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| **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

Grade Inflation at Saudi Universities Before, During and After the Pandemic: A Comparative Study

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| **ABSTRACT**

This study investigates grade inflation in 127 language, linguistics, translation, education, and computer courses taught at some Saudi universities before, during and after the Pandemic. Grades obtained from some instructors for courses taught over 8 semesters were analyzed. It was found that between 20% 65% chose a pass/no-grade results, the rest of the students mostly earned A & B grades in Spring 2020 when instruction and assessment were held online compared to students' grade in Fall 2018, Spring 2018, Fall 2019, and after the Pandemic (in Fall 2020, Spring 2021, Fall 2021, Spring 2022). Grade inflation was the highest in computer courses followed by education courses and was the least in language, linguistics, and translation courses. Grade inflation in Spring 2020 was due to the adjustments mandated by universities to alleviate students' anxiety caused by the sudden shift to online teaching and assessment. Universities allocated 20% of the course marks to final exams, gave alternatives to a written final and to be lenient in grading. Students had the option to drop the course or have a pass with no-grade result. In Fall 2020, classes were still held online but exams were held on campus. Starting Fall 2021, both instruction and exams were held on campus. Mark distribution and exam requirements went back to normal as before the Pandemic. However, grade inflation continued in many courses even in Spring 2022. The study gives recommendations for maintaining exam reliability, validity, and fairness in emergency and normal situations to achieve the desired learning outcomes.

| **KEYWORDS**

Grade inflation, COVID-19 Pandemic, online assessment, online exams, distance education, online instructions, learning assessment, learning outcomes, emergency exam procedures, emergency assessment adjustments.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The lockdown that started Spring semester of 2020 forced all schools and universities around the world to close and deliver classes remotely using a variety of platforms without any prior preparedness or training. Results of a survey conducted by Al-Jarf (2020) showed that 55% of the students and instructors at Saudi higher education institutions were unhappy and dissatisfied with distance learning. Both students and instructors were in a state of confusion and could not cope with the new emergent mode of teaching and learning. Among other issues, the students' major concern was final exams and passing their courses with high grades. The students were complaining about exams and were expressing their worries about grades on social media such as Twitter. Some requested to be automatically passed in the courses, to have the course mark waived to cancel or postpone final exams, or to be given projects, research papers, or reports instead of written final exams. Some requested that the marks they earned in the first half of the semester be duplicated.

Due to students' complaints and anxiety about online exams, course grades and GPA, university administrations in Saudi Arabia issued several directives and made numerous adjustments to online exams in Spring 2020. They mandated that only 20% of the

total course mark be allocated to final exams instead of 50% during face-to-face instruction. They mandated that instructors give easy and straightforward questions, rather than higher-level thinking questions, be lenient in grading and allow more exam time. Instead of a written final exam, instructors could choose from several options such as giving open-book exams, projects, assignments, term papers, or assign an oral presentation. Instead of essay questions, many instructors gave objective questions such as true false, multiple choice, matching and gap filling rather than. The students were given many options for the course results such as dropping the courses, choosing a letter grade, pass/fail or no-grade result, and to have the course grade included in their total GPA. At the end of the semester all students in grades 1 to 12 were automatically passed by the Ministry of Education without taken any final exams including 12 grade students who sit for a secondary school exit exam. Similarly, the vast majority of college students passed their courses with high grades which reflected a high level of grade inflation and unfair passing of courses as reported by many instructors (Al-Jarf, 2020a; Al-Jarf, 2022l).

In the summer and Fall semesters of 2020, numerous adjustments were made in online learning, such as providing disadvantaged students with devices, improving the internet infrastructure and connectivity, and offering training courses to instructors in online instruction and assessment using a variety of platforms such as Blackboard. To alleviate students' anxiety and avoid complaints about online assessment and grades, classes were held online, but the students had to go to campus for one interm test and the final exam, i.e., exams were held face to face taking all precautionary measures for protecting the students such as wearing masks, keeping social distance and sanitization. The same online instruction and on-campus examinations continued in Spring 2021 (Al-Jarf, 2022l; Al-Jarf, 2021g).

Starting Fall 2021, face to face instruction and assessment in the classroom were resumed with few courses delivered online. Everything went back to normal as it was before the COVID-19 Pandemic in terms of course mark distribution and exam questions, assignments, and attendance (Al-Jarf, 2022l).

The status of online and face-to-face exams and standards for awarding course grades and degrees in a valid and reliable manner to ensure fair assessment of all students is crucial in education. Grade inflation lowers standards. Unfair, unreliable and invalid assessment may not reflect students' actual abilities, performance and attainment of the desired learning outcomes.

2. Literature Review

Grade inflation at schools and universities has been an issue of concern in many countries for a very long time. However, during the COVID-19 Pandemic, grade inflation has become a topic of research by numerous researchers in numerous countries. For example, at the high school level, Sanchez & Moore (2022) investigated whether high school grade inflation occurred between 2010 and 2021, especially for students who were assessed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Results revealed evidence of grade inflation which was apparent in courses taught in 2020 and 2021, with the inflation rate substantially increasing in those years.

In Italy, Doz (2021) examined the differences between the pre- and post-COVID-19 pandemic middle and high school students' mathematics grades. The results showed a statistically significant difference in the pre- and post-COVID-19 quarantine grades. End-of-year grades were higher than those before the COVID-19 Pandemic. The results also showed that more than half of the students in the sample achieved a higher grade at the end of the academic year.

In the UK schools, summer exams were cancelled due to the closure in Spring 2020. Educators tried to find a fair way to award grades in the absence of exams. To be fair as possible, all UK countries and the Republic of Ireland switched to awarding Centre Assessed Grades. The result was not only significant grade inflation (compared to previous years) but also unequal treatment of different subjects and groups of students (Shaw & Nisbet, 2021).

A report about A-levels in the UK by Finn, Cinpoes & Hill (2022) indicated that students due to finish A-levels in 2022/23 had their GCSE exams cancelled and have suffered COVID-related disruption spread across the last three academic years. In early September 2021, 272,500 (37.9%) of all 18-year-old students in the UK were due to start their college study. Results from the 2020-2021 academic year continued a trend of grade inflation, with 44.8% of students getting an A* or A grades in 2021, compared with 38.5% in 2020. This compares with 25.2% in 2019 and 26.2% in 2018. Yet, the trend of grade inflation appeared more in private schools showing the biggest rise in grades, and in state schools compared to grammar and selective schools. The Sunday Times reported that in 2019 16.1% of A-Levels were graded A* at private schools, but in 2021 it went up to 39.5%. Interestingly, there was a 21.3% difference between the biggest rise in private schools and the biggest two-year increase between 2019 and 2021 in state schools. The largest state school increase was at Tiffin School in Kingston Upon Thames, which witnessed a 35.1% increase in the awarding of A* grades from 32% in 2019 to 67.1% in 2021. Similarly, The King David High School in Manchester witnessed a 32.5% rise in the awarding of A* from 2019 18.2% in 2019 to 50.6% in 2021. These increases compared with a 11.3% rise overall in the awarding of A* grades from 7.8% in 2019 to 19.1% in 2021. As such, though the awarding of the highest grades

rose overall, this rise was heavily skewed in favour of private, grammar, and selective schools. This means that the short-term inequality of grade inflation that occurred during the pandemic has triggered longer-term societal stratification and inequality.
At the university level, Karadag (2021) collected the grades of 152,352 students who attended 2,841 courses conducted by 903 instructors at 5 universities in Turkey before the COVID-19 pandemic and the grades of 149,936 students who attended 2,841 courses conducted by 847 instructors during the COVID-19 pandemic. Results showed that the COVID-19 pandemic led to a marginal increase in students' grades in higher education. A grade inflation of 9.21% was the highest ever reported in literature. Compared with a year earlier, DD and DC grades decreased 55%; FD and FF grades decreased 31%; and the highest AA grades increased 41% for courses taken during the Pandemic.

At the University of Oregon, Walker & Grimm (2021) investigated the impact of COVID-19 on student performance and retention in the Spring and Fall semesters of 2020. Comparison of average grades in the pre-COVID and post-COVID semesters showed an increase of 0.278 points in the students' GPA on a 4-point scale.

At the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Texas A & M University, data analysis of 17,696 classes between 1985 and 2019 revealed evidence of systemic grade increase (Yeritsyan, Mjelde, & Litzenberg (2022).

In Oman, surveys and structured interviews with 60 academic staff at Sultan Qaboos University uncovered some challenges of online assessment such as grade inflation, a large number of students per section, the long time required for developing online assessment instruments, assessing group work, assessing practical experiences, academic integrity, cheating, plagiarism, refusing to turn on cameras, and instructors' heavy teaching load (Al-Maqbali & Raja Hussain, 2022).

According to the data obtained from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Shampagne by The Daily Illini, Troher (2021) found that the average GPA across the University for Fall 2020 was 3.50, in comparison with an average of 3.33 in Fall 2019. For the Spring 2020, the average GPA was 3.47 in comparison with 3.32 in Spring 2019. The degree of GPA inflation during the Fall and Spring 2020 varied from college to college. GPA inflation was most prominent in the Division of General Studies, where the average GPA increased from 3.04 in Spring 2019 to 3.41 in Spring 2020, i.e., a 12% increase. Inflation was also highly prevalent in the Gies College of Business, where the average GPA was 3.72 in Fall 2020 in comparison with an average of 3.55 in Fall 2019, i.e., an increase of 5%.

On the other hand, few studies in the literature found no effect, and even a decrease in students' grades due to the Pandemic. At the Department of Electrical and Electronic Engineering, Southeast University, Bhuyan (2021) noted that the students' Semester GPA was not affected by the online mode of teaching. Another study by Fass-Holmes (2021) analysed all international undergraduates' GPA at an American West Coast public university during the 2019–2020 academic year. Fewer than 10% of international undergraduate students who were previously admitted to the university as transfers, and fewer than 5% who were previously admitted as first-time undergraduates, earned GPAs below 2.0 during Fall 2019, i.e., before the Pandemic. These percentages decreased by 80.2% and 69.5%, respectively during the Pandemic in Spring 2020. This means that only a small percentage of international undergraduate students at the university struggled academically during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In Saudi Arabia, the literature review showed lack of studies that have investigated the issue of grade inflation during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Therefore, this study aims to fill a gap in this area of research by examining grades awarded to undergraduate students in English language, linguistics, translation, education and computer science courses at a sample of Saudi higher education institutions over 8 semesters before, during and after the Pandemic to find out if the adjustments made to online exams as mandated by Saudi university administrations have lead to any grade inflation during the Covid-19 Pandemic (Spring 2020) and in the second, third and fourth semester of the Pandemic as opposed to assessment results (grades earned by the students) before the Pandemic. The grades earned by the students in a sample of courses 3 semesters before the Pandemic will be compared with the grades earned by the students in the first semester (Spring 2020), second semester (Fall 2020), third semester (Spring 2021), fourth semester (Fall 2021) of the Pandemic and two years after the Pandemic (Spring 2022).

Unlike prior studies which compared students' GPAs before, during and after the Pandemic, this study will compare the percentage of students who earned a grade of A+, A, B+, B, C+, C, D+, D and F and the percentage of those who have withdrawn the courses as a group. Comparing the percentages of students (as a group) who earned each letter grade gives a better picture of students' performance as a group. Comparing the grades that individual students have earned may not necessarily reflect the existence or absence of inflation because students' performance across the courses might fluctuate from one course to another and one semester to another, whether there is a Pandemic or not.

Moreover, there is a need for this study because the study of grade inflation at all times is significant. Academics worry about the fact that grade inflation might lower standards. For employers, grade inflation may not enable them to distinguish students' abilities, i.e., who is excellent, who is average and who is below average, if all the students have earned A grades. These concerns are dismissed if higher grades reflect improved academic achievement, rather than inflation. Doz (2021) asserted that excessively high students' grades that do not represent their actual knowledge and competencies of students would give educators and stakeholders misleading and even false information about the quality learning and students' achievement.

3. Methodology
3.1 Samples of Instructors
A sample of 40 faculty were selected 4 state universities: King Saud University, King Abdul-Aziz university, Imam Abdul-Rahman Bin Faisal University and Umm Al-Qura University as follows: (i) 38% from colleges/departments of languages, translation and linguistics, with 23% holding a Ph.D. and 15% holding an MA degree; (ii) 12% from education departments, with all instructors holding a Ph.D. degree; and (iii) 50% from computer science departments, with 25% holding a Ph.D., 15% holding an MA and 10% holding a B.A. degree. 86% were female and 14% were male.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis
End-of-course grades for a sample of 126 courses, with a total enrollment of 3609 students were collected from the sample of instructors at the four universities as follows: (i) 34 English language courses for different college levels; (ii) 4 linguistics courses; (iii) 4 translation courses; (iv) 9 education courses and (v) 75 computer science courses. Some of the 126 courses in the sample include courses with two or more sections concurrently taught by different instructors and/or same course taught over two or more semesters for different groups of students, or the same course title taught at different universities such as the listening, speaking and writing courses.

The courses under study were taught over 8 semesters as follows: (i) 24 courses taught in 3 semesters before the Pandemic (Fall 2018, Spring 2018 and Fall 2019); (ii) 46 courses taught in the first semester of the Pandemic (Spring 2020) when both instruction and exams were held online; (iii) 30 courses taught in the second semester and third semesters of the Pandemic (Fall 2020 & Spring 2021) when instruction was held online but exams were held face to face on campus; (iv) 26 courses taught after the Pandemic in Fall (2021) and Spring (2022) when both instruction and exams were held on campus and things went back to normal.

Collecting the grades of same courses such as speaking, listening, writing and some computer courses taught by different instructors or over several semesters is intentional to show the variability or similarity in the grade distribution regardless of who taught the courses, to which groups of students and in which semester.

For each course, the percentages of students who earned a grade of A+, A, B+, B, C+, C, D+, D, F, those who withdrew the course, and those who chose a pass/fail or a no-grade result in the Pandemic courses (Spring 2020) were computed.

For comparison purposes, the total number of students in the set of courses under each semester combined was computed and the percentages of students who earned a grade of A+, A, B+, B, C+, C, D+, D, F and those, withdrew the course, and and those who chose a pass/fail or a no-grade result in each set of courses combined were computed.

Results of the analysis of the language, linguistics, translation and education course grade may not be generalized to other colleges such as science, pharmacy, agriculture, law, business and others. They may not be generalized to other language, linguistics, and education courses not mentioned herein and may not be generalizable to similar departments at institutions not included in the study. However, results of the analysis of computer courses in the current sample can be generalized to other computer courses in the departments from which the data was taken but may not be generalizable to other computer science departments at universities not included in the study.

4. Results
4.1 Grade Distribution Before the Pandemic (Fall 2018 and Fall 2019)
Before the Pandemic, instruction, and exams in all courses at Saudi universities were held face to face. Tables 1, 2 and 3 show the grades earned by the students in 24 language and computer courses taught in 3 semesters before the pandemic (Fall 2018, Spring 2018 and Fall 2019). A total of 672 students were enrolled in the 24 courses combined. The distribution of the grades in the 9 Writing courses taught by different instructors at the same or different universities combined were as follows: 1% earned an A+ & A; 11% earned a B+ & B; 38% earned a C+ & C; 20% earned a D+ & D; 15% (one sixth of the students) failed the course and 16% withdrew the course. This means that 12% of the students earned a grade of A+, A, B+ & B combined as opposed to 58% who earned a C & D combined and over one sixth of the students who failed their writing courses.

In the 15 computer courses in Table 2, the distribution of the grades of 409 students taught by different instructors at the same or different universities combined were as follows: 48% earned an A+, A; 22% earned a B+ & B; 37% earned a C+, C, D+ & D and only 2% failed in the 15 courses. Grade inflation is very clear as 70% of the students earned A and B grades.

For Fall 2019, a total of 135 students completed the 4 Writing and Reading course taught by different instructors at the same or different universities combined were as follows: 3% earned an A+ & A; 13% earned a B+ & B; 15% earned a C+ & C; 37% earned a D+ & D; 13% failed the course and 19% withdrew the course. This means that 16% of the students earned a grade of A & B combined as opposed to 52% who earned C& D grades and a little over one seventh of the students who failed their writing courses. It is noted that the grade distribution of the language course grades over the Fall 2018 and Fall 2019 semesters are comparable with half of the students falling in the average range (Cs and Ds), between one sixth and one eighth of the students earning A & B grades and another sixth failing the courses.

Table 1: Frequencies of Students' Earning Each Grade in Language Courses Before the Pandemic (Fall 2018)

Courses	N	A+ & A	B+ & B	C+& C	D+ & D	F	W
Writing1	18	-	2	7	2	4	4
Writing1	34	-	4	13	8	6	3
Writing1	30	-	4	13	7	3	3
Writing1	28	1	3	10	4	5	5
Writing2	18	-	1	6	5	1	5
Grand Total	128	1%	11%	38%	20%	15%	16%

Table 2: Frequencies of Students' Earning Each Grade in Computer Courses Before the Pandemic (Spring 2018)

Courses	N	A+ & A	B+ & B	C+& C	D+ & D	F	W
IT skills	9	-	3	2	-	4	-
Computer programming	31	--	2	1	7	17	4
Computer networking	18	--	1	4	8	5	-
Computer Programming	31	1	2	5	7	15	1
Internet technologies	25	1	14	10	-	-	-
Problem solving skills	15	1	7	2	1	3	1
Object-oriented programming	32	12	4	10	5	1	-
Computer networking	34	16	9	9	-	-	-
Numerical methods of computation	33	18	6	5	3	1	-
Numerical methods of computation	40	26	8	3	3	--	-
Computer networking	21	4	4	6	6	1	-
Logical digital design	35	4	8	11	8	3	1
broken structures	40	6	13	12	4	3	2
Computer organization and architecture	36	7	7	7	10	5	-
Graduation Project	9	9	-	-	-	-	-
Grand Total	409	26%	22%	21%	15%	14%	2%

Table 3: Percentages of Students' Earning Each Grade in Language Courses Before the Pandemic (Fall 2019)

Courses	N	A+ & A	B+ & B	C+& C	D+ & D	F	W
Reading1	24	3	7	3	5	1	5
Writing1	30	-	2	4	14	4	6
Writing1	55	1	5	10	22	7	10
Writing1	26	-	4	3	9	6	4
Grand Total	135	3%	13%	15%	37%	13%	19%

4.2 Grade Distribution During the Pandemic (Spring 2020 & Fall 2020)

Tables 4 shows the grades in 17 language and linguistics courses taught in the first semester of the Pandemic (Spring 2020). Overall, of a total of 384 students enrolled in the 17 courses combined, 33% of the students in all the course combined earned A & B grades. Interestingly 65% of the students chose a pass/fail and no-grade results. A look at the grades for each course shows that Writing courses, in particular, have the lowest percentages of students who earned A & B grades. Between 75%-94% of the

students chose a pass/fail or no-grade result probably because the Writing courses are difficult, or the students are afraid of failing the course or earning a low grade.

Likewise, Table 5 shows the percentages of the grades earned by the 180 students in the 9 education courses combined. Here again, 71% of the students in all the courses combined earned grades A+, A, B+ & B. Overall, 28% of the students chose a pass/fail or a no-grade result in all the courses combined.

In Table 6, the percentages of grades earned by 621 students enrolled in 20 computer science courses combined are as follows: 76% of the students in the 20 computer courses combined earned A & B grades, and 20% chose a pass/fail or no-grade result and nobody failed the courses.

Comparison of the results of language, and linguistics, education and computer courses one would notice that the percentage of students earning A+, A, B+ & B is the highest in computer courses (76%), followed by education courses (71%) vs 33% in language and linguistics course. By contrast, the number of students who chose a pass/fail or a no-grade result is highest in the language and linguistics courses (28% vs 65%), followed by education courses (28%), and the least percentage was in computer course (20%) probably because the language and linguistics courses are more difficult and language and linguistics instructors are tougher in their assessment, compared to computer and education courses where exams were probably easy and instructors are more lenient in grading.

Table 4: Percentages of Students' Earning Each Grade in Language and Linguistics Courses in the 1ˢᵗ Semester of COVID (Spring 2020)

Courses	N Per section	A+& A	B+ & B	C+ & C	D+& D	F	Pass/no grade
Listening & Speaking 1	14	64%	21%	14%	-	-	-
Listening & Speaking 1	16	69%	25%	6%	-	-	-
Listening & Speaking 1	2	100%	-	-	-	-	-
Listening & Speaking 2	15	60%	20%	-	-	-	20%
Reading & Writing1	2	100%	-	-	-	-	-
Reading & Writing 3	17	59%	41%	-	-	-	-
Reading2	20	10%	10%	5%	-	-	75%
Writing1	30	-	7%		-	-	94%
Writing1	24	-	4%	4%	-	-	92%
Writing1	25	-	8%	-	-	-	92%
Writing1	31	-	6%	-	-	-	94%
Writing1	34	-	6%	-	-	-	94%
Writing1	31	3%	3%	-	-	-	94%
Writing1	34	3%	3%	-	-	3%	91%
Writing1	30	10%	3%	3%	-	-	84%
Semantics & pragmatics	31	61%	16%	-	-	-	23%
Semantics & pragmatics	28	72%	14%	-	-	-	14%
Grand Total	384	23%	10%	2%	-	-	65%

Table 5: Percentages of Students' Earning Each Grade in Education Courses in the 1st Semester of COVID (Spring 2020)

Courses	N	A+ & A	B+ & B	C+ & C	D+ & D	Pass/ no grade
Educational Psychology (B)	15	13%	53%	-	-	34%
Educational Psychology (D)	36	14%	39%	-	-	47%
Developmental Psychology	25	16%	48%	-	-	36%
Thinking Skills	7	29%	29%	-	-	42%
Educational Psychology (A)	10	30%	40%	-	-	30%
Educational Psychology (C)	42	36%	43%	-	-	21%
Play Psychology	15	40%	60%	-	-	-
Early Childhood	15	67%	13%	13%	-	7%
Educational Assessment	15	67%	13%	-	-	20%
Grand Total	180	32%	39%	1%	-	28%

Table 6: Frequencies of Students Earning Each Grades in Computer Courses in the 1st Semester of COVID (Spring 2020)

Courses	N	A+ & A	B+ & B	C+ & C	D+ & D	F	Pass/ no grade
Computer Graphics	18	-	-	-	-	-	18
Computer Programming	43	3	14	12	-	-	14
Computer Programming	31	4	16	3	1	-	7
Computer Graphics	29	5	1	-	-	-	23
Artificial Intelligence	9	7	2	-	-	-	-
Advanced web programming	22	8	8	1	-	-	5
Object Oriented Programming	22	10	2	--	-	-	10
Object Oriented Programming	26	10	4	1	-	-	11
Software Engineering	38	11	11	6	-	-	10
Parallel Computing	17	12	3	-	-	-	2
Algorithms	35	14	12	2	-	-	7
Databases	25	19	3	-	1	-	2
Data Structures	29	20	6	-	-	-	3
Discontinuous Structures	29	23	4	-	-	-	2
Installing Translators	26	23	2	-	-	-	1
Software Engineering	39	24	15	-	-	-	--
Discontinuous Structures	39	35	-	-	-	-	4
Computer Securing	45	37	4	-	-	-	4
User Interface Design	46	44	2	-	-	-	--
Introduction To Computer Science	53	51	1	-	-	-	1
Grand Total	621	58%	18%	4%	Less 1	-	20%

4.3 Grade Distribution of in the Second Semester of COVID (Fall 2020)

In Fall 2020 (second semester of COVID), instruction in all the courses at all Saudi Universities was held online, and exams were held face to face on campus. However only one midterm exam was given face to face, in addition to the final exam. Instructors and students went back to the same distribution of course marks in terms of the marks allocated to semester work, class attendance, class participations, homework assignments, in-term tests and final exams.

Results presented in Table 7 show that 66 students were registered in two sections of a Semantics and Pragmatics course. 35% of the students in the two sections combined were in the A & B category, whereas more than half the students (56%) earned C & D grades; 6% failed the course with 3% course withdrawals.

In Table 8, 692 students were registered in the 20 computer courses combined in the second semester of the Pandemic (Fall 2020). 83% earned grade A & B and only 2% failed in the 20 courses.
It is very clear that grade inflation is very high in the computer courses as opposed to the Semantics and Pragmatics courses.

Table 7: Frequencies of of Students Earning Each Grades in Linguistics Courses in the 2ⁿᵈ Semester of COVID (Fall 2020)

Courses	N	A+ & A	B+ & B	C+ & C	D+ & D	F	W
Semantics & pragmatics (A)	33	3	10	9	9	1	1
Semantics & pragmatics (B)	33	2	8	10	9	3	1
Grand Total	66	8%	27%	29%	27%	6%	3%

Table 8: Frequencies of Students Earning Each Grades in Computer Courses in the 2nd Semester of COVID (Fall 2020)

Courses	N	A+ & A	B+ & B	C+ & C	D+ & D	F	W
Databases	19	2	5	12	-	-	-
Computer programming	25	4	6	5	2	5	3
Computer programming	36	8	7	10	7	3	1
Object-oriented programming	40	8	12	7	10	3	--
Broken structures	41	15	17	5	-	-	4
Object-oriented programming	40	16	14	6	3	1	--
Data structures	23	18	2	3	-	-	-
Introduction to computer Science	25	20	4	-	1	-	-
Computer graphics	22	20	2	-	-	-	-
Parallel computing	25	22	2	-	1	-	-
Operation systems	31	23	5	2	1	-	--
Advanced programming	41	26	6	8	1	-	-
Artificial intelligence	40	27	6	6	1	-	-
Software engineering	45	28	13	4	-	-	-
Software engineering	37	31	6	-	-	-	-
Databases	33	32	-	-	-	-	1
Introduction to computer Science	40	33	7	-	-	-	-
Internet applications	38	36	1	1	-	-	-
Image processing	40	37	3	-	-	-	-
Broken structures	51	39	9	1	1	-	1
Grand Total	692	64.5%	18.5%	10%	4%	2%	1%

4.4 Grade Distribution in the Third Semester of COVID (Spring 2021)

In the Spring 2021, classes were still being held remotely with face-to-face exams on campus. Only one midterm exam was given face to face, in addition to the final exam. As in Fall 2020, instructors and students went back to the same distribution of course marks in terms of the marks allocated to semester work, class attendance, class participations, homework assignments, in-term exams and final exams.

Results shown in Table 9 for a total of 169 students enrolled in the 8 language and translation courses combined show that half the students (50%) were awarded A & B grades; 28% were awarded C and D grades; 1% failed in one course only and 21% withdrew the courses.

Table 9: Percentages of Students' Earning Each Grade in Language Courses in the 3ʳᵈ Semester of COVID (Spring 2021)

Courses	N	A+ & A	B+& B	C+ & C	D+ & D	F	W
Listening & Speaking 1	16	56%	19%	12.5%	-	-	12.5%
Listening & Speaking 1	16	69%	25%	6%	-	-	-
Translation Project	13	100%	-	-	-	-	-
Reading1	32	38%	50%	3%	3%	-	6%
Writing1	19	-	16%	21%	21%	-	42%
Writing1	25	-	4%	40%	24%	-	32%
Writing1	26	4%	23%	35%	7%	-	31%
Writing1	22	5%	23%	18%	13%	5%	36%
Grand Total	169	28%	22%	20%	8%	1%	21%

4.5 Grade Distribution After COVID (Fall 2021 & Spring 2022)

In Fall 2021, face-to-face instruction in the classroom was resumed which means that both instruction and all exams were held in class. Table 10 shows results of 6 Writing and Translation course for a total of 169 students registered in the courses combined. Results indicate that 17% of the students earned A & B grades; 64% earned C & D grades; 8% failed in 5 out of 6 courses and 11% withdrew form 5 out of 6 courses. Two thirds of the students registered in the linguistics courses combined earned C & D grades rather than the higher percentages of students earning A & B grades in the first, second, and third semesters of the Pandemic probably because everything went back to normal in terms of the normal mark distribution for the semester work, attendance, class participation, assignments and final exam and giving higher level-thinking exams.

In Table 11, it is clear that percentage of students earning A & B grades is still high (77%%) for a total enrolment of 654 students in all the computer courses combined. This is probably because computer instructors in the sample are still giving very easy questions and are very lenient in grading compared to language, linguistics, and translation instructors even after 5 semesters after the closure caused by the Pandemic.

Table 10: Percentages of Students' Earning Each Grade in Language and Translation Courses After COVID (Fall 2021)

Courses	N	A+ & A	B+ & B	C+ & C	D+ & D	F	W
Introduction to Translation Studies	22	9%	18%	23%	41%	9%	-
Introduction to Translation Studies	29	9%	10%	31%	38%	6%	6%
Introduction to Translation Studies	24	4%	13%	24%	29%	25%	5%
Academic Writing	30	-	13%	40%	30%	3%	14%
Academic Writing	33	3%	6%	18%	46%	9%	18%
Academic Writing	31	-	19%	23%	42%	-	16%
Grand Total	169	4%	13%	26%	38%	8%	11%

Table 11: Frequencies of Students' Earning Each Grade in Computer Courses After COVID (Spring 2022)

Courses	N	A+ & A	B+ & B	C+ & C	D+ & D	F	W
Data Structures	25	2	6	8	6	3	-
Algorithms	20	8	7	5	-	-	-
Computer programming	38	9	9	7	6	7	-
Introduction to Computer Science	37	11	12	8	5	-	1
Broken Structures	39	12	13	5	2	6	1
Introduction to Computer Science	32	13	8	8	3	-	-
Artificial Intelligence	16	13	1	1	1	-	-
Software Engineering	23	14	7	2	-	-	-
Algorithms	41	16	25	-	-	-	-
Parallel Computing	28	17	6	3	2	-	-
Installing Translators	37	18	13	4	1	-	1
Object-Oriented Programming	36	19	8	6	2	1	-
Databases	40	19	6	7	8	-	-
Algorithms	39	19	14	6	-	-	-
Mobile Applications	22	21	1	-	-	-	-
Advanced Web Programming	35	21	12	2	-	-	-
Object-oriented Programming	38	22	7	6	2	-	1
User Interface Design	29	24	3	1	1	-	-
Computer Security	39	24	9	2	3		1
Computer Graphics	40	33	4	1	2	-	-
Grand Total	654	51%	26%	12.5%	7%	2.5%	1%

Interestingly, all students enrolled in the graduation project when in translation or computer science earned an A+. Nobody earned an A, B+, B, C+ C or an F.

4.6 Comparisons of the Grade Distribution over the Six Semesters

Table 12 shows a summary of the percentages of students earning a A & B grades; those who earned C & D grades; those who failed their courses and those who withdrew their courses before and after the Pandemic and those who chose a pass/fail or no-

grade result during the first and second semesters of the Pandemic (Spring 2020). The Table clearly shows very high-grade inflation in the computer courses before, during and after the Pandemic with the highest inflation rate before the Pandemic (Spring 2018), during the Pandemic (Spring 2020) and continued in the Fall 2020, and even in Spring 2022. Nevertheless, there are variations among the computer courses in the percentages of students earning A & B grades with some courses showing low percentages as in IT skills, Computer programming, Computer networking, Computer Programming before the Pandemic; and Computer Graphics, Computer Programming, Computer Graphics during the Pandemic; and Data Structures after the Pandemic.

As for education courses, the percentage of students in the courses combined who earned an A & B was 71% which shows clear inflation during the Pandemic (Spring 2020).

On the contrary, language, linguistics and translation grades for courses offered before the Pandemic (Fall 2018 and Fall 2019) do not reveal any grade inflation as more than half of the students in the courses combines earned a C& D grade (58% and 52% respectively), and those who failed (15% and 13% respectively), compared to those who earned an A & B (12% and 16%)

Even in the Spring 2020, the percentage of students in the language, linguistics and translation courses combined revealed that 33% of the students earned an A & B, and the high rate of students who chose the pass/fail or no-grade result (65%). In semesters 2, 3, and 4 of the Pandemic, the percentages of students in all the courses combines who earned an A & B were 35%, 50% and 17% respectively, compared to 56%, 28% and 64% of the students who earned a C & D which reflect a low to moderate grade inflation.

The distribution of grades in the language, linguistics and translation courses show a drop in the A & B grades in Fall 2021 (17%) compared to Spring 2021 (50%). This means that the language, linguistics and translation course grade distribution is heading back to normal as it was the case before the Pandemic.

Table 12: Summary of Course Grades Earned by the Students Over the Eight Semesters

Semesters	Courses Taught Per Semester	N	A+ & A	B+ & B	C+ & C	D+ & D	F	W
Before the Pandemic	Fall 2018 (language)	128	1%	11%	38%	20%	15%	16%
	Spring 2018 (computer)	409	26%	22%	21%	15%	14%	2%
	Fall 2019 (language)	135	3%	13%	15%	37%	13%	19%
Pandemic Semester 1	Spring 2020 (language)	384	23%	10%	2%	-	-	65%
	Spring 2020 (Education)	180	32%	39%	1%	-	-	28%
	Spring 2020 (computer)	621	58%	18%	4%	-	-	20%
Pandemic Semester 2	Fall 2020 (language)	66	8%	27%	29%	27%	6%	3%
	Fall 2020 (Computer)	692	64.5%	18.5%	10%	4%	2%	1%
Pandemic Semester 3	Spring 2021 (language)	169	28%	22%	20%	8%	1%	21%
After the Pandemic	Fall 2021 (language)	169	4%	13%	26%	38%	8%	11%
After the Pandemic	Spring 2022 (Computer)	654	51%	26%	12.5%	7%	2.5%	1%

5. Discussions

Finding of the current study in a sample of language, linguistics, translation, education and computer science courses selected from a sample of universities in Saudi Arabia have demonstrated very high-grade inflation and grade increase in the 46 courses taught during the first semester of the Pandemic (Spring 2020) due to the numerous adjustments mandated by university administrators and lowering the passing/failing standards to relieve students' anxiety caused by the Pandemic and the unprecedented lockdown, and to compensate for the students' lack of familiarity with the distance learning and assessment mode.

Findings of the present study are consistent with findings of other prior studies in the literature such as Finn, Cinpoes & Hill (2022), Sanchez and Moore (2022), Doz (2021), Shaw and Nisbet (2021), Karadag (2021), Walker and Grimm (2021), Yeritsyan, Mjelde, and Litzenberg (2022), and Troher (2021), which found inflation in the high school and college students' grades during the pandemic in other countries such as the USA, Turkey, Italy, the UK and Ireland.

Likewise, the grade inflation found in the online language, linguistics, and translation courses during the Pandemic in the current study is higher than that in language and translation courses reported in studies by Al-Jarf (2022g), Al-Jarf (2022l), Al-Jarf (2021a), Al-Jarf (2002a), Al-Jarf (2002b), Al-Jarf (2001). In those studies of 70 language and translation courses, the author found that 44% of the students earned A+ and A; 27% earned B+ and B; 14% earned a C+ & C; 5.7% earned a D+ and D; 1.6% between 50-59 marks and fewer than 1% failed the courses. The percentage of students who earned A and B grades (41%) with a pass rate of 99% which reflect obvious grade inflation.

On the other hand, findings of the current study are partially consistent with findings of a study by Lloyd, Sealey and Logan (2021) in Australia, which revealed that more students withdrew from their courses in 2020, while fewer students remained enrolled but failed their courses. In addition, Bhuyan (2021) reported that the students' semester GPA was not affected by the online mode of teaching and assessment. Fass-Holmes (2021) found that fewer than 10% of international undergraduate students who were previously admitted to the university as transfers, and fewer than 5% who were previously admitted as first-time undergraduates, earned GPAs below 2.0 during fall 2019, i.e., before the pandemic. These percentages decreased by 80.2% and 69.5%, respectively during the Pandemic in Spring 2020. This means that a small percentage of international undergraduate students at the university struggled academically during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic.

One explanation for the grade increase and grade inflation is the effort of instructors who are accustomed to face-to-face instruction and exams. The sudden switch to distance education, made them try to give higher marks to compensate for the unforeseen negative circumstances of the Pandemic (Karadag, 2021).

Another possible explanation given by Troher (2021) is that students earning low grades in some of their classes were more likely to select CR/NC, (which is equivalent to the pass/fail or no-grade result in the current study) for a particular class, to help boost their GPA or avoid affecting their GPA negatively. Students who earned higher grades were less likely to select CR/NC, as to have their grade count towards their GPA. In the current study a high percentage of students in the courses under study, especially in language course chose a Pass/no-grade result.

An examination of data about 17,696 classes between 1985 and 2019 at the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Texas A & M University, Yeritsyan, Mjelde, and Litzenberg (2022) found evidence of systemic grade increase which they partially explained by recruiting better and more female students and associating the grade increase with increased hiring of graduate students and other instructors. In the current study no difference between male and female instructors, and between instructors holding a Ph.D, M.A. and B.A. degree was found in the high percentage of A & B grades especially in the computer courses with more A+ grades awarded in many courses.

Furthermore, two studies by Al-Jarf (2022g; Al-Jarf, 2022l) shed some light on the causes of grade inflation during the Pandemic (Spring 2020), and why students earned high grade as reported by a sample of instructors at some Saudi universities. The instructors surveyed indicated the that the university administration wanted all the students to pass to avoid their grumbling and complaints. They felt obliged to be lenient and give easy questions, as the administration mandated that they make it easy for students. Some instructors felt that the 20 marks allocated to the final exam by the universities were like a gift to the students to alleviate their anxiety and make them feel better. They confirmed that grade inflation in online exams during the Pandemic was higher than face to face exams before the Pandemic. They mentioned that most students passed with high grades (As and Bs), few Cs and no Ds and Fs. An instructor mentioned that 7 students in her course got an A during the Pandemic compared to one student before the Pandemic. They added that some students got an A without deserving it.

6. Recommendations and Conclusion

Although grade inflation has been a global phenomenon for decades, during the Pandemic, it has been even more serious than expected. To reduce the effect emergency situations on learning and assessment and to guarantee validity, reliability, variability, fairness, and efficiency of assessment, whether in emergency or normal situations, this study recommends that students and instructors are notified, trained, and have an opportunity to practice the new assessment procedure to combat any new emergency situation.

Secondly, college administrators and faculty should set learning goals that the students need to achieve in each course and at the end of the course or program under any circumstances. Tests should be designed to assess the students' performance to find out if they have attained the desired learning outcomes, who has and who has not.

Thirdly, familiarizing instructors with the program goals and learning outcomes that should be achieved by the students in each course and the specific skills they should be taught. Training courses, seminars and webinars can be held for that purposes where some department instructors can train their colleagues. A special teachers' professional development page on Facebook or Twitter can be created where information about teaching and assessment can be posted and where teachers can post their queries and receive answers from colleagues and other professionals (Al-Jarf, 2022n; Al-Jarf, 2021d).

Fourth, traditional written exams are not the only way to assess students' learning. A variety of test tasks can be utilized to assess the different skills and knowledge that the students should acquire and master, especially the ability to apply and transfer knowledge to new situations. For example:

1) In Listening exams, students can listen to podcasts, TED talks, Youtube videos and lecture recordings and answer listening comprehension questions on their content (Al-Jarf, 2021d; Al-Jarf, 2021j).
2) In speaking, the students may give oral presentations online or face to face in the classroom about a topic which they prepare at home; participate in online or face to face debates about some issues; answer problem-solving questions orally; create a podcast on a topic of their choice and publish it online on Twitter, Facebook or YouTube (Al-Jarf, 2021b; Al-Jarf, 2021c; Al-Jarf, 2021d).
3) In reading exams, the students can make an outline, write a summary of a reading passage, answer literal and inferential comprehension questions, infer the meanings of difficult words from context, and explain the meaning of certain structures in the passage. They can also explain the meanings of difficult words, idioms, certain structures in linguistic landscapes commonly seen in the environment (Al-Jarf, 2021i; Al-Jarf, 2021k; Al-Jarf, 2009).
4) In writing exams, the students can write about current global issues such as global Pandemics, global warming, gas and oil crises, and political conflicts. They can address a problem situation, and propose a solution to a health, social, educational or a youth problem (Al-Jarf, 2022b; Al-Jarf, 2022c; Al-Jarf, 2021f; Al-Jarf, 2014).
5) Vocabulary and grammar exams may focus on recognition as well as production tasks such as recognizing and producing singular and plural forms; connecting the written form of words with their pronunciation; writing a paragraph using a certain tense; adding articles in a paragraph; using idioms and collocations in sentences; producing certain grammatical structures and so on. They can use ready-made vocabulary flashcard apps and create their own to help prevapre and revise for their vocabulary exams (Al-Jarf, 2015; Al-Jarf, 2017b Al-Jarf, 2022m; Al-Jarf, 2022a). Al-Jarf, 2021h).
6) In linguistics exams, the students can find definitions of and Arabic equivalents to linguistic and translation terms; work on problem-solving questions, project-based assignments or conduct debates. They may perform a linguistic analysis of family speech and videos. They can create their own digital stories and podcasts. Instructors can integrate technology such Padlet, Slido, Kahoot and Vocaroo in tests (Al-Jarf, 2022e; Al-Jarf, 2022f; Al-Jarf, 2022h; Al-Jarf, 2022i Al-Jarf, 2021e).
7) In translation exams, different students may translate different English and Arabic excerpts in different subject areas to assess their ability to translate polysemous words (Al-Jarf, 2022d); English and Arabic names of chemical compounds (Al-Jarf, 2022j), English and Arabic color-based metaphorical expressions (Al-Jarf, 2019), Arabic om- and abu-expressions to English (Al-Jarf, 2017a) and others. They may analyze translation errors in English word + preposition collocations (Al-Jarf, 2022o); English and Arabic plural forms (Al-Jarf, 2020b); English and Arabic binomials (Al-Jarf, 2016); English and Arabic pronouns (Al-Jarf, 2010a); English neologisms (Al-Jarf, 2010b), verbal and nominal sentences (Al-Jarf, 2007); and grammatical agreement errors between the verb and subject, adjective and modified noun, and noun and referent pronoun (Al-Jarf, 2000).
8) In interpreting exams, different students can listen to different podcasts, or TED talks and give a simultaneous, consecutive or liaison interpretation of it (Al-Jarf, 2021j).
9) In education exams, students can perform peer teaching or online simulated teaching without any preliminary training or rehearsal. They can perform hands-on teaching; solo-acting, mimic, simulate dealing with a problem that teachers encounter in the classroom; teach a certain skill using a specific teaching technique; apply a particular theory of learning, teaching with a specific technology, or solve an online teaching problem; apply ; principles of teaching; show how to communicate and interact with and give feedback to students; how to design tests and homework-assignments; how to set cognitive, affective and psychomotor goals to a unit in the textbook in a specific subject; and how to use the different Blackboard tools in teaching. They may discuss the impact of the Pandemic on students' psychology and well-being; how to motivate schoolchildren to communicate and interact in the distance learning environment (Al-Jarf, 2022e; Al-Jarf, 2022f).
10) In computer science exams, students may create certain apps related to the pandemic; design robots to be used in airports, hospitals, restaurant, and other locations. They may collect and analyze pandemic statistics from around the

world; conduct some learning analytics,[1] i.e., collect, analyze, measure, and report data about students in Saudi schools and universities in order to understand and optimize learning, and improve the teaching learning environment. They may help in solving faculty and students' connectivity problems. They may collect data about students while using LMSs, online learning platforms, social media, or other online tools. They may track students' clicks, time on task, navigation patterns, information flow, social interaction, and concept development (Al-Jarf, 2022e; Al-Jarf, 2022f).

11) Raising graduate and B.A. students' awareness of the criteria that should be met by graduation projects, M.A. and Ph.D. theses. For exams, students can prepare a list of references on an assigned topic from different online resources and databases. They can read and summarize a research paper or translate a paper abstract (Al-Jarf, 2022k; Al-Jarf, 2021k; Al-Jarf, 2013).

To ensure exam reliability, validity and ability to discriminate between the students who have achieved the desired learning outcomes, an exam should test all the skills levels and sample all the content taught, i.e., test all the chapters taught (Al-Jarf, 2021a; Al-Jarf, 2015; Al-Jarf, 2002a; Al-Jarf, 2002b; Al-Jarf, 2001).

To guarantee fairness and reliability, a grading rubric can be used in grading speaking and interpreting courses. A scoring rubric consists of a list of speaking and/or interpreting skills and several performance level (excellent, very good, good, poor) (Al-Jarf, 2021b). In this respect, Sun & Robin (2022) declared that the specification of a grading rubric directly impacts on the distribution of grades which may subsequently reduce grade inflation.

Due to difficulties in obtaining grades for all the courses offered by any department, the sample of courses in the current study is far from being inclusive and does not include all the language, linguistics, translation, education and computer courses offered by the sample departments at the sample universities. An in-depth and inclusive analysis of the grade inflation issue with a focus on all the courses in one discipline and the investigation of grade inflation in other disciplines such as business, agriculture, law, pharmacy, physics, mathematics, chemistry and others are still open for further investigation in the future.

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