

Grade Inflation in Higher Education: Analysis of the Institutional Practices in Lower Dir, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

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Abstract: *This research studies the institutional practices which contribute to grade inflation at higher education institutions in Lower Dir, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. This is a region where socio-cultural, economic, and institutional pressures dominate educational standards. Using a quantitative design within a positivist paradigm, data were collected from a sample of 387 students at four institutions using structured questionnaires and analyzed using descriptive statistics and chi-square calculations using SPSS. The data found that 40.8% of students believe their institutions practice lenient grading, 32% agree that institutions prioritize high pass rates to the detriment of academic rigor, 34.6% of students note that institutions exhibit a lack of accountability in grading, and 35.8% suggest that academic and learning outcomes are affected by institutions' desire to maintain pass rates. The results suggest that grade inflation is sustained by institutional leniency, lack of accountability and social institutions' will to preserve institutional reputation and student retention in the system. The study concludes that grade inflation constitutes a significant threat to the moral credibility of higher education, and if unchecked, would appear to threaten employability, especially in the rural regions of Pakistan. The researchers recommend the use of standardized and consistent grading rubrics at all Higher Educational institutions; periodic audits of the grading practice of faculty members; stronger faculty training in ethics of grading; and the use of enhanced transparency and community awareness programs to protect academic integrity.*

Keywords: Institutional Practices, Grade Inflation, Education and Socio-Cultural

1.1 Introduction

Education is an important social institution through which students learn specific knowledge, basic facts, cultural norms, and values, and enhance their income (Ayodo, 2022). Through achieving higher education, students change their quality of life with social mobility (Borghesan, 2023). Education helps to bring awareness about all the demanded tendencies (Abdullah et al., 2023; Sonner, 2000). It provides skills that are necessary for life, and it is also important in societal development, bringing innovation, technology, industries, specialized knowledge, and globalization, which support social mobility, economic stability, and quality of life (Boubaker et al., 2022). Education also faces many problems, and one serious problem is grade inflation. Grade inflation is the act of awarding student's higher grades or exaggerating students' marks (Khan et al., 2023). The results of this issue are to diminish the value and significance of high grades and reduce academic performance and standards (Jiang et al., 2022; Khan

& Alam, 2025).

The trend of awarding increasingly higher grades over time, even for similar levels of accomplishment, is these days termed grade inflation (Brown, 2020). Grade inflation is a factor undermining objectivity and rigorous appraisal of academic assessments, narrowing the differences among various levels of achievement, thus diminishing the real value of an academic qualification (Cha & Amrein-Beardsley, 2024). There has been a phenomenal increase in the participation of global higher education, where the gross enrollment ratio (GER) reached 19% in the year 2000 and 38% by 2020 (Khan et al., 2023). This demonstrates generally the importance of post-secondary education for national development (Jephcote et al., 2021; Khan & Alam, 2026). Grade inflation has become a major problematic issue in various educational systems and tends to signify the pressure to give higher grades throughout the competitive academic systems in vogue (Choi, 202; Kajishita et al., 2025; Sonner, 2000).

Students are thought to be under pressure to obtain every high grade since woven together in between the weft of family honor over generations and future economic prosperity, lies only academic achievement (Elkady, 2024). Educational institutions are said to be involved with grade inflation to attract students and upgrade their rating in the competitive market (Emere et al., 2025). Besides, standardized assessments divert grade-oriented attention away from developing critical thinking skills (Esangbedo & Xue, 2025).

Many reasons contribute to grade inflation and the government is sometimes guilty of improper management in education (Ferrer et al., 2023). There can be pressure on the part of the teachers to give higher grades to students of disadvantaged backgrounds to assist them in making up for lost ground. There can be further pressure from school administrators or politicians to make students happy at the cost of standards (Ford, 2022). Teachers are constantly aware of criticism regarding how effective their teaching methods are. To avoid criticism, they sometimes inflate the grades of the students, but they have no clear system for preventing grading inflation (Ge, 2024). Thus, few institutions have any formal processes for checking or addressing this question. In their absence, this kind of problem tends to be ignored (Alam et al., 2024). Even in cases in which regulations exist regarding teacher performance and grading, personal considerations often take precedence over these standards (Garcia, 2019).

Other major contributors to grade inflation are favoritism towards ethnic groups, strong pressure from certain groups, denigrating attitudes against teachers, and poorly performing assessments by government entities (Gelman et al., 2022). Teachers in Pakistan resort to grade inflation so students do not drop out of schools, especially in a milieu that does not attend to and embrace education with great zeal in such a society that looks at failure as a mark of closure to any further academic pursuit, teachers promote the passing of students to retain them in the system (Grunwald et al., 2025). Even though influenced by institutional financial pressures, it shows teachers' commitment towards preserving educational continuity, especially recognizing economic or cultural factors driving students out of school (Gill, 2022).

Furthermore, grade inflation can emanate from an abundance of institutional pressures: the demand to retain students, to raise institutional rankings, and the requirements imposed by accreditation, all likely to drive teachers into awarding higher marks (Grunwald et al., 2024).

1.2 Research Methodology

1.2.1 Philosophical Orientation: The Study Nature and Design

This study is pure quantitative in nature and focused on the collection and analysis of numerical data. The purpose of the study is to quantify the contributory factors of grade inflation in higher education institutions. For this study, quantitative approach was incorporated by the researcher it provides the researcher with measurable data from a large sample, enabling the researcher to find patterns and relationships between institutional and grading inflation. Mostly quantitative framed by positivist

paradigm, which argues that reality can be observed. The positivist stance supported the use of structured instruments and statistical techniques to yield generalizable conclusions about the factors associated with grade inflation within higher education. A cross-sectional research design was used for this study. The data were collected at one point in time, by looking at the relationships among the variables being examined as they related to the topic of the research study.

1.2.2 Universe: Unit of Analysis and Sampling

The universe of this study consisted of all students currently enroll in higher education in district Dir Lower. The target population is comprised of students from selected higher education institutions in Lower Dir, the inclusion and exclusion criteria as follow;

Data were collected from students who were in their at least fourth semester of study, from four institutions:

- Postgraduate Degree College (Balambat)
- National Institution Kandaro (Balambat)
- Govt Girl's Degree College (Timergara)
- Abdul Wali Khan University Campus (Balambat)

The students chosen had been at their institutions long enough to have experienced some level of the institutional grading policies. Those who did not have four semesters (i.e., sometime at one or more of the institutions) were eliminated from the have been practice it was anticipated they would not have received sufficient exposure to grading policies to provide meaningful reflections on historical grading trends. The stratified random sampling method was used to fulfill in terms of representing both gender groups. The total student population around the selected institutions was 2,178 and, with sampling table, the appropriate sample size for these student population was 387 after collecting data from 387 students, 194 were male and 193 were female participants. This sampling method provided a balanced sample across gender groups and provided better accuracy and reliability around grade inflation findings in higher education institutions.

1.2.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected using a structured questionnaire containing closed-ended questions. The format of the questionnaire was developed to allow for quantitative analysis focused on variables that are relevant to social influences, economic influences, and the influences of institutions towards students than to grades.

1.2.4 Data Analysis

The data was analyzed through SPSS while presented on Table and Forest-Plot (RStudio). One way univariate descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) were used to summarize the demographic characteristics of the respondents and bivariate inferential analysis using the chi-square test was used to analyze for relationships between variables.

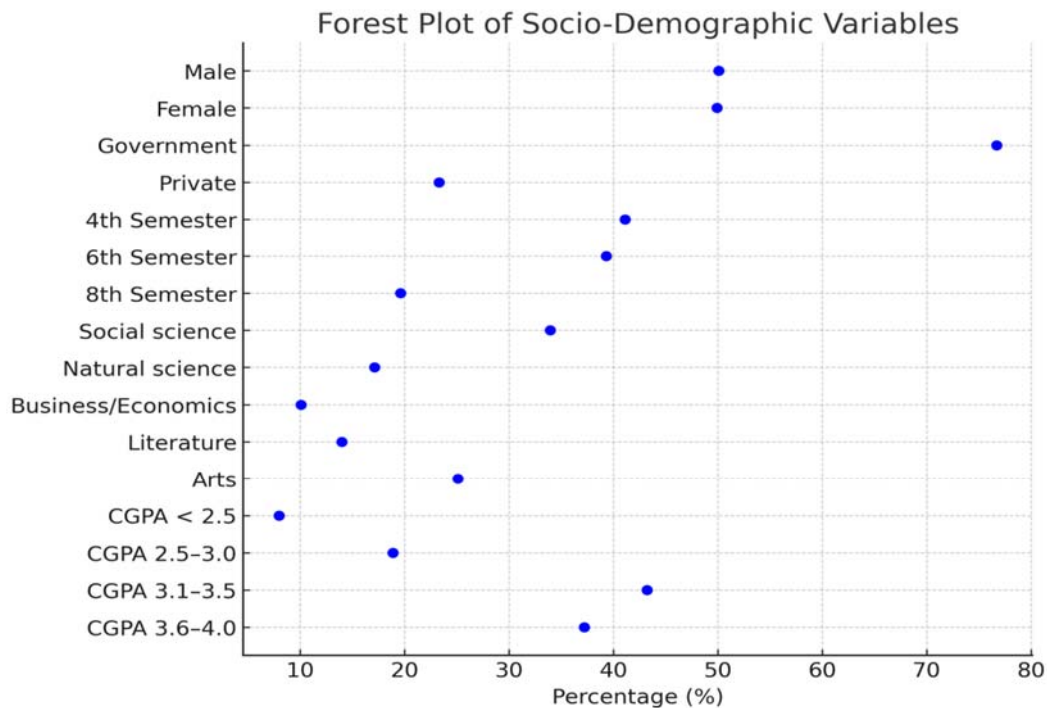
1.3 Results

1.3.1 Descriptive Analysis

This section provided a descriptive analysis of the demographic characteristics of the sampled respondents. The information included gender, type of institution, discipline/department, and academic performance (CGPA or Percentage) as well as institutional factor responsible for grading inflation

Table No. 1: Socio-Demographic Variable

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	194	50.1%
Female	193	49.9%
Type of Institution		
Government	297	76.7%
Private	90	23.3%
Semester		
4 th	159	41.1%
6 th	152	39.3%
8 th	76	19.6%
Discipline/Department		
Social science	131	33.95%
Natural science	66	17.1%
Business/ Economics	39	10.1%
Literature	54	14.0%
Arts	97	25.1%
Academic Performance (CGPA or Percentage)		
Below- 2.5	3	8%
2.5–3.0	72	18.9%
3.1–3.5	167	43.2%
3.6–4.0	144	37.2%

Forest Plot No. 1: Socio-Demographic Variable**Description**

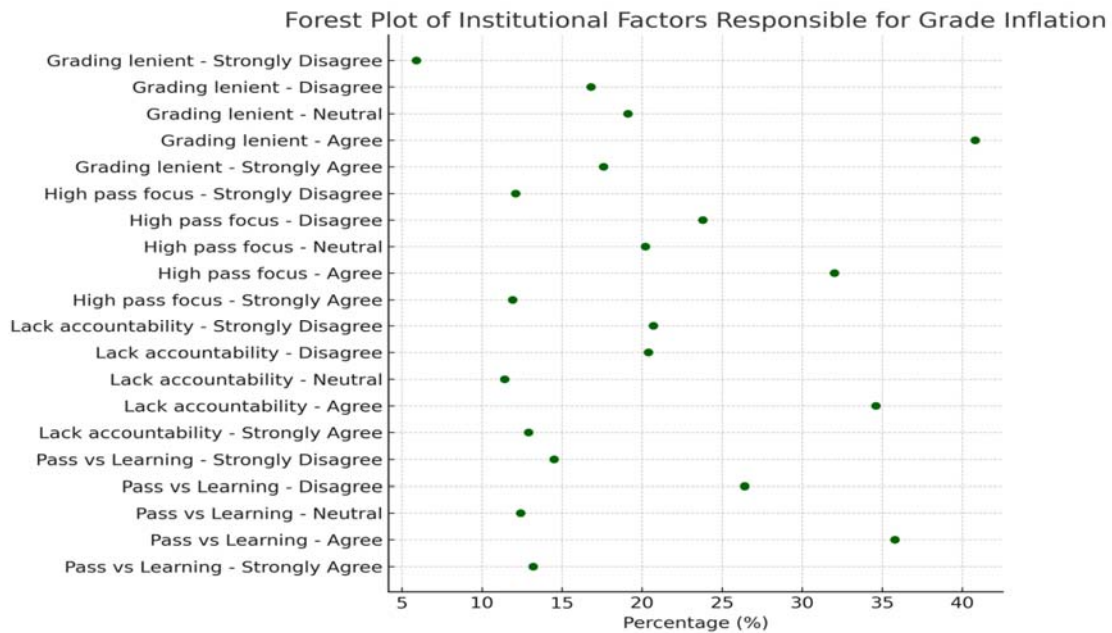
The above table and forest plot presents the socio demographic profile of the potential respondent: Out of the total respondent 50.1% are male while the reaming 49.9% are female in the series of data A gender-balanced sample will be critical in limiting bias and/or in assessing gender-based differences in academic outcomes and educational institutional social dynamics (Johnson & Lee, 2019). Out of the

total respondent 76.7% belong to government institution while the remaining 23.3% lead to private institution in the series of data. Institutional type may impact degree granulation standards, access to resources, availability for motivation, or expectations with respect to student's success. Overall studies confirm that public institutions and private institutions often study academic culture and quality assurance differently (Williams, 2014). The distribution of respondents by semester shows 41.1% in 4th, 39.3% in 6th, and 19.6% in 8th semesters indicating a sample likely predominantly representing intermediate- to advanced-level undergraduate and graduate students. Academic standing may affect perceptions about grade inflation or academic pressures (Garcia, 2019). Out of the total respondent 33.95% belong to Social science, 17.1% belong to Natural science, 10.1% belong to Business/Economics, 14.0% lead to Literature and the remaining 25.1% wipe off Arts in the series of data. It is well established that disciplinary differences impact grading norms and students' perceptions of grading (Chen & Lee, 2016). Out of the total respondent 8% belong to Below- 2.5 CGPA, 18.9% belong to 2.5–3.0 CGPA, 43.2% lead to 3.1–3.5 CGPA, and the remaining 37.2% wipe off 3.6–4.0 CGPA, in the series of data. The level of academic achievement can influence a student's perceptions of fairness, sense of pressure, and attitude to grading (Martin & Hill, 2016).

Table No. 02: Institutional factor responsible for grade inflation

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
The grading system at your institution seem more lenient compared to other institutions?		
Strongly Disagree	23	5.9%
Disagree	65	16.8
Neutral	74	19.1
Agree	157	40.8
Strongly Agree	68	17.6
Institution focus on maintaining high pass rates rather than academic rigor?		
Strongly Disagree	47	12.1%
Disagree	92	23.8%
Neutral	78	20.2%
Agree	124	32%
Strongly Agree	46	11.9%
Institution lack proper checks and accountability measure to ensure grades are given fairly?		
Strongly Disagree	80	20.7%
Disagree	79	20.4%
Neutral	44	11.4%
Agree	134	34.6%
Strongly Agree	50	12.9%
Institution prioritize the number of passing students over actual learning outcomes?		
Strongly Disagree	56	14.5%
Disagree	102	26.4%
Neutral	48	12.4%
Agree	127	35.8%
Strongly Agree	52	13.2%

Forest Plot No. 02: Institutional factor responsible for grade inflation



Description

The above table and forest plot present the institutional factors responsible to Grade Inflation: Where 5.9% respondents strongly disagree with the statement that the grading system at your institution seem more lenient compared to other institutions, 16.8 disagree, 19.1 neutral, 40.8 agree and the reaming 17.6 wipe off strongly agree. Out of the total respondents 12.1% select strongly disagree against the statement that institution focus on maintaining high pass rates rather than academic rigor, 23.8% disagree, 20.2% neutral, 32% agree and the reaming 11.9%wipe off strongly agree. Out of the total respondents 20.7% select strongly disagree against the statement that Institution lack proper checks and accountability measure to ensure grades are given fairly, 20.4% disagree, 11.4% neutral, 34.6% agree and the reaming 12.9% wipe off strongly agree. Out of the total respondents 14.5% select strongly disagree against the statement that institution prioritize the number of passing students over actual learning outcomes, 26.4% disagree, 12.4% neutral, 35.8% agree and the reaming 13.2% wipe off strongly agree.

1.3.2 Bivariate Analysis

The collected data were analyzed through SPSS (Statistical project for Social Sciences) software. The bivariate data were presented in tables while utilized Chi Square Test to measure the association between dependent and independent variables

Table No. 03: Institutional Factor Responsible for Grade Inflation

Statement	Response	Institutional factors					Total	Statistics
		SD	D	N	A	SA		
The grading system at your institution seem more lenient compared to other institutions	SD	3 (8.8%)	9 (7.4%)	5 (4.2%)	5(5.4%)	1(1.3%)	23	$\chi^2=104.059$ P = (0.000)
	D	2 (5.9%)	30(24.6%)	19(16.1%)	5(5.4%)	9(45.0%)	65	
	N	15 (44.1%)	29(23.8%)	10(8.5%)	13(14.0%)	7(35.0%)	74	
	A	3 (32.4%)	44(8.2%)	70(11.9%)	37(39.1%)	3(15.0%)	157	
	SA	11 (32.4%)	10(8.2%)	14(11.9%)	33(35.5)	0(0.0%)	68	

	Total	34	122	118	93	20	387	
2 Institution focus on maintaining high pass rates rather than academic rigor.	SD	9 (26.5%)	22(18.0%)	13(11.0%)	3(3.2%)	0(0.0%)	47	$\chi^2=108.698$ P = (0.000)
	D	13(38.2%)	38(31.1%)	23(19.5%)	15(16.1%)	3(15.0%)	92	
	N	12(35.3%)	21(17.2%)	29(24.6%)	6(6.5%)	10(50.0%)	78	
	A	0(0.0%)	40(32.8%)	34(28.8%)	43(46.2%)	7(35.0%)	124	
	SA	0(0.0%)	1(0.8%)	19(16.1%)	26(28.0)	0(0.0%)	46	
	Total	34	122	118	93	20	387	
Institution lack proper checks and accountability measure to ensure grades are given fairly?	SD	14(41.2%)	40(32.8%)	17(14.4%)	5(5.4%)	4(20.0%)	80	$\chi^2=122.943$ P = (0.000)
	D	5(14.7%)	20(16.4%)	40(33.9%)	4(4.4%)	10(50.0%)	79	
	N	0(0.0%)	18(14.8%)	13(11.0%)	13(14.0%)	0(0.0%)	44	
	A	3(8.8%)	42(34.4%)	30(25.4%)	53(57.0%)	6(30.0%)	134	
	SA	12(35.3%)	2(1.6%)	18(15.3%)	18(19.4%)	0(0.0%)	50	
	Total	34	122	118	93	20	387	
Institutional factor responsible for grade inflation	SD	18(52.9%)	17(13.9%)	15(12.7%)	2(2.2%)	4(20.0%)	56	$\chi^2=128.567$ P = (0.000)
	D	8(7.8%)	30(24.6%)	48(40.7%)	16(17.2%)	0(0.0%)	102	
	N	0(0.0%)	22(18.0%)	18(15.3%)	8(8.6%)	0(0.0%)	48	
	A	2 (5.9%)	45(36.9%)	29(24.6%)	41(44.1%)	10(50.0%)	127	
	SA	0(0.0%)	3 (%2.5)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	3	
	Total	34	122	118	93	20	287	

Explanation

There is statistical highly significant relationship between the grading system at your institution seem more lenient compared to other institutions, where is $\chi^2=104.059$ P = (0.00). There is statistical highly significant relationship Institution focus on maintaining high pass rates rather than academic rigor., where is $\chi^2=108.698$ P = (0.000). There are statistical highly significant relationship between Institution lack proper checks and accountability measure to ensure grades are given fairly, where is $\chi^2=122.943$ P = (0.000). There are statistical highly significant Institution lack proper checks and accountability measure to ensure grades are given fairly, where is $\chi^2=128.567$ P = (0.000)

1.4 Discussion

The current study investigated institutional, factors that influence grade inflation in higher education institutions. The results indicate that 40.8% of respondents agreed that their institutional grading system was the more lenient in grade distribution when compared to other institutions and 32% agreed that institutions emphasize maintaining high pass rates over academic. In the same vein, 34.6% agreed there is no accountability for grading in their institution, while 35.8% agreed that institutions emphasize student pass rates over learning outcomes. These results show there to be a strong institutional bias towards grade inflation as a strategy for maintaining institutional reputation and student retention. These results are consistent with the argument Ayodo, (2022), who affirm the decline in academic rigor is in part justified by creating a learning environment that severely minimizes student stress, ultimately to the detriment of academic rigor.

Similarly, Borghesan, (2023), indicates that institutional rewards that have more weight on pass rates than actual learning stimulate superficial outcomes when they actually should be intellectual ones. The results northern Pakistan indicate this additional evidence, indicating institutional and systemic pressures to maintain viability and competitiveness within an increasingly commodified education context (Boubaker et al., 2022). All over the world, we see similar patterns. Brown, T. (2020), indicated that lack of standardized grading in departments often means that grading becomes subject to individual discretion, and very easily leads to inflation. The results Pakistan in which venues were some

accountability checks appeared weak or nonexistent, [add citation] concurs. Cha & Amrein-Beardsley, (2024) adds that institutions that emphasise measurable outcomes (e.g. graduation rates) ultimately choose when it comes to representing intellectual growth in higher education.

1.5 Major finding

This study explained factors responsible for grade inflation which major finding the following;

- 50.1% of respondents are male and 49.9% are female, indicating a nearly gender-balanced sample important for minimizing bias.
- 76.7% of respondents attend government institutions, while 23.3% attend private institutions, highlighting that the majority study in public sector colleges.
- 41.1% of respondents are in their 4th semester, 39.3% in 6th semester, and 19.6% in 8th semester, indicating a sample primarily representing intermediate to advanced undergraduate students.
- 33.95% of respondents study social Sciences, 25.1% Arts, 17.1% Natural Sciences, 14.0% Literature, and 10.1% Business/Economics, showing diversity across academic disciplines.
- 43.2% of respondents have a CGPA between 3.1–3.5, and 37.2% have CGPA between 3.6–4.0, indicating that most respondents have relatively high academic achievement.
- 40.8% respondents agree with the statement that the grading system at their institution seems more lenient compared to other institutions.
- 32.0% respondents agreed with the statement that institutions focus on maintaining high pass rates rather than academic rigor.
- 34.6% respondents agree with the statement that institutions lack proper checks and accountability measures to ensure grades are given fairly.
- 35.8% respondents agree with the statement that institutions prioritize the number of passing students over actual learning outcomes.

1.6 Conclusion and Recommendations

This research has examined institutional elements that cause grade inflation in higher education. The results show grade inflation can be defined as a complex and multi determined process that stems from and institutional factors. The fact that respondents were in various stages of their studies, primarily between intermediate to advanced semesters, and studying in a range of disciplines, suggests that the findings have a possible wider applicability for students at various points in their studies in higher education.

- Institutions should endorse, embrace, and support a culture that values learning and mastery of content and skills, in contrast to a culture that promotes passing or achieving a high grade.
- Community engagement initiatives can help educate community members including parents and local leaders about the consequences of grade inflation on their social and economic mobility.
- Encourage formative assessment and reduce the reliance on final grades as measures of individual educational success.
- Offer financial aid packages to students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds in order to reduce the need and desire to manipulate grades.
- Increase transparency of grading systems and reporting so students and stakeholders have a

better understanding of the criteria for grading.

- Strengthen partnerships between institutions and communities to align academics with community expectations.
- Establish means for students and teachers to privately report undue pressure or coercion over grades, free from retaliation for doing so.
- Foster interdisciplinary studies that research grading to understand socio-economic and institutional influences leading to grade inflation.

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