Grade Inflation in HETAC Awards

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ABSTRACT
In this paper we present data indicative of grade inflation in HETAC awards between 1998 and 2002. This is based on the trend in proportion of certificates and diplomas of each class being awarded over that period. Grade inflation at third level has occurred against a backdrop of grade inflation at Leaving Certificate level and a drop in the minimum entry requirements for third level courses. The net effect is that weaker students are entering third level courses and yet are attaining higher grades.
GRADE INFLATION IN HETAC AWARDS

What is Grade Inflation?

Grade inflation exists when there is a pattern of improvement in grades without any improvement in the level of learning achieved. In simple terms grade inflation occurs when:

- Examinations and assessments become easier.
- Examination marking becomes less stringent.
- Quantity and quality of material covered on courses diminishes.
- Grading systems are altered to facilitate better outcomes.

The outcome is that weaker and less motivated students not having achieved a level of learning equivalent to their predecessors, nevertheless, achieve superior grades in their examinations.

Negative effects of grade inflation include:

- Having a degree, a diploma or a certificate does not attest to the same level of education it formerly did but that fact is concealed.
- For employers, it means that educational qualifications do not predict the standards they used to predict.
- Qualifications are devalued to the point where they cannot be used for selection purposes in education or employment.
- It undermines the motivation of academics to teach and of students to learn.

Grade inflation is the cause of considerable concern at both second and third level in Britain and in the United States. Even if the level of grade inflation is the same throughout the world, which it may not be, this in no way ameliorates the impact of the problems it causes. While the problem is being actively addressed in the US and the UK, it is not even recognised yet as an issue in Ireland.

We concentrate here on grade inflation in awards granted by the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC), though we refer to the problem also at Leaving Certificate level because of its knock on effects on third level.

In the next section evidence of significant grade inflation in HETAC awards between 1998 and 2002 is presented. This is placed in the context of rising
average CAO points attained in the Leaving Certificate and diminishing minimum entry requirements for courses leading to HETAC awards. Grades in HETAC and University awards are contrasted. In the following section we review recent developments concerning grade inflation in the US and the UK. Finally, we summarise our conclusions and suggest a high level investigation.

**Evidence of Grade Inflation in HETAC Awards**

A report recently prepared by Dr Cathal Walsh of Insight Statistical Consulting for HETAC and available on the HETAC web site provides a lot of relevant supporting data (Walsh, 2004).

This deals with the period between 1998 and 2002 although it is very probable that grade inflation long predates this period.

**Grade Inflation in HETAC National Certificates, Diplomas and Degrees**

In the short period between 1998 and 2002 grades have inflated significantly at Certificate, Diploma and Degree level, as illustrated in figures 1-4 below. The inflation is particularly significant at the upper end of the spectrum in all qualifications.

![Figure 1: Proportion of Certificates of Each Class (Walsh, 2004)](image)

At Certificate level, the proportion of distinctions (average mark of 70% or higher) increased from around 12.5% to around 20% over the period. Merit grades (55-69%) showed a small increase and awards at pass level (40-54%) declined from around 39% to 30%. This latter figure is perhaps the most striking of all. It means that at Certificate level 70% of those given awards are
now deemed worthy of a merit standard or higher. It is notable that HETAC guidance suggests that marks above 55% are indicative of above average performance (HETAC, 2001). It is, therefore, contradictory that the norm should now be somehow ‘above average.’

**Figure 2: Proportion of Diplomas of Each Class (Walsh, 2004)**

At Diploma level, the proportion of distinctions increased from roughly 12% to 18%. The award of merit grades showed no clear pattern of change but the rate of pass grade awards showed a small decline to about 23% in 2002. Being meritorious at Diploma level – a characteristic it would seem of 77% of students gaining this award - has even less to do with being in any way out of the ordinary.

**Figure 3: Proportion of Degrees Awarded in Each Class (Walsh, 2004)**
In HETAC degrees, the proportion of first class and 2:1 grades has increased while the proportion of 2:2 grades and passes has commensurately declined.

Walsh (2004) states that the increase in first class awards between 1998 and 2002 is “highly statistically significant.” The increased proportion of distinctions at both Diploma and Certificate levels is also identified as “highly statistically significant.”

Comparison of HETAC with University Degrees

A striking comparison is the proportion of first class honours degrees awarded through HETAC with that awarded in the University (HEA) sector. Over the period examined the proportion has been consistently higher for HETAC degrees. In 2001 the rate of firsts in the Universities was around 9% while it was around 13% in HETAC. By 2002 this had jumped to 14% having climbed from 10% since 1998. Figures for 2002 were not quoted for the University sector but a smaller rate of increase in the rate of firsts awarded was evident.

Within the HETAC sector, the marks increase has not only occurred at first class but also at second class, grade one, the proportion of which has increased to about 32% in 2002 from about 27.5% in 1998. All other lower grades have declined commensurately.

One possible way of comparing degrees within the two sectors is to look only at ab-initio degrees. In 2003, the HETAC sector, as a whole, accepted students on the basis of CAO points alone into 105 degree courses. A further
small number of courses had additional requirements such as interviews or art portfolios. They have not been included in this analysis. In that same year the combined universities accepted students on the basis of CAO points alone onto a total of 325 courses.

Comparing the minimum CAO entry points for ab initio degrees at the Universities with those in the HETAC sector in 2003, a stark contrast emerges. According to our statistical analysis of published CAO data, whereas 51% of university ab initio degrees had minimum points requirements in excess of 400, the comparable figure in the HETAC sector was 3.8%. Going further down the CAO points scale 51.4% of courses in the HETAC sector had requirements under 300 points as compared with 5.5% at the Universities.

It appears that less capable students are getting higher awards in the HETAC sector.

**Trends in CAO Points**

There are two important trends with respect to CAO points. In recent years the average points attained in the Leaving Certificate have been steadily rising. On the other hand the CAO points required for entry to HETAC courses have fallen.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CAO Point Bands</th>
<th>1998 (%)</th>
<th>2003 (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>500-600</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>400-499</td>
<td>17.8</td>
<td>20.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>300-399</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>25.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>200-299</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>20.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100-199</td>
<td>19.0</td>
<td>15.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 100</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1: Points Bands Attained by CAO Applicants in 1998 and 2003**

As regards rising average points attained in the Leaving Certificate, the earliest year for which such data is available from the CAO office is 1998 although it is likely that the trend long precedes this date. As evident in Table 1, there has been a shift from the lower to the upper bands between 1998 and 2003. In 1998, for example, 45.6% of CAO applicants were above the 300-point threshold. By 2003, the equivalent figure was 53.3%. In our opinion, this trend is unlikely to be indicative of any real improvement in learning.
As regards the decline in the CAO points required for entry to HETAC Certificate and Diploma courses, it has been possible to compare the minimum entry points for 1996 and 2000, the years in which the 1998 and 2002 Certificate graduate cohorts would have entered third level.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Minimum Point Bands</th>
<th>1996</th>
<th>2000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>300 upwards</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below 200</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Qualified Applicants</td>
<td>12.4%</td>
<td>27.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: CAO Minimum Entry Points for Certificate/Diploma Courses in 1996 and 2000

At the higher end of the points’ spectrum, there was no change with 17.4% of courses in both 1996 and 2000 requiring minimum points in excess of 300. There was only a minor change in the proportion of courses with minimum points below 200 from 49% in 1996 to 51% in 2000. The significant change between 1996 and 2000 is in the proportion of courses into which all qualified applicants (AQA) were accepted. In 1996 the proportion was 12.4%. In 2000, this figure had more than doubled to 27.6%. There has, therefore, been an appreciable increase in students being admitted on very low points.

The upward trend in grades at Certificate and Diploma level must then be compared with minimum entry points that are dropping and with the fact that there is a trend of more students getting better points in their Leaving Certificates.

**Concern about Grade Inflation in the UK and the US**

In the UK 55% of students at bachelors degree level now achieve a first or a 2:1 compared with 25% ten years ago. This has led the government to set up a task force to investigate how the degree grading system might be changed so that there is clearer discrimination between different levels of achievement. (Ward, 2004).

A programme entitled ‘Dumbed Down Degrees’ broadcast by Channel 4 on May 15 2004 discussed the decline in standards at Universities in Britain following on from the competition among institutions to attract and retain graduates. It was reported that, due to the entry of weaker students into third level, courses were being made ever easier so that institutions can maintain the student numbers on which they depend to gain funding. “Sub O-level” is how one academic from Brighton University described the standard of many degrees. Richard Sykes, the rector of the prestigious Imperial College, London, admitted on the same programme that grade inflation was a reality, agreeing that there is a “tendency, even here to give more firsts simply because it pushes you up the league table.”
Oxford University has introduced major changes to its grading system for final degree examinations this year in what is viewed by academics at the University as an attempt to counteract grade inflation. According to Ward and Smithers (2004), a letter leaked to history faculty members by the chairman of the final honour school, Simon Skinner, revealed that the new marking system if used last year would have reduced the number of first class awards in history from 23% of the total to 13.5%.

Throughout the university system in the UK there is much concern regarding the value of A level grades for deciding on admission to third level courses. In the decade between 1991 and 2001 the proportion getting A grades in the A levels jumped from 11.9% to 18.6% In every one of the past 20 years students have outperformed their predecessors. This prompted the establishment of an international panel to examine A-level standards. It reported in January 2002 that it was impossible to answer the question of whether or not standards had been maintained. Among those who are convinced that standards have declined and that the improvement in grades is down to easier examinations are Ruth Lea (Head of Policy at the Institute of Directors) and Chris Woodward (former Chief Inspector of Schools in England), (BBC News, 2001).

Though it may not be possible to prove that grade inflation is the cause of the improving A-level grades the predictable effects of grade inflation are already plainly visible.

Universities have begun to establish a variety of tailor made tests and assessments to use in place of A- levels for selecting school leavers on to their courses. Both Oxford and Cambridge have gone down this route.

In the United States, Harvard has capped the proportion of undergraduates who can obtain honours in their finals at 60% and Princeton seems set to follow its example with a proposal that no department can have more than 35% of A grades. (Coplin, 2004)

Rosovsky and Hartley (2002) set out the background to the grade capping policy by the prestigious universities in the United States. The report cites research data showing that across all third level institutional types grade point averages rose approximately 15-20% between the mid 1960s and the mid 1990s. Another study cited showed that in that period the proportion of A grades grew from 7 to 26%, while the grade of C fell from 25% to 9% (Levine & Cureton, 1998). What is more striking about this grade improvement is that it occurred over the same period when the average score on the Scholastic Achievement Test (SAT) declined by 5%. The improvement in grades has also to be viewed in light of the fact that there has been an increasing need for remedial educational courses at third level institutions in the US. Grade inflation seems the only logical explanation for why students are getting better grades.
Conclusions and Recommendations

There has been significant grade inflation in HETAC awards in the period studied – from 1998-2002. This problem also exists in the University sector.

Grade inflation at third level has occurred against a backdrop of grade inflation at Leaving Certificate level and a drop in the minimum entry requirements for third level courses. The net effect is that weaker students are entering third level courses and yet are attaining higher grades.

We recommend that a national committee be established to investigate the problem of grade inflation in the Irish third level sector.

References

BBC News (2001), So are A-levels Getting Easier?, August 16.

Coplin, B. (2004), Grade Inflation Works for Today’s Students, USA Today, April 22.


