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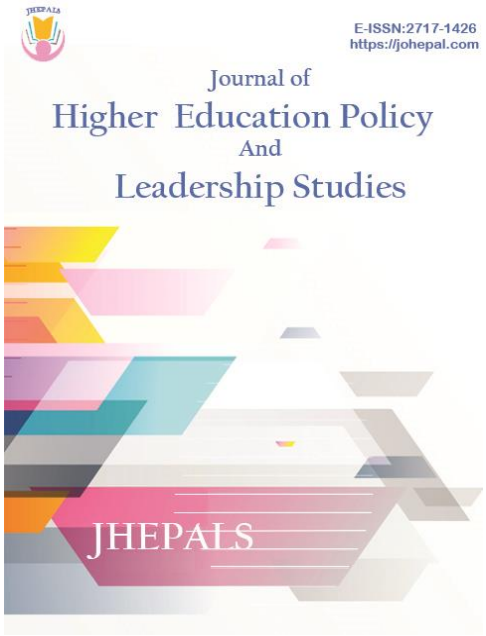

Grade Inflation in Turkish Higher Education: Insights from Faculty at Public and Private Universities

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Grade Inflation in Turkish Higher Education: Insights from Faculty at Public and Private Universities

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Abstract

This qualitative case study explores the perspectives of faculty members on the complex dynamics surrounding grading practices in Turkish higher education, with a special focus on public and private universities. The findings of the study reveal that the prevalence of bell curve grading, especially in private universities, is perceived to benefit underperforming students. Additionally, non-academic factors affecting grading highlight the subjective nature of the grading practice, suggesting that grades alone might not accurately reflect students' true performance. Parental expectations and university administration demands, particularly in private universities, were acknowledged to influence the tendency of the faculty to adjust the grades upward. A subjective approach to grading might be a reaction of faculty to a consumerist mindset in higher education in which maintaining student satisfaction is prioritized and transactional relation becomes more pronounced . At both types of universities, faculty expressed a tendency among students to feel entitled to higher grades regardless of their actual academic performance. This shift in student attitudes has transformed the perception of faculty and contributed to grade inflation.

Keywords: Grade Inflation; Grading Practices; Faculty; University Students; Turkish Higher Education

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Introduction

The grading system in higher education (HE) is a critical tool to evaluate student achievement. However, when it deviates from its intended purpose (Chan et al., 2007; Pattison et al., 2013), students receive higher grades than deserved by their mastery and performance (Baglione & Smith, 2022; Birnbaum, 1977). Grades, crucial for graduation, employment, and further education (Rojstaczer & Healy, 2012), become problematic if they fail to represent proficiency accurately. Grade inflation (GI) addresses an inconsistency in grading standards that leads to variations in what a 4.0 GPA signifies.

While GI has been extensively studied (Bachan, 2017; Baglione & Smith, 2022; Bowen & Cooper, 2021), research on faculty perceptions in the Turkish context remains limited (Karali, 2021; Sınacı, 2019). This qualitative study focuses on this gap by applying Social Exchange Theory (SET) to offer fresh insights into faculty perspectives on grading practices and GI in Turkish HE. Specifically, this study aims to answer how faculty members perceive the effectiveness and fairness of the grading systems used in their universities and what factors faculty members perceive as contributing to grade inflation within their universities.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

GI is a phenomenon in which average grades increase over time and lose their discriminative power as there is not a corresponding rise in the actual level of content mastery (Rosovsky & Hartley, 2002). Inflated grades can cause a misleading impression of student performance, which might reduce student motivation and societal trust in the value of higher education (Baglione & Smith, 2022). Today, fear of failure has diminished as high grades are easily attainable, potentially leading to incorrect reporting and feedback (Wilson, 1999). GI misleads employers, affecting postgraduate applications and scholarship eligibility (Chan et al., 2007). Transcripts, contaminated with non-academic information, lose value and mislead students and external parties (Close, 2009). Ethical considerations emphasize the necessity of grades reflecting academic competence impartially and consistently. Faculty subjectivity introduces bias, promoting competition and confusion (Feldman, 2019).

The Social Exchange Theory (SET), focusing on negotiated and reciprocal exchange principles (Molm et al., 1999), offers a valuable framework for understanding GI. SET suggests individuals enter social relationships expecting rewards with minimal costs (Blau, 1964). Explicit agreements in tuition payments create expectations of higher grades in exchange for financial investment (Molm et al., 1999). Reciprocal exchange, observed in student-faculty relationships, involves implicit exchanges where positive connections with faculty result in potentially inflated grades. In essence, SET illuminates how consumer-oriented dynamics influence the grading process and contribute to GI.

The Turkish Context of HE

Turkiye's predominantly young population (15.2% aged 15-24) is served by 208 HE institutions, including 129 public and 79 private universities, governed by the Council of Higher Education (CoHE) since the enactment of Law No. 2547. Public universities are government-funded and free, while private universities charge tuition, leading to a commercial lens of education (Şah & Candaş, 2021). Despite substantial governmental funding, approximately 38% of universities are private. Research on GI in Turkish HE is

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limited despite some studies exploring grade dynamics in high school exams (Karali, 2021; Sınacı, 2019) and medical education in HE during the Covid-19 pandemic (Karadag, 2021). However, a comprehensive understanding of GI, particularly from the faculty perspective, is lacking. This qualitative study aims to explore faculty perceptions of GI in both public and private universities in Turkish higher education to address this gap.

Research Method

This study employs a holistic multiple case design, a method recognized for its ability to offer comprehensive insights by thoroughly examining one or more cases within a confined system (Crowe et al., 2011). In this instance, two distinct cases were identified—one at a public university and another at a private university— where faculty from these institutions were chosen as participants. Faculty members were interviewed, and data were analysed separately for each case, and subsequently, a comparative analysis was conducted to provide a well-rounded perspective. For this study, case 1 pertains to a public university where government funding covers tuition fees, rendering educational services essentially cost-free for students. Case 2 involves a private university where students or their families bear the cost of tuition, transforming students into customers of the educational services they receive. The characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1.
Participant Characteristics

Participants	University Type	Gender	Seniority	Title
Pub-1	Public	Male	7	Asst. Prof.
Pub-2	Public	Male	30	Assoc. Prof.
Pub-3	Public	Male	3	Asst. Prof.
Pub-4	Public	Male	6	Asst. Prof.
Pub-5	Public	Male	21	Asst. Prof.
Pub-6	Public	Female	22	Lect.
Pri-7	Private	Female	13	Asst. Prof.
Pri-8	Private	Female	3	RA
Pri-9	Private	Male	35	Asst. Prof.
Pri-10	Private	Female	2	RA
Pri-11	Private	Male	6	Assoc. Prof.
Pri-12	Private	Male	7	Assoc. Prof.

The representation of university type was also considered. The participants were coded as Pub-1 ... Pub-6 from the public university, and Pri-7…Pri-12 from the private university. Following an extensive literature review, a semi-structured interview form with nine questions was developed. This form drew on insights from studies in the field of grade inflation, including Achen and Courant (2009), Kezim et al. (2005), Sonner (2000), and Sorurbakhsh-Castillo (2018). Open-ended questions about grade inflation in Turkish higher education were designed to elicit in-dept answers regarding the perceptions of faculty members. The interview form was pilot tested with a group of faculty members (n=5) to decide sequence, content, wording, and interview time. The interview questionnaire included one knowledge-based question and eight thought-provoking questions on GI. The interview questions were refined with the feedback from the pilot testing to ensure that

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they were understandable and capable of eliciting deep qualitative data from the participants. For example, some ambiguity was reduced by rephrasing vague questions and the natural flow of conversation was supported by changing the order of questions when needed.

Ethical approval was obtained from the related university's ethics committee. 12 faculty members from both public and private universities participated in the study. Each interview was audio-recorded with the consent of the participants and then transcribed verbatim to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the study. For the qualitative analysis, the transcribed data were analysed using a thematic analysis. The analysis compared public and private universities in terms of the explored themes to clarify common aspects and unique patterns. To facilitate a meaningful comparison between the two contexts, the reciprocal and negotiated exchange theory, rooted in Social Exchange Theory (SET) (Blau, 1964), was utilized as a guiding framework. For the interpretation of faculty perceptions, this theoretical approach was used as it considered students and academic staff as rational decision-makers acting in their individual self-interest.

Findings and Discussion

The results are structured in alignment with the research questions. Theme 1 encompasses participants' perspectives on the effectiveness and fairness of the grading systems used in their institutions (Research Question 1). Theme 2 and Theme 3 examine faculty-related factors in the context of GI (Research Question 2).

Theme 1. Perceptions of Grading System Effectiveness and Fairness

The faculty members participating in this study possessed knowledge and experience with both the bell curve and hundred-point system. However, their preferences diverged. Faculty in the public university leaned towards the hundred-point grading system, whereas those in the private university favoured the bell curve. Faculty at the private university found that the bell curve matched their students' expectations well, making it a convenient means to promote student achievement (Table 2).

Table 2 indicates that some faculty members at the private university prefer the bell curve for managing grade distribution and potentially benefiting underperforming students. The selection of bell curve grading to give a second chance to underperforming students aligns with previous research (Finefter-Rosenbluh & Levinson, 2015). While it may lead to more students passing upper-level courses with higher grades, it raises concerns about equity and transparency. One faculty member mentioned adjusting the bell-curve grading system to align exam difficulty with students' abilities:

> "When I was at X University, there was a system similar to a bell curve. You enter the exact grades there, and there are three stages: the worst case, the middle case, and the good case. When you grade according to the worst case, the number of students who pass increases. When you grade according to the middle case, it provides a normal standard. If the class average is very low, when you grade according to the good case, the algorithm works accordingly". (Pri-11)

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Table 2.
Faculty Perspectives on Grading Systems

Grading system	Public University	Private University
Bell curve grading	Undeserved success Injustice Reduction in quality Tendency to higher grades	Convenient Giving second chance to underperforming students More students to pass the course
Hundred-point grading	Fairer More convenient	Inapplicable Students' disadvantage

This table exemplifies how faculty considered various performance levels and adapted grading standards accordingly. The bell curve permits the use of lenient grading when student averages are low (good-case grading) and stricter grading when more students are capable of passing (worst-case grading). As grades cluster around A, faculty have to seek alternative ways to distinguish above-average performance, exacerbating disparities (Bowen & Cooper, 2021). Additionally, the acceptance of the bell curve method could be attributed to lower expectations from students. For instance, one participant elucidated how the bell curve helped avert potential conflicts stemming from grading disputes between students and faculty.

> "What is the students' capacity like? Based on that, I adopt an approach; you can understand that it's not very logical to ask for much higher standards when students' capacity is at a certain level". (Pri-11)

This inclination may be rooted in the desire to meet student expectations, especially considering the financial investment students make in their education. The concentration of top grades negatively impacts enthusiastic students' motivation (Baglione & Smith, 2022). This difference between public and private universities might reflect different priorities of institutions and pressures on faculty. Private universities, under the pressure of market forces and student satisfaction, can prioritize high grades, while public university faculty put a greater emphasis on maintaining academic standards.

Theme 2. Student-related factors contributing to the GI

Faculty in both private and public universities identified several student-related factors; nevertheless, the most prevalent cause for awarding higher grades than merited was the good manners of students. Some non-academic factors may have a long-term impact on transcripts and potentially diminish the value of grades (Close, 2009). Faculty remarked that respectful behaviour and engagement of students often led to inflated grades.

As presented in Table 3, faculty indicated that students' tendency to participate in class activities, collaborate with their peers and faculty, and attend classes consistently was often rewarded with higher grades. Students' respectful attitude towards faculty members was another reason for higher grades. For instance, participants explained how a student's good manners influenced the ultimate grade of the exam:

> "A student might have tried hard in the final but couldn't express themselves well. They say "yes" to a basic question, but I understand. When I look at how they perform in the class and during question-answer sessions, I see that the

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> student couldn't explain it. For a 10-point question, I should give them 4 points, but I end up giving 7 or 8 points. Is this a kind of favoritism? Yes, everyone does it, and it's necessary". (Pub-1)

Table 3.
Student-related factors contributing to the GI

Public University	Private university
Civility of students	Friendly interaction between teacher and student
Good manners	Class participation
Class participation	The pressure exerted by families or university administration
Demonstrating diligence and effort	

This table underscores that the mutual exchange facilitated through social interaction between students and faculty within the classroom often leads to inflated grades, even when there is evident deficiency in content mastery as demonstrated in exams. This finding aligns with previous research by Sonner (2000) suggesting that the development of close relationships between instructors and students in relatively smaller classes might incline faculty towards leniency in grading.

Participants from both sectors disclosed that they assigned higher grades to students for their regular class attendance. One referenced study addresses the correlation between good relations with and positive attitudes of students and their correspondingly inflated grades (Caruth & Caruth, 2013). In another study within the Turkish HE context, the finding showed that faculty tended to align with students' expectations in terms of high grades to benefit potential advantages (Atalay, 2018). For instance, one participant mentioned raising a student's exam grade solely for displaying good manners during class:

> "Extra points are given for class participation. For example, a student who attends more classes, actively engages, asks questions, and stands out, they might get like an extra 4 or 5 points, just to motivate them. We use this method to encourage them. In my opinion, this could be more effective in terms of student participation in classes". (Pri-8)

Parental and societal pressure is another student-related factor contributing to GI especially in private universities, which can be understood effectively through the lens of SET. As parents, and indirectly their children, are the parties of an exchange, faculty members are thought to have understood what they are expected to ensure. Both parents and the students expect high grades in exchange for tuition payments. The findings of this study showed that particularly in private universities, faculty hesitated to disappoint students with low grades as their university administration supported the family's position. Faculty, especially new instructors, tended to avoid conflicts. Interviews revealed that both family and university administrators could contribute to GI. This effect is specifically pronounced by the faculty of private universities. A majority (five out of six) of the faculty from private universities highlighted the challenges they were exposed to. For instance, one participant from a private university, as a public university graduate, shared her experiences:

> "I graduated from a public university. I never faced such things, and with my family and my friends' families, we would just accept whatever grade was given

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> and continue with our lives obediently. But now, the families of students come to the school if there's any slight issue. If they don't get the response they want from us repeatedly, they even request to meet the deans or the rector". (Pri-10)

Other studies support this view. For example, for Boretz (2004), faculty, receiving negative reactions to initial grading from parents, tended to award higher grades thereafter. Harrison and Risler (2015) and Sinicki (2017) stated that students or their families might find it difficult to accept receiving low grades, particularly in case of a payment as they financially invested in their children's education and expected a return in the form of high grades (Webb, 2018). This tendency raises concerns about grading fairness and consistency (Morreale & Staley, 2016) because especially in private universities, students often gain a competitive advantage over their counterparts from public universities (Boretz, 2004). Unfair competition arises not only between universities but also among peers within the same institution. The practice of awarding higher grades based on subjective criteria may inadvertently pressure other students to resort to unethical means to bolster their grades. While not a direct finding of this study, if GI becomes institutionalized, students may be tempted to manipulate the system through dishonest practices (Dowling, 2003). Students and faculty could feel compelled to align with the GI trends seen in other students or universities, leading to potential academic dishonesty.

Theme 3. Faculty-related factors contributing to the GI

Evaluating student performance typically demands objectivity. Nevertheless, in this study, it is evident that certain faculty members in both public and private universities acknowledged relying on their subjective judgment when they observed students' dedication to or enthusiasm for their courses. Participant perspectives on faculty-related factors contributing to GI are presented in Table 4.

Table 4.
Instructor-related factors contributing to the GI

Public University	Private University
Subjective judgement	Subjective judgement
Granting second chance to students	Friendly interaction between teacher and student
Counterbalancing the unethical advantage that inflated grades caused	Ensuring the number of students passing the course
	The pressure exerted by families or university administration
	Avoiding conflicts
	Evaluation surveys

As indicated in Table 4, faculty in public universities acknowledged increasing grades based on subjective judgement, granting students second opportunities, addressing issues of inequality, and managing substantial academic workloads. They were inclined to apply their subjective judgment when students showed effort and enthusiasm with course content and class activities. Another faculty-related factor was end-of-semester evaluation surveys. Evaluation surveys are intended to assess the effectiveness of the teaching methods of instructors by students (Chowdhury, 2018); however, it has been argued that evaluation surveys have a decisive influence on promotions, seniority, and salary increases.

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Consequently, faculty members are inclined to seek positive evaluation results by assigning higher grades to students (Hu, 2005; Lin, 2009; Stroebe, 2020; Zangenehzadeh, 1988). Within this study, faculty were apparently aware that students used these surveys as a threat if they received lower scores. One participant mentioned that if they were content with students' efforts, faculty might adjust grades to reward or motivate students accordingly:

> "In this sense, I'd like to say that we're not too strict about it. In our department, if a student deserves it and has earned it, if they've achieved what they should in our class, then if we're generally satisfied with that, I'm in favor of giving them a grade that's pretty close to what they've earned. It's all about supporting the student." (Pub-3)

Some faculty in public universities expressed an intention to consider students' personal circumstances and challenges in their grading decision. This finding aligns with prior research which suggested that instructors tended to give higher grades during the COVID-19 pandemic (Goldhaber & Goodman Young, 2024; Karadag, 2021; Tillinghast et al., 2023). It is noteworthy that giving a second chance is another factor contributing to GI.

> "I always make bonuses, for instance. That's because I believe in something. I mean, if things have gone wrong in someone's life, I feel there might be a chance to recover from somewhere". (Pub-6)

The development of strong interpersonal connections within the classroom seems to have inclined the faculty to prioritize students' feelings. "I always make bonuses" is a significant statement as it shows that the faculty member confesses to using subjective grading. This tendency was more apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic when there was lack of student-teacher interaction, which would typically result in lower academic performance; however, studies showed the opposite (Karadag, 2021; Tillinghast et al., 2023).

Faculty at the private university voiced greater apprehension regarding student evaluation surveys than their public-school counterparts. Notably, a few faculty members at the queried public university admitted being unaware of such surveys, and some firmly asserted that there was no discernible link between students' evaluation surveys and the grading process. For example, one participant expressed his lack of awareness about the existence and purpose of evaluation surveys:

> "I don't know if they are evaluating how well I am doing. I usually don't check the system for that. Also, I haven't had any complaints about me to the department head or the dean in the 30 years I've been here." (Pub-2)

This instance highlights how students use student surveys to influence faculty members. In public universities, faculty members are less concerned with student evaluations. In private universities, the focus on student evaluations is driven by both students and faculty being viewed as economic agents responding to incentives. Participants from private universities were aware that promotion and tenure prospects were dependent on feedback from evaluation surveys.

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Theoretical and Practical Implications

The most apparent issue within public universities regarding GI was the unethical results that it led to, as noted by Dowling (2003). The pressure felt by students to secure jobs or gain admission to graduate programs can drive them to unethical actions. In this study, faculty members from a public university with an established reputation expressed concerns that their students faced unfair competition from private universities and less-established public universities, which tended to graduate a higher number of students with higher grades. According to signaling theory, grades serve as signals to various stakeholders, including employers and graduate programs, indicating a student's proficiency and capabilities (Chan et al., 2007). However, GI weakens the signaling role of educational credentials, leading to a decrease in the value of grades and a loss of trust in students from prestigious universities and colleges (Lin, 2009). Some faculty conveyed the need to inflate the grades to counterbalance the effect of GI and protect their students against the inequality within the HE system.

> "When some universities have a passing grade of 70, others have 50, and some have 60. In a remote city in Anatolia, most students graduate with a grade of 70, while in an established university, the best student can graduate with a grade of 70. Of course, for international companies, the grade point average is valuable, so I think that this confusion harms students from high-stakes universities. Of course, how can we provide equality. Well, it seems unfair to me, in my opinion." (Pub-2)

This faculty member highlights a significant problem stemming from GI. Evidently, subjective grading may appear as a seemingly straightforward approach, but its consequences have a lasting impact. Practically, the findings suggest a need for greater transparency and standardization in grading practices across institutions to ensure fairness and consistency.

Conclusion

This study explored faculty perspectives on grading practices in Turkish higher education, focusing on public and private universities. Key findings indicated that the use of bell curve grading, especially in private universities, benefits underperforming students raising concerns about equitable and transparent grading. Faculty members in both types of institutions considered non-academic factors, such as classroom interactions and interpersonal relations, along with exam performance, potentially introducing bias. Grading practices were also influenced by external factors, including pressure from families and university administrations, particularly in private universities where higher grades are sometimes revised due to parental expectations tied to the perceived investment in higher education. Additionally, faculty members in both settings found subjective grading acceptable, rewarding students' effort and enthusiasm, believing that grades alone may not accurately reflect genuine performance. There appears to be a link between student consumerism and grade inflation as students perceive themselves as entitled to satisfactory grades despite lack of actual academic rigor (Alvarez, 2015). The acknowledgement of

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subjective grading apparently created a room for grade inflation, or avoidance from criticism or conflict contributed to this trend in an undesired way.

Limitations

The relatively small sample size of faculty members may restrict its capacity to comprehensively encompass the diverse perspectives within both public and private universities in Turkiye. Consequently, the findings may lack generalizability to a broader context. The study's exclusive focus on faculty members' viewpoints could potentially introduce bias by not considering the perspectives of students and university administrators. Additionally, the research predominantly relies on qualitative data, which offers valuable insights into faculty perceptions but lacks quantitative evidence to quantitatively assess the extent and frequency of GI.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Human Participants

The research has been approved by the ethical committee of a public university in Turkiye (Ankara Yildirim Beyazit University, Meeting date and decision number: 11.05.2022-09). Before data collection, all participants have been informed about the research objectives. All participants have signed consent forms, and their anonymity was guaranteed.

Originality Note

This paper is based on the PhD thesis of the first author under the supervision of the second author. The authors confirm that the research is their original works; and proper citations are included where others' works are cited. The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, upon reasonable request.

Use of Generative AI/ AI-assisted Technologies Statement

We confirm that AI-assisted Technology - ChatGPT 4o is used in this research just for the purpose of improving the language of the manuscript. No further use of these technologies are also confirmed by the authors to write different parts of the research. We also confirm that one narrative speaker of English is invited to proof-read the text prior to its online publication.

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