successive cohorts of students taking a given examination or set of examinations in the absence of a matching improvement in learning or achievement. It is a process that results in better grades being awarded more leniently and with less justification. Grade inflation afflicts the third level education sector in Ireland (O'Grady and Guilfoyle, 2007a, 2007b), and in other countries such as the United States (Rosovsky and Hartley, 2002; Leef, 2003) and the United Kingdom (Garner, 2003). This paper explores the causes for the downward drift in third level education standards in Ireland. An adequate explanation for the phenomenon requires the identification of influences that are shared by countries and the educational sectors within them along with consideration of the factors unique to Ireland that affect the grade inflation process.

We identify three sets of influences and policy choices that drive the grade inflation process: the impact of social and economic changes, institutional choices about educational policies and the operation of the educational awards process. Firstly, social and economic changes can create an environment that fosters grade inflation. These influences derive from shared values and norms within society and a significant commonality across countries allows for a shared explanation of grade inflation at this level. The second set of influences occurs within the sphere of the institutions which are charged with the implementation of education policy and through the actions of the key decision makers within these institutions. This paper focuses on third level education in Ireland and considers the particular institutional policies adopted as these are critical choices that are integral to the framework of educational standards. The policies and procedures within educational sectors and individual institutions can explicitly enable and legitimise the grade inflation drift. Finally, a close examination of the operation of the third level grading process itself explains how grade inflation actually emerges and evolves within the parameters of the grading system. The grading system contains intrinsic metrics and procedures that determine the level of awards and the interpretation and application of these constraints reveals many facets that facilitate a decline in standards and some others that exert direct inflationary pressure on the awarding of grades. These key choices and interpretations are made by the individual academics and other professionals who determine the grades awarded.

The three sets of influences that we have identified are highly intertwined, with social and economic changes creating a climate for grade inflation, the education institutions devising policies that enable and legitimise a

concomitant drift in educational standards and the gradual emergence of a grading system that is applied by academics in a manner that leads to the emergence of inflated awards.

2. The Impact of Social and Economic Changes

2.1 Background

There are two interrelated developments at societal level that together contribute significantly to the conditions under which grade inflation flourishes. Both are shared in Ireland, the United States and the United Kingdom. One is the upward drive of universal education, through the second level and into the third level sectors. The other is the decline in social distance in society between those with traditional disparities of power and status.

2.2 Universal Education

2.2.1 Minority to majority education

Since the introduction of free second level education in Ireland in the early nineteen sixties, there has been a dramatic increase in completion rates at this level. Between 1965 and 2000 the rate of retention of secondary school entrants to Leaving Certificate completion went from 20% to 78% (Department of Education and Science, 2000) By 2004, only about 14% of those in the population aged 20-24 had not completed second level education. This contrasted with approximately 46% of those aged 45-54 and almost 60% of those aged 55-64 who had failed to complete the second level programme (CSO 2005, cited in CORI, 2007).

The rate of entry to third level education has also climbed dramatically. By 2004, the overall admission rate to third level courses reached 55% of the relevant age cohort. In 1980, the equivalent figure was only 20% (Higher Education Authority, 2004).

2.2.2 Impact on the average ability of student cohorts

In Ireland, as in the United Kingdom and United States, we have progressed from privileged towards universal educational access. While this is a socially progressive development, the difficulty with universal education is that as you include more and more of the age relevant population in the educational

process, the trend is towards a progressive decline in the ability and motivation of the student cohort. This effect is not experienced immediately. As soon as severe financial restraints to remaining on in education are lifted, initially the most likely individuals to grasp the opportunities are the more able and motivated – those most likely to learn and perform well in examinations. Consequently, at first there will be an enriching of the academic pool as merit replaces wealth and family background as the key to educational access. However, as the proportions staying on in education continue to increase, weaker students are retained at each given level. The difficulties with universal education are magnified as the expectations of universality extend upwards.

The effect should then be a progressive decline in the average performance of the numerically increasing (and academically weakening) cohorts of graduates. There is a very real limit placed upon learning by limits in ability even though average ability can be improved, particularly in very poor and disadvantaged populations, by improved social conditions. Learning ability is distributed in the manner of most human characteristics, half above and half below the average and with the bulk of the population not differing too greatly from that average (Gottfredson, 1997; American Psychological Association, 1995; Seligman, 1992). The most important implication for our purposes is that strong learning ability, the kind used to cope well with upper secondary and third level education begins to run out quite rapidly as education becomes less selective and as an ever greater proportion of the population is included.

In proportionate terms then, there should have been fewer higher grades awarded in third level Degrees as educational participation grew more universal. Surprisingly, the opposite has in fact happened – not because of some elusive formula to get weaker and less motivated students to learn better – but due to a progressive watering down of expectations to match the weaker students that entered the third level system.

2.2.3 Ignoring the increasing heterogeneity of students

With a wide divergence in the ability levels amongst the universally expanded student cohort, the education system should therefore provide a differentiated model with an appropriate variety of awards. However, the Irish education system has increasingly ignored the real heterogeneity of student ability. Students of all levels of ability are filtered towards an academic Leaving Certificate and increasingly towards third level Degrees. It is surely an irony that just when the Leaving Certificate approached close to universal access, it became largely conceived of as an entrance examination for third level education. It is an even greater irony that just when third level

education became the target for the majority of Leaving Certificate graduates, the Institutes of Technology shifted their focus away from technician qualifications to the provision of Degree programmes that mirror those already provided in the University sector.

If educational and grading standards had been maintained as the participation rate at third level grew, a proportionate decline in the overall grade profile and a higher failure rate would have been faced. Grade inflation has instead been the answer. Educators and society at large have been able to mask reality and pretend that all is well. The grades tell us that students are doing fine. In fact, the figures say that students are doing better and better with each passing year.

2.3 Decline in Social and Professional Distance between Students and Examiners

2.3.1 Declining social distance

The general theory of a decline in social distance suggests a decline in respect for, or perhaps more accurately a decline in fear of, authority in Irish society. Coupled with this is a genuine social levelling, whereby the doctor and the patient, the teacher and the parent, the lecturer and the student are at less of a remove from each other than was formerly the case. This is certainly in part a function of more universal education. By and large the education gaps in society are no where near as wide as they were several decades ago.

The authority gap is nowadays less manifest and those with more and less power interact with a much greater sense of equality. In consequence, the exercise of role authority over another is now much more difficult in Irish society than it was some decades ago. Status or positional authority and power have had to give way to power derived from knowledge and expertise. Decisions will be accepted only if they can be justified. It is of course much easier to make negative or unpopular decisions about others if they will not challenge you and if you feel no obligation to justify yourself. It is also more emotionally discomfiting to have to upset someone in the exercise of your authority when the person affected is more proximate socially to you.

Lecturers have ample experience of this phenomenon with respect to their students. The social distance between the two groups has very palpably decreased over the last few decades. In many ways this makes for a more comfortable and relaxed teaching reality. However, lecturers are also responsible for grading students, a process that is frequently much less comfortable under current conditions. Awarding grades that are below student expectations is likely to court disapproval, a response that can and is

mediated with considerable impact under conditions of low social distance. It should be noted that lecturers rarely have much training in the assessment process and under pressure frequently do not feel the requisite sense of confidence in their grading judgements.

Furthermore, because of the pressure for student numbers and progression rates in third level institutions, many lecturers may feel that awarding inflated grades and thereby courting student approval is consistent with the institutional mission. A wholly inappropriate model of the lecturer/examiner student relationship has subtly emerged. Students are referred to as 'customers.' Lecturers are characterised as 'marketing' to them. The emphasis is on 'satisfying' or 'pleasing' the customer. The rights and entitlements of students may be emphasised over their obligations. Student feedback and evaluation of lecturers has been introduced. This latter initiative, in a more pernicious form than exists in Ireland, is widely credited as the main driving force for grade inflation in US third level colleges (Johnson, 2003; Leaf, 2003). Lecturers who inflate grades are rewarded by their students giving them positive evaluations and in the US, unlike in Ireland to date at least, such evaluations matter considerably for career progression.

In an increasingly competitive 'educational market' with students treated as customers to be courted, the message from institutional mangers to lecturers and examiners is no longer consistent with the maintenance of standards. Students are to be appeased and flattered, not examined objectively

2.3.2 Muddled aspirations of 'egalitarianism'

Associated with the cultural change whereby social distance has declined, there is another cultural strand that has taken firm hold in Ireland and elsewhere. It is a popular acceptance of what may be described as 'egalitarianism.' It encompasses the broad and highly diffuse, notion that all people are equal and manifests itself in a discomfort at any overt discussion of personal rank or status where, for example, one person is viewed as intellectually superior to another.

Even a rudimentary examination of children at primary level will reveal that vast intellectual gaps exist and that the filtering of all in the same direction towards an academic Leaving Certificate and on to an academic third level education is an injustice to a great many. The distinction between higher and ordinary level courses and even the experiment in the applied Leaving Certificate achieves little or nothing when the whole process is subservient to winning CAO points because in the end all must be equal. All must be able to

pursue an academic third level course. Before long it may be that all must get Degrees. We are fast headed there.

Of course in the hard nosed economic sphere no such pretence at equality is entertained and employers use whatever mechanisms they can to rank order the applicants for jobs and to rate their employees for the purposes of pay, promotion and for other economic purposes. Educationalists however are more affected by 'egalitarianism' and seem ever ready to clutch at quasi scientific theories that foster the idea that if only the educational and environmental circumstances were right then all students would learn equally well. This is the Pygmalion myth which states that in ability terms all humans are some how equal and that differences are amenable to elimination by the correct manipulation of environmental variables (Synderman and Rothman, 1988). In the educational context, the myth takes on the precise form that teaching can somehow be adjusted to educate successfully any student that appears within the system. There is, we are to believe, no such thing as a student who is not sufficiently intelligent to study for a Degree. One simply has to tap into his or her specific intelligence strengths, use the correct learning style in the educational process, apply the appropriate style of individually tailored assessment and you produce a top class graduate every time.

2.3.3 Adult students and social pressure

The increasing numbers of adult students in third level education is serving to exacerbate the lack of professional distance between examiners and those examined. Lecturers being adults naturally identify more with other adults than they generally do with school leavers. Professional ethics should dictate otherwise, but human nature may find it more difficult to fail an adult student who is perhaps much older than oneself and who has kept one abreast throughout the year of their personal trials and tribulations. Adult students are also better equipped to exert pressure on lecturers in subtle and not so subtle ways to award better grades.

3. Institutional Policy Choices and Grade Inflation

3.1 Background

This section considers the role of the third level institutions which are charged with the implementation of education policy. The institutions are affected by the social and economic changes examined above and they interpret these into particular policies and thereby make choices that are

integral to the framework of educational standards. Institutions also have their own individual expansionary objectives and we describe how this has impacted directly on education standards and has enabled grade inflation.

3.2 Institutional Objectives and Effectiveness

At third level, the impact of institutional growth and increased competition for students cannot be ignored. Organisations primarily serve their own ends and educational institutions can be relied upon to serve the broader needs of society only if they can be made answerable for not doing so. To render them answerable it must be possible to judge their contribution, to appraise the extent to which they are achieving the educational mission entrusted to them. This is where the difficulty arises and where grade inflation creates a distortion.

A primary measure of a third level institution (leaving research output aside) is its throughput of students. With the resources available to it, how many students does it educate and to what standard? It is generally assumed that an output of say five hundred Degree graduates at a certain mix of grades in one institution is equivalent to the same output in that institution if it occurred ten years previously or in another institution contemporaneously or previously. Grade inflation creates the appearance of equivalence while the underlying actuality is entirely different. There is however no available yardstick against which the public can evaluate the throughput of educational institutions. Doubts they may have, but there is little that can be done to gainsay the institutions' insistence that standards are being maintained.

3.3 Institutional Growth and Academic Standards

3.3.1 Investment and institutional growth

In the last twenty years there has been an enormous increase in investment in third level education, accompanied by a huge increase in course places available in all institutions. In the five years between 1995 and 2000, there was a massive 87% increase in government expenditure on third level education in Ireland (OECD, 2004, p14). The proportion of secondary school entrants completing the Leaving Certificate cycle increased from 70% in 1990 to 78% in 2000 (Department of Education and Science, 2000). At the same time, the proportion going forward to third level education has increased dramatically from 25% of the school leaving age cohort in 1986, to 36% by 1992, 44% by 1998 and 54% in 2003 (Higher Education Authority, 2005). The total number of full-time places at third level expanded from 86,624 in 1993 to 133,887 in 2003 with an additional 26,148 places added in

the Universities and an additional 18,913 places in the Institutes of Technology (Department of Education and Science, 2004).

Third level institutions vied with each other to fund larger campuses justified by their intake of more students each year and continuing upward projections for the future. Department of Education capital expenditure on third level education increased enormously since the early 1990s. In 1994 it stood at €45.3 m. In 1998 it approached €200m and remained in excess of €150m each year up to 2002. Since then it has dropped back substantially. In the five year period 1998-2002 a total of €898m was invested by the Department of Education and Science in capital projects at third level (Department of Education and Science, 2004). At the same time the Department of Health and Children invested €240m in the building of 13 new nursing schools within various Universities and Institutes of Technology to support the development of new Degree programmes.

In the headlong rush to growth no account was taken of the fact that as you admit an ever greater proportion of the Leaving Certificate cohort, which itself is an increasing proportion of those entering second level, the average ability of the student intake at third level necessarily declines. Much weaker students have to be admitted. In order to justify the increasing investment in capital and human resources (lecturers and administrators) and to reach the targets set for student intake on which those investments have been justified, it is necessary to admit large student numbers, retain them for as long as possible and to maximise the number graduating. This imperative entirely eclipsed the necessity to maintain educational standards.

3.3.2 The impact of 'professionalisation'

A growing trend of 'professionalisation' has assisted the growth of higher education institutions. More jobs are regarded as requiring Degree level qualifications as a preparation and an entry requirement. It is generally understood that only those more academically capable than average can be expected to make a competent doctor, engineer, accountant, lawyer or psychologist. Nobody would be happy to discover that individuals of very mediocre ability were diagnosing their illnesses. A Degree qualification for such professions is expected to require a level of ability commensurate with those intellectually demanding and important jobs. In simple terms, the good of society requires that a Degree should not be a debased currency obtainable by people of weaker ability.

If society then defines that work in the past that was carried out by those who were not educated to Degree standard should now require such an increased level of education, as has happened in the fields of nursing and

social care, then it has in effect decided that this work should now be restricted to people of above average academic ability. This 'professionalisation' of careers is legitimate where it is deemed that the demands of the job and its importance to society have changed to such an extent that a shift of scarce resources – intellectually talented people – to that career area is warranted. Above average talent is always by definition a finite and relatively scarce resource and what is devoted to one activity is denied another. There will always be a limited number of individuals in society capable of meeting the demands of certain professions. The danger is that grade inflation can degrade standards such that it becomes possible to 'professionalise' more and more careers, and to enable ever more students to graduate with Degrees without it becoming apparent that a talent shortage is emerging.

To the extent that society has been under utilising its talent pool, 'professionalisation' can continue without talent shortages. But, as the proportion of the population with Degrees increases, inevitably at some point traditional standards have to be dropped to fill the Degree places since all those with the old standard of ability are accounted for and more are needed. At some point 'professionalisation' becomes an illusion whereby grade inflation is used to make up the difference between the number of Degree candidates wanted and the number with the innate ability to attain a Degree. It appears that this point has been passed in Ireland. It is a reality not only true of Degree qualifications but also of the Leaving Certificate.

3.3.3 Mission change in Institutes of Technology

There is ample evidence of high levels of grade inflation throughout both the Institute of Technology and the University sectors in Ireland (O'Grady and Guilfoyle 2007a, 2007b). Though most of the dynamics described in this paper apply equally to either sector, there are a number of factors that are specific to Institutes of Technology.

The Institutes of Technology (originally the Regional Technical Colleges) were set up in the late nineteen sixties to fill a gap in the provision of third level education. Their mission was to educate to technician level, as opposed to graduate or professional level, a cohort of motivated students who in the main did not have the aptitude to undertake a Degree course at a University. The development of industry in Ireland required considerable numbers of such trained technicians, mainly in the scientific and engineering fields. In the late eighties and early nineteen nineties when the number of second level students was increasing, the Institutes of Technology shifted their focus to the provision of Diploma and Degree courses. The total number of National Certificate graduates across the Institutes of Technology (excluding Dublin

Institute of Technology) increased by less than one third between 1994 and 2004 but the number of Degree graduates increased by six times (O'Grady , 2007). It appears that the reasons for this shift derived in the main from the logic within all organisations that vies for institutional growth. Becoming bigger and expanding the scope of activities is an irresistible objective. One obvious way for the Institutes of Technology to achieve this was to retain students for longer by offering them the opportunity to pursue Degrees of three to five years duration rather than the traditional two year Certificate programme. In that way, the institutions would expand and at the same time extend their remit into the Degree territory traditionally held by the Universities. Many of the Institutes of Technology also aspired towards attaining University status. The lure of institutional growth and the status of University designation beckoned.

This expansionary mission was also encouraged by government and society. There were perceived electoral rewards for politicians who could be associated with large capital and staff investments in the institutions in their constituencies. In provincial towns, an expanded third level institution has a very substantial impact on the local economy. Colleges provide secure and well paid employment adding to local purchasing power and students spend considerable funds on local services.

3.3.4 The Institutes of Technology and the 'ladder' system of awards

In the Institutes of Technology, a ladder system of awards was used whereby students enrolled on a two year National Certificate course (now a higher Certificate) and upon achievement of a merit threshold could then progress to a Diploma award (now an ordinary Degree) and then to a subsequent Honour's Degree programme. The ladder system set quality thresholds of academic achievement that had to be attained in order to progress from Certificate to Diploma and on to Degree level. The quality threshold for progression to Diploma and Degree programmes required the achievement of a merit grade of 60% in the prior qualification. The benefit of the ladder system derived from the fact that access to an Institute of Technology was more attractive for students of modest means. Unlike in the University sector, there were no tuition fees and maintenance grants were more easily obtained. Students capable of aspiring towards a Degree could achieve their aspirations through the Institutes of Technology which for financial reasons they could not achieve through the Universities. In addition, students of ability who failed to prove themselves at second level and win the points to enter University Degree courses had, due to the lower points for entry to a National Certificate course, two further years in which to demonstrate their real ability.

The difficulty with the ladder system of awards was that National Certificate courses came to serve two conflicting purposes. On the one hand a National Certificate was a system of training and education for those with a level of ability below that required for a Degree and was focused on the teaching of applied skills at technician level. However, a National Certificate course also had to serve as the first two years of a Degree. If the problem was simply one of quantity, the four years overall to obtain a Degree might well have been sufficient but the problem was more a qualitative one. How was such a diversity of student ability and their disparate needs to be served together? It appears that the Degree award was given precedence and the content of National Certificate courses was 'academised' so as to include subjects more akin to a Degree programme and with much of the applied and practical focus lost.

3.3.5 The removal of the quality thresholds for progression

The reduction in the ability mix among students entering National Certificate courses (a product of digging ever deeper into the ability barrel coming through from second level) resulted in lower proportions who were capable of attaining the quality threshold for progression to Diploma and Degree programmes. The Institute of Technology sector was increasingly focused towards the provision of Degree programmes rather than National Certificates and there were significant pressures for institutional growth. With substantial additional government investment in capital and staff budgets available the Institutes prioritised the expansion of Degree programmes as the key to their future growth. However, the quality threshold for progression was a barrier to institutional expansion and the Institutes lobbied the Higher Educational Training and Awards Council (formerly the National Council for Educational Awards) for a downgrading of the quality threshold. In 1998, the Higher Educational Training and Awards Council cast aside the logic of the ladder system of awards and the quality threshold for progression was significantly downgraded. This process continued until the threshold concept was largely dispensed with in 2003 (O'Grady, 2007). In light of the fact that the grades achieved before the disintegration of the quality threshold were already severely inflated (O'Grady and Guilfoyle, 2007a), the disintegration of the quality threshold represented a very low standard indeed.

If academic standards had been maintained, then the lowering of the minimum CAO points for initial entry as the supply of more capable students dried up coupled with the downgrading of the progression threshold would have resulted in an increased failure and drop out rate and might have rendered the whole process untenable. The only possible mechanism for

squaring the circle was grade inflation. In that way, failure rates could be maintained at acceptable levels and the retention and progression rates high enough to support rapid institutional growth. Institutions have a powerful motive to encourage grade inflation and to avoid robust academic standards.

3.4 Other Institutional Pressures

3.4.1 Adverse demographic changes

Demographic changes made a bad situation worse. Just when third level institutions had gone through a process of unprecedented growth, the number of students coming through from second level began to decline. In 1994, 64,034 candidates sat the Leaving Certificate but this had fallen to 58,742 in 2004 (Department of Education and Science, 2004). Institutions with vastly increased course places are now chasing a declining population. This is leading to additional pressures to further drop minimum course entry points thus admitting even weaker students. It is also leading to an urgent search for alternative students in the shape of returning adults and students from overseas. While the anecdotal evidence to date suggests that both of these new classes of students are in the main academically stronger than average, this is not always the case, nor is there any guarantee that the trend will continue in this vein.

At present, given that there is little in the way of funding to support adults returning to third level education, it typically takes quite a deal of ability and motivation to take such a step. If funding should improve and the numbers grow, since no real account is taken of academic ability in admitting such students onto courses, it is inevitable that increasingly returning adults will lack the basic ability to pursue third level education. In the face of this, judging by their track records, institutions will simply further degrade standards to conceal the reality of what is taking place and to maintain student numbers. Already there are signs of a drift in this direction. As the number of adults coming onto certain courses has grown in recent years, it is becoming increasingly apparent that ability wise they are a very heterogeneous group. Clearly some are being admitted that lack the requisite educational ability and their success is entirely a testimony to the remarkable elasticity of educational standards.

As for overseas students, similar dangers lie ahead. If by happenstance, they are high performers, as seems to be the general pattern to date, then they exert an effect that is counter to grade inflation. The problem is that institutions are not selective and if weak foreign students should enter the system in significant numbers, then further grade inflation is inevitable.

3.4.2 Variations in competitive pressures

In 1992, maintenance grants provided through the European Social Fund became means tested and this placed students attending Institutes of Technology on a par with those attending Universities with respect to the maintenance grants system. The Institutes of Technology thus lost a significant competitive advantage in attracting capable students who otherwise might have gone to University. In 1995, the government abolished tuition fees in the Universities and the remaining financial attraction of the Institutes over the Universities was eliminated.

In the battle for students, some third level institutions have fared much better than others and within institutions there are differences across courses and disciplines. By and large, the Universities are under less pressure than the Institutes of Technology. Universities with higher status courses and reputations tend to attract the lions share of the more academically capable students. Universities have never sought to draw their students in through low CAO point National Certificate courses. Over the last decade the majority of University courses have had minimum points' thresholds exceeding 400. Only a few percent of courses, even ab initio Honour's Degree courses, in the Institutes of Technology have ever required points of over 400 (O'Grady and Guilfoyle, 2007a, 2007b). In a competition for numbers the pinch is first felt in the Institutes. It is they who have to dig deeper in the ability barrel to fill course places.

Universities are, however, not immune from competitive pressures, though some such as Dublin City University have on occasions deliberately sought to protect standards by refusing to drop minimum entry points for courses even when they could not fill all available places from among the CAO applicants. Where course places are few and the applicants many and talented, courses remain largely immune from the competitive pressures towards grade inflation. Medicine, dentistry, architecture, and veterinary science, to name a few courses, are as yet under no competitive pressures. The paucity of course places compared with the enduring popularity of those courses ensures that this remains the case. This however is true of only a limited number of courses and the dangers of competition also besets the Universities as the figures on grade inflation clearly illustrate (O'Grady and Guilfoyle, 2007b).

4. The Operation of the Grading Process at Third Level

4.1 Background

Grades awarded should be a faithful representation of student performance but grade inflation creates a distortion that masks the reality of student performance and misleads the stakeholders in education. Grades can lose contact with real performance only if the process by which they are arrived at facilitates this distortion. If grades derived from objective measuring devices like weighing scales or thermometers, then no external pressures could alter the meaning of grades and they would be immune to the inflationary pressures discussed above. Grades in contrast are arrived at through a socially constructed process. It is a process that is open to subjectivity and to subtle revisions of the yardstick as time passes. While a kilogram remains a kilogram, unfortunately a percent does not necessarily retain any constant meaning from place to place or time to time. Considerable effort is required to ensure it does and it is possible to sustain standards reasonably well but the pressures, as we have outlined here, are in the contrary direction. The following section evaluates the operation of the grading process at third level and reveals how grade inflation actually emerges within the parameters and metrics of the grading system.

4.2 Variable Course Content and Coverage

4.2.1 The subject syllabus and variations

At second level, there is a separation of powers so that teaching and the conduct of the state examinations such as the Leaving Certificate are not carried out by the same persons, leastwise not with respect to any given student. While the separation of powers at Leaving Certificate level seems to have been unable to prevent grade inflation, it is still a very powerful mechanism for ensuring fairness between students from wherever they come and whatever subjects they study. In third level institutions a key feature is that (with a few exceptions) a lecturer teaches the course, devises the assessments and grades the results. The subject lecturer has in principle a great deal of autonomy and professional freedom and is not bound by a uniform national syllabus.

The content of a particular course is set out in a subject syllabus which is drawn up at the commencement of the course by one or more lecturers and is revised periodically. The detail and specificity of syllabi vary considerably

depending largely on the predilections of the authors. Lecturers who favour clarity about what should be taught are likely to write more detailed accounts of what should be covered. Those who favour a more laizzez faire approach may only write a few headings or phrases to describe what is meant to be taught or learned in that subject. There are review panels consisting of academics from other institutions and experts from other organisations who review the syllabi but this does not seem to prevent great variation in specificity.

4.2.2 Syllabus discretion and the impact on course coverage and quality

A subject lecturer has a high degree of flexibility to interpret the syllabus as he or she wishes. A very great deal of interpretation is called for in many cases because of the way they are written but, even where syllabi are relatively precise, different lecturers may interpret the content in such varying ways that it is hardly the same course at all that is being taught. Large elements may be omitted, additional material brought in, areas heavily emphasised, other areas minimally treated and so on. The academic level at which the syllabus is interpreted is also open to highly varying treatment. Headings on a syllabus will suggest that an issue be covered but at what level of depth or superficiality is the choice of the lecturer.

Where the student cohort admitted to a course is weakening, lecturers who insist on maintaining a constant interpretation of syllabi over time experience higher failure rates and poorer grade patterns. Some lecturers may teach a much more simplified version of the syllabus than formerly, because to maintain a standard would result in very high failure rates in a class of academically weak and unmotivated students. With the best will in the world, conscientious lecturers who wish to resist grade inflation may find that their pace of delivery is restricted alarmingly by the inability of students to follow what is being explained. They are required to slow down the delivery of material in an effort to keep the weaker members of the class abreast. In consequence only a fraction of the syllabus is covered over the course of a semester or a year. The lecturer sets an examination which only assesses a significantly reduced fraction of the syllabus. This results in a serious decline in course coverage and quality.

A transparent approach to making courses easier both in quantitative and qualitative terms would involve explicitly simplifying syllabi at the drafting stage and reducing the content and level of the material so that it is appropriate to the ability of the students enrolled. However, the institutional desire to maintain the appearance of standards is contrary to this approach.

4.3 The Examinations Process and Grade Inflation

4.3.1 Examiners and the monitoring process

An examination is set by the subject lecturer who is also the internal examiner. Sometimes there are complexities where a subject paper may need to be set by two or more lecturers working together. A marking scheme is also devised by the internal examiner. The examination papers are reviewed in advance by external examiners who are required to ensure that the examination paper is sound, is a reasonable sample of the syllabus and has a fair marking scheme. External examiners are typically academics drawn from other third level institutions.

The quality and value of such marking schemes varies greatly. Some are comprehensive schemes for the awarding of marks, designed to limit subjectivity and enhance the reliability of the marking process. Others are no more than a brief list of some broad areas which may be taken into account in an undefined way when allocating marks. There appears to be a laissez faire culture surrounding marking schemes and frequently external examiners do not seek greater clarity and are content to allow the internal examiner decide how marks will be awarded.

Frequently external examiners cover a number of subjects on the same course. They are course examiners, not subject examiners. This is a deficiency in the monitoring process as such an external examiner may have no expertise in some of the subjects for which they are responsible.

4.3.2 Examination papers: variations in standards

A deal of latitude is admissible in the setting of examination papers and this can lead to substantial variations in standards even in subjects within the same course. Whereas one paper may require students to do no more than describe quite simple material another subject paper for the same year of the same course may demand application, evaluation and synthesis of knowledge. Apart from the demands of individual questions, there are other major sources of variation from paper to paper. The number and choice of questions can vary greatly. Seven or eight questions are common, from which four or five must be attempted. In other cases, there is a requirement to attempt four out of five questions and sometimes there is no choice at all. The greater the choice available on a paper the smaller the proportion of the syllabus a student has to achieve a command of in order to stand a good chance of passing or even doing excellently. More choice equals more grade inflation, all other things being equal.

4.3.3 Predictable examination questions and 'hints'

Any mechanism that allows students to predict which topics will appear among the questions on an examination paper undermines the validity of the examination process. This may arise from topics and questions being predictable from year to year. It may also arise from subtle or not so subtle 'hints' given by lecturers as to the topics they favour or as to what is likely to appear on the paper.

If information about an examination paper is revealed in advance to students then a syllabus of a given size is reduced to a fraction of that. Furthermore, having foreknowledge of the questions or the topic areas to be examined encourages students to learn by rote pre prepared answers. Such rote learning bypasses the core meaning of learning which is to gain a personal understanding of the material. In its place there is put a mechanical process of transferring mentally undigested words, phrases and sentences from one place (students' notes) to another (examination scripts).

While it is very difficult to establish definitively, we are in no doubt that predictable examination papers play a major role in grade inflation. External examiners may be unable to detect anything amiss. They are expected to scrutinise a sample of scripts from across the performance range, together with a compilation of all students' marks in that subject, so as to verify that the marking is consistent and of a reasonable standard in keeping with that applied in other institutions at that level. Nothing they see will reveal the true state of affairs. The questions will seem fine; the syllabus may appear to be well covered; the responses will seem reasonable and the profile of marks may well seem to reflect the standard of performance evinced in the scripts. On the face of it, the standard of performance may be quite high. Without an independent probing of student command of material, there is nothing to indicate that all that is attested to is students' ability to rote learn a limited volume of material without necessarily any real understanding of that material and with little or no grasp of the syllabus as a whole.

Institutions may well have rules prohibiting such practices as are described here but there is no will to police or implement those rules. As already explained, the entire organisational culture is likely to work in the opposite direction.

4.3.4 Inflationary examination marking

As we suggested above, the quality of marking schemes varies widely. Less precision in marking schemes allows more latitude for examiners, so motivated, to inflate marks. Higher marks may be awarded for lower levels of

effort and omissions and deficiencies can be ignored. Consistency is replaced by subjectivity. Obvious floors below which marks do not fall and skewed distribution of grades hint strongly at inflation. The only challenge to such examiners is to ensure some degree of relativity.

There may also be variations in the actual standard of learning expected by examiners of students at different levels. This refers to what depth of grasp should be achieved, to the qualitative as opposed to the quantitative dimension. For example, it is clearly to be expected that graduates at an Honour's Degree level will have a more academic and in-depth command of their subject area than those at Ordinary Degree level. When application, synthesis and evaluation are demanded in addition to knowledge and comprehension, intellectually weaker candidates pushed forward by the grade inflated system show little ability to cope. Examiners who ignore those crucial academic distinctions between low level and higher level learning and who reward students in Degree examinations for simple regurgitation of material committed to memory inflate the grades awarded.

Unlike predictable questions, external examiners should be able to rectify the problem of marking subjectively through rose-tinted glasses and the problem of inappropriately low level learning expectations. However, external examiners very frequently come from equivalent institutions and are therefore inculcated in the acceptance of poor standards. They may frequently encourage, not discourage, grade inflation, presumably because that reflects their own examining practices and that of their own institutions. They may also be responsible for a number of institutions, subjects, internal examiners and student scripts and they are expected to conduct review work in a very restricted time frame after examinations.

More than anything the external examination system stands testimony to the deficiencies of internal regulation within any system that is driven by competing priorities. Student throughput has trumped academic standards as the priority. We have explained the reasons above. External examiners are insiders, victims like internal examiners of the common ills that assail the system. They are part of the problem, not the cure. In fairness, there are exceptions to this general rule but the trend is quite the opposite. As grades have climbed over the years against the backdrop of weaker student cohorts and CAO points being more plentifully obtained, external examiners have detected nothing amiss. They have in the main been cheer leaders for the whole grade inflation enterprise.

4.3.5 The board of examiners and upward grade alterations

The final results for each student are decided by a board of examiners which usually includes the internal subject examiners and the heads of academic function of the particular institution. External examiners may also be in attendance but this practice varies significantly. The board of examiners reviews the subject grades assigned to each student by each internal examiner as agreed with the external examiner. The subject marks are then aggregated into an overall result in accordance with the awards system of the particular institution.

For example, to obtain a pass result a student must obtain 40% in all subjects. However, there is a margin of leniency allowed whereby marks in subjects between 35% and 39% are amenable to compensation. This is admissible where the student in his or her passing subjects has a surplus of marks over 40% that equals double the number of marks required to achieve a pass in the failing subjects. One highly inflated set of subject marks can provide ample opportunity to compensate in other subjects, therefore.

A board of examiners has discretion to alter the marks achieved by any student and the practice of revising upwards individual subject grades is widespread. For example, grades between 36-39% are frequently altered to appear as 40% and grades of 30%-34% altered to 35% to allow for compensation. Examiners may also be requested to increase subject grades in order to increase the overall average result to the thresholds required for honours awards.

Grade alterations are agreed by a majority vote of the board of examiners and the grades in a subject may therefore be increased despite the misgivings of the subject examiner who graded the examinations. Considerable pressure for grade alterations may be exerted by institutional managers and from other examiners who desire inflated results. It is very rare for grades to be lowered in this process and it is unlikely that examiners who submit inflated grades will be the focus of attention. There is little public knowledge about this process as it is carried out in private and is not recorded in the final results issued.

Paper 3 in this series (O'Grady, 2007) furnishes an informative account of how the rules governing the award and grading of qualifications by the National Council for Educational Awards (now the Higher Educational Training and Awards Council) were manipulated since 1990 to significantly lower the academic demands on students. For a very significant block of qualifications, not only were the rules amenable to interpretation in a manner conducive to grade inflation, the rules themselves were continually

revised so as to facilitate the slide in standards by the very organisation charged with their protection.

4.3.6 The self sustaining nature of grade inflation

Attention has been drawn by researchers elsewhere to the insidious capacity of grade inflation to quickly achieve a self sustaining momentum (Rosovsky and Hartley, 2002). There are at least two separate factors that contribute to this dynamic. Firstly there is the manner in which students are influenced by feedback within the educational system, as indeed they should, in their decisions about how much effort to invest. The most direct and influential sources of feedback are, of course, marks and grades obtained in assessments both by themselves and by others. Having realised that good results can be attained for mediocre performance, they drop their efforts commensurately. This further diminishes the quality of performance and lecturers, anxious to maintain pass rates and grade profiles, drop their performance expectations even further which then leads to another round of performance decline and standards debasement.

A further reason why grade inflation is self sustaining has to do with the inevitable tendency of examiners to benchmark their standards against each other. When one examiner employs the various techniques described above to maintain a grade profile in the face of weaker and less motivated students, it encourages others to do likewise. Soon a new norm is established. It is a process analogous to that which sparks wage inflation in a local bargaining situation. One group wins an increase which raises expectations among others who demand similar or greater increases and very quickly wage expectation norms are altered. Before long only a minority of examiners are maintaining the original standard and are quickly isolated as having excessive expectations or, more perniciously, as being in some way deficient in doing their jobs due to their students' higher failure rates and poorer grade profiles. Particularly where there are powerful institutional pressures to maintain student throughput, only the very conscientious and conformity resistant examiners may withstand the pressure to inflate.

This benchmarking process can be expected to hold true not just among examiners but among disciplines, institutions and even from country to country.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

It appears that grades are increasingly regarded as elastic and are not seen as being arrived at in an objective way but as being the product of a social norm about what grades should be. That social norm dictates that grades

should ensure a high level of throughput and stand as a testimony to the continuing 'success' of the system.

Social and economic changes have influenced educational policy and the demand for universal education has led to a huge increase in the proportion of students that progress to third level. This has led to the admission of much weaker cohorts of students which should have resulted in a decline in the grades achieved in third level awards. It is striking that the opposite has in fact occurred but the evidence shows that grade inflation is the mechanism that was used to mask the reality of a decline in performance.

Within the third level institutions which are charged with the implementation of education policy, it appears that growth and expansion was accorded priority over academic standards. The shift towards the provision of academic Degrees for all award levels and the dismantling of technician level qualifications increased student numbers but accentuated the gap between the weakening student cohort and the courses undertaken. More recent demographic changes have increased the 'competition' for students and furthered the organisational pressures that are prevalent within third level institutions.

Weaknesses in the operation of the third level examinations and grading process have enabled and legitimised the grade inflation drift. A very high degree of flexibility over the content of courses and the grading process enables the inflation of grades by a variety of mechanisms. It is the individual academics and other educational professionals who are involved in this process at this level.

It is striking that grade inflation is not a serious concern to those within third level institutions and the bodies charged with maintaining academic standards. Educational policy seems to have evolved in response to social and institutional demands with a laissez faire approach towards consistent academic standards. The growth and throughput imperatives have eclipsed the necessity to maintain standards in education. Unless there is a determined and concerted effort to stem the grade inflation tide by regaining some objective standard against which grades are benchmarked, an unrelenting decline in the value and meaning of qualifications is assured.

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