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Has there been Grade Inflation in Irish Universities?

The argument against

by Dr. Áine Hyland, former Professor of Education and Vice-President of University College Cork.

(NAIRTL Debate – November 2008))

The statistics speak for themselves. More students are graduating today with an honours degree than was the case a generation ago. Forty years ago, less than 30% of undergraduates were awarded an Honours degree compared to 75% today. But to use words such as “dumbing down” or “grade inflation” to describe this phenomenon is, in my view, unfair to present day students who, I would argue, generally deserve the grades which they are awarded. I believe that it is wrong to interpret the improvement in the proportion of students getting an honours degree as artificial grade inflation or to imply that students are awarded grades or marks that are undeserved. The academic standard of most students entering Irish universities is considerably higher today than it was a generation ago. While the Leaving Certificate points system is far from perfect, it has resulted in students entering university today with Leaving Certificate results that were unheard of in the 1960s. It has also led to a culture of hard work, confidence and competitiveness among students on a scale unimagined a generation ago.

How many readers today remember the university admissions system of the 1960s? Admission was basically restricted to those whose families could afford to pay college fees and living costs for their offspring, and who could forego the extra income that a working son or daughter might contribute to the family coffers. In the early 1960s less than 5% of 18 year olds went on to higher education. Today that proportion has increased more than tenfold with over 60% now proceeding to higher education. Entry to virtually all university courses in the early 1960s was open to all who had matriculated i.e. who had passed the Matriculation examination or the Leaving Certificate. Of the males who were admitted to Medicine in the NUI colleges in 1963, over 70% of them had achieved less than three Honours in the Leaving Certificate i.e. they had the equivalent of less than 300 points by today’s calculations! (Interestingly, the achievement level of girls was higher with more than 50% of them at that level – indicating that better academic performance by females is not a new phenomenon). Similarly, 80% of males were accepted to study Law with less than 300 points and over 70% were admitted to Commerce. The completion rate for most courses was low, but many of those who would nowadays be regarded as “low-points” students, graduated successfully and many are now eminent medical consultants or members of the Bar or judges – proving a point that students do not need the extraordinarily high points required today in some professional courses to graduate successfully. However, international research evidence shows that academic achievement in secondary school is a reliable predictor of future performance at university. Consequently, it is not really surprising that the proportion of students achieving an Honours degree is higher today than it was in

the 1960s as very few university courses nowadays accept students with less than 300 points.

However, this is only part of the explanation for the higher grades achieved by today's university students. A relatively recent re-calibration of the marking scheme for all degree courses within the NUI universities, has led to a situation where examiners generally now use the full range of 100 marks. In the past, following the tradition of the Oxbridge universities, there was a marked reluctance in the "older" Irish universities (i.e. the NUI universities and Trinity College) to use the full range of marks especially in the upper range. Students almost never got a mark above 75% on any examination paper or assignment, especially in Arts, Humanities, Social Science and Business courses or in professional courses such as Law, Medicine and Dentistry. This placed NUI graduates at a serious disadvantage when competing for a postgraduate place against graduates from universities whose students had been marked out of the full 100 mark range. With the introduction of the new NUI marking system some years ago, the criteria for the various levels of marks were made available to students, somewhat akin to the practice of the (Irish) State Examinations Commission which makes available on its website the marking schemes for the various subjects of the Junior Cert and the Leaving Cert examinations.

A current development arising out of the EU Bologna agreement will bring this transparency and visibility a step further. All Irish universities are now required to re-define their courses in terms of student Learning Outcomes i.e they are required to make explicit what it is they expect their students to know, understand and be able to do. The teaching approaches and methods of assessment used by lecturers will also be more clearly defined and consistent with what the course is trying to achieve. For those who agree that examinations should be designed to provide an opportunity for students to demonstrate what they know, understand and can do, this is a positive development. Those who would prefer to think of examinations as obstacle races, designed to trap students or to place obstacles in their way, are less happy about the introduction of a Learning Outcomes. Like so many issues in education, one's view of student assessment is coloured by one's philosophy and values!