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# Grades and Student Favouritism



This newsletter focuses on a topic for which we have been receiving lots of enquiries. Some students are wondering whether their poor grade can have to do with 'academic favouritism'. Does favouritism happen? What can we do about it?

## Student Favouritism?

A number of our students expressed different concerns by asking some of the following questions:

- Does he pick on me when is asking questions every week?
- The way he looks at me during the lectures and seminars is strange. Does he not like me?

Tutors are likely to develop 'friendly-encounters' with students and this does not mean that anything inappropriate is going on. Like any service-exchange environment the person that provides the service is trying to develop a working relationship with his/her audience.

**Developing a personal and friendly relationship with certain recipients is inevitable.**

If someone claims that tutors are NOT less or more interested in particular students this would be inaccurate! Academic tutors, like everyone else, can be subjected to different emotions. Even though they are trying to remain neutral and objective developing some type of bias remains INEVITABLE.

Surely you are now asking 'life is not fair!' You might find yourself in the position where you are liked or not so liked. However, you need to understand that tutors are not keen on undermining students that they do not feel to have a good rapport with. Tutors are actively engaged with trying to be fair and consistent as incidents of discrimination are heavily penalised and the last thing a tutor wants is some form of bad reputation.



The truth of the matter is that tutors **are affected** by student reactions and behaviours. It does not take much of an effort to find out which student might be more or less interested in a tutor.

Participating in a group discussion or asking questions are typical examples of a student that is keen to learn. If the tutor happens to have students that **are not particularly engaged** then it is inevitable that he/she will experience particular satisfaction with 1 or 2 students who ARE engaged. However, the real question is whether these students are going to get better grades because they are engaged more than the others.

To answer this question you need to do the following. Close your eyes and put yourself in the shoes of a recruiter who happens to have before him two people. First, someone who just graduated and is looking for work. Second, someone that has 40 years of work experience. **If you were in the position of the recruiter would you go for the younger student or the older employee?**

You might say that in theory the recruiter should not discriminate between the two and should go for the one that has the most 'appropriate skills'. **This indeed the correct answer but does it take place in reality?**

In reality appearances matter! People are inevitably influenced by their own stereotypes and bias. Hence, the point of this example is that tutors cannot remain completely objective in their interaction with students.

Even though they will try to remain neutral and objective they will take into consideration the student(s) who really went the extra mile to submit the work early and to ask the relevant questions and who really tried to engage with the tutor in a more personalised way.

On this occasion, tutors not necessarily discriminate over other students who are less engaged. However, they might be willing to reward the students that demonstrated greater engagement! Thus, in the course of engaging with your MBA studies, surely you cannot be a close friend with all tutors because the tutors will think that you are trying to manipulate them and they will not allow you to do so.

There is no need to be sneaky in the way you seek to create the right impression about yourself.

What you need is to demonstrate genuine interest in the tutor by having frequent meetings and showing that you are trying to apply that which they are teaching you. Do not overdo it with bombarding your tutor with emails. You will help exacerbate the situation. What you really need to do is to create the impression that you are not simply trying to do the minimum best possible for the effort but that you are willing to do your best. Tutors are changing the way they see a student by looking at the effort they are making and despite they might still fail.

## I pay lots of money for the MBA!



Lots of students are making the fatal mistake of trying to exert force and pressure onto the tutors by reminding them 'how much money they have actually paid for the course'. By making mention of this **magic sentence** they are hoping to negotiate the service they get from what they paid. However, this is a big mistake that you MUST not make.

Regardless of the high fees you have paid for getting into the course your tutor had no involvement in terms of your admission. Moreover, the tutor is already experiencing a difficult situation with the academic sector losing its meaning and essence by becoming very profit-oriented.

There is a difference between the administration staff and the teaching staff. The people that teach you often find themselves at tension with the people that are responsible for your recruitment.

Academics have spent meticulous time with developing their ideas and they know that education is not about the money but about the experience and knowledge. However, do not have control over new

administrative procedures that they have to meet and this situation is making their life very difficult.

You will not win the favourite of your tutor by mentioning to him/her about the 'high fees'. On the contrary, you might contribute to triggering his/her bias. Hence, the tutor might be thinking that you believe how you can bypass basic academic expectations.

The best way to win the tutor's favour is to make sure that you follow the content taught. Even if you are not very interested in the topic itself asking questions and contributing to the team-work discussions is a good sign that you are engaging with the content taught.

Can I use other students as an example for negotiating a better grade?



You might be under the impression that the tutor has favoured another student by giving him/her a higher grade. You are tempted to get the person to send you his/her work so that you can compare and contrast the actual quality.

After careful consideration you are certain that it is the 'same' piece of work and you are frustrated that your tutor has downgraded you for no reason. Hence, you feel tempted to drop an email, clearly stating that you have been "marked down for no reason and this is

utterly unfair”. Surely, you expect that the tutor will change the grade but you are eventually surprised that this is not happening.

Challenging tutors on the process of marking is something that all MBA students can do. **However the WAY by which you go doing it can make the biggest difference in the world.**

Comparing your work with someone else is never a good strategy. Just don't do it! If you want to challenge a grade focus on the marking grid and identify which element from the assessment criteria has not been fairly applied on your work.

You need to develop a very specific argument for how and why the criteria has not been met and you need to make every effort to sustain a friendly and professional tone in your email. If you adopt an accusative tone you will not get anywhere and your grade will not change. However, if you are able to get back to the marking grid and identify how and why your assignment has met the relevant criteria you will be in a much better position for your tutor to reconsider it.

The real difference between **this** and the previous example mentioned is that you focused on the 'procedure' rather than the 'person'. Focusing on the procedure helps a lot! This is because it concerns the marking criteria set by the tutor. If you focus on the person you fail the risk of personalising your frustration onto the tutor and you are likely to experience a firm reaction where the initially grade is defended.

**You need to remember that tutors are limited with altering given marks.** If they do it on one student then it is assumed that they might be able to do it to ALL. The administration of any Business School department cannot afford this to happen. It will create massive volume of additional workload and it will spoil the reputation of the university. For this reason tutors are careful with how they grade their scripts but also defend each other on giving a grade.

Another option is to consider instances where you went through some illness and which might have impacted your attendance to the course. Mitigating circumstances are taken seriously and you should become familiar with the policy and procedures within your institution. All universities have in place a reporting system where students can suggest that their performance/attendance has been affected by reasons which lie outside their control. You often have to wait until the exam board to take place in order to decide the outcome of your case. However, if you provide evidence about the event that you experienced and how it affected your academic engagement then you are very likely to be supported in your case.

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