

400

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AN ASSESSMENT OF ASSESSMENT

Influences of teachers, learners, and a research unit  
in changing university policies

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Objectives

Using a case-study of the dissemination of research findings and their application to problems experienced with continuous assessment, this paper attempts to identify the complementary roles of teachers, learners, administrators, and a research unit in changing policies and practices concerning assessment within a university. The study draws indirectly on sociological theories of power and influence in organisations, and makes direct use of the anthropologically based participant-observer approach which is described by Parlett and Hamilton.<sup>1</sup>

Contextual Framework

Before 1973 the Australian National University, like many other tertiary institutions in Australia, made extensive use of formal end-of-year examinations for undergraduate courses, with other forms of assessment being used by some lecturers. In the years from 1973 to 1977 there occurred a series of marked changes in assessment policies and practices, changes which are frequently linked with the student agitation over a number of issues in 1973 and 1974. It seems likely that the changes are attributable to a combination of student demands and changing attitudes of teachers at all levels of education, rather than to research findings or developments in educational technology, most of which had occurred from ten to twenty years earlier.

By 1977, both teachers and learners were complaining about the effects of the 'new' forms of assessment on workloads. Neither group had time, they claimed, to follow individual interests with in-depth reading or research unless it was directly connected with compulsory course-work. Lecturers complained that even their normal class teaching time was being

eroded by preparation for or discussion of assignments and tests. The Vice-Chancellor expressed his fears that the 'quality of life' on the campus was deteriorating as a result of excessive workloads being imposed upon some first year students under the guise of continuous assessment.<sup>2</sup> As Head of the Office for Research in Academic Methods (ORAM), the author was approached for advice on ways of improving assessment without reverting to compulsory final examinations or losing some of the advantages gained for students during the preceding years. These advantages included a greater degree of consultation between lecturers and students about course content and timing of assignments,<sup>3</sup> and less dependence on one or two major pieces of work and the final examination for awarding grades of pass.<sup>4</sup>

Subsequent actions by the author and other members of the University provide the basic material for this study, which was not designed as a research project but as an attempt to find more effective methods of improving teaching and learning within the University.

#### Methodology

A position paper, *Some Assessment Issues Within The ANU*,<sup>5</sup> was prepared by the author, with the twofold aim of acquainting readers with recent educational research on assessment methods in higher education, and drawing attention to those issues on which some action might be taken. The paper was prepared partly in response to a general invitation issued by the General Policy Committee (GPC) of the Board of the School of General Studies (BSGS), partly as a follow-up to a meeting which had been called by the University Chaplain and a member of the Communication and Study Skills Unit (CSSU) for a few representative staff and students at the end of 1977, and partly to indicate material which was already available in ORAM for staff wishing to improve their methods of assessment.<sup>6</sup>

The paper was first distributed to about twenty influential members of the University, including all members of the General Policy Committee. Then, after discussions with the Academic Assistant to the Vice-Chancellor, the President of the Students' Association, the Academic Registrar, and

the Dean of Students, the paper was circulated to a second group of twenty-five, approximately half of whom were students. This group of twenty-five 401 was invited to a meeting which was chaired by the Dean of Students and at which the paper was discussed. They were also invited to submit written statements or recommendations about assessment for the consideration of others at the meeting. The remainder of this paper describes the reactions of those who received the position paper, summarises the meetings which were held, and examines possible inferences from these events.

#### Data Sources

The main data sources are letters to the author from those who read the paper, supplementary papers submitted by participants in the meetings called to discuss assessment issues, and records of these meetings. The data sources are necessarily incomplete, as it was thought that any attempt to obtain fuller information, either by tape-recording meetings or asking participants to complete a questionnaire, would interfere with the prime purpose of the exercise, which was to encourage staff and students to discuss assessment issues rationally, preferably with a view to reaching some consensus.

#### Results (in terms of contacts and influence)

Initial reactions to the position paper varied from indifference to enthusiastic support for the ideas and recommendations in the paper. No cases of hostility or outright rejection of the ideas were detected, although it is possible that such feelings were present among some recipients but were interpreted by the author as indifference. Among those who received the position paper soon after it was published, at least five people can be identified whose support for the project resulted in much wider acceptance in sections of the University where they had an influence.

(i) One of the earliest recipients was the man who at the time was Acting Chairman of the General Policy Committee and of the School Board (BSGS). While he expressed marked enthusiasm for the ideas in the paper

402

and had it circulated to members of the GPC, the Committee decided that assessment issues could not be considered until members had completed their examination of university goals. The paper was not circulated to the much larger membership of BSGS, as both the author and the Acting Chairman felt that it could be more effective if discussed in smaller groups. Despite the apparent lack of success of this phase of dissemination, it should be noted that the Acting Chairman was previously Dean of a Faculty which later in 1978 sought the assistance of the author in an examination of the effect of course structures and assignments on staff and student workloads. Whether the Acting Chairman or a Sub-Dean from his Faculty was responsible for this request was not determined.

(ii) A departmental Head who received the paper wrote expressing an interest and commenting on a number of specific issues raised in the paper. The author replied with a phone call, but at the time there appeared to be little interest shown by members of that department. Nevertheless, some six weeks later the author was invited to an informal chat over morning tea with members of the department responsible for first year courses. They were concerned about an apparent rise in failure rates for progress tests and a lack of interest among students for certain sections of the course which were deemed to be essential for further studies in that discipline. Although the meeting did not seem to be very productive at the time, a number of ideas for the first year course were discussed, and again the matter seemed to rest until a further phone call from the Head of the department came requesting further information about diagnostic tests suitable for use in his subject.

(iii) A Dean of one of the larger Faculties who received the position paper acknowledged it immediately with a brief note expressing interest in discussing it at a future date. About two months later a special meeting of the Faculty Education Committee (consisting of staff and student representatives from each department) considered the paper in some detail. Although the meeting made no firm decisions concerning assessment policy in that Faculty, there was fruitful discussion of redeemability, submission of essays in draft form, and use of oral examinations to test individual contributions to group projects. The meeting recommended a wider distribution of the position paper, at least to departmental committees

within that Faculty. This will be done in the third term with a covering letter to the committee Chairman offering to come and speak at a departmental committee meeting.

(iv) The Academic Assistant to the Vice-Chancellor was also sent a copy of the position paper, and arranged for an early meeting with the author to discuss its proposals and to consider further action. After one such meeting, the President of the Students' Association was invited to join in the discussions. This proved to be a very worthwhile step, as the small team of administrator/lecturer, student politician and education researcher knew many key people among teaching staff and students who could be invited to a 'seminar' on the subject, using the position paper as a basis for discussion. We decided to hold the seminar in neutral territory, neither the Chancelry nor ORAM, with a neutral Chairman, the Dean of Students, who readily agreed to the proposal. After potential participants were contacted either by telephone or in person, a letter from the author was sent to them with a copy of the position paper. The letter included an invitation to submit a supplementary paper for distribution at the meeting, an invitation which was eventually taken up by at least six participants, though in some cases the papers submitted were reprints of earlier ones on the subject rather than something written to examine current issues and problems, as was the case with the author's paper.

Of the twenty-five people invited to the first seminar, fifteen actually attended. Those who came thought that the issues raised were important enough to call a second meeting a week later. This second seminar was attended by sixteen people, of whom eleven were from the first group. At the end of the second meeting it was agreed that assessment problems for first year students were likely to be quite different from those experienced in senior years, so the author and the Dean of Students were requested to plan a seminar to allow lecturers and students from first year classes to discuss their special problems. This was attended by twenty-four people, and its follow-up session a fortnight later was attended by twelve, all of whom had been present at the earlier session.

Matters on which there was fairly general agreement between staff and students will be described in the following section. It is important to note here, however, that in the series of meetings chaired by the Dean of Students significant contacts were established by ORAM and the Communication and Study Skills Unit (CSSU) with certain key lecturers and students. Among the students were representatives on departmental and Faculty committees, the Chairperson of the Education Committee of the Students' Association, and the President of the Students' Association. Among the lecturers present were a Sub-Dean, the Deputy Chairman of the Board of the School of General Studies, the Academic Assistant to the Vice-Chancellor, and three Heads of departments. Most of the others were responsible for teaching at least one important course in their respective departments. It was significant too that the groups included students and teachers from departments which had received more criticism than the average for their teaching or assessment methods.

Within a month of these seminars, the author was approached by two people who had been present with requests for further action. The first person was the Sub-Dean of a professional Faculty requesting the assistance of ORAM in an investigation of alleged heavy workloads which were thought to be associated with continuous assessment, but which on further discussion appeared to be more related to the total curriculum in the Faculty and to other aspects of Faculty policy and teaching methods. After a meeting attended by the Dean, the Sub-Dean, a lecturer, representative students from each of the years in the Faculty, and two members of ORAM, the Dean requested ORAM's assistance with a questionnaire to ascertain student opinion on the matters raised in the meeting.

The second person who requested further action was the Chairperson of the Education Committee of the Students' Association, who requested a meeting between himself, the author and the Dean of Students in order to formulate a series of recommendations for presentation to the General Policy Committee and thence to the School Board. As both the Chairperson and the Dean of Students have seats on the GPC, there appeared to be a good chance that the recommendations would receive sympathetic treatment.

(v) At the time when the position paper was being prepared, a lecturer from one of the language departments was on secondment to ORAM for two days per week to review the systems of language teaching and learning currently in use in the ANU and to compare these with systems used elsewhere. This lecturer provided some of the material which was incorporated in the position paper and later was instrumental in having the paper circulated to all teachers of European languages in the University. The author was invited to a meeting of these language teachers early in third term, but this time no students were invited. 403

#### Results (in terms of agreements reached)

None of the meetings called to discuss these assessment issues to date had the power to make decisions which would be binding on other groups within the University. In fact the seminars chaired by the Dean of Students had no official standing and could therefore make no direct recommendations to official groups such as Faculty or departmental Education Committees. Nevertheless, as one purpose of these meetings was to identify those problem areas in which there is a likelihood of staff and student agreement and those where strong disagreements are likely, an important part of the results at this stage is to list these areas. The fact that only a sample of lecturers and students was used in the present study means that it is still necessary to monitor future meetings on assessment, particularly those which are able to make decisions, to see whether recommendations made in the position paper and the subsequent reports and discussions become part of University policy.

(i) Teachers and students present at the assessment meetings were agreed on the adverse effect that continuous assessment is having on both staff and student workloads. They also agreed that assessment may serve varying functions, including certification and assistance with teaching and learning. General agreement was also reached among those who discussed the matter that it is inadvisable to seek rules governing assessment which will apply equally to students in all Faculties or at all levels. First year students were seen to lack the ability to select the form of assessment which might best suit their needs.

(ii) Teachers present agreed on the need for some final measure of attainment, but not all students were convinced of this need. For this reason there was strong support among teachers, but not among students, for making some form of final examination or assignment compulsory.

(iii) Students present were agreed that, at least in senior years, they should be offered a choice of assessment methods to suit their individual needs, and that this choice should be offered after discussion with the class at the beginning of each course. Some lecturers felt that these discussions are too time-consuming to be worthwhile. There was strong opposition among students to the wishes of the lecturer or even of a majority of students being imposed on the whole class.

(iv) A majority of students and some lecturers supported the need for allowing students whose work did not measure up to their own expectations to redeem this work. Some lecturers, however, expressed concern that redeemable essays can be unfair to the better students, as weaker ones are given a chance to learn from the successes of others in their group. There are also more opportunities for plagiarism.

#### Educational Relevance of the Study

When a university, a college or a state department of education establishes a unit to carry out educational research, it is sometimes imagined that as a result of the research it will be possible to make improvements to teaching and learning fairly rapidly. This expectation is implicit in the original mandate of the Office for Research in Academic Methods (ORAM) within the ANU:

*The main objectives of the Office will be: to encourage an interest by the academic staff of the University in increasing the effectiveness of teaching and learning; and to collect, maintain, organise and analyse information useful in the planning and decision-making processes of the University, particularly with respect to the allocation and effective use of resources.*

It will come as no surprise to members of the Australian Association for Research in Education to be told that neither our own research in ORAM nor the publicising of other relevant research has led to rapid improvements in teaching and learning or to a more effective use of resources. While there are many individuals and a few departments where quite marked improvements in course organisation or in teaching can be directly attributed to assistance and information provided by the staff of ORAM, this almost always occurs when there is a climate in the department receptive to change, when individual teachers see the need for an evaluation of their teaching, and where a unit such as ORAM (or a colleague who is both interested in and knowledgeable about teaching) is available to provide concrete proposals for debate, if necessary, before they are tried out.

The advantage of having a unit such as ORAM in a university or college is that a considerable level of expertise in recognising curricular or teaching problems can be developed and made available to interested persons when the need arises. Experience in solving educational problems with one teacher or in one discipline can be applied repeatedly in other contexts. In the case study described in this paper it is possible to identify a number of factors which contributed to the production of a climate receptive to suggestions concerning the need for a re-appraisal of systems of assessment within the University.

First of all, there was the widespread dissemination of information supplied to the Vice-Chancellor by counsellors and others concerning the amount of continuous assessment expected of some students. Secondly, the student leaders during 1978 were particularly interested in helping to find genuine solutions to the problems of continuous assessment, rather than in making some form of political capital by using assessment as an issue for confrontation with the authorities, as was the case in 1974. Thirdly, the people holding some of the key administrative positions in the University were sympathetic to the goals of ORAM and were prepared to discuss the issues with students. Finally, sufficient members of the teaching staff appear to be receptive to suggestions for change in procedures of teaching and examining to make it possible to reintroduce

the subject of assessment at departmental and Faculty meetings without obtaining the reaction that 'we have been through all this before'.

### Conclusion

Observations made in this study support the hypothesis that learners, teachers, administrators and research workers have complementary roles in identifying areas of dissatisfaction, and recommending or implementing changes to remedy these problems.

Learners have the vital role of assisting teachers, administrators and research workers to identify problem areas, preferably before the problems become too great. Sometimes they are able to communicate their dissatisfaction directly to teachers through informal discussions in class, but opportunities for this type of interaction are often limited by large class sizes or unsympathetic teachers. Direct approaches to the university administration, particularly when accompanied by confrontations or threatened violence, may result in token changes to administrative procedures, such as greater student representation on committees or compulsory consultations with classes concerning course content and choice of assessment, but because the teachers feel under pressure and do not change voluntarily, they are likely to revert to their former habits once the pressure is removed; or they may over-react by making changes which are educationally undesirable.

Learners have an additional obligation if educational changes are to be implemented in a satisfactory way, namely to react responsibly to proposals advanced by people with differing viewpoints to their own. Teachers, of course, have the same obligation. In the initial stages of some of the staff-student discussions reported in this study, the impression was gained that some people felt that they would 'lose face' if they agreed too readily to propositions contrary to their own. This problem was encountered with much greater intensity at School Board meetings in earlier years, and in one Faculty Education Committee meeting earlier in 1978 (at which the author was not present), than in the meetings chaired by the Dean of Students or other meetings reported in the present study.

In addition to the obligation mentioned in the preceding paragraph, teachers have the task of relating research findings and proposals for change to the objectives and subject content of their courses. Their special knowledge of the content, their contacts with more than one group of students and their access to other teachers of their subject normally fits teachers better than learners, administrators or education researchers for the task of reviewing their teaching programmes.

105

Those in administrative positions can facilitate or hinder educational change and innovation through their provision for fruitful discussions between staff and students and through the types of regulations developed to cover timetables, degree structures, assessment procedures, and staff:student ratios in each teaching department. Although staff:student ratios are governed by formulae laid down by governments and government agencies, the actual amount of contact possible between staff and students is more likely to be influenced by the total class time demanded in each subject, the proportion of lectures to tutorials, and the attitude of staff towards students than by the nominal staff:student ratio. A common complaint among senior university teachers is that they have to spend so much time on administrative duties that they are hindered both in their research activities and in the amount of time they are able to devote to students to re-structuring their courses. There appears to be room for improvement here, in that it may be possible to reduce the demands on the time of senior academic staff by making academic boards and faculty meetings smaller, reducing the number of committees associated with these bodies, and relying more on draft reports from two or three people for proposals, rather than allowing almost unlimited, and often unprepared, debate in lengthy meetings attended by large numbers of teachers and students who could use their time more profitably in more academic pursuits.

One task of an education research unit would be to provide the type of position paper or draft report which might later form the basis for decision-making in an academic board or a faculty. A second task is the gathering of staff and student opinions where it is thought that these may be helpful to the decision-makers, such as occurs when changes in course content or teaching and assessment methods are contemplated. Such

units cannot afford to devote all their resources to research projects, even 'action research'. An important part of their activities is in reading, summarising and applying the research of others to the solution of institutional problems which may have been identified by the research unit or by other groups within the university, such as counsellors or student organisations. Not the least of the tasks of a unit such as ORAM is the bringing together of members of the university who have a common interest in discovering ways of improving teaching and learning.

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## MEASURING CONSTRAINT ON LEARNING

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The social organization of children's homes, communities and schools in the deliberate pursuit of definite goals (even if unarticulated) are aided by patterns of interactions among members. The norms, values, customs, modes of communication and other role features which bound interactions are well-known as sources of constraint on children's learning. Conceptualization and measurement of these organizational constraints have proven elusive. This research concerns the measuring of constraint on learning outcomes in the basic skills of reading, calculating and written expression of 1,200 children in years 7 to 10 of two high schools in the central metropolitan region of Sydney. One high school is funded under the Schools' commission disadvantaged schools programme with two-thirds of the students having a non-English-speaking migrant background while the other school serves a predominantly middle-class, Australian-born population.

In practical terms, the research objective was to generate an information system inter-relating children, parents, teachers and school executives with regard to children's achievements in the basic skills. To this end the research set out to identify the sources of constraint on learning and to measure the quantity and intensity of constraint on learning outcomes in the basic skills.

### THEORETICAL BASIS

The theory of the research is a development from General Systems Theory in its social aspects, and a development from Statistical Information Theory in its measurement aspects. General Systems Theory and Statistical Information Theory are closely related in current literature and the theory of the research shows the influence, particularly, of Buckley, Cherry, Frick, Rapaport, and Shannon and Weaver.

The social theory develops the concept of constraint on educational achievement of children in terms of contingencies which take particular states for all students and act as causal agents. The collection or profile of states which each student possesses from a collection of contingencies is his complexion. As complexions are differentially associated with outcomes on educational goals (in this case acquisition of the basic skills) we have the basis for measuring quantity and intensity of constraint.