



GPA as a Gatekeeper: A System Thinking Perspective on Industry Expectations and Inclusion in Graduate Recruitment

Nadiya Tri Aryani^{1ABCD*}, Adila Shabira Nurfaizah^{2ABD*}, I Gusti Ayu Agung Istri Risna Prajna Devi^{3ABD*}, Wa Ode Sitti Israwati^{4BCD*}, Aldan Abdul Haris^{5BCD*}

1,2,3,4,5 Magister of Psychology, Airlangga University, Indonesia

*Authors' Contribution: A – Study design; B – Data collection; C – Statistical analysis; D – Manuscript Preparation

ABSTRACT

Background: The increasing reliance on Grade Point Average (GPA) as a primary screening criterion in graduate recruitment has positioned GPA as a systemic gatekeeper limiting access to employment opportunities, despite widespread acknowledgment that GPA inflation has eroded its validity as an indicator of actual competence. **Objective:** This study aims to examine the phenomenon of GPA inflation and its interaction with industry expectations, and to analyze how these dynamics shape inclusion and exclusion within graduate recruitment systems. **Method:** A qualitative approach was employed, combining document analysis with a systems thinking framework to identify key actors, feedback loops, and system traps underlying the educational and recruitment ecosystem. **Results:** Findings show that pressures from accreditation systems, university rankings, and societal perceptions drive institutions to prioritize high GPA outcomes, producing grade inflation without corresponding competency gains, while industry continues applying minimum GPA thresholds (e.g., 3.00–3.25) as an initial filter despite recognizing their limited validity. This creates a reinforcing cycle in which GPA loses meaning yet remains structurally embedded, excluding capable graduates with lower GPAs, sustained by system traps such as "seeking the wrong goals" and "shifting the burden." **Conclusion:** The study proposes leverage points including redefining evaluation metrics, integrating competency-based assessments, and reorienting systemic goals toward holistic graduate quality to support more inclusive and equitable recruitment standards.

Keywords: GPA Inflation, System Thinking, Graduate Recruitment, Industry Expectation, Inclusion

ABSTRAK

Latar Belakang: Ketergantungan yang semakin tinggi terhadap Indeks Prestasi Kumulatif (IPK) sebagai kriteria utama penyaringan dalam rekrutmen lulusan telah menjadikan IPK sebagai gatekeeper sistemik yang membatasi akses terhadap peluang kerja, meskipun telah banyak diakui bahwa inflasi nilai (grade inflation) telah mengikis validitas IPK sebagai indikator aktual. **Tujuan:** Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji fenomena inflasi IPK dan interaksinya dengan ekspektasi industri, serta menganalisis bagaimana dinamika tersebut membentuk inklusi dan eksklusi dalam sistem rekrutmen lulusan. **Metode:** Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan memadukan analisis dokumen dan kerangka berpikir sistem (system thinking) untuk mengidentifikasi aktor kunci, feedback loop, serta jebakan sistem (system traps) yang mendasari ekosistem pendidikan dan rekrutmen. **Hasil:** Temuan menunjukkan bahwa tekanan dari sistem akreditasi pemeringkatan universitas dan persepsi masyarakat mendorong institusi untuk memprioritaskan capaian IPK tinggi, sehingga menghasilkan inflasi nilai tanpa disertai peningkatan kompetensi yang setara, sementara industri tetap menerapkan ambang batas minimum IPK (misal 3,00-3,25) sebagai filter awal meskipun menyadari validitasnya yang terbatas. Kondisi ini menciptakan siklus penguatan (reinforcing cycle) dimana IPK kehilangan makna namun tetap tertanam secara struktural, sehingga mengeksklusi lulusan yang sebenarnya kompeten namun memiliki IPK rendah, yang diperkuat oleh jebakan sistem seperti Seeking the Wrong Goals dan Shifting the Burden. **Kesimpulan:** Penelitian ini mengusulkan sejumlah leverage point, antara lain redefinisi metrik evaluasi, integrasi asesmen berbasis kompetensi, dan reorientasi tujuan sistemik ke arah kualitas lulusan yang lebih holistik, guna mendukung standar rekrutmen yang lebih inklusif dan berkeadilan.

Kata Kunci: Inflasi IPK, Berpikir Sistem, Rekrutmen Lulusan, Ekspektasi Industri, Inklusi

Corresponding Author: Nadiya Tri, Aryani
 E-mail: nadiyatriaryani@gmail.com
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Introduction

A single metric often holds substantial power, determining whether an individual can advance to the next stage of selection or is eliminated from the very beginning. This metric is the Cumulative Grade Point Average (GPA) earned by individuals during their time as university students. Fundamentally, GPA serves as an indicator of academic achievement and is widely utilized in job recruitment processes as an initial screening tool for career opportunities. In the Indonesian context, GPA requirements are extensively applied in recruitment; for instance, State-Owned Enterprises (BUMN) set a minimum GPA of 3.00 for Associate and Bachelor's degrees (D-III/D-IV/S-1) and 3.25 for Master's degrees (S-2). A similar practice is widely observed in job vacancy advertisements, which frequently establish a minimum GPA standard ranging from 3.00 to 3.50 as an administrative prerequisite. This demonstrates that GPA functions not merely as a record of academic progress, but also acts as a mechanism of gatekeeping that dictates whether graduates can enter the labor market (Glints, 2024; Universitas Padjajaran, 2025).

The utilization of GPA as an initial filter in the recruitment process is understandable, given that companies require selection instruments that are fast, easily comparable across applicants, and seemingly objective when dealing with a large talent pool. However, relying on GPA as the primary indicator does not always accurately reflect a graduate's actual competence. Sulastris et al. (2015) point out that while GPA correlates with success in securing specific jobs, other factors—particularly personal development—play a critical role in determining graduate readiness. The personal development in question encompasses work experience, technological proficiency, and foreign language skills. These findings emphasize that academic achievement, as reflected in the GPA, is merely one indicator rather than the sole measure of graduate competence (Sulastris et al., 2015).

The relevance of the aforementioned issue within the Indonesian context further demonstrates that the primary challenge for higher education does not simply conclude with academic achievement; rather, it lies in aligning graduate competence with labor market demands. Isbah et al. (2023) emphasize that the alignment of higher education graduates with workplace requirements has become a crucial issue in the global era. Concurrently, Abelha et al. (2020) indicate that higher education must be oriented toward the competencies demanded by the professional world. In other words, graduates with high GPAs are not necessarily fully aligned with industry needs if the educational system does not earnestly develop substantive competence, practical skills, and employability (Abelha et al., 2020; Isbah et al., 2023).

This issue is further compounded as higher education institutions face mounting pressure regarding accreditation, reputation, and university rankings. Ranking systems such as QS, THE, and WUR have become sources of pressure for universities to compete globally (Dill & Soo, 2005). Hazelkorn, (2015) demonstrate that international rankings are frequently utilized as a strategy for institutional legitimation and communication within higher education. In this context, academic performance indicators, including the achievements of students and graduates, can serve as central components of an institution's quality image (Dill & Soo, 2005; Hazelkorn, 2015).

The emerging pressure potentially drives higher education institutions to showcase high academic achievements, including an inflation in the average GPA of their graduates. This introduces the risk of GPA inflation, a condition where average academic grades increase without a corresponding improvement in competence (Kohn, 2002). In this context, academic grades no longer fully reflect the actual capabilities of graduates; instead, they become a byproduct of institutional pressure, inter-university competition, and the demands of the educational market. Concurrently, a continuous rise in academic grades can diminish the signaling power of the GPA as an indicator of

students' genuine abilities (Pattison et al., 2013). As the number of students achieving high GPAs grows, the competency variance among graduates becomes increasingly blurred. This condition is further exacerbated by educational systems that encourage students to select academic pathways that are more "ability-concealing," rendering high grades ineffective as a primary reflection of actual quality or capability (Herron & Markovich, 2017).

GPA is also understood as a form of administrative credential utilized to assess the eligibility of graduates upon entering the workforce. Credentialism positions diplomas, degrees, and GPAs as symbols of social legitimacy assumed to represent a graduate's capacity, even if they do not always correlate directly with real competence. In the modern era, communities have evolved into a "credentials society," wherein academic certificates are treated as the primary prerequisite for securing employment and achieving social mobility (Liu, 2011). This is further compounded by the expansion of higher education, which triggers "credential inflation", a condition where the meaning of degrees and academic grades shifts due to an increasing number of graduates that is unmatched by labor market demands for genuinely high competence (Araki & Kariya, 2020).

If GPA undergoes continuous inflation, its discriminative power as an indicator of graduate quality may weaken. Paradoxically, however, companies persist in using GPA as an initial filter due to its perceived practicality and efficiency. This situation creates a reinforcing cycle: higher education institutions are driven to showcase high GPA achievements, students pursue GPAs as a symbol of eligibility, and companies maintain GPA thresholds as a selection standard. Consequently, the GPA remains structurally institutionalized despite its limited capacity to represent actual graduate competence. From a systems thinking perspective, this pattern can be understood as a reinforcing loop, a mutually reinforcing causal relationship that sustains a specific practice within a system (Fajnzylber et al., 2019; Meadows, 2009).

Recruitment processes that are predominantly governed by GPA requirements are closely linked to issues of inclusivity and equitable access to employment. Recruitment practices that look beyond GPA scores and consider diverse aspects of an individual's capabilities can be viewed as a form of social inclusivity. Social inclusivity refers to the process through which individuals are accepted, involved, and fully integrated into a social unit (Forsyth, 2014). Within the workforce context, inclusivity is reflected in fair opportunities for individuals from diverse backgrounds to gain employment access. However, when academic indicators are utilized as an initial screening tool, it restricts access for certain graduates, as the established prerequisites focus more heavily on educational credentials rather than a comprehensive evaluation of competence (Rivera, 2011). Many companies utilize educational credentials as an administrative screening mechanism, frequently prioritizing institutional prestige over the applicant's actual competence. Consequently, a heavy reliance on academic indicators such as GPA potentially compromises the inclusivity of employment access for graduates from diverse social and educational backgrounds.

Studies spanning the 2021–2026 period demonstrate that GPA or academic achievement is still predominantly positioned as an individual variable associated with graduate employability and job readiness. For instance, a study by Li et al. (2022) shows that academic performance plays a significant role in enhancing student employability, while Mainga et al. (2022) discuss employability as a constellation of personal, academic, and teamwork skills possessed by students prior to graduation. Within the Indonesian context, Nugroho et al. (2024) also affirm that graduate work readiness is widely linked to the ability to meet qualifications demanded by employers, particularly through higher education initiatives such as internships, soft skills training, and the MBKM program.

Conversely, several studies have begun to critique the reliance on GPA as a sole metric. Overdependence on GPA can lead students to become overly focused on coursework, thereby neglecting out-of-class experiences vital for employability (Chhinzer & Russo, 2022; Gatto et al., 2021). Meanwhile, research on work-integrated learning indicates that minimum GPA requirements can act as barriers to access for specific demographics, particularly students with disabilities and mental health challenges. Furthermore, even within predictive employability studies, GPA continues to be cited as a frequently utilized indicator in the initial screening of applicants' resumes (Chen et al., 2025).

Consequently, while these studies have elucidated the relationships between GPA, academic achievement, employability, and job readiness, they still tend to frame GPA as an individual attribute or a predictive variable. Prior research has rarely addressed GPA as part of a complex system that involves higher education institutions, students, industry, accreditation, university rankings, and social perceptions of graduate quality. This precise gap forms the foundation of the present study: to comprehend GPA not merely as an academic indicator, but as a systemic mechanism that shapes selection standards, employment opportunities, and the risk of exclusion in graduate recruitment.

Based on this gap, the present study utilizes a systems thinking perspective to analyze GPA as a gatekeeper in graduate recruitment. This approach enables the research to examine the interrelationships among actors, incentive structures, feedback loops, and systemic traps that sustain the overdependence on GPA. Within this framework, GPA inflation can be understood as a product of interactions among institutional pressures, academic grading systems, industry expectations, and students' strategies to meet employability standards. Consequently, this study does not merely investigate whether GPA influences employment opportunities, but also explores how higher education and recruitment systems collectively produce, maintain, and legitimize GPA as a selection standard (Meadows, 2009).

The research questions of this study are formulated as follows: how does GPA inflation emerge within the higher education system; how do industry demands for GPA shape graduate selection standards; and how does this system influence the inclusivity of public university graduates within the recruitment process. In alignment with these research questions, this study aims to analyze the system dynamics of GPA inflation, identify its impact on graduate inclusivity, and discover leverage points that can be utilized to foster a recruitment system that is more equitable, holistic, and competence-based. Consequently, this study is expected to provide a theoretical contribution to the literature on GPA and employability, while simultaneously offering practical contributions for higher education institutions and industry in designing more inclusive evaluation and recruitment standards (Eimer & Bohndick, 2023; Meadows, 2009).

Material and Method

Participants

The data sources for this study rely on secondary data to illustrate the behavioral patterns of actors and the interconnections among variables within the system. Secondary data serves as a robust foundation for analyzing gaps and issues occurring within society while simultaneously enabling a comprehensive literature review (Bowen, 2007; Jhonston, 2014). Secondary data were selected because they provide a macro-level understanding of the relationship between GPA inflation and industry competence requirements. The secondary data utilized in this study comprises several primary sources, including scientific literature and journals addressing GPA, grade inflation, credentialism, employability, learning motivation, graduate recruitment, inclusivity, and systems thinking concepts.

Specifically, this study adopts the foundational systems thinking literature from Meadows (2009) as well as Senge & Sterman (1992) as the baseline for the analytical mapping. Beyond scientific literature, the secondary data is supported by macro-policy regulatory documents, specifically the Regulation of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Permendikbudristek) No. 53 of 2023, alongside accreditation and quality assurance documents from the National Accreditation Agency for Higher Education (BAN-PT). To capture actual industry demands, this study also integrates recruitment documents sourced from job vacancy announcements and recruitment requirements from both State-Owned Enterprises (BUMN) and other relevant industrial sectors.

Procedure

The approach implemented in this study utilizes a systems thinking perspective. According to Meadows (2009) systems thinking examines the interrelationships among actors within a system, the interconnectedness of variables, and systemic traps. These interactions are represented through

feedback loops, system traps, and leverage points to explain the dynamics of the system. Within the educational domain, the application of systems thinking facilitates the elucidation of the underlying logic governing existing cases. Consequently, through this analysis and the logical framework of systems thinking, targeted interventions and improvements can be proposed (Meadows, 2009; Senge & Sterman, 1992). In this study, the systems thinking boundaries are delineated to focus specifically on student learning outcomes and current workplace competence requirements.

Data Collection

The data were selected using four criteria. First, regarding the time frame, empirical and contextual literature on GPA, employability, and graduate recruitment was limited to publications from 2021–2026 to capture recent developments in the Indonesian higher education and labor market context. Foundational theoretical works, including Meadows, (2009) on systems thinking, Deci & Ryan (2000) on motivation theory, Forsyth (2014) on group dynamics, and Tajfel & Turner (1986) on social identity, were included without time restriction because they served as the conceptual foundation for the analysis rather than as contemporary empirical evidence.

Second, regarding document type, four categories of documents were included: (1) peer-reviewed journal articles discussing GPA, grade inflation, credentialism, employability, learning motivation, graduate recruitment, inclusivity, or systems thinking; (2) national policy and regulatory documents, including Permendikbudristek No. 53 of 2023; (3) institutional accreditation and quality assurance documents, including BAN-PT (2022); and (4) recruitment documents, including job vacancy announcements and formal recruitment requirements from State-Owned Enterprises (BUMN) and selected private-sector employers.

Third, regarding contextual and substantive relevance, priority was given to documents situated within the Indonesian higher education and labor market context. International literature was included when Indonesian-specific empirical evidence was unavailable, particularly for systems thinking methodology and comparative evidence on grade inflation and employability. A document was retained if it explicitly discussed GPA as a recruitment or employability criterion, provided empirical or regulatory evidence regarding GPA thresholds in graduate recruitment, or contributed directly to the theoretical framework used in this study.

Finally, documents were excluded when GPA appeared only as a peripheral demographic control variable without discussion of its role as a selection or gatekeeping mechanism, or when the source lacked sufficient institutional or editorial credibility. An exception was made for recruitment-related sources that provided direct evidence of GPA threshold practices in actual job vacancy announcements, which were treated as contextual evidence rather than as peer-reviewed empirical findings. During document synthesis, recurring stakeholders, variables, and causal relationships were coded inductively. Actors that consistently appeared across the selected documents and demonstrated reciprocal causal relationships were retained in the systems map. This process resulted in the identification of six key actors.

Data Analysis

The data analysis technique is systematically executed by transforming the gathered secondary data into a Causal Loop Diagram (CLD). Through the CLD, the causal relationships and feedback loops among variables can be clearly visualized. Once the structural system is established, the CLD is categorized into reinforcing feedback loops and balancing feedback loops to examine how the interconnected patterns operate. The analysis consisted of four stages. First, the selected documents were synthesized to identify key actors, variables, and causal relationships. Second, these relationships were translated into a Causal Loop Diagram (CLD). Third, the resulting CLD was examined to identify reinforcing and balancing feedback loops, as well as potential system traps. Finally, leverage points were identified to determine strategic intervention areas capable of generating sustainable improvements in graduate quality and workforce competence.

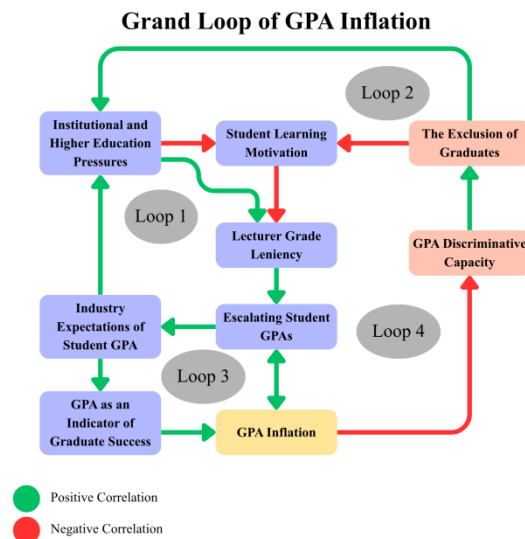
Result

The document analysis identified two major structural forces that contribute to the institutionalization of GPA as a dominant indicator in graduate recruitment: higher education quality assurance policies and recruitment practices across employment sectors. These documents reveal that GPA functions not only as an academic achievement indicator but also as an administrative benchmark embedded within both educational governance and labor market selection.

From the higher education perspective, the analysis of the Regulation of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Permendikbudristek) No. 53 of 2023 indicates that institutional performance is evaluated through measurable graduate outcomes, including graduation rates, graduate employability, and other quality assurance indicators (Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi Republik Indonesia, 2023). Although the regulation does not explicitly require universities to increase students' GPAs, its emphasis on measurable institutional performance encourages universities to prioritize quantifiable academic achievements as evidence of educational quality. Similarly, accreditation standards issued by BAN-PT reinforce the use of measurable performance indicators that indirectly shape institutional incentives toward maintaining favorable graduate outcomes.

From the labor market perspective, the recruitment documents included in this study indicate that GPA remains a commonly used administrative screening criterion. Recruitment requirements from State-Owned Enterprises (BUMN) specify minimum GPA thresholds of 3.00 for undergraduate applicants and 3.25 for master's graduates, while several private-sector job advertisements also require minimum GPAs ranging from 3.00 to 3.50. These examples illustrate how GPA is commonly used as an initial eligibility criterion before applicants' competencies, portfolios, or work experience are further assessed. Collectively, these findings suggest that educational policies and recruitment practices reinforce the perception of GPA as a proxy for graduate quality, creating structural pressures that shape the behaviors of universities, faculty members, students, and employers.

Picture 1. Grand Loop of GPA Inflation



Building upon these findings, the systems analysis identified six key actors whose interactions collectively sustain GPA inflation and its role as a gatekeeper in graduate recruitment. The current developments in graduate recruitment processes are heavily influenced by the Cumulative Grade Point Average (GPA), which functions as a systemic gatekeeper driven by various stakeholders. Within this study, the systems analysis identifies six key actors who contribute to establishing and maintaining the ecosystem of GPA inflation, each operating with distinct yet interconnected mental models. A mental model is understood as a set of assumptions or beliefs regarding how the world works, manifested in concrete forms so it can be tested and comprehended to interpret circumstances

and make decisions within a system (Meadows, 2009). The policy and recruitment documents described above provide the empirical basis for identifying the key actors and their interactions within the system. Based on these findings, six interconnected actors were identified as contributing to the persistence of GPA inflation and its role as a gatekeeper in graduate recruitment.

The first actor, the industry (employers), utilizes academic performance to map cognitive abilities and motivation, employing it as an initial phase to screen a large volume of applicants (Imose & Barber, 2015; Pinto & Ramalheira, 2017; Roth & Bobko, 2000). Although GPA does not always accurately predict job performance, the industry maintains it as a requirement due to the absence of a practical alternative, thereby establishing GPA thresholds as screening criteria within recruitment systems (Imose & Barber, 2015; Roth & Bobko, 2000). Among industry actors, the prevalent mental model is the belief that a high GPA serves as an initial signal of a candidate's ability, motivation, and eligibility to advance to the next stage of selection. Faced with a large volume of applicants, GPA is perceived as a fast, efficient selection tool that allows for easy comparison across applicants.

The second actor, higher education institutions, tends to utilize student academic achievement, including the average GPA of graduates, as an indicator of institutional success closely tied to university accreditation and reputation. The document analysis further indicates that the emphasis on measurable institutional indicators including graduation rates, graduate outcomes, and quality assurance requirements stipulated in the Regulation of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Permendikbudristek) No. 53 of 2023 (Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi Republik Indonesia, 2023). That regulation creates incentives for universities to prioritize quantitative academic performance. Although the regulation does not explicitly encourage grade inflation, these measurable performance indicators can indirectly motivate universities to emphasize numerical achievements as evidence of institutional quality. At the institutional level, GPA is understood not merely as a measure of student academic achievement, but also as an integral component of the university's quality image. The higher the academic achievement of the graduates and the shorter the duration of study, the stronger the perception that the institution has successfully produced high-quality graduates.

The third actor, operating within the institutional scope, comprises faculty members who must maintain academic standards while fulfilling institutional operational demands. Faculty members are frequently trapped in a dilemma between upholding academic rigor and satisfying administrative evaluations that dictate their career progression. The utilization of performance evaluations based on student satisfaction creates a strong incentive for faculty members to relax grading standards, which ultimately contributes directly to grade inflation (Stroebe, 2020). Student evaluation forms linked to faculty performance further reinforce this tendency. Consequently, faculty members operate under a mental model where academic assessment relates not only to teaching quality, but is also intertwined with student evaluations, institutional demands, and professional performance sustainability. In this situation, grading standards are prone to leniency when faculty members face administrative pressures and student expectations.

The fourth actor, the government acting as the regulator of higher education, also plays a pivotal role in shaping the incentive structures that influence the behavior of higher education institutions. Through quality assurance systems and institutional evaluations, the government establishes quality assurance systems and institutional evaluation mechanisms that encourage universities to fulfill various measurable performance indicators. In practice, an orientation toward numerical achievements such as GPA, graduation rates, and graduate outcomes can push institutions to focus more heavily on optimizing administrative metrics rather than assessing students' substantive competence. A governance model that emphasizes numerical indicators as a form of institutional accountability potentially creates incentives that trigger grade inflation. Consequently, academic grades may lose their informative function as a true indicator of students' actual capabilities (Nordin et al., 2019).

The fifth actor, accreditation agencies, functions as external entities that establish quality standards and evaluation indicators for higher education institutions. Within the accreditation process, various institutional performance metrics and student academic achievements are utilized as integral parts of university quality assessments (BAN-PT, 2022). The reliance on measurable

indicators within external evaluation systems can shift the behavior of higher education organizations to preserve their institutional reputation and competitive positioning (Dill & Soo, 2005). Under these conditions, universities may become more oriented toward optimizing easily evaluated numerical performances rather than strengthening students' substantive competence. This situation, consequently, reinforces the tendency toward GPA inflation as part of the effort to maintain the image of institutional academic success.

The sixth actor, students, experiences pressure from the industry that mandates a specific GPA threshold. Concurrently, familial demands frequently position GPA as a symbol of academic success. This situation drives students to adopt ability-concealing strategies, prioritizing academic grades over substantive understanding (Herron & Markovich, 2017). Consequently, the pressure they experience reinforces the demand for GPA inflation from the student side. Within this system, students operate under a mental model that a high GPA is the primary prerequisite to be deemed successful, worthy, and competitive when entering the workforce. As a result, students become more oriented toward achieving numerical outcomes rather than engaging in meaningful learning processes. Collectively, these actors forge a reinforcing system dynamic. While the interests of each actor appear rational at the individual or institutional level, they ultimately culminate in systemic losses over the long term, specifically the dilution of GPA's validity as an indicator of competence.

GPA inflation and industry expectations form a reinforcing feedback loop that continuously influences and amplifies one another. When the industry maintains a GPA threshold as an initial recruitment screen, educational institutions push their graduates by ensuring this GPA threshold is met. This pressure drives faculty members to loosen grading standards and motivates students to chase numbers, causing the average GPA to escalate while systematically eroding its meaning in terms of quality and competence (Jewel et al., 2013). The external pressure of high GPA demands can shift students' learning orientation from mastering the material to merely achieving academic performance.

The expansion of higher education has triggered the phenomenon of credential inflation, which leads to the diminishing differentiation value of academic degrees and high GPAs. Consequently, the screening standards for new labor market entrants have shifted toward demands for soft credentials, such as organizational experience, certifications, interpersonal skills, and practical work experience.

However, this shift in industry demands is not immediately met by adjustments within the higher education evaluation system. This delayed response causes educational institutions to remain oriented toward producing graduates with high GPAs, even though such academic achievements do not necessarily correlate with workforce readiness. From an inclusivity perspective, this dynamic yields a serious unintended consequence. A GPA threshold, originally intended as an objective selection standard, potentially excludes competent graduates who possess organizational experience, portfolios, or relevant practical skills but fail to meet a specific numerical baseline (Pinto & Ramalheira, 2017).

Within this context, GPA functions as a seemingly neutral screening mechanism, yet it can generate a recurring exclusionary effect. Graduates with high GPAs are frequently placed in positions of maximum inclusion, as they are perceived to possess the motivation, cognitive abilities, and eligibility required to advance to subsequent selection phases (Pinto & Ramalheira, 2017). Conversely, graduates with moderate or low GPAs may be eliminated at the initial stage, despite possessing relevant organizational experience, interpersonal skills, portfolios, or practical expertise (Pinto & Ramalheira, 2017). This condition indicates that inclusion within a GPA-based recruitment system is highly competitive and relative; an individual must not only meet the baseline requirements but also stand out relative to other applicants within the job-seeking hierarchy (Pinto & Ramalheira, 2017).

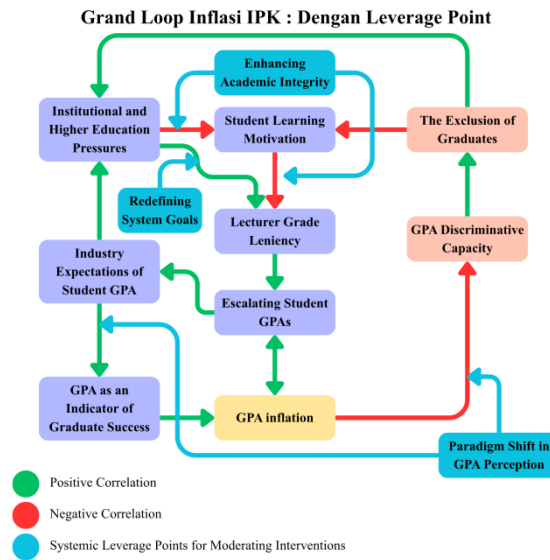
When high GPAs become ubiquitous due to grade inflation, firms may seek alternative differentiators such as institutional reputation, social background, or social class as additional criteria to determine who is eligible to advance to the next selection stage (Schwager, 2012). Consequently, a mechanism that initially appeared inclusive can shift into a new form of exclusion. If firms solely rely on a high GPA as the primary gateway, the recruitment system can indirectly perpetuate exclusionary

structures against disadvantaged groups or graduates who possess potential but lack equal access to the same academic and social resources (Schwager, 2012). GPA inflation also diminishes the quality of the signal provided by academic grades. When high grades are awarded to a large segment of students, they become less informative in depicting the actual knowledge and competence level of the students (Ciftci & Karadag, 2024). A GPA that originally functioned as a differentiating indicator now gradually loses its informative power as a marker of graduate capacity (Nanga, 2026). Consequently, firms experience increasing difficulty in distinguishing between applicants who are truly competent and those who merely possess high grades. This condition can disrupt labor allocation, as selection is no longer fully based on the candidates' comparative advantages (Schwager, 2012). Graduates with high GPAs are not necessarily equipped to face the dynamics of the workforce if they lack crucial soft skills such as problem-solving, collaboration, adaptability, and communication skills.

Based on the system dynamics mapping above, two system traps function as leverage points identified for systemic improvement. *Seeking the Wrong Goal* occurs when GPA replaces competence as the system's objective, and *Shifting the Burden* occurs when grading leniency serves as a short-term solution that fails to address the root problem (Meadows, 2009). In this analysis, *Seeking the Wrong Goal* takes place when GPA supplants competence as the system's primary goal. Under these conditions, educational institutions, faculty members, and students no longer fully focus on the development of substantive competence, but rather on achieving numerical targets perceived to represent quality. GPA shifts from being an academic indicator into a symbol of reputation, eligibility, and success.

This trap manifests when the operational goals of institutions are reduced to numerical achievements, even though the formal vision of higher education continuously states a commitment to holistic competence. This discrepancy between formal goals and operational practices reinforces GPA as the primary target of the system, rather than as one of the indicators of graduate quality. *Shifting the Burden* occurs when the relaxation of grading standards serves as a short-term solution to respond to system pressures without addressing the root cause. Within this context, lenient grading standards appear to be a quick fix to preserve reputation, meet student expectations, and strengthen graduates' competitiveness in the labor market. However, this solution instead reinforces GPA inflation and diminishes the validity of GPA as a measuring tool for competence. Consequently, the system becomes increasingly dependent on numbers that are progressively losing their meaning.

Picture 2. Grand Loop of GPA Inflation with Leverage Point



From these two system traps, three leverage points operating at various levels are identified. First is the paradigm shift. Currently, the paradigm viewing GPA as a valid representation of competence is deeply embedded across all levels of the system, from student admissions to accreditation forms. Shifting this paradigm entails recontextualizing GPA not rejecting it, but rather repositioning it as one assessment metric among multiple indicators. A paradigm shift occurs through the continuous reinforcement of new narratives, the strategic placement of individuals who hold alternative paradigms into key positions, and system modeling that helps all actors comprehensively define the structural problem.

Second is the redefinition of the system's goal. Currently, the operational goals of institutions are reduced to numerical achievements, even though formal vision and mission statements express a commitment to holistic competence. This discrepancy is precisely what reinforces *Seeking the Wrong Goal* as the primary trap. In concrete terms, redefining the goal can be realized by expanding institutional evaluation indicators beyond GPA toward employability skills, project-based portfolios, and structured tracer study data (Abelha et al., 2020). The integration of competence certifications and micro-credentials that align with industry demands can serve as complementary measures, expanding graduate workforce readiness indicators beyond GPA alone (Eimer & Bohndick, 2023; OECD, 2023).

Third is the strengthening of balancing loops in academic integrity. The reinforcing loop driving the use of unprincipled academic services currently lacks an effective counterbalance; consequently, regulations exist, but their enforcement remains weak. Meadows (2009) asserts that weakening a destructive reinforcing loop demands concrete and consistent enforcement rather than mere written rules. Without intervention at this leverage point, the two previous leverage points will continuously be undermined by the adaptive behavior of students seeking short cuts toward numerical targets rather than competence.

These three leverage points are mutually reinforcing: a paradigm shift creates space for the redefinition of goals, while the enforcement of academic integrity ensures that these new goals are not again sabotaged by deeply entrenched short-term incentives. Fragmented interventions targeting only a single point without addressing the others tend to be absorbed by the existing system structure without yielding meaningful change (Meadows, 2009; Senge & Sterman, 1992). Collectively, this system mapping demonstrates that GPA functions as a seemingly neutral screening mechanism, yet it can generate delayed impacts in the form of grade inflation, the dilution of GPA's function as a competence signal, and the recurring exclusion of graduates who fail to meet a specific numerical baseline.

Discussion

This study demonstrates that the Grade Point Average (GPA) cannot be understood merely as an isolated individual academic indicator. Instead, it functions as a node within a complex system involving six primary actors: Industry, Educational Institutions, Faculty Members, the Government, Accreditation Agencies, and Students. This finding reinforces Meadows (2009) argument that the behavior of a system cannot be explained solely by examining a single actor in isolation; rather, it must be understood through the interconnections, feedbacks, and mental models that forge the systemic structure as a whole.

First, regarding how GPA inflation is formed within the higher education system, the findings of this study align with Kohn (2002) who defines grade inflation as a condition where average academic achievements increase without a corresponding elevation in competence. The Reinforcing Feedback Loop pattern identified in this study's CLD—wherein institutional pressure drives grading leniency among faculty members, which subsequently inflates students' GPAs and reinforces industry expectations—is consistent with the findings of Pattison et al. (2013) regarding the weakening signaling power of academic grades over time. Furthermore, the tendency of faculty members to relax grading standards due to performance evaluation pressures based on student satisfaction reinforces the findings of Stroebe (2020) and Jewel et al. (2013), both of whom identified a correlation between teaching evaluation systems and the propensity for grade inflation.

Second, regarding how industry GPA demands shape graduate selection standards, the findings of this study reaffirm the arguments of Imose & Barber (2015) as well as Roth & Bobko (2000) that GPA is maintained as a selection instrument not due to a strong predictive power of job performance, but rather for its practicality in screening large volumes of applicants. Psychologically, the persistence of this method is driven by heuristic decision-making among recruitment practitioners. Amidst an information overload of applicants, recruiters utilize GPA as an efficient cognitive shortcut to minimize their cognitive load, despite being aware of its low predictive validity. This condition is further exacerbated by internal role conflict and goal conflict experienced by recruiters. On one hand, their role demands the identification of top talent with holistic competence (a long-term goal); on the other hand, operational efficiency demands and corporate KPIs pressure them to complete screenings in the shortest time possible (a short-term goal). Consequently, they sacrifice accuracy in quality for the sake of speed. The paradox wherein the industry acknowledges the limitations of GPA yet continues to maintain it illustrates that actors' decisions within a system are often rational at the individual level, yet collectively contribute to an overall systemic loss, as conceptualized by Meadows (2009) through the Tragedy of the Commons.

Third, regarding the impact of this system on graduate inclusivity, this study finds that the GPA threshold—originally intended as an objective selection mechanism—instead generates an unintended consequence: a recurring exclusion of competent graduates who fail to meet a specific numerical baseline. This finding is consistent with Rivera, (2011) who demonstrates that educational credentials are frequently utilized by elite employers as an administrative screening mechanism that disregards applicants' actual competence. Furthermore, it aligns with Pinto & Ramalheira (2017) who assert that the perception of graduate employability is determined not solely by academic performance, but also by extracurricular activities and practical experience.

Interestingly, this barrier to inclusivity is not merely an administrative recruitment issue, but rather reflects deep-seated dynamics of social inclusion and exclusion. When analyzed through Forsyth (2014) group dynamics theory, the GPA thresholds applied by firms function as tools for social categorization, creating a sharp division between the ingroup (the accepted/eligible group) and the outgroup (the excluded group).

Forsyth emphasizes that for individuals, group rejection or exclusion—in this context, manifested as early-stage administrative elimination in recruitment—triggers a psychological response akin to physical pain (social pain), as it threatens the fundamental human need to belong. When the industry establishes rigid numerical standards, they are inadvertently engaging in institutional ostracism. Competent graduates falling below this numerical threshold are instantly categorized as the outgroup, without ever being granted the opportunity to display their social identity and actual competence within the "group" of the professional workforce.

Furthermore, corporate expectations for high GPAs are frequently driven by a mental model of group homogeneity. Forsyth explains that groups (in this case, organizations or firms) possess a natural tendency to maintain cohesion and reduce uncertainty by recruiting members who share similar social attributes or credentials. This aligns coherently with Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity Theory, which posits that organizations tend to exhibit a biased, positive evaluation toward applicants whose identity attributes are perceived to be congruent with their ingroup. A high GPA acts as a marker of a "safe" and "high-achieving" group membership. Conversely, graduates with lower GPAs are instantly categorized into the outgroup through an immediate process of social categorization. Through this lens, the rejection of graduates with lower GPAs is not merely an objective business decision, but rather a manifestation of group motivation to maintain the positive distinctiveness and prestige of the organization's social identity. A high GPA is viewed as a social signal indicating that the applicant possesses the same normative compliance and adaptability required by the organization's internal standards.

Consequently, a distortion occurs in the formation of graduates' social identities. First is the social identity threat (Forsyth, 2014) Graduates who possess exceptional practical competence (such as being active in organizations or holding real-world portfolios) yet have lower GPAs experience a degradation of self-evaluation. Their identity as "competent prospective professionals" is fractured by a structural rejection that solely looks at numerical representations. Second is the industry's outgroup stereotyping. The industry falls trap to intergroup evaluation bias, wherein they generalize that applicants with below-standard GPAs possess low motivation or cognitive deficits—an erroneous assumption that disregards individual variations outside the formal academic corridor. Through Forsyth's perspective, we can observe a concrete manifestation of Meadows' Tragedy of the Commons operating at a psychological level. For the sake of their own group's convenience (maintaining the efficiency of internal recruitment processes), firms collectively exclude a vast portion of potential human resources. This action triggers massive social anxiety among students, which in turn forces them to resort to ability-concealing strategies and normalize grade inflation simply to avoid outgroup status in the labor market.

The phenomenon of students shifting their orientation toward ability-concealing strategies prioritizes numerical achievements over substantive understanding (Herron & Markovich, 2017). Through the lens of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), this condition illustrates a shift in learning motivation from being initially intrinsic to extrinsic and controlled, driven by external pressures such as GPA thresholds. This shift in motivation reinforces the cycle of GPA inflation, as students are compelled to pursue numerical outcomes rather than meaningful learning processes.

Furthermore, the expansion of higher education, which triggers credential inflation (Araki & Kariya, 2020; Liu, 2011) explains why firms have begun shifting toward demands for soft credentials such as organizational experience, certifications, and interpersonal skills. Academic degrees alone are no longer sufficient to guarantee graduate workforce readiness amidst an increasingly competitive labor market (Tomlinson, 2008). However, the higher education evaluation system adjusts slowly to these changing industry needs, leaving institutions continuously oriented toward producing high-GPA graduates, even though such achievements do not always correlate directly with job readiness.

Pressure from accreditation and global rankings also serves as a primary driver of this dynamic. External evaluation systems can significantly influence the behavior of higher education institutions, compelling them to maintain their reputation and competitive positioning through the optimization of numerical indicators (Dill & Soo, 2005). Indicator-based governance, implemented as a form of institutional accountability, potentially creates incentives for grade inflation, thereby causing academic grades to lose their informative function as indicators of students' actual capabilities (Nordin et al., 2019).

The two system traps identified in this study explain why the dynamic of GPA inflation remains difficult to break, despite being recognized by nearly all actors within it. Seeking the Wrong Goal occurs when GPA displaces competence as the primary objective of the system; consequently, institutions, faculty members, and students focus on achieving numbers perceived to represent quality rather than on the development of substantive competence itself (Meadows, 2009). Concurrently, Shifting the Burden takes place when the relaxation of grading standards is utilized as

a short-term solution to respond to systemic pressures without addressing the root cause—namely, the gap between academic achievement and actual competence (Meadows, 2009).

This phenomenon of Seeking the Wrong Goal represents a concrete manifestation of Goodhart's Law, which states that when a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure (Goodhart, 1975; Manheim & Garrabrant, 2019). When GPA is rigidly targeted by accreditation systems and the labor market, the psychological meaning of the grade shifts from an "instrument for measuring comprehension" to a "commodity to be pursued." As a result, all actors engage in behavioral manipulation to optimize these numbers, which paradoxically undermines the very integrity of competence measurement. These two traps are mutually reinforcing: when GPA is established as the primary goal, the pressure to achieve it intensifies, rendering grading leniency a seemingly rational shortcut for each actor. Short-term solutions that fail to address the root cause ultimately reinforce the system's dependence on symptomatic fixes rather than structural resolution (Meadows, 2009).

Conclusion

Conclusion Based on the systemic analysis presented, this study concludes that GPA functions as a seemingly neutral screening mechanism, yet generates delayed consequences in the form of grade inflation, the weakening of GPA's function as a competence signal, and the recurring exclusion of graduates who fail to meet specific numerical standards despite possessing relevant competence. This dynamic is formed through reinforcing feedback loops involving six key actors with distinct yet mutually reinforcing mental models, and it is sustained by two primary system traps: Seeking the Wrong Goal and Shifting the Burden (Meadows, 2009).

The issue of GPA acting as a gatekeeper cannot be resolved through an isolated intervention on a single actor. Due to its systemic and interconnected nature, sustainable improvement requires simultaneous interventions at the levels of paradigms, system goals, and mechanisms for enforcing academic integrity. The three proposed leverage points—shifting paradigms, redefining system goals, and strengthening the balancing loops of academic integrity—are mutually supportive; consequently, fragmented interventions at only one point risk being reabsorbed by the deeply entrenched systemic structure (Meadows, 2009; Senge & Sterman, 1992).

Implications Theoretically, this study contributes by positioning GPA not as an isolated, standalone predictive variable of employability, but rather as a product of systemic interactions among actors within the education and recruitment ecosystems (Li et al., 2022; Mainga et al., 2022). The systems thinking approach employed in this study complements previous research—which has tended to treat GPA as an individual attribute—by offering a framework that explains how GPA is structurally produced, maintained, and legitimized by multiple actors simultaneously.

Practically, the three identified leverage points provide an intervention roadmap that can serve as a reference for higher education institutions, industry, and policymakers. The redefinition of system goals, for instance, can be realized by expanding institutional evaluation indicators toward employability skills, project-based portfolios, and structured tracer study data, as recommended by Abelha et al. (2020). The integration of competence certifications and micro-credentials relevant to industry needs, as suggested by Eimer & Bohndick (2023) and the OECD (2023), can serve as a complement that broadens the indicators of graduate workforce readiness beyond GPA alone. In the Indonesian context, this effort aligns with the findings of (Nugroho et al., 2024), who note that graduate workforce readiness is heavily linked to programs such as internships, soft skills training, and MBKM (Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka), which need to be continually strengthened to complement academic achievements.

Limitations There are several limitations to this study. First, the reliance on secondary data: this research completely utilizes secondary data, including scientific literature, regulatory documents, and recruitment materials, without the support of primary data such as interviews with recruiters, faculty members, or students; consequently, the mapped mental models represent the researcher's

interpretation of the literature rather than direct elicitation of the actors' perceptions. Second, the qualitative nature of the CLD without simulation: the generated Causal Loop Diagram has not been quantitatively tested through system dynamics simulation, meaning that the strength of the inter-variable relationships and the relative effectiveness of each leverage point remain theoretical propositions. Third, the limited literature scope and context: the literature review was restricted to the 2021–2026 timeframe with a focus on the Indonesian context, particularly state-owned enterprise (BUMN) recruitment patterns; therefore, generalizing these findings to other country contexts or the multinational private sector must be done with caution. Fourth, the system boundaries as an analytical choice: the determination of the six key actors was an analytical decision by the researcher, which potentially excludes other actors, such as employment agencies, alumni organizations, or social media, which also shape perceptions of graduate eligibility.

Future Research Fifth, the untested leverage points: the proposed leverage points are conceptual and have not been empirically tested within specific institutional contexts; thus, future research utilizing case studies, policy experiments, or system dynamics simulations is required to verify their validity and effectiveness prior to broader application. .

Author Contribution Statement

N.T.A. contributed to conceptualization and study design, data collection, statistical analysis, and writing of the manuscript. A.S.N. contributed to study design, data collection, and writing of the manuscript. I.G.A.A.I.R.P.D. contributed to study design, data collection, and writing of the manuscript. W.O.S.I. contributed to data collection, statistical analysis, and writing of the manuscript. A.A.H. contributed to data collection, statistical analysis, and writing of the manuscript. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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