



Quality Compass



International perspectives on degree classification profiles - is it an issue around the world?

July 2022

Welcome to the fourth edition of Quality Compass – QAA’s publication that aims to look more closely at current topics and help you navigate and respond to future challenges and potential opportunities. This issue focuses on international perspectives on degree classification and explores how international quality assurance communities have approached the rise in top grades in recent years. Links can be made between this edition and other [QAA resources for external examining, outcomes-based approaches to learning and assessment, and academic misconduct](#).

We view a Quality Compass as a conversation-starter, linked to our wider membership offer. We are keen to engage with you and provide the opportunity to share your thoughts and practices. If you would like to contribute to future editions or respond to anything we have covered in this issue, please do get in touch at membership@qaa.ac.uk

About this paper



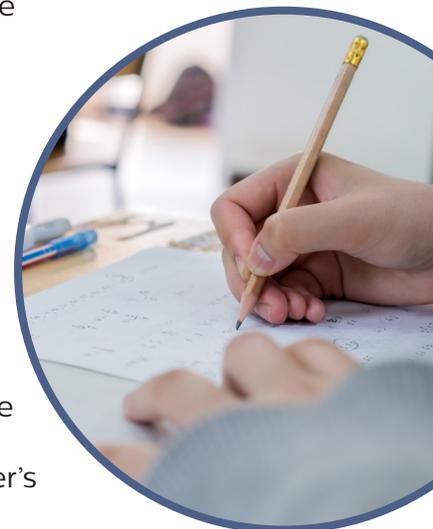
Unchecked, grade inflation will undermine the reputation of the entire UK HE sector, creating a dangerous impression of slipping standards, undermining the efforts of those who work hard for their qualifications and poorly serving the needs of employers.

***Jo Johnson, Minister for Universities,
UUK Annual Conference, September 2017***

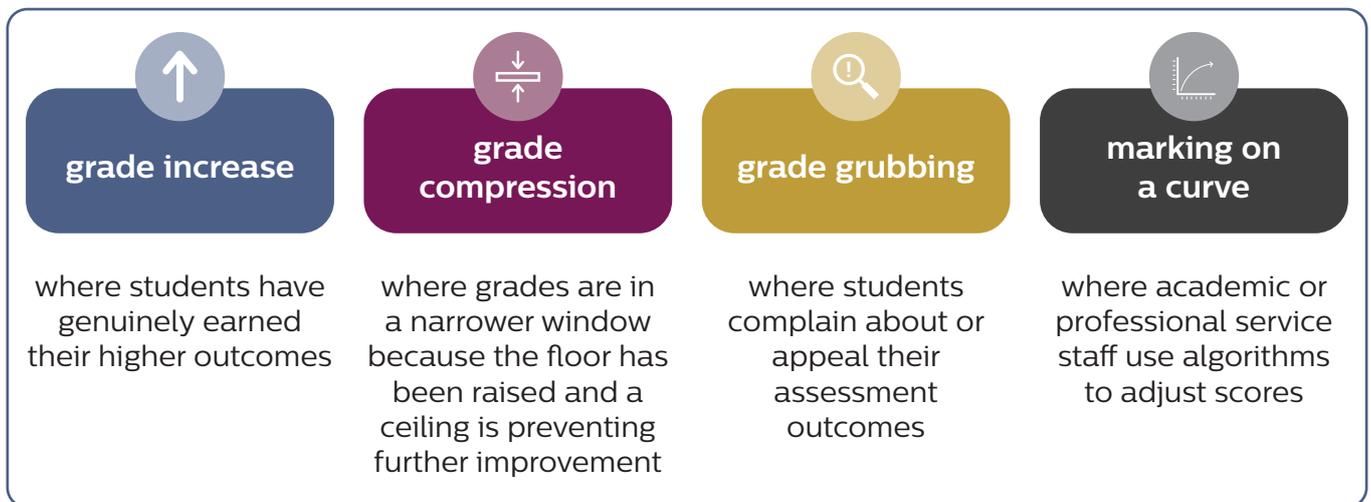


The year-on-year rise in student grades and degree classifications over an extended period of time has become the subject of much debate and discussion in higher education policy and practice (Rosovsky and Hartley, 2020). Often shortened to the term ‘grade inflation’, this debate has seen media commentators, governments and policy groups weigh in on the merits or otherwise of this increase in awards at the top end of student performance, usually interpreted as a ‘first’ or upper second (2:1) on the UK degree classification system.

In 2019, the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment published a [Statement of Intent](#) with the aim of helping higher education providers maintain transparent, reliable and fair outcomes for degree classifications, including embedding degree classification criteria within institutional [Teaching Excellence Framework](#) assessments. We also have Ray Bachan’s analysis of [drivers for degree classifications](#) and Simon Baker’s discussion of [worldwide trends](#).



But what are other countries and nations doing around the world? In this Quality Compass we discuss emerging issues concerning the rise in student grades based on a sample of 14 nations, with the USA dominating the research literature. We explore how countries or individual providers are developing strategies for responding to challenges associated with 'grade inflation' and adjacent topics characterised in the literature as:



Our data and insight is drawn from a number of sources, including:

- formally defined higher education quality assurance policy or guidance
- academic peer reviewed research output
- blog-based discussions of 'grade inflation' within academic communities.

What are some of the key issues?

Our evidence base highlights a series of issues surrounding the rise in grades at the top end, both positive and negative, including:

- drawing firm conclusions when there are **data limitations**
- popular interest in higher education **standards** and grade inflation **league tables**
- balancing **institutional autonomy** with state or country-wide **regulation**
- evaluating the **better student hypothesis**
- determining the impact of **student satisfaction with teaching** on the awarding of grades
- recognising changes in the use of **assessment algorithms**
- tracking **online support** and **no-detriment assessment policies** during the pandemic
- exploring **policy silence** within quality assurance agencies
- considering links to **diversity and inclusion** within higher education
- **assessment continuity** across secondary and higher education sectors
- analysing the accuracy of **student recruitment and marketing information**
- challenges posed for **undergraduate and postgraduate admissions**
- **employer requests for more information** about the quality of graduates
- **divided academic and professional services communities**
- **ungrading alternatives.**

A word of caution

There are difficulties in trying to paint a big picture for the rise in grades around the world because:

- grades can be defined in different ways – for example, degree classifications and grade point averages (GPAs) – making it difficult to make comparisons between countries
- incomplete statistical databases can prevent robust comparisons of student achievement across cohorts or between institutions
- access to grade information can be inconsistent when some providers do not provide public data about final attainment outcomes of their graduates.

A hot topic

The rise in student grades has often been linked in the media with falling standards and more lenient marking in specific subject areas. Most authors point to a growing global trend, with terms like ‘rampant’ ‘remarkable’ and ‘rife’ being found in the literature.

In the years since the term was first coined, ‘grade inflation’ has morphed from being an object of academic inquiry to the subject of widespread, and often heated, political and media debate.

[Quality and Qualifications Ireland, 2019](#)

There is widespread recognition of the UK and USA as leaders in this rise influencing international markets. With all of these causal factors, the major emerging headline is the student-as-a-consumer: an individual who is now paying higher fees, and who in return expects more quality and attainment leading to better career trajectories. Furthermore, this rise can be attributed to funding methodologies that use student attainment data to reward institutions.

One commentator from the Queen’s University Medical School Ontario highlights a ‘virtuous cycle’ of course, programme and institution profiting from higher grades attracting student applicants and providers becoming more competitive for graduate studies and eventual employment.

Four disadvantages are also identified with ‘grade inflation’:



devaluation

where the value of degrees and diplomas decreases



unfairness

where the genuine top students ‘get lost’ within the much larger top grade categories



deception

where students are being given incorrect information about their abilities and skills which could lead to career choices or postgraduate studies that are inappropriate



uncertainty

with employers disappointed with the performance of graduates

Or is it more effective student engagement?

Improved student attainment – rather than ‘grade inflation’ per se – has also been linked with better student engagement (Heulett, 2013; Cote and Allahar, 2011). This includes increased support by academic staff for the student experience, improved student representation, and greater responsiveness by staff to requests for clarifying assessment criteria. Indeed, in the USA such empathy dates back to when a first wave of support emerged through academic staff supporting students who were veterans from the Vietnam war drafts during 1969–1975 (Rojstaczer, 2015).

Direct connections between student engagement and ‘grade inflation’ are also made within our evidence base, including:

- students choosing less challenging assessment methods
- students choosing courses with reputations for giving higher average grades
- minimising student complaints and ‘student nuisance’ through awarding higher marks.

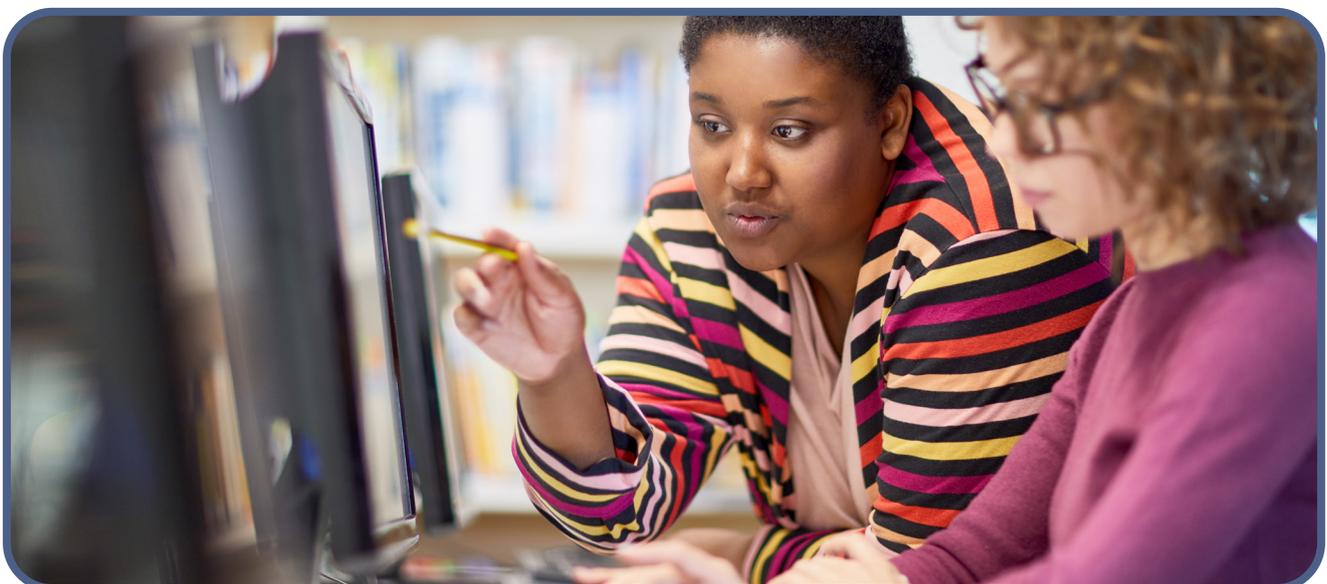
The ‘better student’ hypothesis has, however, been refuted by researchers in the USA and Turkey. This literature includes comparing results from tests having the same levels of difficulty, used repeatedly year-after-year, and with confirmed significant rise in grading. Adding to this argument are that:

- students are spending less rather than more time on their studies
- standardised assessment test scores and secondary school data from USA and Turkey have either remained stable or declined over the same time period, implying that new undergraduates do not arrive with more advanced skills as compared with previous cohorts
- the expansion of higher education in recent years has led to larger classes with an overall relative decrease in funding for learning and teaching resources.

The use of SETs

[Berezvai et al \(2021\)](#) investigated the impact of student evaluations of teaching (SETs) at two Hungarian universities, where SET surveys are completed after final grades have been disclosed to students. They found significant positive correlations between higher evaluations and increased grades and advise that grades should only be disclosed after SETs have been completed.

Authors from the USA, Germany, Hungary and Turkey also point to the possibility that higher grades may on occasions be awarded by staff who are seeking tenured appointments.



Assessment and the pandemic as key factors

Changed assessment practices have attracted much international attention when it comes to exploring the reasons for 'grade inflation'. Evidence from Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Germany and the USA points to the use of 'soft marking', 'inflated norms' and 'marking on a curve'. Awareness of disparities with assessment practices has led to benchmarking and catch-up by providers with lower overall grade averages in order to boost their own student recruitment and improve the international employability prospects of their graduates. These procedures raise the issue of corporate decision making influencing assessment judgements by academics, with the top-down imposition of new grading policies and algorithms being highlighted in research from Canada, Turkey, and the international CHEA network's analysis of corruption in higher education (Karadag, 2021; Cote and Allahar, 2011; CHEA, 2019).

The potential impact of changing digital technology on assessment is also a key area for research. In Germany, the administrative effect of moving paper-based records and systems to digital databases has been recognised, thereby making it easier to compare student achievement within and between disciplines, sectors, institutions and countries (McGrory and Muller-Benedict, 2017). More recent work has investigated online delivery during the pandemic, with evidence of grade increases being documented in New Zealand (AQA), Turkey and Hong Kong (Matear, 2021; Karadag, 2021).

A research team involving [UK and Sri Lanka](#) academics has charted the potential impact of the pandemic on student achievement through the use of no-detriment assessment procedures, the use of pass/fail outcomes rather than grades, re-taking assessment without academic penalties, using open-book examinations, and changing degree classification algorithms.

As noted by Universities Australia, TEQSA and AQA New Zealand, a key priority involves developing a knowledge base for student achievement following more flexibility with the use of deadlines, aegrotats (where the student is deemed too ill to take an assessment) and new special grades based on disruption caused by the COVID pandemic.

[Gonzalez et al \(2020\)](#) compared before-and-after grades for three online courses at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, using the same assessment criteria and methods. Increases in student achievement over the previous 18 months were noted, although these researchers warn against assuming that this means 'grade inflation' per se. Instead, grade increases can be linked to the novelty of lockdown, absence of any earlier reference points, the priority to ensure that the academic year would be completed successfully, and the presence of a frightening and challenging global scenario that lead to intrinsic motivation to engage in higher education as both a distraction and a crusade.



Policy recognition

So how do various quality assurance bodies interpret the rise in grades at the top end? While the topic is debated by numerous individual academic authors around the world, our snapshot reveals no **explicit** equivalents to the UK statement of intent when it comes to published material from overarching national or international quality assurance frameworks. There is, however, extensive **implicit** evidence of concern about ‘grade inflation’, with examples including:

- Quality and Qualifications Ireland’s [Green Paper on Assessment](#), and a QQI [Insight publication](#) analysing award classifications over the period 2012–17. Both resources refer to the importance of introducing a system for audit and monitoring in order to help institutions move towards more self-regulation
- Universities Australia expectation for providers calibrating and benchmarking grade distributions in their academic quality frameworks
- AQA New Zealand valuing the use of externality and benchmarking, with New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) introducing Consistency Reviews to help providers and stakeholders compare graduates
- Action points from accreditation reports for individual providers reviewed by the Hong Kong Council for Accreditation, the Australian TEQSA, the Ontario Universities Council, and the US Department of Education - all of which recognise the importance of ensuring comparability of grades within their respective higher education sectors.

As might be expected, when it comes to more implicit considerations of ‘grade inflation’, all of the quality frameworks sampled in this study emphasise the value of externality and the monitoring of student achievement, although there appears to be very little explicit guidance for external examiners about guarding against ‘grade inflation’ per se.

In Ireland, QQI recognises the possible impact of external examiners from another country effectively importing grade inflation:

What constitutes a ‘good degree’ can also depend, at least in part, on the discipline and the institution awarding the degree. These change over time within the community of practice, particularly through the work of external examiners. Irish HEIs often draw their external examiners from the UK and so we may well be importing some of our inflation from the league table pressures there.

***The QQI View - Do We Need to Talk About Grade Inflation?
Quality and Qualifications Ireland, page 1***

Notable by its absence is any explicit discussion of potential ‘grade inflation’ within international quality assurance partnerships that explore assessment issues, based on a search of QAA TNE, ENQA and Erasmus documentation.

Furthermore, there is no direct guidance or case study material in the good practice guide for the [cross-border sharing of quality assurance in higher education](#) that was published by the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC), the American Council on Education (ACE), the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), and the International Association of Universities (IAU).

Consequences of the rise in grades

Positive impact	Negative impact
<p>Strengthening diversity and inclusion, with USA researchers arguing for more disadvantaged students being more confident of success and more protected from any public exposure about lower achievement rates through faculty staff avoiding any use of C grades (Greason, 2020; Vedder, 2020).</p> <p>Improved learner motivation and wellbeing, especially during the pandemic, including the effective use of no-detriment assessment policies with examples from Spain and Australia (QAA, 2020; Gonzalez et al, 2020).</p> <p>More consistency between education sectors - for example, Canadian researchers have noted that universities continue with the earlier rewarding of raised expectations established in secondary schools (Volante and DeLuca, 2018).</p> <p>Increased postgraduate enrolments, as noted in New Zealand (Gunn and Kapade, 2018).</p> <p>Additional information for employers in order to demonstrate graduate skills and achievement, with examples including the use of 'masterpieces' and portfolios in the USA, the creation by the Groningen Declaration of a digital qualifications database, and the provision of additional information about how individual students perform in comparison to the rest of their learning cohort (Denning et al, 2021; Leef, 2021).</p>	<p>In New Zealand and Canada, the devaluation of degrees and a 'degrading' of qualifications have been discussed, while in the USA the lowering of standards in graduate professions has been recognised - social work being an example (Marginson, 1995; Foster, 2012; Miller, 2014).</p> <p>Inaccurate information being presented to graduating students, with deception leading to uninformed choices for postgraduate studies and an increased likelihood of difficulties with their subsequent careers.</p> <p>Employer confusion, with USA research identifying employer disappointment with the quality of graduate trainees as well as difficulty in identifying genuine high-flier applicants (Denning et al, 2021; Leef, 2021).</p> <p>USA-based authors have further argued that a climate of grade inflation can lead to less motivation and less study time - especially for the most advanced students who then compare themselves with their peers who would otherwise have gained lower grades (Finefter-Rosenbluh and Meira, 2015).</p> <p>Aggressive marketing and student recruitment campaigns creating friction between providers based on the 'poaching' of student applicants through the use of publicity for improving graduate outcomes. This includes internet resources, such as the Ripplematch careers company in New York and the website containing league tables of providers awarding the highest grades.</p>

Divided academic communities

These positive and negative consequences are accompanied by a universal recognition of perhaps the most serious impact of 'grade inflation' – the creation of divisions within academic communities at student, subject and provider levels. Examples include:

- in the USA, some prestigious institutions do not provide open access to their GPA data
- conflict within and between institutions when comparing:
 - new and old providers in Turkey (Karadag, 2021)
 - different campuses of the same providers in the USA and Canada (Carter and Lara, 2016; Anglin and Meng, 2000)
 - different universities in Germany (McGrory and Muller-Benedict, 2017; Müller-Benedict and Gaens, 2020)
 - two-year community college and four-year university provision in the USA (Hu, 2005)
 - home and international student cohorts in Australia (Foster, 2012)
 - pre and post pandemic cohorts based on the introduction of no-detriment assessment policies in Sri Lanka
- the [CHEA international network](#) has drawn attention to increasing polarisation between academic and administrative staff within the same institutions, with examples being cited from Japan and America where student grades have been adjusted by corporate managers
- friction has emerged between secondary and tertiary education sectors because higher education admissions tutors have to make decisions about a larger field of candidates with top-grades. One example is seen in media coverage of a dramatic five-fold increase in top grades for Hong Kong, UAE, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam International Baccalaureate students during the pandemic.

Attempts to control inflation

Difficulties have been noted when institutions take action to limit an increase in grades at the top level, the most dramatic of which is a fall in student applications and unfavourable student satisfaction feedback when graduate students are disadvantaged within the employment markets because they have to:

- compete with students from other colleges
- compete with graduates from previous cohorts in their own institutions.

As noted by [Butcher et al](#), senior management at [Princeton University](#) and [Wellesley College](#) experimented with the use of institutional quotas in order to limit the awarding of top grades, but most of these regulations have had to be changed following complaints from students, alumni and faculty. An explanatory statement has sometimes been offered to potential graduate employers when there has been a policy U turn, to accompany the grade transcripts of those students caught in the quota period.

Researchers at the [University of Western Ontario](#) note that any action against 'grade inflation' would therefore damage an individual institution or department that swims against the tide; effectively leading to 'a race to the bottom'. Any strategy to counter grade inflation would have to involve policymakers shaping funding strategies for an entire sector so that there would be different incentives. Similar arguments have been proposed by researchers in the Netherlands, Malaysia and Turkey; all recognising a need for national oversight for any introduction of grade ceilings – and with top-flight institutions leading the way (Mustapha et al, 2020).

Or perhaps we should simply do nothing?

Within our evidence base authors from the USA, Australia, Spain and Germany have warned that no conclusions can ever be reached because:

- 'grade inflation' data is not comprehensive, thereby preventing effective evaluation
- national policies have to be balanced with institutional autonomy and self-regulation
- better grades can be justified through improved teaching and assessment methods
- there are so many other intervening political and socio-economic variables to consider
- with very little evidence for what might be termed 'pure' or 'true' grade inflation attributed to just one variable.

It is therefore tempting to accept the premise that this increase in grades at the top end is here to stay, with a need for additional measures to demonstrate student achievement through more detailed qualification transcripts. The use of ranks, percentiles and median grades has been used in USA, but is also now attracting interest elsewhere - for example, in the [Netherlands](#) and [Malaysia](#). Moral philosophers at [Harvard](#) warn however of the creation of disharmony amongst student communities when the outcomes of these kinds of statistical measures are made known.

Ungrading

There is the further possibility of abandoning grades and classifications altogether, building on the work of Brazilian educator [Paulo Freire](#). [Ungrading](#) values the development of cooperative learning, reminding higher education communities about the relatively recent phenomenon of graded qualifications and the need to return to less competitive scenarios. The implications for ungrading include the possibility of additional demands on academic staff through writing qualitative statements outlining the individual achievements of students which, while laudable, could disadvantage larger and less well-resourced universities and colleges.



What happens next?

More information is needed in order to understand global perspectives on 'grade inflation'. Possibilities include:

- balancing justified grade increases with grade inflation
- building robust grade inflation evidence bases giving country-wide perspectives on grade inflation
- providing policy and guidance statements about grade inflation as issued by organisations or agencies which have quality assurance responsibilities for higher education
- monitoring the prevalence and credibility of grade inflation comparison websites used by students and employers
- developing a multi-variable model for identifying the causes of grade inflation
- identifying strategies used by higher education admissions tutors for dealing with grade inflation in the secondary education sector
- gathering information about the impact of the pandemic on student attainment, online assessment, and the use of no-detriment assessment policies
- devising continuing professional development programmes for academic and faculty staff in order to understand connections between student evaluations of teaching, student complaints and grade inflation
- tracing the impact of national funding policies on grade inflation
- developing case studies on employers' use of supplementary information - such as student rankings, portfolios and references - when recruiting graduates
- identifying pilot studies involving actions taken by providers to counter grade inflation.

An exploration of degree standards including a close look at classifications and degree classification profiles will form a significant part of the QAA Membership offer for 2022-23. We look forward to engaging with our members and sector bodies through informed discussions, events and activities.

A [companion publication](#) providing further reading on the points raised in this Quality Compass is available for QAA Members on our Membership Resources Site.



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