## The impact of institutional factors on student academic results: Implications for 'quality' in universities

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This article situates the topic of student assessment and the moderation of assessment within a broader context of policy debates about the quality of teaching and learning in universities. The focus and discussion grew out of a research project which aimed initially to investigate factors related to academic success and failure in a Faculty of Arts. The study identified a range of student demographic and biographical factors significantly related to academic success and failure. However, there was also evidence of pronounced differences in grading practices between different components (courses, programs, schools) within the institution. The paper explores the implications of such inconsistencies for the institutional mechanisms and processes that have typically been advocated as sufficient safeguards of quality. It concludes that the tendency of governments and other stakeholders to now champion performance indicators, along with the shifting focus toward quality 'outcomes', are likely to increasingly throw the strengths and weaknesses of institutional assessment practices into stark relief.

## Introduction

The ongoing review and reform of higher education in Australia, which was inaugurated by the Commonwealth Labor government in the late 1980s, continued to gather momentum during the following decade and culminated in the establishment of a national system for auditing universities. These audits are administered by the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) which commenced its work proper in 2002. Given that the review and reform process has now lasted almost two decades, admittedly moving along in fits and starts under both Labor and Liberal regimes, it is not surprising that the notion of 'quality' itself in higher education might seem to have undergone "chameleon-like" change along with differing ideological emphases of successive governments (Vidovich, 2001). Nevertheless, most of the key components of the quality agenda have remained fairly constant over the past couple of decades – irrespective of the political party in government.

The Labor administration initially emphasised reform of the higher education sector with the aim of enhancing access and equity, and the number of students doing higher education courses more than doubled between 1984 and 2001. However, it was an expansion for which the consumers themselves would be increasingly expected to pay, thus offsetting the corresponding decline in direct public funding to universities. Liberals since the latter 1990s might have pursued harder-nosed interventions in areas once seen as the essential preserve of university autonomy – in particular the quality and standards of institutional teaching and learning – but again, the seeds for such increasing (and controlling) interventions were sown by Labor as far back as the 1980s.

This article does not wish to revisit debates about the motives and pressures behind the review process in Australia. Most commentators agree that the vision of higher education as a commodity in a global market has been a very important consideration for successive governments on both sides of politics (Vidovich, 2001; DEST, 2002; James, 2003; Marginson, 2003). It is noted that big money is increasingly at stake in terms of being able to assure foreign governments and international students about the high quality of the Australian educational 'product'. While the appeal to foreign consumers has no doubt been an important factor driving policies to strengthen the quality agenda, the concerns and expectations which usually cluster under this umbrella would seem to be equally important to most university students, their families, and other stakeholders (including employers). Among such concerns might be: consistency of academic standards and assessment practices across and between higher education providers, quality of teaching and the quality of provisions for learning, "value for dollar" in terms of the cost to individuals and families of participation in higher education, and the reputation of academic courses and programs in the eyes of employers (and hence the potential employability of graduates).

The article, however, does take its cue from an important theme which runs through the quality debates. In many ways, perhaps the most crucial (quality) conundrum evident in both the policy and theoretical literature derives from the perceived tensions between the establishment by institutions of <u>quality assurance</u> practices on the one hand, and the actual demonstration of <u>quality outcomes</u> on the other. Quality auditing in Australia has until now followed mainly the "assurance" path. The initial round of AUQA quality audits (some 25 universities had been examined by the end of 2004) were concerned to verify that institutional mechanisms and processes were in place to (apparently) assure the quality of teaching and learning in universities. Nevertheless, there have been countervailing arguments. The major policy-oriented discussion paper on teaching and learning released in the past few years (*Striving for Quality*) claimed that there were "two overarching concerns about Australia's existing approach to quality and standards:

- too much emphasis on institutional quality assurance and not enough on learning outcomes; and
- lack of a systematic approach to articulating and monitoring standards" (DEST, 2002, p. 17).

The document had earlier quoted (approvingly) the comment of a former chair of the predecessor of the current national quality authority that "the best quality assurance processes in the world do not guarantee good outcomes" (p. 16). Martin's thematic summary of the AUQA reports of the first eight universities to be examined also noted that:

A theme that runs throughout the teaching and learning sections of the Audit Reports is the importance of ensuring comparability of standards across units, campuses and teaching modes within the institution, as well as externally – between the institution and its national and international peers ... the reports are generally low-key in their treatment of the standards issue given their focus is on quality assurance processes rather than on substantive performance reviews (Martin, 2003, p. 16).

Thus there have been concerns increasingly expressed about the efficacy of heavy reliance on the presence of apparently appropriate mechanisms within institutions as the <u>major</u> indicator of quality. The following study also suggests that procedures established to enhance 'quality' in assessment practices and moderation do not necessarily guarantee equitable outcomes for students. Interestingly, the university which was the site for the study was commended in AUQA's recent quality audit (2004) on the various mechanisms which had been established by the institution to monitor assessment practices, yet these processes (or something very much like them) had certainly been in place during the period covered by this research, 1998-2000. The article explores Faculty-wide differences in student outcomes, and particularly

the parameters of academic failure. The discussion looks at the implications of these findings for the quality of teaching and learning in universities at a time when these institutions are under increasing pressure to demonstrate their quality and professionalism in teaching, learning enhancement, and assessment practices.

The research reported here began as an attempt to understand student academic failure in an Arts Faculty of a large, multi-campus university. Concerns had been expressed at various assessment boards over the apparent increase in different types of failure; specifically, failure which arose from the non-submission of assessment items. A particular aim of the project was to investigate whether the problem resided essentially in characteristics of non-completing students, or whether there were institutional factors associated with courses or programs that facilitated failure. The wealth of data made available to the researchers by university student administration meant that factors related to academic success could also be explored. Nevertheless, academic failure remained the main concern of the research and is the focus of this article.

Interestingly, it is difficult to identify a body of research literature on student failure in universities. It is almost as if the topic is something of an embarrassment for institutions - and hence has not received much attention from researchers who are themselves (teaching) academics. Initially, some of the attrition research of the 1970s 1980s incorporated student failure under the broader umbrella of and attrition/retention research (eg, Tinto, 1987). These earlier studies tended to portray attrition as the result of student inability to adapt to the university environment. Some 'non-traditional' students who were increasingly entering universities with the coming of 'mass' higher education were said to be particularly vulnerable to failure. As it happens, later research has questioned the view that non-traditional students are at greater risk, noting that these 'new' students adapt more readily than was earlier thought to the demands of higher education (Gravson, 1997). Nevertheless, commentators now generally agree that individual student attrition, whether voluntary (once called, perhaps quite inappropriately, 'dropping out') or involuntary (that is, institutional exclusion based on poor grades) is rarely the result of one single factor, but rather that failure, broadly defined, probably results from a combination of factors (Yorke, 1999; Braxton, 2000).

While previous research has identified some student background factors associated with program non-completion, it has also been argued that difficulties might arise from the institutional context (Belcheir, Michener & Gray, 1998; Heverly, 1999). Recent theorising about failure/attrition continues to focus on the role of student preparedness for university study – but with a keener eye to possible institutional factors. Ozga & Sukhnandan (1998) noted that the rapidly changing nature of higher education and its market has impacted on both students and institutions, such that the potential for mismatch or lack-of-fit between programs and students has increased. Johnson (1996) investigated the negative experiences of students and their subsequent failing grades in an Arts Faculty and found that the problems were exacerbated by the lack of student preparedness and the mismatch between the expectations of students and the program itself. McInnis, James & Hartley (2000) have pointed to the large number of Australian students (up to two-thirds) who say that they feel they were not well-prepared for university study, or were not ready to choose a course when they entered the institution (up to one-third), along with the high proportion of first-years

(almost half) who claim that they find it difficult to motivate themselves to study (see also, McInnis, Hartley, Polesel & Teese, 2000; McInnis, 2001).

There are claims in the literature that institutions should intervene more actively in the prevention of failure in a conscious and planned manner. For example, Martin (2002) incorporates the notion of "resilience" in the proposal that institutions develop strategies which seek to reduce risk of failure, while at the same time enhancing protective factors which either contribute to student success in the first place, or enable students to better recover in the face of academic disappointments. In fact, there has been something of an orientation (or re-orientation) to the idea of academic 'survival' in recent literature on student failure, signalled by Peelo and Wareham's (2002) UK collection of articles on the problem, a book which both recognises the everyday nature of failure, and then focuses on ways to assist students to "bounce back".

Nevertheless, the work on student academic failure and the conditions under which failure occurs remains patchy and underdeveloped. The research reported here confirms that there is probably a compounding relationship between student factors and course factors associated with academic failure (and conversely – success). The findings identified several student characteristics which were associated with academic risk, however there was also evidence of several 'risky' institutional factors. Thus, while students obviously brought their own attributes/conditions of academic risk to the university, their prospects of being awarded particular grades were still determined significantly by such institutional factors as the School which offered their program/course, the particular course they were doing, and the year level of their enrolment. The paper addresses the implications of such inconsistencies in assessment outcomes at a time when universities are conceived by policy makers as increasingly competitive entities in a marketplace shaped by consumer demand, opinions, and levels of satisfaction.

#### Sample and methodology

Data covering all students who were enrolled in Arts courses (subjects) offered by any of the five Schools (or departments) in the Faculty for the three years 1998-2000 (inclusive) were entered into files for statistical analysis. The five Schools offered courses covering typical disciplinary/professional areas in the Arts domain: Languages, humanities, film and mass media studies, and the social sciences (including criminology). The data files included biographical details, academic results, program information and course data for each student. Initially this translated into a data set of 54,590 cases – where one case represented one student grade for a course. Data were aggregated on the basis of course (n=558). Courses for which three years of data (1998-2000) were unavailable were then excluded, and postgraduate courses (which tended to have very small enrolments) were also excluded. This resulted in a data set of 37,960 grades distributed among 11,264 students who were enrolled in 221 undergraduate courses which formed the basis of the analysis.

The majority of students in the study were female (63%), with a median age on entering university of 22.6 years, and two-thirds came from homes where English was the main language. Three-quarters of the students lived in their family home. A third

of them had entered their programs with some history of 'incomplete' education, and the majority (82%) were full-time students

The statistical procedure used was a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). The dependent variables for the analyses of both the student and course data were the proportion of grades FNS, WF, F, PC, P, C, D, and HD. These grades range in ascending order from failure due to non-submission of assessment items (FNS) through to high distinction (HD). While there were three types of failure grades, the majority (60%) in the data set were F ('normal' failure) and most of the others were FNS. The third type WF, which is failure due to late withdrawal from a course, accounted for only 10% of failure grades. The independent variables consisted of a range of student and course related characteristics available from the standard university records as shown below in Tables 1 and 2. In addition, we sought feedback from course convenors on the findings of our statistical analyses. The staff survey was a relatively structured instrument, however there was the opportunity for them to provide more open and reflective comments.

## A note on student factors

For ease of reporting, the analysis reported below has grades aggregated into two categories: failure grades (F, FNS, WF) and very good grades (D and HD). A range of student variables displayed significant relationships with grades awarded. Table 1 shows those biographical/demographic factors which displayed significant differences between students. In fact, a considerable amount of the explained variance (42%) in the range of student grades was accounted for by two variables, which were: mode of course enrolment (16% of variance) and their university entrance score (13%).

# TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Looking at the means associated with these significant results indicates the following: Women received better results than males; indigenous students received worse results than other students; students who deferred payment of their HECS received worse results than other students; students enrolled in external mode received worse results than internal students and those enrolled full-time; older students tended to get better results than those younger; students with the higher entry scores to university did better than those with worse entry scores; and those students with poor results tended to leave university after a short time. In addition, students who had a history of previously incomplete education tended to do either very well or poorly (that is, the relationship between this variable and academic results was bimodal). The student risk factors identified here and their implications have been discussed at length elsewhere (Wimshurst & Wortley, 2005).

Some of these factors have fairly strong confirmation in the (limited) literature on undergraduate success and failure. For example, the finding that external students had significantly higher failure rates than internal and full-time day students has been reported often (for a broader discussion of the challenges faced by external students, see Brown, 1996). Again, the finding that students with poorer entry scores were much more likely to experience failure (F and FNS) has been reported in other Australian studies (Dickson, Fleet & Watt, 2000; McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001; McKenzie, Gow & Schweitzer, 2004). Interestingly, factors such as foreign language mainly spoken in the home, or student disability, that might be seen as indicative of disadvantage, did not display any relationship with academic failure.

On the other hand, some risk factors which were identified have been less commonly discussed in the literature, or at least in the Australian literature. For example, males (and particularly young males) had a significantly higher failure rate than women. While James (2002a), noted in his study of relationships between socio-economic background and higher education that school girls tended to anticipate more rewarding experiences than boys when they entered university, there appears to have been little exploratory research in Australia on the nature and extent of any such 'gender gap' in academic outcomes. If such a gendered gap in academic results does exist, then this might say more about opportunities and conditions in the wider job market, and the impact these wider considerations have on who enters and who stays at university, rather than what it says about the fortunes of people while in the university.

While the student risk factors have been discussed elsewhere (Wimshurst & Wortley, 2005), one example of ways in which biographical factors might intersect with institutional factors is provided here. It could be argued, for example, that university entry scores, at a time when the majority of students have outside employment and other commitments, reflect the effectiveness with which young people have learned to cope (or not cope) with competing demands in their lives (Ball, Maguire, & Macrae, 2000; McInnis, James & Hartley, 2000: Dwyer & Wyn, 2001). Accordingly, those with better entry scores might also be those who bring with them more effective strategies to deal with diverse demands and stresses and who then receive better grades while at university. Interestingly, there might even be a gender link here – since some research suggests that women students better balance their part-time work along with study, partly because they are less likely to engage in excessive outside work commitments (Vickers, Lamb & Hinkley 2003).

The reverse is also likely to be the case, where those who enter university with lower entry scores are less adept from the beginning (for whatever reasons) at balancing competing demands on their time. Of particular relevance to this paper, those undergraduates with the marginal entry scores, with less developed coping strategies, or with less opportunities to exercise their strategies, might also be those most at risk from some of the institutional risk factors which were identified in our study and to which we now turn.

#### **Institutional factors**

For ease of reporting, the analysis reported below has grades aggregated into two categories: failure grades (F, FNS, WF) and very good grades (D and HD). Four of the five course variables were found to have a significant relationship with the awarding of grades. In fact, a considerable amount of the explained variance (57%) in student grades was accounted for by two institutional variables, which were: <u>School</u> awarding the grade (26%) and the <u>year level</u> at which courses were offered (13%).

# TABLES 2 AND 3 ABOUT HERE

Specifically, as shown in Tables 2 and 3, significant relationships between course variables and student grades were found as follows:

## Host School

School B awarded a significantly higher proportion of very good grades than the other four Schools. On disaggregating the data into D and HD, School E tended to award a higher proportion of HD grades, while School B awarded a higher proportion of D grades, as shown in Table 3. On the other hand, School C awarded a higher proportion of failure grades than the other four Schools. Again, on looking at specific types of failure in Table 3, School D tended to award F grades, while School C tended to award proportionately more FNS. Thus, the chances of receiving a failure grade increased for students taking courses in Schools C and D.

#### Year level

There was a positive correlation (r=0.29, p<.001) between the year level at which the course was offered and the proportion of very good grades, indicating that as year level increased (first through to third year) so did the proportion of very good grades. There was also a negative correlation (r=-0.37, p<.001) between year level and the proportion of poor grades, indicating that as year level increased, the proportion of fail grades (specifically F) awarded in courses decreased. In short, the chances of receiving a failure grade were proportionately higher for first year students.

## Number of students enrolled

There was a negative correlation (r=-0.43, p<.001) between the number of people enrolled in courses and the proportion of very good grades, indicating that as class size got bigger, the proportion of very good grades awarded decreased. On disaggregating the data, we find that this relationship held for both D and HD grades. The reverse also held for failure where there was a positive correlation (r=0.34, p<.001) indicating that as the number of students in a course increased so did the proportion of F grades. Thus, students in courses with larger enrolments (at any year level) had increased chances of getting fail grades.

#### Semester of course offering

Very good grades tended to be awarded in third semester courses rather than full year, first semester, or second semester courses. Third semester courses are taken over what is normally the Christmas student vacation (and hence tend to be concentrated into a shorter period), tend to have smaller enrolments, and are usually taken in later years of degree programs. On the other hand, full year courses tended to award a higher proportion of F grades than courses taken over any of the individual semesters.

While a couple of Schools in the Faculty awarded a higher proportion of failure grades (and conversely, two others awarded a higher proportion of very good grades), Table 4 indicates that some courses with high failure rates could be identified in each of the Schools. Courses shown in this table were the largest courses in the Faculty (the fourth quartile) which also showed the highest rates of failure (either FNS or F). Moreover, two courses from this table illustrate another important consideration,

which is that when all types of failure are combined, then failure rates for some courses reached serious levels (20%-25%). For example, course D1009 increased from 16% to 26% failure when all types of failure were combined, and E1081 from 16% to 24%. These were both large first year courses which might be expected to reflect some of the 'risk' characteristics noted above, but other examples of 'compounding' failure can be identified. For example, the medium-sized third year course C3002 from the third quartile (with an enrolment of 119 in the period 1998-2000) more than doubled its failure rate from 10% to 26% when all types of failure are considered.

# TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

In fact, this group of undergraduates illustrates Peelo's (2002, p. 7) comment about the essential ubiquity of failure – a phenomenon that tends to be overlooked in the official reports of undergraduate assessment. We might note (positively) that almost three-quarters (73%) of the 11,264 students did <u>not</u> receive any failing grades. However, for the group of students who did fail courses, the median for FNS was one, and for all types of failure combined (F, FNS, WF) the median was two. This suggests that failure was a relatively common experience for these students, in that over one-quarter of them received some sort of failing grade at some point. Put another way, it does not seem to be the case that failure was accounted for by only a small group of students consistently failing. A small percentage did receive multiple failures (just over one-quarter of failing students received 3 or more failures), but for the rest, failing grades were distributed among a larger group of students who each received only a few (1-2) failures. Thus, the experience of failure was not uncommon for this sample of Arts students.

Finally, in passing, one potentially important finding was that grades awarded in courses were <u>not</u> significantly related to the proportion of students who came from outside the Host School offering the course. This finding suggests that when university elements (particularly those elements within faculties which encompass relatively similar knowledge domains or professional orientations) establish various entrance hurdles for admission, then such rules and regulations might derive more from considerations of status, protection of turf, and/or resource implications, than they do from actual or perceived differences in student abilities.

# Staff views

Fifty-two questionnaires were distributed and 24 convenors provided responses, a response rate of 46%. Twenty-three of these responses have been used for the analyses upon which Table 5 is based. One response was submitted in the form of a lengthy email which provided some insight into the thinking of the current convenor, but did not provide data strictly comparable with the views expressed by the other respondents. Responses came mainly from convenors in three Schools: D (9), C (6) and E (5). No attempt was made in the analysis to compare Schools. The response rate, however, was sufficient to identify some broad themes in the thinking of academic staff about student failure.

The majority view was that reasons for failure could be attributed to student characteristics and shortcomings, reminiscent of Killen's (1994) finding that while

staff and students might agree on the elements for academic success, they tend to blame each other in the event of failure. Overall, the impression conveyed by staff was that student failure resulted from lack of student commitment to study (F) and ignorance of university procedures (FNS). Staff were asked to rank a number of options provided to them as possible reasons for F and FNS. In each section of Table 5 only those options mentioned most often are shown.

#### TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE

Interestingly, despite frequent comments about outside matters impacting adversely on student results, other options in the survey which referred to specific external concerns (family matters, work commitments) were not ranked highly by convenors. Staff did not believe that embarrassment prevented students from approaching academic or general staff for advice/assistance about academic withdrawal or their poor results. Moreover, when convenors provided reasons for student failure in their own course, they pointed to the 'high standards' of these courses and tended to portray students as struggling to come to grips with the academic requirements for success, or struggling to come to grips with the wider university environment. For example:

This course demands discipline, time management, and a sustained attention to the quality of the main assessment item. These factors contribute to the failure rate. Also, normally taken in second year, the course denotes the major "getting serious". I am not unhappy about this tough course weeding out people who cannot find the time or commitment, or whose skills haven't reached the standards we set.

Responses occasionally indicated some disregard for the <u>realpolitik</u> of maintaining student numbers and confidence at a time of increasing competition among universities:

Campus X students have easier entry than students on other campuses. To reduce FNS, encourage students to drop out early. We should be upfront about the standards of the course. Some students decide it is too hard or not relevant to their lives. They should be supported in their decision because we have too many students anyway.

Irrespective of the types of failure, remediation in the form of better communication with students about assessment practices and/or university procedures was mentioned far more often by staff than any suggested changes to curriculum, assessment, or pedagogical practices. Responsibility for enhanced communications and student support tended to remain unclear. Sometimes convenors indicated that academic staff should take the lead, while at other times they referred generally to the need for more administrative assistance. Strategies nominated by convenors to reduce both FNS and F consisted largely of:

- instituting compulsory class attendance
- setting early pieces of assessment to identify students at risk
- follow up of non-submission of assessment items (with the view to contacting students).

There were indications that some staff had been thinking about the problem of failure in their own courses – and had attempted remedial action. For example, in smaller courses (usually at later year levels) some staff attempted to make allowances for part-time and evening students with family commitments by reminding them about procedures for seeking extensions beyond assessment deadlines. Others attempted to clarify very early the particular orientation of the course, for example by specifying clearly that a media studies course was heavily theoretical rather than practical and hands-on. Indeed, even the research project itself set some staff thinking about possible interventions, as one acting Head of School noted:

I had no idea a course I sometimes convene had a high FNS rate. So the feedback from the School Assessment committee to convenors could be improved. The chairs should be required to make a short summary of trends and problems available to staff. Perhaps the temporary stewardship of courses, the turnover in convenors -- contributes to a more passive convenorship with higher failure rates.

Nevertheless, the strong impression left by convenor responses was that where remediation was already occurring at the time of the research, or was anticipated, these efforts appeared to come largely from individual staff, rather than emerging as whole-of-School or Faculty-wide initiatives.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

There are important implications here for debates about the nature of 'quality' in teaching and learning, and about ways we might conceptualise aspects of quality, especially at a time of rapid change in 'mass' higher education.

First, the subjective nature of grading is in evidence in the marked variation among Schools in the awarding of grades. There is clear evidence that Schools across the Faculty had differing conventions and expectations – cultures if you will -- about what constitutes high and low achievement. The results from the analysis showed that in terms of institutional factors, the School in which a student was enrolled was the best predictor of their grades. It is not plausible that the large differences in proportions of high and low grades awarded represent true variations in the respective 'quality' of students in those Schools. Mechanisms in the form of assessment boards at School and Faculty levels were clearly in evidence at the time, and processed (that is, approved) these significantly different results. One conclusion then might be that the mere presence of quality assurance processes certainly does not necessarily guarantee equitable outcomes.

A second conclusion is that moderation of assessment remains an unsophisticated aspect of teaching and learning in higher education. It could be that the consideration of assessment matters across large and complex components within universities requires interpersonal, professional and communication skills on the part of staff that we take largely as given – skills and ways of viewing assessment that in fact require assiduous development and which cannot be taken for granted. Certainly, the research reported here confirms DEST's observation that:

There is not a strong tradition of systematic moderation of assessment and evaluation of performance within Australian universities at undergraduate or postgraduate coursework level either between different markers in the same subject, across subjects, across courses or across institutions (DEST, 2002, p. 28).

Compounding this situation is the fact that different Schools over time develop particular (even idiosyncratic) cultures which arise partly from staff personalities, but importantly also from different disciplinary cultures and the different orientations to teaching and learning perhaps associated with different subject disciplines (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999). Moreover, these different orientations operate within Schools as well as between them, which might especially be the case for those universities which pride themselves on their 'interdisciplinary' or 'multidisciplinary' offerings (as in the present study). Such differing disciplinary cultures and pedagogical orientations are likely to impact in different ways on staff and student conceptions of standards and quality. These are important issues about which simple and quick value judgements should not be made. However, debate and discussion about the implications of such matters for student assessment, at least in the experience of the writers, are not prominent in the day-to-day discourse of mainstream academia.

Third, the pronounced differences between Schools in the awarding of grades, and the disproportionate awarding of grades within Schools according to year level, would confirm the need for rigorous and consistent moderation and monitoring processes. The necessity for rigorous moderation might sound self-evident, and relatively straightforward. Nevertheless, resource and budgetary 'panics' across institutions have a tendency to undermine positive pedagogical and assessment practices, and particularly those practices at first year level where courses with large enrolments typically absorb considerable resources. The finding that students in first year classes and large classes were awarded higher proportions of failure grades might suggest that students new to higher education find themselves in a kind of double jeopardy. For example, in response to one of these recent budgetary crises, and reduction in time allocated to teaching, one Head of School in another Faculty was reported in the press as saying that "the only options were increased group sizes, reducing the number of small group sessions or asking staff to do more teaching when their promotion depended primarily on their research activity" (*Courier-Mail*, 15/9/04). One can only wonder about the impression this might have left with students, and their families, new to the institution and higher education.

Fourth, and related to the above point, the role of academics themselves in the enhancement of quality teaching and learning remains problematic, despite the considerable investment made by universities in creating opportunities for staff development. There is a lack of empirical research in Australia about how academics generally have responded to mass higher education and the emergent quality agenda. The rather limited investigation that has been done does not hold out cause for optimism.

For example, Taylor et al's (1998) study of an earlier phase of the reform process (1991-96) found academics increasingly concerned (and angry) by what they saw as outcomes from the "massification" of higher education. They felt vulnerable in an environment where quality teaching on the one hand was seen as increasingly important for one's career, at least at the level of rhetoric, while at the same time higher education (or so the academics believed) was increasingly seen by consumers as a commodity 'guaranteeing' their employability. As the researchers also commented, "the notion that staff can buy themselves out of teaching in favour of research does little to increase the status of teaching" (Taylor et al, 1998, p. 266). McInnis's (1999) study of the work preferences of academics also suggested that they were increasingly turning to research as their preferred activity in place of teaching. There was the sense that a research orientation, or withdrawal into research, offered academics some feeling of stability in a changeable higher education sector where the

expectations of the 'new' students were also changing and diversifying. There is the suggestion in these earlier research findings that those academics most concerned about what they saw as negative outcomes of mass entry to universities, were also those most disconcerted that students first and foremost want jobs and, in the main, do not see themselves as apprentice scholars.

It was noted earlier that staff typically see student success and failure as essentially the result of student efforts and abilities, or lack thereof. Obviously student effort, ability, and motivation are powerful factors in the equation. However, when combined with the busy schedules of academic staff, the view that students overwhelmingly determine the outcomes of the assessment process might not be as conducive to the careful monitoring of their results as the policy statements of the wider institution would like to think is the case. Ultimately, quality outcomes require that academics occupy centre stage in terms of monitoring and moderating assessment. In particular, academics might be careful when making pedagogic/administrative decisions which inadvertently disadvantage students. As James (2002) notes, this involves putting the needs of students ahead of a range of competing interests, but it does not mean capitulating to the student-as-consumer, rather:

Student-centredness brings an emphasis to student needs alongside, or ahead of, institutional/academic priorities. This does not imply, or should not imply, a narrow or thoughtless reactiveness to student expectations. Student-centredness means educators making informed decisions in relation to students' developmental needs and placing the best interests of students at the heart of planning (2002, p. 81).

Governments have become increasingly serious about a range of performance indicators, and particularly those indicators that point to progress or otherwise in areas such as: widening access to higher education, student retention, and the measurement of quality teaching and learning. The first round of quality audits in Australia focused on provision of mechanisms and processes by which universities intended to ensure their quality outcomes. The audits were not meant to measure and compare 'standards' within and between institutions. But such comparisons are increasingly on the horizon, which is why the performance indicators have been championed by governments.

Admittedly, the results of these comparisons and their publication can at times resemble league tables of institutions. There is, for example, the recent report from Action on Access (2004) which identified institutions in the UK which have and have not met their quotas for access by under-represented groups, but which in passing also addressed wider issues such as retention, and also named institutions performing below their benchmarks. Intriguingly, the report showed that apparently similar institutions at times had very dissimilar outcomes in terms of attracting and retaining students. Some universities were doing a better job than others, and the report called for finer-grained analyses of what successful/unsuccessful institutions were doing (or not doing) and what was happening to students once they entered. The point, however, is that without these 'intrusions' from the outside, broader institutional reviews may conceal the types of inconsistencies revealed above in our study. The performance indicators on matters such as student attrition rates, failure rates, rates of progression, and others, will be used rightly or wrongly as indictors of institutional 'health'. This is not necessarily a bad thing, since asking apparently straightforward

questions – in our case, exploring the nature of student failure in one Faculty -- can raise broader questions about quality assessment practices across the institution and higher education generally.

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# Tables

Table 1. Multivariate tests of student variables: Faculty of Arts, 1998-2000

Student Variable	Df	F	Sig.
Gender	(7, 1957)	4.686	<u>&lt;.001</u>
Indigenous status	(7, 1957)	3.152	<u>.003</u>
Living at home	(7, 1957)	.791	.595
English/Other language spoken at home	(7, 1957)	1.243	.275
Disability	(7, 1957)	1.398	.202
Incomplete prior education	(7, 1957)	3.349	<u>.001</u>
Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) status	(14, 3916)	2.716	<u>.001</u>
Mode of enrolment	(21, 5877)	55.875	<u>&lt;.001</u>
Age on commencing university	(7, 1957)	6.227	<u>&lt;.001</u>
University entrance score	(7, 1957)	43.352	<u>&lt;.001</u>
Number of years at university	(7, 1957)	3.024	<u>.004</u>

Course Variable	Df	F	Sig.	
Host school	(28, 828)	10.629	<u>&lt;.001</u>	
Semester	(21, 618)	2.605	<u>&lt;.001</u>	
Year level	(7, 204)	4.425	<u>&lt;.001</u>	
Number of students enrolled	(7, 204)	2.151	<u>.040</u>	
Proportion of students from host school	(7, 204)	.833	.561	

Table 2. Multivariate tests of course variables: Faculty of Arts, 1998-2000

Table 3. Distribution of grades between schools: Faculty of Arts, 1998-2000

Courses (which full for the full three					=1)				
School	Total	FNS	WF	F	PC	Р	С	D	HD
	grades								
	awarded								
А	8,699								
		4.5%	1.2%	4.9%	1.6%	22.4%	37.1%	21.4%	6.9%
В	5,652								
		0.9%	0.8%	10.4%	1.0%	17.5%	33.6%	28.1%	7.8%
С	7,998								
		8.2%	1.8%	9.9%	1.4%	25.5%	28.3%	18.7%	6.2%
D	7,894								
		5.3%	2.5%	12.2%	4.1%	33.4%	25.8%	12.9%	3.9%
Е	7,717								
		1.8%	1.1%	8.3%	1.7%	23.1%	27.0%	22.8%	14.2%
Total	37,960	1,639	579	3,414	765	9,399	11,513	7,714	2,937
		4.3%	1.5%	8.9%	2.0%	24.8%	30.3%	20.3%	7.7%

Courses (which ran for the full three years n=221)

Shaded cells indicate proportions of particular grades awarded that are higher than Faculty average, 1998-2000.

	FNS			Fail		
	Course	Enrolment	%FNS	Course	Enrolment	%F
1	C1004	279	19.4	E1030	206	27.7
2	C2001	197	12.7	B2006	246	26.4
3	C1008	474	12.5	E1010	199	19.6
4	A1601	222	11.7	D1006	421	18.1
5	C2002	149	10.1	B2008	263	16.7
6	A2105	158	9.7	B2005	212	16.5
7	D1001	558	9.7	D1009	458	16.4
8	D3010	290	9.7	E1081	304	16.1
9	D3005	179	9.5	D1003	663	15.7
10	D1007	506	8.9	D1004	1381	15.6

Table 4. Courses from the fourth quartile with the highest percentages of FNS and F, 1998-2000\*

\*The fourth quartile consists of courses with the largest enrolments for which three years of data were available (that is, enrolments listed in the table are the total over three years). Faculty median percentages of FNS and F for courses in the fourth quartile were 4.3% and 9.9% respectively. Host School for the course is designated by A,B,C,D,E. Year level is indicated by the first numeral (first, second, third).

Main reasons why students <i>fail</i> university courses	• The student does not do enough study	11 16.9%	1
(n=65)	• Not handing in assessment items or attending exams	11 16.9	
	• Poor time management (disorganised, unprepared)	8 12.3	
Main reasons why students do not formally withdraw	• Student does not realise that action is required	17 27.4%	1
from university courses (n=62)	• Preoccupation with matters external to their courses	13 20.9	
	• Not realising that an FNS will be awarded for non-submission of assessment	10 16.1	

Table 5. Views of academic staff on reasons for student F and FNS and ways to improve the situation.

Views of academic staff about potential changes to alleviate F and FNS (n=23 staff).

Are there specific aspects of your own course(s) that	• Requirements of the course are very demanding	8	34.8%
than-average F or FNS?	<ul> <li>Students are still adjusting to university standards and environment</li> </ul>	6	26.1
In your opinion, what sorts of strategies might reduce F or FNS in your	• More support for students/better communications between university staff and students	14	60.9
course(s)?	• Change aspects of the course (eg, assessment items, teaching methods, etc)	4	17.4