Professor Grady Venville
Dean of Coursework Studies   9 September 2015

Dear Grady:

Comment on draft new University Policy on Assessment

Thank you for inviting me (2nd Sept 2015) to comment on the draft Policy in my capacity as president of the Academic Staff Association. Overleaf, I identify some issues that I believe need resolving before the Policy is finalised and also reasons why I think the exercise is worthwhile and timely. Our colleagues will have other comments. I should say the views expressed are mine and not necessarily that of the Staff Association.

I acknowledge it's easier to critique a policy than to write one. In my discipline, it can take well over a year for a working paper to go through reviews and it is not unusual for authors to question (under their breath) the competence and motives of the referees. However, for me their comments typically result in a better paper. I hope the consultation phase of the draft assessment policy proves not as irksome to the Working Party but as productive as my engagement with referees.

I have disciplined my comments by bearing in mind "Evidence based teaching – UWA provides evidence-based, quality teaching practices" [1].

If there is one "takeaway" (as the Americans say) from my comments, it is that that the process of consultation continues for sufficient time to allow academics at the teaching "coal face" to weigh in on the process and take ownership. The draft Policy recommends adoption of digital technology in assessment. Heinrich, Milne, Ramsay and Morrison (2009) note "shortcomings in providing good quality assessment could be related back to situations where staff had not volunteered to use a system but were required to. It is thought that staff need to take some ownership of the e-learning system in order for assessment to be of good quality" (more detail in my attached comments). In my discipline, Accounting & Finance, whose units accounts for about 8% of all enrolments across the University, hardly anyone is aware of the draft Policy so there is much scope for more engagement with rank and file academics.

Once again thank you for inviting me to comment.

Yours sincerely

Professor Raymond da Silva Rosa
President, UWA Academic Staff Association

Cc: Dr Kabilan Krishnasamy, Academic Secretary, Academic Board and Council
        Committee members of the UWA Academic Staff Association
        Professors: Ann Tarca and Phil Hancock, Accounting & Finance; Michael Wise (Chemistry)

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[1] One of the seven statements that describe UWA's Education Futures.

Tension in policy recommendations on criterion-based assessment and grading.

The draft policy recommends grading using criterion-based assessment[2] and also mandates the shape of distribution of grades[3]. John B. Biggs and Catherine Tang's (2011) Teaching for Quality Learning at University[4] is a highly cited[5] text that includes a chapter on assessing for learning quality. They declare unequivocally:

> "Requiring results to fit some predetermined distribution, normal, rectangular or whatever, *cannot be justified on educational grounds.*" (p. 28, emphasis in italics in original).

At the end of their chapter on designing assessments, Biggs and Tang state:

> "The one problem we couldn't solve was an uncompromising insistence on reporting grades along a curve, which makes criterion-referencing impossible …. Students will always second-guess the assessment task, and then learn what they think will meet those requirements. **But if those assessment requirements mirror the curriculum, there is no problem. Students will be learning what they are supposed to be learning**" (p. 35, bold emphasis added).

The tension between the recommendations on criterion-based marking and grade distributions arise because UWA is conflicted about the purposes of assessment. On the one hand assessment is intended to be transparent and to certify competence, in accordance with "national quality assurance standards"; on the other hand, we wish to use grades as a signal of relative quality to justify rationing student admission into courses. This is evident from the Review of Assessment Working Group Report that states:

> "[t]he competitiveness for admission into some of these [highly competitive professional] courses [delivered at the postgraduate level] highlights potential problems with inconsistent ratios of marks and grades in different units at UWA" (s4.5 Distribution of Grades at UWA, p. 8)

The Working Group Report also claims:

> "The competitiveness for admission into some of these courses highlights potential problems with inconsistent ratios of marks and grades in different units at UWA" (s4.5 Distribution of Grades at UWA, p. 8)

If the distribution of marks or grades at UWA differs across units it does not necessarily follow that there is any inconsistency in application of standards. Variation in achievement may be expected, in part as a function of students' preparedness. Take, for instance, a media headline that "maths and science lecturers struggle with ill-prepared university students"[6]. Unless we're giving away the grades – or investing substantial resources to bring the students up to scratch – we wouldn't expect this cohort to do as well in quantitative units as they might in other subjects. Differences in distribution of marks across quantitative and non-quantitative would reflect substantive variation in achievement.

The tension between sticking to criterion based marking and grading to a mandated distribution is

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[2] "Part 3: Academic Provisions for Coursework Units" includes: "*2.2.3 Assessment criteria, marking keys and rubrics: (d)* Each assessment item must publish either a marking key for assigning marks or a rubric for indicating the standard of student work that is aligned with the assessment criteria, and is used consistently by all members of a teaching team, across all campuses and all modes of teaching."

[3] "Part 5 Grading System includes: "1.5.1 To ensure parity in marking standards across units, courses and disciplines, the distribution of marks and grades in a unit must comply with the band set out in Table 1". Table 1 states the minimum and maximum proportion of Higher Distinction grades that may be awarded in any class.

[4] 4th edition, 2011, published by the Society for Research into Higher Education

[5] 10,672 citations according to Google Scholar

[6] Reported by Amy McNeilage, Sydney Morning Herald, December 14 2013

significant at the teaching coal-face. An academic with a class of say, 80 students, who clearly sets out the course requirements, forms of assessment and marking rubric and puts substantial effort in ensuring that her students understands what is required to do well and inspires them to perform would face a dilemma in being able to award a fixed proportion of Higher Distinctions. The problem is likely to be more acute in units will small enrolments.

To repeat Biggs and Tang's (2011): "requiring results to fit some predetermined distribution, normal, rectangular or whatever, *cannot be justified on educational grounds.*" The implication is clear. Let's not use the grading system to achieve two conflicting aims: ranking students and assessing them using competency based criteria. Doing so is an invitation to cynicism.

Uneven development of university-wide policy

Three examples:

(a) A university-wide policy on late submission of assignments has been developed but important issues about class participation have been left unresolved. The Working Party noted there is

> "[n]o consistent pedagogic underpinning in this area at either UWA or benchmarked institutions" and listed the following unresolved issues, among others: "can marks be awarded for just attendance? Can penalties be applied for non-attendance? How is participation to be linked to learning outcomes?" "Recommendation: insufficient data to create university policy".[7]

Given that class participation is an important part of approaches such as "the flipped classroom" that UWA academics are encouraged to adopt this lack of guidance is odd[8]. The Working Party's observation about "lack of pedagogic underpinning in this area at either UWA or benchmarked institutions" and reference to "lack of data" are also curious. Why can't UWA lead in this area? What kind of data are required?

(b) A university-wide policy on the maximum weighting of group assignments has been drafted:

> "where the contributions of individuals cannot be identified, the assessment item is limited to no more than 30% of the total assessment for the unit and all members of the group are awarded the same mark".

The above policy does not address the key issue with group work. A guide, "Assessing group work" (2002), published by the Centre for the Study of Higher Education, noted

> "under less than ideal conditions, group work can become the vehicle for acrimony, conflict and freeloading. It may also impose a host of unexpected stresses on, for example, students with overcrowded schedules living long distances from the University"[9]

More guidance on how academics might design group-based projects and assessment to facilitate optimal learning by students as opposed to the present "sink or swim" approach is more likely to achieve UWA's goal of "transformational learning" than the draft policy.

(c) The Working Party has drafted a university-wide policy on what happens if students exceed a word count but nothing on what is an optimal word count. The latter question is more likely to be relevant to learning being transformational.

What the above examples indicate, perhaps, is an undue focus on second-order assessment issues. They are "second-order" in terms of their impact on the learning experience.

Imbalance in treatment of late submissions and academic misconduct

Late submission of assignments receives substantial attention. A five percent penalty of the total

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[7] Appendix B : Draft recommendations resulting from the benchmarking process by members of the Working Party, page 4.
[8] See also Weaver and Qi (2005).
[9] http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/assessinglearning/03/group.html

mark awarded for the assessment for every 24-hour period that an assignment is late and those received seven days after they are due receive a mark of zero.   This seems unduly harsh in comparison with UWA's policy for a "minor breach of academic conduct", an arguably more culpable issue than lateness:

> "[f]or a first instance in the first 48 points of a student's study in a course at UWA, no grading penalty is applied. A student usually is given the opportunity to revise and resubmit the assessment if practicable, and counselled by academic staff about the nature of the academic misconduct and positive strategies for its future avoidance, by way of a ' Notice of Academic Counselling"[10]

I don't know how many students are late in submitting assignments but studies indicate academic misconduct is rife. In a study of Australian university students, Marsden, Carroll and Neill (2005) found that 41% of their sample admitted to cheating, 81% to plagiarism and 25% confessed they had engaged in falsifying records or dishonest excuse making.

The Working Group noted that "while these issues do not seem to be a major problem at UWA the Working Group considered it important to ensure that UWA's assessment policies and procedures kept pace with trends in the digital world and, as best as possible, supported academic integrity and guarded against potential misconduct by both students and staff."

The Working Group's remarks hint at a belief that adopting digital technology lowers the incidence of academic misconduct, otherwise the reference to keeping pace with digital trends is a *non-sequitur*. This issue is discussed next.

Undue reliance on technology (e.g., Turnitin) to maintain academic standards.

The Working Group has recommended University-wide use of Turnitin for text-based summative assessment[11]. Relative to the "good old days" pre-internet, tools such as Turnitin don't so much improve the likelihood of plagiarism being detected as "level the playing field". Pre-internet, students had access to fewer resources, mainly in the library, and it wasn't difficult for a marker to identify the same old passages appearing in different essays. It's unlikely all plagiarism was detected but then Turnitin's record is far from perfect. Straumsheim (2015) cites a 2007 study by Susan E. Schorn that found Turnitin missed just under 40% of instances of plagiarism. A follow-up study in 2015 found no improvement.

The point isn't that using technology to assist in detecting plagiarism is worthless, although it may be imprudent to mandate a specific technological application in University policy[12]. The point is that temptation and opportunities to cheat are pervasive and reliance on technology is inadequate[13]. Getting a degree at UWA is not a mere commercial transaction: "[t]he University seeks to nurture excellence, enable creativity and intellectual exploration, and promote effective citizenship among its students and graduates in the Australian community and beyond"[14]. For this to be meaningful we must be than a certification institute. Perhaps it's time we placed less weight on summative assessment and more on formative assessment, thereby reducing students' incentives to cut corners and more space to cherish and develop the attributes we value, including academic standards.

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[10]See: http://www.governance.uwa.edu.au/procedures/policies/policies-and-procedures?policy=UP07%2F21

[11] See s3.1.1 of the Working Party's Report (p.9): "[a]ll text-based work prepared for summative assessment must be submitted digitally, using a common digital form, through Turnitin to the University's Learning Management System. The digital form must seek student declaration that the assessment is their own work".

[12] Straumsheim (2015) notes that Google "trounced" Turnitin and another proprietary application in identifying plagiarism. He also noted that Google is free and worked fastest.

[13] For recent reports see: "Online assessment stalls on inability to prevent cheating" by Erica Cervini *Sydney Morning Herald* May 4, 2015 and "International network shows difficulty of detecting student ghostwriting" by Kylar Loussikian *Inside HigherEd* 18 June 2015

[14] UWA Educational Principles (http://www.teachingandlearning.uwa.edu.au/staff/principles)

The Working Party does recommend that:

> "[a]ll undergraduate students must have an opportunity to receive formative feedback in the first five weeks (or equivalent for units taught in non-standard teaching periods) of the commencement of their unit"[15].

This is a worthy objective but as James notes in his (2003) article "Academic standards and the assessment of student learning: some current issues in Australian higher education":

> "[t]he provision of 'low stakes' early assessment for feedback purposes, for instance, is increasingly difficult due to resource constraints (p. 197).

We do well seeking to "optimise resources" but at some point there is no getting around the link between quality of academic standards and resource expenditure.

Issues in mandating use of digital technology

The draft Policy recommends that digital technology be mandated on the basis that it is more "efficient"[16]. Efficiency is not defined. The experience of many academics at UWA is that things to do with technology that are identified as "efficient" from the Executive's perspective are not so for them. I can provide many instances from the introduction of Blackboard.

Heinrich, Milne, Ramsay and Morrison (2009) provide a generally positive report on the use of e-tools in improving marking quality based on their study of "90 lecturers across five higher education institutions in New Zealand, selected purposively for engagement in this area" (p. 469). Nevertheless, Heinrich et al take care to caution that:

> "[i]nstitutions must be careful about mandating the use of particular e-tools. There may be some danger in lecturers feeling they are left with little choice as to what system they use for assessment. Weaver, Nair, and Spratt (2005) found that shortcomings in providing good quality assessment could be related back to situations where staff had not volunteered to use a system but were required to. It is thought that staff need to take some ownership of the e-learning system in order for assessment to be of good quality" (p. 476).

There's a clear evidence-based message here: introduce technology but ensure that academics have ownership of the process. Do not impose change on them.

Why the draft new University-wide policy on assessment and consultation is timely and why we should temper our expectations.

Notwithstanding the above, I believe the draft new policy on assessment and the consultation process are well-timed. It's difficult to go on as before. As Jane Long[17], writes in her excellent chapter (2008) "Teaching and Learning at UWA":

> "any lingering view that teaching and learning were embodied exclusively in the relationship between academic and student was challenged by forces both within the beyond the University which came into play late in the [20th] century … Instead, 'teaching and learning' evolved to denote, not simply classroom practice and pedagogy but an entire discourse concerning systematic improvement and support for academic development, accompanied by an inexorable trend in monitoring and benchmarking for 'quality assurance' at a national level" (p. 106).

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[15] Appendix C: List of parameters around aspects of assessment to be included in the new University-wide policy on assessment. See section on feedback.

[16] Part 1: University Standards for Assessment includes the statement that "assessment is … 1.4 Efficient if it (a) uses digital tools where appropriate" This is taken up in recommendation 3:"[t]hat the University move to a 'digital first' strategy for assessment submission, feedback, marking, grading and submission of marks through the Learning Management System"

[17] Former Pro Vice Chancellor (Teaching) at UWA and, presently, Senior Deputy Vice Chancellor and Vice President (Academic) at La Trobe University.

James (2008) identifies the broader trends driving the move to outcomes-oriented assessment in Australian universities:

> "Traditionally, universities have given attention to input factors as a means for defining and protecting standards. These include factors such as entry stringency (student preparedness or capability), academic staff qualifications, course duration, and course content. But the use of input factors as a measure or safeguard for standards is strongly challenged by contemporary trends in access, modes of delivery and modes of student participation. The selectivity of student admissions, for example, is a less significant factor in mass higher education systems that are actively seeking to attract a broader student base and to recruit students regardless of prior educational advantage or disadvantage.
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> Likewise, process-based measures for signifying standards are likely to become less appropriate as the pathways through which students achieve learning outcomes are now often deemed less significant than the learning outcomes themselves – the duration of study, for instance, has become significantly less important than it was once thought to be. In these circumstances, in which university entry pathways and the modes of student participation and engagement with learning resources diversify, student learning outcomes might come to provide the ultimate test and safeguard for standards. Standards will be embodied in assessment practices and will be essentially outcomes-oriented; that is, standards will be more closely associated with the nature and levels of learning that students demonstrate during their university studies" (pp. 193-4)[18].

Given the seemingly inexorable forces pushing for greater accountability and transparency in assessment, it is sensible of UWA to have embarked on a review of policy in the area. The trap to avoid is that identified by a lecturer in sociology in Anderson's (2006) study of academics' response to "quality" in some Australian universities. The lecturer said

> "at his university the emphasis seemed to be on the development of particular policies, rather than determining whether or not their implementation actually improved quality" (p. 168)

What can we expect from implementing a new assessment policy?

It's a matter of comparison. It's not unusual to think teaching and standards were better "back in the day". There's some evidence against this assumption, at least at UWA. Long (2008) writes:

> "A Pelican article revealed that in survey returns from 1,850 students gathered by the Guild's Education Council in 1972, 1,400 students said they were dissatisfied either with an aspect of their course, including the standard of lectures and lecturing. The survey methodology was not reported, but nearly half had 'a complaint about the formal teaching process', although the majority 'had taken no action beyond talking to fellow students" (p. 101).

On the other hand, there scant evidence to support the notion that redesigning assessment has substantial impact on student outcomes or satisfaction. If it does, the impact is swamped by other factors. We can infer this much from Pascarella and Terezini's magisterial (2005) work "How College Affects Students: A Third Decade of Research", a 848-pages long synthesis of thousands of research studies. Pascarella and Terezini state:

> "the great majority of postsecondary institutions appear to have surprisingly similar net impacts on student growth … Overall, no single institutional characteristic or set of characteristics has a consistent impact across outcomes, but statistically reliable between-college effects are apparent in certain outcome areas. These between-college effects are

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[18] James (2008) also (seemingly unwittingly) identifies the reason why many academics will find the trend in assessment disquieting: "[a]t present, there are no mechanisms for ongoing and sustained discussion on the nature of standards at national level. **By and large, academic standards are a matter of professional trust**" (p. 193, emphasis in bold added).

more pronounced in the areas of career and economic attainment after cole than they are in the developmental changes that occur during college (such as knowledge acquisition, cognitive development, changes in values and attitudes, and psychosocial development)"

Pascarella and Terezini's findings are consistent with students' ratings of their experience at Australian universities. Students seem satisfied with their institution regardless of its ranking on measures that academics might care about. The DVC (Education), Professor Alec Cameron, recently distributed a briefing paper "Understanding the Good Universities Guide ratings"[19]. The Good Universities Guide (GUG) uses Course Experience Questionnaires (CEQs) scores to measure variables such as students' "overall satisfaction" scores. To quote:

> "When we look at the "overall satisfaction" scores, the range of survey results is actually quite narrow, with almost all universities achieving a result in the range of 80-90%. The University of Wollongong is currently at the top, therefore receiving 5 stars, with a score of 89.8%. On the other hand UWA, with a score just above 80%, receives 1 star. This is a good news story for higher education in Australia; there is a uniformly high level of satisfaction of Australian students with their university experience. Between 8 and 9 out of 10 students are either satisfied or very satisfied with their experience.
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> The GUG, however, does not publish these scores and rather than all universities receiving ratings of 4 or 5 stars based on their scores, small differences in score are amplified to large differences in star ratings, creating a perception of large variance in student satisfaction between institutions.
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> When we look at "teaching quality", the range of scores for the sector is slightly wider at 60%-80%. The difference here is UWA, rated 1 star, receiving a positive response from more than 3 in 5 graduates, in contrast to the 5 star rated universities which received a positive response from close to 4 in 5 graduates."

Notwithstanding the good news on students' "overall satisfaction", it's galling that UWA is rated so poorly on teaching. We can wish to improve. The question is, will our focus on assessment and teaching technology and approaches make a difference? It's far from obvious.

John Lodewijks, who has been awarded a "Carrick Citation for Outstanding Contributions to Student Learning" identifies what he terms "the elephant in the room: conflicting demands on academics in Australian higher education" (2011):

> "[t]he contribution to pressures on academic staff arising from student expectations (or misperceptions) about what being a university student involves and how these expectations have a completely different focus from that of educational theorists who drive another important source of pressure on academics" (p. 20).

Lodewijks reviews several thousand student survey forms drawn from the University of Western Sydney. He notes that:

> These responses indicate that students appreciate knowledgeable, passionate, friendly, enthusiastic and caring teachers. Perhaps it comes as no surprise to note that none of these favourable student comments relate to how wonderful or useful the learning outcomes were, how well mapped the assessment tasks were to these learning outcomes, or how well scaffolded were the subject learning outcomes to the overall course learning outcomes and graduate attributes. There is a nonintersecting parallel communication occurring here. The educationalists are stressing theoretical pedagogical principles that do not seem to matter at all to students. The two conversations do not align" (p.26).

Pertinently, Lodewijks (2011) also observes that:

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[19] Available via a Google search (I couldn't copy the website address without the paper downloading automatically)

"Students complain about assessment 'feedback' but also about the required 'standards' and particularly seem concerned about assessment 'expectations'. Presumably, their expectations about what sort of assessment tasks they should complete is at considerable variance from what academics believe is appropriate to satisfy learning outcomes" (p.27).

Lodewijks' concluding comments include the following:

"this paper strongly argues that student expectations, or student misperceptions, of what is to be gained from a university experience, is the elephant in the room that cannot be blissfully ignored. In the opinion of the present author, student attitudes arising from these misperceptions are contributing significant, additional pressure on academics that undermines rather than enhances the quality of core services that academics can offer students: the teaching of discipline-based content" (p. 33).

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