
NON-AGENDA

With the view of causing an increase to take place in the mass of national wealth, or with a view to increase of the means either of subsistence or enjoyment, without some special reason, the general rule is, that nothing ought to be done or attempted by government. The motto, or watchword of government, on these occasions, ought to be — Be quiet...Whatever measures, therefore, cannot be justified as exceptions to that rule, may be considered as *non-agenda* on the part of government.

—*Jeremy Bentham* (c.1801)

Examine Them Until They Pass!

Robert Albon

Examinations are an important part of the tertiary education process. They act as a screening device for enrolment in higher-level units and for the award of degrees, and they provide a reason to learn for students not otherwise motivated by the desire to gain income-earning skills or driven by the thirst for knowledge. Many changes have occurred over the years to the way that students are examined. For example, students tend to be examined at more frequent intervals and in smaller doses, as continuing assessment has become more widespread. Further, 'follow-up' examinations have become more common, to the extent that supplementary examinations on a comprehensive basis and as a right are offered by many of the government owned and regulated Australian universities. These allow students with 'near passes' (usually 45-49) to have another examination, enabling them the possibility of achieving at best a pass grade. Supplementary examinations should not be confused with 'special examinations' which are granted to students who are unable or unprepared to sit examinations at the usual time, usually through illness or accident but sometimes through work commitments. Policies on granting special examinations vary across and even within institutions.

The purpose of this article is to consider the case for and against using resources to conduct supplementary examinations. This is based on in-principle

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argument and the experience of the Australian National University (ANU) with introducing and operating supplementary examinations.

The Origins of Supplementary Examinations

While most Australian universities apparently have at least some availability of supplementary examinations, the extent of this availability within some institutions is limited to one or both of particular faculties and years of study. For example, at the University of Adelaide they are not available in Economics and Commerce and at the University of Queensland they are only available for students failing a unit in their final year that would prevent them from attaining their degree. Similarly the ANU had limited supplementaries in two areas (the Institute of the Arts and the Law Faculty) prior to the introduction of a comprehensive system.

The 'Dawkins era' of the late 1980s and early 1990s was one of big changes to the tertiary education sector that provided the stimulus to comprehensive supplementary examinations in many institutions. The White and Green Papers on Higher Education emphasised the need for universities to increase expedition of students' progress and 'productivity', and did not seem to care whether this was 'artificial'. A 1990 ANU Sub-Committee on supplementary examinations mentioned these productivity improvements as advantages of supplementary examinations.

The ANU joined the 'supplementary examinations club' effective from 1998 after a decision made in 1996. In the case of the ANU the introduction of comprehensive supplementary examinations followed years of activity from radical students with support from the various offices in the University that depend for their existence on students that are 'abnormal' in some way. There were major pushes in the late 1980s and in 1992-93. Both were unsuccessful. The successful campaign was relatively low-key.

In late 1992 the President of the Students' Association announced as part of her agenda the achieving of 'Supplementary examinations for all students' (Howe, 1992). The Students Association was joined by the Dean of Students, the Study Skills Centre, the Educational Services Advisory Committee, some in the Arts Faculty, and, according to the President of the Students' Association, 'The ANU administration is in favour of the proposal in principle'. Indeed this statement proved to be correct. When supplementary examinations were finally legislated in 1996 the then Vice Chancellor welcomed them warmly.

The role of the student support services was extraordinary in all three campaigns. For example, a staff member from the Study Skills Centre initiated the 1989 inquiry by the Board of the Faculties and was an important player in the 1992-93 round. In a paper to the Working Party (Clanchy, 1993) he ran through the standard arguments made in favour of supplementary examinations and concluded from this that supplementary examinations 'provide a flexible, educationally sound, equitable and efficient instrument for counteracting some of the inadequacies and burdens on students imposed by the current structures of

Higher Education.’ The Dean of Students (Cornish, 1993) felt that this paper ‘raises a number of persuasive arguments’.

The Benefits Claimed

Proponents of supplementary examinations have claimed a number of benefits from them, and these were all rehearsed during the ANU debates. These arguments are considered, beginning with the more plausible, and ending with those that are either illusory or are arguments for other things.

Examiners are unsure

It is often claimed that examiners may be unsure whether a student has passed or failed. In my experience, examiners place greater weight on avoiding failing a student who has actually passed than the opposite error of passing a student who has actually failed, and have devoted considerable effort (including examiner-initiated further examination) to the consideration of marginal cases. While a supplementary examination may help in deciding whether a student has passed or failed, compulsion is neither necessary nor desirable. There are other ways of ensuring that examiners do their job properly, including the (re)introduction of external examiners.

Resource savings

Supplementary examinations at ANU followed a period where the number of students being granted special examinations had been increasing rapidly and was a matter of some concern because of the associated administrative burden. Suggestions made at the Working Party that specials and supplementaries could be integrated showed little understanding of the role and nature of special examinations. The timing requirements of specials (in the interests of students and staff, usually held before or very soon after results are finalised) and the nature of the assessment being made under specials (students concerned are being tested for the full range of grades, not just pass/fail) are different from those of supplementary examinations. The suggestion that a combined ‘special-supplementary’ examination could be held in September and February has proved unworkable.

Inadequate preparation and declining educational quality

The 1990 ANU sub-committee report pointed to the ‘inadequate preparation for or slow settling into university study’ by many students, and declines in the quality of advice and teaching. Making supplementary examinations available is an inappropriate approach to these problems for three main reasons.

First, these problems should be — and are — attacked in other ways. Admission criteria and opportunities for students to prepare in advance for university studies are the important considerations for dealing with

unpreparedness. Where a student has learning or other difficulties throughout the semester or year, s/he has access to expert advice. If the problem is with a specific unit, advice can be sought from tutorial and lecturing staff in that unit. Where the difficulties relate to study skills or library use, students have access to specialist facilities for advice available at the ANU and other universities. Information about these facilities is disseminated widely; including prior to and during orientation presentations. If the difficulty lies with course advice, the Sub-Deans and Faculty Secretaries provide the support structure. Similarly, if the difficulties relate to personal and/or adjustment problems, counsellors provide assistance.

Second, if there are concerns about quality of teaching and advice then it is looking in the wrong place to suggest that the problems can be attacked by a change that will result in the diversion of resources away from teaching and advisory activities.

Third, it is difficult to see how the availability of supplementary examinations can enhance the settling-in process and the solution of learning difficulties. If anything, the existence of a 'safety net' will act as a disincentive to the early development of responsible and productive work habits. This aspect is further considered later.

Increasing costs of failure

Claims were made in the ANU debates that 'the penalties for students (of poorly informed choice, of poorer teaching and learning) are actually rising', the introduction of the Higher Education Charge and changes to the Overseas Student Scheme mean that 'failure and withdrawal suddenly cost in a way they haven't before', and that 'problems of "blockage" arise when students fail first semester units'. All these points relate to the rising cost of failure, which, in the minds of the proponents, somehow constitute a case for a radical change to the examination system.

Let us accept for the sake of argument the implicit proposition that the higher the cost of failure for a particular student, the more 'consideration' and chances that student should be given. The implications of accepting such an argument are disturbing. For example, the pecuniary costs of failing for a person not intending to enter the work-force are minimal as no HECS will ever be paid and there is no opportunity cost of being at university. The 'principle' would dictate that no second chance be given; the Dean of Students could be imagined to say — 'Off you go, the costs of failure for you are zero. Try again next year'.

In the middle of the costs spectrum we have the typical Australian school-leaver who probably will get a sufficiently well-paying job as to require repayment of a HECS liability. Here a single supplementary examination may be reasonable under this principle. Then, at the other extreme, there are the full-paying students from overseas for whom the costs of failing are often much higher than they are for Australian students. For them the 'principle' might dictate a supplementary 'supplementary' examination (that is, a third attempt at passing) or at least that they be given an easier first examination and the opportunity for a

supplementary examination. The implications of accepting this principle are neither fair nor conducive to educational attainment.

Increase in 'productivity'

Two of the hallmarks of the Dawkins era are the White and Green Papers on Higher Education. These emphasised the need for universities to increase expedition of students' progress and 'productivity'. But what is academic progress? Unfortunately the authors of these papers in the Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) did not mean 'real' progress; rather the process of just crossing out some Ns and replacing them with Ps on the result sheets. There is no real productivity or academic progress improvement from doing this. For those who do not clear the hurdle and who attempt the supplementary examination, a week of 'cramming' is probably the most that could be expected from most students granted a supplementary examination, and this does not constitute quality work time of lasting value. There is no real productivity or academic progress improvement.

Pervasiveness

It was claimed in the ANU debates that supplementary examinations are 'available at almost every other Australian university'. This is neither an argument for supplementary examinations at any particular university; nor — at the time — was the statement correct in any meaningful sense. The principal criterion of evaluation of any educational innovation should be, in some sense, 'educational attainment', not what others are doing.

The Costs

Disincentives to industry and responsibility

Educators in tertiary institutions are constantly trying to find ways of motivating students to industrious and responsible work habits. Unfortunately there is a substantial minority of students who attempt to get through with the minimum amount of work. It is this group that will perceive an advantage from the availability of supplementary examinations in that they have a safety net. The unequivocal message from theoretical and empirical research in educational psychology is that some degree of pressure is necessary as a motivational force (see, for example, Mouly, 1968, Ch. 12). Within reason, pressures to do well should manifest themselves in diligent work habits, acting as a stimulus to educational attainment. Anxiety always seems to increase around examination time for all students — and staff — but especially so for those students who have not worked consistently throughout the semester. Supplementary examinations will reduce the pressure on, and effort of, these students — as Mouly puts it, a 'complete lack of tension ... [will be] reflected in indifference to schoolwork and in irresponsible behaviour.' (p. 335).

This also has implications for the ‘increasing cost of failure’ argument for supplementary examinations. If the cost of failure is high for a particular student, then that student has an incentive to work harder to ensure success. Lowering the cost of failure by allowing a supplementary examination reduces the incentive to work.

Direct resource costs

Compulsory supplementary examinations have resulted in increased costs to academic and general staff which, in turn, impacts adversely on the majority of students. Staff has been diverted from its primary task to that of examining and advising students who, in many if not most cases, are not devoting enough time and effort into their studies. Teaching staff is unable to devote as much time to preparation of lectures and course materials. Research also suffers. This contributes to what has been called elsewhere the ‘dumbing down’ of the universities.

Unfairness

Compulsory supplementary examinations are inequitable under common notions of fairness. In particular it is unfair to the majority of students who do sufficient work throughout the semester and it is inequitable for those students concerned about the lack of opportunity to have a second chance at grades above the pass level (for example, those on a ‘near distinction’).

Conclusion

There are no compelling arguments on either educational or practical grounds for the existence of supplementary examinations as a right. The arguments put either are irrelevant, refer to problems with other solutions, or refer to situations where supplementary examinations actually cause damage. Indeed, there are clear costs from compulsory supplementary examinations, especially through disincentives to industry and responsibility and the diversion of staff from activities with positive educational value. As there are no credible arguments for compelling examiners to offer supplementary examinations and there are compelling arguments against them, supplementary examinations should be non-agenda for Australia’s government owned and regulated universities.

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