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The Costs of Accessible (Easier) Education!

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how increasingly accessible, flexible, and easier education has undermined the overall academic culture globally. It highlights several pitfalls of easier education, often masquerading as accessible and flexible education, that have devalued credentials and have had serious ramifications for those who truly are diligent and strive for excellence. It also highlights the illusion of equality thus created and provides directions for balancing accessibility with excellence.

Keywords: Education Management, Social Justice, Accessibility, Easier Education, Credential Devaluation

I. INTRODUCTION

The ‘in vogue’ thrust to make education more accessible, flexible, and easier to complete has been reshaping educational institutions across the world (Neem, 2019). Although this thrust is the result of the recent push for equity, it has also led to several intended/unintended consequences that adversely affect diligent, serious students. When degrees are easily earned and universal completion is emphasized over learning, not only merit and credentials get devalued but the whole academic culture comes under strain (Neem, 2019; Fordham Institute, 2024). This article explores the pitfalls of easier education (often masquerading as accessible and flexible education) including erosion of academic standards, credential inflation, labour market distortions, the psycho-social and ethical ramifications for those who truly strive for excellence, among others. It then highlights the illusion of equality created by making education easier along with making it accessible and flexible. This is followed by providing directions for balancing accessibility with excellence. The article ends with a conclusion.

II. PITFALLS OF EASIER EDUCATION

A. Erosion of Academic Standards

A core danger of making education easier is the deterioration of academic standards. Grade inflation is a clear indicator wherein average grades and/or GPAs rise gradually without a corresponding increase in actual learning (Fordham Institute, 2024). Several policy analysts and researchers highlight that grades across many systems have increased steadily, leading to what

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is termed as ‘grade compression’ wherein most students flock at the top, hiding true variances in accomplishments (Fordham Institute, 2024).

When educational institutions are judged by increasingly absurd metrics including pass rates/percentages, placements, reputation, etc. rather than learning-focused ones, they face strong incentives to reduce difficulty by simplifying curricula, easing assessments, or tolerating low efforts (Fordham Institute, 2024; Fordham Institute, 2026). Fordham Institute highlights how ‘mean grade inflation’ can lower future test scores, reduce the likelihood of high school graduation, and shrink earnings later in life, showing that inflated grades actually harm long-term outcomes (Fordham Institute, 2026), thus highlighting a critical issue that programs and policies designed to foster success in the short term can undermine learning and professional and perhaps even life readiness in the long term.

For diligent students, such erosion of standards is a betrayal. In case of compressed grading and lowered expectations, the additional efforts of diligent students are also compressed and do not generate additional outcomes. Consequently, these diligent students understand that excellence is not a requirement as the system will pull all up irrespective of their distinct efforts (Fordham Institute, 2024).

B. Credential Inflation and the Devaluation of Degrees

Hess and Addison (2018) and Morgan (2021) both report that with expanding education, securing degrees becomes more common thus giving rise to ‘credential inflation,’ under which jobs that earlier needed modest qualifications now demand higher formal degrees. It is further highlighted that many middle-skill jobs including clerical roles, supervisors, administrative positions now require at least a 4 year degree or more (e.g., MBA), even when the work itself is still the same (Morgan, 2021). In fact, it is also elicited that postsecondary education increasingly functions as a costly ‘toll’ imposed by employers, where degrees act as filters rather than fulfilling genuine employment/entrepreneurial skill needs (Hess & Addison, 2018).

When degrees are easier to obtain, the signaling power of those degrees weakens. When confronted with a large pool of graduates with high grades and similar credentials, employers find it increasingly tough to identify really capable candidates (Morgan, 2021; Fordham Institute, 2024). This undermines the value of credentials and further pushes students to pursue higher levels of certification (degrees, diplomas, short term certifications, etc.) to differentiate from others rather than to gain more knowledge and skills.

For worthy students, credential inflation means that the value of their earned degree is smaller than earlier and that they will have to invest more resources to earn more qualifications just to

stand out from the crowd and not because their chosen field demands it (Hess & Addison, 2018; Morgan, 2021). The opportunity cost is substantial, especially for students from modest families.

C. Undermining Meritocracy

An increasingly serious concern is the erosion of meritocracy. It entails that grades, degrees, and jobs reflect actual ability, effort, and performance. But, if the system dilutes the path, the merit-reward connection weakens (Fordham Institute, 2024). It is worth noting that policies framed around ‘attainment of degrees’ shift efforts from gaining intellectual experience to a mere accrual of credentials (Neem, 2019).

Fordham Institute (2024) highlights that when students receive high grades without corresponding learning, grades lose their value as a measure of performance. This incongruence leads to moral and motivational loss. When students realize that it is possible to achieve high marks with minimal efforts and weaker students are pulled up to similar grades, genuine excellence loses its sheen (Fordham Institute, 2024). Additionally, easier education can lead to new inequities. Fordham Institute (2024) further highlights that grade inflation is uneven across educational institutions and socio-economic and regional contexts, often granting students in low rigour systems inflated grades that do not reflect preparedness (Nordin et al., 2019). Grades are the gateway to higher education, scholarships, and often jobs but, due to grade inflation, diligent students from tough systems face unfair disadvantage.

D. Impact on Learning Motivation and Intellectual Culture

Education is about intellectual discipline, curiosity, and most importantly, character building, rather than mere certification. Systems that are structured to curtail hardships compromise the real purposes. Artificial Intelligence is a new accomplice in this compromise as it removes friction from learning thus eliminating the productive struggle central to developing resilience and a true deep understanding (Saadat, 2025).

It is worth noting that students who rely heavily on Generative Artificial Intelligence exhibit lower curiosity and cognition which indicates erosion of active thinking – a subtle way of saying that students are sadly becoming dumb (Saadat, 2025). This example concerns technology albeit, the pattern remains the same i.e., systems where shortcuts are promoted, students put bare minimum efforts to obtain the degree/certificate and learning loses.

Within such environments, students who seek genuine knowledge also lose interest and become distant, and often conform to lower standards. In such systems, sometimes even teachers,

lecturers, professors conform to lower norms rather than seeking critique (Fordham Institute, 2024; Fordham Institute, 2026).

E. Labour Market Distortions

Traditional signals of skill, viz. degrees and grades, are no longer reliable, making employers look for alternatives including psychometric tests, connections/networking, internships, work experience, etc. (Hess & Addison, 2018; Morgan, 2021). Since such alternatives depend on social capital and are less transparent, these present new inequalities.

Research on degree inflation (Morgan, 2021) further highlights that insisting on degrees for ‘middle-skill’ roles makes such positions difficult to fill thus, adversely affecting mobility, especially of those from less affluent backgrounds. It is also documented how employers sometimes reject experienced candidates because they lack formal degrees, despite possessing the necessary skills (Hess & Addison, 2018). Thus, the devaluation of degrees makes hiring more inefficient by reducing roles-skills matching.

This frustrates diligent students as mass certification and grade inflation erode their academic distinction (Fordham Institute, 2024; Nordin et al., 2019). Such students (eventually, graduates) then compete in labour markets where informal advantages such as family networks (nepotism), elite internships, etc. are valued above efforts at the university.

F. Ethical and Psychological Implications

Easier education also affects attitudes and character. Students who repeatedly gain accolades without much efforts eventually develop unrealistic expectations about progress in their respective careers and lives as they start believing that standards will always adjust for them (Fordham Institute, 2024; Fordham Institute, 2026). For such students/graduates, professional exams, competitive workplaces, research environments, etc. can be very unsettling due to their demanding nature.

Educational philosophers have long argued that struggle and difficulty are intrinsic to meaningful learning (McEwan, 2000). By removing these elements students lose the opportunities to develop resilience, patience, and a sense of earned accomplishment. Studies have also argued that students report studying more for courses perceived as more strictly graded, indicating that higher standards directly encourage greater effort (Fordham Institute, 2024).

The tension is thus between inclusivity and fairness. Reducing failure rates and simplifying curricula are often justified as being compassionate and driving access; still, if such ‘reforms’

result in misrepresentation of competence then they introduce new injustices especially towards diligent students and those who rely on education for emancipation from disadvantage (Fordham Institute, 2024; Plato, 2022).

III. THE ILLUSION OF EQUALITY

Champions of making education easier often frame their agenda in terms of social justice. However, expanding access and relaxing standards are not the same as equalising opportunity (Sanghi & Srija, 2015; Plato, 2022). Critiques highlight that unprofessional and non-standardised systems waste students' time and money, leaving them dissatisfied and driving them towards alternatives (Plato, 2022). Policy papers on skill development in India highlight that what truly traps disadvantaged groups in low productivity is not just lack of formal credentials but lack of access to education and training, or the low quality or relevance of the training available (Sanghi & Srija, 2015).

When degrees mushroom without commensurate teaching, mentoring, infrastructure, etc., those with preexisting advantages can still leverage family resources and networks to convert their credentials into opportunities (Morgan, 2021; Roy, 2025). A commentary on "degree dilution" in India notes that mass expansion of higher education has sometimes produced graduates whose skills do not match the labour market, thus reducing trust in degrees and disadvantaging both, diligent students and employers (Roy, 2025).

Easier education thus creates an illusion of equality, with more people having degrees amid huge disparities in skill and opportunity, which may further grow.

IV. BALANCING ACCESSIBILITY WITH EXCELLENCE

A critique of easier education is not made to reject inclusion and expanding education. Rather, it is a call to bring balance between maintaining standards and expanding access. Neem (2019) has warned that policy aimed towards completion of degrees ignores education's true purpose i.e., providing 'intellectual experiences.' Research has also suggested solution pathways including the following:

- Rigorous, transparent assessment standards along with remedial structures (Fordham Institute, 2024; Fordham Institute, 2026)
- External grading benchmarks to check grade inflation and ensure that performance truly reflects competencies (Fordham Institute, 2024; Nordin et al., 2019)
- Teacher development and curriculum design emphasizing problem-solving and critical thinking (Neem, 2019; Saadat, 2025)

- Separate pathways for academic, professional, and vocational education to reduce pressure for credential inflation (Hess & Addison, 2018; Morgan, 2021)

These measures can protect the interests of the diligent and deserving students who rely on system integrity to recognize and signal achievement.

V. CONCLUSION

Making education easier and the broadening of degrees furthers opportunity and inclusion thus aligning education with democratic ideals. However, research suggests several lacunae: loss of academic standards, grade inflation, credential dilution, labour market distortions, and the undermining of merit.

Diligent students face particularly severe outcomes as their hard work and eventually their degrees lose value thus eroding their motivation. Education has to maintain difficulty wherever needed for the advancement of individuals, society's progress, differentiate achievement, and to ensure that credentials truly reflect learning and not mere participation.

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