

# Tertiary education quality perceptions in developed countries, during and after a half-century of internal evaluations

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## Abstract

Increased use of internal evaluations in tertiary education (TE) since the 1960s appears to have been insufficient to stem rising anxiety over TE quality. This study uses a mixed-methods approach to evaluate perceptions of TE-quality changes in developed countries. Relevant literature and other sources are analysed to identify trends and develop an overview. Responses to a questionnaire by academics in several Australian TE institutions provide a quantitatively-corroborated perspective on TE-quality changes. The vast majority of responding academics feel that TE quality: has declined over the past decades, continues to decline, and needs improvement. Responders also generally perceive that: 1) Revenue needs aggravate conflicts and crowd-out teaching inputs; and 2) An over-reliance on student evaluations can encourage unfair decisions that can impair pedagogy and teaching quality. Further research in TE quality is needed to provide a firm foundation for a policy response to enhance stakeholder confidence in TE quality.

*Key words:* Tertiary education, Perceived quality, Evaluation, Expectations

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## Introduction

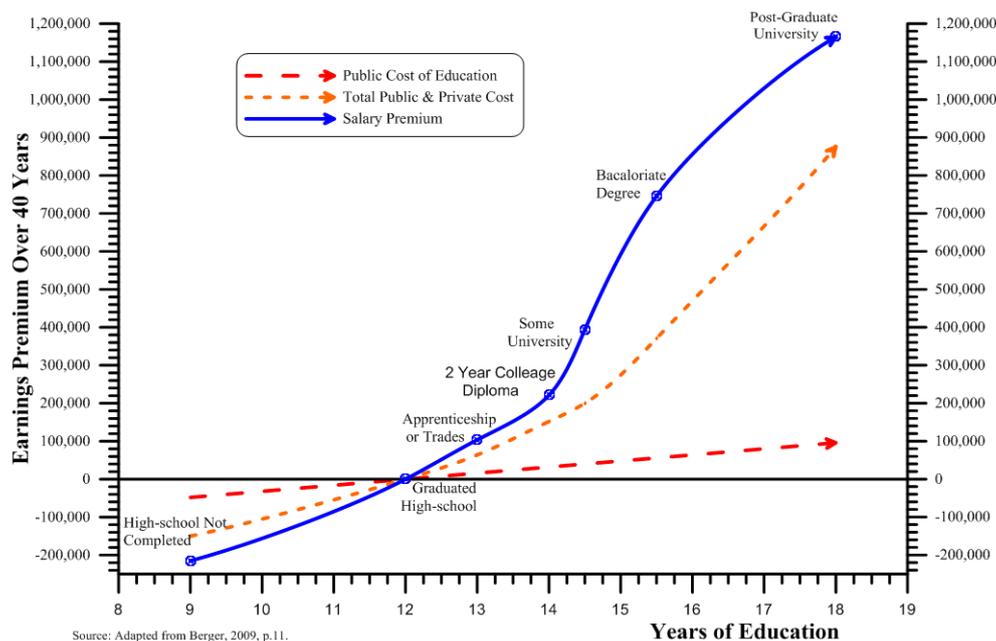
A historical context is vital for today's tertiary education (TE) quality evaluation issues, so as to reduce the risk of TE being committed to unsustainable decisions. For example, recent rapid expansions of TE in developed countries (DCs) are driving massive changes to the TE landscape. This expansion is occurring, to a large part, because many DC governments see TE as a cost-effective key to future prosperity, competitiveness, and enhanced well-being (e.g., Bradley et al. 2008; Wilton 2008; Taylor and Pick 2008). Gillard (2009) asserts:

“For Germany the target is 40 percent. For Sweden and the UK it is 50 percent. For the Irish, it's 72 percent. ... [In response, the Australian Government has ambitions] that by 2025, 40 percent of all [Australian] 25-34 year olds will have a qualification at bachelor level or above. Not just to have enrolled in higher education, but to have completed an undergraduate degree. Today that figure stands at 32 percent”.

An extensive often statistically-intensive literature has over five decades asserted that substantial socio-economic gains will accrue to increasing participation in education (e.g. Berger and Parkin 2009; Allen 1999). Such assertions are epitomized in Levin’s (2009 3) claim that:

“...more educated people are on average more productive workers and earn higher salaries. Their lifetime earnings are significantly higher than high school graduates, even taking into account the years of foregone income associated with more education, which means they pay more taxes. More than that, though, more education is also associated with just about every other imaginable social benefit, such as better health, greater longevity, and less criminality.”

Figure 1 (Wright and Hettihewa 2012 53) illustrates the substantial private and public net gains attributed to participation in TE.



**Figure 1: Estimates of cost and salary premium vs. years of education, in Canada**

However, the correlations depicted in Figure 1 reflect the past and their relevance to the future depends on a ceteris paribus assumption that will be violated if key factors change (e.g. if quality in a rapidly expanding TE system changes). Over the last 50 years, quality of education has been a rising concern in most DCs (e.g. Hirsch 1987; Trout 1997; Shattuck 1997; Bercuson et al. 1997; Reeves 2001; Allit 2005; Roman 2005; Amble 2005; Vedder 2005; Leigh 2005; Reedy 2006; Leef 2006; 2009; Gollin 2009; TPA 2009; Leigh and Ryan 2010). However, equally vociferous researchers argue in counter-point (e.g. Reynolds 2002; Ehrenberg 2002; Jamison, et al. 2007). Difficulties in gauging the true-state of TE quality centre on three themes:

1. *Hirsch’s (1987) concept of cultural literacy* suggests that (over time) as cultures evolve, shift, and change, cultural drift makes it difficult or even impossible to set meaningful measurement standards, over the time-frame needed to evaluate changes in educational standards and content,

2. *Gradual quality declines can be* little noticed until they reach a tipping-point,<sup>1</sup> and
3. *Difficult-to-quantify ranges of quality* always exist and vary, with time, across education providers and degrees provided (even within the same institution).

The above themes and interaction between them make it unfeasible to quantitatively determine changes that have occurred to the actual quality of Bachelor degrees over the last few decades. In recognition of those strictures, this study's objective is to assess the current perception of TE-quality, how it has changed over the past few decades and potential driving factors of those changes. Specifically, general perceptions are drawn from relevant literature, reports, and other sources. A questionnaire was used to evaluate the perceptions of TE-quality issues of academics from several Australian TE institutions. The questionnaire was also designed to elicit, from those respondents, their understanding of the drivers of quality changes in Australian TE. The analysis is based on simple statistical analysis and the demographics of those participating in the study are provided.

## The perceived quality of tertiary education

In a world with near daily wonders being produced by medical and scientific research it is hard for those committed to TE to think of universities as doing anything other than advancing on all fronts. However, those wonders are often generated by small clusters of excellence that represent only a tiny fraction of academic endeavour and those wonders still leave the question of average TE quality open. Shifting quality gradients across and within TE institutions and many other complexities, make it unfeasible to determine whether competency in TE has been declining. As a result, this study seeks to assess the perception of TE quality changes, which can be:

- Logically examined via inductive qualitative analysis,
- Broadly estimated by reviewing literature and specific opinions on education, and
- Estimated via questionnaires directed at academics.

Over the past 30 years, participation in TE has doubled in many DCs and quadrupled in others. Statistical logic dictates that half of any population is below that population's average. Thus, the large participation increases in TE, according to Murray (2008), suggest that degree content has been increasingly watered-down and/or an increasing number of students are struggling to complete degrees for which they *are ill prepared, ill suited, and from which they are unlikely to derive and/or provide great benefit.*

Over the decades, grade inflation (often a key signal of declining quality) has been a rising issue (e.g., Carney, et al. 1978; Kolevzon 1981; Millman, et al. 1983; Sabot and Wakeman-Linn 1991; Kuh and Hu 1999; Johnson 2003; Chan et al. 2007), suggesting that TE performance measures are eroding—several anecdotes support this assertion.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, if a frog is dropped into scalding water, it quickly jumps out, but if put into cool water that is slowly heated, it swims about, dumb, happy, and little worried, until it is cooked.

A decline in the quality of UK university graduates is suggested by Tarver (2007):

“After seven years of the new regime, I had the opportunity to compare the class of 1999 with the class of 1992. In 1992, I set ... [a] course in Artificial Intelligence requiring students to solve six exercises, including building a Prolog interpreter. In 1999, six exercises had shrunk to one; which was a 12 line Prolog program for which eight weeks were allotted for students to write it.”

Leef (2009) suggest that some higher-education curriculums may have deteriorated to where little or nothing is added to a student’s knowledge:

“Human capital gains occur when an individual *improves* his mental ability; when his learning enables him to better think through problems, produce value, communicate, evaluate options, and so on. Unfortunately, at many colleges and universities, students can easily pass courses with just the mental toolkit they possessed in high school.... [Thus] passing a college course no more indicates a human capital gain than just going to a gym indicates an improvement in physical fitness.” (Leef 2009 1).

Bauerlein (2008) asserts that:

“... even though Americans now have more formal education than ever – more classroom time, more degrees – the younger generation is quite poorly educated. It isn’t just that they don’t know much, but that they’re not much interested in acquiring knowledge and are ill-equipped to comprehend anything that isn’t written in the simplest of modes.”

Sperber (2000) cynically suggests that declining TE standards reflect a faculty-student non-aggression pact where light assignments and good grades are exchanged for expecting little effort from lecturers (who are focused on research).

Hodges and Garner (2009) suggest that when TE institutions are caught between *the pressure to recruit and retain students and requirements of quality assurance*—eventually: one, the other, or both constraints must yield. Funding in TE is clearly an issue—Healy and Trounson (2010) assert that the:

“...university sector faces an infrastructure funding gap of \$10 billion-\$15 bn to meet the Rudd [Australian] government's participation targets in the next 15 years, and there are now calls for an urgent re-examination of how the targets will be properly funded...”

## Employer perceptions of the quality of education

Increasingly, concerns over education quality expressed by many educators are being paralleled by employers, many of whom complain that increasingly they must resort to:

- Supplementary training to overcome deficiencies in the knowledge, skills, aptitudes, and attitudes of the new graduates they hire (Balch 2004; Amble 2005),
- Raising the education hurdles for job interviews (Amble 2005; Wilton 2008; and phone interview with Witt 2010), and
- Bringing back retirees, to be exemplars of work ethics, reliability, and personal integrity for younger new staff (Meyer 2006; SeniorMag 2010).

A UK private-business survey (Amble 2005 1) notes that literacy, numeracy and oral skills of school leavers recruited by business were poor or very poor and one respondent suggests:

"...qualifications are so invalidated that many employers now have the additional task of making their own assessment of any applicant, irrespective of their apparent qualifications".

A more recent UK survey shows that "...employers discard applications from students with less than an upper second [class honours]" (Crane, 2012 1).

Thus, while many TE institutions struggle to maintain quality and innovate in a rapidly changing world, there are perceived issues with TE. Even if TE quality is not declining, continually increasing participation in higher education enables employers to push entry-level education attainment for job seekers to ever-higher levels and, thus, force job seekers onto an education *treadmill-to-oblivion*.

## Perceived quality of school-leavers

Logically, the perceived quality of school-leavers is affected by the: 1) Entry-level of education employers demand of job seekers, and 2) Quality of education received. Wright and Hettihewa (2012) in estimating these factors generated the following equations:

$$D_{ed} = e^{(0.0082075[Year-1658])} - 1 \quad (1)$$

D<sub>ed</sub> = following-edge education  
Year = time line

$$E_Q = 101 - e^{0.05995(Year-1965)} \quad (2)$$

E<sub>Q</sub> = indexed competencies  
101 = anchor parameter

In order to be displayed on the same graph as eqn (2), eqn (1) was indexed to 1965 using:

$$I_{De} = (e^{(0.0073203[Year-1658])} - 1)100 / (e^{(0.0073203[1965-1658])} - 1) \quad (3)$$

I<sub>De</sub> = Indexed following-edge education

The multiple of eqns (2) and (3) represents the perceived quality of school leavers—eqns (2), (3) and their product are illustrated in Figure 2.

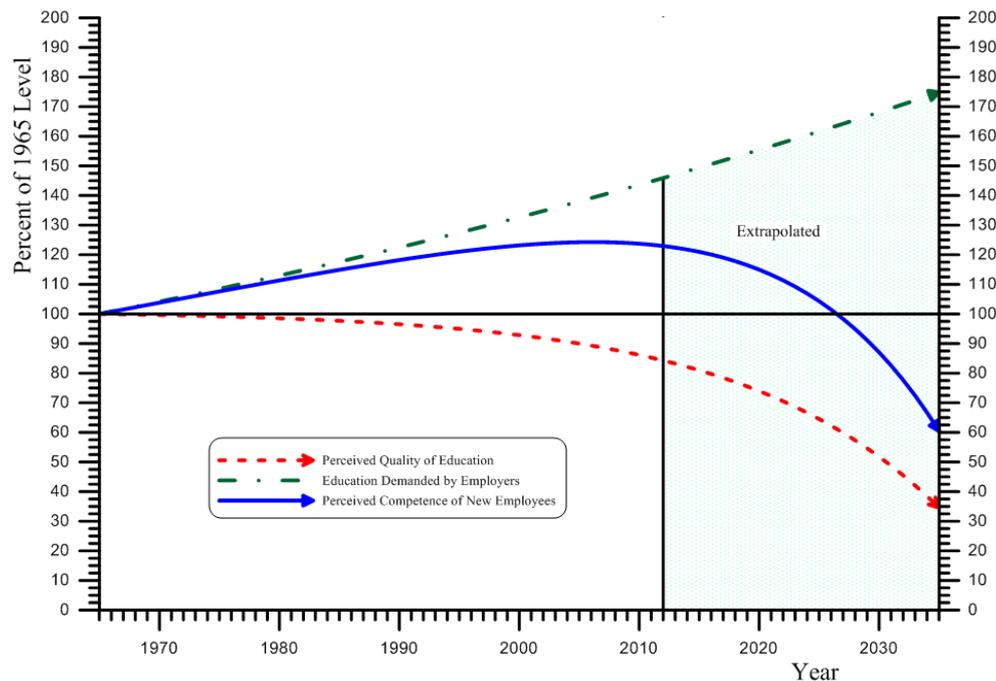


Figure 2: Perceived competency of following-edge new employees

If the relationships in Figure 2 are valid, then perceived TE-quality declines were more than offset from 1965 to 2006 by employers demanding increased entry-level education. As a result, the costs of any quality declines were mostly born by taxpayers and students. However, that buffering capacity peaked around 2006 and appears to be diminishing at an accelerating rate.

## Empirical analysis of the perceptions of tertiary education academics

A questionnaire with 61 questions was distributed to the 180 Business academics at six TE institutions (eight campuses) associated with the University of Ballarat (UB). *Lime Survey* was posted by the UB IT on the UB campus intranet and hardcopy was distributed on a random basis (stratified by campus) to seven campuses of five partner providers.<sup>2</sup> The response rate was 35.56 percent. The demographics of the responders are in Table 1 and 25 of the 61 questions (Table 2) are used in this study (the other questions provide background and/or cross-validate answers).

Based on questions 1-3, the vast majority of responding academics *strongly agree* or *agree* that the TE quality *has fallen over the past decades, continues to fall, and should rise* (respectively, 96.0, 95.3, and 100.0 percent). Potential causes of the perceived quality decline were sought by asking dispersed clusters of questions (i.e. the questions fit into clusters, but were dispersed throughout the questionnaire mitigate gaming by responders), included:

<sup>2</sup> Given that some of the campuses of the UB partner institutions (see footnote 3) are quite small, confidentiality needs precluded gathering the discipline details of the questionnaire participants.

- 1) Student Evaluations of Teaching and the Course:
  - a) Per questions 21, 19, & 20, the majority of responding academics (78.1 percent) believe that these evaluations *adversely affect teaching pedagogy and quality*, 71.4 believe that *they affect internal-promotions and awards*, and 60.7 percent think that the *affect is unfair*.
  - b) Per questions 17 & 18, the responding academics have mixed feelings about the effectiveness of Teaching and the Course evaluations with, respectively, 42.2 and 48.4 seeing value in them and, respectively, 42.3 and 43.8 seeing no value in them.
- 2) Student Input Issues:
  - a) Per questions 4 & 5, the vast majority of responding academics *strongly agree* or *agree* that student academic outcomes are diminished by *Non-academic commitments* and *quality issues with entry-level students* (respectively, 91.9 and 95.3 percent).
- 3) Allocation of Academic Time/effort:
  - a) Per questions 15 & 23, 74.6 percent of responding academics consider their administration loads to be too heavy and 82.3 percent want those loads reduced.
  - b) Per questions 22 & 24, 90.6 and 89.1 percent of responding academics would like to *devote more time to, respectively, teaching and research*.
  - c) Per question 16, 79.7 percent of responding academics feel *that teaching is being compromised by the emphasis on research in promotions*.
- 4) Revenue Needs Coming First:
  - a) Per question 11, 79.7 percent of responding academics felt that *revenue needs are being put ahead of the interests of students, program quality, and staff*.
- 5) Conflicts with Senior Administrators:
  - a) Per questions 8, 9 & 10, the responding academics felt that senior administrators tend to more concerned about *the interests of students* (42.6 percent) than *the interests of academics* (50.8 percent), but the academics were not overly concerned *that the interests of students would be put ahead of those of academics* (39.1 percent).
  - b) Per question 13, the responding academics appear to *trust their immediate supervisors* (83.6 percent), but *see senior administrators as being less than trust-worthy* (53.1). That lack of trust is compounded by only 20.3 percent of responding academics feeling that they are generally *fairly consulted about changes that affect them within their institution* (question 25).
- 6) Access to Training and Resources:
  - a) Per questions 5 and 6, only 9.3 and 33.9 percent of responding academics *strongly agree* or *agree* that their access to, respectively, training and resources are reasonable.

The vast majority of responding academics believe the quality of TE has declined over the past decades and continues to decline. All of the responding academics believe that the quality of education should improve. Revenue needs being put ahead of the interests of students, program quality, and staff is seen as a major

problem and that issue may contribute to several other issues. In particular, cost cutting appears to have shifted excessive administration to academics and that interferes with teaching and research. Revenue needs may increase conflict between academics and senior administration—nearly half of respondents feel that senior administrators are untrustworthy and only 1/5<sup>th</sup> feel fairly consulted about changes that affect their performance. A lack of ongoing training is a major issue—only 1/10<sup>th</sup> thinks the level of ongoing training is reasonable.

Teaching evaluations are one of the few feedback tools academics have to assess and improve their teaching. However, there are serious issues with how this tool is being adapted and applied to other uses. Specifically, over 78 percent of respondents believe they *adversely affect teaching pedagogy and quality* and just over 60 percent believe they *unfairly affect internal-promotions and awards*.

Student evaluation of teaching became a regular assessment tool in North American TE in the late 1960s and, currently, over 90 percent of US TE institutions assess teaching with some variant of student-evaluation mechanism (Miller 2009; Murray 2005). The rise in student evaluations as a measure of teaching quality has not stemmed the perceived decline in the quality of TE and an entire literature argues that they contribute little, damage pedagogy, and/or encourage grade inflation (e.g., Rodin and Rodin 1973; Everett 1977; Feldman 1978; Kaschak 1981; Koermer and Petelee 1991; Greenwald and Gilmore 1997; Felton et al. 2004; Isely and Singh 2005; Wright 2006; Ashraf 2008; Felton et al. 2008). The contribution of teaching evaluations to actual and perceived TE quality is an important issue for future research.

## Discussion, summary and conclusions

Allegations of ongoing competency declines in education are difficult to assess, even with the rising perception of problems. The many government programs to verify *Quality Assurance* in higher education and the need for many programs to gain accreditation from professional bodies (e.g. accounting, engineering, law) argue against declining competency in TE. However, Harvey (2005 268) notes that by “...the early 1990s, quality had evolved from a marginal position to being the foremost concern in British higher education alongside funding issues and expansion” —thus, if quality was not an apparent issue in 1990, why was it becoming so important? However, many quality assessment tools (e.g. ISO 9000) are less about quality outcomes than consistency and process documentation. Harvey (2005 272) suggests that quality “...evaluations involve game playing to place the evaluated programme or institution in the best possible light” and further asserts that:

“The more cynical view is that the huge quality superstructure is designed to hide a worsening academic base. Evaluations that rely on fitness for purpose tend to be reductionist, fragmenting the notion of quality rather than exploring the complex interrelationships that ultimately impact on the key stakeholders. They are deliberately disassociated from the politics of quality and are incapable of making any link between the quality monitoring procedures, the resource envelope, the student experience of learning and the range of accomplishments and standards of graduates” (Harvey 2005 274).

Clearly, quality is an issue in TE that is becoming ever more important as many DC governments (expecting any-and-all Bachelor degrees to enhance: incomes, competence, health/longevity and to reduce criminality) continue to fund and encourage participation in Bachelor programs. If these outcomes do not occur, governments, students, parents, and taxpayers may blame those in the TE sector.

After finding significant reasons for concern about the perceived quality trend, in the literature review and analysis of earlier studies, this study used a questionnaire to assess how academics in Australian Business Faculties and Schools feel about TE quality. The vast majority of responding academics feel that quality in TE: has declined over past decades, continues to decline, and should rise. The responding academics see much of the problem being driven by revenue needs and that cost-reduction efforts have shifted excessive administrative tasks on them and cut into teaching and research. Given that promotion is often more about research output than teaching excellence, teaching suffers a double-hit. Conflict with senior administration is a problem but it may arise from excessive cost-cutting. Thus, government efforts to expand education to cost-effectively resolve social issues may be a major driver of rising conflicts and shortfalls in TE.

The concern of Business academics that student evaluations of teaching and courses may damage TE pedagogy and quality is supported by management axioms. Specifically, *what gets measured, gets managed* (Willcocks and Lester, 1996) in combination with *rewarded behaviour gets repeated* (LeBouef, 1985) may drive academics to improve their evaluations by base means.<sup>3</sup> An even greater concern is that if academics believe that TE quality is falling, it may become a *self-fulfilling prophecy*.

While it is impractical to quantitatively test whether TE quality has declined, it is significant that education providers believe TE quality has declined, is declining, and should rise. There are a number of reasons to believe that stakeholders perceive that TE-quality declines are accelerating. Given that the rising use of quality evaluations has not reversed or stemmed those perceptions, more research is needed to evaluate the relationship between the use of quality evaluations and TE quality. Such research should look at more than the benign intent of the evaluations and should evaluate the effects of how they are actually used and how they are perceived to be used.

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<sup>3</sup> The axiom *what gets measured, gets managed* is often attributed to Peter Drucker. However, it likely a variant of LeBouef's (1985) axiom: *things that get measured are the things that get done*.

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