

Grading for Growth

RETHINKING THE GRADING SYSTEM TO PROMOTE EQUITY AND
LEARNING AT LUMS

TEAM MEMBERS:

DR. QASIM IMTIAZ - SBASSE
USMAN ELAHI - MGSHSS
SAIMA MUJTABA RANA - SDSB
EILYA MOHSIN - LLI
ANAUM ZAHID - SDSB

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Policy Audience:	VC Council / Dean’s Council / Registrar / Provost / Academic Leadership
Decision requested:	Policy review / Institutional consideration / Further study

Executive Summary

This study examines the evolving grading system at Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS) and its implications for equity, learning, and student wellbeing. Drawing on institutional grader data, faculty and student surveys, interviews, and focus groups, the study identifies growing concerns related to grade inflation, grade compression, section-level inconsistencies, and competitive stress associated with the current grading model. Findings indicate increasing variation in grading practices across courses and sections, raising concerns regarding fairness, transparency, and comparability of academic outcomes. The study recommends strengthening grading alignment mechanisms, monitoring inconsistent grading patterns, conducting faculty grader orientation sessions, and establishing a centralized academic oversight mechanism to support greater consistency and transparency in grading practices.

1. Why This Issue Matters

LUMS was established in 1986 with a commitment to excellence and merit. Starting as a business school, the university has since evolved into a multidisciplinary institution comprising five schools, a diverse student body, and multiple academic programs.

According to Dr. Zahoor Hassan (Founding Faculty, Former VC, Professor Emeritus at LUMS), the initial relative grading scheme was adopted from Harvard Business School, where the case method formed the cornerstone of pedagogy. Over time, LUMS began adapting this system to suit its own context, although its implementation largely remained instructor led. Subsequently, Dr. Arif Zaman was commissioned to develop a customized grader, which continues to be used by faculty to date.

As the university has expanded from a single graduate program to multiple undergraduate and graduate programs serving thousands of students, and as global perspectives on learning and assessment continue to evolve, this study explores the theme, “*Grading for Growth: Rethinking the Grading System to Promote Learning and Equity at LUMS.*” The current bell curve-based grading approach is raising some concerns regarding fairness, student stress, competition, and its impact on meaningful learning. Drawing upon student experiences, faculty feedback, and institutional data, this research examines these concerns and proposes evidence-based interventions. The primary population for this study comprises current undergraduate students and faculty members at LUMS.

2. Research Methodology

This study employs a mix-method approach (see Table below) and institution-level inquiry to assess how grading practices have evolved and where problems of consistency, equity, and transparency are most acute.

Approach	Method
Secondary Data	Institutional and grader data
Qualitative	Interviews and focus groups
Quantitative	Student and faculty surveys & Grader data

3. Findings

F1: Faculty & Student View of Relative Grading:

- Faculty perspective: 55% support relative grading based on cohort size and academic ability, while 33% acknowledge it increases stress without improving learning.
- Student perspective: 66.2% of students support maintaining a curve-based approach. However, 45% of students raised concerns over curved-based grading, reporting that small differences in scores could lead to disproportionately different grades, creating undue competition and stress.

F2: Grade Compression: LUMS-wide Grade Cutoffs (2014-15 vs 2023-24):

Analysis of university wide grader data reveals that the grading structure is slowly getting compressed over time, raising the average performance bar for all grades:

- The A grade cutoff shifted upward from 81% in 2014–15 to 85% in 2023–24, meaning students are now scoring higher marks in assessments. (Fig. 3)
- The proportion of courses with D grade assigned at >70% increased substantially over time, rising from 1.8% of courses (fewer than 11 classes annually) during 2014–17 to 4.9% of courses (over 55 classes) by 2024–25. (Fig. 4)
- Compressed intervals between grade categories create unhealthy competition and stress among students because even small differences in marks can lead to significantly different final grades.

F3: Section-Level Variation in University Core-courses:

- Analysis of grades of all core courses for the academic year 2024–25 revealed substantial intra-course grading variability. For instance, an overall score of 70% could correspond to four different letter grades depending on the section in which a student was enrolled. In general, low variability (e.g., ~80–92% for A) is noted in higher letter grade boundaries across different sections whereas, lower grades were assigned across large percentage ranges (e.g., 45% to 75% for D). (Fig. 5, 6).

F4: Grade Inflation:

- Dean's Honor List (DHL) attainment has risen persistently across all schools. From a 2016 baseline of 15.3%, attainment peaked at 24.1% in 2023 (driven by pandemic-era grade relaxation) before easing to 21.5% in 2025, still roughly 6 percentage points (40%) above the pre-COVID baseline. Average GPA has followed the same route across all schools, with 2025 levels remaining significantly elevated relative to 2015. The LAW school shows the steepest increase. (Fig. 1, 2)

F5: Familiarity with Grader:

A majority of faculty (54.7%) are well familiar with the LUMS Grader system. However, a substantial proportion (45.3%) reported having only a basic understanding and expressed interest in learning more.

4. Policy Brief

- Every school needs to develop a mechanism to ensure that all the multi-section courses follow similar assessment structure, evaluation criteria, and grading policy. This may include alignment on component weightages, grading expectations, assessment difficulty, and communication of evaluation standards to students, while still allowing reasonable instructor flexibility in pedagogy and classroom delivery.
- Each school should develop a framework for monitoring unusually high ‘mean’ (e.g., >90%) courses. Schools should also identify courses where the D grade boundary has repeatedly exceeded a certain threshold (e.g., >70%) over multiple semesters. Based on these findings, schools should develop and implement an internal review and engagement mechanism through which academic leadership can work collaboratively with instructors to address these concerns.
- A centralized academic unit/office should be established to systematically record grading data, define institutional monitoring parameters, and publish annual dashboards on grading patterns across schools. The unit can also be tasked to identify ultra-high mean courses and other inconsistent grading trends and share these findings with relevant schools for further review and corrective action where necessary.
- Some instructors still do not know how the grading system actually works. Accordingly, a Grader orientation session should be conducted for faculty at the start of each semester, particularly new instructors, covering the technical functioning of the Grading system.

5. Recommendations

#	What	Lead Owner	Timeline	Resource implication
1	F2: Multi-Section Course Alignment and Standardization Framework	Deans’ Offices	Next semester	LOW
2	F4: Establishment of centralized office/unit of Education	LLI	Immediately	LOW
3	F5: Grader Orientation session	RO Office	Next semester	LOW

6. Implementation Consideration:

Phased Timeline: Given the breadth of recommendations, a phased approach is both necessary and practical. The establishment of a centralized academic unit (Recommendation 2) is the most urgent priority and should be actioned immediately, without a dedicated body to systematically record grading data, define monitoring parameters, and publish institutional dashboards, the impact of all other interventions will be difficult to track and sustain. In the following semester, the Multi-Section Course Alignment and Standardization Framework (Recommendation 1) and Grader Orientation sessions for faculty (Recommendation 3) should be implemented in parallel as both are low-cost, operationally straightforward. Also, they both directly address the consistency and transparency failures identified in

the findings. Together, these three recommendations form a coherent and sequenced reform pathway: establish the oversight infrastructure first, then construct the alignment and awareness mechanisms that the oversight unit will monitor. Progress across all phases should be reported to academic leadership on a term-wise basis, with explicit tracking against consistency, equity, and transparency outcomes.

7. Appendix

Research Methodology:

Component	Detail
Expert Interviews	Dr. Zahoor Hassan (Former VC, Professor Emeritus) Dr. Arif Zaman (Professor Emeritus & Grader Developer), Dr. Tariq Jadoon (Current Provost)
Focus Group Survey	Structured focus group discussions with students from all schools including SDSB, SSE, MGHSS, SOL and SOE to surface grading norms, concerns and challenges of current grading practice.
Secondary Data: Global Best Practices	Incorporated a comparative analysis of grading models and assessment practices adopted by globally recognized universities.
Faculty Survey	A structured survey of LUMS faculty measuring perceptions of relative grading, familiarity with the Grader system, and views on cross-section fairness.
Student Survey	Survey of undergraduate students capturing attitudes toward grading norms, competitive pressure, and perceived fairness across multi-section courses.
Grader Data	Longitudinal analysis of LUMS Grader records, 2014–25; covers grade distributions, cutoff trajectories, DHL attainment, D-grade concentration, and section-level cutoff dispersion across SS-100 and SS-101 in 2024–25. Grader Data gathered from RO office & IST

Table 1

Rising Dean’s Honor List Trends (2016–2025)

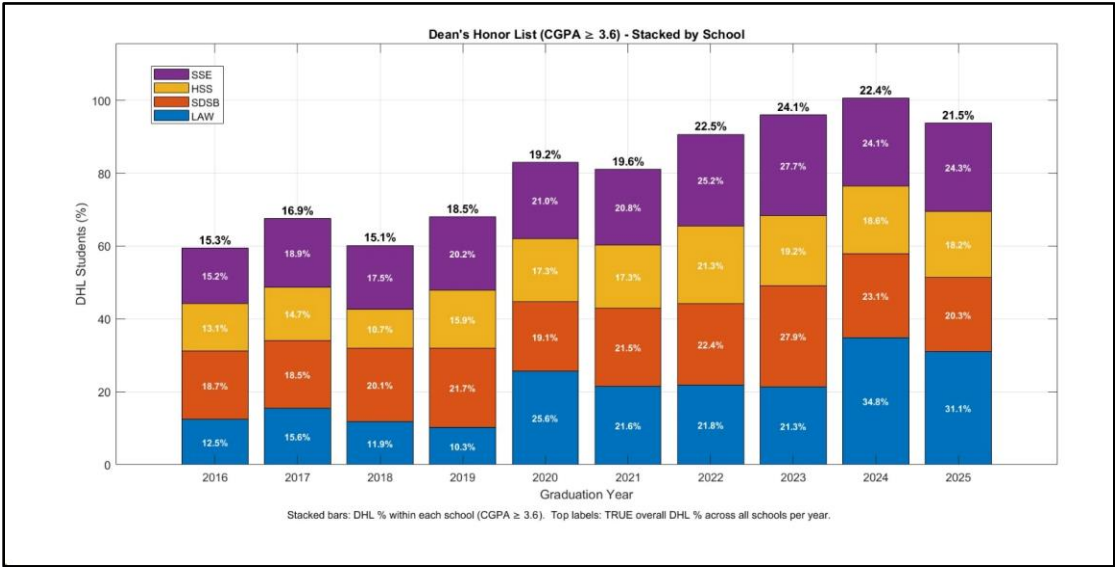


Figure 1

School-wise Average GPA Trends:

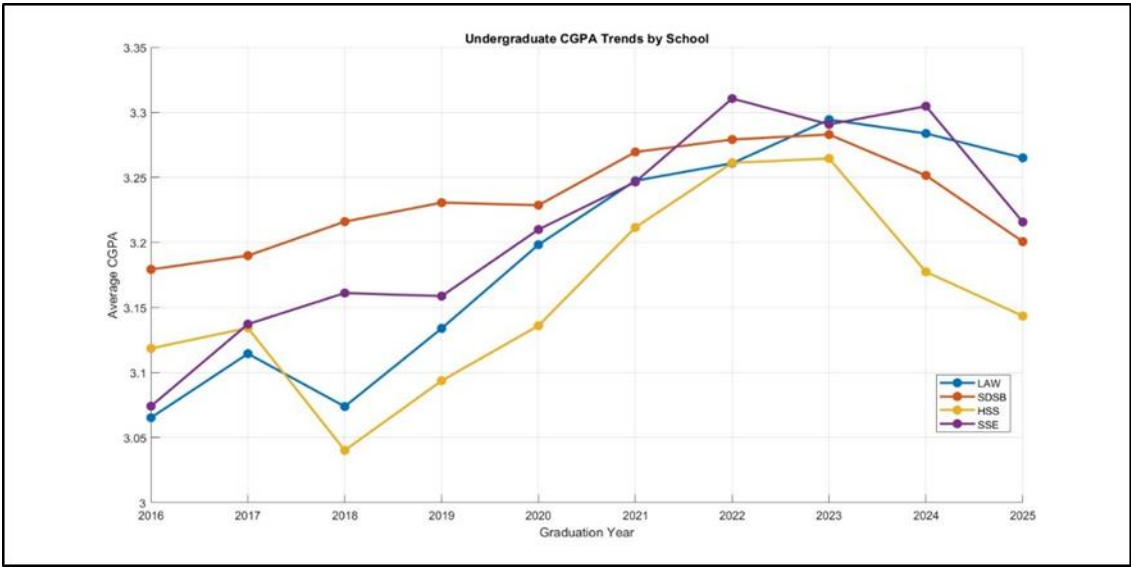


Figure 2

Grade Compression: LUMS-wide Grade Cutoff Trends (2014-15 vs 2023-24):

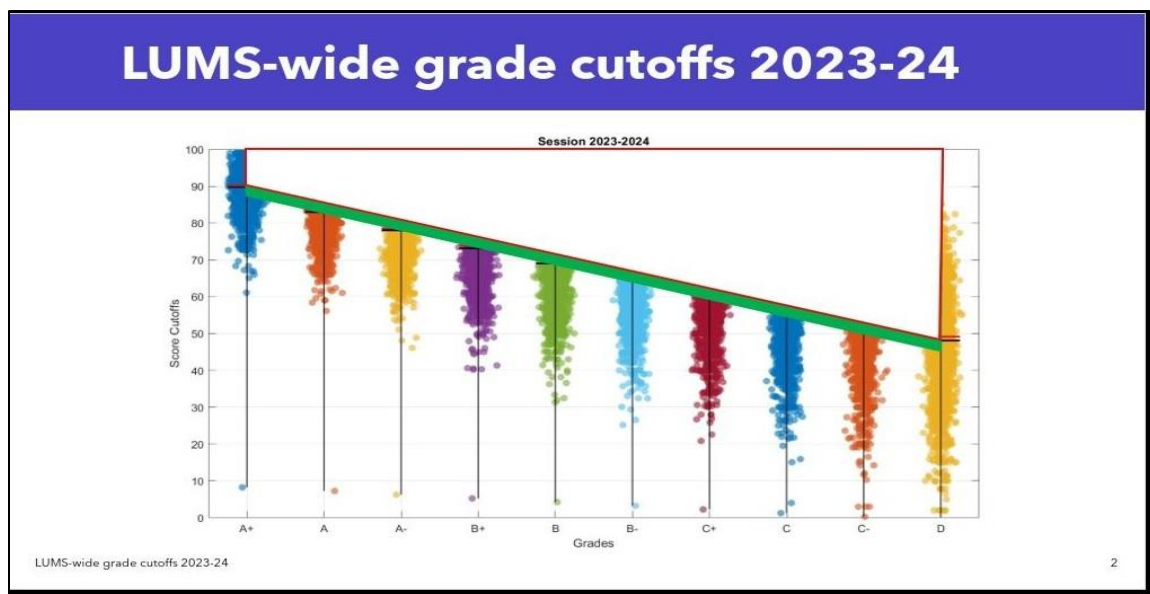


Figure 3

Grade Compression: D Grade Trends:

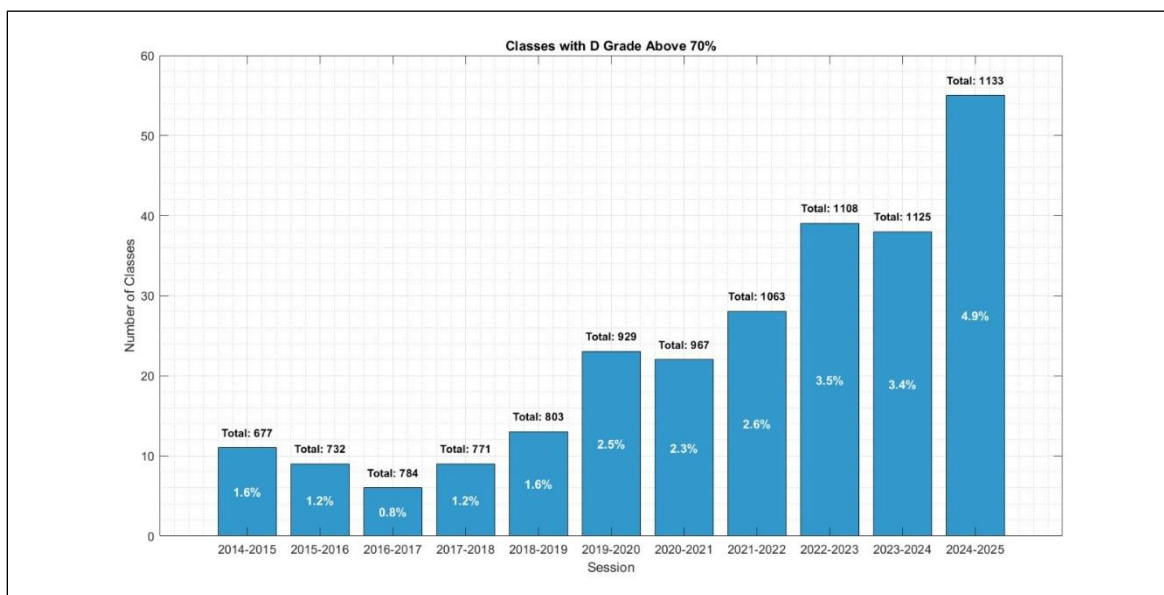


Figure 4

Multiple sections Variation in University Core-course (Writing & Communication):

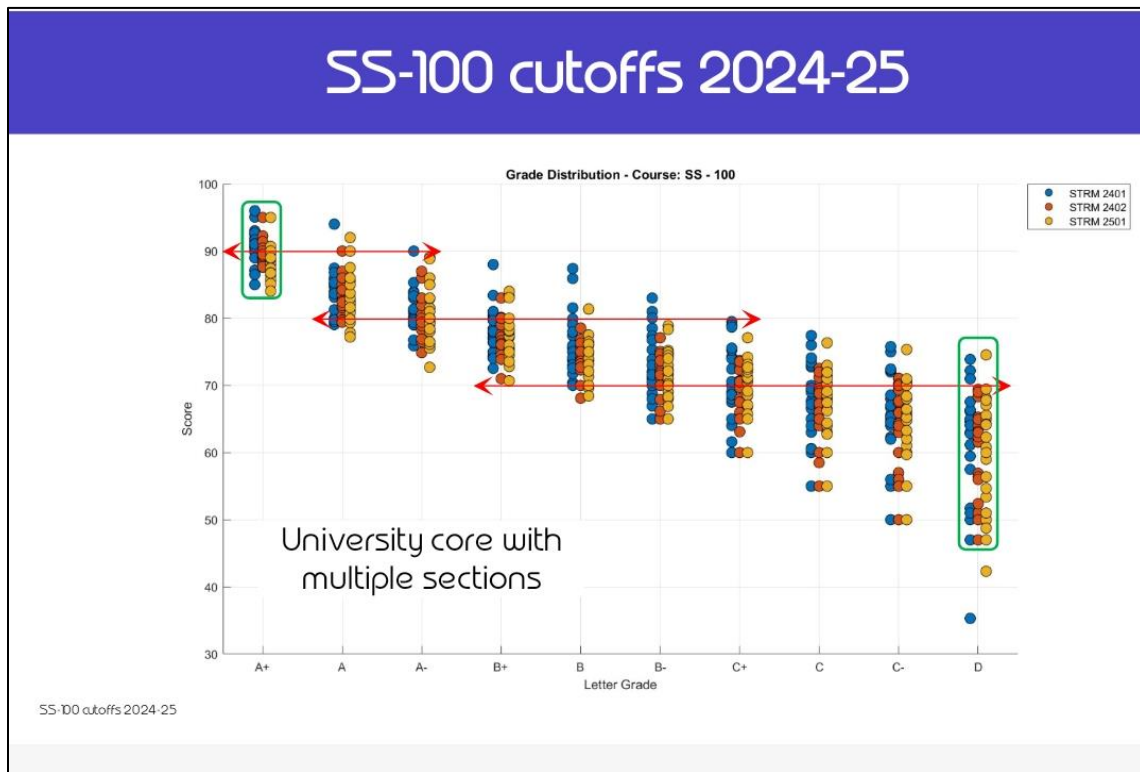


Figure 5

Multiple section Variation in University Core-course (Islamiyat):

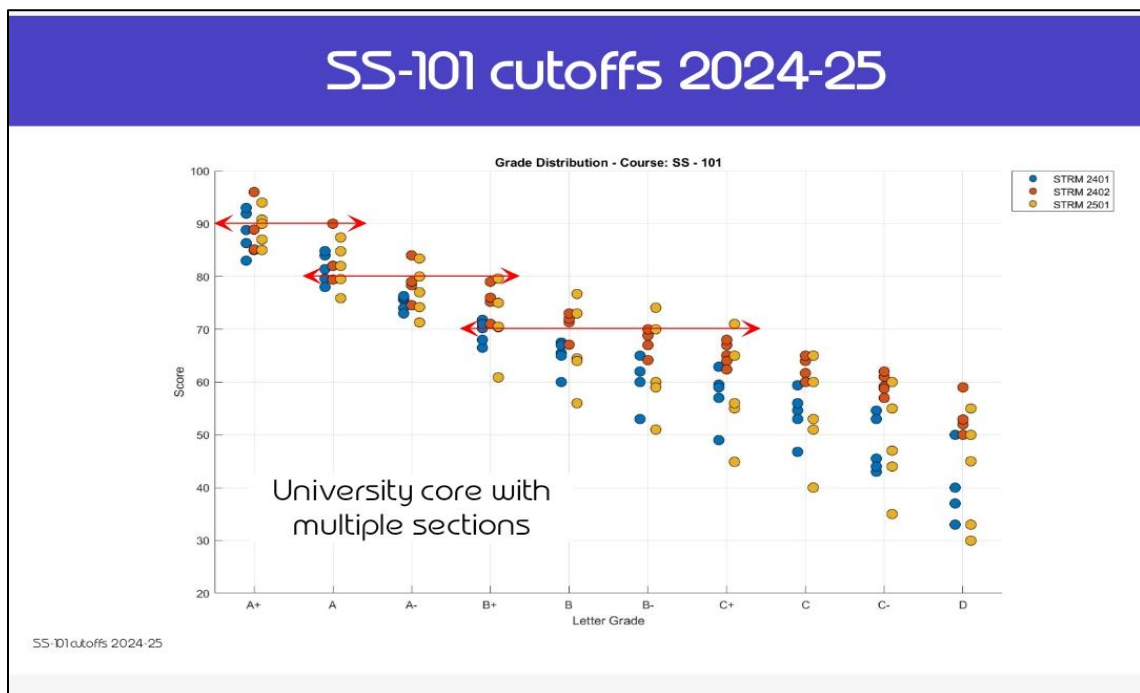


Figure 6