

# If university grades are going up, does that mean there's a problem?

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In 1894, Harvard University commissioned a report on grading standards, [due to concerns](#) that:

Grades A and B are sometimes given too readily—Grade A for work of no very high merit, and Grade B for work not far above mediocrity.

More than a century later, the fear of declining academic standards continues. In Australia, there are [ongoing media reports](#) about universities awarding increasing numbers of high grades. Evidence has also been found in the [United Kingdom](#) and the [United States](#). Some US studies suggest grade averages have been steadily increasing since at least [the early 1960s](#).

This week, a report by academics at the University of Sydney [found](#) a 234% increase in the number of high distinctions awarded to [students](#) at the university between 2011 and 2021 (the university notes it changed its grading model in 2012).

Education experts call this "[grade inflation](#)." It is often presented as a negative, a sign of lowering standards. However, this is [only one way](#) to look at the phenomenon of marks going up.

## What are grades for?

Behind concerns about grade inflation are assumptions about what grades are and what they are meant to do.

Several decades ago, assessment used to be "[norm referenced](#)." This means the performance of students was measured against their peers. In this system, the best students get high distinctions, the worst fail and there's a bell curve in between. This holds true regardless of the quality

of the teaching and the capability of the students.

A high distinction in this system communicates you were one of the best students. It's a commodity valuable primarily because of its rarity, like a gold medal at the Olympics. It says nothing about what you are capable of, because your performance was entirely judged against what your peers could do.

But norm referenced assessment has since gone out of fashion. In Australia, the [Higher Education Standards Framework](#) now requires students to be assessed against predetermined standards. If a student meets the standard for a high distinction, they get one.

The mark of high distinction signals they met a very high standard. The performance of their peers does not matter. If there's a particularly strong student cohort, or improvements to teaching, more people get high grades.

## **There has been a change in assessment**

Grades are the product of assessment, so significant changes to assessment in recent years may also have driven grade inflation.

On top of the move towards standards-based assessments, many universities now give students rubrics (or scoring guides) before they begin their work.

These guides tell students how their work will be graded. So it's no surprise they **can?** [lead to significant improvements](#) in student performance. If we tell students [what good work looks like](#), they are more likely to be able to do it and achieve higher grades.

Similarly, there is growing attention given to the quality of [feedback](#)

[practices in higher education](#). We know feedback is a [significant part](#) of student learning.

So, in a standards-based grading system, where grades are directly tied to student learning outcomes, this improvement in performance should naturally translate to higher grades.

## Other explanations

There are other explanations for why grades have been going up.

Since 1979, some academics have been arguing [student evaluations](#) drive grade inflation.

This refers to the increasing practice of universities asking students for feedback on their lecturers and tutors, which in turn has an impact on academics' career progression.

The [logic is](#), if teachers give students a better grade they will get better evaluation scores.

But while there is [some correlation](#) between students who get better grades giving better scores to their teacher, it's not clear if this is a causal link. It might be that successful students like their teachers more, or perhaps students learn more from people they think are good teachers.

## 'Grade improvement'

Society depends on universities to produce competent graduates and grades are one signal of competence.

But we need to be careful about equating rising grades with declining

academic standards.

If better teaching is enabling students to meet a higher standard then [it's not grade inflation](#), it's actually "[grade improvement](#)."

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