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Moral Responsibility for Grade Inflation: Where Does It Lie?

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Abstract
Grade inflation has been shown in this and other academic journals to be an unethical academic practice. Where the moral responsibility lies is, however, not entirely clear. Various studies directly or impliedly point to the grader (university lecturer, tenured or casual), said to inflate grades mainly in return for positive student evaluations. This article employs empirical (academics' feelings about grade inflation) and conceptual (coercion theory) tools to further elucidate the proper allocation of blame. We find that depending on the individual circumstances of the grader, some can be exonerated from blame, as having acted under coercion when inflating grades.

Keywords Academic ethics · Applied ethics · Coercion · Grade inflation · Moral responsibility · Student evaluation of teaching

Introduction and Methodological Aspects

This article contributes to the debate on the ethical implications of grade inflation (GI), prominent in recent years in the academic literature on higher education (see, in this journal, Crumbley et al., 2010; Roberts, 2016; Kreitzer & Sweet-Cushman, 2021; Pell & Amigud, 2023; Yalçın, 2023; Close, 2024). Most authors (e.g., Tucker & Courts, 2010; Roberts, 2016; Blum, 2017; Baglione et al., 2025) adopt a consequentialist perspective, showing that GI negatively impacts the profession (which is denied an accurate tool of assessing a prospective employee), the deserving student (who will be affected by the injustice they witness), the non-deserving student with inflated grades (who will be provided with a false sense of accomplishment), teachers who mark objectively (who will be disadvantaged in promotion and award decisions), the university (which can lose reputation in the long term) and even society at large (flooded with graduates hard to distinguish from the competent ones). Viewing GI through the lenses of the three main normative ethics theories – deontology, consequentialism, and virtue ethics – Collins (2020) finds it unethical in all.

The question, then, becomes where responsibility may fall for the proliferation of this unethical academic practice. Roberts (2016) directly points to several grade inflating practices that are described as unethical graders' behaviour. Koper et al. (2015), in the very

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title of their article, bluntly refer to "greed, sloth and cowardice in the college classroom" (p. 248). One author adopting a more cautious perspective is Yalçın (2023), who finds the unethical character of grade inflation and the blameworthiness of those who do it "at least open to further discussion" (p. 649). He places his argument in a historical perspective: "[f]actors relevant to [an academic] decision about inflating grades here and now are arguably very different from the factors that were relevant to the decision of individual faculty members 50 years ago" (p. 662).

This article is part of the 'further discussion' proposed by Yalçın (2023) in this journal. Its purpose is to further examine the academics' moral responsibility for GI. After a literature review (Section 1) establishing that grade inflation is widespread and unethical, Section 2 introduces views on GI collected from academics in Australian universities, following a survey that will be more comprehensively reported in a forthcoming publication by the authors.[1] The research project, which had ethical clearance at the authors' university, was entitled 'Grade inflation in Australian universities: academics perspectives', and consisted of a randomised online survey followed by focus groups. The survey, comprising mostly quantitative questions, but also two open qualitative questions, was live during June and July 2024. Deans of Research at all Australian Universities were approached for consent and assistance with circulation of this research instrument. Thereafter a snowball effect was relied on, where initial respondents recruited others, expanding the sample size through social networks. There were in total 100 respondents, with 88 answering all questions.

This article focuses on the qualitative data collected from one of the two open-ended questions in the above survey, which asked respondents to share their feelings about grade inflation: whether it occurs, and if yes, why, and how does it impact the student, profession, institutional reputation, society, and the respondent themselves. The qualitative, open question data was manually reviewed to seek key themes. The results, as reported in Section 2, indicate that influence is exerted on academics to inflate grades.

Section 3 then moves to analysing the data introduced in Section 2, in order to find the type of influence exerted, and whether academics who inflate grades are morally responsible. First, the student evaluations of teaching (SETs) used by the university administration are identified as the main tool of influence. Then, a coercion theory framework (e.g., Nozick, 1969; Feinberg, 1986; Wertheimer, 1989) is employed to assess the type of influence (manipulation? coercion?) exerted via SETs and other mechanisms, and the extent to which graders could and should resist the pressure from the university administration to inflate grades. We find that academics who inflate grades retain a degree of moral responsibility for this unethical act, but this in turn is dependent on their specific context, circumstances and characters.

Grade Inflation as an Unethical Practice

Extent and Causes of Grade Inflation

Drawing on Collins (2020) and Roberts (2016), we define grade inflation as creating the conditions for an artificial rise of grades in a specific course, by either (1) lowering the

[1] The survey can also be obtained by emailing the research team at ciprian.radavoi@unisq.edu.au.

course and assessment level of difficulty purposely to lead to higher marks, or (2) providing students with marks higher than those objectively deserved for a specific assessment. The definition of GI employed here is therefore centred upon the sentient act of the course leader and/or grader, in line with Cambridge online dictionary, according to which to inflate is "to make a number or value higher or greater than it should be, or to make something seem more important than it really is".[2] A symptom of grade inflation so defined is the increase in grade point averages (GPA) over time without a corresponding rise in students' achievement.

"The symptoms of grade inflation are familiar: an upward shift in the grade point average of students over an extended period of time (…)." (Kamber, 2008, p. 46). Half a century ago, drawing on data obtained from 134 higher education institutions, Juola (1976) had already noted an increase in GPA from 2.4 in 1960 to 2.8 in 1973, in the United States. In the decades that followed, the amplitude of the phenomenon continued to grow, with numerous countries reporting evidence that higher grades (As and Bs in the US grading system; first class and upper-second class honours in the UK grading system; high distinctions and distinctions in Australia, etc.) are on the rise. This has been confirmed for the US (e.g., Denning et al., 2022), UK (Jephcote et al., 2021), Philippines (Giray, 2024), Ireland (Simon, 2011), Pakistan (Ullah et al., 2024) and Germany (Müller-Benedict & Gaens, 2020), among numerous countries; a geographic spread not surprising given the isomorphic tendencies in higher education, in the globalised world. For countries that do not publish centralised GPA data, like Australia, researchers have explored GPA evolutions at their own institutions, where access to relevant data was possible. For example, as reported by Dawson and Corbin (2024), the number of high distinctions (roughly the equivalent of As in the American grading system) awarded to students at the University of Sydney between 2011 and 2021 increased by 234%. A symptom of grade inflation in Australia could also be the constant rise in student success rates (the proportion of courses passed by a student from all courses they attempted), which rose from 83.5% in 2014 to 86.2 in 2024 (Department of Education, 2024).

In short, more students achieve higher and higher grades. Citing all the academic studies that confirm this reality would make this article's list of references longer than the article itself – besides, it would be redundant, since to our knowledge there is no single author denying the existence of a global, significant, and persistent upward trend in university grades. When it comes to the causes of the phenomenon, however, the opinions are diverse.

In her entry on 'Grade Inflation' in the *Encyclopedia of Social Problems,* Nolan (2008) argues that "[t]hough grades may be on the rise, it is not clear whether this is due to artificial inflation, lack of reliable research, or simply greater teaching and learning over the period in question" (p. 240). For what she believes to be the "greater teaching" contribution to grades rising, the author mentions the "faculty development programs that help professors to plan effective syllabi, state explicit expectations, and foster student learning" (p. 240). The teacher-effectiveness theory was, however, empirically rebutted by Johnson (2003), who sees it as fabricated by educational researchers intending to hide the real causes of grade inflation. As for the "greater learning" contribution to rising grades, this is supposedly motivated, in Nolan's (2008) view, by things like "the expansion of financial aid programs may motivate students to achieve in order to maintain their aid packages", and "a rise in the median age of the U.S. college student [which] may indicate that today's

[2] Cambridge Dictionary, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/inflate.

students are more mature and better able to handle college material" (p. 240). However, there is no support in the literature to the idea that the continuous rise of grades is due to better teaching and better learning. Quoting a variety of empirical research on exam performance and on amount of time spent on study, Stroebe (2020) puts it directly: "[t]here is no evidence that students have become more intelligent or hardworking in recent decades. If anything, the evidence points in the opposite direction" (p. 288).

The relevant literature is quasi-unanimous in the verdict that GI is an artificial process, willingly done by graders, yet leaves us with the question of why graders do it. Kamber (2008), discussing the surge of grades in the 1960 s and 1970 s, identifies three somewhat overlapping types of causes, which we argue apply today as well. The first cluster is *political and ideological*, and for the early wave of GI, this was explained as follows:

> [A] significant percentage of instructors (especially younger instructors) softened their grading practices to show solidarity with students whose lives were being shaken by forces from outside the academy (…). This was a moment of deep dissent in American society. Students began to demand "relevance" in the classroom, participation in college and university governance, and greater freedom in the conduct of their personal lives. Rules and standards of every kind were subject to student criticism and negotiation. (Kamber, 2008, pp. 52–3).

Ideology has a role in the current wave of grade inflation in the contemporary classroom as well. Students still demand "relevance", but the driving forces are different nowadays. Instead of the leftist revolutionary ethos of the 1960 s, demands of "relevance" today reflect a neoliberal marketplace mentality and culture of instant gratification – for students, in the form of high marks, regardless of whether they are deserved or not (Blum, 2017). Consumer ideology drives the student, who spend money and time for their studies, towards seeking satisfaction in the form of grades, not intellectual growth. To exemplify, one third of the undergraduate students feel they deserve a B just for attending lectures (Greenberger et al., 2008).

Politics and ideology may be relevant from the teacher perspective as well. With academics disillusioned and demotivated by a neoliberal ideology deifying profit and efficiency above critical and inquisitive minds, it is perhaps not surprising that many simply lost interest in educational rigour, perceived as futile. Or, from a different perspective, academics, too, may be unwittingly absorbed in the neoliberal paradigm of efficiency: after all, "lax grading is faster than stringent grading [since] … a grade of D or F needs to be explained in detail and may lead to time consuming protests" (Kamber, 2008, p. 55). Or in yet another ideology-relevant perspective, in the multicultural world, "[one] cause of grade inflation may be political correctness as teachers assign higher grades to representatives of minorities in fear of otherwise being labelled as biased toward a certain ethnic group" (Tucker & Courts, 2010, p. 48).

The second cluster is *market-related, demographic, and fiscal*: "Institutional overexpansion, declining applicant pools, and cuts in budgetary support for higher education in the early 1970 s prompted trustees, administrators, and faculty to be more permissive in recruiting and retaining students." (Kamber, 2008, p. 53). Again, applicable today, perhaps even more poignantly since institutional overexpansion has continued, and the cuts in budgetary support as government funds continually decline, leaving universities willing to do whatever it takes to recruit and retain students.

This leads directly into the third cluster of GI causes: *internal policy changes*. To recruit and retain students, university management keeps lowering the academic standards by adopting a wide array of student-friendly policies in the area of assessment – so friendly

that Martinson (2004, p. 50) sees them as part of an administration/student "nonaggression pact". The 'pact' is put into operation via a Kafkian web of policies meant to protect the student from failing, for instance: time-consuming teacher reports are required on reasons for low retention in courses, or for below average marks; a second chance, via supplementary assessment, must be given to certain students who fail; various circumstances unrelated to learning, such as parenthood, class provenience, or proneness to exam anxiety must be taken into account when grading (Hassan et al., 2020; Martinson, 2004; Tucker & Courts, 2010).

But the most important instantiation of the administration/student nonaggression pact, and arguably the main contributor to grade inflation (Martinson, 2004; Stroebe, 2016), is the tool called Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET): the end of semester anonymous surveys whereby students rate their teachers. The SET practice started some half century ago and continues unabated, although it has been demonstrated time and again that the use of SETs for tenure, promotion, contract renewal and other important employment decisions is ineffective as a performance assessment tool, let alone unethical and potentially illegal (e.g., Close, 2024; Crumbley et al., 2010; Emery et al., 2003; Stroebe, 2016, 2020). We will discuss SETs as a tool of either coercion or manipulation in the following sections. In the meantime, we must clarify that the behaviour to which the academic is arguably coerced, or manipulated into – inflating grades – is unethical.

Why Grade Inflation is Unethical

In reviewing the vast literature on the wrongfulness of GI (e.g., Biggs, 2008; Collins, 2020; Crumbley et al., 2010; Hassan et al., 2020; O'Halloran & Gordon, 2014; Pell & Amigud, 2023; Roberts, 2016), we will follow the taxonomy proposed by Collins (2020), who examines the morality of GI along the three main normative ethics theories: deontology, value ethics, and consequentialism. Deontology is about the rightness or wrongness of humans' actions per se, virtue ethics is about human character – assessing what kind of person one is, and guiding what kind of person one should be – while consequentialism judges the ethical value of an action based on its consequences.

In a *deontological* perspective, the problem with grade inflation is that it is a dishonest action. While Collins (2020) builds an elaborate argument that inflating grades is lying about the student's real performance, thus impermissible as violating Kant's categorical imperatives, it is probably safe to say that lying is prima facie wrong in any culture and any ethical theory. It is particularly so when the person who lies has a special responsibility to behave honestly, such in the case of academic educators and graders, as persons entrusted by the community with the important task of properly educating and assessing the student.

A *virtue ethics* approach further substantiates grade inflation as unethical. Virtue ethics does not see the morality of an action as related to either compliance with duties or rules (like deontology) or consequences (like consequentialism); instead, an action is ethical if it aligns with what a virtuous person would do in the circumstances. A virtuous person is "one who has, and exercises, certain character traits, namely the virtues" (Hursthouse, 1999, p. 29). As for what counts as virtues (that is, excellent traits of character), there have been numerous lists proposed in the history of philosophy, and courage, integrity and justice feature in most (Van Hooft, 2014). Courage is "the disposition to voluntarily act, perhaps fearfully, in a dangerous circumstance, where the relevant risks are reasonably appraised, in an effort to obtain or preserve some perceived good for one self or others recognizing that the desired perceived good may not be realized" (Shelp, 1984,

p. 354). Courage therefore requires the presence of some sort of danger or risk, which in the case of grading objectively (the perceived good) is the risk of being trashed in SETs, sidelined in the organisation, being denied promotion and so on. A teacher who, aware of the risks, choses the easy path of inflating the grades does not act like a courageous person but displays cowardice. A teacher who fails to appraise these risks yet inflates the grades, perhaps because they love to be loved by the students, does not display cowardice but still does not act as a virtuous person, namely one who would show the virtues of modesty and integrity (for a comprehensive modern list of virtues see Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Finally, regardless of the reason one inflates grades, that person does not act as a just person. Justice is a virtue requiring social contexts, and incorporates traits like fairness, social responsibility and leadership (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, pp. 357–428). It is easy to see how the act of equally rewarding with top marks hardworking and lazy students is unequal treatment that shows social irresponsibility, and fails to show leadership.

The above are arguments that inflating grades is unethical through both a deontological and a virtue ethics prism. At the same time, deontological and the virtue ethics approaches are also the conceptual space where a few authors attempted to build justification for GI, around kindness as either an intrinsic value of a human act, or a virtuous trait of character (e.g., Finefter-Rosenbluh & Levinson, 2015; Silverstein, 2013; Tierney, 2015). However, aside from Silverstein (2013), who pleads for the outright prohibition of low marks because they "injure students psychologically" (p. 487), the other authors who factor compassion and beneficence in their analysis of GI take a more cautious position. Finefter-Rosenbluh and Levinson (2015) for example, entitling their article "What is wrong with grade inflation (if anything)?", admit that compassion may to some extent morally justify the act of GI, yet still recommend a variety of means to combat the practice. Tierney (2015) similarly calls the altered grades "a grey zone in the ethics of classroom" (p. 5).

Like the wide majority of scholars in the GI literature, we do not believe that kindness and beneficence in the form of undeservedly high grades are values that morally justify GI, under either the deontological or the virtue ethics approach. But even admitting that in these two perspectives, the qualification of GI as unethical is open to questioning, these doubts do not extend to the third perspective – the *consequentialist* one. GI harms everyone involved, in multiple ways.

The student's main interest is ideally to receive a good education, and this interest is impaired by grade inflation. Students whose grades are inflated are harmed by being disincentivised from studying, shielded from the educative experience of failure, and instilled with a false sense of success: they are not extended to learn more but given an illusion that they have the requisite knowledge, which will be a problem when they reach the job market unprepared professionally and emotionally (Collins, 2020; Giray, 2024; O'Halloran & Gordon, 2014; Tucker & Courts, 2010). Indeed, grade inflation prevents the student from building "the grit, fortitude, dedication, perseverance, persistence, discipline, humility, the ability to sacrifice, ambition, and a can do what it takes attitude necessary to successfully compete in a changing and challenging global economy" (Blum, 2017, p. 2289). As for the hardworking students deserving of their high grades, they are also disincentivised by grade compression at the top of the scale: it must feel unjust to work hard for an A, when half of the class gets it anyway, without merit (O'Halloran & Gordon, 2014). As Roberts (2016) puts it, "[s]tudents who, but for the inflated grades of their classmates, would stand out as members of the top five to ten percent of the class, are relegated to the top fifty percent or worse" (p. 145). Also, all students, whether deserving or not of their high grades, are negatively impacted in the long run if the university sector is seen as practising GI on a large scale: they will have spent time and money for degrees that are no longer valued by employers and society (Tucker & Courts, 2010).

Employers are harmed by the tainting of a valuable tool of human resource selection: the graduate's GPA. If a recruitment panel relies on the seriously inflated grades of a candidate and gives them the job, this may result in economic loss or human suffering (Blum, 2017; Roberts, 2016). Universities can have their reputation damaged when they become known as mere 'diploma mills', with severe consequences for the type of students they attract, and how a degree qualification is valued by potential employers. But the most severe harm is perhaps suffered by society at large. Indeed, higher education is not just another profession; university teachers are:

> … a metaprofession, controlling, as it does, not only its own ranks and what students will learn in order to prepare for thoughtful living and useful citizenship, but also what they must know to enter virtually all of the other professions (…) and how attainment of that knowledge will be measured. Who gets in—for the benefit of society. Who is kept out—for the protection of society. Who is distinguished as 'excellent' (Biggs, 2008, p. 115).

If academic teachers do not fulfill their gatekeeping role, society will end up with incompetent doctors who may damage someone's health, incompetent lawyers may ruin someone's wealth or liberty, and so on. Also, if grades lose their quality of correctly indicating achievement, society will lose its trust in higher education and in universities as places of learning and excellence. In a broader perspective, "[a] potential consequence of grade inflation is that students are unable to engage in the nation's political life. The effects of grade inflation might create an uneducated citizenry where individuals are unable to critically think about the issues of the day" (Blum, 2017, pp. 2293; see also Côté & Allahar, 2011, pp. 67–68).

Behaviour that is unethical under all the main normative ethics theories is unethical simpliciter (Collins, 2020). Those acting unethically when inflating grades are the graders – tenured or casual academics. Why would academics, despite being entrusted with responsibilities in the formation of good professionals and human beings for the labour market and for society in general, engage in the unethical practice of grade inflation? We disagree with Jephcote et al. and and's (2021, p. 566) conclusion that "[i]n the debate surrounding grade inflation, the need to find who or what is to blame is a diversion from the development of better understanding of the key influences". To the contrary, we believe it could help better understand the key influences, and thus indicate how to fix the matter. Accordingly, to examine 'who or what is to blame' for GI, the remainder of this article first presents the feelings academics reported on GI in a survey we conducted, and then examines the responses in an analytical framework of coercion and manipulation theory.

"A Frustrating Practice that I Feel I am Unable to Fight"

In the grade inflation survey we conducted among university educators in Australia, Question 12 was: "Please express, in a few words, your opinion regarding grade inflation. Does it occur, and if yes, why, and how does it impact the student, profession, institutional reputation, society, and yourself?". The overwhelming majority of the 74 respondents (R1-R74) to this question confirmed that GI does occur in Australia, and saw the impacts on students, teachers, university, profession, and society along the lines presented in the literature and summarised above. As for causes, again confirming the

literature cited in the previous section, numerous respondents pointed to coercive pressure from management, either referring to SETs directly, or more generally to policies leading to GI, and to institutional lack of support when students challenge grades. For example:

> "Learning and Teaching should not assess the quality of a course based on student surveys, full stop." (R3).
> "There seems to be pressure (…) that set percentages of students need to pass the course or it's the academic's fault." (R7).
> "We talk to each other and we know others also feel powerless and disgusted in the face of managerial pressure for grade inflation." (R8).
> "Rarely do I feel supported when students challenge grades." (R9).
> "There is a lot of pressure (…) as students will often provide strong negative feedback in SETs (…)." (R11).
> "It is troubling that the system and attitudes seem to make failing a student very hard." (R14).
> "Everyone I know who admits to grade inflation cites student evaluations, promotion, and workload as drivers." (R18).
> "The customer is always right and if they are not happy, you are asked to grade again." (R19).
> "Academics want good student feedback and less complaints and appeals as these create work and anxiety." (R28).
> "If a student appeals outside of the school (e.g., faculty or university) their appeal will be automatically upheld." (R34).
> "I do acknowledge pressure in the sector to inflate grades" (R38).
> "Your course will be marked if your failure rate is too high. It will often be used against an academic." (R55).
> "Faculty are penalised for Fail grades and made to lessen the standard in their subjects, reduce the marking criteria in assessments and allow supplementary after supplementary to get students over the line. University policy is a great contributor to this." (R57).
> "There is fear for students' reactions." (R60).
> "The directions of management and leadership are pushing me to be complicit with grade inflation." (R62).
> "Grade inflation occurs because (…) a low student evaluation harms your promotion prospects." (R66).

The responses reflect a strong understanding of the immoral character of GI, and identify the political and institutional mechanisms at its origin. Further, when it comes to the feelings towards GI, numerous respondents expressed anger and frustration, see for instance: "Instilling a popularity grade is ludicrous" (R3); "I feel powerless and disgusted" (R8); "I resent grade inflation" (R18); "A frustrating practice that I feel I am unable to fight" (R22); "It is frustrating and disappointing" (R26). These feelings motivate resistance, as reflected in notes, included in numerous answers, that the respondent does not inflate grades. Interestingly, a few of the respondents who denied wrongdoing felt like reporting, with disapproval, that others around them do it:

> "Grade inflation absolutely occurs at my institution. Recent involvement in an interdisciplinary event shocked me at how widespread it was and how readily some admitted to it." (R18).

> "Over the years the behaviour of young and/or very ambitious colleagues has sometimes concerned me." (R27).
> "I am aware of colleagues who give extremely high marks across the board. This sets students' expectations and makes it harder [*for other teachers to mark objectively*]." (R40).
> "Grade inflation is a dishonest way for mediocre academics to get promoted." (R41).
> "There are rumours that a colleague does it (…). It's annoying and doesn't create good vibes in the team." (R47).

Only two responses, on the other hand, indicate that the academic would rather leave the sector than being coerced into GI:

> "Everyone is captive to the terrible culture of attack. I'm leaving the sector because of this." (R40).
> "[*The pressure to inflate grades*] leads to moral distress and the thought of leaving academia, as the neoliberalistic university approach clashes with my professional values, codes, ethics and standards." (R62).

Among those not claiming any form of resistance, some suggest this would have been in any case supererogatory in the times of the neoliberal corporatised university: "The customer is always right and if they are not happy, you are asked to grade again" (R19). Besides, "with students as customers, the pressure is on to pass them. Otherwise they leave in a huff and attend another university that will pass them" (R32). These statements evoke Arnold's (2001) claim that futility of resistance is known to mitigate the blame of an otherwise unethical act (Arnold, 2001, p. 63).

Other respondents justify engaging in GI as an acceptable trade-off when done to a limited extent, or as something morally neutral, suggesting that there is nothing to resist:

> "1–5 marks do not make a significant difference on professional competence for some course content." (R5).
> "It is simply a corollary of shifting from tertiary education for the elites to tertiary education for the masses. It is no big deal." (R27).
> "I keep the machine moving… this might be through a bit of grade inflation here and there. (…) What does it matter over a lifetime if they got a Distinction instead of a Credit in one essay?" (R36).
> "I have inflated grades slightly for students who have failed the course by less than two marks. This saves hundreds of hours of worktime." (R50).

Finally, a few respondents went even further, presenting GI in a positive light, as an act of social justice and compassion or of solidarity with certain categories:

> "I consciously inflated the grade of one student who was an Aboriginal Elder and had a wealth of knowledge and wisdom." (R20).
> "People from remote communities are helped to achieve as part of university policy." (R30).
> "Students experience many competing demands and many experience mental health issues. Teachers need to be compassionate to students' situation." (R43).

On Moral Blame for Influenced Unethical Acts

The responses above confirm that the graders feel influenced into GI, be it by institutional pressure or by broader circumstances related to the grader or the student. As we have already established that GI is unethical and as our aim is to assess the moral responsibility of the grader, it becomes essential to scrutinise the influencing factors. Indeed, the influenced person's blameworthiness for an unethical action varies depending on what type of influence was exerted. As Beauchamp (2010) suggests, "[n]ot all influences exerted on another person are controlling. Many influences are resistible, and some are welcomed. The category of influence includes acts of love, threats, education, lies, manipulative suggestions, and emotional appeals, all of which can vary dramatically in their impact on persons" (p. 69).

The ways of influencing someone towards acting in a certain way can be placed on a spectrum running from compulsion at one end, to coercion, manipulation, persuasion, enticement, and finally, simple requests. The line between forcing someone to act, and merely getting someone to act, is somewhere in the area of manipulation (Feinberg, 1986, p. 189). It is that area we should therefore first look at. If the academics are manipulated (let alone enticed) into GI, they retain full responsibility, which is not the case if they were coerced. Generally, coercion provides an excuse for having done something wrong, while manipulation does not (Rudinow, 1978, p. 339).

For grade inflation, the influenced is the academic engaged in GI, the influencer is the university, and the tools of influence are the policies enumerated above – most prominently, the SET. Before moving to discussing the type of influence exerted on academics, a brief explanation on SETs as such a tool is necessary.

SETs as Tools of Influence

While the question over the student's competence to evaluate their teachers was asked in academia a century ago (see Guthrie, 1927, p. 175, cited in Close, 2024), this journal has been at the forefront of the more recent academic efforts to explore the complexities that surround the use SET as a Learning and Teaching quality assurance activity. Most recently, Close (2024) published a powerful argument on the unethical character of SETs. Close (2024) rebuts the argument of Guthrie (1927) and other earlier researchers that the student is in the best position to assess teaching as they are directly exposed to the teacher's performance. Among Close's (2024) arguments, many based on a survey of a vast literature, are the problems of comparability across universities, disciplines, and even teachers of the same discipline at the same university. Indeed, first, there is no agreed upon definition of 'teaching effectiveness' (one of the main attributes claimed to be assessed via SETs); second, quantitative courses elicit better ratings than qualitative courses (ref); and third, there is cultural, gender, racial, and even physical attractiveness bias (see Wachtel, 1998 for an ample review, covering several decades, of bias in SETs). Also, one major problem exposed by Close (2024) and others (e.g., Martinson, 2004; Lindahl & Unger, 2010; Stroebe, 2016) is the anonymous character of the student surveys, which can encourage abuse such as potentially defamatory accusations, and robs the abused teacher from the possibility of defending themselves. Lindahl and Unger's (2010) article on the problems stemming from anonymity has a telling title: "Cruelty in student teaching evaluations".

If SETs were solely intended for teacher's reflection and improvement, these negative impacts could perhaps be treated as benign. However, giving them weight in university decisions on promotion, recruitment and retention maligns their purpose, turning them into unjust and unjustifiable management tools (see, e.g., Cahn, 2011, Ch. 2; Roberts, 2016; Stroebe, 2020; Close, 2024). This raises the question of the moral responsibility of those designing and employing this tool: the university management, sometimes referred to in the critical academic literature on higher education as the "parasitic" class of administrators (e.g., Smyth, 2017; Taylor, 2003). For this article however, their actions and motivations are not relevant. What matters here is only whether SETs data, however used by management, further influence academics into another unethical practice, the artificial inflation of grades. In other words, is there a correlation between SETs and grade inflation?

The answer is a confident yes. Among the myriad of studies demonstrating, reporting and/or explaining a high positive correlation between grades and SET ratings are Johnson (2003), Martinson (2004), Felton et al. (2008), Koper et al. (2015), and Stroebe (2016, 2020). Johnson (2003) proved a clear statistical correlation between high grades and high course evaluations, and showed that this is not due to better teaching. Stroebe (2020) relies on six quantitative surveys previously undertaken, and finds that all reported a high correlation between grades and SET evaluations. Moreover, putting the correlation in a broader perspective, five of these reports demonstrated that positive feedback simply rewarded bad teaching or inappropriately light curricula (Stroebe, 2020). The fact that there is little to no correlation between real achievement by students and positive SET ratings, empirically demonstrated by Emery et al. (2003), further supports this view.

The next question is what type of influence do SETs specifically exert on the academics' decision to inflate grades.

Are Academics Manipulated into GI?

A broadly used definition of manipulation is Rudinow's (1978): "A [*manipulator*] attempts to manipulate S [*agent*] iff A attempts the complex motivation of S's behaviour by means of deception or by playing on a supposed weakness of S" (p. 346). What differentiates manipulation from rational persuasion is the absence, in the former, of a straightforward, open character: the manipulator attempts "to procure or engineer the needed assent by bringing pressure to bear, in a deliberate and calculated way, on what he presumes to be the manipulable features of B's motivational system" (Kligman & Culver, 1992, pp. 186–7).

With the use of SETs, it could be argued that the university plays on a supposed weakness of the agent (the academic employee) to achieve a desired outcome (high satisfaction scores in SETs, as essential in the marketing of the university). If the academic inflates grades because reading the SET results makes them happy and proud, we have a case of manipulation, but such would be the case if they inflated grades out of solidarity with the management, sentimentality, or sense of duty; indeed,

> The character flaws potentially vulnerable to manipulative cultivation may be infinite. One can play on others'insecurity, gullibility, or fear, pander to their vanity, morbid curiosity, or superstitiousness, exploit their sentimentality, misplaced anger, or wishful thinking. One need not rely on character flaws or weaknesses alone to gain leverage over another. One can also appeal to the sense of duty, sympathy, friendship, or generosity in others, or utilise the rule-abidingness, industry, honesty, or cooperativity of one's fellows to advantage. In either case, it is the premeditated exploitation

> of some systematic character trait to achieve an ulterior purpose which stamps the behaviour as manipulative (Kligman & Culver, 1992, p. 190).

Closest to showing manipulation come our respondents R20, R30, and R43, with generosity as manipulable trait, if the concern with aiding the disadvantaged minorities they cite is genuine. But the explanation these respondents provide for inflating grades could also be an indication of vanity as manipulable trait. As winners of the popularity contest, some academics feel validated by the high scores in student surveys, and cherish their reputation – sometimes resulting in teaching awards – of teachers loved by their students (Blum, 2017).

Our survey, however, indicates a limited occurrence of manipulation. First, our respondents show awareness of GI, whereas in organisations, "when manipulation is involved, the manipulated employee would not even recognize the existence of a power relation with the manipulator, attempts to influence him, or the methods being used to do so" (Krause, 2012, p. 200). Second, if manipulated into GI, academics would be unaware of being influenced and would therefore not experience any negative feeling related to this practice. However, in one of the quantitative questions of our study (Question 5), the dominant feelings reported by the 88 respondents that completed the entire survey were frustration (50% of the respondents), powerlessness (44.32%), dissatisfaction (30.68%), indignation (17.05%), and shame (14.77%). Only 11.36% reported indifference, and 6.82% satisfaction. A further 22.73% ticked 'Other' and then reported feeling 'bullied', 'annoyed', 'distressed' etc. in the space provided for open comments. This is consistent with other studies reporting on academics' perceptions of GI (e.g., Simon, 2011, in Ireland; Blum, 2017, in the US; Ullah et al., 2024 in Pakistan; Giray, 2024, in Philippines) showing that academics are aware of and concerned about GI, perceived as a problem that must be resolved.

It is reasonable therefore to conclude on the basis of our research that most academics do not act unwittingly in GI. That is, the 'supposed weakness' that lets academics vulnerable to influence towards GI is in most cases not related to a trait of character, but to their position of powerlessness. Faced with the potential threat of being denied promotion, tenure, retention etc. if they have low SET scores (that is, if they do not inflate grades), academics do not have a reasonable alternative but to do something unethical – a state of facts generating frustration, dissatisfaction, shame. The question is therefore if they can be exonerated from blame, due to acting under coercion.

Are Academics Coerced into GI?

Manipulation and coercion are similar in that they involve the instrumental use of the agent – here, the academic – by either the manipulator or the coercer. What differentiates them is the degree of psychological pressure involved:

> … in cases of manipulation the manipulator does not psychologically compel the victim to act against his or her will. Instead the manipulator attempts to alter the agent's environment, and/or beliefs, and/or motives in order to get the agent to behave in the desired manner. In cases of manipulation the agent enjoys freedom of the will, and the agent acts on the will she or he wants to be effective under the circumstances, albeit under a degree of psychological pressure. In cases of coercion the psychological pressure that it brought to bear upon the victim is much more severe. (Arnold, 2001, pp. 60–61).

The latter seems to be the case in higher education: "[i]f teachers' livelihoods depend on the degree of their popularity with students, self-interest dictates that they award their students high grades" (Cahn, 2011, p. 38). The existence of a threat of a penalty imposed on the agent if they do not choose the line of action desired by the coercer is the fundamental condition for coercion. Admittedly, there is no overt threat by university management, but in his foundational study on coercion, Nozick (1969) makes it clear that threats also exist in "cases where no one threatens to inflict some damage on Q [*agent*] if he does A [*action*], but someone sets things up so that damage is automatically inflicted if Q does A" (p. 444).

Other conditions stipulated in coercion theory are (1) immorality of what is asked (Wertheimer, 1989, pp. 202–221), fulfilled here since GI is unethical; (2) success of the coercive attempt (Nozick, 1969, p. 441) again fulfilled here – see the empirical data on grade inflation cited throughout this article; and (3) intentionality on the coercer's part. The continued use of SETs after decades of literature demonstrating their lack of relevance suggests that their real purpose is no longer, if it ever was, to assess the quality of teaching. While the conditional threat ('you will not promote/keep your job/get tenure etc. unless you have good SET scores') does not directly ask the academic to inflate grades, it does it indirectly, in light of the strong positive correlation between grades and SET feedback. Besides, the whole panoply of pro-student policies, such as supplementary exams, appeals, long and repeated extensions is intended to facilitate student satisfaction, to be then turned into university marketing tools (e.g., Hemming & Power, 2021). There is reason to think that SETs belong to the same repertoire.

With all the conditions fulfilled, potentially there is a prima facie case that academics are coerced into inflating grades by administrators. In the applied ethics literature, coercion claims generally arise in discussions on the coercee's responsibility: is it nullified, or at least mitigated, by the conditional threat put forward by the coercer? Arnold (2001) contends that the answer will depend on the view of moral responsibility one takes: those favouring the contingent view would say that the coerced is never responsible, as their autonomy has been infringed, while those adopting the independent view will see the two questions (whether there was coercion, and whether the coercee retains some moral responsibility) as unrelated. Arnold (2001) supports the independent view, which he sees as better accounting for individual differences in the response to the coercive threat.

Wertheimer (1989) also sees the matter of one of definitional choice, but centred upon the coercion concept, rather than that of moral responsibility. We could, on the one hand, define coercion as occurring whenever the conditions are fulfilled (intentional, immoral, conditional threat to which the agent succumbs) and then examine whether the coercee should have resisted (Nozick, 1969). We could, on the other hand, differentiate, as Feinberg (1986) does, between coercion proper (when no resistance was possible) as opposed to coercive pressures, which could and should have been resisted. But if what we are after is the coercee's blameworthiness, the definitional choice does not matter, as both approaches lead to the same question: whether the agent could and should have resisted (Wertheimer, 1989, p. 268).

If Under Coercive Pressure, Could and Should they have Resisted?

According to Wertheimer (1989), when faced with a coercive proposal, "B is sometimes entitled to do what A demands and then be released from the normal legal consequences of his act. At other times, B should either stand his ground, or, if he chooses to yield, he

should at least not expect to recover later on" (p. 268). Frankfurt (1998) details, suggesting someone is not morally responsible for their submissive action.

> … when the threat appeals to desires or motives which are beyond the victim's ability to control, or when the victim is convinced that this is the case. If the victim's desire or motive to avoid the penalty which he is threatened is – or is taken by him to be – so powerful that he cannot prevent it from leading him to submit to the threat, then he really has no alternative but to submit. He cannot effectively choose to do otherwise. It is only then that it may be proper to regard him as bearing no moral responsibility for his submission (p. 39).

It may be argued that in a shrinking job market, in higher education in particular, the desire to not jeopardise one's job with low SET scores is beyond the coercee's ability to control. The subjective look at the matter, through the victim's eyes, proposed in the quote above, is particularly supportive of this conclusion. But coercion by SETs does not seem one of those overwhelming types of pressure, if looked at objectively. Rather, it looks like an intermediate case, where.

> … the threat in effect puts a price tag on noncompliance and leaves it up to the threatened person to decide whether the price is worth paying. The metaphor of the price tag is especially useful since it reflects the fact that there are different degrees of *coercive pressure,* some greater than others, and the greater the coercion (the higher the cost) the less eligible is noncompliance, short of the limiting case of impossibility where coercion becomes compulsion proper. (Feinberg, 1986, p. 192; italics in original).

Are the pressures for GI so powerful that academics cannot but submit to the threat, without moral blame, or are they presented with a 'price tag' they could choose not to pay? The variety of reactions in the face of coercive pressures to inflate grades, shown in our survey, is consistent with the observation, made in the coercion literature, that people's capacity for resistance differs based on their *circumstances* and *character* (e.g., Arnold, 2001, generally on the impossibility of discussing the blame of a whole group, since individual circumstances and characters differ). But the two variables have different implications to the moral assessment of grade inflators. Circumstances are stronger mitigators than characters.

A clear indication of the relevance of circumstances to the existence and degree of blameworthiness is the frequent statement, in responses to Question 12, that casual academics are those who inflate marks the most. This is consistent with findings reported in the SET literature that most unfairly affected by the use of SETs are casual employees (e.g., Koper et al., 2015; Stroebe, 2016, 2020). As Stroebe (2016) puts it: "Whereas established professors who also have a good record as researchers do not have to yield to such pressure, the price of resistance might be too high for young academics who are not yet tenured" (p. 813). So at least for casual academics, it seems safe to say they inflate grades under coercion, and this mitigates their moral blameworthiness: indeed, the coercive pressure on them, exercised via SETs, is insurmountable given the insecurity of their position and the overwhelming desire to secure another contract.

On the other hand, we would be less sympathetic towards someone who inflates grades due to some character trait, such as "ambition" (like the person referred to in R27's answer, above). Character, defined as "an interconnected set of traits, such as honesty, fairness, and fidelity, which, in turn, are largely deep-seated dispositions to do

certain things for an appropriate range of reasons" (Audi, 1991, p. 308) is distinct from personality; two people could have similar characters yet very distinct personalities. There are two conjoined reasons that support a stricter approach to moral responsibility when the variable is character, rather than circumstance. First, the overly-ambitious person (or transactional individuals who, as per the responses listed above, inflate grades out of calculation) is not coerced at all. Second, according to Audi (1991, pp. 308–213), we are to a large extent responsible for our moral character, even though we may not be for our personality: we can and should engage in moral reconstruction, and if we do not, we are morally responsible for that omission.

Conclusion

This article builds on existing literature on the morally problematic practice of grade inflation, and in particular on Yalçın's (2023) attempt to place a question mark on the culpability of academics who inflate grades. Looking at the case of a paradigmatic teacher of the present, Yalçın finds them to be facing circumstances much harsher than those faced by academics of the previous century. We take the project further by conceptually explaining why exactly we should be reserved in assigning blame to a whole class: because the academic of today faces coercive pressures from university managers to inflate grades.

To assess whether the pressures are indeed irresistible – in which case the wrongdoer would be exonerated from moral responsibility – we then take the analysis to the individual level, to see what are the feelings academics experience when doing, or seeing others doing, grade inflation. The fact that the overwhelming majority feel frustration and powerlessness is revealing, confirming that overall, this is a case of coercion rather than enticement or manipulation on the part of the university administration. On the other hand, the examination of the detailed responses reminds us of the relevance of individual circumstances and character in assessing whether succumbing to coercive pressures mitigates responsibility. The variety of responses – from those illustrating what was called the "academics' abject failure" to oppose managerial regimes obsessed with metrics, productivity, and surveillance (Taylor, 2003, p. 77), to those showing courage and resistance – simply suggests that academics can only individually, and not collectively, be deemed coerced into grade inflation.

While this article does not provide a definitive answer to the question of academics' moral blameworthiness for GI, it does a few other important things: first, it confirms that at least the casual academics, but perhaps many tenured ones in difficult personal circumstances, are coerced, thus less morally responsible for the unethical act of inflating grades; second, it shows the relevance of the 'character' variable to the moral assessment of a potentially coercive relationship; and third, it illustrates a variety of strategies of coping with wrongdoing, from resistance to justification and denial.

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Declarations

Ethics Approval University of Southern Queensland, Australia. HREC Approval number: ETH2024 - 0106. Project title: 'Grade inflation in Australian universities: Academics' perspectives'.

Consent for Publication The following statement was included in the Instructions page of the survey: "Participants can access the project results through publications from the research".

Consent to Participate The following statement was included in the Instructions page of the survey: "Clicking on the 'Submit' button at the conclusion of the questionnaire is accepted as an indication of your consent to participate in this project".

Competing Interests N/A.

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