

CHINA EFL: Grade Inflation in Higher Education

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BACKGROUND

Grade inflation in Chinese universities is out of control, by western standards.

In a famous Chinese university within the north Shanghai university ghetto, Chinese professors, associate professor, lecturers and other staff are required to assign 40% of their students an “A” grade; 30% must receive a “B” grade and 30% are required to receive a “C” grade. A grade of “D” should be used very sparingly because it would tend to discourage a student and a grade of “F” should only be used when a student’s tuition remains unpaid.

In a Joint Venture business institute in central Shanghai any student who fails their final exam is entitled to a re-examination and another and another until they receive a passing grade. A different teacher administers and grades each successive examination until one is found who will give the coveted passing grade.

At a famous university in Beijing, a student who fails a final examination may pay a visit to the teacher at home, bringing gifts of food, money and even sexual favors to raise their grade.

At a university in central China foreign teachers are encouraged to pass everyone. When the foreign teachers give a failing mark, the mark is raised to a passing grade administratively.

At a central China university every teacher must submit three alternate final exams for administrative approval. If the original teacher fails a student, the failed students gets two shots at a make-up exam, with two different teachers doing the grading. No student fails all three exams.

At a Joint Venture university in Dalian, an administrator’s child, who was a student at the time, was hired as a computer technician and given complete access to the school’s computer system, including the codes to access official records. He was the most feared and loved student on campus. He had access to all teachers’ computers and tests. He always received an “A” grade on every final exam, even exams where no other student was able to achieve an “A” grade.

At one Joint Venture university in northern China failed grades remain failed grades until the student pays new fees and retakes the failed course. Another Joint Venture school in northern China that tried that, and went so far as to expel students, who failed three

courses. The parents stormed the Dean's office in protest. The expelled students were reinstated and admitted on probation. There was never another failing grade issued.

A very famous Beijing university utilizes Tutors to assist foreign professors who teach long distance program from their home foreign university. A tutor was pressured and even threatened to change certain low grades. The tutor succumbed to the pressure and threats. When the foreign professor learned of this, he contacted the authorities at the Beijing University who denied any knowledge of pressure or threats against the tutor. Within a short span of days, the tutor was dismissed.

Chinese teachers know the score and only violate the grading policy when they know there is an opportunity for economic enrichment from a rich parent or when they lust for a student. While some schools encourage foreign teachers to fail deserving students, the list of failed students has all the potential to become an extortion list.

Foreign teachers usually exhibit disdain for the grading policies, if they are made aware of them. Usually, foreign teachers become aware of the grading policy by accident or learn of it if they have taught for several years in China. Foreign teachers usually submit their grades to someone who inputs them into the school's computer system while Chinese teachers input the grades directly into the computer system.¹ Foreign teachers rarely receive the access code the course grades section of the school computer system and thus never really verify what grades were assigned to their students. Foreign teachers who object do not have their contracts renewed.

It is generally understood throughout China's higher educational system that once a student has been admitted; they will graduate so long as their tuition is paid and they have not committed a serious offense against school rules or a law of China.

NEW GRADING POLICY

In the fall of 2007, at Xinyang Agricultural College, 22 English major students failed to meet the attendance requirements of the Holistic English Program and thus were not allowed to sit for the final examination and received a grade of "0". All 20 failing grades were administratively raised to a passing grade over the concerns and objections of the foreign professor.

In the spring of 2008, these same 20 English major students, (15 boys and 5 girls), plus another 2 boys, failed to attend a single Holistic English class, their only oral English class. The foreign professor was asked to re-examine the students and give them a second chance, a plea that was rejected since the Holistic English class is a participation class and the students never participated, not even once. A serious dialogue ensued wherein it was agreed that the failing grades would remain and be logged into the students' scholastic record.

The administration recognized that the “everyone passes” policy was anti-academic, cheated the students and Chinese society, and denied the professor the ultimate external motivation device.

The foreign professor called a meeting of the 22 failed students, with the administration’s approval, and offered them a second chance program. (Thirty minutes prior to the meeting, one female student called the foreign professor and stated that she was too busy to attend the meeting and wanted to meet on another day. The student was informed that the meeting was a second chance meeting and that no third chance meeting would be scheduled. She did not attend the second chance meeting.) The students were offered an opportunity to earn a revision of their prior failed grade if they met the following conditions:

1. They must attend all of their classes this semester, not just the Holistic English class., and they must sit up front and do all of the assigned homework.
2. They must attend all four weekly free choice evening English movies and sit up front where roll would be taken for them.
3. They must attend a special remedial class to be held on Saturday afternoons at 2:30.
4. A single failure to meet these conditions would result in the prior failing grade becoming permanent.

The stakes were extremely high for these 22 English major students because with a “0” grade in their record, they will not graduate until they repeat the course after paying new tuition fees.

All 20 English major students, who attended the second chance meeting, agreed to the conditions.

CHINA IS ALWAYS CHANGING, BUT CHINA NEVER CHANGES

Within the first three days of the second chance program, four students failed to meet the agreed conditions and were dropped from the program. We are compelled to conclude that there are some students who are not only unteachable; they do not belong in any institution of higher education.

AND THEN THE SHOE DROPPED! Two weeks into the second chance program it was discovered, when the students started dropping out of the program en mass, that all of the failing grades had already been administratively changed to passing grades. The second chance program was immediately terminated upon confirmation of this information.

A written inquiry was made of the administration, “Is it true that so long as a student’s college fees are paid and they do not kill a teacher, they will receive a passing grade in every course, even if they never attend a single class?” There has been no response, no denial. This is the norm throughout China, not the exception, and is just one reason a Chinese college education receives little or no recognition in the west.

CONCLUSION

We are not optimistic that the west will give much credence to a Chinese university diploma so long as it is a matter of entitlement rather than something to be earned. Although China graduates approximately 5 million college graduates each year, China is not developing a highly educated society.

; In Anhui, I taught at a local university in Hefei for two and a half years. When school started again in the fall of 2005, I was greeted by a class of sophomore English majors who seemed depressed and down and out. Several of the students complained about their final marks the previous semester. I told them that I would bring my grade book in the next day and I requested that they go online and tell me what their marks were. Out of approximately 25 students, 7 grades were not changed, 10 grades were lowered and 8 marks were raised. After lunch I climbed 5 flights of stairs to the Foreign Languages Department and spoke to the Dean, how an error like this could possibly happen. She didn't have a clue. To make a long story short, I told her that I felt I would have no integrity with my students and that I would resign if the grades were not changed. They were changed within a week. It seems that the person entering the grades with a family name of Chen was incompetent and his father was a professor/leader.

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