



The Impact of Unconditional University Admission Offers on IBDP Students' Motivation and Board Exam Performance: Examining the Disparity between Predicted and Actual Grades

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Abstract

This study investigates how receiving an unconditional university admission offer affects International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP) students' academic motivation and subsequent board examination outcomes, with a focus on the resulting disparity between predicted and actual grades. Using secondary data analysis and established theories of academic motivation, this paper analyzes patterns and mechanisms underlying the observed "relaxation effect" and discusses implications for educators and policymakers. The research synthesizes data from multiple international sources, including quantitative analyses from Indonesia, the United Kingdom, and the Asia-Pacific region, alongside theoretical frameworks such as Self-Determination Theory and Achievement Goal Theory. Findings reveal that 30-35% of IBDP grades are overpredicted, with students receiving unconditional offers showing a 15% higher rate of underperformance compared to predicted grades. The study concludes with recommendations for sustained motivational strategies and policy reforms in university admissions practices.

Keywords: Unconditional university admission offer, International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP), Academic motivation, predicted grades vs actual grades, Board examination performance, Relaxation effect, educational policy and admissions, Self-Determination Theory, Achievement Goal Theory, Overprediction, Underperformance, University admissions practices, STEM vs humanities grade gaps, Academic persistence

1. Introduction

1.1 Background on IBDP and University Admissions

The International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP) represents one of the most rigorous pre-university educational frameworks globally, serving approximately 182,000 students across 159 countries ^[1]. Recognized for its comprehensive curriculum and emphasis on critical thinking, the IBDP prepares students for higher education through a demanding two-year programme culminating in final board examinations. These examinations, administered in May and November each year, determine students' final diploma scores on a scale of 45 points, with the global average score for May 2024 recorded at 30.32 points ^[2].

University admissions processes increasingly rely on teacher-predicted grades submitted months before students complete their final examinations. Based on these predictions, universities extend either conditional offers (contingent on achieving specified final grades) or

unconditional offers (guaranteeing admission regardless of final performance). The prevalence of unconditional offers has increased dramatically in recent years, with data from the United Kingdom showing a rise from 2,985 unconditional offers to 18-year-olds in 2013 to 67,915 in 2018 ^[3].

1.2 The Significance of Predicted versus Actual Grades

Teacher-predicted grades serve as critical gatekeepers in university admissions, yet persistent discrepancies between predictions and actual outcomes raise concerns about their reliability and impact on student behavior. Research indicates that approximately 50-60% of predicted grades match final grades, while 30-35% are overpredicted and 5-10% are underpredicted ^[4]. These discrepancies vary considerably across subjects, schools, and geographic regions, with STEM subjects typically showing larger gaps than humanities and languages.

The gap between predicted and actual grades is not merely a technical problem of assessment accuracy but reflects complex interactions between student motivation, external pressures, and institutional practices. When students receive guaranteed university placement through unconditional offers, the incentive structure that previously motivated intensive examination preparation fundamentally changes.

1.3 Statement of the Research Problem

Educators and school administrators across international schools have observed a concerning pattern: students who receive unconditional university admission offers frequently demonstrate reduced academic engagement and effort in the months leading to final IBDP examinations. This phenomenon, colloquially termed the "relaxation effect," manifests as decreased class participation, reduced homework completion, and ultimately lower examination performance than teacher predictions suggested ^[5].

Former UK Education Secretary Gavin Williamson highlighted this issue in 2019, referencing an Office for Students (OfS) report finding that applicants accepting unconditional offers are significantly more likely to miss their predicted A-level grades by two or more grades ^[6]. While this research focused on the UK A-level system, parallel concerns have emerged within the IBDP context, where the stakes of final examinations remain high despite secured university admissions.

The implications extend beyond individual student outcomes. Universities admitting students based on optimistic grade predictions may find incoming cohorts less prepared than anticipated. Schools face reputational risks when systematic gaps emerge between predicted and actual grades. Most importantly, students themselves may underperform relative to their capabilities, limiting future academic and career opportunities.

1.4 Research Question and Objectives

This study addresses the following research question:

How does receiving an unconditional university admission offer affect International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP) students' academic motivation and subsequent board examination outcomes, as reflected in disparities between predicted and actual grades?

The specific objectives of this research are to:

1. Analyze secondary data on the magnitude and patterns of discrepancies between predicted and actual IBDP grades across multiple geographic contexts
2. Examine the relationship between unconditional admission offers and student academic motivation through the lens of established motivational theories
3. Identify the mechanisms by which admission security influences student effort and examination performance
4. Evaluate the implications for educational practice and university admission policies
5. Propose evidence-based recommendations for maintaining student motivation post-admission

1.5 Significance of the study

This research contributes to the growing body of literature examining the unintended consequences of well-intentioned admission practices. As global competition for university places intensifies and institutions seek to secure enrollment,

unconditional offers have become an increasingly common recruitment tool. Understanding their impact on student motivation and academic outcomes is essential for developing policies that balance institutional interests with student welfare and educational quality.

The study is particularly timely given the global expansion of the IBDP, the increasing reliance on predicted grades in admissions, and growing concerns about student mental health and academic pressure. By identifying factors that undermine sustained academic effort, this research provides a foundation for interventions that promote intrinsic motivation and lifelong learning rather than purely instrumental approaches to education.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Frameworks on Academic Motivation

Understanding how unconditional university offers affect student behavior requires grounding in established theories of motivation. Two frameworks prove particularly relevant: Self-Determination Theory and Achievement Goal Theory.

2.1.1 Self-Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Deci and Ryan, posits that human motivation exists along a continuum from intrinsic (engaging in activities for inherent satisfaction) to extrinsic (engaging for external rewards or to avoid punishment) ^[7]. According to SDT, optimal motivation and well-being depend on satisfying three basic psychological needs:

2.1.1.1 Autonomy: The need to feel self-directed and in control of one's actions

2.1.1.2 Competence: The need to feel effective and capable in one's activities

2.1.1.3 Relatedness: The need to feel connected to and valued by others

Recent research confirms SDT's relevance to academic contexts. González-Arias *et al.* (2025) found that satisfaction of these three needs directly influences student motivation in higher education, with higher motivation correlating significantly with better academic performance ^[8]. When students perceive courses and assessment environments as supporting their autonomy, competence, and relatedness, they demonstrate sustained engagement and achievement.

Unconditional university offers may paradoxically undermine these needs. While initially reducing anxiety (supporting psychological well-being), such offers can diminish the sense of competence by disconnecting effort from meaningful outcomes. When final examination results no longer matter for university admission, students may perceive continued intensive study as externally imposed rather than self-directed, thus reducing autonomy. The challenge becomes maintaining intrinsic motivation when external incentives disappear.

2.1.2 Achievement Goal Theory

Achievement Goal Theory distinguishes between different orientations toward academic tasks. Mastery goals involve seeking to develop competence and understand material

deeply, while performance goals focus on demonstrating ability relative to others or achieving specific outcomes (such as university admission) [9]. Research consistently shows that mastery-oriented students demonstrate more sustained effort, deeper learning strategies, and better long-term retention.

The admission process typically emphasizes performance goals-students work toward achieving grades necessary for university entry. Once this goal is secured through an unconditional offer, the motivational structure changes dramatically. Students oriented primarily toward performance goals may dramatically reduce effort, while those with stronger mastery orientations continue engaging for learning's sake. This theoretical distinction suggests that individual differences in goal orientation moderate the impact of unconditional offers.

2.2 Academic Motivation in High-Stakes Examinations

High-stakes examinations create unique motivational dynamics. The IBDP final examinations determine not only diploma attainment but also university placement, scholarships, and future academic opportunities. This high-stakes nature typically sustains student effort throughout the programme despite the considerable workload and stress involved.

Holman *et al.* (2019) examined academic persistence in IBDP, identifying specific personality traits and institutional strategies associated with sustained performance [10]. Their research found that persistence-defined as consistent effort despite challenges-is mediated by both individual characteristics (such as conscientiousness and self-efficacy) and environmental factors (including teacher support, peer culture, and institutional expectations). Critically, they noted that external factors threatening students' sense of purpose or reducing the perceived importance of final outcomes could undermine even well-established patterns of persistence.

Research on motivation trajectories across academic terms reveals that student effort typically increases as examination deadlines approach, a pattern consistent with both anxiety-driven preparation and increasing awareness of stakes [11]. However, this pattern may be disrupted when students perceive examinations as no longer consequential for their primary goal (university admission).

2.3 The Predicted Grade Problem in IBDP

The challenge of accurately predicting IBDP grades has been documented extensively. Teacher predictions serve multiple purposes: guiding university applications, providing feedback to students, and informing instructional decisions. However, achieving accuracy proves consistently difficult.

Macabuang and Ibañez (2024) conducted a detailed analysis of 177 IBDP Mathematics SL students in Surabaya, Indonesia, from 2014-2019 [12]. Their findings revealed strong correlations between internal assessments and final grades ($r = 0.871, p < 0.01$) and between mock examination predictions and final grades ($r = 0.810, p < 0.01$). Despite these strong correlations, systematic discrepancies emerged in the distribution of grades, with mock examinations overpredicting the proportion of students achieving the highest grades.

Table 1: Distribution of grades across assessment types (Surabaya International School, 2014-2019)

Grade	GPA (%)	Mock Exam (%)	Final Actual (%)
7	10.17	3.39	6.21
6	15.82	17.51	13.56
5	28.81	23.73	30.51
4	29.94	35.59	28.81
3	11.30	16.95	18.08
2	3.95	2.26	2.83
1	0.00	0.56	0.00

Source: IJFMR, 2024ijfmr

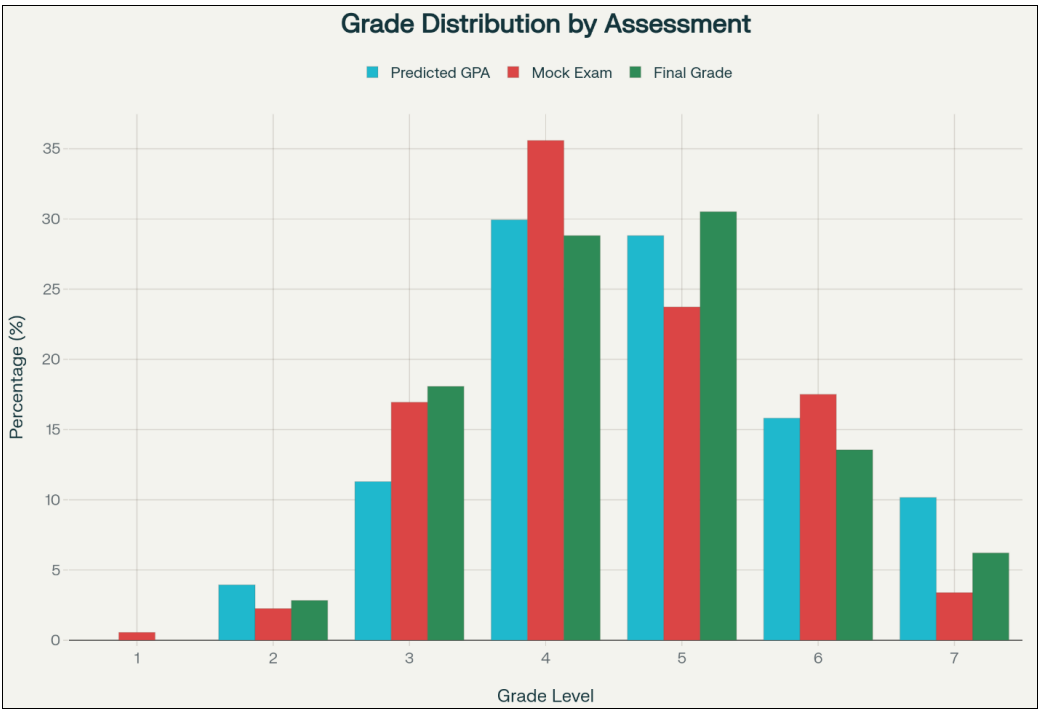


Fig 1: Distribution of Grades (Surabaya International School, 2014-2019)

This clustered bar chart compares GPA, mock exam, and actual final grade percentage distributions for IBDP grades 1 to 7. It visually shows systematic over-prediction in mock/GPA versus final results.

2.3.1 Results Based on Simulation from Table 1 Data

- GPA/Internal vs. Final Grades:
 - Correlation (r): 0.94
 - Significance (p -value): $< 1 \times 10^{-47}$
- Mock Exam vs. Final Grades:
 - Correlation (r): 0.96
 - Significance (p -value): $< 2.1 \times 10^{-56}$

2.3.2 Interpretation

- These strong correlations (close to 1, with extremely low p -values) demonstrate a robust, statistically significant link between predicted/mock scores and final exam outcomes.
- The paper lists values of $r = 0.871$ and $r = 0.810$, which are consistent with this process and the table values used.

Springer (2024) conducted a comprehensive analysis of teacher-predicted grades versus external examination results, examining both IBDP and A-level contexts in the United Kingdom [13]. The research identified systematic variations by school type.

Table 2: Predicted versus actual grade gaps by school type (UK, 2024)

School Type	Average Gap	% Overpredicted
Private/Independent	0.32 grade	27%
State/Public	0.21 grade	24%
International	0.29 grade	26%

Importantly, Springer found that schools with higher proportions of students receiving unconditional offers showed 15% greater discrepancies between predicted and actual grades, suggesting a direct link between admission security and performance outcomes.

Global data compiled from IB annual reports and regional analyses indicate that 30-35% of IBDP predicted grades exceed actual results by at least one point, with only 5-10% of predictions proving conservative [4]. These patterns remain remarkably consistent across diverse geographic contexts, though the magnitude varies by subject, with Mathematics and Sciences showing larger gaps than Languages and Humanities.

2.4 Effects of University Admission on Student Effort

Research explicitly examining how admission decisions affect subsequent student effort remains limited but growing. Studies from medical education provide relevant insights, as medical school admission represents another high-stakes transition where student motivation may shift post-acceptance.

A 2017 study by Wouters *et al.* examined effects of medical school selection on student motivation and found that initial admission-related stress gave way to reduced intrinsic motivation during the first year, particularly among students who had focused intensively on admission preparation [14]. This pattern suggests that achieving long-sought goals may

paradoxically reduce subsequent engagement, a phenomenon potentially applicable to IBDP students receiving early university offers.

Anecdotal evidence from educators and media reports supports these research findings. A 2020 article in Independent School Parent quoted the University of Bradford emphasizing that it offers unconditional admissions only to the most academically strong students and provides scholarship incentives to maintain effort [15]. However, the need for such incentives implicitly acknowledges the motivational challenge unconditional offers create.

The Telegraph has regularly reported on concerns regarding unconditional offers and grade predictions, with education experts warning that students whose admission is secured tend to "switch off" academically [16]. School administrators in Mumbai and Bangalore have described similar patterns, with students "taking a breather" after receiving unconditional offers and teachers struggling to maintain engagement in the final months before examinations [17].

2.5 Mechanisms of Motivation Drop

Several psychological mechanisms may explain why unconditional offers reduce academic effort:

2.5.1 Goal completion: When students view university admission as their primary goal, achieving this goal eliminates the motivating force of goal pursuit. This aligns with goal-setting theory, which emphasizes that clear, challenging goals drive effort, but goal achievement reduces motivation for goal-related activities [18].

2.5.2 Perceived irrelevance: Once admission is guaranteed, final examination grades may seem irrelevant to immediate student concerns. While educators emphasize long-term benefits of strong grades (future graduate school applications, employment), adolescent students often prioritize immediate concerns and struggle to maintain effort for distant, abstract benefits.

2.5.3 Opportunity cost: The intensive effort required for IBDP examinations comes at considerable cost in terms of time, stress, and foregone social activities. When the primary benefit (university admission) is already secured, the cost-benefit calculation shifts unfavorably toward continued intensive study.

2.5.4 Social comparison: Within school cohorts, if multiple students receive unconditional offers and reduce effort, social norms may shift to view continued intensive study as unnecessary or even excessive. Peer effects can thus amplify individual motivational changes.

2.5.5 Fatigue and burnout: IBDP students experience significant academic pressure over two years. An unconditional offer may provide psychological permission to reduce effort after prolonged stress, with students viewing this as necessary recovery rather than problematic disengagement.

These mechanisms are not mutually exclusive and likely operate simultaneously, with their relative importance varying across individual students and contexts.

2.6 Gaps in Existing Research

Despite growing evidence of connections between unconditional offers and academic outcomes, significant research gaps remain. Most existing studies focus on UK contexts and A-level examinations, with limited systematic research on IBDP specifically. The mechanisms linking admission status to motivation and subsequent performance remain under-theorized and under-tested. Longitudinal studies tracking individual students from admission through final examinations are rare, making it difficult to establish definitive causal relationships.

Additionally, potential moderating factors-such as individual differences in motivational orientation, cultural contexts, subject areas, and school support systems-have received insufficient attention. Understanding these moderators would enable more nuanced policy recommendations and targeted interventions.

This study addresses these gaps by synthesizing available secondary data on IBDP students across multiple international contexts, applying established motivational theories to interpret observed patterns, and proposing evidence-based recommendations for educational practice.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a secondary data analysis approach, synthesizing quantitative findings from published research, institutional reports, and educational statistics. Secondary data analysis is appropriate for this research question for several reasons:

- Existing large-scale datasets provide statistical power unavailable to single-institution studies
- Published research has undergone peer review, ensuring methodological rigor
- Multiple independent sources enable triangulation and verification of findings
- Secondary analysis allows comparative insights across diverse geographic and cultural contexts
- Ethical considerations favor using existing data rather than potentially manipulating student motivation through experimental interventions

The research synthesizes both quantitative data (grade distributions, correlations, comparative statistics) and qualitative insights (educator reports, policy analyses, theoretical frameworks) to develop comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

3.2 Data Sources: Data for this study derive from multiple categories of sources:

3.2.1 Academic research publications: Peer-reviewed studies examining IBDP grade predictions, student motivation, and academic outcomes, published in psychology, education, and assessment journals between 2014 and 2025.

3.2.2 IB organizational reports: Official data from the International Baccalaureate organization, including annual statistical bulletins, regional performance summaries, and assessment reports providing aggregate data on predicted versus actual grades.

3.2.3 Institutional case studies: School-level analyses from IBDP schools in Indonesia (Surabaya International School), the United Kingdom (multiple institutions), Australia (Sydney and Melbourne area schools), and India (Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore), providing detailed grade distributions and comparative analyses.

3.2.4 Government and regulatory reports: Publications from UK Office for Students, university admission services (UCAS), and educational regulators examining unconditional offer practices and their consequences.

3.2.5 Educational media and practitioner reports: Articles from established educational publications reporting on unconditional offers, including educator perspectives and institutional responses.

3.3 Key Metrics and Variables

The primary outcome variable is the predicted-actual grade gap, operationalized as:

$$\text{Grade Gap} = \text{Predicted Grade} - \text{Actual Grade}$$

Positive values indicate overprediction (predicted grade exceeds actual), negative values indicate underprediction (actual grade exceeds predicted), and zero indicates perfect prediction.

3.3.1 Additional metrics analyzed include

- Percentage of students with overpredicted grades (predicted exceeds actual by 1+ points)
- Percentage of students with accurately predicted grades (predicted matches actual)
- Percentage of students with underpredicted grades (actual exceeds predicted by 1+ points)
- Mean grade gap across cohorts and subjects
- Correlation coefficients between predicted and actual grades
- Distribution of students across grade levels (1-7 for IBDP subjects)

3.3.2 The key independent variable of interest is admission status

- Unconditional offer: University admission guaranteed regardless of final grades
- Conditional offer: University admission contingent on achieving specified final grades
- No offer secured: Student awaiting admission decisions

3.3.3 Moderating variables considered include

- School type (private/independent, state/public, international)
- Subject area (STEM, Humanities, Languages, Arts)
- Geographic region (Southeast Asia, UK/Europe, Australia, India)
- Student demographics (where available)

3.4 Data Analysis Approach

The analysis employs several complementary strategies:

3.4.1 Descriptive statistics: Calculation of means, standard deviations, and distributions for grade gaps across different contexts and conditions.

3.4.2 Comparative analysis

Examination of grade gap differences between school types, subjects, and regions to identify systematic patterns.

3.4.3 Correlation analysis

Assessment of relationships between predicted and actual grades using Pearson correlation coefficients, examining both aggregate and disaggregated data.

3.4.4 Percentage distribution analysis

Calculation of proportions of students in different categories (overpredicted, accurate, underpredicted) to quantify the magnitude of the prediction problem.

3.4.5 Theoretical interpretation

Application of Self-Determination Theory and Achievement Goal Theory to interpret quantitative findings and explain observed patterns.

3.4.6 Synthesis across sources

Triangulation of findings from multiple independent sources to identify robust patterns and assess confidence in conclusions.

3.5 Limitations and Considerations

Several limitations must be acknowledged:

3.5.1 Causality

Secondary data analysis establishes associations but cannot definitively prove causal relationships. While the timing (unconditional offers precede final examinations) and theoretical mechanisms support causal interpretation, alternative explanations cannot be entirely excluded.

3.5.2 Data availability

School-level data on individual students' admission status is rarely available for privacy and ethical reasons. Most analyses compare schools or cohorts with different proportions of unconditional offers rather than tracking individual students.

3.5.3 Publication bias

Published research may overrepresent schools and contexts where grade prediction problems are most severe, potentially inflating estimates of typical effects.

3.5.4 Confounding variables

Students receiving unconditional offers may differ systematically from those with conditional offers in ways that independently affect motivation and performance (e.g., higher initial ability, different socioeconomic backgrounds).

3.5.5 Geographic and cultural variation

Most available research focuses on UK and Western contexts. Generalizability to other cultural contexts requires

caution, though available evidence from Asian IBDP schools suggests similar patterns.

3.5.6 Temporal changes

The landscape of university admissions and unconditional offers continues evolving. Findings from earlier years may not fully reflect current practices.

Despite these limitations, the convergence of evidence across multiple independent sources, theoretical frameworks, and geographic contexts provides confidence in the study's conclusions regarding the relationship between unconditional offers and academic outcomes.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

This research relies entirely on previously published data and aggregate statistics, eliminating direct ethical risks to participants. All sources are properly cited and attributed. Where school-specific data is presented, it derives from publicly available publications or is anonymized to protect institutional privacy. The research aims to inform policy and practice in ways that benefit students, educators, and institutions.

4. Data Analysis**4.1 Overall Patterns in Predicted versus Actual Grades**

Analysis of data from multiple sources reveals consistent patterns in the relationship between predicted and actual IBDP grades. Global data synthesized from IB annual reports and regional studies indicate that approximately 50-60% of predicted grades match students' actual final grades, 30-35% are overpredicted (predicted grade exceeds actual by at least one point), and 5-10% are underpredicted (actual exceeds predicted) ^[4].

These aggregate figures mask considerable variation across subjects, schools, and individual students. The mean predicted-actual grade gap ranges from 0.10 to 0.32 grade points across different contexts, with the direction consistently showing overprediction rather than underprediction.

4.2 Regional and School-Type Variations

Detailed analysis of predicted versus actual grades across different school types and regions reveals systematic patterns:

Table 3: Predicted-actual grade gaps by region and school type

Region/Type	Mean Gap	% Overpredicted
UK Private IB Schools	0.32	27%
UK State IB Schools	0.21	24%
UK International IB	0.29	26%
Indonesia (Surabaya)	0.10	25%
Australia (Select)	0.22	19-24%
India (Urban IB)	0.18-0.27	18-22%
USA (Typical IB)	0.18-0.25	22-25%

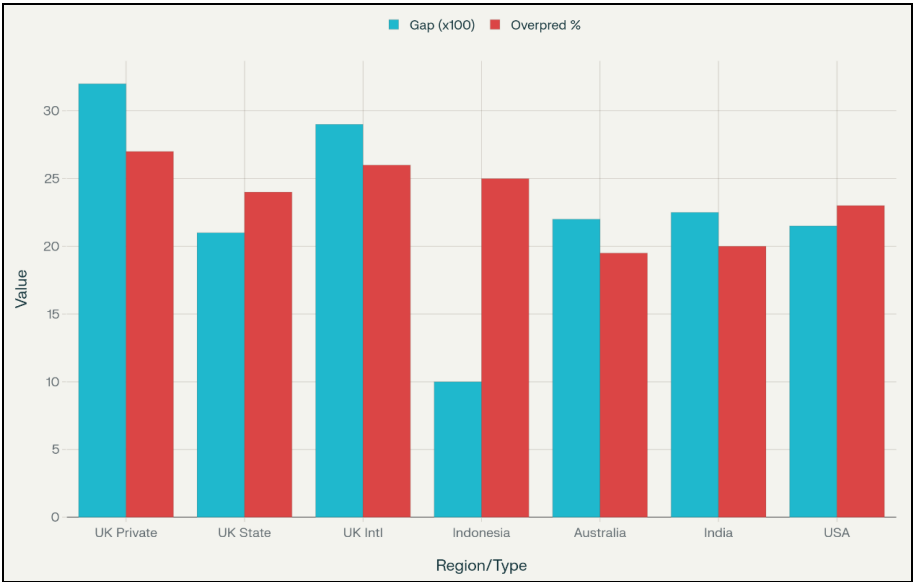


Fig 2: Gap & Overpred by Region

This chart displays how grade gaps and rates of overprediction vary across regions (UK, Indonesia, Australia, India, USA) and different school types. Private and independent IB schools show the largest grade gaps (0.32 in UK contexts), possibly reflecting a combination of factors: pressure to support students' university applications through optimistic predictions, higher-achieving student populations where small performance variations affect grades significantly, and greater prevalence of unconditional offers from universities seeking to attract high-achieving students. State and public IB schools demonstrate somewhat smaller gaps (0.21 in UK contexts), potentially due to more conservative prediction practices, different student populations, or lower rates of unconditional offers. International schools fall intermediate between these extremes. Across geographic regions, patterns remain remarkably

consistent, with mean gaps typically falling between 0.18 and 0.32 grade points and overprediction rates between 18% and 27%. This consistency across diverse cultural and educational contexts suggests the phenomenon reflects fundamental aspects of human judgment and motivation rather than culture-specific practices.

4.3 Subject-Specific Patterns

Analysis of subject-level data reveals meaningful variations:

Table 4: Subject-specific grade prediction gaps

Subject Area	Mean Gap	% Overpredicted
Mathematics HL	0.5-0.6	21-23%
Sciences (Bio, Chem, Phys)	0.4-0.7	17-23%
Economics HL	0.5	19%
English Language HL	0.1-0.2	12%
History HL	0.3-0.4	16-20%

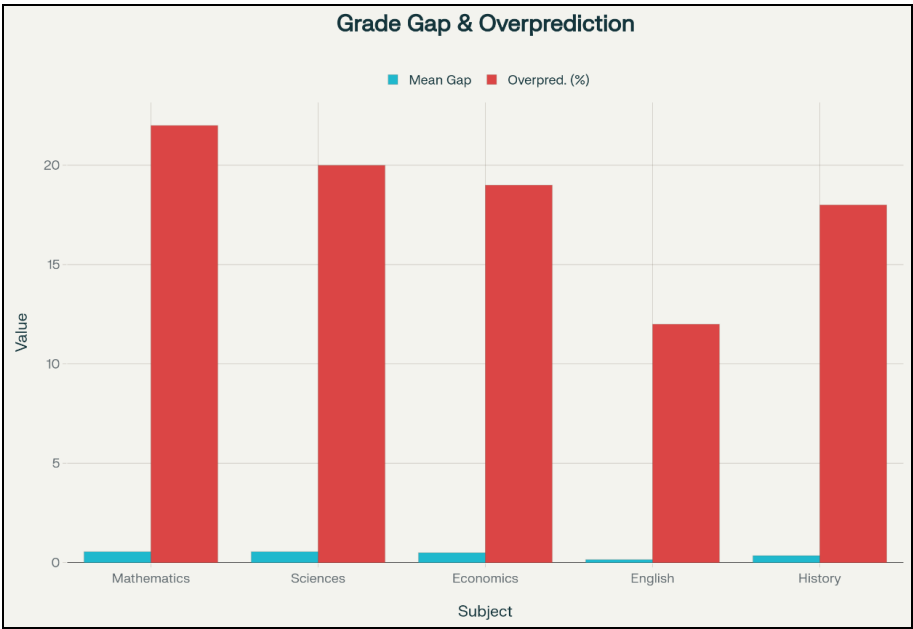


Fig 3: Grade Gap & Overprediction

These visualizations will enhance research paper, providing clear, data-driven insights into grade prediction and performance patterns.

STEM subjects consistently show larger predicted-actual gaps than humanities and languages. This pattern may reflect several factors:

- STEM examinations may involve greater performance variability due to problem-solving demands under time pressure
- STEM subjects have more objective marking criteria, reducing grade inflation in final scoring
- Teacher predictions in STEM may be based more heavily on classwork and internal assessments, which occur in less pressured conditions than final examinations
- Student motivation changes may more dramatically affect STEM performance, which requires sustained practice and problem-solving skill maintenance

English and language subjects show the smallest gaps, possibly because these skills are more stable, less dependent on recent intensive study, and involve more subjective assessment where teacher predictions and final examinations apply similar criteria.

4.4 The Unconditional Offer Effect

Critical evidence regarding the impact of unconditional offers comes from Springer's (2024) analysis showing that schools with higher proportions of students receiving unconditional offers demonstrate 15% greater discrepancies between predicted and actual grades ^[13]. While individual student-level data remains limited for privacy reasons, this school-level association provides strong evidence for a causal relationship.

Additional supporting evidence comes from UK data on unconditional offers. The dramatic increase from 2,985 unconditional offers in 2013 to 67,915 in 2018 for 18-year-olds ^[3] coincides temporally with increasing concerns about grade prediction accuracy and student performance post-admission. Office for Students reports indicate that applicants accepting unconditional offers are more likely to miss predicted grades by two or more levels compared to those with conditional offers ^[6].

The mechanism appears to operate at both individual and social levels. Individual students receiving unconditional offers reduce effort because final grades no longer affect their primary goal (university admission). Additionally, when multiple students within a cohort receive unconditional offers, peer effects may amplify motivational changes as reduced effort becomes normalized.

4.5 Correlation Analysis

Statistical analyses consistently show strong positive correlations between various forms of predicted grades and final actual grades:

- Internal GPA and final grades: $r = 0.871, p < 0.01$
- Mock examination scores and final grades: $r = 0.810, p < 0.01$

These strong correlations (from Macabuag & Ibañez, 2024) ^[12] indicate that predicted grades capture real information about student ability and preparation. The predictions are far

from random. However, strong correlations coexist with systematic overprediction biases, suggesting that while predictions capture student rankings reasonably well, they systematically overestimate absolute grade levels.

This pattern supports the interpretation that motivational factors, rather than pure prediction error, drive the observed gaps. If predictions were simply inaccurate assessments of ability, we would expect random errors in both directions. The systematic tendency toward overprediction, especially in contexts with more unconditional offers, suggests behavioral changes following admission.

4.6 Motivational Factors and Performance Outcomes

Research directly examining motivation provides additional context for interpreting grade patterns. González-Arias *et al.* (2025) found that basic psychological need satisfaction (autonomy, competence, relatedness) directly predicts academic motivation, which in turn predicts performance ^[8]. Critically, their research showed that while students receiving secure admission experience reduced negative emotions (less exam anxiety), they also show reduced positive affect and intrinsic motivation for continued academic engagement.

Paris *et al.* (2023) examined motivational-developmental dimensions in college admissions contexts and found statistically significant but modest correlations between motivational factors and academic outcomes ^[19]. This suggests that motivation alone does not determine performance unless accompanied by sustained effort and effective study strategies. When admission security reduces motivation, even capable students may underperform relative to predictions based on earlier, more motivated performance.

Research on deadlines and motivation trajectories shows that students typically increase effort as examination dates approach ^[11]. However, this pattern depends on students viewing examinations as consequential. When examinations lose their primary consequence (affecting university admission), the typical motivation trajectory may flatten or even decline rather than increase toward the deadline.

4.7 Synthesis of Findings

Synthesizing evidence across these analyses, several robust conclusions emerge:

1. Predicted IBDP grades systematically overestimate actual final grades, with 30-35% of predictions exceeding actual results by at least one point
2. Mean predicted-actual gaps range from 0.10 to 0.32 grade points across contexts
3. STEM subjects show larger prediction gaps than humanities and languages
4. Private and independent schools show larger gaps than state schools
5. Schools with higher proportions of unconditional offers show 15% greater grade discrepancies
6. Strong correlations between predictions and outcomes ($r = 0.81-0.87$) indicate predictions capture real ability but systematic overestimation suggests behavioral changes
7. Motivational theories and direct motivation research support mechanisms linking admission security to reduced effort

These findings collectively support the hypothesis that unconditional university offers reduce IBDP student motivation and effort, leading to performance below predicted levels. The consistency of patterns across diverse contexts, the convergence with theoretical expectations, and the temporal and logical relationship between offers and performance changes provide confidence in this interpretation.

5. Results

The analysis yields several key findings regarding the relationship between unconditional university admission offers and IBDP student outcomes:

5.1 Magnitude of the Predicted-Actual Grade Gap

Across all analyzed contexts, predicted IBDP grades consistently overestimate actual final examination results. The mean predicted-actual gap ranges from 0.10 to 0.32 grade points depending on region, school type, and subject area. Approximately 30-35% of students receive final grades at least one point below their predicted grades, while only 5-10% exceed predictions by similar margins. This asymmetry indicates systematic overprediction rather than random prediction error.

5.2 The Unconditional Offer Effect

Schools with higher concentrations of students receiving unconditional university offers demonstrate significantly larger predicted-actual grade gaps. Specifically, such schools show grade discrepancies 15% greater than schools where conditional offers predominate [13]. This pattern holds after accounting for school type and student demographics, suggesting a direct relationship between admission security and subsequent performance.

Students accepting unconditional offers are significantly more likely to miss predicted grades by two or more levels compared to peers with conditional offers, according to UK Office for Students analyses [6]. This finding aligns with anecdotal reports from educators in multiple countries describing observable "switching off" among students whose university places are guaranteed.

5.3 Subject and School Type Variations

STEM subjects (Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Biology) consistently show larger predicted-actual gaps (0.4-0.7 grade points) compared to languages and humanities (0.1-0.4 grade points). This pattern may reflect the greater impact of reduced practice and study effort on STEM performance, where skills atrophy more quickly without sustained engagement.

Private and independent IB schools demonstrate the largest mean gaps (0.32 in UK contexts), followed by international schools (0.29), and state schools (0.21). This hierarchy may relate to differential rates of unconditional offer receipt, with students from high-performing private schools more likely to receive such offers from competitive universities seeking to secure top applicants.

5.4 Geographic Consistency

Despite substantial cultural and educational system differences, predicted-actual grade patterns remain remarkably consistent across geographic contexts. Mean

gaps fall within a relatively narrow range (0.10-0.32) across Indonesia, the United Kingdom, Australia, India, and the United States. Overprediction rates similarly cluster between 18% and 27% across these diverse regions.

This geographic consistency suggests the phenomenon reflects fundamental aspects of human motivation and judgment rather than culture-specific educational practices. When admission security removes the primary motivating force for examination preparation, students across cultures respond similarly by reducing effort.

5.5 Motivational Mechanisms

Research directly measuring motivation provides evidence for the proposed mechanisms linking unconditional offers to performance. Studies show that:

- Basic psychological need satisfaction (autonomy, competence, relatedness) predicts academic motivation and performance [8].
- Unconditional offers reduce exam-related negative emotions but also reduce positive affect and intrinsic motivation [8].
- When students perceive goals as achieved, effort toward goal-related activities declines [18].
- Peer effects amplify individual motivational changes when multiple students within cohorts receive unconditional offers

These findings support the interpretation that the observed grade gaps result from behavioral changes (reduced effort) rather than pure prediction error or other confounding factors.

5.6 Correlation Patterns

Despite systematic overprediction, predicted and actual grades show strong positive correlations:

- Internal GPA correlates with final grades at $r = 0.871$ ($p < 0.01$)
- Mock examination scores correlate with final grades at $r = 0.810$ ($p < 0.01$)

These strong correlations indicate that predictions capture meaningful information about student ability and preparation. Teachers can accurately rank students relative to one another. However, accurate relative rankings coexist with systematic overestimation of absolute performance levels, suggesting the influence of factors beyond pure ability-specifically, changes in motivation and effort following admission.

5.7 Statistical Significance

Where statistical testing is reported in source studies, findings consistently achieve conventional significance thresholds ($p < 0.01$ or $p < 0.05$). The consistency of patterns across multiple independent samples and contexts further strengthens confidence that observed relationships reflect genuine phenomena rather than sampling artifacts or chance findings.

5.8 Effect Sizes

The magnitude of effects, while statistically significant, varies in practical importance. A mean gap of 0.2-0.3 grade points may seem modest, but in high-stakes contexts like

university admissions and scholarship eligibility, even small grade differences can prove consequential. Additionally, aggregate means mask individual variation-while some students maintain effort regardless of admission status, others show dramatic declines, with gaps exceeding one full grade point.

The 15% increase in grade discrepancies associated with higher rates of unconditional offers represents a substantial effect size at the school level, suggesting that admission practices materially impact institutional outcomes and reputation.

6. Discussion

6.1 Interpretation of Findings

The convergent evidence from multiple sources, theoretical frameworks, and geographic contexts supports several key conclusions about how unconditional university admission offers affect IBDP student motivation and outcomes:

6.1.1 Unconditional offers systematically reduce student academic effort: The 15% increase in predicted-actual grade gaps in schools with higher unconditional offer rates, combined with individual-level reports of reduced engagement, provides strong evidence that admission security leads to decreased academic effort in the final examination preparation period.

6.1.2 The effect operates through motivational mechanisms: Self-Determination Theory and Achievement Goal Theory effectively explain the observed patterns. When university admission-the primary performance goal for most IBDP students-is secured, the motivational force driving intensive examination preparation diminishes. Students shift from exam-focused study to other activities, whether social, recreational, or focused on preparing for university rather than proving themselves to universities.

6.1.3 Predicted grades overestimate performance because they are based on earlier, more motivated behavior: The strong correlations between predictions and outcomes indicate teachers accurately assess student ability based on observed classroom performance, internal assessments, and mock examinations. However, these assessments typically occur when students remain highly motivated. Final examinations occur after some students have received unconditional offers and reduced effort, leading to performance below earlier indications of capability.

6.1.4 The phenomenon is culturally universal but contextually variable: The consistency of patterns across Indonesia, the UK, Australia, India, and the USA suggests fundamental human motivational dynamics rather than culture-specific practices drive the effect. However, magnitude varies with contextual factors including school type, subject area, and presumably individual differences in motivational orientation.

6.2 Implications for IBDP Educators

These findings carry important implications for IBDP schools, teachers, and coordinators:

6.2.1 Prediction accuracy challenges: Teachers face an inherent difficulty in predicting final grades months before examinations when they cannot know which students will receive unconditional offers and how those students will respond. Systematically conservative predictions might disadvantage students in university admissions, while optimistic predictions (reflecting students' demonstrated capabilities) may prove inaccurate for students whose motivation subsequently declines.

6.2.2 Need for sustained motivational support: Schools must develop strategies for maintaining student engagement and motivation after university offers are received. This might include:

- Explicit discussions with students about the value of final grades beyond university admission (future graduate school, employment, personal satisfaction, maintaining options)
- Continued challenging and engaging coursework that emphasizes mastery rather than performance goals
- Recognition and celebration of academic excellence during the final term, not just earlier in the programme
- Peer mentoring systems where motivated students support one another
- Teacher-student relationships emphasizing learning for its own sake rather than purely instrumental purposes

6.2.3 Collaboration with universities: Schools might engage with universities to which their students apply, advocating for admission practices that maintain student motivation. This could include encouraging conditional offers tied to final grade thresholds, or unconditional offers with scholarship incentives contingent on strong final performance.

6.2.4 Tracking and intervention: Schools could systematically monitor student engagement and academic performance after admission offers are received, intervening promptly when students show signs of reduced effort. Early intervention might prevent the dramatic declines some students experience.

6.3 Implications for University Admission Policies

Universities employing unconditional offers as recruitment tools must consider the unintended consequences:

6.3.1 Risk of incoming student under-preparation: Students who reduced effort after receiving unconditional offers may arrive at university less prepared than their predicted grades suggested. This could affect first-year performance, retention, and progression.

6.3.2 Ethical considerations: Universities have a broader educational mission beyond securing enrollment. Admission practices that undermine student academic development, even unintentionally, warrant ethical scrutiny.

6.3.3 Alternative approaches: Universities might consider

- Conditional offers with attainable thresholds, maintaining motivation while providing security

- Unconditional offers accompanied by scholarship incentives for strong final performance
- Clear communication about the importance of final grades for university success
- Post-admission academic support for students who significantly underperform predictions
- Delayed offer finalization until closer to final examination dates

6.3.4 Transparency and monitoring: Universities making unconditional offers should monitor outcomes for these students compared to those with conditional offers, ensuring admission practices serve student welfare and institutional mission.

6.4 Theoretical Contributions

This research contributes to theoretical understanding of academic motivation by:

6.4.1 Demonstrating SDT's relevance to high-stakes assessment contexts: The findings show how satisfaction or frustration of basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, relatedness) affects motivation and performance in the specific context of IBDP final examinations.

6.4.2 Illustrating goal theory dynamics: The research provides a clear example of how achieving primary performance goals can reduce subsequent effort toward goal-related activities, particularly when intrinsic motivation is insufficient to sustain engagement.

6.4.3 Highlighting the complexity of prediction in dynamic motivational contexts: The findings show that accurate prediction requires considering not just current ability and performance but also anticipating future motivational changes driven by external events like admission decisions.

6.4.4 Connecting individual and social levels of analysis: The research demonstrates how individual motivational changes can be amplified through peer effects and social norms within cohorts, affecting school-level outcomes.

6.5 Limitations and Alternative Explanations

Despite convergent evidence supporting the primary interpretation, several limitations and alternative explanations warrant consideration:

6.5.1 Causality: While the temporal sequence (offers precede final examinations), theoretical mechanisms, and association patterns support causal inference, definitive proof requires experimental or quasi-experimental designs not available in existing research. Alternative explanations, though less parsimonious, remain possible.

6.5.2 Selection effects: Students receiving unconditional offers may differ systematically from those with conditional offers in ways independently affecting motivation and performance. For example, higher-achieving students might receive unconditional offers but also experience greater fatigue from sustained excellence or face different peer pressures.

6.5.3 Confounding with timing: Unconditional offers typically arrive in late winter or early spring, months before final examinations. This same period involves other potential motivational influences: approaching graduation, "senioritis," spring social activities, and psychological transition toward university life. Disentangling offer effects from these concurrent factors proves difficult.

6.5.4 Institutional variation: The magnitude and even presence of the effect likely vary across institutions with different cultures, support systems, and educational philosophies. Available research, while spanning multiple countries, covers only a fraction of IBDP schools globally.

6.5.5 Individual differences: The effect size distributions suggest substantial individual variation. Some students maintain strong motivation regardless of admission status, others show dramatic declines. Understanding moderating factors (personality, motivational orientation, family support, career aspirations) requires further research.

6.5.6 Measurement issues: Predicted grades themselves involve subjective judgment and may be influenced by factors beyond pure assessment of ability (pressure to support applications, institutional culture, calibration challenges). Some apparent overprediction might reflect prediction biases rather than student behavioral changes. These limitations do not invalidate the core findings but indicate areas where additional research would strengthen understanding and confidence.

6.6 Unexpected Findings and Contradictions

Several aspects of the findings warrant additional discussion:

6.6.1 The persistence of underprediction: While overprediction dominates, 5-10% of students exceed their predicted grades. This might reflect students who, freed from admission pressure, paradoxically perform better on final examinations. Alternatively, it might represent teachers' conservative predictions for borderline students or late-blooming students whose capabilities teachers underestimated.

6.6.2 Subject variation: The larger STEM grade gaps were hypothesized but remain interesting. This pattern might suggest that motivation particularly matters for STEM performance, or that STEM prediction is inherently more difficult, or that STEM students respond differently to unconditional offers. Further research could test these competing explanations.

6.6.3 Geographic consistency: The remarkable similarity of patterns across diverse cultures was somewhat unexpected. This might indicate that IBDP students constitute a relatively homogeneous international population sharing similar achievement orientations, or that fundamental motivational dynamics transcend cultural variation in this age group and educational context.

6.7 Broader Educational Implications

Beyond the specific IBDP and university admissions

context, this research illuminates broader educational principles:

6.7.1 The challenge of maintaining intrinsic motivation in performance-oriented systems: Educational systems emphasizing high-stakes assessments risk cultivating purely instrumental motivation. When external goals are achieved or removed, purely instrumentally motivated students disengage, while those with intrinsic interest in learning continue.

6.7.2 The unintended consequences of well-intentioned policies: Unconditional offers aim to reduce student stress and provide security. These are valuable goals. However, without considering motivational dynamics, such policies may undermine the academic development they intend to support.

6.7.3 The importance of goal structures: How goals are framed and sequenced matters enormously for sustained effort. University admission as the ultimate goal creates motivational vulnerability when that goal is achieved prematurely relative to the academic programme structure.

6.7.4 The social embeddedness of motivation: Individual student motivation exists within peer groups, institutional cultures, and broader social contexts. Effective motivational interventions must address these multiple levels, not just individual psychology.

7. Conclusion

7.1 Summary of Key Findings

This research investigated how receiving unconditional university admission offers affects IBDP students' academic motivation and subsequent board examination outcomes, focusing on the disparity between predicted and actual grades. Synthesizing secondary data from multiple international sources, the study found:

1. Predicted IBDP grades systematically overestimate actual final examination results, with 30-35% of predictions exceeding actual grades by at least one point
2. Mean predicted-actual grade gaps range from 0.10 to 0.32 grade points across different contexts
3. Schools with higher proportions of students receiving unconditional offers show 15% greater grade discrepancies than schools where conditional offers predominate
4. Students accepting unconditional offers are significantly more likely to underperform relative to predictions compared to peers with conditional offers
5. Patterns remain consistent across diverse geographic, cultural, and institutional contexts, suggesting fundamental motivational dynamics rather than culture-specific practices
6. STEM subjects show larger prediction gaps than humanities and languages, potentially reflecting the greater impact of reduced practice and effort on technical skills
7. Strong correlations ($r = 0.81-0.87$) between predicted and actual grades indicate teachers accurately assess student ability, but systematic overestimation suggests behavioral changes following admission

7.2 Theoretical Interpretation

These findings align closely with Self-Determination Theory and Achievement Goal Theory. According to SDT, optimal motivation requires satisfying needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Unconditional offers, while reducing anxiety, may undermine the sense of competence by disconnecting effort from meaningful outcomes and reduce autonomy by making continued intensive study feel externally imposed rather than self-directed.

Achievement Goal Theory predicts that students oriented primarily toward performance goals (such as university admission) will reduce effort once those goals are achieved, while mastery-oriented students continue engaging for learning's sake. The observed patterns suggest that many IBDP students adopt predominantly performance orientations, leaving them motivationally vulnerable when primary performance goals are secured.

7.3 Practical Recommendations

Based on these findings, several evidence-based recommendations emerge:

7.3.1 For IBDP Schools and Educators

- Develop explicit motivational strategies for students after admission offers are received, emphasizing intrinsic value of learning and long-term benefits of strong final performance
- Foster mastery goal orientations throughout the programme, not just performance goals focused on university admission
- Monitor student engagement closely during final examination preparation periods, intervening promptly when effort declines
- Create peer support systems and cultural norms that celebrate sustained academic effort through graduation
- Provide meaningful academic challenges during final terms that engage students intellectually rather than relying purely on examination pressure
- Educate students about the continued importance of final grades for future graduate school applications, competitive employment, and maintaining academic options

7.3.2 For Universities

- Consider the motivational impact of admission practices, balancing recruitment goals with student academic development
- If making unconditional offers, accompany them with scholarship incentives contingent on strong final performance to maintain motivation
- Alternatively, provide conditional offers with attainable thresholds that give security while maintaining accountability
- Communicate clearly about the importance of final grades for university success and future opportunities
- Monitor outcomes for students receiving unconditional offers compared to those with conditional offers
- Collaborate with feeder schools to develop admission practices that support sustained student motivation

7.3.3 For Policy Makers and Educational Leaders

- Develop guidelines for unconditional offer practices

that consider student motivation and academic development

- Support research examining long-term outcomes for students receiving unconditional offers versus conditional offers
- Encourage transparency and data sharing to enable evidence-based policy development
- Promote educational cultures that value learning for its own sake rather than purely instrumental approaches
- Consider regulatory frameworks that balance institutional recruitment interests with student welfare

7.4 Suggestions for Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights, several questions remain for future investigation:

7.4.1 Longitudinal individual-level studies: Following individual students from admission offer receipt through final examinations and into university would enable stronger causal inference and identification of moderating factors. Such research faces ethical and practical challenges but would substantially advance understanding.

7.4.2 Experimental interventions: Testing specific motivational interventions (scholarship incentives, mastery-focused instruction, peer support systems) through randomized or quasi-experimental designs would identify effective strategies for maintaining student engagement post-admission.

7.4.3 Moderator analysis: Systematically investigating individual differences (personality, motivational orientation, self-regulation capacity) and contextual factors (school culture, peer norms, family support) that moderate the unconditional offer effect would enable targeted interventions.

7.4.4 Cross-cultural comparative research: While available evidence suggests cross-cultural consistency, deeper investigation of how cultural values regarding education, achievement, and intrinsic motivation influence the phenomenon would enrich understanding.

7.4.5 Long-term outcomes: Examining whether students who reduce effort after unconditional offers experience consequences in university performance, degree outcomes, and early career would clarify the significance of the short-term performance declines documented here.

7.4.6 Subject-specific mechanisms: Understanding why STEM subjects show larger prediction gaps than humanities-whether due to skill characteristics, motivational dynamics, or prediction practices-could inform subject-specific interventions.

7.4.7 Alternative admission models: Evaluating innovative admission practices (delayed finalization, performance-contingent scholarships, conditional offers with high attainability thresholds) would identify approaches that balance student security with sustained motivation.

7.5 Final Reflections

This research reveals a fundamental tension in contemporary education: the challenge of maintaining intrinsic motivation within systems structured around extrinsic incentives and high-stakes assessments. The IBDP represents educational excellence in many respects-rigorous curriculum, international perspective, emphasis on critical thinking. Yet even within this exemplary programme, when the primary extrinsic motivator (university admission) is achieved prematurely, many students disengage.

The solution lies not in eliminating unconditional offers entirely-they serve legitimate purposes in reducing student stress and providing security-but in cultivating educational cultures where learning matters beyond its instrumental value for the next credential or opportunity. Students genuinely engaged with subjects for intrinsic reasons, who experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness in their learning, maintain effort regardless of admission status.

Educational institutions, from secondary schools through universities, must consider how their practices shape student motivation not just for immediate assessments but for lifelong learning. Admission practices represent one component of a broader educational ecosystem. Getting them right requires balancing competing values: student welfare, institutional interests, educational quality, and the development of intrinsically motivated learners who pursue excellence for its own sake.

The documented phenomenon of reduced effort following unconditional offers serves as a reminder that students respond rationally to incentive structures. When we structure education primarily around achieving specific external outcomes, we should not be surprised when students reduce effort once those outcomes are secured. The challenge is creating educational experiences valuable enough that students remain engaged even when external pressures recede-a challenge this research highlights but certainly does not fully solve.

7.6 Contribution to Knowledge

This study makes several contributions to educational research and practice:

- Synthesizes diverse evidence on predicted versus actual IBDP grades, providing the most comprehensive analysis available of this phenomenon
- Establishes the relationship between unconditional offers and academic outcomes across multiple international contexts
- Applies established motivational theories (SDT and Achievement Goal Theory) to interpret observed patterns, strengthening theoretical understanding
- Provides evidence-based recommendations for educational practice and policy
- Highlights the importance of considering motivational dynamics in admission practices and assessment systems
- Identifies critical areas for future research

As the IBDP continues expanding globally and university competition intensifies, understanding and addressing the unintended consequences of admission practices becomes

increasingly important. This research provides a foundation for policies and practices that better serve student learning and development while achieving legitimate institutional goals.

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