

# Student ‘Voice’ and Higher Educational Assessment: Is it all About the Money?

Andrew Hemming\* and Margaret Power†

## Introduction

*‘History has shown that where ethics and economics come in conflict, victory is always with economics.’*

*B. R. Ambedkar.*

Universities are no longer exclusively centres of learning but have devolved into educational businesses in a competitive higher education market where the tertiary student is the consumer. Consequently, any analysis of higher education assessment has to be undertaken through an economic lens rather than an educational or pedagogical lens. Universities need to be seen as firms in the higher education market. At the same time, the number of courses has proliferated. For example, in 1960 there were six law schools in Australia. By the mid-1970s that number had doubled to 12, and then by the mid-1990s had doubled again to 24 law schools (Weisbrot, 1990). As at 2019, there are 39 law schools in Australia. In 2015, a total of 7,583 students graduated in law in Australia (Council of Australian Law Deans, 2017) representing 11.4% new entrants to the total law ‘market’, when as at October 2014 there were 66,211 practising solicitors in Australia (Law Council of Australia).

This article addresses the question of whether, in the context of student self-funding of higher education courses<sup>1</sup> and the widespread obsession with retention rates by universities in Australia, student ‘voice’ on assessment is informing the teaching practices of lecturers and the preferences of tertiary education policy makers. Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET)<sup>2</sup> is conducted at the end of each semester, and while primarily used to review and improve the quality of teaching, is also used as part of the process to determine academic promotions (Foster, 2015). Another aspect of the use of SET is by way of comparison in ‘league tables’ between universities (QILT Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching), whose marketing campaigns and websites stress the institution’s student friendliness and responsiveness to students’ needs.<sup>3</sup> Tertiary education assessment practices are moderated by decisions and factors that are currently poorly understood. What is clear is that 100% assessment by invigilated exams has been abandoned, and substituted with a raft of alternatives ranging from multiple choice tests and mini exams to assignments, participation appraisal and group projects. Essentially, students are being offered more ways to pass, resulting in a win-win outcome for both the student and the university, although the shadow of falling standards and reputational damage lurks in the background (Robinson, 2018), compounded by the higher education sector in Australia being dependent on full fee paying overseas students for its financial viability (ICEF Monitor, 2018).

Research indicates that three broad categories of student ‘voice’ exist:

1. Student co-creation in learning and teaching and assessment.
2. Student choice in assessment.
3. Student perception of assessment.

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\* Senior Lecturer, School of Law and Justice, University of Southern Queensland. †Research Assistant, School of Creative Arts, University of Southern Queensland.

<sup>1</sup> For 2019, the cost per unit under HECS of a law degree at the University of Southern Queensland is \$1,369 (\$10,958 for a year) and \$32,874 (in 2019 dollars) in total for a 24 unit three year degree. These figures are typical of the cost of three year law degrees across Australia under HECS.

<sup>2</sup> Universities use different acronyms to denote these surveys ranging from Student Evaluation of Course and Teacher (SECAT) and Course and Teaching Evaluation and Improvement (CATEI) to MyOpinion and Pulse Surveys. For the purpose of this article SET will be used to denote such surveys.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the University of Southern Queensland’s website dealing with student support: ‘Studying at USQ gives you access to a personal support network including a dedicated team of Student Relationship Officers (SROs). It is for this reason that USQ achieved a five-star rating for Student Support in the 2017 Good Universities guide.’ <https://www.usq.edu.au/about-usq/why-usq/sro-support>

It is contended that the first category will be increasingly irrelevant in a higher educational environment where students are time poor and seeking to finish as soon as possible. The third category of student perception of assessment is the most prevalent category in Australia and covers SET. Two issues emerge which will be addressed in this article: (1) identifying the uses to which SET is put by students, lecturers and universities; and (2) whether in the future, given the technological advances that can be anticipated in the delivery of tertiary courses and the competition between universities in Australia for the student dollar under the self-funding model, there is likely to be a shift towards greater student choice in the type of assessment offered tailored to the strengths and preferences of students expressed in SET. In short, what is the nature of the relationship between student choices/preferences in assessment and the business model for tertiary education in Australia?

### **A Brief History of Higher Education in Australia from 1988**

*'Realise that everything connects to everything else.'*

*Leonardo Da Vinci.*

The days of free universal higher education in Australia are long gone. The passage of the *Higher Education Funding Act 1988* (Cth) set the scene for future developments in the manner in which the Commonwealth would fund higher education, and the contributions students would be required to make to their own education. Chapter 4 of the Act deals with the operation of the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS). In particular, s 39 sets out the requirements for students to pay contributions to the relevant institution. The reform of higher education (often referred to as the 'Dawkins Revolution' after the Labor Federal Minister of Education) has been extensively criticised as the application of neo-liberal ideology to universities (Gare, 2006), and an attempt to reduce public funding of universities, 'commercialise' university education, and expose research to 'subjective' market pressures (Butler, 2007; Wellsmore, 1997). Butler (2007, p. 43) has observed that 'from the early 1990's, if not before, it has seemed a more urgent matter to cut the public cost of the universities' undergraduate teaching, by reducing the average cost and by transferring an increasing proportion of the total cost burden to the private sector'. Nillsen (2004, p. 27) has noted that the Dawkins policy changes have been pursued equally by both Labor and Liberal-National Federal governments, and has described the main changes in the following terms:

*The Dawkins changes had the following main components: reducing government funding on a per capita basis, forcing universities to become more financially independent from government, increasing the number of students, removing distinctions between different tertiary education institutions (so that Colleges of Advanced Education became universities), introducing new techniques for the paying of fees by students, "commercialisation" of universities both in terms of their teaching programs and their research, the indirect control of universities by means of a language of conformity which reflected government values and ideology, and a concern with "top down" management.*

Nillsen's article was written in 2004, some eight years prior to another seismic change in the higher education landscape, namely, the removal of the 'caps' on Commonwealth funded undergraduate places at higher educational institutions. Up until 2012, the Commonwealth operated a supply driven policy whereby the Commonwealth provided a block grant to tertiary institutions and determined the total number of Commonwealth funded places for each institution, although generally the institution was able to distribute the block funding between courses according to its own priorities.

Then, in 2012, the Commonwealth adopted a demand driven policy which was designed to allow higher education institutions to adapt more readily to student and labour-market needs, and to move away from a policy whereby the Commonwealth dictated and rationed the supply of tertiary places. The then Federal Labor government set a target of 40% of all 25-34-year-olds to have a bachelor degree by 2025, up from 32% at the time. Removing the caps on places had the desired effect, and domestic student bachelor-degree enrolments in 2017 were up by 45% from 2008, reaching nearly one-quarter of a million, putting Australia on track to meet the 40% target. However, as Norton has observed, the demand driven policy was a victim of its own success and ended in 2017 due to its cost (Andrew Norton, 2019).

*By 2017, demand-driven funding had caused spending to increase by more than 50% in real terms since 2008. From 2013 to 2017, every federal budget included an attempt to curb higher education spending, while keeping the demand-driven system.*

*But when the last of these attempts failed in the Senate in late 2017, the Coalition government used a fiscal emergency provision and froze bachelor-degree spending for two years, with population-linked adjustments from 2020 for universities that met certain performance criteria (Andrew Norton, 2019).*

Another reason for the demise of the demand driven policy and the freeze on bachelor-degree spending was that in 2016 the Federal Government abandoned its policy of full university fee deregulation in the face of community concerns (Conifer, 2016). However, the re-election of the Liberal-National Federal Government in 2019 opens up the possibility of a further attempt to replace the freeze on bachelor-degree spending with full university fee deregulation. When deregulation of university fees was first proposed in 2014, the justification was that deregulation would ensure Australian universities could compete globally by setting their own course fees and choosing which courses they offered (Doyle, 2014). The argument that deregulation of university fees is the only way to ensure Australia is not left behind remains a plausible one as global competition for international students intensifies.

As Australia begins to follow the United States in transferring the cost of tertiary education onto the shoulders of a growing number of students, both domestic and international, a sense of student entitlement has arisen which has altered the relationship between students and academics.

Research in the United States indicates that there is a greater sense of student entitlement than ever before (Fullerton, 2013). Fullerton (2013, p. 35) has stated that students now see themselves as customers.

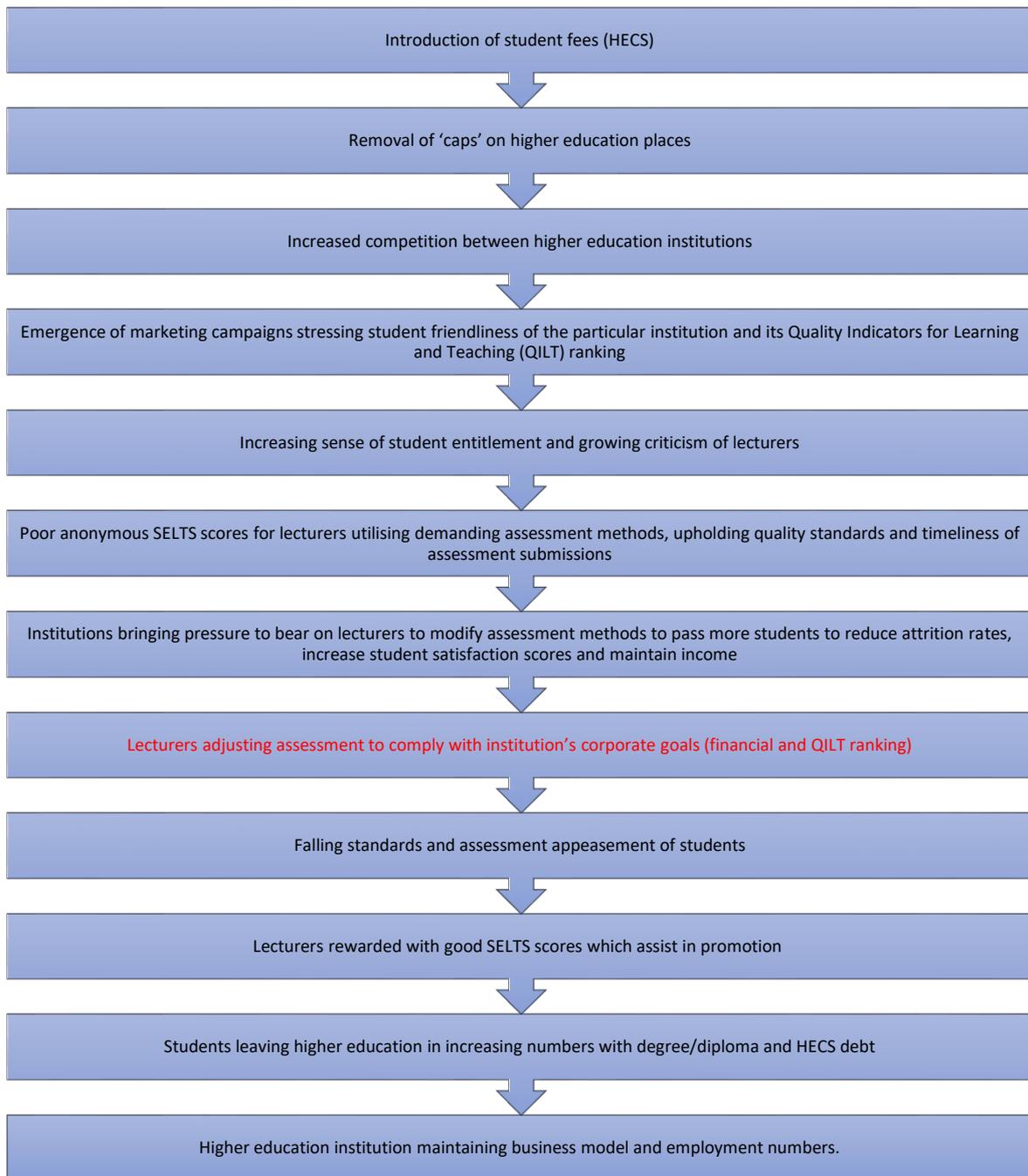
*Students arrive on our campuses expecting to have not only a voice but also a significant degree of control over that college experience (Singleton-Jackson, Jackson, & Reinhardt, 2010). The results of these focus groups seem to support this perspective and suggest that students view themselves as customers who are paying for a consumer product.*

Holdcroft has described American students as the 'Quitter Generation', claiming 'they have never learned or valued perseverance because it has been absent from all their pursuits, except, perhaps, video games', going on to suggest that 'without a guarantee of success, students either give up or become intimidating' (Holdcroft, 2014). This view is supported by Schaefer, Barta, Whitley and Stogsdill (2013, p. 89) who in their evaluation of college students' self-entitlement perceptions found that their 'results indicated that surveyed students expected and anticipated that they were positioned within the classroom in a dominant customer-business role rather than in a traditional teacher-student role'.

At present, there is little comparable research on student entitlement in Australia, but there is no *a priori* reason to believe that the results will be greatly different to those emerging in the United States as Australia increasingly follows the American business model for higher education.

This brief history of higher education in Australia since 1988 has sought to set out the broad parameters of the higher education environment in Australia under which educational assessment takes place, and can be summed up in the schematic model below. It can be seen that one box in the model is highlighted in red to denote its central importance: 'Lecturers adjusting assessment to comply with institution's corporate goals (financial and QILT ranking).' This theme will be developed later in the article as depicted in Figures 1 and 2.

Schematic model of relationship between lecturers, students and higher education institutions



The main point to be drawn from the above schematic model is that higher education institutions have become businesses (or more aptly described as 'degree factories'), and as such have customers in the form of domestic and international students. The inevitable consequence is that the relationship between lecturers and students is changing as students increasingly exercise their power as the customer with the option to change supplier. Essentially, the model is predicated on there being an inverse relationship between student entitlement and quality indicators, because SET scores are based on assessing student satisfaction rather than on a matrix that measures student learning. This inverse relationship is expressed in the following formula for a given university in a given financial year:

$$RRSE \lim E \times \sum(\$HECS + \$FFPS) = FRQS \lim TEQSA \times \$UI$$

Where RRSE = Rising Rate of Student Entitlement; lim E = limited by standard sufficient to secure employment; \$HECS = Total Annual Sum of Student HECS; \$FFPS = Total Annual Sum of Full Fee Paying Students; FRQS = Falling Rate of Quality Standards; lim TEQSA = limited by organisation charged with maintaining quality standards; \$UI = Total Annual University Income.

The above equation predicts that if the rising rate of student entitlement is not met by an equivalent fall in quality standards to satisfy student expectations of personal performance, then the total income from all students (on the left hand side of the equation) will fall because students have the option to change university or select another more accommodating university. As universities are keen to preserve the overall number of students to maintain income, there is an incentive to minimise attrition rates and to make second and third round offers with ever lower entry scores until the quota for the particular course has been filled.<sup>4</sup> Universities are businesses in the tertiary education market, and rational market behaviour requires universities to maximise or at least maintain market share. In this sense modelling university behaviour is akin to modelling a firm's behaviour in a market, with the proviso that unlike a firm a university would never be allowed to go bankrupt by the Federal/State governments because of the negative political implications (although it might face amalgamation with another larger university).

However, there is a ceiling to rising student entitlement and a floor to falling quality standards, expressed in the formula as *lim*, denoting the limits to each variable. In the case of the former, there is student recognition that the value of the degree has to retain a standard sufficient to secure employment; in the case of the latter, there is recognition by the university that ultimately the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA),<sup>5</sup> the organisation charged with maintaining quality standards, will intervene at some point.

The balance in the lecturer-student relationship is further distorted by the fact that higher education institutions are increasingly reliant on a casual workforce (Long, 2018), with the ever present threat of termination of casual and fixed-term lecturers. 'On a full-time-equivalent basis, casual staff are 23 per cent of the university academic workforce. On a headcount basis, casually-employed academics are probably a majority of the academic workforce.' (Andrew Norton & Cherastidtham, 2018, p. 37).

The driving force behind the casualisation of the academic workforce is the desire to reduce costs, and in this sense is entirely consistent with universities behaving like firms in a competitive market. The extent of casualisation also exposes the fiction that universities are seriously concerned with quality standards, opting instead to pressure academics to focus on student satisfaction by adjusting assessment to suit.

### ***Students as Consumers and Agents of Change***

*'When I think back, on all the crap I learned in high school, it's a wonder, I can think at all ...'*

*Paul Simon, Kodachrome.*

As noted in the Introduction, the current funding arrangements in higher education result in students being self-funders of their tertiary education. This self-funding model places students in a powerful position to bring about institutional change in the manner in which degrees (the products) are delivered and assessed. Scholars in the higher education teaching and learning field (C. Bovill, Cook-Sather, Felten, Millard, & Moore-Cherry, 2016) describe students in the new 'marketised' higher educational context as 'consumers'. Therefore, as consumers, students have a new position within this new higher educational paradigm as potential 'agents of change' that can give 'voice' to their perceptions of assessment (C Bovill, Cook-Sather, & Felten, 2011). 'Student voice' has been depicted as 'a theory and set of practices that positions students as active agents in analyses and revisions of education' (C Bovill et al., 2011, p. 134). Listening to what students say and implementing change questions firmly established teaching and learning beliefs and practices (Cook-Sather, 2006).

Research into 'hearing student voice' and involvement in educational design and curricula development is viewed favourably in the higher education sector (HES) (Brooman, Darwent, & Pimor, 2015). However, the sector is primarily focused on 'quality assurance' and student retention, with little regard for the direct involvement of students in changing the teaching and learning process (Seale, 2010). A key part of this learning and teaching process is the assessment of student learning (Dawson et al., 2013).

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<sup>4</sup> For mature age students, universities offer alternative pathways to enrol in courses.

<sup>5</sup> The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency was established under the *Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency Act 2011* (Cth). Under s 58(1) of the Act, the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2015 was introduced as a legislative instrument. These Standards represent the minimum acceptable requirements for the provision of higher education in or from Australia by higher education providers registered under the TEQSA Act 2011.

Initiating change to the conceptualisation, development, and practice of student assessment in higher education requires changes to the learning and teaching culture at an institutional, faculty, and lecturer level (Brooman et al., 2015, p. 34). Research into student 'choice' of assessment in Australian higher education courses is embryonic and limited. However, an opportunity to improve student retention and course engagement may be tied to greater student 'voice' in the type of course assessment offered and its weighting.

Assessment of student learning consumes a large part in university lecturers' workloads and is a major focus of higher education students (Dawson et al., 2013, p. 38). As assessment is so critical to the teaching and learning process, the need to understand what factors influence students' preferences for assessment modes and their bearing on student performance is important to lecturers, faculties, and universities. The purpose of the next section of the article is to examine student 'voice' in higher education assessment under three headings: first, co-creation in learning and teaching and assessment which explores the findings of studies related to the collaborative design of assessment at a course and program level; secondly, student 'choice' in assessment which makes inquiry into studies examining the agency provided to students regarding course level assessment choice; and, thirdly, student perception of assessment which examines students' shared perceptions of assessment and the impact this has on learning.

### ***Student 'voice' in higher education assessment***

#### **1. Co-creation in learning and teaching and assessment**

Calls for greater student involvement in curriculum design have a long history stretching back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century with scholars such as Dewey (Dewey, 2007) and later Rogers and Freiberg (1994) advocating curriculum design become a shared responsibility between teacher and student. Many authors since Dewey have argued that active student participation (ASP) in the design of curriculum, and more specifically assessment, supports learning by engaging students in authentic and relevant learning, and in addition redefines the traditional power differential between lecturer and student (Freire, 2009; Rogers & Freiberg, 1994).

Bovill, Cook-Sather and Felten (2011, p. 134) acknowledge student voice as a contemporary theory and collection of practices that situates 'students as active agents in analyses and revisions of education'. Positioning students as active learners shifts the power dynamic between student and teacher (Mihans, Long, & Felten, 2008) and allows students to move away from passivity towards agency (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000). Canning (2017) highlights the interchangeable relationship between 'student voice' and 'student engagement'. Canning points out that student engagement and initiatives such as 'students as partners' (Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014) are also closely connected to student voice.

For Canning (2017), student voice is multifaceted, and involves incorporating student course feedback via student surveys, both formal and informal, student and teacher partnerships, and co-creation of curriculum including assessment. Bovill, Morss, and Bulley (2009) highlight the frequent use of student feedback on learning and teaching via student surveys as the dominant form of feedback used to inform the modification of course curriculum. Student survey feedback was used by teaching staff to change aspects of their course content. However, this mode of working with student feedback was viewed as reactionary rather than proactively involving students in course design decisions.

The ASP approach to curriculum design is predicated on an understanding that power is shared between teacher and student and the process is underpinned by the model of co-creation (Bovill et al., 2009). A further co-creation study by Bovill (2014) suggested that students when given new responsibility over the design of their curricula took this responsibility seriously. Bovill (2014) notes that co-creation approaches that use ASP do not eliminate the important contribution made through the expertise of the lecturer, but instead changes the role of the lecturer to that of "facilitator of learning" (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000).

The use of the terms co-creation and student participation is widespread and viewed positively in the literature. However, ASP in curriculum design is not without its share of problems and critics (Bovill et al., 2009). One such criticism can be found in Rogers and Freiberg's (1969) paper, which identifies the negative aspects of ASP approaches to curriculum design such as the threat posed to students who have come from an educational system dominated by the teacher. Students from this environment often resist this approach to educational change. Other critics of ASP approaches raise the issue of placing an overinflated value upon the views of students (Cooke & Kothari, 2001).

Further opponents to the use of co-creation point out that the processes have many constraints. These include limiting factors such as institutional resourcing and time pressures (Bovill, 2014); staff and student discomfort

with changing the roles and norms of teaching and learning (Bovill, 2014); and the demands of regulatory frameworks and the need to meet certain professional standards (Bovill et al., 2009).

However, a more fundamental criticism of co-creation in learning and teaching is that the model is dated, utopian and unrealistic for the following reasons:

- Students are time poor.
- Students often have full or part-time employment while studying.
- Students are conscious of minimising HECS costs.
- Many students just want to finish as soon as possible.
- Mature age students with families recognise the risk of dropping out if study is spread out over too many years.
- The co-creation model is divorced from the realities of the ongoing pressures and hardships faced by students.

For example, according to the 2017 Universities Australia Student Finances Survey (University Australia, p. 12), more than four in five domestic undergraduate students (82 per cent) are in paid employment. Full-time undergraduate students who work do a median of 12 hours per week. Nearly a third (30 per cent) of full-time domestic undergraduate students work more than 20 hours a week and more than 10 per cent work more than 30 hours. The share of students working more than 20 hours has increased steadily since earlier surveys.

Notwithstanding the limitations of the co-creation model, students are using their growing sense of entitlement as the consumer to exert pressure to secure greater choice in the type of assessment offered. Irrespective of whether working with student feedback is viewed as 'reactionary' (Bovill et al., 2009), the power sharing envisaged under the co-creation model has been transformed into lecturers adjusting their assessment to comply with the university's corporate financial and QILT ranking goals, as depicted in the schematic model above of the relationship between lecturers, students and universities.

## *2. Student 'choice' in assessment*

Many scholars view assessment as an essential part of effective teaching and learning (Boud, 2007; Race, Smith, & Brown, 2005). Race, Smith and Brown (2005) argue assessment is more than a method or technique used to measure learning attainment, contending that assessment aligns learning outcomes and evidence-based judgments with appropriate assessment approaches within the broader scope of learning and teaching. Assessment results have consequences for students, therefore good assessment design that is fit for purpose is essential (Garside, Nhemachena, Williams, & Topping, 2009).

Boud and Falchikov's (2007) study found numerous instances of learners who desired and sought a degree of autonomy in assessment. Providing students with a degree of choice within the assessment task or assessment mode was reported by Boud and Falchikov (2007) as significantly supporting student learning and academic success. Garside et al.'s (2009) empirical study examined the impact of moving away from traditional examination style assessment to a more student-centred approach which provided students with assessment choice by offering students a self-selection strategy to assessment.

Garside et al. (2009) and Boud and Falchikov's (2007) study findings confirm that involving students in taking charge of their learning, by including some degree of choice in assessment, develops learner autonomy and enhances student learning experience. This research suggests the use of student choice of assessment across both program and course level caters for different student learning styles, acknowledges individual student assessment experiences and perceptions, and allows students to work to their strengths and weaknesses, thus improving student success (Boud & Falchikov, 2007; Garside et al., 2009; Race et al., 2005).

This article contends the better view is that the role of assessment in the current competitive higher education market is less about aligning assessment with learning outcomes or student autonomy in selecting alternative modes of assessment, and more about (a) allowing students a self-selection strategy to assessment that maximises their strengths; (b) minimising the collective impact of assessment on student workloads; and (c) facilitating the fastest trajectory to completion of the respective degree. 'Academic success' is broader than the number of graduations, and encompasses promotion outcomes for staff and the university's corporate goals.

### *3. Student perception of assessment*

Assessment is not a clinical process devoid of emotion (Boud & Falchikov, 2007). Boud and Falchikov (2007) argue that assessing students can have unintended consequences that may have positive or negative emotional interpretations attached to the experience of assessment. Students bring individual experiences and perceptions of assessments modes into the assessment process (Race et al., 2005). Student experience of assessment is often closely aligned to strong emotional reactions, supported by research into examination and test anxiety (Boud & Falchikov, 2007).

Boud and Falchikov (2007, p. 144) suggest the emotional experiences associated with being assessed are multifaceted and are a “function of the relationship between the expectations and dispositions of the learner, relationships between learners and other people, the judgments made about learners and the ways in which judgments are made”.

Garside et al. (2009) highlight the negative aspects of assessment experience such as stress and anxiety encountered in formal examinations and oral presentations having a profound effect and influence on student preference and choice of assessment mode. Likewise, Race et al. (2005) suggest students’ strengths, weaknesses and prior experience of assessment are all strong influencing factors of choice. Additionally, Ben-Shakhar and Sinai (1991) argue that gender plays a role in influencing assessment choice and preferences. Their findings suggested female students chose essay style exam assessment methods over multiple choice exams, in contrast to male students who preferred multiple choice assessment modes that required greater guessing tendencies. While prior experiences, individual strengths and weaknesses and gender influenced student assessment choice, students also viewed choice of assessment modes as an opportunity to challenge themselves and develop further skills and knowledge (Garside et al., 2009).

In O’Neill’s (2011) book ‘A Practitioner’s Guide to Choice’ students took part in seven case studies focusing on student choice of assessment, and findings from these case studies listed four different reasons for making their choices:

1. To better manage their time across program workloads over the semester;
2. To choose assessment modes that allowed them to cater to their strengths;
3. To give them ownership over their learning experience; and
4. To provide first year students with the ability to choose an assessment mode they were familiar with and had confidence in their capacity to complete.

An examination of the seven case studies showed the seven assessment choices as follows:

- End of semester prepared essay exam or four problem-based learning assignments completed during the semester.
- End-of-semester essay (100%) or group presentation (50%) and reflective writing assignment (50%).
- Group poster or group oral presentation.
- Continuous assessment or major project work.
- Group presentation or group poster and individual essay or individual audio-visual assignment.
- PowerPoint oral presentation or oral/poster presentation.
- Clinical Practice Report/Reflective Essay or make contributions to a wiki.

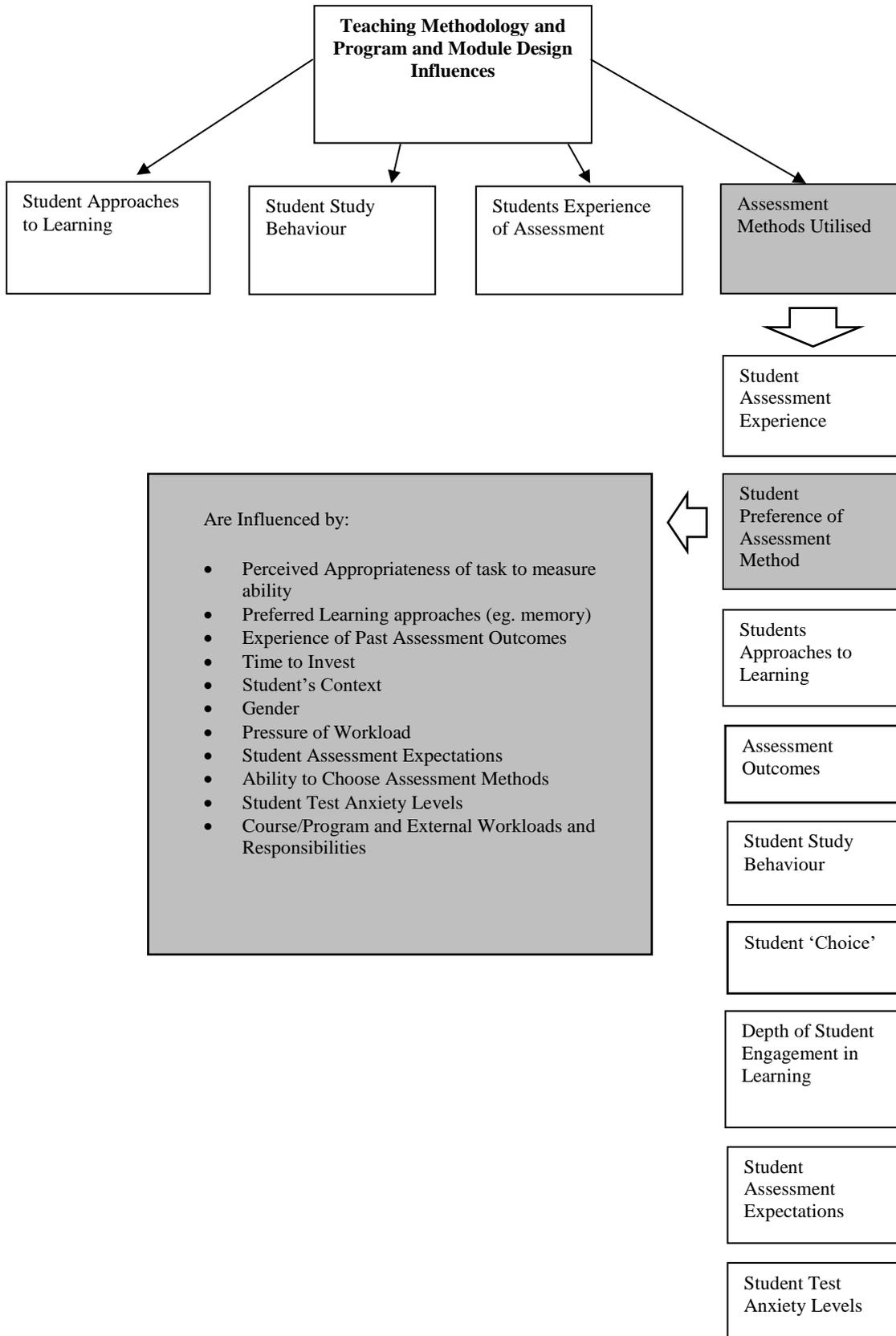
Unsurprisingly, notably absent from the above list of choices was an invigilated exam. The reasons given by students for their assessment choices, particularly catering to their strengths and assisting in managing their workload, point to the type of assessment universities will offer in a competitive market and are being recorded in SET surveys. Time poor students will clearly select the assessment options that give them the best chance of securing a good mark and maintaining their grades across units.

#### ***Creating our own conceptual model***

The literature review undertaken in this article has revealed that limited evidence currently exists as to the factors that influence student perception and choice of assessment modes or methods. A synthesis of the literature related to the three identified themes of co-creation in curriculum and assessment design, student choice and student perception of assessment, has highlighted a number of factors that play a part in influencing student choice of assessment. We propose a conceptual model illustrating the influences that shape student perception and choice of assessment which is depicted below in Figures 1 and 2.

Figure 1

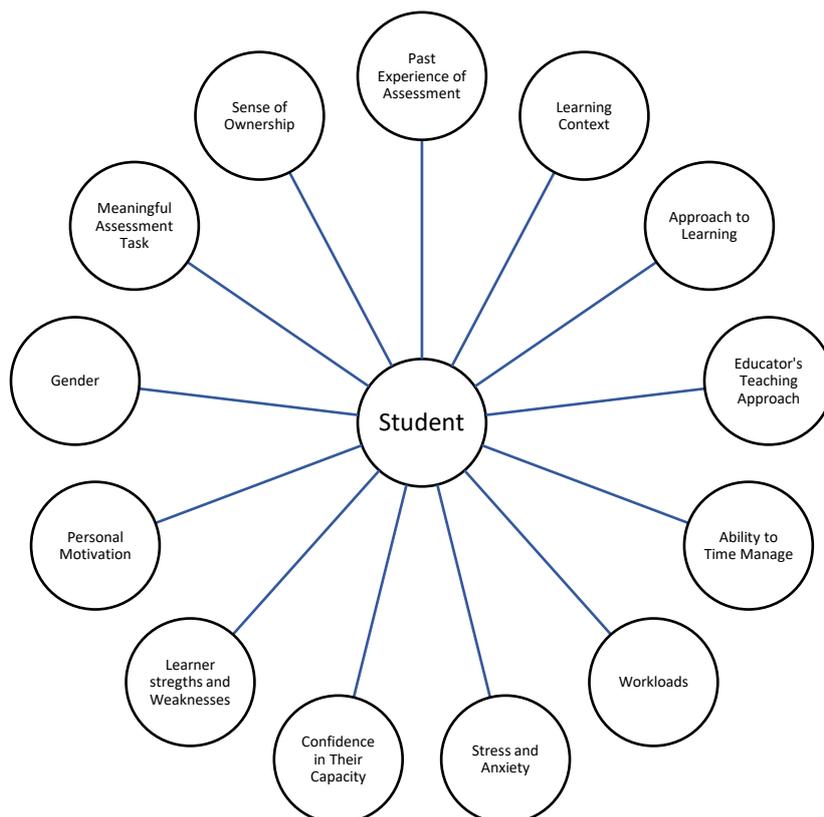
Student Preference of Assessment Methods are Influenced by:



In the model depicted in Figure 1 above, teaching methodology and program/module design is shown as being influenced by four key factors: student approaches to learning; student study behaviour; student assessment experience; and assessment methods utilised. The next step in the model is to break down the last listed factor, assessment methods utilised, into nine components, ranging from student assessment experience to student exam anxiety levels. The focus of the model is upon the second of these nine components, student preference of assessment method, which is then in turn depicted as being subject to eleven fields of influence, one of which is ability to choose assessment methods. These fields are developed in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2

Influencing Factors in Students' Perception and Choice of Assessment



The conceptual model depicted in Figure 2 above *Influencing Factors in Student's Perception and Choice of Assessment* provides a visualisation of the many factors identified in the higher education literature pertaining to assessment perception and choice. The centre circle clearly highlights students as the active agent who forms perceptions and preferences to assessment modes and methods. The outer circles that radiate out from the central circle contain the 13 key influences associated with shaping student perception. Importantly, the lines connecting the student to the influences acting upon their perceptions should not be viewed as a static, one way influence, but instead, be seen as part of an ongoing impact process that is developed over time as the student grows and their learning and understanding of assessment expands. Under this dynamic model, reinforced by university corporate goals, student preferences will feed back into the assessment methods utilised by lecturers.

**Summary of future impact of student 'voice' on student course choices and assessment menu**

The analysis adopted in this article predicts over time that:

1. Students will choose the shortest courses with the lowest HECS debt.
2. Students will select the fastest higher education trajectory to full time employment.
3. Universities will introduce a Trimester system to facilitate faster completion of degrees.
4. Universities will offer the most student friendly assessment possible to reflect the needs of time poor students and the easiest workload balance.
5. Lecturers will accommodate this trend by adjusting assessment methods utilised in order to enhance promotion opportunities and to comply with the respective university's corporate goals.

- Lecturers will redesign their courses and assessment in light of the new consumer driven environment in higher education in order to attract students and improve retention rates.

The economic lens model of higher education propounded in this article, which treats universities as firms in a competitive market, is consistent with the strength of student 'voice' being supplemented in the future with incentives to study at a particular university where 'brand' loyalty will be rewarded. Already free textbooks are being offered for first year courses under the umbrella of 'inclusive access', such as at Western Sydney University. It is a small step for universities to offer a free laptop with course software if the student completes the degree, tapered reductions in HECS cost per unit as the student progresses through the degree, and a capped total cost of the degree. The number and type of incentives offered to students is only limited by the imagination of the Marketing Department and the depth of the pockets of a university.

### **Conclusion**

Universities in Australia have entered into a brave new world of consumer driven higher education, where universities are actively pursuing students in the same manner as a firm markets and brands its products to prospective customers. The higher education market could become even more competitive if the current Liberal-National Federal government successfully revisits full university fee deregulation. In any event, the demand driven policy which operated between the years 2012-2017 has already dramatically changed the higher education landscape.

This article has argued that higher education in Australia now has to be viewed through an economic lens and that the behavior of universities mimics that of firms in a competitive market. The implications for academics and the nature of assessment in such a market are profound and wide-ranging. Quality standards now play second fiddle to attrition rates, SET scores, and QILT rankings. Australia is following the United States down the path of students having a greater sense of entitlement than ever before, positioned in a dominant customer-business role rather than in a traditional teacher-student role. The future impact of student 'voice' on student course choices and the assessment menu is in its infancy, but this article has sought to predict the shape of things to come.

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