

Grade Inflation in Higher Education: A Guidance for Future Research and Solutions

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Abstract--- *The groundbreaking phenomenon of grade inflation has been discussed widely as student grades have increased significantly regardless of their actual ability in many higher education institutions around the world. Such issue has alerted many parties due to the fact that the grade achievement gap has affected the credibility of the institutions involved. The increasing trend of grade inflation in many institutions of higher education has become the focal point for the researchers to take this issue seriously as it has significant negative implication on Malaysia higher education institutions particularly in Teacher Education Institutes. Although the issue of increasing grade inflation is considered important and received serious attention from various parties, to date no evidence-based study has been conducted to investigate the phenomenon in Malaysian higher education institutions. As such, this study has been proposed to examine the trend, causal factors and proposed solutions to overcome the issue of grade inflation at teacher education institutes in Malaysia based on critical analysis of various studies from the literature reviews.*

Keywords--- *Grade Inflation, Achievement Gap, Grade Gap.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The issue of grade inflation and grade levels has been an issue of concern and has been debated lately as student grades have increased significantly in many institutions of higher learning around the world (Bar et al., 2009). This increase, especially since the early 1990s, may have led to a decline in the standard of higher education that awards are given to graduates regardless of their actual ability (Bachan, 2017; McCall, 2011).

The grade inflation is defined by Hunt and Gardin (2007) as the average grade point increase without seeing a real increase in students' overall ability. Although there are various definitions of grade gap, most researchers define grade inflation as a higher grade given without any improvement in student achievement (Boretz, 2004; McCall, 2011).

The phenomenon of grade inflation in the education system has been around for many years. For example, Hurwitz and Lee (2018) reported that the problem of grade inflation in American higher education institutions increased from 39% to 47% in 1998-2016. Groundbreaking is becoming an issue of concern as this can lead to mismatches in the labor market, creating injustices in the selection of the job market for graduates. In addition, the grade gap also leads to changes in perceptions of individual credibility, which may affect the probability of being accepted into higher education or entering higher quality universities.

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In fact, each institution has its own standards of evaluation (Attewell, 2001; Bagues et al., 2008; Goldman & Widawski, 1976). These basic facts raise the question of whether assessors use accurate grade information to evaluate students; or does the appraiser use the correct assessment method based on the criteria set?

II. GRADE INFLATION TREND IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

In 1966, 22% of Harvard University undergraduates received grade A, and in 1973, 31% of Princeton students received grade A. In 1996 and 1997, 46% of Harvard students and 43% of Princeton students received grade A (Pariaseau & Quinn, 2005). Meanwhile, Levine et al. (1998) presented the results of their study at university level and found that students with grade A increased from 7% to 26% and grade C dropped from 25% to 9%, as of the 1969 academic year and 1993 (Kezim et al., 2005).

During the period of 1980-1999, Eiszler (2002) in his study of 983,491 students in more than 37,000 schools in the western United States showed that the number of students receiving grade A was stable in the 1980s. However, there was a significant percentage increase in the 1990s where 47% of students received either A or A-. Recent data shows that the degree of credit awarded to graduates of tertiary institutions in the United Kingdom increased from 47.3% in 1994/1995 to 61.4% in 2011/2012. In addition, the number of graduate degree recipients increased from 112,500 to 240,000 (HESA, 2012). This phenomenon also steals the attention when the rate of first-class degree recipients is more than double from 7% to 15.8% over the same period (Bachan, 2017).

Juola (1976), one of the earliest researchers who undertake preliminary initiatives to examine the issue of grade inflation in institutions of higher learning, reported that there was a gradual increase in the grade inflation from 1965 to 1973 in 134 institutions of higher education. But there was a slight decrease of 0.42% in higher education institutions between 1974 and 1980. In fact, the study of student grade reports occurred significantly between the mid-1980s and 1990s in higher education in the United States (Kuh & Hu, 1999; Levine & Cureton, 1999; Rojstaczer & Healy, 2012). Kuh and Hu (1999) used student grade reports to illustrate that higher education institutions' grades increased between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s.

Empirical data show that the issue of grade achievement gaps has been studied specifically in some countries such as the UK and the US. Studies indicate that there are a number of factors that influence the grading of grades in most US universities, including student evaluation of teaching (Anglin & Meng 2000; Astin, 1998; Ewing, 2012; Krautmann & Sander, 1999) and the need for increased enrollment students (Achen & Courant, 2009; Ehrenberg, 2010; Ewing, 2012; Jewell & McPherson, 2012; Ost, 2010; Rask, 2010; Sabot & Wakeman-Linnm, 1991) and the need for a high-grade labor market to earn high wages (Freeman, 1999).

According to Harvard University, the percentage of A and A- grades increased from 22% in 1966 to 46% during 1997 (Wilson, 1998). Even in 2013, A- grade became the median (dominant) grade for some students at Harvard

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University (Bernhard, 2014). Studies in other institutions in 2006 presented 43% of students' grades were grade A. The data represented a 28% increase since 1960 and 12% since 1988 (Rojstaczer, 2015; Rojstaczer & Healy, 2010). Surprisingly, private colleges and universities give grades A and grade B significantly more than public universities although the characteristics of students are similar (Rojstaczer & Healy, 2010).

III. STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Grade inflation is a big problem in higher education today. This phenomenon in particular affects the credibility of institutions of higher learning, courses of study taken, and university selection. As a country with a high commitment to education, does this issue also occur in higher education institutions in Malaysia? In the context of Malaysian Institute of Teacher Education (IPGM), awareness of the issue of grade achievement gap has been debated from recent reports on the significant achievement gap between teacher education institutes. An analysis of the results of degree-granting of IPGs for the academic year 2017-2019 shows that the achievement of first-class degree exceeds 50% of students in 16 out of 27 IPGs involved in various core areas (IPGM, 2019).

The rising trend of grade inflation has significant negative implication for researchers to take this issue seriously. Grade inflation provides the opportunity for mediocre students to share the same grades with outstanding students. This is extremely unfair to outstanding students because the assessment is carried out regardless of the students' actual achievement. Such scenario can hinder the motivation of the students to reach their full potential (Lackey & Lackey, 2006).

Furthermore, Bar et al. (2009) emphasize that granting grades is intended to convey valuable information to students (identifying their strengths), financial aid officers (funding allocation), graduate school (decision making), and employer (job application screening). The lack of grade-level differences between students can cause problems for employers and the Education Sponsorship Division, Ministry of Education to offer jobs or scholarships. The party also has to put emphasis on other aspects besides academic achievement. As a result, a transcript or document detailing a student's academic record at IPG will lose some of its value.

The increasing grade inflation has also prompted students to choose the elective field of study based on whether or not the Department normally provides high grades to their students. The study of Bar et al. (2009) on 500 students confirms that the loose grading of a course contributes to the increasing number of student engagement in the course. Indirectly, the grade inflation also affects students' selection of elective course. Although the issue of increasing grade inflation is considered important and received serious attention from various parties, to date no evidence-based study has been conducted to investigate the phenomenon in Malaysian higher education institutions. As such, this study has been proposed to examine the trends, causal factors and proposed solutions to the issue of grade inflation between teacher education institutes.

IV. FACTORS CAUSING GRADE INFLATION PROBLEM

The phenomenon of grade inflations among students in higher education institutions has been widely studied in the west since 1970s (Hu, 2005; Johnes, 2004; Johnson, 2003). This section discusses several factors that have been

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identified as contributors to the problem of grade inflation. Thulin (2004) explained that the occurrence of grade inflation is due to student assessment by lecturers. Lecturers tend to give students high grades due to the anxiety of getting low grades in teaching performance from their students. Low student ratings give a poor perception of lecturer performance as if lecturers were not able to teach effectively. Therefore, the lecturers have to give high marks to the students though they do not meet the criteria. Even more serious is the situation among new and contract lecturers at higher education institutions (Kingsley & Sharon, 2014). Contract lecturers are more likely to give high grades to students in the hope that the students will also give them the best grades. Such a thing is essential for lecturers with contractual status to be seen as having the quality of an administrator's view to continue to serve as a lecturer at the institution.

Ewing (2011) found that there is a positive relationship between student expectations and student evaluations of lecturers. Students with low grades give low marks to their lecturers. Although lecturers give grades based on students' actual ability to do coursework and exams, students still feel that they deserve high marks. This will have an impact on the integrity of the lecturers in conducting student evaluations. This is due to the low student rating of the lecturer even though the lecturer gives an honest assessment of the lecturer's competence. Langbein (2008) also argued that proper grade assigned to students has a negative impact on student assessment of lecturer performance. Therefore, the practice of lecturer assessment by students should be reviewed. Crumbley et al. (2010) found that student assessment of lecturers promotes less ethical behavior among lecturers by giving high scores to students who do not meet the criteria. In fact, in these circumstances lecturers may not improve the quality of their teaching. Love and Kotchen's (2010) disclosed that the emphasis of higher education institution on student assessment aspects can exacerbate the problem of grade inflation and indirectly undermine the efforts to improve the quality of higher education.

The second factor contributing to the problem of grade inflation is the perceived value of an institution of higher learning (Sanchez-Fernandez & Iniesta-Bonillo, 2007). This view of value refers to the orientation of marketing theory as explained by Zeithaml (1988), which is the overall consumer evaluation of a product based on the perception of what it receives and what the service provider provides. In the context of institutions of higher learning, the number of students achieving high grades reflects the quality of an institution. This creates a perception among the public about the excellence of an institution that has resulted in many first class graduates. However, the production of first-class graduates is not based on an assessment of their students' actual abilities but due to the tendency of lecturers giving high grades to boost the reputation of an institution. This phenomenon occurs because higher education providers are influenced by the marketization element. This refers to the practice of higher education institutions using marketing methods to get students to pursue their studies at an institution (Guilbault, 2016). This is due to a number of factors facing higher education providers such as competition between equivalent institutions, higher education costs and reduced government funding. When it comes to marketing, people's perception of an institution is a priority. As such, higher education providers compete for the satisfaction of their students including aspects of student achievement (Kuh & Hu, 2001; Levitz & Noel, 2000; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). However, perceptions of students' satisfaction with

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an institution can be obtained through the quality of the environment provided including aspects of learning and comfort in the institution of learning (Elsharnouby, 2015).

The third factor is the evaluation experience of the lecturer during the assessment process. Less experienced lecturers are more likely to give students higher marks (Donaldson & Gray, 2012). They usually avoid giving negative feedback on student work. This is because lecturers who are less experienced in a course want to avoid getting caught up in a conflict with students. Therefore, they consider that higher grades provide more satisfaction to faculty and students (Cacamese et al., 2007; Fordham, 2005; Walsh & Seldomridge, 2005; Weaver et al., 2007; Yorke, 2005). Studies by Chambers (1999), Gill et al. (2006), Isaacson and Stacy (2009) show that more experienced lecturers in a course are not affected by the difficulty of grade achievement. They dare to give students a low grade. They think that giving grades transparently based on their students' true potential is the right thing to do. Even such actions are considered important so as not to waste their time entertaining student appeal. This is against new faculty who tend to give students second chances.

Furthermore, the aspect of relationship between lecturers and students is a factor causing grade inflations (Donaldson & Gray, 2012). Elements of bias in grading an assignment may exist due to the good relationship between students and lecturers. Although students do not demonstrate their potential in academic writing, it is because of students' attitudes when interacting with lecturers such as assisting the lecturer, being courteous and active during learning become a factor that lecturers give higher grades to particular students (Cowan et al., 2005; Fletcher, 2008; Iramaneerat & Yudkowsky, 2007). It is difficult for lecturers to give a low score to students who always show good behavior in front of them (Clouder & Toms, 2005). Brown (2000) revealed that 76% of lecturers who are mentors to students tend to give high score based on student personality. Calman et al. (2002) found that in grading practice, the scores given were strongly related to the personality of the lecturers and their knowledge of students' personalities. In addition, factor such as field of study also contributes to the grade inflation (Arcidiacono et al., 2012). Students in the field of pure science, engineering and economics show lower grade achievement than students in social science (Bar & Zussman, 2012; Grove & Wasserman, 2004; Koedel, 2011).

V. PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

There are many factors that affect the grade inflation in higher education institutions. But the institution authorities need to think of a method that can control this achievement gap. Based on the literature reviews, there are various suggestions made by the researchers in order to overcome the problem, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Proposed Solutions

<i>Author</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>Type of Research</i>	<i>Proposed Solutions</i>
David Blum	2017	Nine Potential Solutions to Abate Grade Inflation at Regionally Accredited Online U.S. Universities: An Intrinsic Case Study	Qualitative	(1) Use rubric (2) Review scoring / scoring moderation (3) Employ neutral appraisers

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Jack W. Kostal, Nathan R. Kuncel, and Paul R. Sackett	2016	Grade Inflation Marches on: Grade Increases from the 1990s to 2000s	Quantitative	(1) Control demographic features, course selection (2) Delay in the process of teacher credit (leniency)
Jack W. Kostal, Nathan R. Kuncel, and Paul R. Sackett	2016	Grade Inflation Marches on: Grade Increases from the 1990s to 2000s	Quantitative	(1) Establish a "probit model" data panel for controlling student gender, demographic characteristics and student achievement levels
Wolfgang Stroebe	2016	Why Good Teaching Evaluations May Reward Bad Teaching: On Grade Inflation and Other Unintended Consequences of Student Evaluations	Text study	(1) Use other criteria to avoid bias (2) Take into account other assessment criteria such as the opinion of other lecturers, student external work and student portfolios.
Tim Ehlers and Robert Schwager	2015	Honest Grading, Grade Inflation, and Reputation	Quantitative	(1) Diversify the number of cohorts (take-offs) together with introducing the need for crediting based on the take-up cohort (2) Five incentive based on achievement.
Rosenbluh, Ilana, and Levinson	2015	"What Is Wrong with Grade Inflation (If Anything)?"	Text study	(1) Define and adjust grades (2) Standardize ratings
Donald L. Caruth and Gail D. Caruth	2013	Grade Inflation: An Issue for Higher Education?	Text study	(1) Provide a clear explanation of grading criteria (2) Provide clear guidance on the decisions and factors that students expect to measure (3) Provide prompt and continuous feedback to students throughout the semester
Jayne H. Donaldson a, *, Morag Gray	2012	Systematic Review of Grading Practice: Is There Evidence of Grade Inflation?	SLR	(1) Give evidence of credit process (2) Use grade sections
Jayne H. Donaldson a, *, Morag Gray	2012	Systematic Review of Grading Practice: Is There Evidence of Grade Inflation?	Concept paper	(1) Use grade sections as an assessment tool. The section should be detailed for its scoring criteria and the actual ability of the applicator to be evaluated based on the actual section and in accordance with the actual assessment criteria. (2) Use rubric as a tool of assessment. The rubric needs to be detailed to its scoring criteria and the actual ability of the applicator to be evaluated based on the actual rubric and to meet the actual assessment criteria.

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Mark Fincher	2011	Grade Inflation in Accelerated Adult Degree Programs: The Impact of Faculty Development on Grade Differentiation	Concept paper	(1) Establish the value of appropriate grade differentiation (2) Delay group work (3) Encourage credibility based on classroom interaction (4) Give creative processing periodically after the lecture session
Jan Tucker and Bari Courts	2010	Grade Inflation in the College Classroom	SLR	(1) Prepare grade expectation plans that students may achieve (2) Look at student excellence (3) Evaluate the other group not being taught by the assessor
Elizabeth Boretza	2010	Grade Inflation and the Myth of Student Consumerism	Concept paper	(1) Discuss the content of the teaching assessment method needs and publicly review for further suggestions. Besides, getting feedback and feedback from student feedback, the effectiveness of lecturer teaching and so on. (2) Inform students and expose how the evaluation process is conducted. For example, new students need to be exposed to the assessment method implemented at the institution.
Judson C. Faurer, Larry Lopez,	2009	Grade Inflation: Too Much Talk, Too Little Action	Quantitative	(1) Provide training to staff and faculty (2) Categorize pedagogy in each course (3) Classify students based on ability
Judson C. Faurer, Larry Lopez,	2009	Grade Inflation: Too Much Talk, Too Little Action	Concept paper	(1) Provide training to academicians and trainers (2) Abolish grading method and employ comprehensive examinations (3) Use rubric and detailed description of category grade (4) Categorize students according to their achievements and skills
Laura W. Lackey and W. Jack Lackey	2006	Grade Inflation: Potential Causes and Solutions	SLR	(1) Provide information and assure institutions of grade reduction requirements (2) Present GPA data (3) Provide policies and guidelines on credit
Anglin, P.M. and Meng, R.	2000	Evidence on Grades and Grade Inflation at Ontario's Universities	Quantitative	(1) Establish a "probit model" data panel that can identify high-achieving students. See if students will take the subject back to the same faculty in the future.

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1) Control over Demographic Aspects

Over the decades, the number of students entering higher education institutions has increased dramatically, from 51.7% in 1970 to 66.1% in 2007 (Kostal et al., 2015). The increase in the number of female students is greater than that of male students (US Department of Education, 2006). Differences in demographic characteristics from students' gender aspects are likely to have an impact on grade achievement in higher education institutions as each gender has different levels of academic achievement. Therefore, it is important to control for student demographic factors when estimating student achievement.

2) Control over Courses Offered

In addition to the demographic changes, the selection of courses offered by higher learning institutions also contributes to the gradient of grade differences. Since 1970, the percentage of students graduating with degrees in pure science, social science, and education has dropped (US Department of Education, 2013). However, decline in lower professions such as social science (Rojstaczer & Healy, 2010) and education (Adelman, 2004) has been offset by increased enrollment in other majors. Therefore, courses offered in various fields need to be balanced.

3) Control of Grading Process

Increasing of grade achievement may reflect flexibility in the grading process (Bejar & Blew, 1981; Juola, 1976). Usually students get high grades associated with the teacher's loose grading process. In addition, the increase in cost and affordability of maintaining student enrollment causes institutions of higher learning to compete to maintain excellent student performance (Fagan-Wilen et al., 2006). Therefore, institutions need to devise a control mechanism for the grade grading process. A centralized check or online scoring system monitored by a parent body could be performed.

4) Training for Lecturers

Lecturers need to disclose in detail the methods of assessment and evaluation (Faurer & Lopez, 2009). They should attend courses on the techniques of academic assessment presented by a recognized specialist. The process is able to provide lecturers with an understanding of the standards that need to be complied with.

5) Categorize Pedagogy in Each Course

Although the courses taught are at the same level, the pedagogy used may vary based on the teaching style of the lecturers despite the fact that the course goals are the same (Faurer & Lopez, 2009). These pedagogical differences contribute to different final and grade decisions. This is due to different aspects of stress, understanding and testing. Therefore, in coordination with pedagogical aspects, the assessment must be carried out.

6) Moratorium

Indiana University proposes the use of a moratorium on student assessment as a means to curb the increasing problem of high grade granting over time. This method is able to address students' anxiety and frustration about their

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achievement. In addition, this method can motivate all lecturers to adhere to the standards of preaching (Mc Spirit, 2000).

7) *Classification of Students Based on Ability and Achievement*

Classification process is created if there are too many ability differences among students. Each student is evaluated according to his or her own abilities. High-skilled students are more likely to understand a course and may be given the opportunity to assess it more quickly and also allow the teacher or lecturer to make a more accurate assessment of the students' abilities rather than other factors (Boritz, 2014).

8) *Grade Reduction and Coordination*

Institutions of higher learning and their administrations need to be aware of the reduction and adjustment that need to be made (Lakey & Lakey, 2006). Grade reduction and adjustment need to be carried out so that the grade obtained does not have a significant difference.

9) *Information on GPA Data*

GPA achievement analysis information and student grades need to be disclosed to academic staff (lecturers / administrators) so the grade trend and difference can be seen and regulated.

10) *Guidelines and Policies*

Specific guidelines and policies on credit should be established and disseminated to institutional members and administrators. This can foster awareness and knowledge of credit policies and methods that academicians and administrators can use (Lackey & Lackey, 2006).

11) *Evidence of Grading Process*

Chambers (1999) and Battistone et al. (2001) supported the need to provide detailed evidence as to why a particular grade was awarded as this has the effect of reducing the grade achievement gap. Weaver et al. (2007) found that using clear criteria for each grade helped to reduce the grade achievement gap. Some researchers considered that grade gap is caused by assessors are unable to effectively discriminate between grades (Hill et al., 2006; Hemmer et al., 2008; Iramaneerat & Yudkowsky, 2007). Norcini (2007) suggested that the use of self-assessor is not among student mentors to reduce bias.

12) *Use of Grade Rubrics*

According to Truemper (2004) and Blum (2017), the use of assessment rubric is an alternative to solving the grade inflation. Rubrics can be defined as assessment tools that use clear criteria and skill levels to measure student achievement. Each grade criterion and grade-level performance of the student can be done by referring to the grade level value provided (Montgomery, 2000). There are two types of grading rubrics: analytical and holistic (Donalson & Gray, 2012; Truemper, 2004). Each of these types of sections will determine the grade for each individual and at the same time the criteria for determining excellence can be more specific. Donaldson and Gray (2012) suggested that a

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section contains three components; the first contains the achievement criteria, the second contains a detailed description of the achievement and the third contains the scoring scale.

13) Grade Based on Student Intake

Ehlers and Schwager (2015) suggested that grade grading is distinguished by student intake (cohort). Each intake has a different grade than other intake. The same grade given to each intake can cause grade difference to be unjustified.

14) Define and Adjust Grades/Standardize Ratings

Finefter et al. (2015) suggested a method of setting boundary marks that can be applied to solve the grade achievement gap. This method is performed by explaining the purpose of each grade given in the transcript of each student's decision and each course. Each course includes a grade or an overall grade and grade.

15) Moderate or Revise Scoring

Blum (2017) recommended a review or moderation process could be carried out for each scoring process being conducted. This process is a regulatory standardization of the scoring standard based on the specified rubric standard. This aspect of controlling allows the second or third evaluators to respond to the rating given by the first evaluator. This process can reduce the bias and inconsistencies in the evaluation process.

16) Neutral Appraiser

The appointed independent assessor should not be chosen among course lecturers to avoid bias in the assessment process (Blum, 2017). Ratings are based on the sections and criteria set. An independent assessor will be able to evaluate based on the student's actual achievement criteria without any bias.

17) Create a "Probit Model" Data Panel

Kosthel et al. (2016) proposed the creation of a probit model data panel in controlling student gender, demographic and grade achievement level before student enrollment.

18) Define Additional Assessment Criteria

The process of assessing students' needs should include additional criteria, such as the opinions and opinions of other evaluators, external work as well as student portfolio evaluations (Greenwald & Gillmore, 1997; Stroube, 2016).

VI. CONCLUSION

Over the decades, the increase in the phenomenon of grade inflation in educational institutions has been increasing. Some of the problems associated with grade inflation have a negative impact on the rating system of a higher education institution. Ideally, issues such as bias, integrity and vulnerability in the awarding of an achievement should be assessed transparently and fairly based on the students' actual abilities. External issues that influence the censorship made must be avoided and do not impair the institution's award and student achievement system. Researchers are aware that solutions to these issues may not be immediately possible, but steps toward improvement need to be in designing a better and fairer evaluation system. The less we research, the more issues we can raise. Further study needs to be done in the future by delving deeper into these issues and how to resolve them. This study highlights some of the things that

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can be taken based on the literature review. More effective methods for assessing and analyzing students' skills and achievements should be considered more effectively.

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