

A decade of grade inflation boosted by the COVID-19 pandemic

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Summary

1. Academic performance prior entering university is declining, while university access has widened, suggesting a decreasing marginal academic proficiency of incoming higher education students.
2. Paradoxically, university grades have remained stable or even increased, pointing to the presence of grade inflation, driven by more lenient grading practices.
3. Our study finds a modest but consistent inflation trend, which intensified sharply—up to tenfold—during the COVID-19 crisis.
4. These effects are concentrated among weaker students, while stronger students show little to no change.
5. To maintain the signaling value of grades, universities should promote staff awareness, adopt standardized grading practices, and consider independent review mechanisms to uphold academic standards.

1. Introduction

Higher education is going through a period of change marked by seemingly opposing trends. First, students are arriving at university with weaker academic skills than in the past. According to the 2022 PISA results, there has been a steady decline in school performance over the last decade—a trend made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic (OECD, 2023). At the same time, universities are welcoming a more diverse group of students than ever before, thanks to broader access to higher education.

Taken together, these trends might suggest that today's students are less academically prepared. Yet, surprisingly, student grades have been rising.

Research shows this rise in grades might not be due to better performance, but to grade inflation—where students receive higher marks without showing more learning (Bachan, 2017; Bamat, 2014; Chowdhury, 2018; Griffith & Sovero, 2021; Jephcote et al., 2021; Jewell et al., 2013). This is a concern because when grades lose their meaning, employers find it harder to judge which

graduates have the strongest skills and potential.

In François and De Witte (2025), we study grade inflation at a major European university that operates with an open admission policy. Using a detailed dataset covering individual students from 2012 to 2022, we track changes in grades over time. By applying a fixed effects approach, we are able to separate the overall trend of grade inflation from the specific impact of the COVID-19 period, when instructors were encouraged to be more lenient in their grading. We also use a method called Coarsened Exact Matching (CEM) to group students into “strong” and “weak” performers. This allows us to examine whether grade inflation affects different types of students in different ways.

2. Data and Methodology

Our analysis covers 28,520 students enrolled in economics and business programs between the academic years 2012–2013 and 2021–2022. For each student, we track their performance in every course they took during their studies, along with background information such as gender, nationality, and high school program

In addition to identifying the presence of grade inflation, we also explore what might be causing it. Grade inflation refers to rising grades that do not reflect real improvements in students’ skills. One possible explanation is that the students who entered university in 2012 were academically stronger than those in 2021, meaning that changes in the makeup of student cohorts could partly explain why average grades have gone up over time. Another possibility is that recent cohorts are simply more motivated and put in more effort,

leading to better learning outcomes. However, this seems unlikely, given that international assessments such as PISA 2022 (OECD, 2023) and TIMSS 2023 (von Davier et al., 2024) report declining student achievement and ambition. To account for changes in student composition, we classify students in the 2012 cohort as either “strong” or “weak” based on their academic performance.

3. Results

Our estimates of the effects of COVID-19 and long-term grade inflation are shown in Figure 1. Before the COVID-19 pandemic (before January 2020), student grades were gradually declining. However, during the pandemic, we see a clear and significant increase in grades. This rise is likely due to either students working harder during a difficult time or, more plausibly, the more lenient grading policies introduced in response to the crisis. After the pandemic, this leniency appears to have diminished, as shown by the smaller increases in grades in the years that followed. Our analysis also confirms the broader trend of grade inflation. When we convert the standardized effects into a 20-point grading scale, we find that grades increased by 0.5 points during the pandemic. In addition, there has been a steady increase of about 0.075 points per year over the full period studied.

However, these results alone do not tell us whether grade inflation is caused by more lenient grading or by genuine improvements in student ability. To explore this, we keep the student population constant over time. The consistently positive trend in Figures 2 and 3 suggests that the main driver of grade inflation is increased leniency in grading,

rather than stronger students.¹ This trend is especially noticeable among weaker students, whose grades increased by 0.085 to 0.16 points per year. In contrast, stronger students show no significant grade gains—and in some cases, even slight declines. This pattern is concerning, as it suggests that grades for weaker students are rising to match those of stronger students, potentially reducing the value of university degrees.

In François and De Witte (2025), we are not able to formally test the reasons behind grade inflation among weaker students. However, existing research points to the role of instructor bias. Studies from earlier stages of education (Ferman & Fontes, 2022; Gortazar, Lafuente & Vega-Bayo, 2022; Reibel, 2022) suggest that teachers often aim to maintain a stable pass rate from year to year—even when the academic level of borderline students declines. This tendency may help explain why weaker students have seen larger increases in grades over time.

4. Policy recommendations

Grade inflation poses serious risks for both universities and students. It undermines the credibility of academic qualifications, reduces the value of degrees in the job market, and can mask gaps in student learning. These consequences highlight the need for timely and targeted policy action.

1. Raising staff awareness

Our findings, along with previous research on cognitive biases, suggest that some grade inflation may occur unintentionally. We recommend raising awareness among teaching staff about this issue and reinforcing the importance of fair and consistent grading.

At this stage, we do not propose limiting academic freedom. Preserving instructor autonomy remains crucial, given its proven link to institutional quality and innovation.

2. Targeted policies

Since grade inflation can differ across faculties or departments (Jephcote et al., 2021), a one-size-fits-all approach may not be effective. Grading policies should be tailored to reflect these variations. One possible solution is to introduce standardized grading scales that apply across multiple courses or instructors, helping to ensure more consistent and transparent assessment practices.

3. Evaluation committees

Independent internal or public committees should be established to monitor grading practices, ensure consistency, and uphold academic standards. However, these committees should not only evaluate, but also guide institutions in case of crisis such as the pandemic.

Overall, prioritizing student competence over pass rates must become a core objective for all stakeholders. While this may lead to lower immediate success rates, it represents a necessary and courageous step toward preserving academic integrity.

¹ In this case, the results are directly translated in a 20-grade scale.

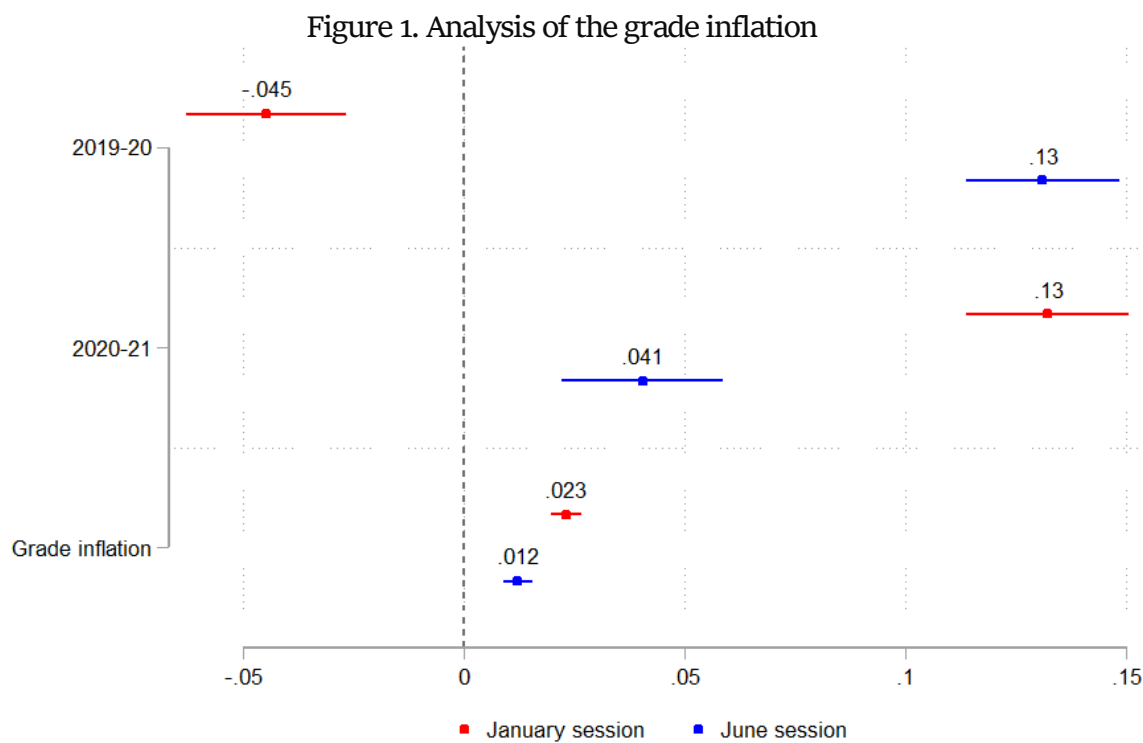
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BRIDGE is an impact-driven project that aims to build resilient individuals through effective educational transition by formulating robust policy recommendations on education and training policies, the efficient use of public resources and the support of equity and inclusion in education and training systems in the EU.

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Figures



Note : Figure 1 presents our main estimates highlighting changes in standardized grades during COVID-19 and evaluating the grade inflation on a yearly base.

Source : The above figure is derived from Table 2 in François and De Witte (2025, p9)

Figure 2. Grade inflation between constant population of weak VS strong Students – CEM using student's 'rank'

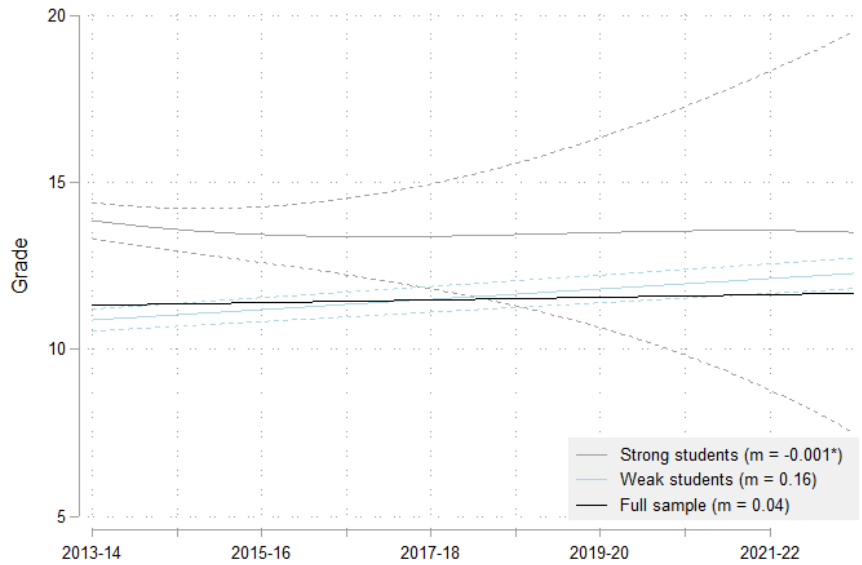
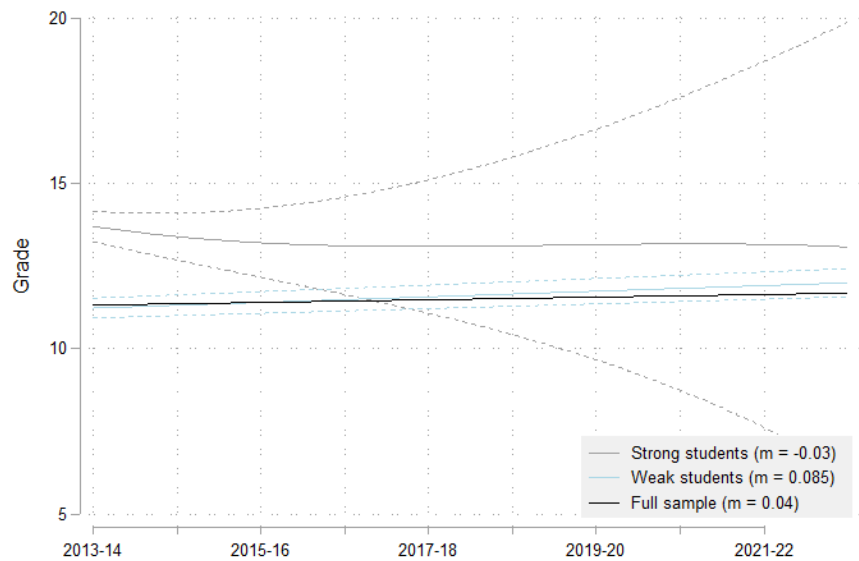


Figure 3. Grade inflation between constant population of weak VS strong Students – CEM using student's likelihood of re-take exams



Note: Figures 2 and 3 illustrate the grade inflation phenomenon for strong and weak students, respectively. The distinction between these groups is based on different criteria in each figure. In Figure 2, students are classified as strong if they are among the top 35% based on their average rank position compared to their peers, while weak students are in the bottom 40%. Figure 2 categorizes students based on the average number of retake exams: a value of 1.2 or below indicates a strong student, while a value above 1.5 indicates a weak student. Students observed for more than 7 years are excluded. m represents the average trend.
 * The trend of "strong" individuals is not significantly different from 0.

Source : The above figures are respectively referred as Figure 1 and 2 in François and De Witte (2025, p12-13)

Further Information:

François, M. & De Witte, K. (2025). A decade of grade inflation boosted by the COVID-19 pandemic—An empirical analysis of a top European university. *British Educational Research Journal*, 00, 1-69. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.4172>



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