

## **Problems with moving the University of Manchester up a level: grade requirements**

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*Abstract.* You may remember that a document circulated amongst University of Manchester staff asks, “Can top down management make our university great?” I suspect there is a difficulty with solving this problem by increasing the admission requirements, in terms of the grades you need to get in. At a certain level, one encounters a widespread and strong preference not to be the bottom level.

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I don’t know if you received what I received: a document entitled “The M2020 fallacy.” It asked, “Can top down management make our university great?” I think you can run into a problem, which probably “everyone” is aware of. I shall depict it by means of a simplified scenario. Suppose that the requirements for getting into any undergraduate course are C in all subjects or above. Later you increase it to C+ and then B- and then B, using a North American grading system I suppose. The plan is that the students you are taking in will gradually be of a higher level academically. But consider this preference. “I hate to be the bottom member of a club, or the first to be voted off, in a dancing competition say.” And imagine that the preference is not distributed evenly, as is likely. It is very common at B+ level. And A grade students, including A-, are rare. This is going to create problems when your system of increasing admission grades reaches B+ as its minimum level.

Let’s suppose that if everyone who will get in is B+ in all subjects and the applicant can be assured of this, then lots of B+ applicants will apply and join, though this may be an

extraordinary supposition. Still, to do that, you need a system which signals to everyone, “We don’t like grade A.” That is probably the end of your university’s dream of greatness though. Another option is to not signal that. Then a lot of B+ students avoid your university, despite having the grades, and your student numbers shrink excessively.

In general I think a university climbing up the global rankings faces a series of very difficult problems to solve. The distance between 31 and 29 might be larger than the distance between 7 and 4, and 29 did something extraordinary when faced with a problem such as the one above.

## **Reference**

Berk, D. 2019. The M2020 fallacy. Can top-down management make our university great?  
*Document circulated amongst University of Manchester staff.*