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Can Professors Buy Better Evaluation with Lenient Grading?

The Effect of Grade Inflation on Student Evaluations of Teaching

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In many universities, student evaluations of teaching (SET) are used for determining promotion, tenure and other financial benefits for professors, which gives incentive for them to try to increase their scores. However, instead of improving their teaching effectiveness, professors may be tempted to give better grades or lower academic standards, in hopes of less critical evaluations from students. As a result, the potential relationship between SET scores and grade inflation became a significant topic of interest for researchers, with countless studies showing strong positive correlation between the SET score given by a student, and the grade received from the teacher. Yet, it is difficult to assess whether higher grades are due to grading leniency, or due to actual teaching effectiveness. The reason being, if SET scores are accurate, then students attending a skilled professor's class would give high SET scores and perform better on tests, even without any grading leniency. Although, it is popularly believed that student evaluations contribute to grade inflation, there is no clear consensus on the exact effects, or how accurate SET scores are, in general.

In this study, we aimed to examine the effects of grade inflation on SET scores using four years' worth of data from two leading universities in Hungary, namely the Budapest University of Technology and Economics (BME), as well as the Corvinus University of Budapest (CUB). Our methods include regular OLS regression, but that does not account for the endogeneity of the received grade. To mitigate that, we use fixed effects, and two stage least squares, with an instrumental variable chosen to account for the endogeneity. Each regression was weighted based on the course size, divided by the number of instructors in each course.

This study is unique in regard to the existing literature, because most similar studies have been conducted on American data, and we have not found any similar studies yet on Central or Eastern European universities. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study of this nature on Hungarian data. BME data is also unique for the fact that BME students typically fill out their SET after receiving their grades, while most universities require students to fill them out before writing their exams.

The results for all three methods were similar and showed that, on average, inflating the grade of a student by 1 will cause them to give approximately 0.3 higher evaluations on the SET surveys, for the given instructor, which is in line with North American results. This suggests that SET scores in Hungary may exhibit the same bias and that adjustments would be needed for the SET score to more accurately reflect teaching effectiveness.

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