

# **A Survey of Student Standards in Economics in Australian Universities in 2003**

**Report prepared by  
The Economic Society of Australia**

**May 2004**



# Contents

Preface	3
Summary	4
I Introduction to Survey	7
II Basic Information: Economic Students and Staff Numbers	9
III Student Standards	11
IV Factors Determining Student Standards	18
V Policy Options and Practices	23
V1 Honours and Ph.D Students	27
VII Additional Comments	29
Appendices	
A Questionnaire for Survey of Student Standards in Economics in Australian Universities in 2003	32
B Textbooks used in Core Economics Courses	43

## Preface

Australian universities have been under considerable pressure over the last 10 or so years. The pressures included the expansion of the university sector following the incorporation of colleges of advanced education in the early 1990s, the reduction in public funding per student and the associated search for private funding, large increases in student numbers including large increases in international students, and higher student-staff ratios.

These and other pressures have produced concerns about student standards among some members of the Economic Society of Australia. It should be stressed however that these concerns are not held universally. Some Departments of Economics believe that they have been able to maintain and even to raise student standards despite these pressures.

In September 2003 the Central Council of the Economic Society of Australia resolved to conduct a survey into student standards in economics courses in universities. The survey had three main aims. These were to determine:

- the standards of work currently achieved by students of economics in Australian universities;
- some of the main factors that influence these standards; and
- policies for maintaining or improving standards in economics.

A survey questionnaire was sent to Heads of Economic Departments at 29 universities. Responses were received from 21 Departments. These included 6 responses from the Group of Eight metropolitan universities, 10 responses from other metropolitan universities, and 5 responses from non-metropolitan universities.

This report describes the nature and results of this survey. The results include quantitative assessments and qualitative comments on standards, their causes and possible policies. Responses to the survey are reported as accurately as possible and in full. The Society believes that many of these comments indicate important issues and attitudes. The Society has not attempted to impose its own judgement on the relative value of the comments made or censored any views expressed. As was agreed with the respondents, no universities or individuals are identified in this report.

This report was prepared by the Council's Honorary Secretary, Professor Peter Abelson, and reviewed by Professor Phil Lewis (Council President), Professor John Freebairn, Professor Allan Layton and Professor Paul Miller. The Council is grateful to Professors Freebairn, Layton and Miller for reviewing the survey responses and the report. The Council also thanks the Heads of Departments or their representatives for taking the time to respond to the lengthy questionnaire.

The Central Council of the Economic Society invites interested parties or persons to comment on any aspects of the survey. Comments should be emailed to [ecosoc@optushome.com.au](mailto:ecosoc@optushome.com.au) or posted to Ms. Jane Oldroyd, Administrator, Economic Society of Australia, P.O. Box 937, St. Ives, NSW 2075. Central Council will review in due course whether the survey results or reactions to the survey warrant any further actions by the Society.

Professor Peter Abelson (Hon.Secretary, Economic Society of Australia).

## Summary

The survey is designed to determine:

- the standards of work currently achieved by students of economics in Australian universities;
- some of the main factors that influence these standards; and
- policies for maintenance or improvement in standards in economics.

The survey focuses on three main categories of students. These are (i) students in first year economics courses, which often include large numbers of students doing these courses as part of other degrees, (ii) students in third year economics courses most of whom are presumably graduating with economics qualifications, and (iii) students in coursework Masters programs. The survey also seeks information on Honours and Ph.D students.

The Society sent the questionnaire to 29 Heads of Economics Departments and received responses from 21 Departments. These included 6 responses from departments in the Group of Eight metropolitan universities, 10 responses from other metropolitan universities, and 5 responses from non-metropolitan universities. Thus the responses may be regarded as representative of Australian universities.

The following are the main conclusions of the report. These conclusions are drawn mainly from answers to questions that lend themselves to quantification along with supportive qualitative responses. In this report we provide all the qualitative comments by respondents. Many of these comments are important and it is recommended that the report be read in full so that readers can draw their own conclusions from the material provided.

### **Economic students and staff numbers**

Most economics departments have over 1000 first year undergraduate students and nearly all have over 500 students. In third year, there are usually under 500 economics students and the median number is between 100 and 199 students.

International students typically constitute over 30 per cent of all students in all levels of economics studies, except in Honours degrees. The proportion of international students tends to be especially high in first year undergraduate studies and in Ph.D studies.

Of the 17 respondents reporting student-staff ratios, all but one reported an EFTS – staff ratio in excess of 20 and nine reported an EFTS – staff ratio over 30. Even allowing for increased employment of casual staff, these ratios appear to be high historically and high relative to many other faculties in universities.

## **Student Standards**

Respondents reported a broad distribution of student standards, especially among first year students. Seventeen of the 20 respondents relating to this issue reported that 30 per cent or more of their first year students are very good or good (defined in this survey as credit grade students or higher). On the other hand, 11 departments reported that 30 per cent or more of their first year students are poor or very poor (categories representing students deemed likely to fail their courses). Another 5 departments reported that between 20 and 29 per cent of students were in the poor or very poor categories.

The respondents reported a similar proportion of good or very good third year students but slightly fewer poor or very poor students. Assessments of students undertaking masters by coursework were more mixed, with respondents reporting a variety of experiences.

Overall, the survey responses suggest that standards in undergraduate courses have fallen. Respondents for thirteen departments consider that standards in first year courses have fallen compared with respondents for three departments who considered that standards have risen. Eight respondents consider that standards in third year courses have fallen, whereas only four respondents judged that they have risen.

On the other hand, in masters' courses, respondents for four departments judged that standards have risen compared with respondents for two departments that judged they have fallen.

Respondents were asked to state whether their assessments were based on experience or evidence. About two-thirds of the judgments are based on experience and the rest on evidence or a combination of experience and evidence. The evidence cited was most often an assessment of results over time. Some specific research on low student hours and poor literacy standards was also cited. There appears to be a case for more research into and evidence on student standards. However, the experience cited generally reflected many years of involvement with students.

## **Factors Determining Student Standards**

Several factors were deemed to affect standards. For first year students, out of 20 respondents, 15 considered that high student-staff ratios were important or very important, 14 rated poor English of international students as important or very important, and 13 considered that competition with other subjects had an important or very important impact on (lowering) standards. Qualitative responses indicated particular concerns about the way that business studies have resulted in lower standards.

Other factors that are assessed to contribute to lower standards in first year (where applicable) are low entry standards of international and local students and low student work hours. Several survey responses indicated that declining levels of student application are a major concern and an important determinant of standards.

Similar factors are considered important for third year undergraduate students. Here, poor English standards of international students, low student work hours, high student-staff ratios and competition with other subjects are commonly cited as important or very important factors in standards.

Views on standards of masters' coursework students are more mixed and there are fewer responses. The responses indicate some concern about entry standards and English standards. But given the small number of responses, generalisations are not appropriate.

### **Policy Options and Practices**

Preferred policies generally reflected respondents' judgments on the determinants of standards. For first year students, out of 20 respondents, 15 considered that lower student-staff ratios are important or very important, 14 cite higher English standards as important or very important, and 11 cite higher entry standards for international students as important or very important. Higher entry standards for local students were also considered important. There was some support for external accreditation or reviews of courses, but most respondents considered that external accreditation or reviews were of minor or no importance.

Policy preferences for third year students are similar. Lower student-staff ratios, higher entry standards for students (especially for international students) and higher English language requirements were cited as the most important policies. There was some support for external reviews of courses, but little support for and strong opposition to accreditation of degrees, and little support for the idea of a common external exam for third year students.

Entry standards and English language requirements are again an issue for Master's students, albeit that the sample of respondents is small. Again, there was little support for external reviews of any kind.

Thus the main themes of these responses are concerns about quality control on entry, the need for more resources, and the idea that each institution needs to do things in a way that best reflects the backgrounds and objectives of their particular students.

### **Honours and Ph.D Students**

Most departments reported high student standards in Honours and Ph.d programs. An important factor is high student and staff motivation in these courses.

## I Introduction to Survey

The survey has three main objectives — to determine:

- the standards of work currently achieved by students of economics in Australian universities;
- some of the main factors that influence these standards; and
- policies for maintenance or improvement in standards in economics.

In developing the survey, the Society recognized that the university economics market comprises several sub-markets, which are not necessarily subject to the same factors. In particular it was believed that there may be significant differences between first and third year undergraduate students. First year students often include large numbers doing economics courses as part of other degrees. On the other hand, most students in third year economics courses are presumably planning to graduate with an economics qualification. Students studying for Honours, Masters and Ph.D qualifications are likewise seeking an economics qualification but may exhibit different standards (relative to what might be thought appropriate) and be subject to different constraints.

Accordingly, the Society designed the survey to elicit answers about student standards for the main sub-markets. Special attention is given to first and third year undergraduate students and masters by coursework students. The survey also provided an opportunity for respondents to provide information on Honours and Ph.D students.

The survey questionnaire is reproduced in full in the Appendix. The main features are briefly summarized below.

In order to provide perspectives on the nature and size of these sub-markets, **Section A** of the survey sought information on the numbers of students taking economics courses in various undergraduate years and in postgraduate courses, the proportion of international students in each year, and student-staff ratios. Respondents were asked to provide approximate numbers and not to do detailed research to obtain answers.

**Section B** of the survey addressed the standards of work achieved by first and third year undergraduates and masters by coursework students. In order to assess standards of work achieved, respondents were asked to use the following guidelines.

- Very good – a high distinction or distinction standard of work, 75 plus out of a 100
- Good – a credit standard of work, 65-74 out of a 100
- Satisfactory – work that is worth 50-64 out of a 100
- Poor – work that is worth 40-49 out of a 100
- Very poor – work generally below 40 out of 100

Respondents were asked to judge the percentage of students in each of these five categories and whether standards had changed over the last 10 years. They were also invited to say whether their answers were based on their experience or on some specific pieces of evidence.

In Section B, as elsewhere in the survey, respondents were invited to provide additional comments if they wished either to clarify their quantitative answers or to provide additional qualitative material that was not explicitly asked for in the preceding questions.

**Section C** seeks to determine the major factors that influence the standards achieved by first and third year undergraduates and masters by coursework students. The questionnaire seeks responses on eight or nine possible factors in each case and provides respondents with the opportunity to describe other factors that might affect standards. The questionnaire also asks respondents if departments have adopted special strategies to achieve desired standards.

**Section D** seeks to determine views on policies for the maintenance or improvement of standards achieved by first and third year undergraduates and masters by coursework students. The questionnaire provides some ten possible policies for each student group and provides respondents with the opportunity to describe other policies.

**Section E** asks respondents for comments on standards of work achieved, determining factors, and possible strategies for Honours and Ph.D students. It also invites final comments on any aspect of the survey.

The questionnaire was sent to Heads of Departments at 29 universities which are known to run economics courses, most of which also provide economics degrees. The Society received 22 responses from Heads of Departments or their representatives from 21 universities. The Society received two separate responses from large independent campuses in one university, which are treated as two separate responses in our analysis below.<sup>1</sup>

The 21 universities responding included 6 of the 8 major metropolitan universities<sup>2</sup>, 10 responses from other metropolitan universities, and 5 responses from non-metropolitan universities. This may be considered a representative cross-section of the 29 universities in the survey.

The degree of detail in the responses varied. In some cases, this reflected the limited courses and number of students in the responding institution. In other cases, this doubtless reflected the time and interest of the respondent.

In this report we show the numbers responding to each quantitative question. We also report all the qualitative comments by respondents. We do this partly because we believe that many of these comments are important. Also, the Society has attempted to avoid imposing judgment on the relative importance of these comments. No individuals or individual institutions are identified in this report.

---

<sup>1</sup> In effect there were usable 22 responses from 21 Departments of Economics.

<sup>2</sup> The self-titled group of eight are Adelaide University, Australian National University, Melbourne University, Monash University, Sydney University, University of New South Wales, University of Queensland, and University of Western Australia.

## II Basic Information: Economic Students and Staff Numbers

As noted above, the first part of the survey sought information on the approximate numbers of students taking economics courses, the proportion of international students, and student-staff ratios in each university.

Table 1 shows the number of departments reporting various numbers of economics students.<sup>3</sup> For example, for first year students, 12 respondents indicated that there were over 1000 economics students, 8 respondents indicated that there were between 500 and 999 students, and 2 respondents indicated that there were between 200 and 499 students. For Ph.D students, one university reported over 50 students, three respondents reported between 30 and 49 students, and so on.

The table shows that most economics departments have over 1000 first year students and nearly all have over 500 students. In third year, there are usually less than 500 economics students and the median number is between 100 and 199 students.

**Table 1 Number of departments reporting various numbers of economics students**

Economics sub-market	Numbers of economics students									Total (a)
	1000+	500- 999	200- 499	100- 199	50- 99	30- 49	20- 29	10- 19	<10	
First year	12	8	2							22
Third year		2	6	7	3	2	0	1		21
Honours					1	0	4	4	6	15
Masters (coursework)	1	0	2	2	1	1	2	2	1	12
Ph.d					1	3	2	5	10	21

(a) The number of respondents varied according with the question.

### The following are respondent comments on student numbers.

- We deliver large service subjects plus a core of B.Ec. (hons) students.
- We mainly provide service teaching for undergraduate and post-graduate. Numbers taking an economics major are relatively low.
- First year economics is a ‘foundation unit’ for all Business students.
- Total undergraduate includes enrolment of 300 students in first year quantitative methods course for which school of economics is responsible – compulsory in B.Ec and B. Finance degrees.
- We don’t have an economics degree. The economics major is only available by distance mode.

<sup>3</sup> These numbers are indicative, but we believe broadly accurate. One respondent observed that this information would be better obtained from the university. ‘I am a low-level teacher in a complex institution. If you mean to survey me, ask questions that relate to me. The people who know the correct answers to the questions above are unlikely to know much useful about the experience of undergraduate education’.

- The university has a specialist Land Economy program with under 50 students.
- Around 1100 non economics and finance students take the one semester service unit Introductory Economics. Here the best is done that can be done with a one semester subject.
- Economics students are either internal or external, full-time or part-time. As a general rule of thumb, around 20 per cent of students are internal and the remaining 80 per cent external.
- Dependent upon services courses; have recently cut several economics elective units; have added one more theory unit at 3<sup>rd</sup> year level.

Table 2 shows the estimated percentages of international students. International students typically make up over 30 per cent of all students in all levels of economics studies, except in Honours degrees. The proportion of international students tends to be especially high in first year undergraduate studies and in Ph.D studies.

**Table 2 Number of departments reporting international students as estimated percentage of total students**

Economics sub-market	International students as % of total students						Total
	50+	40-49	30-39	20-29	10-19	<10	
First year	3	1	6	5	3	1	19
Third year	2	0	7	3	3	1	16
Honours	0	0	3	0	2	3	8
Masters (coursework)	1	2	2	0	2	2	9
Ph.d	5	1	0	3	2	0	11

**The following are respondent comments on the numbers of international students.**

- Although percentage of overseas students is not available for later year economics courses, this percentage falls sharply after first year.
- Fewer international students in B. Econ.
- Although half the undergraduates in years 1 and 2 are overseas students (who reside permanently overseas), there is no overseas student in the Honours Degree. This is a significant indicator of relative standards of local and international students. On the other hand, nearly 90 per cent of Masters' students are overseas students.

Table 3 shows reported ratios of effective full-time students (EFTS) to staff. Of the 17 departments responding to this question, all but one reported an EFTS – staff ratio in excess of 20 and nine departments reported an EFTS – staff ratio above 30. Even allowing for increased employment of casual staff, who may not be allowed for by these figures, these ratios are historically high and appear to be high relative to many other faculties in universities.

**Table 3 Reported EFTS-Staff ratios**

	EFTS / staff ratio					Total
	40+	30-39	25-29	20-24	<20	
Number of respondents	5	4	4	3	1	17

### **The following are respondent comments on EFTS – staff ratios**

- Not only has the number of students per FTE staff member increased quite significantly over the last 15 years, but the quantum of work per EFTSU has also increased (as Universities have competed with each other by offering more and more academic and administrative services to students). Also, international students need and ask for more intense assistance.
- If casual staff (employed mainly for tutoring in first year subjects) are included, the staff student ratio would fall to around 1:20.
- Massive shift to service courses; virtual freeze on staff positions over the past 10 years; we remain viable (financially) due to offshore teaching.
- We have one level D, 2 level C, 4 level B, 2 level A staff – a very high student/staff ratio.
- Staff members falling: student load steady.

### **III Student Standards**

Table 4 shows how economics departments rated their 2003 first and third year undergraduate students and their masters by coursework students. Heads of departments were asked what percentages of all current students achieved a very good, good, satisfactory, poor, or very poor standard. The guidelines for these standards are described on page 7 above of this report.

The numbers in Table 4 show the number of departments responding that fell into the category shown. For example, taking first year students, two departments reported that 30-39% of these students are very good, 14 departments reported that 10-19% of students are very good, and 4 reported that less than 10 per cent are very good. At the other end of the spectrum for first year students, 5 departments reported that fewer than 10 per cent of students were very poor, 11 reported that between 10 and 20 per cent were very poor, and 4 reported that between 20 and 29 per cent were very poor.

To facilitate interpretation, the table also groups the ‘very good’ and ‘good’ students together (all students likely to achieve a credit or better) and the ‘poor’ and ‘very poor’ students together (those students likely to fail by getting less than 50 per cent). This highlights the broad distribution of student standards, especially among first year students. Seventeen of the 20 departments answering this question reported that 30 per cent or more of their first year students are good or very good. On the other hand, 11 departments reported that 30 per cent or more of their first year students are poor or very poor. A further 5 departments reported that between 20 and 29 per cent of their students were in the poor or very poor category.

**Table 4 Number of departments reporting standards of economics students in 2003**

<b>Standard</b>	<b>Percentage of first year students</b>					<b>Total</b>
	<b>40%+</b>	<b>30-39%</b>	<b>20-29%</b>	<b>10-19%</b>	<b>&lt;10%</b>	
Very good	0	2	0	14	4	20
Good	0	4	10	6	0	20
Satisfactory	12	5	2	1	0	20
Poor	0	0	6	12	2	20
Very poor	0	0	4	11	5	20
Very good/good	6	11	1	2	0	20
Satisfactory	12	5	2	1	0	20
Poor /very poor	1	10	5	4	0	20

  

<b>Standard</b>	<b>Percentage of third year students</b>					<b>Total</b>
	<b>40%+</b>	<b>30-39%</b>	<b>20-29%</b>	<b>10-19%</b>	<b>&lt;10%</b>	
Very good	2	1	5	8	3	19
Good	4	6	7	2	0	19
Satisfactory	9	6	2	0	2	19
Poor	0	0	2	8	9	19
Very poor	0	1	0	1	17	19
Very good/good	13	4	2	0	0	19
Satisfactory	9	6	2	0	2	19
Poor /very poor	1	0	5	9	4	19

  

<b>Standard</b>	<b>Masters coursework students</b>					<b>Total</b>
	<b>40%+</b>	<b>30-39%</b>	<b>20-29%</b>	<b>10-19%</b>	<b>&lt;10%</b>	
Very good	2	2	1	4	1	10
Good	2	1	3	3	1	10
Satisfactory	3	0	6	1	0	10
Poor	0	0	2	6	2	10
Very poor	0	0	3	1	6	10
Very good/good	6	2	1	1	0	10
Satisfactory	3	0	6	1	0	10
Poor /very poor	2	1	1	4	2	10

The departments reported a similar proportion of good or very good third year students but fewer poor or very poor students. The assessments of masters coursework students were more mixed, with departments reporting a variety of experiences.

Table 5 provides more summary statistics. The numbers are the means of the responses, not weighted for numbers of students in departments or other factors. Taking the mean of the 20 departmental responses for first year students, 12.7 per cent of all students are very good and 12.2 per cent are very poor. The estimated proportion of good and very good students in third year (48.1 per cent) is much higher than in first year (34.8 per cent). Consistent with this, the estimated proportion of poor and very poor students in third year (14.1 per cent) is also much lower than in first year (27.2 per cent). In the Masters courses, an estimated 47.4 per cent are good or very good students and 19.6 per cent are poor or very poor students. Of course, there is significant variability within the sample respondents.

**Table 5 Estimated mean percentages of students in each standard (% of students)**

Standard	First year	Third year	Masters (coursework)
Very good	12.7	17.7	22.9
Good	22.1	30.4	24.5
Satisfactory	37.9	35.0	33.0
Poor	15.0	9.5	10.9
Very poor	12.2	4.8	8.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Heads of departments were also asked to compare present and past student standards over the last 10 years on a five-point scale from ‘risen significantly’ to ‘fallen significantly’ — see Table 6. The responses suggest that, overall, standards in undergraduate courses have fallen. Thirteen departments consider that standards in first year courses have fallen compared with three that considered standards have risen. Eight departments consider that standards in third year courses have fallen, whereas four judge that they have risen.

On the other hand, in masters’ courses, four departments judged that standards have risen compared with two departments that judged they have fallen.

**Table 6 Changes in Student Standards over last 10 years**

Sub-market	Changes in student standards					Total responses
	Risen significantly	Risen a little	Stayed constant	Fallen a little	Fallen significantly	
First year	1	2	3	10	3	20
Third year	2	2	6	8	0	18
Masters	0	4	2	1	1	8

**The following are respondent comments on changes in standards.** Most of the comments on changes in standards reflected perceived falls in standards.

- Students at the lower end of the distribution have declined over the past 10 years. The top end remains very good.
- Students written skills have fallen away over the last 10 years. General preparation in mathematics has always been inadequate.
- Average must have fallen due to higher retention rate of students through post-compulsory education who are potential university entrants.
- From my own experience of teaching students the overall standard fell in the late 1980’s but there were still a number of good students. I think the standard has stayed more or less the same over the last 10 years. The students who stick it out to the third year are generally good as this is indicated by the 100% employment rate for our Applied Economics degree graduates.
- There are a group of students who can, with work, get 65-75, but there are fewer of the really good students.

- The exam performances are mediocre. Students seem not to be interested in reading reams of material, even books.
- While the quality of the intake has declined significantly with Faculty shifting its investment to China and Indonesia where English language skills are poor, staff have two options: hold the pass rate steady and allow quality to fall or allow the fail rate to rise. I have chosen the latter strategy at ... Micro fail rate in 1999 was 12 per cent, in 2003 it was 38 per cent. With financial pressure on departments and increased job insecurity, it would not be surprising if some staff chose the former option.
- Among direct entry second year students via a University approved private college, failure rates have been about 66 per cent on all second year courses.

### Experience and evidence

In an attempt to determine the basis for these assessments of student standards, respondents were asked to state whether their assessments were based on experience or evidence. Table 7 summarises the answers. As can be seen, about two-thirds of the judgments are based on experience and the rest on evidence or a combination of experience and evidence. Generally the evidence cited was an assessment of results over time. There has been little specific research into student standards. This may indicate a gap in, and need for, research in this area. However, in many cases the cited experience reflects years of involvement with students.

**Table 7** Judgments based on experience or evidence

Sub-market	Judgments based on			Total
	Experience	Evidence	Experience /evidence	
First year	13	2	4	19
Third year	14	2	3	19
Masters	6	1	1	8

### Respondent comments on experience and evidence for standards of first year students

- Experience of members of the department over that period. Greater emphasis on high-quality teaching and innovative teaching methods (eg. now use best lecturers in first year subjects); introduction of modern material into curriculum; no decline in average quality of students; greater work effort and time by student; new problem-based tutorial methods have developed capacity to apply economics.
- We have a quality group that discusses results and subject performances and this seems to be the general impression.
- I was Head of School at ... from 1994 to 2000 and Head of School for the ... from 2001-2003. The major difficulty for our School was in ... the mid 1990's, when (entry) cut-offs averaged around 55-65. In addition there was high student attrition into other business degree programs that were seen as easier during first year. However, since around 2000 (entry) cut-offs have been trending up (between a low of 66 at ... Campus to a high of 82 at ... Campus in 2003). In addition the new restructured degree system used at ... means that students have to obtain three credits out of their first four subjects to transfer to another degree, which has virtually eliminated competition problems. This means that we now have

cohorts of higher ability, and greater stability in numbers. The School also has ongoing subject quality review groups in Microeconomics, Macroeconomics, Econometrics and miscellaneous subjects. Experimentation is continually taking place with teaching methods and additional support for students such as student mentoring etc. Consequently, first year standards have been rising steadily over the past four years or so.

- Evidence comes from statistics of results. Experience is of teaching first year macro in late 1980's and again over past two years.
- In the last 15 years I have set assessment and examination for first year economics students. In my assessment I have found on the whole the level of achievements of students in the first year to have fallen marginally based on the average marks obtained in the various written assessments and the pass rate in the final examination.
- Interviews with experienced undergraduate teachers.
- Same coordinator for many years; results data.
- Teaching experience in ECON101 recently and 27 years worth of introductory economics teaching experience.
- Question 1: Based on grade distributions; Question 2: Less really enthusiastic students who aspire to be practicing economists.
- The content of units has been simplified.
- (1) Observation of understanding of basic principles. (2) Lack of attendance at tutes and lectures which has been statistically tested to show correlation to poor performance. (3) Comparison of results over time.
- Grades awarded, academic research student surveys that register apathy, disinterest and incomprehension of economics.
- Discussions with first year lecturers. Standards in second year courses have fallen. The failure rate in one core second year course has risen from 20 per cent ten years ago to over 40 per cent in each of last four years. Failure rates in other second year economics courses often exceed 30 per cent.
- My own experience as unit leader in micro at --- from 1961-1998 and at --- 1999-2004.

#### **Respondent comments on experience and evidence for standards of third year students**

- Experience as member of Department over that period. Higher quality teaching and development of modern curriculum; shift to problem-based assessment instead of essays in core subjects; greater amount of work by students.
- Evidence comes from statistics of results. Experience of teaching in third year of economics major during relevant period.

- From my own experience of teaching students, the overall standard fell in the late 1980's but there were still a number of good students. I think the standard has been more or less the same over the last 10 years. The students who stick it out to the third year are generally good as this is indicated by the 100 per cent employment rate for our... graduates.
- I teach a third year unit.
- Interviews with experienced third year teachers.
- Informal discussions with lecturers.
- Cohort standards are rising steadily as measured by (entry) cut-offs and the School has ongoing subject quality review groups in Microeconomics, Macroeconomics, Econometrics and Miscellaneous subjects. In particular for most second and third year subjects textbooks are supplemented by handbooks of key readings, designed to introduce students to new and alternative perspectives, and second year subjects have optional additional revision tutorials to boost learning outcomes in core units. Consequently, third year standards have been rising significantly over the past four years or so.
- I teach 300/400 units and have 27 years worth of experience.
- Personal teaching.
- Higher requirements made by staff in student assessment.
- The content of units has been simplified.
- Observation of ability to undertake high order analysis.
- Analysis of results and grading work. Writing skills have deteriorated.
- English competency is less of a problem as the poor students tend to be excluded while others improve their language skills.
- Quality of graduates in some years has been higher than in other years. Enthusiasm of 3<sup>rd</sup> year students remains high.
- Teaching on two third year courses. Failure rates have risen significantly in third year courses across the Division. Some large third year courses in accounting now have failure rates over 30 per cent, which used to be extremely rare.

#### **Respondent comments on experience and evidence for standards of masters students**

- Experience as member of Department over this period. Increase in average quality of students; greater emphasis on teaching quality; higher proportion of full-time students.
- Evidence is statistics of results. Experience is indirect but clear impression and expectation of staff that graduate teaching is to maintain established standards.
- Interviews with relevant staff.

- Years of experience has given me this view. I think foreign students who have inadequate English are a big source of the problem. The collapse of effective high schooling in Australia is another big problem.
- Communication with teachers.
- Observation of abilities and comparison of results over time. Most of the students are MBA students and some are very poor quality.
- New course in the past years so a bit early to judge.
- Masters students are allowed to take two elective undergraduate courses. In recent years the *median* mark of Masters' students doing these undergraduate courses has been a pass. Most Masters' students achieve, at best, mediocre undergraduate standards. Few achieve credits or higher grades. From experience in teaching in Masters' courses, many students have little comprehension of basic economic material.

**Responses to final question on standards 'do you have any other comments on the standards of work achieved by undergraduate or masters by coursework students in economics?'**

- Standards have been maintained but the nature of the courses has changed to reflect a higher 'business' orientation of the faculty and a proportion of the students we teach being Economics majors.
- Standards are low and falling.
- For undergraduate students there is often a real reluctance to get to grips with theory. Real understanding is quite poor.
- Two surveys of students (one by me and one by the Division) found that 25% of all students work less than 3 hours a week, and 60% work less than 6 hours a week, per 3-credit point course for which the University used to expect 12 hours per week. The University has now reduced the guidelines to 9 hours per week partly because of these surveys, but does not enforce (even) these lower standards.
- In a simple vocabulary test devised by the Linguistics Department for a large second year economics course, the vocabulary skills of 37 per cent of all students (and for over half of international student) were found to be so deficient that, on language skills alone, the Linguistics Department predicted that these students were 'highly likely' to fail the course.

## IV Factors Determining Student Standards

In Section C of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to rate various factors that might affect student standards by their importance — as very important, important, minor importance, not important or not applicable.<sup>4</sup> As noted in the questionnaire, questions 15, 17 and 19 focused on potential causes of low standards for first and third year undergraduates and masters coursework students respectively. In questions 15(a), 17(a) and 19(a), respondents were invited to nominate other important determinants of standards. In questions 16, 18 and 20, respondents were asked what strategies his/her department has taken to achieve desired standards for the respective student groups.

Consistent with previous findings, most concerns were expressed about first year students. In this category, out of 20 respondents, 15 considered that high student-staff ratios were important or very important, 14 rated poor English of international students as important or very important, and 13 considered that competition with other subjects had an important or very important impact on (lowering) standards. Qualitative responses indicated particular concerns about the way that business studies have resulted in lower standards.

Other factors that are assessed to contribute to lower standards in first year (where applicable) are low entry standards of international and local students and low student work hours. This last factor may be under-reported in the responses shown in Table 8 because some respondents apparently interpreted low student work hours to refer to expected work hours rather to work hours done. Many comments in the survey responses indicated that declining levels of student application are a serious concern and an important determinant of standards.

Not surprisingly, similar factors are considered important for third year undergraduate students. Here, poor English standards of international students, low student work hours, high student-staff ratios and competition with other subjects are commonly cited as important or very important factors in standards.<sup>5</sup>

Views on standards of masters' coursework students are more mixed and there are fewer responses (see Table 8). The responses indicate some concern about entry standards and English standards. But given the small number of responses, generalisations are not appropriate.

---

<sup>4</sup> The 'not important' category was intended to denote a factor that was potentially relevant but not important, whereas 'not applicable' was intended to denote a factor that was not relevant. This intended distinction was not always clear to respondents.

<sup>5</sup> Surprisingly, respondents did not link high student-staff ratios strongly with university cross subsidies.

**Table 8 Numbers of respondents citing factors affecting standards of economics students**

	Very Important	Impor-tant	Minor importance	Not important	Not applicable	Total
<b>First year students</b>						
Low entry standards local students	5	4	3	4	3	19
Low entry standards int. students	6	3	7	1	3	20
Poor English of international students	8	6	5	0	1	20
University standards on failure rates	1	2	6	9	1	19
University cross subsidies	2	3	4	6	5	20
Low student work hours	5	3	3	5	3	19
High student-staff ratios	5	10	2	2	1	20
Competition with other subjects	8	5	4	2	1	20
<b>Third year students</b>						
Low entry standards local students	0	4	4	3	4	15
Low entry standards int. students	2	3	6	1	3	15
Low standards private transfers	2	1	6	3	3	15
Poor English of international students	4	4	5	2	2	17
University standards on failure rates	1	1	6	5	2	15
University cross subsidies	1	1	1	6	5	14
Low student work hours	3	3	2	2	5	15
High student-staff ratios	2	5	3	1	4	15
Competition with other subjects	2	4	5	1	3	15
<b>Masters coursework students</b>						
Low entry standards local students	2	0	2	2	0	6
Low entry standards int. students	3	0	2	1	0	6
Poor English of international students	2	2	2	0	0	6
University standards on failure rates	0	0	3	1	1	5
University cross subsidies	0	0	2	2	2	6
Low student work hours	1	0	2	1	2	6
High student-staff ratios	0	4	2	0	0	6
Competition with other subjects	0	2	1	1	1	5
Joint with other Masters degrees	1	0	0	2	3	6

**The following are respondent comments on factors influencing first year standards.** Note that the ordering of the comments below broadly follows the ordering of the factors in Table 8.

- Really, highly variable quality (of overseas students) among those who have met the (entry) standards.
- Students are functionally illiterate because standards in Australian High Schools have collapsed.
- Less than adequate English language standards and an inability to construct logical arguments are also problems for domestic students as well and suggest high school preparation is less adequate than say 25-30 years ago. Abilities with computers are no substitute for the ability to think soundly. Also, automatic credit for some private Associate Diploma providers seems to be a problem.
- Low student hours per credit point due at least in part to greater hours of paid employment by students.

- Lower standards set in business courses.
- University policies constraining failure rates are not overt, but are felt.
- The university has guidelines constraining failure rates but these are not currently binding. If they were binding, they could be a cause of low standards.
- There is a decline in a culture of study whereby many students see getting by with minimum effort the norm. Often study is a second or third priority to other activities.
- Percentage of students engaged in full time, or high hours part-time, work. Change in attitude — university is something ‘done on the side’ and learning is something you receive because you pay for it, not something you work towards.
- Students pressure to work; grade inflation in other subjects; lack of visible career paths for economics students.
- Part-time work commitments.
- Change in student body with most working and devoting less time to study.
- Trend away from full/part-time tutors to sessional tutors. Increasing focus on grant applications and research at the expense of commitment to teaching has led to a lower quality.
- We are in competition with an ever-enlarging range of ‘business’ subjects that have little focus on analysis and that have very high success rates (sometimes with over 50 per cent of students obtaining high distinctions). Not only does this make it hard to retain students in economics, it also sets a low standard of student expectation of what is required to succeed in a university course.
- In my opinion, the primary driver for low performance in economic classes here is low expectations by students, staff, the university, employers, parents, that is by society in general. So, in what sense can the standards be considered low?

**The following are respondent comments on strategies to achieve desired standards of work for first year undergraduate students in economics courses.** It is evident from these comments that departments have put considerable thought and effort into teaching.

- We do not lower standards in response to the conditions listed in the table (8) above.
- Nil - standards haven’t changed.
- The department has committed significant resources to teaching methods in first year courses.
- The School has ongoing subject quality review groups in Microeconomics, Macroeconomics, Econometrics and Miscellaneous subjects. Experimentation is continually taking place with teaching methods and additional support for students such as student

mentoring, etc. Consequently, first year standards have been rising steadily over the past four years or so.

- (a) We have reduced our demands on students a little, but not much, and we have retained the focus on an analytical approach to the discipline.
- (b) We use our best teachers in first year classes (one of them was nominated by the students for a vice-chancellors teaching award)
- (c) We put more pressure than previously on students to work continuously with increased emphasis on ongoing assessment.
- (d) We are pretty fussy about the quality of the tutors employed and don't automatically give casual tutoring to graduate students.
- (e) We maintain failure rates that are high relative to general faculty standards and suffer a lot of grief from the dean.
  
- Provision of lecture notes (etc) at the commencement of semester. Subject quality review meetings. Electronic assistance online.
  
- Better teaching strategies.
  
- We have always been very successful from putting lots of high quality effort into our first year teaching.
  
- We have taken to running extra – at our own school cost – ‘drop in’ tutorials in Math and Stats. We have also written an intro Maths/Stats manual to assist them and put it on the Web. ... no longer has formal pre-requisites and so students doing a B.Bus (and therefore an Economics Major) may not have done sufficient Maths. Of course, we are also making additional use of on line teaching technology to give greater learning opportunities to students and to help them learn at their own pace, etc
  
- 1. Peer assisted learning program. 2. Maths introduction course. 3. Essay writing instruction.
  
- More student assistance (but systematic, not individual). More guidance on how to study/what words mean, etc. Help desks.
  
- Make use of WebCT as a means of communication with students. Rely more on email for direct contact with students. Write our own text to help students understand the construction of economics in a business degree.
  
- Additional workshops and WebCT services.
  
- Assistance with learning strategies. eg. Note taking, revision. Authentic learning – less theory, more practical application.
  
- Use of the Web for lecture notes and recordings. Websites for references/research.
  
- Course content has been reviewed and regraded in the past 5 years. Case studies have been used to boost student interest and learning in the subject.
  
- Tried new teaching methods with limited success to date.

- Early tests to identify strugglers but without much success. The main problem is lack of staff resources with such high teaching and administration loads to devote time to these students.
- (I have) tampered with trying to find easier textbook, compulsory tutorial exercises, putting lectures on CCTV forum, engaging them in contemporary economic news, etc. My department has done exceedingly little to address this problem.

### **Responses on factors influencing third year student standards**

- I see no evidence that our standards are low relative to the USA or to other Australian universities.
- As for undergraduate students, especially paid work as competition for study.
- Poor training in mathematics and English ... at schools (Public).
- Reduction in compulsory quantitative units in earlier years.
- The move from 3 to 4 courses per semester in later years has necessitated reduction in content, but it also reduces student attention simply because they have more things to think about and greater problems organising their time.
- Students need to put in more effort.
- Part time work commitments.

### **Responses on strategies to achieve desired standards for third year undergraduate students in economics courses.** Several respondents noted that their strategies were similar to those for first year courses.

- Cohort standards are rising steadily as measured by entry cut-offs and the School has ongoing subject quality review groups in Microeconomics, Macroeconomics, Econometrics and miscellaneous subjects. In particular for most second and third year subjects, textbooks are supplemented by handbooks of key readings, designed to introduced students to new and alternative perspectives, and second year subjects have optional additional revision tutorials to boost learning outcomes in core units. Consequently, third year standards have been rising significantly over the past four years or so.
- We have instituted a 'seminar' program for advanced U/Gs, run by our P/Gs to try to encourage an interest in Economics issues outside of the classroom. We also use external guest lecturers to give students exposure to the 'real world' of economics.
- We teach what we think the students should know (and in some cases complex material that we simply like) and some students perform well.
- No special strategies.

- No, not really. Our dean decided to make all second and third year economic subjects available only by distance mode. The ... is rather dead. For instance, of 300 macro students I had this semester, only one was doing or going to do an economics major.

**There were no specific respondent comments on factors influencing masters by coursework student standards.**

#### **Responses on strategies to achieve desired standards for masters by coursework students**

- Admission standards have increased.
- We have resisted pressures to reduce entry levels for coursework MEd and have successfully used Graduate Diploma as entry route for sub honours 2A applicants, requiring higher 2A performance in graduate diploma for entry. Viability has been maintained by sharing core courses and electives with Honours and PhD programs.
- Most students are distance students and so most strategies relate to improving discussion etc, using email.
- Selection process is crucial for overseas students.
- Few strategies. The contents and requirements of most Masters' courses are similar to those in undergraduate courses. The Department has in the main adjusted to the level of student presenting.

## **V Policy Options and Practices**

Section D of the questionnaire deals with policies for maintaining and raising student standards. Respondents were invited to assess the importance or otherwise of various specified policies or to nominate alternative policies. The main results are summarised in Table 9.

Not surprisingly, the preferred policies reflected respondents' judgments on the determinants of standards. For first year students, out of 20 respondents, 15 considered that lower student-staff ratios are important or very important, 14 cite higher English standards as important or very important, and 11 cites higher entry standards for international students as important or very important. Higher entry standards for local students were also considered important. There was some support for external accreditation or reviews of courses, but the majority opposed external accreditation or reviews, some strongly so.

Policy preferences for third year students are similar. Lower student-staff ratios, higher entry standards for students (especially for international students) and higher English language requirements were cited as the most important policies. There was some support for external reviews of courses, but little support and strong opposition to accreditation of degrees, and little support for the idea of a common external exam for third year students.

Entry standards and English language requirements are again an issue for Master's students, albeit that the sample of respondents is small. Again, there was little support for external reviews of any kind.

**Table 9 Numbers of respondents citing policies for maintaining and raising student standards**

	Very Important	Important	Minor importance	Not important	Not applicable	Total
<b>First year students</b>						
Raise entry standards local students	3	4	8	3	2	20
Raise entry standards int. students	7	4	4	2	3	20
Raise English language requirements	9	5	4	1	1	20
Higher failure rates	3	2	6	6	2	19
Reduced cross subsidies	3	5	4	4	4	20
Lower student-staff ratios	5	10	4	1	0	20
External accreditation of courses	5	2	6	6	1	20
External reviews of courses/standards	1	7	8	4	0	20
External exam for 1st year students	2	2	5	10	1	20
Award certificates of attendance	0	3	2	9	5	19
<b>Third year students</b>						
Raise entry standards local students	1	5	5	3	2	16
Raise entry standards int. students	4	4	4	1	3	16
Raise English language requirements	4	4	6	1	2	17
Higher failure rates	2	3	5	5	2	17
Reduced cross subsidies	1	4	1	5	4	15
Lower student-staff ratios	4	6	4	1	1	16
External accreditation of courses	3	2	4	6	1	16
External accreditation of degree	3	0	4	6	2	15
External reviews of courses/standards	2	5	5	3	1	16
External exam for 3rd year students	2	1	2	8	2	15
Award certificates of attendance	1	1	3	7	2	14
<b>Masters by coursework students</b>						
Raise entry standards local students	2	1	3	2	0	8
Raise entry standards int. students	4	1	3	1	0	9
Raise English language requirements	2	2	3	1	0	8
Higher failure rates	1	1	2	3	0	7
Reduced cross subsidies	0	0	1	4	1	6
Lower student-staff ratios	0	3	3	1	1	8
External accreditation of courses	1	1	1	4	0	7
External accreditation of degree	1	1	1	4	0	7
External reviews of courses/standards	1	2	3	1	0	7
External exam for Masters students	2	0	0	5	0	7
Award diplomas to weak students	0	3	0	4	0	7

**Responses on policies to achieve desired standards by first year students**

- What is a desired standard? The expected standard is much different in an economics major to an economics B.Bus 'service unit', where 'economic literacy' is more important than economic techniques and formal theory.
- This is a document about statistics that doesn't mention teaching or teachers. And where is the content of the teaching? And standards of what? Research and writing skills have fallen, quantitative and memorisation skills have risen. Standards are not absolute, but directed towards ever-changing ends. Who desires the 'desired standards'?

- We have always been very successful from putting lots of high quality effort into our first year teaching.
- Take in fewer full fee local students
- Higher university admission standard for local and international students would be nice if you could have them, but need numbers for viability of department.
- The profession needs to take the school system head on — at a national level.
- Require a credit average overall for HECS or for admission into upper level units. In effect, state that we expect better than passing performance.
- Better preparation in Maths from school or elsewhere.
- I do not think high failure rate are desirable per se, but I think we have been pushed too far towards homogeneously high success rates, limiting the capacity to give students the grades they desire.
- I am ambivalent about these (external accreditations and reviews). Since we pride ourselves in being more analytically rigorous than just about everybody else now is, I'm not sure this wouldn't result in a lowering of our sights. And I think there are horses for courses. It is not obvious that first year economics should be the same across the multiplicity of universities. On the other hand, there might be scope for some minimal common standard and associated examination complementary to a possibly more demanding internal assessment.
- The accreditation idea is good but remember the students we get are, in my cases, congenitally unable to deal with economics unless they are given simplistic texts and very simple exams or some form of foreknowledge as my micro lecturer often does.
- Re option of a general external exam — not applicable, we need differentiation of product.
- Student mentoring programs, where student mentors, who have achieved at least a credit in the subject provide intensive orientation for first year students during the first half of their first semester. These are crucial to reducing attrition rates.
- Much more written assessment by way of formal essays.
- More focus on the role of teaching and research into units. Less reliance on sessional tutors. Better promotional prospects for excellent lecturing — only lip service at ---. Less obsessed with competing with other universities in grants, conferences and publishing.
- Improve the staff-student ratio.
- Reduced student-staff ratios is the key factor.
- The University preferably, or the faculty, should establish a work culture for university students by for example making student obligations clear, possibly in the form of a contract. Many students, encouraged by University marketing, appear to enter the university with little idea of the work involved and there are few upfront explicit requirements.

**Responses on policies to achieve desired standards by third year students.** Several responses repeated points made about first year students. These points are not repeated below.

- We need to give more time to those who have chosen to do an economics degree. By third year the ones who had no choice and probably no interest in economics should be gone.
- First we need to get students to do economics (certainly at ...). My first years swear off economics probably because of its difficulty and inherent nature.
- (a) An emphasis on pluralism in approaches to core third year economics units by using handbooks of readings to expose students to alternative approaches. (b) To expose students to alternative Schools of thought (Post-Keynesian, Evolutionary Economics, Institutionalism, Marxism, Feminism, etc) via specific subjects in Political Economy, History of Economic Thought, Economic History, Development Economics and Labour Economics.
- We have always been very successful from putting high quality effort into our teaching.
- Better preparation in Maths from school or elsewhere.
- It's a bit late to deal with the problem at 3<sup>rd</sup> year.
- I don't think accreditation of courses is worthwhile but I think reviews of courses and standards would provide worthwhile comparisons of what different institutions achieve over the 3 years. External accreditation of degrees for professional purposes might help in switching student attention towards economics but is only going to be useful in maintaining standards so long as everybody doesn't get accredited. However, we do need some clearer market signals about the value of good economics training to employers, and about which institutions provide it.
- Let the market rule. Avoid credentialism and the temptation to centralise. Let everyone choose their own brain surgeon regardless of qualifications.
- Unless certification of university attendance was misleading, how would this differ from a transcript studded with poor results?
- Why not think like economists? Perhaps we could make the following information available for each participating school of economics: transparent, publicly known standards; audited surveys of employer satisfaction; audited graduate employment rates and salaries; etc.
- In the view of this respondent, a general external exam, adopted widely by universities, would be the simplest and most effective test of standards for completion of an undergraduate degree in economics, as is the case for school leavers in most Australian states and in many other countries.

**Responses on policies to achieve desired standards by Masters' students.**

- This is an area where it appears standards now vary very considerably. While our MEc is at the high standard (and entry requirement) it has always had, there are other programs trading under the Masters banner that are not, by our standards, providing post undergraduate training. The market is currently pretty poorly informed about these differences as often are the students themselves. A common set of core micro and macro

examinations for ‘real’ masters degrees (and an agreement that nobody could proceed to Ph D. research without having passed them) might be no bad thing.

- It would be useful if there was a push from management bodies to strengthen economics in the MBAs.
- Careful selection.
- Again, a common external exam is supported.

## **VI Honours and Ph.D Students**

**Responses for Honours students are shown in Table 10.** Most departments reported that standards in Honours programs are high or very high. Student and staff motivation in these courses are generally high.

**Responses for Ph.D students are shown in Table 11.** Most departments with Ph.D programs reported high standards with few dissenting views.

**Table 10 Standards and Policies for Honours Students**

<b>Issues</b>	<b>Responses</b>
Standards of work achieved	<p>Generally excellent</p> <p>Very high.</p> <p>I am actually quite satisfied with the standards of our Honours students. The numbers are small, but I believe the standards are quite intertemporally comparable.</p> <p>High</p> <p>Consistently high</p> <p>Standards of work achieved in --- Economics Honours are quite high. All theses have at least one external examiner and top graduates regularly obtain research positions with the Reserve Bank, and other institutions such as state treasury, local government and the private banks.</p> <p>Fair to good.</p> <p>The standards appear reasonable though not quite as high as they used to be</p>
Determining factors	<p>High entrance requirements. Reputation of program that attracts the best students.</p> <p>High enthusiasm amongst staff for the honours program.</p> <p>High level of skill and dedication from both students and staff.</p> <p>Well structured program.</p> <p>Lack of extensive reading of basic works is a problem. Attempting to work while doing honours also a problem.</p> <p>Interest, passion, ability</p> <p>Lower quality of entry standards</p>
Possible strategies	<p>We have been doing very well (as measured by the employment of our B Ec (Hons) students) for many years. This is due in large part to periodic internal reviews to do even better.</p> <p>Attract females to the discipline.</p> <p>Students need exposure to non-mainstream approaches to economic theory and policy. We believe this gives our students a competitive edge in the marketplace.</p> <p>Maintenance only, given the poor funding.</p> <p>Encourage able students to undertake Honours (this is done)</p>

**Table 11 Standards and Policies for Ph.D Students**

Issues	Responses
Standards of work achieved	<p>Excellent</p> <p>Very high</p> <p>I am actually quite satisfied with the standards of our Ph.D students. The number is small but I believe the standards are quite intertemporally comparable.</p> <p>High</p> <p>Good</p> <p>High but requires level V coursework.</p> <p>Good but most of our PhD students are mature age and in full time employment.</p> <p>The standard of work by most potential Ph.Ds is low. Apart from some staff members, there have been few successful completions in the last 15 years.</p>
Determining factors	<p>We only take as many students as we can realistically manage. We set very high requirements and then we give the students a high quality program.</p> <p>With very low numbers it is usually students with an interest similar to that of the supervisor.</p> <p>New progress procedures.</p> <p>Use of external as well as internal co-supervisors</p>
Possible strategies	<p>Introduction of optional coursework component of PhDs</p> <p>Level V coursework implementation in 2000.</p> <p>We have a small program but we have been doing very well (as measured by the continued application rate) for many years. This is in large part due to periodic internal reviews to do even better.</p> <p>What we need is more time to involve students in our research but we are constrained by teaching, admin., etc.</p>

## VII Additional Comments

Respondents were invited to add final comments if they wished. Some did so. These are the additional comments.

- I have written quite a bit on this problem. You could face serious opposition if you put up the idea of an external exam to check economics competency. Many economists want a ‘quiet life’ in their teaching so as to get on to new research DEST points maximisation. Also, lecturers who use their own textbooks can face an inherent tendency to go easy on the grading to reflect well on their book and teaching prowess. They do brilliantly because they give strong hints about exam preparation. They look to be a good teacher, the book looks good and the students are happy with their grades. A positive sum game, but I have had cases where I have retested their competency in my exams and it is poor.

- I believe the idea of establishing an external accreditation body for undergraduate students majoring in economics is seriously misplaced. First, the majority of students achieve only a Pass standard degree. They are not likely to become professional economists, but rather simply compete (very well) with graduates from more general business degrees for junior management positions in the private sector. Generally speaking it is only the small number of distinction level students and Honour students who go on to become professional economists. This raises the issue of what the professional accreditation is designed to do. If realistic it would be set at a high standard, which only Distinction level students could pass. But such students already have their home institution transcript to speak for itself. However, the high standard exam would then relegate all the mere pass students to some sort of certificate of attendance, which would greatly disadvantage them relative to graduates from other business degree programs in the marketplace. As this news filtered down to High Schools, economics would likely face a dramatic reduction in first year enrolments (and there are problems enough with the perception of economics as a degree of diminishing relevance as it is). On the other hand if the external exam was set at a level that the average Pass student in economics in Australia could pass then it would become a meaningless exercise.
- (The same respondent continued) I am also greatly concerned that the external exam could become a gate-keeping exercise, designed to accredit students who know only their neo-classical economics as well. Programs that emphasise breadth and depth of economics education, and expose their students to the plurality of approaches to theory and methodology that can be taken in economics, may then find that they disadvantage their students relative to those who have been exposed only to the mainstream neo-classical approach. If the general tendency towards a decline in economics education in Australia is to be avoided, the discipline need to take a more innovative approach, designed to listen to the market, and deliver more diverse, interesting and critical approaches to the teaching of economics. A mainstream gate-keeping exercise would, I believe, lead only to a further loss of interest in economics by HSC students.
- I just got back from an AUTC's discussion session for the proposed National Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education. There were lots of jokes about Stalinist central control. As economists, we should find a better way. I'm unconvinced that there is a problem to be fixed. All the principals seem happy, except for the more motivated students. Perhaps it is only us agents who are upset. I suggest taking note of the Hippocratic Oath and try not to do any harm.
- (The same respondent continued) If we can find a problem let's fix it. But we must identify the problem first. Romantic academics musing that standards were higher when we educated fewer people is not a problem. Are we satisfying the people who pay the bills; students, employers, parents, taxpayers? If not, then how not, then why not, and only then how do we fix it?
- Increased reliance on poorly qualified international students as a means of increasing revenue in an environment of reduced funding by government is creating a crisis — in practice for the students who are not qualified — and inefficiency in terms of the time spent by staff as well as the enhanced level of stress. I have argued for a university-run language test, but this has been regarded as undermining the university's competitive position. This

university, which used to be multicultural is becoming more and more dominated by students from Asia to the detriment of the diversity of education experienced by all students.

- To survive, economics educators need to seek ways of developing understanding of actual business practice. The neo-classical tradition is losing its relevance for the large bulk of our students.
- Economics at ... University is a small but very good program. We would be only too happy to share our skills with others. We could work on articulation arrangements into our programs for institutions that have not been as lucky as we have been. These articulations might help some institutions get back on their feet.
- Economic Society could work to increase the profile of economics. This may assist in motivating students, and attracting students.
- Thanks for organising the survey. Hope it is useful.

# Appendix A: Survey of Student Standards in Economics in Australian Universities in 2003

Prepared by the Economic Society of Australia (November 2003)

This survey has five parts:

- A Basic Information for Survey
- B Student Standards of Work Achieved
- C Factors Determining Student Standards of Work Achieved
- D Policy Options and Practices
- E Other Issues

## A Basic Information for Survey

University \_\_\_\_\_

Faculty \_\_\_\_\_

Department \_\_\_\_\_

Respondent \_\_\_\_\_

Position of Respondent \_\_\_\_\_

Can you please indicate the **approximate** numbers of students studying economics in your university in 2003? For large first year enrolments, numbers to the nearest 100 are sought. For third year undergraduate or other study levels, numbers to the nearest 20 or 10 are sought if the precise number is not available.

Study level	No of students in economics courses (a)	% of students in economics courses who are overseas students	No. of students enrolled in economics degrees or other economics qualifications (b)
1 <sup>st</sup> year undergraduate			
2 <sup>nd</sup> year undergraduate			
3 <sup>rd</sup> year undergraduate			
Honours students			
Total undergraduate			
Masters students (coursework)			
Masters students (research)			
Ph.D students (total)			

(a) In this survey, 'courses' is intended to be synonymous with subjects or units.

(b) This is intended to include all degrees for which economics is the major component of study, regardless of the name of the degree.

Student – staff ratio for effective full time students (EFTSU) as at 30 June 2003 \_\_\_\_\_

General comments. If you wish to add any further information or comments on current student or staff numbers, or on the composition of the students (eg. the numbers of service courses versus economic degree students or on international or local students), please do so.

---



---

## B Student Standards of Work Achieved

In order to assess standards of work achieved in the following questions, please use the following broad guidelines.

Very good – a high distinction or distinction standard of work, 75 plus out of a 100

Good – a credit standard of work, 65-74 out of a 100

Satisfactory – work that is worth 50-64 out of a 100

Poor – work that is worth 40-49 out of a 100

Very poor – work generally below 40 out of 100

- 1 **In your view**, what percentages of **all** current students in **first year undergraduate** courses in economics achieve the following standards of work?

	Overall standards of work achieved				
	Very good	Good	Satisfactory	Poor	Very poor
Percentage of first year students (%)					

- 2 In your view, have the standards of work achieved in **first year undergraduate** courses in economics changed in the last 10 years? Please indicate one of the following. Standards have:

Risen significantly   Risen a little   Stayed constant   Fallen a little   Fallen significantly

\_\_\_\_\_

- 3 What is the basis for your responses to Questions 1 and 2?

General experience \_\_\_\_\_ Evidence \_\_\_\_\_

- 4 Please briefly explain the nature of the experience or evidence.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

- 5 **In your view**, what percentages of **all** current students in **third year undergraduate** courses in economics achieve the following standards of work?

	Overall standards of work achieved				
	Very good	Good	Satisfactory	Poor	Very poor
Percentage of third year students (%)					

- 6 In your view, have the standards of work achieved in **third year undergraduate** courses in economics changed in the last 10 years? Please indicate one of the following. Standards have:

Risen significantly   Risen a little   Stayed constant   Fallen a little   Fallen significantly

\_\_\_\_\_

- 7 What is the basis for your responses to Questions 5 and 6?

General experience \_\_\_\_ Evidence \_\_\_\_

- 8 Please briefly explain the nature of the experience or evidence.

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

- 9 **In your view**, what percentages of **all** current students in a **Masters in Economics by coursework** achieve the following standards of work?

	Overall standards of work achieved				
	Very good	Good	Satisfactory	Poor	Very poor
Percentage of Masters by course work students (%)					

- 10 In your view, have the standards of work achieved by students in **Masters in Economics by coursework** changed in the last 10 years? Please indicate one of the following. Standards have:

Risen significantly   Risen a little   Stayed constant   Fallen a little   Fallen significantly

\_\_\_\_\_

- 11 What is the basis for your responses to Questions 9 and 10?

General experience \_\_\_\_\_ Evidence \_\_\_\_\_

12 Please briefly explain the nature of the experience or evidence.

---



---

13 Do you have any other comments on the standards of work achieved by undergraduate or masters by coursework students in economics? Note that there are separate questions for Honours and Ph.D students in Section E.

---



---

14 Textbooks used in core Economics courses

The level of economics taught may be gauged to some extent by the textbook used. Could you please indicate the major textbooks used in 2003 and those used about fifteen years ago (in the late 1980s) in the major core courses, where applicable?

Course	2003	Late 1980's
<b>Combined macro-micro courses</b>		
First year		
Second year		
<b>Macroeconomic courses</b>		
First year		
Second year		
Third year		
<b>Microeconomic courses</b>		
First year		
Second year		
Third year		

## C Factors Determining Student Standards of Work Achieved

- 15 What, if any, **external** factors influence the standards of work of students in **first year undergraduate** economics courses as shown in your responses to Questions 1 and 2?

This question focuses on causes of low standards. The causes may not be independent. If student standards are considered high or if no factors are applicable, please turn to Question 16.

External factors	Very important	Important	Minor importance	Not important	Not applicable
Low university admission standards for local students					
Low university admission standards for overseas students					
Poor English language standards of overseas students					
University policies constraining failure rates					
University cross subsidies from economics to other areas					
Low student hours per credit point					
High student to staff ratios					
Competition with other subjects, eg, business studies, for students					
Other factors (a)					

- (a) If other factors are important determinants of standards of work, please describe.

---



---

- 16 What strategies has your Department taken to achieve desired standards of work for first year undergraduate students in economics courses?

---



---

- 17 What, if any, **external** factors influence the standards of work of students in **third year undergraduate** economics courses as shown in your responses to Questions 5 and 6?

Your answers here may be similar to those for Question 15. However the student body in third year may differ from that in first year. Also an extra factor is added here – namely standards of post first year student admissions from private educational providers.

Again, this question is designed to determine causes of low standards of work. If standards are considered high, turn to Question 18.

External factors	Very important	Important	Minor importance	Not important	Not applicable
Low university admission standards for local students					
Low university admission standards for overseas students					
Low standards of students transferring from private educational providers post first year					
Poor English language standards of overseas students					
University policies constraining failure rates					
University cross subsidies from economics to other areas					
Low student hours per credit point					
High student to staff ratios					
Competition with other subjects, eg, business studies, for students					
Other factors (a)					

- (a) If other factors are important determinants of standards, please describe.

---



---

- 18 If your Department has undertaken strategies to achieve desired standards in third year courses of economics other than those shown in Question 16, please describe.

---



---

19 What, if any, external factors influence the standards of work by students doing a **Masters in Economics by coursework** as shown in your responses to Questions 9 and 10?

Note: this question is designed to determine causes of low standards. The causes are not necessarily independent. If standards are considered high, turn to Question 20.

Causes	Very important	Important	Minor importance	Not important	Not applicable
Low university admission standards for local students					
Low university admission standards for overseas students					
Poor English language standards of overseas students					
University policies constraining failure rates					
University cross subsidies from economics to other areas					
Low student hours per credit point					
High student to staff ratios					
Competition for students with other subjects, eg, business studies					
Provision of combined courses for a Masters in Economics and other Masters qualifications					
Other factors (a)					

(a) If other factors are important determinants of standards, please describe.

---



---

20 What strategies has your Department taken to achieve desired standards for students currently studying for a Masters in Economics by coursework?

---



---

## D Policy Options and Practices

21 What policies, if any, do you support for the maintenance or improvement of standards of **students in first year courses** in economics?

Policy options	Very important	Important	Minor importance	Not important	Not applicable
Higher university admission standards for local students					
Higher university admission standards for overseas students					
Higher English language admission requirements					
Higher failure rates					
Reduced cross subsidies from economics to other areas in the university					
Lower student to staff ratios					
Formal external accreditation of courses					
Regular external reviews of courses and standards					
A general external exam for first year students (a)					
Certificates of university attendance for students who do not achieve required standards					
Any other policies (Q.22)					

(a) Such an exam might be set externally by a panel of university economists and marked blind externally (similar to year 12 school examinations).

22 In your view, are there any other policies or practices that may assist achievement of desired standards of work for first year students? If so, please describe.

---



---



---

- 23 What policies, if any, do you support for the maintenance or improvement of standards of **undergraduate students in third year courses**?

The options are as for Questions 21 with one addition - external accreditation of degree for purposes of professional accreditation. This differs from external accreditation of courses in that it does not interfere with university self-accreditation of courses.

Policy options	Very important	Important	Minor importance	Not important	Not applicable
Higher university admission standards for local students					
Higher university admission standards for overseas students					
Higher English language admission requirements					
Higher failure rates					
Reduced cross subsidies from economics to other areas in the university					
Lower student to staff ratios					
Formal external accreditation of courses					
External accreditation of degree for professional membership					
Regular external reviews of courses and standards					
A general external exam for third year students (a)					
Certificates of university attendance for students who do not achieve required standards					
Any other policies (Q.24)					

(a) See comment above on possible nature such an exam.

- 24 In your view, are there any other policies or practices that may assist achievement of desired standards for third year students? If so, please describe.

---



---



---

25 What policies, if any, do you support for the maintenance or improvement of standards of students studying for a **Masters in Economics by coursework**?

Policy options	Very important	Important	Minor importance	Not important	Not applicable
Higher university admission standards for local students					
Higher university admission standards for overseas students					
Higher English language admission requirements					
Higher failure rates					
Reduced cross subsidies from economics to other areas					
Lower student to staff ratios					
Formal external accreditation of courses					
External accreditation of degree for professional membership					
Regular external reviews of courses and standards					
A general external exam for Masters students (a)					
The award of diplomas to students who do not achieve required Masters standard					
Any other policies (Q.26)					

(a) See comment above on possible nature such an exam.

26 In your view, are there any other policies or practices that may assist achievement of desired standards for students studying for a Masters in Economics by coursework?

---



---

## E Other Issues

- 27 Do you wish to add any comments on standards, causes of standards, or policies for **Honours students in Economics** in your university?

Issues	Responses
Standards of work achieved	
Determining factors	
Possible strategies	

- 28 Do you wish to add any comments on standards, causes of standards, or policies for **Ph.D students in Economics** in your university?

Issues	Responses
Standards of work achieved	
Determining factors	
Possible strategies	

- 29 If you wish to add any final comment(s), please do so.

---

---

---

On behalf of the Economic Society, thank you for your cooperation and patience in responding to this survey.

Please send your response by post or email to Professor Peter Abelson, c/o Jane Oldroyd, Administrator, Secretary of the Economic Society of Australia, P.O. Box 937, St. Ives, NSW 2075 or by to [ecosoc@optushome.com.au](mailto:ecosoc@optushome.com.au)

## Appendix B: Textbooks used in Core Economics Courses

Appendix B shows the textbooks reported in the survey for combined macro-micro first year courses and for separate macroeconomic and microeconomic courses in first and other years. In most cases, respondents provide only names of author(s) and, as can be seen, names given were not always consistent.

The survey sought data on texts as a potential guide to the levels of economics taught over time in each year. However, some respondents were unable to provide information about texts in use some 15 years ago. Also, as one respondent observed, the ‘real issue is what sorts of questions do we ask and what sorts of answers are we “satisfied” with?’ Accordingly, this report infers no conclusions from these data.

Some readers may feel able to draw conclusions from the adopted texts. In any case, some may find the list of texts of more general interest.

**Table B1 Combined Macro-Micro Courses**

<b>First year</b>	
<b>2003</b>	<b>Late 1980s</b>
Jackson and McIver, <i>Macroeconomics, Microeconomics</i>	Samuelson, Hancock & Wallace
Layton, Robinson and Tucker, <i>Economics for Today</i>	Maxwell, Waud and McConnell
Sloman and Norris, <i>Economics</i>	Baumol and Blinder, <i>Economics</i>
Gans, King, Stonecash and Mankiw, <i>Principles of Economics</i>	Text not cited
Mankiw	Ditto
Jackson and McIver	Ditto
Layton, Robinson and Tucker	Ditto
McTaggart, Findlay and Parkin	Ditto
McTaggart, Findlay and Parkin	Ditto
Not applicable	Samuelson

**Table B2 Macroeconomic Courses**

<b>First year</b>	
<b>2003</b>	<b>Late 1980s</b>
Crompton, Hopkins, Swann and McEachern	Jackson and McConnell
Crompton et al	Baumol
Crompton et al	Waud
Jackson and McIver	Samuelson, Hancock & Wallace
Jackson and McIver	Parkin, McTaggart and Sloman
Mankiw and Stonecash	Stegman & Junor
Mankiw and Stonecash	Waud et al.
McTaggart, Findlay, Parkin	Waud
McTaggart	In house
Miles and Scott, <i>Macroeconomics</i>	Jones and Perkins, <i>Contemporary Macroeconomics</i>
O'Donnell, <i>Macroeconomic Principles</i>	Jones and Perkins
Rivers and Ward, <i>Economics in the Business Environment</i>	Waud et al., <i>Economics</i>
Smith, B., <i>Principles of Macro Analysis</i>	Parkin
McTaggart, Findlay and Parkin	Text not cited
Sloman and Norris, <i>Macroeconomics</i>	Ditto
Sloman	Ditto
<b>Second year</b>	
<b>2003</b>	<b>Late 1980s</b>
Dornbusch, Bodman, Crosby, Fischer & Startz, <i>Macroeconomics</i>	Parkin and Bade
Dornbusch, Bodman, Crosby, Fischer & Startz,	Levavic and Rebmman, <i>Macroeconomics</i>
Dornbusch et al.	Ekelund
Dornbusch	Dornbusch
Dornbusch	Hill and Taylor
Mankiw	Dorbusch & Fischer
Mankiw	Waud
Mankiw	Parkin and Bade
Lecturer notes	Dornbusch and Fischer
Blanchard, <i>Macroeconomics</i>	Text not cited
Dornbusch, Bodman, Crosby, Fischer & Startz,	Ditto
Dornbusch, Fischer & Kearney	Ditto
Dornbusch and Fischer	Ditto
Dornbusch	Ditto
Mankiw	Ditto
<b>Third year</b>	
<b>2003</b>	<b>Late 1980s</b>
Blanchard	Branson, <i>Macroeconomic Theory &amp; Policy</i>
Krugman & Obsfeld	Stephenson, Muscatelli & Gregory
Dornbusch et al., <i>Macroeconomics</i>	Text not cited
Makin	Ditto
Soderston – changing to Krugman & Obstfeld	Ditto

**Table B3 Microeconomic Courses**

<b>First year</b>	
<b>2003</b>	<b>Late 1980s</b>
Frank & Bernanke	Tisdell
Jackson and McIver	Samuelson, Hancock & Wallace
Jackson et al.	Jackson and McConnell
Mankiw, Gans and King, <i>Principles of Microeconomics</i>	Waud, <i>Microeconomics</i>
Mankiw	McTaggart
McTaggart, Findlay, Parkin	Maurice and Phillips
McTaggart	In-house
Rivers and Ward, <i>Economics in the Business Environment</i>	Waud et al., <i>Economics</i>
Swann & McEachern, <i>Microeconomics</i>	Swann & McEachern
Swann & McEachern	Eckert and Leftwich
Swann	Ferguson
Taylor and Frost	Alchian & Allen
Landsberg	Text not cited
McTaggart, Findlay and Parkin	Ditto
Sloman	Ditto
Swann & McEachern	Ditto
<b>Second year</b>	
<b>2003</b>	<b>Late 1980s</b>
Eaton, Eaton and Allen, <i>Microeconomics</i>	Varian, <i>Intermediate Microeconomics</i>
Katz and Rosen, <i>Microeconomics</i>	Nicholson
Katz and Rosen	Tisdell, <i>Microeconomics of Markets</i>
Katz	Leftwich
Keat and Young, <i>Managerial Economics</i>	Pindyck and Rubinfeld
Pindyck and Rubinfeld	Mansfield, <i>Microeconomics</i>
Pindyck	Ferguson
Varian, <i>Intermediate Microeconomics</i>	Mansfield,
Varian	Course reader
Varian	Awh
Besanko & Brautigam, <i>Microeconomics</i>	Text not cited
Katz and Rosen	Ditto
Pindyck and Rubinfeld	Ditto
Pindyck and Rubinfeld	Ditto
Pindyck and Rubinfeld and Baye	Ditto
<b>Third year</b>	
<b>2003</b>	<b>Late 1980s</b>
Friedmann	Baldrey
Gravelle and Rees	Gravelle and Rees
Lecturer notes	Binger and Hoffman, <i>Microeconomics with Calculus</i>
No text	Varian
Pepaal, Richards & Norman, <i>Industrial Organisation</i>	No text cited