

GRADE ALTERATION AND GRADE INFLATION: ANALYSIS OF CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES

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Abstract

This study analyzes grade alteration and inflation to establish the major causes and consequences. The descriptive survey research design and the quantitative methods were adopted for the study. The population for the study consisted of 1,198 academic staff from an educational platform of staff from universities in Africa. The instrument used for the study was a self-developed questionnaire of the five-point Likert scale of Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree, developed after a thorough literature review. The questionnaire was face and content validated, and an Alpha reliability coefficient of 0.862 was obtained, indicating that the instrument was reliable. The data collected was analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) and factor analysis. Results of the analysis revealed that the main causes of grade alteration are students' considerations, pressure to raise grades, and the need for compassion, while the major causes of grade inflation are administrative and teacher factors, students' nuisance, and the use of part-time or non-tenured lecturers. In the same vein, the leading consequences of grade alteration and grade inflation are the failure of education to achieve its goals and a decrease in the quality of education. Based on the findings of the study, it was recommended that schools should thoroughly interrogate altered grades before their acceptance as a measure of students' performance, while inflated grades should be extensively audited. The pressure by school administration and parents on teachers about grades must be broken, while lecturers should be trained on teaching professional ethics so that they can disabuse their minds from any external influences, as grading is a concern and thus award grades devoid of any other considerations apart from the demands of the test or examination.

Keywords: *Analysis, Causes, Consequences, Grade Alteration, Grade Inflation.*

INTRODUCTION

The grade is a summary evaluation by the teacher of a student's performance at the end of a period of instruction. Grade alteration involves deliberately increasing or decreasing a grade for a reason that may relate to achievement but is not motivated by an interest in accurate reporting, while grade inflation (grading leniency) is the general awarding of

higher grades when the quality of student work does not deserve a high grade.

A grade accurately and meaningfully summarizes the level to which a student has learned the taught materials. According to Awoniyi and Aderanti (2013), the summary is not to be distorted by motivational or other considerations apart from the demand of the task given. The authors further stated that the

function of grades could be primary or incidental. The primary function of grades is to communicate effectively to a variety of audiences the degree of achievement of academic competence of individual students. The audiences to which grades are communicated include pupils, parents, school administrators, employers, counselors, teachers, and other schools. Grades also have incidental functions, of which the three major incidental functions claimed for grades are motivation, teaching students to adjust to a competitive society, and keeping teachers honest.

Today, evidence abounds that students' grades are altered and inflated for various reasons in educational systems worldwide, but very little is known about the circumstances and reasons for grade alteration (Tierney, 2015). In the same vein, there is a lack of studies that comprehensively address the causes and consequences of inflated grades and grade inflation (Yusuf, 2024). This study analyzes the causes and consequences of grade alteration and inflation to establish the major causes and consequences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Grade alteration is changing a student's grade, which could be done for several reasons, while grade inflation is when students receive higher grades for the same quality of work over time. Grading is a matter of great importance in education, as an academic mark is expected to reflect students' performance in their learning process. Grades play an essential role in students' future lives since they are one of the determining factors in getting scholarships and opportunities, determining learning paths, and influencing career choices (Tierney, 2015). Therefore, grades should reflect students' attainment for stakeholders and should rightly represent the students' ability to learn (Cheng and Sun, 2015).

According to Tierney (2015), there is considerable research on teachers' grading practices, but very little is known about the circumstances and reasons for grade alteration. In his research "Altered grades: A grey zone in the ethics of classroom assessment," Tierney drew on information shared by experienced teachers in Ontario, Canada.

For the study, the purposive sampling technique was used to select six teachers from a pool of volunteers on the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) network. All had advanced professional qualifications in addition to undergraduate or graduate degrees, at least ten years of teaching experience, and are specialists in teaching English. Data were collected using questionnaires and interviews, and the data were analyzed deductively and inductively. The study revealed that the reasons for grade alterations fell into three categories: compassionate grounds, student opportunity, and life lessons. Tierney (2015) concludes that the consequences of grade alteration have not received attention for too long, and it is time for a more considered response.

Cheng and Sun (2015) posit that grading decision-making is influenced by both internal factors, such as teachers' values and beliefs about learning, and external factors, such as parental influences and state accountability testing pressures. Cheng and Sun concluded that it is crucial to do more studies on grading decision-making in different educational contexts because each context is unique and has different characteristics affecting teachers' grading decision-making.

Ida and Ali (2017) investigate teachers' grading decision-making, focusing on the beliefs behind their grading decisions. Two teachers from two junior high schools were interviewed, and the study showed that their

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grading decisions were influenced by students' effort and behavior as well as school policy. Zoeckler (2005) argues that teachers in their grading need to consider such factors as the student's good personal characteristics, willingness to motivate, encourage, and appreciate students' greater learning effort and achievement for the sake of students' improvement and further development, accountability with the larger community, the school organization and parents, and the teachers' integrity.

Grades are of great importance in evaluating students' academic achievement and performance (Castillo, 2018; Chowdhury, 2018, in Yusuf, 2024) as they help teachers determine, understand, and make appropriate decisions concerning students' learning levels. Yusuf (2024) states that students can be given high grades in examinations and class performance in today's schools, thus resulting in the problem of inflated grades, which could lead to grade inflation. He investigated the existence of high grades in primary school, secondary school, and high school with the main purpose of revealing the existence, causes, and consequences of inflated grades. The study was a case study design for which data were collected through both in-depth face-to-face interviews and online surveys using 203 teachers working in the three categories of educational institutions in Van.

The data was analyzed thematically. The research result reveals that the majority of teachers give inflated grades to cover up failures, and that inflated grades are common in both public and private schools. It was also discovered that the problem of inflated grades is exacerbated in private schools by the fact that non-tenured teachers in private schools have no choice but to give inflated grades to maintain their employment and for the school to satisfy parents and meet their expectations. The study concludes that inflated grades and

grade inflation are more common at primary and secondary school levels.

Scientific studies reveal Turkey's limited existence of inflated grades and grade inflation. Karadag (2021) analyzes the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on grade inflation in higher education in Turkey. Data were collected from five universities, and they include grades of 152,352 students who attended 2,841 courses conducted by 903 instructors before the COVID-19 pandemic and grades of 149,936 students who attended 2,841 courses conducted by 847 instructors during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results of this study demonstrate that the COVID-19 pandemic causes a marginal increase in grades in higher education when the other factors that might explain the differences are controlled. This increase in grades resulted from the effort of instructors who are accustomed to face-to-face settings. When they suddenly switch to distance education, they try to grade higher to compensate for the unforeseen negative circumstances.

Yeritsyan, Mjelde, and Litzenberg (2022) examine potential grade inflation using data from 17,696 classes between 1985 and 2019 in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Texas A&M University. After controlling for institution, instructor, and student characteristics, evidence of systemic grade increase was found, and the increases are found to be associated with increased hiring of graduate students and other instructors.

Another cause of grade inflation is "Students' nuisance" as exemplified by the parable of the persistent Widow in Luke 18:2-5. Franz (2010) defines "Students' nuisance" as students' pestering professors for better grades and asserts that the potential threat of students' nuisance can induce professors to inflate grades. The more the student values the grade, the more likely the student is to pester the

professor. Oftentimes, to preempt students' nuisance, professors might inflate students' grades in the first place, so that there will be fewer students coming to pester them.

One of the most common explanations for grade inflation is that professors attempt to "buy" good evaluations from students for tenure and promotion considerations. McKenzie (2014) opines that the abuse of course evaluations by students could be a potent reason for grade inflation by professors. Since grades directly affect students' well-being, students rate professors according to the grades received. To get better evaluations from students, professors "bribe" students by giving easy A's and B's. Maamari and Naccache's (2022) quantitative study on the impact of grade inflation on teachers' evaluation in five Lebanese universities suggests an ethical duality affecting grade inflation, as the results of the multiple regression show a strong relationship between GPA and students' attitudes toward faculty evaluations.

On teachers' grading practices and decision-making, Isnawati and Saukah (2017) claim that even though teachers consider student achievement the chief influencing factor in grading, they still consider other elements such as effort, study habits, classroom conduct, class participation, administrative policies, and the curriculum. In the quantitative study of Cheng and Sun (2015), data reveal that students' effort, non-test indicators, and improvement in student performance are some of the most widely considered factors in grading.

Grade alteration and inflation result in several consequences. Although there is no full consensus on the consequences of grade inflation, according to Karadağ (2021), the opinion of teachers who participated in Yusuf's research study (2024) reveals that inflated grades and great alterations lead to various consequences. The consequences in the opinion

of the participants are but not limited to cognitive damage to the student, decrease in the quality of education, imaginary successes, emotional damage to the student, injustice, disappearance of the distinction between successful and unsuccessful students, prejudices against students, education failure to achieve goals, preventing students from receiving healthy feedback which can lead to misleading success in students and society at large. With inflated grades and grade inflation, the feedback mechanism in education is almost disabled.

The literature review showed that most of the research on grade alteration and grade inflation is qualitative, leading to evidence and methodological gaps. The need for more empirical data and innovative research methods on the subject matter is inevitable. The literature also revealed a paucity in the causes and consequences of grade inflation and grade alteration at universities, as most of the research was at the primary and secondary levels of education.

Purpose of the Study

This study aims to analyze the causes and consequences of grade alteration and inflation to establish the causes and consequences.

Research Questions

The researcher sought answers to the following research questions.

1. What are the main causes of grade alteration?
2. What are the major causes of grade inflation?
3. What are the leading consequences of grade alteration and inflation?
4. What are the dimensions of the causes and consequences of grade alteration and inflation as extracted by factor analysis?

METHODOLOGY

The research analyzed the causes and consequences of grade alteration and grade inflation. As a result, the descriptive survey research design and the quantitative methods were preferred. The descriptive survey aims at fact-finding and generally tries to collect information from a representative sample, which is analyzed statistically (Awoniyi, Aderanti and Tayo, 2020). The population for the study consisted of 1,198 academic staff from an academic platform of staff from Universities in Africa. The instrument for the study was a 25-item online survey questionnaire of a five-point Likert type of Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree developed by the researcher on the causes and consequences of grade alteration and grade inflation after a thorough literature review.

The questionnaire was face and content validated with an Alpha correlation coefficient

of 0.862, indicating that the instrument is reliable. The communalities of all the items on the questionnaire range from 0.541 to 0.771, further confirming the reliability of all items on the questionnaire. After a persistent follow-up of the online questionnaire, 126 academic staff responded. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy of 0.694 confirms that the sample used for the study was adequate. Data collected was analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) and factor analysis.

RESULTS

The results of the collected and analyzed data on the causes and consequences of grade alteration and grade inflation are presented according to the research questions.

Research Question 1: What are the main causes of grade alteration?

Table 1: Causes of Grade Alteration

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation	Remarks
The need for compassion.	3.587	1.195	Often
The desire to provide students with opportunities.	3.635	1.256	Often
The intention to teach life lessons (e.g., missed classes or did not complete work despite strong ability)	3.381	1.319	Sometimes
Consideration of student effort.	3.889	1.118	Often
Student behavior.	3.143	1.372	Sometimes
Administrative decisions to improve performance statistics.	3.524	1.349	Often
Pressure to raise grades by favoritism.	2.651	1.444	Sometimes
Future opportunities for students.	2.984	1.271	Sometimes
Inducement of lecturers by students.	2.873	1.459	Sometimes

Table 1 presents the causes of grade alteration. From the table, the need for compassion, the desire to provide students with opportunities, consideration of student effort, and administrative decisions to improve performance statistics are often causes of grade

alteration, with means ranging from 3.524 to 3.889; however, the high standard deviations for all the items show that respondents are heterogeneous in their responses. These are, therefore, the main causes of grade alteration. The result is in agreement with Ida and Ali

University of Arusha Academic Journal, UoAAJ 3(1), 2025 (2017), who showed that grading decision-making by teachers was influenced by students' effort and behavior as well as school policy.

Research Question 2: What are the major causes of grade inflation?

Table 2: Causes of Grade Inflation

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation	Remarks
“Students’ nuisance” (Students’ pestering the professors for better grades).	2.746	1.442	Sometimes
Administrative pressure.	3.191	1.372	Sometimes
Motivating the student.	2.778	1.179	Sometimes
The quality problem of measuring tools.	2.968	1.159	Sometimes
Competition between teachers.	2.413	1.346	Rarely
Teachers' emotional approach (e.g. teachers' fear of negative criticism from parents-administrators).	3.222	1.319	Sometimes
Teachers' reluctance to take responsibility for poor grades.	3.286	1.332	Sometimes
Use of non-tenured faculty (part-time/temporary lecturers)	3.191	1.301	Sometimes
Inducement of lecturers by students	3.286	1.3076	Sometimes

From Table 2 above, all the items except competition between teachers (mean 2.413) are sometimes causes of grade inflation, with mean scores of 2.746 to 3.286. The respondents were found to be heterogeneous in their responses to all the items. The items will be subjected to factor analysis to confirm the major causes of

grade inflation. The finding is inconsistent with Yusuf's (2024) assertion that the majority of teachers give inflated grades to cover up failures.

Research Question 3: What are the leading consequences of grade alteration and inflation?

Table 3: Consequences of Grade Alteration and Inflation

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation	Remarks
A decrease in the quality of education.	4.556	.815	Always
Half-baked graduates.	4.365	1.001	Often
Disappearance of the distinction between successful and unsuccessful students.	3.968	1.131	Often
Injustice.	4.064	1.1296	Often
Prejudices against students.	3.556	1.210	Often
Education fails to achieve goals.	3.794	1.148	Often
Misleads students about their real performance.	4.254	1.043	Often

From Table 3 above, it is evident that decreases in the quality of education are always a consequence of grade alteration and inflation, with a very high mean of 4.556 and a standard deviation of 0.815. The low standard deviation

indicates homogeneity of responses, which means that all the respondents agreed that a

A decrease in the quality of education is the leading consequence of grade alteration and

inflation. All other items on the table are often consequences with means of 3.556 to 4.365, and the respondents were found to be heterogeneous in their responses to all the items.

Research Question 4: What are the dimensions of the causes and consequences of grade alteration and inflation as extracted by factor analysis?

The dimensions of the causes and consequences of grade alteration and grade inflation were determined using factor analysis. Factor analysis is a statistical technique that reduces a set of variables by extracting all their commonalities into a smaller number of factors. It is used to determine which of a large set of items “hang together” as a group, or are answered most similarly by participants (Leech, Barrett & Morgan, 2005). Factor analysis, therefore, becomes a statistical technique used to see how a group shares a common variance.

In factor analysis, the KMO and Bartlett’s statistics should be greater than 0.5 at a bare minimum. KMO of 0.5 and above indicates sampling adequacy, while a significant Bartlett’s test of sphericity is an indication that items on the questionnaire are capable of hanging together as a group referred to as a factor. The total variance explained by each of the factors is expressed in percentages. (Field, 2005).

Causes of Grade Alteration.

The result of the factor analysis on the causes of grade alteration indicates that three factors accounted for 67.265% variance in the causes of grade alteration, an indication that the research questionnaire was able to capture 67.265% of the causes of grade alteration. The three factors are students’ considerations (28.595%), pressure to raise grades (23.685%), and need for compassion (14.985%). The factors are discussed in Tables 4.1 to 4.3.

Table 4.1: Students’ Considerations

Items	Factor Loading	Mean	Std. Deviation
The desire to provide students with opportunities.	.686	3.635	1.256
The intention to teach life lessons (e.g., missed classes or did not complete work despite strong ability)	.717	3.381	1.319
Consideration of student effort.	.780	3.889	1.119
Student behavior.	.643	3.143	1.372
Average		3.512	1.267

Variance Accounted for = 28.595%

Table 4.1 shows that students’ considerations accounted for 28.595 of % variance of the causes of grade alteration. The factor loading of the four items for students’ considerations had high factor loading, an indication that all

the items belong to the theme. The overall mean of 3.512 shows that students’ considerations are often a cause of grade alteration. The high standard deviation of 1.2667 shows that respondents are heterogeneous in their responses.

Table 4.2: Pressure to Raise Grades

Item	Factor Loading	Mean	Std. Deviation
Administrative decisions to improve performance statistics.	.559	3.524	1.349
Pressure to raise grades by favoritism.	.847	2.651	1.444
Inducement of lecturers by students	.868	2.873	1.459
Average		3.016	1.417

Variance Accounted for = 23.685%

Table 4.2 shows that pressure to raise grade accounted for 23.685% variance of the causes of grade alteration. The factor loading of the three items for pressure to raise grades had a high correlation an indicating that all the

items belong to the theme. The overall mean of 3.016 indicates that pressure to raise grades is sometimes a cause of grade alteration. Respondents are heterogeneous in their responses, with a high standard deviation of 1.417.

Table 4.3: Need for Compassion

Item	Factor Loading	Mean	Std. Deviation
The need for compassion.	.944	3.587	1.195

Variance Accounted for = 14.985%

The need for compassion accounted for 14.985% variance of the causes of grade alteration, and the single item had a high factor loading of .944. The mean of 3.587 showed that the need for compassion is often a cause of grade alteration, but the respondents are heterogeneous in their responses, with a high standard deviation of 1.1951. It could be concluded from the above analysis that students' considerations, pressure

to raise grades, and the need for compassion are the main causes of grade alteration.

Causes of Grade Inflation

Tables 5.1to 5.3 below present the results of the factor analysis for the causes of grade inflation. The analysis indicates that three factors accounted for 66.025% of the variance in the causes of grade inflation. The three factors are administrative and teachers' factors (33.252%); students' Nuisance (20.198%), and use of part-time lecturers (12.575%).

Table 5.1: Administrative and Teacher Factor

Items	Factor Loading	Mean	Std. Deviation
Administrative pressure.	.676	3.191	1.372
The quality problem of measuring tools.	.681	2.968	1.159
Competition between teachers.	.702	2.413	1.346
Teachers' emotional approach (e.g. teachers' fear of negative criticism from parents-administrators).	.828	3.222	1.319
Teachers' reluctance to take responsibility for poor grades.	.831	3.286	1.332

Average		3.016	1.306
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Variance Accounted for = 33.252%

From Table 5.1, administrative and teacher factors accounted for 33.252 % variance of the causes of grade inflation. The factor loading of the five items for the administrative and teacher factors had a high correlation, indicating that all the items belong to the theme. The overall mean of 3.016 shows that administrative and teacher factors are sometimes the cause of grade inflation. The respondents were heterogeneous in their

responses, with a high standard deviation of 1.3058. This result is in agreement with the assertion of Isnawati and Saukah (2017) that even though teachers consider student achievement the chief influencing factor in grading, they still consider other elements such as effort, study habits, classroom conduct, class participation, administrative policies, and the curriculum.

Table 5.2: Students’ Nuisance

Items	Factor Loading	Mean	Std. Deviation
“Students’ nuisance” (Students’ pestering the professors for better grades).	.767	2.746	1.442
Inducement of lecturers by students	.862	3.286	1.308
Average		3.016	1.374

Variance Accounted for = 20.198%

From Table 5.2, students’ nuisance accounted for 20.198% of the variance in grade inflation, and the two items had high factor loading. The mean of 3.016 indicates that students’ nuisance is sometimes the cause of grade inflation, but

the respondents were heterogeneous in their responses. Franz (2010) defines “Students’ nuisance as students’ pestering professors for better grades and asserts that the potential threat of students’ nuisance can induce professors to inflate grades.

Table 5.3: Use of Part-time Lecturers

Items	Factor Loading	Mean	Std. Deviation
Use of non-tenured faculty (part-time/temporary lecturers)	.759	3.192	1.301

Variance Accounted for = 12.575%

Table 5.3 above shows that the use of part-time lecturers accounted for 12.575% of grade inflation by lecturers. The mean of 3.192 shows that the use of part-time lecturers is

in Yusuf (2024) discovered that the problem of inflated grades is exacerbated in private schools by the fact that non-tenured or part-

sometimes the cause of grade inflation, but the respondents were heterogeneous in their responses. Castillo, (2018), Chowdhury (2018)

time teachers in private schools have no choice but to give inflated grades to maintain their employment, and for the school to satisfy parents and meet their expectations.

Consequences of Grade Alteration and Grade Inflation.

Factor analysis reveals that two factors accounted for 69.837% of the variance of the

consequences of grade alteration and grade inflation. The two factors are the failure of education to achieve its goals (39.924%) and the decrease in quality of education (29.913%).

Table 6.1: Failure of Education to Achieve its Goals

Items	Factor Loading	Mean	Std. Deviation
Disappearance of the distinction between successful and unsuccessful students.	.699	3.968	1.131
Injustice.	.722	4.064	1.129
Prejudices against students.	.819	3.556	1.210
Education fails to achieve goals.	.775	3.794	1.148
Misleads students about their real performance.	.635	4.254	1.043
Average		3.927	1.132

Variance Accounted for = 39.924%

It is evident from Table 6.1 that the failure of education to achieve its goals accounted for 39.924%) variance of the consequences of grade alteration and grade inflation. The mean

of 3.927 shows that failure of education to achieve its goals is often a consequence of grade alteration and grade inflation; however, the respondents were heterogeneous in their responses, with a standard deviation of 1.1322.

Table 6.2: Decrease in Quality of Education

Item	Factor Loading	Mean	Std. Deviation
Decrease in the quality of education.	.909	4.556	.815
Half-baked graduates.	.924	4.365	1.001
Average		4.460	.908

Variance Accounted for = 29.913%

From Table 6.2, the decrease in the quality of education accounted for 29.913 % variance in the consequences of grade alteration and grade inflation. The factor loading of the two items for the decrease in quality of education had a high correlation, an indication that the two items belong to the theme. The overall mean of 4.460 shows that a decrease in the quality of education is often a consequence of grade

alteration and grade inflation. Participants in Yusuf's research study (2024) reveal that inflated grades and great alteration lead to various consequences, among which are a

decrease in the quality of education and failure to achieve its goals.

CONCLUSIONS

alteration and inflation. The low standard deviation of .908 indicates that the respondents are homogeneous in their responses. They are

It is evident from the result of the analysis of the causes and consequences of grade alteration and grade inflation that the main

University of Arusha Academic Journal, UoAAJ 3(1), 2025 causes of grade alteration are students' considerations (the desire to provide students with opportunities, students efforts and behavior); pressure to raise grades by administration and the need for compassion while the major causes of grade inflation are administrative and teachers' factor; students' nuisance and use of part-time or non-tenured lecturers. In the same vein, the leading consequences of grade alteration and inflation are the failure of education to achieve its goals and a decrease in the quality of education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study, the following recommendations were made. Schools can thoroughly interrogate altered grades before their acceptance as a measure of students' performance, while inflated grades and grade inflation should be extensively audited. The issue of School administration and parents putting pressure on teachers about grades must be broken. For this purpose, in-service training can be given to school administrations on the long-term damages that could result from grade alteration and inflation. On the issues of students' nuisance and use of part-time or non-tenured lecturers, lecturers should be trained on teaching professional ethics so that they can disabuse their minds from any external influences, as grading is a concern and thus award grades devoid of any other considerations apart from the demands of the test or examination.

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