CHAPTER 5

QUALITY AND DIVERSITY OF TEACHING

> There has been much discussion in recent months about standards and the perceived quality of university teaching. It should be recognised that universities have performed remarkably well in the last decade to maintain high standards despite the indifference of governments. The fundamental issue here is inadequate public funding for more than a decade; pressures have built to the point that high workloads and low morale are denying to Australia the full potential of a quality system. If this is not changed - and changed quickly - the damage to universities will become embedded and will take decades to repair.[1]

5.1 This chapter deals with the learning experience of the great majority of students in university. The Committee has attempted to make an assessment of the quality of that experience, taking into account the personal aspirations of students, the social and economic value of their studies, the material and instructional conditions of that experience and the academic standard achieved. The Committee was faced with the irrefutable evidence of larger class sizes, overworked academic staff and abbreviated or rationalised or 'modularised' curricula. It is reasonable to assume that some diminution of standards must result. It was agreed by many vice-chancellors that there was a crisis that was leading to lower standards, but its full effects were not yet felt.

5.2 The focus of this chapter is on quality. The National Unified System of higher education, ushered with the end of the binary system in the late 1980s brought Australia closer to an age of 'mass' higher education. The first question to arise is what is meant by 'quality' in the context of higher education. Clearly, as Professor Peter Karmel has argued, quality is multi-dimensional. For the range of courses offered by a university there are questions of quality in relation to course content, teaching, lecturers, graduate outcomes, the environment for students and so on. Quality of research activities or community services raises an equally large range of issues. Discussions of quality in universities, however, seldom specify quality characteristics in ways capable of precise definition or measurement.

5.3 Another question which arises is how quality is best achieved in a system that promotes mass education. A further question is how that quality can be measured? How can the nation be assured that graduates are being produced who at the least 'fit for purpose'? A question that is even closer to the terms of this inquiry is how quality can be assured in a system that is increasingly impoverished. It is the Committee's view that what is revealed in evidence constitutes unmistakable deterioration in quality standards, as measured by unambiguous quantitative data. The Committee is

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1 Submission 263, University of New South Wales, p.2

also of the view that the evidence reveals an attempts by governments and university administrators to clutch at bureaucratic devices and pedagogical theory to shore up institutional defences against its scrutiny.

5.4 The Committee received a large number of submissions, and received a considerable weight of oral evidence describing the deterioration of learning and teaching conditions. This has affected all universities and all faculties. The situation appears to be similar across highly popular areas like law, to areas of relative decline like sciences and languages. The effects are noted by both undergraduates and post-graduate students, and by academic staff. This section will deal with the impact on the quality of higher education resulting from funding cuts, with reference to the curriculum; to student assessment, to teaching resources like libraries and laboratories, and to class sizes. This section also considers on-line learning in view of its potential, in the eyes of some vice-chancellors, to reshape the way universities carry out their main functions. Finally, the chapter deals with the issue of quality assurance.

Curriculum changes and subject choice

5.5 The Committee has observed several disturbing trends in the organisation of university curricula and in the courses and subjects on offer. These are symptoms of a funding crisis and of expedients to overcome it.

5.6 The first concern, and one most frequently commented upon in submissions is the decline in demand for basic subjects – known as 'enabling disciplines' – that are essential to the understanding of applied sciences and more specialised humanities. Mathematics, physics, chemistry and foreign languages are most often cited as being in decline. There are two elements to this problem: the first being a decline in student interest, reflecting the changing career aspirations as ambitious students follow the higher wages trail; the second being the declining standards of student achievement in these subjects as a result of lower academic entry requirements, and the imperative to pass students at levels higher than would be acceptable two decades ago. In response to this problem, course content has been reduced, and content covered in early undergraduate years in former times has been left till later. In the humanities and social sciences, the restructuring of courses in response to student demands for flexibility has often resulted in a 'smorgasbord' approach to course offerings that provides inadequate scope for structured learning and intellectual development.

5.7 The second, and more general concern is whether present funding arrangements are appropriate to maintain the diversity of teaching. Faculties and schools are being re-organised primarily for budget reasons. Schools in such fundamental disciplines as physics and chemistry have suffered reduction in staff numbers, some disciplines such as geology, are under threat at several institutions, while some specialisations such as entomology and plant pathology have all but disappeared.[2] The Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of

2 Submission 208, Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science, p.4

Science explained to the Committee that the survival of small disciplines was affected by the economies of scale. Subject enrolments of between 20 and 30 students would be the minimum viable size, and even then universities would be disinclined to run a large number of courses of that size, unless there was external support, such as that provided to the University of New South Wales by the state health department to meet the need to supply a small number of specialist prosthestists in New South Wales hospitals.

> If a university were to set up something of its own initiative without expectation of class sizes, I do not think it would get very far: it would be seen as a luxury that we can no longer afford. So there perhaps is a model for identifying disciplines where there is a national interest to be served by having a small number of students. But, if it is left to the universities without much support, it is highly unlikely that a subject like that could be stated, or if it existed, that it would survive.[3]

5.8 Diversity in the national interest is the theme of the Australian Academy of Science submission to the inquiry. The Academy argue that it is not possible, without greatly increased funding, for universities to attain international distinction in scholarship and research. Incentives are needed to diversify and specialise the work of universities. This cannot be achieved by policies which allow student demand to solely determine how universities will allocate their resources. The Academy of Science does not see university autonomy as a guarantee that national needs will be met. National needs may, in some circumstances, require centralised decisions, presumably by government, acting on independent advice.[4]

5.9 At this point it is worth noting current Government policies on the issue of diversity in university course offerings and on the concurrent need for course rationalisations. The Committee heard from DETYA that universities would need to rationalise their course offerings because enrolments were too small in some courses. The Department's view is that some courses continued to survive because academics are interested in teaching them: not because students demand them, a perception disputed by senior academics teaching core humanities and science disciplines. On the other hand it was the government's policy to have a total system that was more responsive and more diverse 'in enabling wider choice for students and greater options in terms of the ways by which students are prepared for various destinations. A plural higher education system which will have institutions differentiating themselves one from the other, is what we are now seeing unfold.'[5]

5.10 The Committee sees no evidence that this is occurring. It appears that the contradictions inherent in government funding policy are least apparent to those responsible for administering it. The Committee notes, on the basis of evidence

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3 Professor Paul Adam (ANZAAS), *Hansard*, Sydney, 17 July 2001, p.932

4 Submission 335, Australian Academy of Science, pp.4-5

5 Mr Michael Gallagher (DETYA), *Hansard*, Canberra, 13 August 2001, p.1349

received, that diversity is a diminishing, rather than an unfolding, trend in higher education. It notes that rationalisation sees the disappearance of specialist and 'niche' courses, and the duplication of popular courses, often under different 'badges'. At the same time there is evidence of a proliferation of certain courses particularly in fee-paying postgraduate areas. These trends continue because there cannot be genuine competition between universities. When the Government talks about 'the market' in higher education it is referring to a highly artificial construct. While the 'market' is largely determined by career choice, the choice of a university will also be influenced by location and therefore influenced by local course offerings. Metropolitan students will have more choice than other students, but within broad areas of study – business, the humanities, SET, for instance – students are likely to settle for acceptable options closest to where they live.

5.11 When DETYA gives gratuitous advice to the financially troubled University of New England to determine the ways in which it will differentiate itself from other universities, through consultation with its communities and assessment of its comparative strengths,[6] it conveniently ignores the fact that substantial numbers of students are highly unlikely – for geographic reasons – to be attracted to UNE even if its curriculum was more relevant or attractive to them. Students will usually take the local option if the course offerings are generally acceptable. The Committee believes that the particular circumstances of regional universities, with their 'thin' markets, need to be addressed. University towns like Armidale may modestly flourish in the United States, but there is no policy avenue which allows this desirable social achievement to be realised in Australia.

5.12 A range of factors in the current arrangements work against diversity: a combination of lack of student mobility; a reliance on overseas students; and also the funding formula. The University of Western Australia notes in its submission that the application of a 'fairly rigid, essentially formulaic approach' to the allocation of operating grant funds has constrained the development of differentiated roles for each university.[7]

5.13 The other impediment to competition, as the ANZAAS evidence illustrated, is the limited financial capacity of universities to serve niche course markets. If there is no market there can be no competition. It follows, therefore, that government policy in regard to diversity can only be pursued through manipulation of 'the market': an action which government has the responsibility to implement. One option would be to provide student living allowance loans in order to encourage mobility of students, as is the tradition in the United States and in European countries. A second option would be to ensure, by some regulatory means if necessary, that at least one university in each state is funded to provide courses deemed to serve the national interest, and that students wishing to study in these fields be given some form of scholarship to meet their living costs.

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6 ibid.

7 Submission 134, University of Western Australia, p.2

5.14 Submissions have highlighted an emphasis on 'profitable' programs, at the expense of low-enrolment courses essential to both the nation and to the individual. This affects both sciences and the humanities. This is not a phenomenon restricted to the influence of overseas fee-paying students. The student intakes determine the funding for schools, so that, as one sociologist told the Committee:

> every school is madly competing to get as many students as possible. If another discipline is offering six first-year courses and 35 upper level courses, everyone thinks they all must do that. If one discipline is changing the names of its courses and not requiring prerequisites then students say, 'Let's not have any prerequisites.' Other schools that want to keep the idea of progression—that is, that you need to be familiar with one set of debates before you are able to cope with next lot of debates because they might be an answer to those first debates—lose that. There are dreadful jazzy words like 'modularisation' so that students can pick a first-year unit here, and a third-year here.[8]

5.15 Another member of the Australian Sociological Society commented that over the past ten years contact hours had halved and class numbers probably doubled. There was therefore less assessment per subject and less content in each subject. The Committee particularly noted his comment that the removal of pre-requisites to subjects and courses had an effect on quality of learning and on standards overall.

> …it is possible in, say, a BA program for a first-year student to do a third-year subject or to mix and match their subjects. It is often done in the name of flexibility, but it erodes the progressive accumulation of knowledge and therefore you are seeing students graduating with very little depth in their disciplinary knowledge because they have had this mishmash of subject choices.[9]

5.16 The same comment was received from an academic from Sydney University who observed that 'market forces' were compelling universities to 'modularise' courses to provide students with more flexibility. This was achieved at great risk to the internal coherency of degrees. It was argued that the development of a student's learning is undermined as unit choices are made 'as one chooses products in a supermarket', without proper advice from academics who are, in any event, unable to cope with student demand on an administrative level as degree structures become more complex.[10]

5.17 Rationalisations and reductions of course and unit options has affected schools and faculties at many universities. The reduction in contact hours has also been widely experienced. A lecturer at the School of Education at Deakin University noted that student teachers have had their contact hours for one course reduced from

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8 Dr Jocelyn Pixley (UNSW), *Hansard*, Newcastle, 19 July 2001, p.1197

9 Mr John Germov, ibid., p.1198

10 Submission 39, NTEU, Sydney University Branch, p.2

130 hours to 60 hours, entire topics have been discarded and students no longer have to demonstrate their competence at teaching Year 6 students. The lecturer wrote in response to the consequences of this, of his dismay at the low standard both of intellectual content and skills in English expression of some student assignments which have received pass grades from some of his colleagues.[11]

5.18 Another phenomenon encountered by the Committee in its consideration of curriculum issues is that of 're-profiling' of courses. This is a marketing gambit; a make-over of courses to give them more appeal to potential students. At Swinburne University, for instance, the Graduate School of Management (now known as the Graduate School of Entrepreneurship) has been re-profiled by the stripping away of established courses and the substitution of new courses that are perceived as being more attractive to the marketplace. This results in disadvantage to students caught in the midst of a course make-over:

> Course closures and rationalisations have a tangible impact on individual students. The termination of a course raises questions as to its inherent value. Students are left wondering if the course they have spent a number of years studying is worthwhile. Those students still studying the course can be left in both academic and administrative limbo. Some find the major they intended to study no longer on offer and so are forced to undertake subjects in which they originally had little or no interest. Rather than students able to choose subjects for which they enrolled, the course rationalisation dictates their subject choices and so the ultimate tenor of the course that is completed.[12]

5.19 Evidence was received from the Curtin University Postgraduate Association expressing concern about the both the quality control of proposed courses and the circumstances of their introduction. According to the Association, new courses are proposed, and outlined to relevant authorities throughout the university. They are then approved by University council en bloc and advertised. Students may enrol in these courses only to find that the subjects have not been written.

> An example of this is the Masters of Infectious Diseases course, which was advertised in the media and published in the university handbook. Although there is a course outline, including the subjects to be offered, and a brief description of the subjects, this is all the course consists of. Students enrolling in the course sit in on undergraduate lectures for some subjects, although do not do the practical work nor sit the exams, and write essays on relevant topics to that subject. More frequently, at the beginning of the subject, students get an email outlining the 6 essays to be completed to fulfil the requirements of the subject. There are no lectures, no lecture notes, no reading lists, no unit outline with the learning outcomes, no feedback, no due dates for work to be submitted, no following of university policy on when the work submitted by students should be returned to them, and for

11 Submission 199, Association for the Public University, p.3

12 Submission 239, Swinburne University Postgraduate Association and Swinburne University Union, p.9

> this students are paying up-front fees. While we appreciate the workload on staff, and realize the time taken to write subjects, there needs to be stricter controls in place so that courses like this are not offered without being ready for students to enrol in them.[13]

5.20 Such practices as these described above suggest to the Committee opportunistic planning inspired by the need for a course to attract fee-paying students. In such cases, marketing proceeds course content, which may be left till someone has time to provide it. Drafting of essay topics may be less demanding task than designing a curriculum, so that is completed quickly in order that students can start work. The rest will follow.

5.21 The NTEU branch at Sydney University has pointed to the widespread reduction in the number of unit of study offerings within disciplines, with a resulting narrowing of knowledge and expertise in these fields, and threats to the future integrity or even survival of some disciplines. This problem is claimed to affect the whole University but is particularly acute in the Humanities and Sciences. Given the University's strong tradition of excellence in these areas, and their importance as a basis both for the development of the country's cultural and social fabric and for more specialist, professional or research-oriented study, this is a matter for grave concern.

5.22 The NTEU argues that more incentives are needed for students who may wish to consider careers in science and mathematics, on the basis of new places offered under the Government's innovation agenda. There is a concern that HECS places which normally go to the essential but declining disciplines will be reallocated to information technology and business studies where enrolments are already very high. The NTEU suggests consideration be given to re-categorising science and mathematics on the cheapest HECS band and complementing a move such as this with a number of scholarship incentives.

5.23 For smaller regional universities the limitations of curriculum choice can be acute. This is exemplified by the position at the Northern Territory University, which longer teaches English Literature and Philosophy, barely provides Engineering or Mathematics, and has virtually abandoned Anthropology, Political Theory and Physics. In addition, Indonesian language studies staff numbers have been cut to the point where this subject is only offered externally. The decision not to offer English Literature in 1997 caught national attention, and today NTU is perhaps the only university in Australia that does not teach it.[14]

5.24 Demographic changes have meant that regional universities are being placed under increased pressure to maintain their enrolments. There is some evidence that the quality of teaching in these institutions rates relatively highly: most of them were former teachers colleges and CAEs under the binary system. Yet under the current

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13 Submission 95, Curtin University Postgraduate Association, p.2

14 Submission 143, Northern Territory University Postgraduates Association, p.3

funding arrangements the only rewards for good teaching and overall student satisfaction lie in the maintenance of operational funding through steady or increasing student demand. Some evidence to the Committee suggests that this demand is unlikely to pick up unless there is a greater awareness of niche markets and comparative data on university performance.[15]

5.25 Curriculum design issues for postgraduate students have also been the subjects of submissions to the inquiry. The main concerns are the reduction in status of masters level degrees, either through less rigorous time requirements or the obvious reduction in the intellectual demands they place on students. The lack of intellectual rigour in a proportion of postgraduate courses is attributed to a climate of anti-intellectualism in universities which is prompted by commercial necessity.[16] It is claimed that, for instance, the University of Queensland has been administering coursework masters programs that are, in many instances, little more than 'rehashed third and fourth year bachelors degrees. The only distinguishing feature of such courses is that candidates are required to submit longer essays than the bachelors' students with whom they share lectures.[17]

Declining standards?

5.26 The Committee found strong evidence to demonstrate that many subject disciplines in many universities had experienced declining standards in recent years. One survey report indicated that the intellectual standards required for degrees had declined over the past two decades. The reason for this is while pass and graduation rates have remained constant, the conditions of teaching and learning have deteriorated, with the unit resources being only about half of what they were in 1980. About 45 per cent of school-leavers are entering higher education, a much higher percentage than 20 years ago, suggesting that students with lower matriculation standards were often encountering overcrowded conditions of learning where they struggle on with the minimal assistance available from overworked and probably inexperienced part-time academic staff. It would be remarkable if standards had not fallen.[18]

5.27 Some of the evidence is alarming. The Committee heard persuasive evidence from Professor Anthony Thomas, of Adelaide University, about the declining standards in physics. An independent review, it was told, would show that there has been an enormous decline in standards in many institutions. To reveal to physicists at MIT or Berkeley the content of an Australian undergraduate physics course would be to invite derision.[19]

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15 Submission 322, Ms Lucy Cameron, pp.2-3

16 Submission 46, University of Queensland Union, p.1

17 ibid.

18 Submission 92, Professor Don Anderson, p.2

19 Professor Anthony Thomas (Adelaide University), *Hansard*, Adelaide, 4 July 2001, p.801

5.28 Professor Thomas told the Committee that there is now little physics taught to engineers now. He referred to a letter written last August by Professor Tony Klein, who is the Australian Institute of Physics representative to National Association of Testing Authorities (NATA). It states:

> I regret to inform the NATA Council that it would not be safe to assume that today's graduates in engineering from most of Australia's universities will have been exposed to even the most rudimentary practical training in physics. It is therefore up to individual member laboratories to ensure that adequate training is given to new staff in the use of scientific measuring instruments, the practical techniques of measurement, the estimation of errors, and other such basic matters which could have been taken for granted in the past.[20]

5.29 Chemistry standards are also in decline, according to a submission from an academic at Monash University who claims his department is one of Australia's leaders in this discipline. It was explained that funding for the School of Chemistry relied mainly on its ability to attract students into second, third and honours years, and for that reason it was necessary to reduce the level of difficulty in the subject. Third year students now use a textbook written for first year undergraduates in Britain; important fundamentals such as kinetics and thermodynamics are dealt with only briefly, while quantum mechanics and statistical mechanics have been omitted as being beyond the capacity of undergraduate students. The content of some series of lectures has been cut by as much as one third over the past five years and the number of lectures overall cut by between 20 and 25 per cent. This material includes a proportion of special interest descriptive subjects.[21]

5.30 Engineers had a similar story to tell the Committee about quality standards. The Australian Council of Engineering Deans stated that maintenance of quality teaching was now largely dependent on senior academic staff, and they were only barely holding the line, in the absence of adequate funding and the failure to retain good staff. As to quality teaching indicators, the Committee heard:

> In first year maths now for engineering we do not have tutorials. We had a review of the department of maths and statistics last year and in the transition year from school to university, when things are pretty tough for students, we cannot afford to provide first year tutorials in mathematics. It is a disaster.[22]

> I would say that laboratory work is being cut back in all schools. How you can produce an engineering graduate who has not had hands-on experience in laboratory work is beyond me. It is getting to the point where it is not possible to maintain the facilities for the number of students and not update

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20 Quoted in *Hansard*, Adelaide, p795

21 Submission 336, Dr Peter Duggan, p.3

22 Professor Barry Brady (Australian Council of Engineering Deans), *Hansard*, Perth,2 July 2001, p.645

> those facilities—in other words, not provide current equipment and current technology. The trend has to be to cut back. The lectures are still given and we still have the quality teaching but it is that practical component and, also, the support that the staff are able to give the students in the learning process that is suffering.[23]

5.31 The NTEU has claimed that the standard of degrees and of research in professional medical faculties is being undermined by staff cuts and reductions in classroom and clinical hours. Senior specialist academics at the University of Sydney have stressed that Australia's competency in some of these areas is slipping disastrously by international standards. Some projects for new degree programs and particularly interdisciplinary programs have had to be shelved due to lack of resources.[24]

5.32 No discipline in higher education has been sheltered from the prospect of lower standards of teaching as a result of funding stringencies. An increasingly common practice in Law Schools is for the Law Students' Societies to arrange tutorials where students teach other students. 'Tutors' either work on a voluntary basis or are employed by the Law Students' Society, paid using funds from student membership fees and outside sponsorship. This arrangement, which applies at the University of Melbourne, as well as at Monash, Deakin, Wollongong and the ANU, provides in many cases the only exposure law students have to a vital small-group learning environment.[25]

5.33 Two accounting bodies, the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Australia (ICAA) and CPA Australia have both expressed concern about the threat to quality training resulting from a decline in funding. The Committee notes that these organisations represent a profession of vital importance to the finance industry; an industry which the government hopes will play an expanding role in positioning Australia as the key regional player in the global economy. If this industry, with its particular influence, is unable to gain the specialised training that accountants require today, there is little chance that other, less strategically placed professions will fare any better. According to the ICAA the existing high regard for Australian degrees overseas is directly threatened by the current rumours and allegations surrounding local tertiary institutions. Concerns arising from a deterioration in reputation is not restricted to current students but will have a concurrent impact on degree holders who are already in the workforce. The ICAA states that the international trade in services – of increasing importance to Australia's current account – is highly reliant on the perceived and actual professional quality of individuals. If professional quality is threatened by deteriorating standards in universities, Australia's trade in services will

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23 Professor John Agnew (Australian Council of Engineering Deans), *Hansard*, Perth, p.645

24 Submission 39, NTEU (Sydney University) p.2

25 Supplementary information provided by the Australian Law Students' Association.

likewise be threatened. This situation is of grave concern not only to Australian accountants, but to all professionals relying on the international trade in services.[26]

5.34 CPA Australia makes many of the same points. Its submission advised of its perception that funding constraints are restricting the ability of universities to respond to the increasing industry demand for quality graduates. It stated that the quality and diversity of teaching is affected by under-resourcing, resulting in increased class sizes, deteriorating staff-student ratios and increasing face-to-face hours for academic staff. These factors compromised the capacity of universities to meet the standards necessary for professional accreditation.[27]

> …accounting teaching departments' capacities to deliver high quality teaching are severely constrained. Departments are stretched to the limits, tempted to divert resources from other critical university activities and obligations (research, necessary administration and community service obligations). Educational standards imposed through the accreditation prescription are high. It is essential that the teaching departments are able to maintain those standards to ensure that Australian commerce and industry in both the private and public sectors are able to contribute to the Federal Government's vision of Australia's capacity to compete internationally and enjoy an appropriately high standing in the global economy. In that context we have drawn attention above to the necessary recognition through the funding formula of the accounting's transition from a predominantly labour intensive to a capital-intensive occupation. Whereas that transition is common throughout the professions, arguably it has occurred in accounting at a greater rate than in the other professions. The impact of that transition is being felt in the capital demands for IT facilities dedicated to accounting teaching and research, placing increasing pressures on the already inadequate funding.
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> We draw the Committee's attention again to the necessity that accounting graduates be exposed to the application of the latest technology so that, as business leaders of world class, they will make the maximum contribution to the commercialisation of the products expected from the recently increased Government funding for scientific research.[28]

5.35 The Committee acknowledges that increased enrolments over the past fifteen years, ushering in the advent of 'mass higher education' has had some bearing on standards as either pass marks are lowered or course content is reduced or simplified. It agrees with the AVCC view on this issue, which suggests that standards are relative:

> …With limits on how many places they can offer, universities endeavour to distribute places fairly among applicants using various ranking mechanisms as well as keeping places for particular groups of priority applicants. As a

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26 Submission 136, The Institute of Chartered Accountants of Australia, p.9

27 Submission 176, CPA Australia, p.1

28 ibid., p.5

> result, the academic ability of those applying for entry – as measured by year 12 university entrance scores – is different from the 1970s and 1980s. Providing entry to those applicants may therefore involve different entry standards than at previous periods. To do otherwise would be to impose out of date standards and potentially limit access to university education for many people capable of gaining from it.[29]

5.36 The Committee also agrees with Professor Anderson that it may not matter if our degrees are generally now easier to pass or if there are variations, even large ones, across the system; but rather than pretending that standards are as good as ever they were and that 'one size fits all' these questions should be matter for vigorous debate within the system. Elsewhere the Committee has referred to evidence that class sizes, and the difficulty of less experienced or less able students in getting help and advice, is a matter of grave concern If government policies claim to support mass education it must be properly funded. The result of not doing so is to waste the time of students, and the resources of the state and the university.

5.37 Matriculation standards are not entirely beyond the control of universities. Yet while it is recognised that entry standards are low at the margins, universities continue to enrol students whose level of ability or preparedness for university may reduce their chances of success. They may be among those students over-enrolled. This is a market-driven response by universities which exacerbates the issue of standards, yet it is clearly within the power of universities to address. One submission to the inquiry points out that in recent times little attention has been given to minimum entry standards, and that such standards have not determined student numbers but rather the reverse. 'In many courses standards of entry, and hence the standards of degrees, are ripe for investigation. Moreover, with limited resources there is an inverse relationship between the number of students and the resources available to service the individual student …a clear quantity versus quality trade-off.'[30] One statement given to the Australia Institute survey on commercialisation touches on some of these observations:

> The executive MBA participants include some really outstanding students. Unfortunately, an increasing number of participants barely completed high school, did not have the capacity for any kind of tertiary academic work but were accepted because they were nominated by their employers who were prepared to write the most glowing recommendations and, more importantly, pay the tuition fees charged by the Executive MBA.[31]

5.38 The Australia Institute survey into the commercialisation of universities uncovered a great deal of evidence, perhaps inadvertently, about declining standards. Anecdotal accounts of the experience of academics in dealing with foreign fee-paying students will be discussed later in this chapter. Some of the problems, however, are

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29 Submission 315, Australian Vice-Chancellor's Committee, p.8

30 Submission 8, Emeritus Professor Peter Karmel, p.8

31 Submission 60, The Australia Institute, p.14

home grown. The following sample of comments give an idea of the magnitude of the problem facing universities in the maintenance of standards, and the culture change that will be required to reverse undesirable trends:

> I have worked as a casual lecturer at uni and it's not just the full-fee paying students that get a better deal. In fact since the HECS scheme came in the late 80', there has been increasing pressure on unis to pass their 'clients'. Plus it is well known that casual tutors and lecturers tend to give higher marks than the full-time tenured staff. If you're a casual lecturer you aren't allowed to fail many students, and you don't want to, because you probably won't be re-employed next year if you cause too many problems.[32]

> A professor at a Western Australian university commented 'we are compelled to accept weaker and weaker students and we are getting close to the bottom of the barrel in some cases…a culture of low-grade cheating and copying eventually compromises the learning process.'[33]

5.39 A combination of factors is contributing to the changes in the intellectual climate of universities in regard to undergraduate students. The Committee received evidence of a declining receptiveness among students for more intellectually demanding subjects. This is revealed, among other indicators, by the results of student assessment of staff. These surveys, while by no means undesirable, may act in the present context to increase the pressure towards lower standards.

5.40 One academic has claimed that student attitude to quality needs to be understood.

> There is a wide perception, frequently noted in the media and used by teachers as motivational device, that getting a good result in the HSC is the most crucial bit of studying one has to do, as it's all important to get into as `high' a university course as possible. Once on the train you can relax and enjoy the ride. The other is the fact that many students are well aware of falling standards and operate accordingly. I've heard students outlining their - admittedly somewhat flawed - thinking along these lines: 90% (or whatever) of us will pass anyway, and multiple choice exams are basically lotteries, so I've got a 90% chance of getting through, regardless of how little I study.[34]

The attitudinal link between school and university may have changed in recent years as a university education becomes a stronger possibility for many students who, fifteen years ago may not have expected to make the transition. A far more serious problem from the Committee's point of view is the downward spiral of quality standards that results from inadequate school preparation, compounded by

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32 ibid., p.15

33 ibid., p.13

34 Submission 9. Dr Bob Berghout, p.2

diminishing standards at university, which are then fed back into the schools. This problem is particularly acute in science and mathematics.

5.41 The problems facing the teaching of mathematics were clearly described in a submission from Dr Philip Laird of the University of Wollongong, who described the national decline in this discipline since the early 1990s. The reasons for this include the decline in university funding in the context of a declining government interest generally in national infrastructure needs. Young people have ceased to be attracted into science and engineering when more lucrative professions beckon. This situation is unlikely to improve as the pool of aspiring mathematics students from schools diminishes. There is now a critical shortage of secondary school mathematics teachers. Most of those under the age of 35 will not have received a full degree in mathematics (as distinct from maths B.Ed degrees). Only about six teachers with mathematics degrees enter the teaching profession in New South Wales each year.[35] Laird's comment on teachers is echoed by Professor Anthony Thomas who told the Committee:

> The other problem is that we now have few teachers at the secondary level—and I know South Australia well—who have a major in physics and therefore can actually inspire their students at years 11 and 12. There is no discipline imposed on departments of education in the sense that our department of education in South Australia and, as I understand it, most other state departments of education do not require that teachers have a major in order to teach at that level.

5.42 The link between school and university was also made in the submission and oral evidence from the Australia and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science. A matter of great concern to ANZAAS is the looming shortage of skilled science teachers in schools. Many schools cannot retain the capacity to teach science at levels previously expected because of serious teacher shortages. The result is that in New South Wales, the majority of universities have dropped HSC prerequisites for most science disciplines. This might not be a serious problem if the length of the degree course could be increased, but there were serious financial impediments to this. It is not just a question of university preparation. ANZAAS believes that science illiteracy is increasing, and that this will result in a further decline in the standing of scientific knowledge.[36] The Committee agrees that if this problem persists, public policy formation on issues centring on scientific understanding will be severely impeded. This becomes a vicious cycle of ignorance and incapacity.

5.43 While postgraduate issues are dealt with elsewhere in this report, it is relevant to note here that the postgraduate curriculum for those undertaking higher degrees through course work have also been affected by ad hoc changes and by fads and fashions partly stimulated by the cash-flow requirements of universities. The

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35 Submission 73, Associate Professor Philip Laird, pp.3-4

36 Professor Paul Adam (ANZAAS), *Hansard*, Sydney, 17 July 2001, p.927

Postgraduate Board of the University of New South Wales is concerned by the lack of control of masters degrees in Australia and the reduction in their length of study. For instance, at UNSW the length of a masters by coursework degree ranges from 1 year to 3 years (Table 4). There has also been a reduction in the number of 2 year degrees and an increase in the 1.5 years masters over the period 1991 to 2001. This reduction in time of a course we believe invariably leads to the reductions in the amount of content that can be covered in a masters course, and therefore leads to a 'dumbing down' of the coursework degree.

5.44 The Postgraduate Board takes the same view as its national body CAPA: that the minimum time for a masters degree should be 2 years, and that all masters degrees should be set to the same level of attainment.[37] In 2001 only 6 out of 98 masters courses (i.e. 6 per cent) at UNSW are of an appropriate length. At stake is the reputation and value of the degree.

5.45 One significant result of the under-funding of Australian universities is that the method of assessment is dictated by the shortage of staff and the lack of appropriate support and resources for academics. One student reports that at the commencement of her degree the university had a wide range of methods of assessment for students. In her senior years the only form of assessment was either a written essay or examination. This was generally and widely attributed to lack of funds, as marking essays and exams is the cheapest form of assessment available. It was also widely understood that marking papers was undertaken by lecturers regularly in their non-work time, that is, at the weekends and late at night, after the other work was completed.[38]

Soft marking

5.46 This inquiry follows immediately after a number of allegations reported in the press about soft marking. These allegations have mainly concerned overseas fee paying students. As the discussion on private funding in Chapter 3 illustrates, the financial incentives for some academics and departments to give passing or higher grades to students whose fees will pay for some portion of the academic salaries bill are clearly very strong. Anecdotal evidence which is to follow in this section may lead to a conclusion that soft marking is endemic. The Committee does not wish to suggest that this is so. It does point out, however, that it is possible that many academics who are in a position to know the extent of the problem feel a great loyalty to their universities and to their colleagues (despite their misdeeds) and are unwilling to speak out for fear of bringing their institutions into disrepute. They would much rather ignore the problem that create publicity.[39]

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37 Submission 222, Postgraduate Board, Student Guild, UNSW, p.21

38 Submission 72, Ms Joanne Smith

39 Dr Clive Hamilton, *Hansard*, Canberra, 22 June 2001, p.535-536

5.47 The Australia Institute has released some research findings into soft marking as part of its survey of academic freedom and the commercialisation of universities. A sample of comments gives some idea of the dimension of the problem facing universities, and shows also that their preferred option is often to 'take the money' and let standards and reputation take the hindmost.

> in our course…that relies to a large degree on overseas students…every year that I was involved in teaching and examining….there would be a significant number of students whose exam performances were hopeless i.e. well below cut-off for [a] pass in own undergraduates, yet we would be coerced to arrange for 'remediation' or to run oral exams, with the end result that students didn't learn any more, but would obtain their qualification and all would graduate. In effect, nobody was allowed to fail.'
>
> 'In my former department….our Head was always telling us to supervise OS students who were on various scholarships. The fact that some of these students were of (an) extremely poor standard and/or had requested a wish for training in areas we could not provide was immaterial. I would flatly refuse to take these students on, so that my less assertive colleagues would inherit them. And the students always passed, even when they had virtually written nothing in the exam. It was embarrassing and awkward to question this at staff meetings as we all depended on a good word from our Head when it came to promotions, study leave etc.'
>
> 'This is an issue which has brought me much anxiety over the last few years. The ONLY students that I have ever had to get paper(s) 're-graded' or 'co-graded' are our foreign students. For me there is no doubt in my mind that we are prostituting ourselves for the foreign student….I was forced to take on an honours student. I had had the student in a range of classes over the three years of her pass degree. She was a very weak student. She had failed a number of 2nd year units but managed to arrange filler courses to get her into third year…She left this university with a 2A honours degree. She did not deserve an honours degree from this university.'[40]

5.48 The Steele case at Wollongong University, outlined briefly in Chapter 4, is a good example of a well-documented case of allegations of soft marking, although the facts of the case are disputed by Professor Ted Steele's academic colleagues. In brief, the case put by Professor Steele is that high level marks have been given undeservedly to some final year honours students in his field of molecular immunology. Professor Steele argues that those responsible for awarding these grades are not qualified in the field in which the student has studied.[41] His own judgement has been backed by a colleague in his discipline at the Australian National University. Steele has also claimed that the grades awarded have been weighted in favour of course components that were not central to the research. His concern is prompted by the knowledge that

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40 Submission 60, The Australia Institute, Appendix 3, p.16

41 Associate Professor Ted Steele, *Hansard*, Canberra, 13 August 2001, p.1303

students obtaining a certain level of honours pass are likely to be offered Ph.D scholarships which, in the case of these students, would be highly inappropriate. The Committee cannot enter into judgements about particular cases. It can only cite this case as one which shows that issues going to the heart of quality control remain problematic in universities. This case is one which the Australian Universities Quality Agency should take up with a view to framing guidelines on how quality can best be assured, and to consider whether to give more weight to external moderation of student performance.

5.49 The plagiarism episode at Curtin University of Technology is an instance of where the soft marking issue came to public attention without the other issues and events which obscured or overshadowed it, as in the Steele case. The Curtin case included the elements mentioned in anonymous or unattributed comment given to the Australia Institute survey. The Curtin student concerned was a foreign fee-paying student and the case saw pressure being brought on teaching staff by school administrators anxious to pass the student despite her failure to meet minimal pass requirements. The academic most under pressure stood her ground and was overruled. The episode brought discredit on Curtin, relieved only by recognition of the integrity of academic staff directly responsible for the teaching and assessment. It is worth repeating an observation made in Chapter 4 that in all cases in which reported irregularities have occurred, and in which highly questionable practices contrary to quality assurance have been identified, it has been relatively junior academic staff who have stood firm in defence of academic values and in upholding quality standards and the integrity of the university. Those on the other side of the argument have been faculty or departmental heads or deans or higher.

5.50 It is a matter of concern to the Committee that university management appears to be most vulnerable to pressure which follows from commercial activity: that their instinctive reaction to rumours, claims or revelations of unethical conduct appears to be to sweep them under the carpet for the sake of the university's public image. Since the 'corporate' management style has come into vogue, the distinction between 'reputation' and 'image' has become important. Collegial managers would once have understood the importance of 'reputation' in relation to quality education. There was not much more to reputation than that. Since marketing is now so important to the existence of universities, 'image' has taken over as the main consideration, possibly because it can be represented in tangible ways. As Professor Karmel was quoted earlier in this chapter, concepts of 'quality' can be nebulous even when we understand their vital importance to the existence of an institution like a university.

5.51 A submission from an academic at the University of Adelaide relates that his experience of teaching an assessing a mixed class of fee-paying and non-fee-paying postgraduate students was 'not entirely happy'.

> When the viability of an academic program is directly dependent on an income stream generated by fee-paying students, it is extremely difficult to prevent assessment and other decisions being coloured by the knowledge that a particular individual is or is not paying fees. The problem is

> exacerbated by the large premium fee charged to international students. In one case of which I am aware, an administrative decision was taken in my absence to permit such a student to continue in the program despite having failed to achieve the prescribed necessary academic standard, for what can only have been financial reasons.[42]

5.52 The dangers of relying on foreign students are encapsulated in this brief account. At stake is the ethical foundation of the maintenance of academic standards, a standard held hostage both to the continued existence of valuable courses and to the financial viability of the university.

5.53 The Committee notes the response of the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee to the soft marking issue, and the details of the measures it proposes. The Committee has no doubt that vice-chancellors will enforce their code of ethical practice when necessary. The Committee is heartened by developments that suggest a more determined approach to address the problem. It notes that the Victorian Auditor-General is to assess the performance of overseas student programs in the state's universities, with the inquiry looking at academic standards, including entry standards and English proficiency tests.[43]

5.54 Nonetheless, the Committee does not believe it has heard the last of these practices. While it notes the proactive work of the University of New South Wales and RMIT in dealing with this issue, it is not reassured by apparent inaction elsewhere.

Recommendation Fourteen

The Committee recommends that the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA):

- **address the issue of course assessment to ensure the integrity of qualifications granted by Australian universities; and**
- **investigate the effectiveness and application of quality assurance regarding assessment procedures.**

Recommendation Fifteen

The Committee also recommends that universities collectively consider:

- **the more widespread use of external examiners: and,**
- **a greater use of moderation exercises across a number of universities.**

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42 Submission 271, Professor Wilfred Prest

43 *The Australian*, 29 August 2001

Pressure on education resources

5.55 The parlous state of infrastructure has been commented upon in relation to three main areas: libraries, lecture room space and laboratories. Almost every university has been affected. Particular examples cited below may be considered representative.

5.56 The Deakin University Students Association stated that there has been a substantial rationalization and restructuring of Deakin libraries. Across a multi-campus institution the rationalization of library holdings has meant a greater reliance on inter-library loans, the result of successive rounds of serial subscription cancellations. Funding constraints at Deakin have forced limitations on interlibrary loans to a point where the Library may no longer be able to support research activities in some areas. There appeared to be little recognition of the fact that libraries are essential elements in the research infrastructure. The impact of funding constraints is heightened by the rising cost of books and serials, even before the recent decline in the value of the Australian dollar.[44]

5.57 The Committee was advised of what a 50 per cent decline in the periodical subscription numbers mean for physics.

> It means that when you come to review a new field you cancel key journals now. Every year we look at which of the key journals—that is, not the ones that would be nice to have but the ones that you have to have—we are going to cut. We have not yet got the message at my university from the library, but I know it is coming, and I have no idea which journals we are going to cut. It means that you cannot start a new area of research because you do not have the enormous backlog of journals in the new area that you would need. We have cancelled all journals in condensed matter physics at the University of Adelaide now. So if we wanted to set up research in serious material science in South Australia at the University of Adelaide, which would be a sensible thing to do, there would be an enormous cost in just buying back the journals for the last decade. We have cancelled them because there is no-one working in that area. In the areas we have people we are now cutting key journals. So when those people want to prepare a major review, when they want to determine the best directions for their research in the next few years, they do not have access to the journals.[45]

5.58 The Committee is particularly alarmed at these trends. Once current subscriptions are cancelled, periodicals subscriptions are generally worthless as a collection from then on. It follows that even if relative prosperity ever returns to universities, they will face a daunting task in back-filling collections that decide are in their interest to acquire.

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44 Submission 238, Deakin University Students Association, p.12

45 Professor Anthony Thomas (Adelaide University), *Hansard*, Adelaide, 4 July 2001, p.800

5.59 Student complaints about library services were included in scores of submissions to the Committee. For students, the library is above all an information tool for studying. And in this respect, the improvements experienced by some libraries in the last few years has not been sufficient to keep up with increased student enrolments. A number of important journal and serials has been cut or their arrival from overseas experiences considerable delays. Moreover, services such as providing recording of lectures for students have also been reduced. At peak hours, there are long cues for photocopying at many universities. Access to catalogues and the Internet remain an endemic problem for many students. The amalgamation of library services has often placed considerable strain on library staff and limited the ability of students to make inquires.[46]

5.60 The neglect of laboratory infrastructure was a particular concern to the deans of science and engineering. The practical base of these disciplines requires continuing maintenance and frequent upgrading of expensive laboratory facilities. As the infrastructure used for undergraduate teaching is funded from recurrent income, maintenance and upgrading are being neglected, with expenditure on computing facilities consuming additional funds at the expense of laboratories. Engineering is attractive to international fee-paying students even though they cannot have the exposure to modern technology that they should have. As the Australian Council of Engineering Deans noted, 'it is embarrassing to see the quality of university laboratories in Singapore, Hong Kong and Malaysia when we are claiming to be able to provide top-quality SET education here for students from those countries.'[47] This point was reinforced when the engineering deans met the Committee:

> In terms of our laboratory infrastructure, if you have been to Singapore, for example, and had a look at the polytechnics—not the universities—you would have seen that the standard of infrastructure in our engineering laboratories is lower than it is in the Singapore polytechs. The fact is that the only thing that allows us to deliver competitive programs in our best engineering schools is the quality of our staff—not our laboratories. There has been no substantial investment in laboratory equipment over the last 10 years.[48]

5.61 The Committee was told in Hobart of the over-dependence of the engineering school at the University of Tasmania on foreign students, given the volatility of the overseas market.[49] For most universities, dependence on foreign students is now such that the fees coming in have become part of 'core' funding to the extent that they are used to supplement salaries and meet other recurrent costs. This puts university budgeting strategy in a precarious position. The Committee believes that it is only a matter of time before the market for foreign students, particularly those from Asia,

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46 ibid., p.7

47 Submission 201, Australian Council of Engineering Deans, p.2

48 Professor Barry Brady (Australian Council of Engineering Deans), *Hansard*, Perth, 3 July 2001. p.643

49 Dr Peter Doe (Institution of Engineers), *Hansard*, Hobart, 26 April 2001, p.148

dries up. When it does, a major cause of the decline will be the realisation by governments and citizens in those countries that they are not receiving value for money from the instructional use of inadequate and obsolete materials and machinery. The failure of the government to show any understanding of the link between the education export drive and the capital investment needs of universities almost defies belief. If Australian universities cannot sell educational services on the basis of quality first, they will certainly find no 'customers' attracted on the basis of price alone. Improved quality, which involves increased investment , is the only defence against market volatility.

Campus conditions and the quality of the learning experience

5.62 The Committee notes frequent press publicity given to overcrowding in university lecture theatres. A submission from the University of New South Wales Student Guild refers to the increasing size of tutorials and lectures in relation to a reduced number of teaching staff. While academic staff has increased from 1483 in 1990 to 1960 in 1999, the rate of increase is significantly below the increase in the number of students enrolled in the last ten years. General staff, on the other hand, has fallen from 2799 in 1990 to 2438 in 1999, giving a significantly increased staff-student ratio since the deregulation of higher education started from 11.8 in 1987 to 15.5 in 1999.[i] That is, the academic and general staff numbers are declining in relation to the number of students enrolled. This has resulted in a number of problems associated with a lack of services, overcrowded tutorials and the increasing difficulty for students in maintaining a proper rapport with teaching staff.[50]

5.63 A similar picture is drawn in the submission from the Australian University Alumni Council, which reported that conditions for student learning have become increasingly appalling in many institutions, with overcrowding of lecture halls and declining facilities. It noted press reports that in 2000 for instance, 160 Financial Markets students were locked out of their first class. A Sydney University education officer and liberal studies student reported that she was forced to sit on the floor in lectures for 22 of her 24 credit points. The results of funding cuts are starkly reflected in the rise in staff-student ratios in recent years. In 1999 Deakin University reported staff-student ratios of 1:26.3, while the University of Southern Queensland reported 1: 23.3. At Sydney University the staff student ratio was recently reported to have risen from 1:28 to 1:32, with some departments reaching 1:40. Ratios in mathematics and computing are reported to have risen by 34.6 per cent between 1994 and 1999). The downsizing of staff has resulted in tutorials in some subjects containing an absurd 35 or more students. When one compares the staff-student ratios at leading US colleges of 1:8 to 1 12, one is not surprised that overseas students, other than those reputed to be attempting to buy their degrees, should look askance at Australian conditions for learning.[51]

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50 Submission 260, University of New South Wales Student Guild, p.5

51 Submission 191, Australian University Alumni Council, p.3

5.64 The Committee received a large number of short submissions from students describing unsatisfactory aspects of their everyday study routines. These difficulties related mainly to overcrowded classes and lack of accommodation, and poor resources generally, especially library facilities. One submission sums up the conditions suffered by a high proportion of students:

> During the course of my Arts degree I witnessed the steady and significant increase in numbers of students in lectures. In some courses, students were so massively over-enrolled that there were not enough seats in even the largest lecture theatres to accommodate the students. The impact of not having a seat or desk to work from during a class is that note-taking is extremely difficult, and participation in class discussion is impossible. Moreover, I believe there are serious occupational health and safety risks inherent in forcing students to sit in the aisles on the floor which workers at any rate would not be expected to suffer.
>
> The shortage of staff and resources situation became so pronounced in the Faculty of Law that face-to-face tutorials were abandoned altogether in courses. This move has resulted in students being forced to undertake a much more solitary and much less satisfactory kind of education, without the benefit of interaction with other students and a professional tutor to assist in learning. Some courses instigated electronic tutorials - however, there were not enough computers available in the Faculty of Law for all students to complete the tutorials and so it is my understanding that these classes have also been cancelled.[52]

5.65 The Committee received evidence from a number of submitters relating to a decline in teaching standards. Dr Aaron Gare from the Association for the Public University, gave a number of instances of indicators of falling standards resulting from cuts to contact hours, and having to deal with students less well prepared for university studies that would have been the case in the past. It supports the general comments made by Professor Don Anderson earlier in this chapter. In drawing on his own experience, Dr Gare observes:

> This decline is not merely a quantitative reduction in the amount of knowledge learned. According to former lecturers in physics and chemistry, it is a decline in students' capacity to think abstractly and to understand theoretical concepts. This is corroborated across all disciplines. A biology lecturer from Melbourne University complained that he had been forced to reduce students' exposure to abstract concepts. Illustrating the effect of this, it has been alleged that at Swinburne University in 1998 a very large number of engineering students failed first-year mathematics and, despite this, were allowed to go on to second year.
>
> Teachers of languages have also noted declines in standards. A lecturer in French at the ANU noted that all students in the Faculty of Arts have had their contact reduced by about 25%, with reductions in contact hours,

52 Submission 72, Ms Joanne Smith, p.2

> reading lists, length and written assignments. The effect of this in the French Department is that students now do as part of their second year what they used to do in first year, and students can only take two years of language work where once they could do three. Present graduates are substandard in comparison to the past graduates. French has been 'very badly damaged over the last 2-3 years'.
>
> Such observations concur with language teachers elsewhere. A teacher at Monash, at which 9 of the 12 Asian languages once taught will not be taught in any form in 2001, described the effect of reducing contact from 5 to 3 hours per week and forcing tutors to take over the role of senior staff who have been pushed into early retirement. The languages remaining cannot be taught properly. At Swinburne University lecturers in Japanese claim that with a dramatic reduction in staff and in student contact hours, students who complete their degrees are no longer proficient in the language.[53]

5.66 Gare proceeds to describe how sessional tutors, who, with the retrenchment or forced retirement of senior academics now do much more of the teaching in universities, view the falling standards. Many of these research postgraduate students have been amazed at the changes that have taken place in the few years since they were undergraduates.

> A tutor in media at Swinburne University conducted his own survey of students to find out whether they were doing their reading. While a few students did some of the reading for the first few tutorials, virtually nothing was being read for the remainder of the semester and most students did no reading whatsoever. The vast majority of students still passed the course.
>
> A tutor in philosophy at La Trobe complained that little is demanded of students, that they now seldom read for tutorials, yet still pass. It appears that students are avoiding core disciplines such as mathematics and languages where it is difficult or impossible to disguise falling standards and are enrolling in subjects where falling standards are most easily disguised.[54]

5.67 Gare concludes that falling standards have little or nothing to do with the increasing number of students enrolling in universities. All universities are affected, including those that are now enrolling a more select group of students than previously. Nor is this collapse in standards a simple consequence of funding reductions. Gare claims that it is due to a fundamental transformation from an academic to a managerialist control of universities. Where the university's goal is defined as satisfying customers or clients to generate the maximum throughput and to maximize profits, it clearly pays to pass as many students as possible and to focus on those students who want to get their degrees with the minimum amount of work.

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53 Dr Arran Gare in Submission 199, Association for the Public University, pp.2-4

54 ibid.

5.68 An important factor in the quality of the learning experience is the degree to which students receive the personal attention they need from academic staff. The worsening student-staff ratios, to be dealt with in the next section, have seen increased student numbers bring with them an increased load of tasks to teaching staff, such as assessment marking and laboratory supervision. The Australian Federation of University Women has made the point that while the time needed for assessing work varies considerably from one discipline to another, marking usually constitutes a large part of an academic workload.

> Two adverse effects being reported by academics are that they do not have sufficient time for the student consultations that often need to take place with the return of assessed work, and that there is pressure to cut marking time by substituting objective tests and short-answer assignments for longer essays. But the writing of longer essays is, in some disciplines, essential for the development of the capacity to sustain and develop an argument, to make complex discriminations and to demonstrate an informed understanding of the scholarship relating to the topic. Without this training in early undergraduate years, students have much less chance of producing high-quality Honours and postgraduate theses.[55]

Staff-student ratios

5.69 Since 1996 there has been a significant deterioration in staff-student ratios. In that time they have deteriorated by almost 20 per cent. They now stand at higher than 1 to 18. Twenty years ago they were about 1 to 12. Over the same period teacher-pupil ratios in schools improved considerably and this improvement has been largely maintained despite budgetary pressures. Professor Peter Karmel stated in his submission, echoed in many others to the Committee, that:

> …if universities are not given greater financial support and some degree of control over revenues available for undergraduate teaching, enterprise bargaining will eventually drive further declines in staff quantity and quality and the Australian universities will sink into a morass of mediocrity. As it is, many classes are now far too large, and staff/student contact has diminished; academic staff have inadequate time for preparation and study, and morale is low. In the international market for top quality staff, the Australian universities are becoming increasingly uncompetitive. This will have serious long term implications for the quality of our universities' research and their international standing.[56]

5.70 Staff-student ratios have suffered a deterioration in all subject disciplines, and evidence from universities shows that there is impact has shown similar patterns across universities. At Sydney University the cuts to teaching staff across the University in the last decade have seen a core faculty such as Science have its student number s (EFTSU) increased by 596 (12 per cent) between 1990 and 2000 while staff

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55 Submission 78, Australian Federation of University Women, p.5

56 Submission 8, Professor Peter Karmel, p.3

numbers have been reduced 44.7, or 11 per cent. In this time student staff ratios have risen from 12.5 to 15.9.[57]

5.71 The Arts faculty at Sydney has seen even higher increases in student numbers and corresponding reductions in staff, so much so that the Student Representative Council has described them as an attack on the Humanities, similar to that experienced at Monash University. Student numbers in the Arts faculty increased by 814 (20 per cent) between 1990 and 2000 while (full -time equivalent) staff numbers fell 20 per cent, or 64.7 academics. In this time student staff ratios have risen from 12.6 to 19.3.[58]

5.72 The effect of these changes can best be appreciated by looking at staff cuts within core disciplines or departments. A list of staff reduction in Arts subjects listed below is revealing. It shows the reduction in the number of teaching staff (Full Time Equivalent Academic Staff) between 1990 and 2000:

- Philosophy has dropped by 4.1 (from 19 in 1990 to 14.9 in 2000 or 22 per cent),
- Anthropology has dropped by 6.3 (from 21.5 to 15.2 or 29 per cent),
- English has dropped by 20 (from 54.4 to 34.3 or 37 per cent)
- History has dropped by 22 (from 46.8 to 24.8 or 47 per cent).

5.73 The SRC claims that while it may not be clear from this statistical data, these figures may in fact be even worse than stated. For instance, over-enrolled, and therefore not fully funded, students place greater demands on departments and real staff-student ratios. Over-enrolment occurs as university administration claw desperately for additional 'discounted' government income - at the expense of staff conditions and the quality of teaching. As a result key learning needs for students suffer, such as an ability to participate in discussion and to receive detailed feedback on assessment.[59]

5.74 The staffing plight of the humanities was addresses by the Australian Academy of the Humanities in its 1998 report *Knowing Ourselves and Others: The Humanities in Australia into the 21st Century*. Recommendation 9 of the report gave particular notice of the need to improve academic working conditions and expressed concern at the adverse effect of high staff-student ratios on humanities teaching. The report indicates a shift in staff-student ratios in humanities disciplines from 16.30 in 1990 to 18.47 in 1996 and notes that when the staff-student ratio for humanities disciplines was compared with the overall university ratio, humanities ratios were not only higher, but the discrepancy was increasing. Indeed, the report notes that humanities disciplines at the University of Tasmania went from being 18 per cent

57 Submission 167, Students' Representative Council, Sydney University, p.3

58 ibid.

59 ibid., p.5

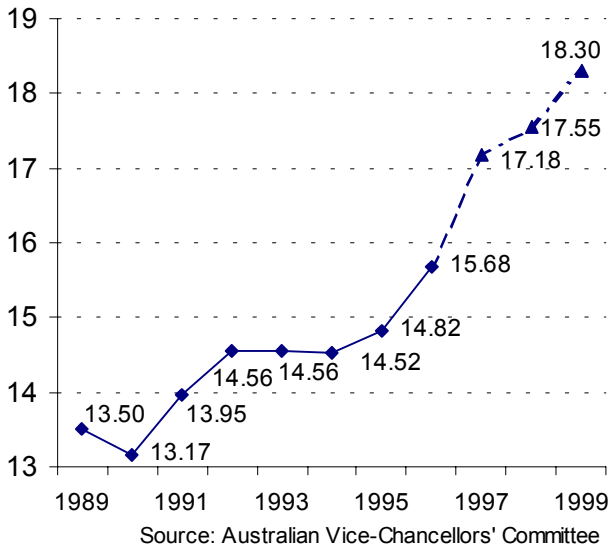
higher in 1990 to 35 per cent higher in 1996. Since then the position has declined further. Within the Faculty of Arts, for instance, academic staff numbers have fallen from 155.6 in 1995 to 130.4 in 2001, while general staff numbers have changed little, going from 39.5 to 38.6. EFTSU has increased slightly from 2620 to approximately 2800 over the same period. The average staff-student ratio across the Faculty (which includes Creative Arts disciplines) has gone from 17.05 in 1995 to approximately 21.5 in 2001.[60]

5.75 The Institution of Engineers of Australia have submitted that current funding levels and arrangements has led to a university focus on student number throughput, to maintain student-funding guarantees, at the expense of education quality. It has are serious concerns about escalating student staff ratios. For engineering, the student-staff ratio increased by 47% over the period 1986 to 1998. The ratio was 10.4 in 1986, 13 in 1993 and 15 in 1998, and currently stands at around 18. The Institute sees this as a direct result of the reduction in funding by the Commonwealth and the transfer of funds by universities away from teaching and research activities due to central costs.[61]

5.76 The following graph shows the increase in student load over a ten year period, showing a sharp rise from 18.8:1 in 1996 to 18.3:1 in 1999.

Figure 5.1

Student to Teaching Staff Ratio, 1989-1999



60 Submission 36, Professor Malcolm Walters, p.3

61 Submission 252, Institution of Engineers of Australia, p.4

Table 5.2

Student-staff ratio by university (total) Source: AVCC

University	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
Charles Sturt University	19.3	19.6	20.6	22.2	25.0	27.7
Macquarie University	18.7	17.4	19.7	20.4	21.4	23.4
Southern Cross University	17.4	17.9	20.4	19.7	19.8	19.5
University of New England	16.1	17.3	20.2	20.4	18.7	19.1
University of New South Wales	14.9	15.2	14.6	14.6	16.0	16.8
University of Newcastle	14.7	15.0	17.3	19.0	18.9	17.8
University of Sydney	11.2	11.8	13.6	14.0	14.7	15.1
University of Technology, Sydney	13.3	15.5	17.7	18.5	17.1	17.4
University of Western Sydney	17.1	17.1	20.3	21.7	22.1	22.4
University of Wollongong	14.3	15.3	17.6	17.4	16.9	17.0
Deakin University	15.8	19.3	24.9	22.5	20.3	21.0
La Trobe University	14.2	16.1	16.4	16.2	16.6	16.5
Monash University	15.7	16.8	17.8	18.8	17.6	17.7
RMIT University	14.9	16.1	19.8	19.7	21.0	22.8
Swinburne University of Technology	16.1	16.5	22.2	23.6	26.0	26.9
University of Melbourne	13.7	14.5	15.9	16.1	16.7	16.9
University of Ballarat	14.0	16.7	16.9	18.0	19.9	20.0
Victoria University	12.8	15.7	16.3	14.9	17.6	18.1
Central Queensland University	17.4	21.2	24.1	22.3	25.2	31.1
Griffith University	14.9	15.8	17.4	18.9	18.3	18.8
James Cook University	12.3	13.4	14.8	17.3	20.5	20.8
Queensland University of Technology	17.4	18.6	20.9	20.9	20.8	21.5
University of Queensland	13.3	13.5	14.7	17.1	17.9	17.5
University of Southern Queensland	19.5	20.7	21.2	23.5	22.6	22.1
Curtin University of Technology	14.2	14.8	16.2	19.2	19.3	22.6
Edith Cowan University	15.2	15.5	18.0	18.0	19.9	20.4
Murdoch University	14.4	15.1	17.1	18.5	19.7	20.3
University of Western Australia	13.9	14.4	14.6	14.5	14.8	14.4
Flinders University of South Australia	13.9	14.2	15.3	15.0	14.7	15.6
University of Adelaide	13.5	13.1	13.9	13.8	13.1	12.7
University of South Australia	15.3	17.3	17.4	20.5	19.6	20.7
University of Tasmania	14.3	14.5	16.8	17.4	18.9	18.2
Northern Territory University	11.9	13.6	13.2	15.5	17.3	18.3
Australian National University	15.0	14.4	15.4	15.3	16.2	16.2
University of Canberra	16.8	16.8	18.2	21.1	18.7	20.5
Australian Catholic University	12.8	13.6	17.8	17.5	18.6	18.3

Table 5.3.

Year	Student Load (1)	FTE Academic Staff(2)
1991	422,563	65,768
1992	433,005	68,410
1993	441,085	69,868
1994	444,406	70,259
1995	462,087	71,505
1996	487,977	72,703
1997	514,727	70,681
1998	528,838	69,574
1999	544,143	69,252
2000	557,763	69,563

(1) Source: DETYA, Selected Higher Education Statistics Students 2000, Table 40. Figures refer to the total of equivalent full-time student units (EFTSU) for both overseas and non-overseas students.

(2) Source: DETYA, Selected Higher Education Statistics Staff 2000, Table 3. Figures refer to the full-time equivalent (FTE) total of full-time and fractional full-time 'teaching only', 'research only' and 'teaching and research' staff.

On-line learning

5.77 A great deal of evidence was presented to the Committee about developments in teaching and learning via the internet. Several universities claimed to be at the fore-front of on-line education development in Australia. One of these was the University of Southern Queensland, whose vice-chancellor was enthusiastic about the impetus given to his university's well-established distance learning program by the internet. Professor Swannell told the Committee that he saw the principal advantage of the internet as taking 'quality education' to people in their place and in their time: removing the need for social disruption, removal from the workplace and removing the costs of relocation. As to the issue of appropriate pedagogy, Professor Swannell said:

> I am the first to say that the alternative experience of the intimacy of asynchronous delivery of thoughtful, reflective interaction with other learners can be more intellectually challenging, more exciting than the old-fashioned interaction of one-to-one which I had. It liberates the nervous, for example. It liberates the person who is not at ease in a live situation when they can do it through the written word after reflection.[62]

5.78 Other evidence to the Committee was less enthusiastic. Authorities from the Queensland University of Technology told the Committee that some of the misunderstandings about projected costs arose from comparisons with traditional distance learning which had relatively high initial costs only, associated with the development of materials. Given a sufficient number of students, the per capita costs of distance learning were low. With high technology, per capita costs remain high because of the constantly changing technological underpinnings. High development costs incur high maintenance costs. The staff involved in programs need to remain intimately involved with the on-line environment.[63]

5.79 Evidence presented in a paper by Ms Yoni Ryan of QUT, attached to the QUT Borderless Education submission to this inquiry. DETYA-sponsored research undertaken by the QUT team disproves claims made in media reports that there is a high level of technological skill among school leavers. The research indicates that students previously excluded from conventional campus study by social or economic disadvantage are least likely to be prepared for computer-based learning, and more likely to be highly dependent students.[64]

5.80 Ryan argues that another aspect of student readiness that should also be considered is their purpose in acquiring a university education. Ryan criticises an assumption made by Professor Dale Spender who argued (*The Australian*, July 26, 2000, p.13) that students 'are becoming astute learning shoppers'; that they used to go to universities 'to get access to the information'. Ryan argues:

> But students **never** went to uni just to get 'information; all the information anyone needs is available in books, in public libraries, and now on the Internet. If 'information' were all that an education involved, Amazon.com would not be laying off 1300 staff, would not have posted five years of million dollar losses, and would not now be charging publishers for posting favourable reviews. The 'new economy' has not reduced the numbers of students enrolling in on-campus studies, nor was it the attraction of online education which produced the large increase in part-time 'external' enrolments over the last five years: it was 'old economy' imperatives, the need to 'earn while you learn' because of fee increases which militated against full-time study. What I am implying here is that the drive to online education has been *supply* driven, not *demand* driven, by universities hoping

62 Professor Peter Swannell (University of Southern Queensland) *Hansard*, Brisbane, 22 March 2001, p.121

63 Dr Lawrence Stedman, *Hansard,* Brisbane , 22 March, 2001, p.16

64 Submission 33, Borderless Education Team, Queensland University of Technology, p.7

> to capitalise on the combined forces of lifelong learning, and the 'outreach' capacity of new technologies to develop new markets.

5.81 As to the issue of quality, there is a concern that innovative teaching materials of high quality are not being produced in sufficient quantity. The cost of producing materials is very high. In technology and software there is never enough money available for this purpose. It has been estimated that in the United States the cost of developing quality on-line packages is about $25 000 per 'instructional hour', or $650 000 per semester. This is far above the cost of delivering conventional programs, except for high volume courses.[65]

5.82 Professor John Quiggin has advised the Committee that the Internet provides an easy method of making existing text-based teaching materials available to students, but its main advantage is that it saves paper, substituting for the `reading bricks' that have increasingly substituted for books and journal articles, as cost-cutting has dominated university teaching in recent years. Only in rare cases is relevant video and audio material available, and then only in low-resolution form which can be made available over the Internet. In addition, some forms of self-paced teaching and multiple-choice quizzes can be converted into Internet form at low cost. According to Quiggin, attempts at producing full-scale multimedia for Internet use have proved both costly and disappointing in terms of outcomes. The costs of producing high-quality multimedia presentations are comparable to or higher than the costs of broadcast-quality.[66]

5.83 Student perspectives on this issue are crucial to the Committees assessment of the potential of on-line learning. The Sydney University SRC is critical of the use of 'flexible delivery' of courses (the prevailing euphemism), which has increased despite the knowledge of its shortfalls. Students who are reluctant, unable or otherwise unlikely to have access to computers are disadvantaged compared to those with the resources and the knowledge and confidence to use computers. People with disabilities or special needs, or who cannot afford the increased price of computer access on campus are placed at a disadvantage.[67]

5.84 Deakin University's on-line initiatives have won it a 'university of the year' title for its distance education initiatives, but this has not impressed the student body. According to the Deakin University Students Association, the experience of students in relation to on-line learning has not been encouraging. It is claimed that Deakin has tended to employ on-line teaching as a substitute for face-to-face contact, rather than as a positive addition to the learning experience. Students have been required to access an increasing proportion of materials from the web, and have incurred heavy printing costs. While the Committee believes that this may be regarded as modern variation of

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65 ibid., p.12

66 Submission 49, Professor John Quiggin, p.13

67 Submission 167, Sydney University Students Representative Council, p.6

traditional student complaints about the cost of books, it takes note of a more general comment on the dependence of universities on the internet:

> Increasingly on-line learning has become a fad pursued by Deakin as an end in itself. Universities are not immune from the 'dot.com' frenzy that saw for instance Yahoo valued by the market at 50% greater than General Motors despite Yahoo having sales about one three hundredth of General Motors. What the recent 'dot.com' crash should remind policy makers is that the 'new' vs. 'old' economy division was fundamentally misleading and this finding is equally applicable to universities. Universities should use new technology to do what they have always done better. The uncritical pursuit of the objective of on-line learning actually contradicts the objective of linking teaching and research. Staff are kept away from teaching and research to update on-line materials. On-line options are pursued despite evidence from surveys of employers that the area in which they are most dissatisfied with university graduates are communication skills and team work abilities, precisely those generic skills fostered by student participation in tutorials. Indeed employers are generally pleased with students' computer skills and some feel that students seek to substitute computer skills for personal skills. The University's preoccupation with forcing students into on-line learning is accompanied by a failure to address the IT skill deficient of many lifelong learners, such as practicing nurses seeking upgraded qualifications.

5.85 Evidence from the University of Tasmania emphasised the expense of technology-based media in terms of academic staff time. 'The reality for those using online teaching effectively is that it opens up a wide range of new or enhanced communication opportunities between staff and students so that it can be extremely costly in terms of academic staff time.'[68] The submission continued:

> Furthermore, electronic delivery cannot be seen as a simple replacement for face-to-face communications. Many teaching and learning processes are best undertaken in face-to-face settings and this will continue to be the case. Quality teaching is about finding the right balance between face-to-face communications, interaction via other media and individual work so that each learning experience is maximised. Flexible delivery of teaching is not intended to cut costs but to improve access and the quality of the learning experience for students.[69]

5.86 Apart from the issue of cost, the paucity of appropriate materials, and the general disinclination of students to share the enthusiasm for on-line learning generated by some universities, there remains the issue of whether the technology has reached a point where it can deliver what is required without breaking down. Individual computer crashes are still common; software has very limited shelf-life; educational technical standards have not yet been agreed to, and there is some doubt

68 Submission 172, University of Tasmania, p.7

69 ibid.

that telecommunications companies can provide a reliable service given the lack of bandwidth in most areas.[70]

5.87 In conclusion, the Committee sees considerable potential for on-line learning, but in order to achieve quality educational outcomes flowing from new technology two problems need to be addressed. First, technical limitations, including those associated with bandwidths, need to be overcome as quickly as possible. The Government has a clear and urgent responsibility to address this problem, which affects communications in general, and not just education. Second, the challenge of on-line learning involves establishing an appropriate relationship with face to face learning if it is to be successful. This is a labour-intensive task requiring far more sophisticated software than is currently available in any quantity.

Recommendation Sixteen

The Committee recommends that the Government ensure a high priority be given to funding to public universities to support on-line learning including:

- **free bridging or pathway programs to university study to encourage as many people as possible to improve their education, with a view to providing an additional 100,000 places;**
- **an expansion in on-line courses for undergraduate students;**
- **increased development of on-line education materials; and**
- an increase in the capacity of all universities to offer on-line courses to overseas students.

Quality assurance

5.88 Quality assurance has become one of the more problematic of the Committee's terms of reference because only a small number of submissions dealt with the subject. The few universities which did comment gave the newly-established Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) guarded approval. No submission was received from the Agency itself, so the Committee has only DETYA policy documents to rely on in this section.

5.89 Quality assurance may be defined as systematic management and assessment procedures adopted by a university to monitor performance and to ensure achievement of quality outputs or improved quality. Quality assurance aims to give stakeholders confidence about the management of quality and the outcomes achieved. Most commonly at the national level, quality assurance is the responsibility of a specialist government agency, and less commonly, the responsibility of an agency established by the universities.

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70 Submission 33, op.cit., p.9

5.90 Higher education quality assurance has been on the national agenda for over ten years. The Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education was established in 1992, and institution audits were conducted between 1993 and 1995. In 1998 quality improvement measures were integrated into DETYA's annual funding negotiations with universities. In March 2000 MCEETYA agreed to the establishment of the Australian Universities Quality Agency. The Agency is responsible for conducting and reporting quality audits every five years, establishing criteria for accrediting new universities, and reporting on the relative standards and international standing of the higher education system. The Agency operates independently, but is owned by and responsible to MCEETYA. For reasons that will be shown, it appears to the Committee that while a quality assurance body has been considered for years, the current arrangement is a hurried expediency to meet criticisms that have come in the wake of media attention to unethical practices like 'soft marking'. AQUA is the result of a compromise between what the Governments knows to be necessary and what the universities are prepared to tolerate.

5.91 The powers of the Agency appear to lie in its reporting capacity. AQUA lacks both the independence and the capacity to investigate allegations such as have been raised recently into 'soft marking.' It will report to universities on their deficiencies and leave it to them to take action. The Committee believes that the main difficulty facing the new Agency will be perceptions of how valid its assessments of quality are if they rely solely on whether the assessment instruments have been administered efficiently. While the Government has stated that the Agency will focus on the processes underpinning quality, the Committee has no information so far as to whether universities will be challenged with the task of measuring the intellectual attainment of their graduates. On balance, the Committee believes it unlikely that AUQA will fulfill its intended role successfully.

5.92 Marginson has noted that over the last decade there has been less focus on the material conditions underlying quality in higher education than on the management of mechanisms of quality assurance. The justification for quality assurance lies in its utility in establishing standardised approaches, reduced error rates and guaranteed minima; its capacity to create a stronger focus on outcomes and a more reflective culture in general; and its utility in international marketing and global regulation. Quality assurance managed by academic units themselves – as distinct from quality assurance organised and managed at the institutional level – has the potential to enhance the evolution of academic disciplines. Institution-managed quality assurance techniques typically produce data 'demonstrating' broad-based excellence and continuous improvement, according to Marginson, and this casts doubts on the reliability and credibility of these processes. It is, according to Marginson, a matter of 'spin over substance': an aid to the marketing of universities.[71]

5.93 In support of Marginson's comments, the Committee notes in particular the experience of Professor Don Anderson, whose submission details some of his

71 Submission 81, Professor Simon Marginson, p.19

experience engaged in a DETYA sponsored project on quality assurance. Anderson states that during its three years of operation the Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (CQAHE) never asked universities the crunch question 'how can you know how good your degrees are?' Rather it focussed on topics only indirectly related to degree quality – courses and resources for teaching, graduation and employment rates, student staff ratios, the qualifications of staff, student services, or provisions for feed-back – none of these are unimportant but none gets close to the central issue.[72] While the success of graduates in obtaining employment or in proceeding to further study or in getting professional registration is important for graduates themselves, these indicators have more to do with the state of graduate labour markets and the professions than with the intellectual standards of degrees.

5.94 The Anderson, Johnson and Milligan report stated that there was currently no ready way for measuring changes in the intellectual standards of degrees. When they asked deans and vice-chancellors about their standards they were told about the destinations of graduates, or they asserted the equivalence of their courses with those of some high-status benchmark university. 'But when pushed they invariably had to admit that they had no direct way of knowing about changes in standards from year to year or between different courses; or how their university stacks up against others. Success by students in getting employment or admission to graduate schools is at best a weak indication of standards.'[73]

5.95 Anderson's views are shared to a degree by Professor Peter Karmel, who is skeptical about whether quality control agencies can serve any useful purpose in an educational institution. Karmel argues that discussions of quality in universities seldom specify quality characteristics in ways capable of precise definition or measurement. Moreover the benefits that a university education may be expected to confer on graduates, and which reflect the quality of that education, accrue not on graduation but over a lifetime and therefore are difficult to assess at any given point of time. He continues:

> The conceptual difficulties in defining what is meant by quality in higher education and in assessing it have lead to an emphasis on quality assurance mechanisms. Indeed this was the emphasis of the CQAHE in 1993-95 and is the remit of the newly formed AUQA. There is a risk that quality assurance procedures will be set up in institutions which will absorb considerable resources and be little more than rituals pursued to conform with the requirements of bodies external to them. A 'whole-of-institution' approach seems likely to reinforce this risk, since the heterogeneity of a university's activities makes variability of quality within the institution probable. Moreover, the existence of quality assurance mechanism is relatively unimportant if quality outcomes are in fact being achieved; if they are not being achieved the existence of quality assurance rituals is no guarantee of quality improvement. In all considerations of quality in universities the

72 Submission 92, Professor John Anderson, p.5

73 ibid., p.3

> fundamental role played by academic staff needs to be emphasized: The surest route to high quality outcomes is high quality staff.[74]

5.96 Anderson claims that his experience and that of his colleagues in interviews with staff and students in 1999 revealed instances where examiners have felt under pressure to lower standards for international students – pressures either from students directly or from authority within the university. More recently a report of The Australia Institute reached a similar conclusion. Such behaviour, while a matter for concern, is part of a larger problem – the general decline in the intellectual standard of university degrees over the last decade or two.

5.97 The Committee noted the claims of vice-chancellors who appeared before it that standard were being maintained, despite an actual or impending crisis. It believes such assertions to be ingenuous for the reasons that Professor Anderson has given. Such assertions made be compared to those made by company promoters and football coaches, aimed at reassuring clients, investors and supporters. Since intellectual excellence in teaching is the historical distinguishing characteristic of universities and gets a mention in most mission statements it might be expected that institutions would take pride in the maintenance of high standards and that they would have the means for checking on them. But, as Anderson notes, there is no Australian university with any systematic means for knowing about its standards and how they might be changing.[75]

5.98 Anderson made the obvious point of their being a variation across institutions; and within them between different fields. Probably the pass degree has suffered most. 'Arts and science departments take pride in honours degrees and will protect them while having to make do with less for the earlier years of undergraduate courses. The standard of research degrees is supposed to be protected by use of external assessors, but here also there are senior academics with grave concerns about the quality of the assessment process and the diligence with which some assessors do their work.'

5.99 Quality Assurance is supposed to be measured by Key Performance Indicators. According to Dr Bob Berghout, Senior Lecturer in Mathematics at the University of Newcastle certain unintended effects arise. Berghout questions a well-established method of securing evidence of quality; that is, the progressive improvement in teaching and administration. Improvement measured mostly by student opinion, as expressed by surveys, and by student achievements. Both of these are subject to manipulation, not only by the cynically minded but also by those simply interested in retaining their jobs or in getting on with their job, in a climate of increasing student-staff ratios and declining funding, and without a lot of extra, non-academic encumbrance.

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74 Submission 8a (Joseph Fisher Lecture in Commerce, Adelaide, 30 April 2001), Professor Peter Karmel, pp.15-16

75 ibid.

5.100 Berghout describes the mechanism proceeding roughly as follows:

> First, student achievement is most simply measured by pass, credit etc rates. Faced with ever larger classes and added administration, and demands to increase research 'output' one can most readily achieve an increase in these by pruning course content, simplifying exams and getting on with research. (This tends also to involve putting exams into multiple-choice format, a format that tests intuition, memory and knowledge rather than the ability to do extensive reasoning or express an argument coherently.) A side `benefit' is that students find the courses easier and thus make more favourable comments about both the courses and their lecturers, in surveys. Regrettably the brightest students tend to be turned off by this, rather than enthused, but they are in a minority. Has anyone investigated relationships between a student's performance and their response to questionnaires?[76]

5.101 The Committee considers it to be premature to comment with any assurance on the likely success or otherwise of AQUA. It has raised the very difficult issue of measuring intellectual worth, and of measuring academic and intellectual achievement against the stated goals and learning objective set by universities. It notes that the responsibilities of AQUA, and what we know of its methods, appear to involve universities in an acceptable – or tolerable – level of scrutiny and reporting. It notes that universities seem to know what they do not want from AQUA. In the case of the Queensland University of Technology, AQUA is accepted on condition that increased regulation is not on the basis 'of often unsubstantiated allegations, for example in the current situation related to perceptions of 'soft marking' for international standards.'[77] This begs the question of who is to assess whether claims are unsubstantiated, and what kind of test a university would like applied before it accepted the need for an investigation. If AQUA does not have this role, it is next to useless. As the Committee has noted earlier, consideration of the university's 'image' is likely to loom higher in the minds of university administrators than considerations more relevant to quality assurance. AQUA will need to come to terms with operating in this unsympathetic milieu.

5.102 Curtin University gives its support to AUQA so long as it does not introduce 'heavy-handed bureaucratic intrusion' as has happened in the United Kingdom. Curtin acknowledges that poorly performing elements within universities ought to be exposed if they cannot demonstrate improvement after a warning, but it urges AQUA to bear in mind that an entire university can have its reputation damaged by one poorly performing element.[78]

5.103 Anderson's concerns about the difficulties of measuring quality may be considered in relation to the views of Edith Cowan University, which submitted that quality in the first sense meant 'customer' satisfaction. In the second sense quality is

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76 Submission 9, Dr Bob Berghout, pp.1-2

77 Submission 26, Queensland University of Technology, p.3

78 Submission 207, Curtin University of Technology, p.19

about efficient processes and systems of measurement. The Committee explicitly rejects both of Edith Cowan's contentions.

5.104 'Quality' cannot be reduced to a series of processes. The term 'customer satisfaction' is a problematic concept of limited value in evaluating either quality or effectiveness in learning. A high approval rating from students, or in some cases their employers, indicates little about course quality, except that it is popular for a variety of reasons that may have nothing to do with rigour or challenge. In the wider commercial world the term 'customer satisfaction' has been used to mask the exact opposite: a diminution of choice, a reduction in flexibility, and other things which are determined for, rather than by, customers. Universities forfeit credibility in adopting the jargon and the trappings of the market. As one non-academic has argued:

> Quality, as an objective and as a marketing goal, works well in the private sector, but its application to the public sector is problematic. 'Customer focus' is a problematic concept because a basic function of the public sector is to balance competing interests and to regulate social contacts. The public sector is concerned with meeting the needs of citizens and managing the relationship of individual stakeholders to the wider community. It is much less concerned with meeting the private preferences of consumers.[79]

5.105 'Quality' meaning 'systems of measurement' makes even less sense. In fact, processes are meaningless in themselves. They are subordinate to the quality results and outcomes that they may or may not expedite. In response to the second Edith Cowan contention about quality, it is worth noting comment that arose following the resignation in August 2001 of the chief executive of the Quality Assurance Agency which monitors the performance of British universities. The resignation followed a 'revolt' by leading universities in Britain against the *modus operandi* of the Agency. A press report explained the central weakness of the Agency's remit: its quality assurance auditing process which diverts attention away from teaching toward more quantifiable territory:

> This stress on process is about systems of management rather than quality of teaching…Universities have become so obsessed with procedures that minimal creative energy is devoted to the content of teaching…Reports from colleagues suggest that inspectors have little interest in the content of teaching or issues relevant to specific academic disciplines. Their preoccupation is with the formal procedures of departments.
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> The agency, driven by the imperative of imposing a common framework on diverse institutions, is committed to teaching that can be quantified and audited. But once teaching is reduced to an auditable object, it is no longer a

79 Geoff Sharrock, 'Why Students Are Not(Just) Customers and Other Reflections on Life After George', *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, vol.22, no.2, 2000. p.151

> subtle, ambitious, critical and open-ended phenomenon that a good university education should, and used to, be.[80]

5.106 Edith Cowan University's submission stated that there is generally goodwill within the sector for the stated aims of the Australian University Quality Agency (AUQA), 'but it was crucial that the paradigm for quality adopted is able to take us into the future, rather than be influenced by vested interests with traditional views, that are clearly best suited by maintaining the past.' [81]Edith Cowan's idea of 'quality', and its tilt at 'traditionalism' in relation to quality, does not give the Committee much confidence that AUQA will fulfill the expectations that many in the higher education sector will have of it.

5.107 The Committee understands that whatever model of quality assurance is adopted, its operation relies on the degree of commitment which universities have to it.

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80 Frank Furedi, 'Agency of change', *The Guardian Education Weekly*, 28 August 2001

81 Submission 267, Edith Cowan University, p.5