

Educational quality is NOT protected by examination hurdles

Abstract

This paper discusses the quality control role attributed to examination hurdles. An examination hurdle is usually defined along these lines: to be eligible to pass a subject, a student needs to obtain at least 50% of the marks available in the semester and to perform to a set level on the end-of-semester examination. Preliminary discussions with academics appear to indicate that examination hurdles largely are seen as a quality control mechanism to counter widespread distrust of the authenticity of marks awarded to students in non-invigilated assessment items and activities, especially group work activities.

However, this paper argues that:

- The use of examination hurdles does not have any positive effect on student study patterns or on improving a subject's fail rates over time. The mistaken belief in and reliance on the quality control role of examination hurdles has been at the expense of developing greater authenticity for and validity in the capacity of non-examination assessment items to measure student performance.
- An examination hurdle is a very blunt instrument that mitigates against students accepting that there is any real value being given by academics to any learning activity except the examination. Such hurdles no diagnostic or remedial intervention function and any assumed quality control role is highly doubtful.
- Any subject that operates an examination hurdle should state in its subject guide that all non-invigilated assessment results in a semester are provisional only and may be discounted or discarded, depending on a student's performance on the examination.
- More importantly, judging from their published assessment policies, many universities accept that examination hurdles have a quality control role because there is widespread suspicion about the capacity of some forms of non-invigilated assessment to authenticate and, thus, measure students' capabilities. This being the case, unless there occurs a coordinated, sector-wide campaign to significantly raise the standard and authenticity of the 'suspect' non-invigilated assessment items, then those items must cease to be used for formal assessment in universities. It would be disgraceful and deceitful for universities to continue to allow the use of items that are clearly not fit for their purpose.

Keywords: education, examination hurdles, quality control

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Background

This paper discusses the role of examination hurdles in Australian universities. This issue arose from a prior project involving an investigation of the types of assessment hurdles used in Australian universities. That project found that assessment hurdles used included examination hurdle, frequency of attendance, attendance at special event/s, satisfactory completion of tasks (i.e. obtaining 50 % of marks in tasks), task completion (no points attached), professional conduct and behaviour.

Literature review

For some time, it has been clear that the total cohort of students at universities generally, and in some programs specifically, means there is also a broad spectrum of learning styles, motivation levels, and expectations (Saljo, 1979; Biggs, 1979; and Marton et al. 1993). Obviously, in such cohorts, the differences between students' capacity to study must be correspondingly diverse (Giacomino, 1998). Such differences would be generated by factors such as individual learning styles (Davidson and Etherington, 1995), language skills (Drew and Ottewill, 1998), gender (Richardson, 1993), cultural background (Richardson, 1994 a), educational motivation (Geiger, 1992 and Gow et al. 1994).

Assessment is central to the student experience as it is the common factor across all disciplines, since university study comes with an output – the credential. At core, this output requires evaluative mechanisms that seek to measure whether or not a student has obtained the necessary knowledge and/or skill in a subject and, thus, program to graduate. And, clearly, assessment is a pivotal variable in the relationship between teaching and learning (Ramsden 1992). Correspondingly, the critical analysis of assessment methods used at universities is long-standing, cross-discipline and international - see Rowntree (1977), Smith et al. (1989), McLaren (1990), Bray et al. (2000), Wood (2007).

In accounting, as in numerous other academic discipline areas, researchers have investigated the impact that the choice and manner of operation of assessment methods can have on many factors, including:

- learning styles of students - Gow et al., 1994; Beattie et al., 1997.
- accountability issues - Streuly, 1995; Lucas & Mladenovic, 2004.
- academic behaviour - Trigwell & Prosser, 1991; Griffiths, Papastrat, Czekanski, & Hagan, 2004; Jackling, 2005.
- teaching methods and student performance - Barnett, 1990; Leveson, 2004; Heikkila and Lonka, 2006.
- motivation of students - Geiger, 1992; Baumgart and Halse, 1999, Lucas, 2001.
- institutional reputation and status - Caldwell, 1997; Mok, 2000; Beeson & Kissling, 2001.

Assessment has numerous functions, e.g. as a mandatory requirement of the university, to provide feedback to both students and teachers, as motivation to students, to help in maintaining standards, and preparation for life (Rowntree, 1977; Nellen, 2001). The assessment methods employed and the evaluation of those methods will be influenced by some combination of educational effectiveness and resource efficiency (Thompson & Bartels, 1999; Gammie et al. 2004). Grading students has implications for their future, and students see grades as determinants of extrinsic rewards, e.g. future employment or post graduate selection (Rowntree, 1977). In addition, assessment from a student's viewpoint defines the curriculum and, thus, strongly affects the learning mode adopted by and activities engaged in by the student (Gammie et al., 2004).

However, despite the breadth of research into assessment cited above – which, in truth, barely touches even the surface of what has been done in many academic disciplines in Australia and internationally – there are still assessment issues and activities largely untouched. For example, while examination hurdles are used in many disciplines in Australian universities, little has been done to investigate whether such hurdles actually have a beneficial impact on student learning behaviour or safeguard the quality of students passing a subject. As will be discussed below, the quality control role of examination hurdles does not stand up to evaluation.

Discussion

This paper stemmed from a project that reviewed 144 subject guides, across over a dozen academic disciplines, from several Australian universities (Curtin, Latrobe, Melbourne, Monash, QUT, RMIT, UNSW, UTS, VU, Uni SA, James Cook, Charles Sturt). A hurdle is any compulsory activity, or mandatory level of achievement in an activity which, if not met, results in full failure for the semester, irrespective of achievement in other tasks and assessment in that subject for that semester. This survey found that there seems to be no consistency in Australian accounting degrees and across knowledge disciplines as to what a hurdle should be, on what activities and assessment items are appropriate to be used as hurdles, what weight of assessment should be awarded to hurdles, when hurdles should occur in a semester, and on the grade to be given if a hurdle is failed. Preliminary discussions with academics indicate that hurdles are not put in place solely to examine a critical capability. Instead, they act as a quality control mechanism to counter an assumed declining rigour in non-invigilated assessment modes, widely argued to be the result of increasing academic work loads and growing student numbers.

In the project outlined above, examination hurdles appear to be a prevalent form of hurdle used. An examination hurdle is usually defined along these lines: to be eligible to pass a subject, a student needs to obtain at least 50% of the marks available in the semester and to perform to a set level on the end-of-semester examination (the level is usually, but not always, to score at least 50% of the marks available on the exam). Failure to meet this standard on the end-of-semester examination means failure for the subject, irrespective of whether the total marks achieved for that semester is more than 50% of the total marks available. Some universities set the hurdle at less than 50% of the marks on the examination, e.g. 40% - see Appendix 2.

Australian universities generally, and disciplines specifically, do not follow any agreed approach to the operation of hurdles. For example, there is no single way to record an exam hurdle fail. In some cases, the result to be awarded to a student upon failing the examination hurdle involved a confusing mix of calculations, depending on the operation of other hurdles in that subject – see Appendix 1. Commonly, though not universally, when an examination hurdle was used, if a student fails the examination hurdle, but has marks greater than 50% of the marks available in the semester, the final mark that student receives for the semester will be their examination score plus their other in-semester results, but only to set maximum, e.g. at RMIT usually 45/100. If a student fails the examination, but has marks less than 50% of the marks for the semester, the final mark that student receives is their examination score plus their other in-semester results.

Considering the widespread use of examination hurdles in Australian universities, the prime question to be asked is what role do these hurdles play? In preliminary discussions of these findings with academics, staff clearly saw their roles as gatekeepers for their subject, credential, discipline, university, and profession. Examination hurdles were a prime tool to prevent reputational harm from occurring if students graduated without having the perceived required skills/processes. Staff generally expressed a lack of trust in the validity of marks obtained by students in non-exam assessment generally and group work especially. La Trobe university policy supports this view, stating that ‘exam hurdles are particularly relevant where assignments could be of dubious origin, or where group work is used extensively’ – see appendix 2.

Boud and Falchikov (2006) argue that assessment has the clear purpose of certifying a level of attainment of a student at the point of completion of a course or a program. And in this vein, the quality control of attesting to attainment ascribed to examination hurdles can only be evaluated in relation to the overall assessment and learning approach and goals of a subject and its relevant program. For quality assurance to be successful, however, it needs to be evaluated in a systematic, structural fashion and be an integral part of an institution's assurance cycle. Thus, for there to be a genuine quality control role in the operation of an examination hurdle, it would have to be an accurate and comprehensive evaluative mechanism capable of measuring the essential knowledge or skill sets of a subject. That is, considering the severity of failing the examination hurdle, a subject should only use such a hurdle if there is a sound educational reason for passing or failing students on the capability, knowledge or skill being tested in that exam. This rationale should be evaluated regularly to see if it holds true, i.e. that the item considered a hurdle is of such importance and that the hurdle is a valid test of that item. To be a quality control, the examination hurdle should provide clear evidence of being able to separate the student cohort into those eligible to pass or not. It should be equitable to all students. It should contribute to a cycle of continual quality improvement, e.g. generate data that outlines why students arrived at the end of a semester without the capabilities to pass the exam.

Taking the above into account, to investigate if an examination hurdle does have a quality control role, the following situation is considered. A subject has this assessment:

- Assessment 1 = 15 marks for the semester
- Assessment 2 = 25 marks for the semester
- Examination = 60 marks for the semester (hurdle requirement)

Assessment 1 and 2 can be any form of assessment providing that activity is not invigilated, i.e. a class presentation, assignment, group project, etc. Group presentations are also excluded if that activity does not require all members of a group to present.

Table 1 is the results in this subject for these students.

Table 1: results

	<i>Students</i>						
	<i>S1</i>	<i>S2</i>	<i>S3</i>	<i>S4</i>	<i>S5</i>	<i>S6</i>	<i>S7</i>
<i>Assmt 1 score =</i>	12	6	12	15	8	15	5
<i>Assmt 2 score =</i>	20	10	20	25	15	25	10
<i>*Exam score =</i>	36	24	24	24	24	3	55
<i>TOTAL</i>	68	40	56	64	47	43	70
<i>RESULT</i>	68	40	45	45	47	43	70
<i>GRADE</i>	pass	fail	fail	fail	fail	fail	pass

**The exam score is held steady for Students 2, 3, 4 and 5 to judge the effect of the examination hurdle.*

One qualification of the above is that there is no discussion of the roles that Assignment 1, Assignment 2 and the Examination play in examining separate, discrete knowledge and skill capabilities of this subject. On the other hand, in reviewing these 144 subject guides, it was not common to find extensive discussions of the goals of all forms of assessment.

Student 2 is a clear fail for the semester, has not passed any single assessment item, and the examination hurdle plays no role at all in identifying that this student has not performed sufficiently to be passed.

Both Student 3 (original score 56) and Student 4 (original score 64) have been awarded more than 50% of the marks available in this subject in this semester, and have passed assignment 1 and 2. However, as both failed the exam, they receive a fail for the semester. Both their results are adjusted to 45 for the semester.

In this adjustment, presumably the examination score, being invigilated, is considered to be the authentic evaluation of that student's performance and is not changed. Instead, logic suggests, it is only their non-exam marks that are discounted, so that Student 3 (S3) and Student 4 (S4) receive 45 for the semester – as outlined in Table 2.

Table 2: Adjusted Results and Discount Rates

	<i>S1</i>	<i>S2</i>	<i>S3</i>	<i>S3 adj</i>	<i>S4</i>	<i>S4 adj</i>	<i>S5</i>	<i>S6</i>	<i>S7</i>
<i>Assmt1 score =</i>	12	6	12	8	15	8	8	15	5
<i>Assmt2 score =</i>	20	10	20	13	25	13	15	25	10
<i>Exam score =</i>	36	24	24	24	24	24	24	3	55
<i>TOTAL</i>	68	40	56		64		47	43	70
<i>RESULT</i>	68	40	45	45	45	45	47	43	70
<i>GRADE</i>	pass	fail	fail	fail	fail	fail	fail	fail	pass
<i>Discount rate</i>				34%		48%			

Therefore, for the hurdle system in this subject to operate, the non-examination marks for S3 are discounted by 34%; for S4 the discount is 48%. By what logic is it acceptable to use different discount rates between these two students? Why is no discount applied to S2, S5 or S6, who also failed the exam hurdle?

The raw marks suggest that S4 did better than S3 in Assignments 1 and 2. Yet, due to final semester scores derived by the hurdle rules, the performance of S4 in non-examination assessment items is considered to be 40% less authentic than S3.

Both S3 and S4 performed better than S5 in Assignments 1 and 2, and equal S5 on exam performance. Yet, S5 is left on 47 for the semester, a higher score than both S3 and S4, although this does not seem warranted by the raw scores of all three students.

S3 and S4 failed the exam and, thus, have the marks of their non-examination assessment items discounted, although at different rates. S2, S5 and S6 fail the exam, but do not have any discount applied to the mark received for their non-examination assessment items.

Thus, clearly, there is no equity or quality control of students in this application of a range of discount rates to students' non-examination assessment items; it is solely based on mathematical expediency – under the rules above, S3 and S4 are to be awarded 45% for the semester. In this situation, the truth is that the scores awarded students for their other assessment are only provisional until the exams are marked. For example, at week six, say, S3 receives 12 out of 15 for Assignment 1. However, this score is simply temporary, and its final value will be conditional on the mark S3 receives many weeks later in the exam. How many staff actually state this truth to students: e.g. 'dear student, my marking scheme has awarded you 12 out of 15 for this assignment I set for you; however, depending on your performance on the exam, it is possible I will significantly discount this assignment score due to my distrust in the validity of this assignment as an authentic assessment of your ability'. It is unsound to award an arbitrary score to those students who fail the examination hurdle, but have marks greater than 50% of the marks available in the semester. Equity would require that the scores awarded for non-examination assessment items to all students who fail the exam hurdle should be voided.

If the non-examination assessment items are considered to be inauthentic evaluations for Student 3 and Student 4, then by what logic are they accepted as authentic and, therefore, left undiscounted for Student 1 and Student 2. Equity would require that all students are treated equally.

If the goal of this hurdle rule is quality control over the marks awarded for non-examination assessment items, and if an assessment item is an inauthentic evaluation of student performance, then all students in the semester should have those results discounted, not just the over-50 marks, hurdle-fail students. Not to do so is a failure of quality control. However, the variation in discount rates would be significantly higher if the exam mark is used as the final assessment for exam-hurdle failure students.

An inescapable aspect of this examination hurdle rule is that, in fact, until the exam is marked, the marks awarded to each student for the non-examination assessment items they have done are provisional only. Discounting seems to ignore or leave aside or consider irrelevant the fact that a student might actually have improved from Assignment 1 to Assignment 2. Examination hurdles seem to act only to prevent students passing who lack just one skill: to pass the exam.

The underlying argument of an examination hurdle is that students' results in non-examination assessment are only authentic if they can then go on to pass an examination. The widely-held belief among academics is that non-examination assessment activity is awash with inappropriate behaviour and outright cheating by student. That is why it can not be trusted as much as examination scores. S6 would be the perfect example of this argument. Most academics would feel that the scores for S6 on Assignments 1 and 2 are definitely not an accurate reflection of the capacity of this student, and are far less valid than the performance of S6 on the exam. Is it fair to stigmatise S6 like this? Is it always correct to assume a performance like that of S6 comes about through cheating, free-riding, plagiarism? Does poor performance in an examination always indicate inappropriate? Might not S6 have had the right skills sets to do Assignments 1 and 2, but be poor in the capacity to deal with examination conditions?

Furthermore, and more importantly, if an academic suspects behaviour of the type S6 is supposed to be an example of, what is done in the next semester to control for such activity? That is, surely it would be inappropriate for an academic to continue to use activities such as Assignments 1 and 2 if there has been no work done to adjust these items to mitigate against the supposed inappropriate behaviour of students? And if S6 has actually behaved in this manner, the fail for the semester is an inadequate response. The matter requires investigation, a hearing and discipline action taken. Otherwise, there has been no intervention against such inappropriate behaviour.

Converse to S6, S7 performs poorly on Assignments 1 and 2, but performs well on the examination, and receives a distinction for the semester. In this instance, for this result to be valid, this subject would have to show that the exam re-tested all the capacities covered in Assignments 1 and 2, plus the other components of the lecture and tutorial schedule. That is, the exam would need to be a measurement of the entire material covered in and the knowledge and skills sets of the semester.

Which leads to the next issue: does an examination hurdle mean that a student must pass all questions on the exam? Can a student fail some questions, but still pass the exam if they manage to obtain 50% or more of the available marks? If so, the subject needs to indicate which exam questions do not canvass and evaluate essential capabilities. In this instance, if Assignment 1 or 2 cover each only portions of the semester's material and, taken together, still do not cover everything, then to be a quality control mechanism, the examination would need to do cover all the this material. Thus, clearly, using an examination hurdle explicitly means that the prime factor influencing the likelihood of passing or not is ability to perform on the exam: all other capabilities, knowledge and skill sets are secondary to this. An examination hurdle is a very blunt instrument that tends to mitigate against any real value being given to many learning objectives and the role of the

interaction between formative and summative assessment in developing the capacity of a student. An examination hurdle has no diagnostic or remedial intervention function except to fail students.

Exam hurdles and student behaviour

Table 3 below has data from the 14 consecutive semesters for six subjects that use examination hurdles.

Table 3: Fail rates in subjects with hurdles

	<i>Subj 1</i>	<i>Subj 2</i>	<i>Subj 3</i>	<i>Subj 4</i>	<i>Subj 5</i>	<i>Subj 6</i>
	<i>% who fail</i>					
<i>sem 1</i>	20	21	13	41	27	12
<i>sem 2</i>	33	41	17	30	43	39
<i>sem 3</i>	34	21	29	33	37	39
<i>sem 4</i>	45	45	19	38	31	40
<i>sem 5</i>	35	34	22	35	32	37
<i>sem 6</i>	34	46	24	29	24	35
<i>sem 7</i>	42	29	41	42	29	23
<i>sem 8</i>	35	45	46	42	38	28
<i>sem 9</i>	31	26	46	38	21	29
<i>sem 10</i>	48	45	46	15	30	18
<i>sem 11</i>	33	37	42	35	24	19
<i>sem 12</i>	35	28	41	28	30	39
<i>sem 13</i>	36	33	43	34	22	45
<i>sem 14</i>	31	37	42	29	36	51

The data above shows that the existence of examination hurdles in these six subjects has not had any beneficial impact on student study behaviour, as these six courses consistently have high fail rates.

Table 4 shows how student cohorts from Table 3 performed as they moved through three semesters.

Table 4: Cohorts and fail rates in hurdle subjects

	<i>Sem 1</i>		<i>Sem 2</i>		<i>Sem 3</i>	
	<i>Subj 1</i>	<i>Subj 2</i>	<i>Subj 3</i>	<i>Subj 4</i>	<i>Subj 5</i>	<i>Subj 6</i>
	<i>fail %</i>					
<i>cohort 1</i>	20	21	17	30	37	39
<i>cohort 2</i>	33	41	29	33	31	40
<i>cohort 3</i>	34	21	19	38	32	37
<i>cohort 4</i>	45	45	22	35	24	35
<i>cohort 5</i>	35	34	24	29	29	23
<i>cohort 6</i>	34	46	41	42	38	28
<i>cohort 7</i>	42	29	46	42	21	29
<i>cohort 8</i>	35	45	46	38	30	18
<i>cohort 9</i>	31	26	46	15	24	19
<i>cohort 10</i>	48	45	42	35	30	39
<i>cohort 11</i>	33	37	41	28	22	45
<i>cohort 12</i>	35	28	43	34	36	51

The persistence across time of high fail rates in Table 3 and the pattern of fail rates in each cohort as they pass through semesters as is shown in Table 4 clearly demonstrates that there is no positive influence on student learning behaviour from the existence of exam hurdles, from the notice of exam hurdles given in subject guides, from staff discussion of hurdles in lectures and tutorials with students, or from students talking to each other about the existence and likely impact of an exam hurdle in their course. Thus, the undeniable truth about exam hurdles is that they do not cause a large proportion of students to study harder, better, more, or at all.

Due to advanced standing entry and repeat students, there is some variation in the students in each cohort in Table 4. However, this only emphasises the failure of examination hurdles to act as a positive on student behaviour. Failure seems to lead to more failure, e.g. across six subjects with

examination hurdles, cohort 1 has gone from a fail rate of 20% to 39%; cohort 12's fail rate from 35% to 51%.

Invigilation

The logic of an exam hurdle is that the examination score, being invigilated, is considered to be the authentic evaluation of that student's performance. For this statement to hold true, two points need to be accepted:

- that the marking of examination papers does not suffer from variation in approach, emphasis and scoring among markers; and,
- that there is no other method or manner of establishing and evaluating the authenticity of an individual's authorship of material submitted in a non-invigilated activity.

On the first point, there is a large body of research that has shown conclusively that assessment scoring is strongly, persistently and inescapably open to inaccuracy – amongst many, see Lane & Sabers, 1989; Stuhlmann, Daniel, Dellinger, Denny, & Powers, 1999; Swartz et al., 1999. The process of marking is far from infallible, and the quality of marking is highly dependent on factors independent of and of no connection to the goals of the assessment item (Hamp-Lyons, 1989; Vaughan, 1991; Lumley, 2006). Among markers scoring the same item or task, variation has been shown to occur not because of difference in students' work but in the markers' background and personal predispositions (Barnwell, 1989; Shohamy, Gordon, & Kraemer, 1992; Brown, 1995) and their individual approach to the weight of penalty to be applied to errors and mistakes (Englehard, 1994; Lumley & McNamara, 1995). Moreover, across time, markers have shown instability in their scorings of the same level of work from students (Congdon & McQueen, 2000). The potential for variation among markers must call into question the efficacy of the quality control role of an examination hurdle.

On the second point – that invigilated assessment is the only form of assessment that can attest to any individual's performance – if accepted, this means that awarding any formal points to any non-invigilated activity or item that is part of an official university course leading to a credential is basically fraudulent and educationally unsound, and must cease. Universities would be honour-bound to remove points from all non-invigilated activities and items. However, several strategies immediately come to mind that would assist the pursuit of the authenticity of an individual or a group's material: Turnitin; unique, randomised individual or group-specific assignment data; unique, individual or group-specific assignment focus or tasks. Such authenticity techniques will have workload implications.

In essence, an examination hurdle acts as de facto exit testing for a subject. But for this to hold valid educationally, that examination would have to measure all critical knowledge and skill capabilities of that subject, including those capabilities already evaluated in the non-invigilated assessment activities. If a subject guide states that a critical capability or learning objective of that subject is, for example, verbal communication skills or ability to work in a group, then those capabilities would need to be evaluated in the activity that operates as a hurdle. Otherwise, the examination has not had a hurdle criteria across all the stated critical requirements of that subject.

Examination hurdles are also supported by the argument that with group assessments usually do not give authentic information about each student's contribution: the so-called free-rider problem. But this is a problem to be sourced directly back to the academic. It has more to do with appropriate alignment of what capabilities staff require students to demonstrate in assessed, group work and how valid is the marking scheme that is used in measuring this. It is missing the point if group work is assessed on the premise that every student has to do the identical amount and type of work as each other student in that group. That focus is best suited to solo student work. Group work is about allocation of tasks, distribution of activities etc so that a group produces a better output than an individual could. Are academics clear themselves, and in their subject guides, as to the requirements

of what is to be the constituent components of the skills involved in the capability, 'works in a group'? Are levels of these constituent components evident in the marking scheme for this activity? And if 'can work in a group' is an essential capability of a subject, it is not produced by using examination hurdles as the sole means of overcoming distrust regarding the validity of the group score for all students in that group.

On the other hand, as the use of an examination hurdle effectively means a lack of trust in students' performance in and, thus, the educational value of all other assessments throughout the semester, a subject should only use such a hurdle if a range of authenticity techniques have been used in and proven ineffective for non-exam assessment items. Also, for exam hurdles to have a quality control, gate-keeper role, it would need to be shown that its use has a significant impact on fail rates. That is, does operating or not operating the exam hurdle make a substantial difference on the fail rate in a subject? If it does not, then why use it, because it has not managed to identify and control against inappropriate student behaviour? More importantly, the use of an exam hurdle as a quality control over the standard of students passing a course seems to ignore the prime issue: are there fundamentally invalid forms of assessment activities that should not be used in universities or do some forms of assessment require far more time and resources to be effective and sound than have been currently devoted to them?

Furthermore, this project reviewed 144 subject guides, available on the Internet, from over ten Australian universities, covering the following disciplines: accounting, IT, economics, marketing, management, law, civil environmental, statistics, health sciences, mathematics and geography, global social science, fashion textiles, psychology, physiotherapy, education. Examination hurdles were used in 47% of these subjects. This raises a curious point. Examination hurdles are not universally used in the Australian higher education sector. Those subjects that use an examination hurdle do so largely to mitigate against inauthentic assessment measurement in the non-invigilated assessment items. However, there are numerous common subjects across programs in universities. Accounting Theory, for example, is a subject common to all Australian accounting degrees. Some of these Accounting Theory subjects would operate an examination hurdle; some would not. Can these subjects be considered equivalent? Surely the hurdle-using Accounting Theory subjects would have to refuse to accept the results from the non-hurdle-using Audit subjects and, thus, deny an exemption for that subject to students seeking advanced entry?

Conclusion

The mistaken belief in and reliance on the quality control role of examination hurdles has been at the expense of developing greater authenticity for and validity in the capacity of non-examination assessment items to measure student performance.

An examination hurdle is a very blunt instrument that clearly sends a message to students that in that subject there is no real value being given by academics to any learning activity except the examination. Such hurdles exist to fail students. They have no diagnostic or remedial intervention function. Any assumed quality control role is highly doubtful, unless accompanied by a sustained and significant attempt to eradicate inappropriate student behaviour in the non-invigilated assessment activities.

Considering their widespread use in Australian universities and the impact they have on students, examination hurdles should only be used if they are demonstrably based on sound educational reasons relating to the evaluation of critical capabilities in a subject. If an examination hurdle is allowed in a subject, then that subject should involve result grades that differentiate between a clear-fail and a hurdle-fail, as these results are obtained by very different activities.

Any subject that operates an examination hurdle should state in its subject guide that all non-invigilated assessment results in a semester are provisional only and may be discounted or discarded,

depending on a student's performance on the examination. Also, if an examination hurdle is to be a de facto exit test for a subject, it needs to measure all critical knowledge and skill capabilities of that subject, including those capabilities already evaluated in the non-invigilated assessment activities. Otherwise, the hurdle has not operated as an evaluative mechanism of comprehensive quality control.

More importantly, judging from their published assessment policies, many universities accept that examination hurdles have a quality control role because there is widespread suspicion about the capacity of some forms of non-invigilated assessment to authenticate and, thus, measure students' capabilities. This being the case, unless there occurs a coordinated, sector-wide campaign to significantly raise the standard and authenticity of the 'suspect' non-invigilated assessment items, then those items must cease to be used for formal assessment in universities. It would be disgraceful and deceitful for universities to continue to allow the use of items that are clearly not fit for their purpose.

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Appendix 1: From the RMIT CSIT school

Unless otherwise specified in a subject guide, the following information applies to all School of Computer Science and Information Technology subjects

Assessment Hurdles

If there is a hurdle requirement for a subject (as specified in the subject guide), a student must pass all components designated as hurdles in order to pass the subject. In the event that a student fails one or more hurdle component, the result is a Fail (NN) and their final percentage mark is the lowest of the failed hurdle components. If, however, the combined grade for all components is lower than that of lowest failed hurdle component, the student will receive the combined grade for all components. Some common examples are provided below:

Case 1: Two components, both hurdles

Assignment component: 40% (hurdle)

Examination component: 60% (hurdle)

Assignment component: 30/40 Exam: 45/60 Gives a final grade of DI and mark of 75 (i.e. 30 + 45)	Assignment component: 18/40 Exam: 40/60 Gives a final grade of NN and mark of 45% (i.e. 18/40)
Assignment component: 10/40 Exam: 25/60 = 42% Gives a final grade of NN and final mark of 25% (i.e. 10/40)	Assignment component: 30/40 Exam: 29/60 Gives a final grade of NN and mark of 48% (i.e. 29/60)

Case 2: Three components, all hurdles

Assignment component = 20% total (2 assignments, 10% each) (hurdle)

WebLearn = 10% total (seven separate modules) (hurdle)

Examination component = 70% (hurdle)

WebLearn: 7/10 Assignments: 15/20 (8/10 + 7/10) Exam: 55/70 Gives a final grade of DI and mark of 77% (i.e. 7+ 15+ 55)	WebLearn: 4/10 Assignments: 17/20 (8/10 + 9/10) Exam: 55/70 Gives a final grade of NN and mark of 40% (i.e. 4/10)
WebLearn: 7/10 Assignments: 9/20 (5/10 + 4/10) Exam: 55/70 Gives a final grade of NN and mark of 45% (i.e. 9/20)	WebLearn: 9/10 Assignments: 19/20 (9/10 + 10/10) Exam: 31/70 Gives a final grade of NN and mark of 44% (i.e. 31/70)
WebLearn: 4/10 Assignments: 9/20 (6/10 + 3/10) Exam: 10/70 Gives a final grade of NN and mark of 14% (i.e. 10/70)	WebLearn: 6/10 Assignments: 10/20 (3/10 + 7/10) Exam: 36/70 Gives a final grade of PA and mark of 52% (i.e. 6+ 10+ 36)

Case 3 – 4 components, 2 of which are hurdles

Classroom quizzes: 10%

Laboratory portfolio: 10%

Exam = 50% (hurdle)

Major project 30% (hurdle)

In this case, if a student fails one or more hurdle, the student result is a Fail and their final percentage mark is the lower of the two hurdle components. If, however, the combined grade for all components (classroom quizzes + laboratory portfolio + exam + major project) is lower than that of a failed component, the student will receive the combined grade for all components. For example:

<p>Classroom quizzes: 9/10 Laboratory portfolio: 8/10 Exam (hurdle): 30/50 Major project (hurdle): 25/30 Gives a final grade of DI and mark of 72% (i.e. $9 + 8 + 30 + 25$)</p>	<p>Classroom quizzes: 9/10 Laboratory portfolio: 8/10 Exam (hurdle): 21/50 Major project (hurdle): 25/30 Gives a final grade of NN and mark of 42% (i.e. 21/50)</p>
<p>Classroom quizzes: 9/10 Laboratory portfolio: 8/10 Exam (hurdle): 30/50 Major project (hurdle) = 13/30 Gives a final grade of NN and mark of 43% (i.e. 13/30)</p>	<p>Classroom quizzes: 9/10 Laboratory portfolio: 8/10 Exam (hurdle): 10/50 Major project (hurdle): 14/30 Gives a final grade of NN and mark of 20% (i.e. 10/50)</p>
<p>Classroom quizzes: 0/10 Laboratory portfolio: 0/10 Exam (hurdle): 23/50 Major project (hurdle): 14/30 Gives a final grade of NN and mark of 37% (i.e. $0 + 0 + 23 + 14$)</p>	

Appendix 2: Australian universities and faculties policies on hurdles

University of Melbourne, Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning Melbourne School of Design, Assessment Policy, Hurdle Requirements

Hurdle requirements can be included as part of the assessment in any subject where the completion of these requirements aligns with the objectives of the subject. For example - a subject in which practical as well as theoretical knowledge is critical and a student who has not satisfactorily completed both practical and theoretical elements is unsuited for further study in that discipline. Students who do not satisfy the hurdle requirements in any subject will be awarded a fail grade (N+), even if they have obtained more than 50% of the marks available by the completion of all the components of assessment. Hurdle requirements must be stated in the assessment details set out in the Course and Subject Handbook.

Examples of hurdle requirements include:

- Class attendance requirements (where class participation constitutes core learning): Examiners must keep a log of attendance.
- Successful completion of all components of assessment required to achieve an overall pass in the subject (where performance against critical subject objectives is demonstrated in different assessment tasks).
- Successful completion of particular components of assessment required to achieve an overall pass in the subject (e.g. - students must pass at least ten out of twelve lab reports, in order to demonstrate breadth of learning).
- Successful completion of both practical and theoretical elements of the subject required to achieve an overall pass in the subject.

Monash University, Faculty of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences

This aims to define hurdle assessment requirements and the implications for students.

Hurdle assessments are compulsory requirements within individual units that must be met in order to achieve satisfactory results in those units. They are normally mastery of professional skills or attainment of required attributes. These requirements fulfil one or more unit learning objectives and they may be activities that are class based or that need to be undertaken outside regular scheduled class times. Any in course assessment that are hurdles should be clearly identified as assessment items. Failure to meet a hurdle requirement will result in the student failing the unit. Failure of a unit may impede student progression. Where a unit has a hurdle requirement, the numbers of total attempts allowed must be clearly outlined in unit guides distributed at the commencement of the unit. Normally, a maximum of four attempts at a hurdle requirement are allowed. However for clinical hurdles fewer attempts may be allowed.

Clinical/fieldwork hurdle assessments

Many units within the Faculty have clinical or fieldwork hurdle assessment requirements in order to pass the units. In such units, normally two attempts are permitted before an overall fail grade is given in the relevant unit. Any repeat fieldwork/clinical is taken as a supplementary assessment. Where a student is required to repeat a unit as a result of a clinical/fieldwork fail, a maximum of one reattempt is allowed. Students will be directed to seek counselling from their relevant Course Coordinator to examine future options.

A unit may have an attendance hurdle requirement where it is considered that the student needs to attend a certain amount of classes/tutorials/laboratory sessions when it is the only means of obtaining specific learning objectives within the unit. Attendance requirements are normally specified as a percentage and will be clearly indicated in the unit manual. If the hurdle requirement

is attendance, then the requirement must be brought to the student's attention at the beginning of the semester.

La Trobe general policy

Assessment – Hurdles: If hurdles (conditions for passing a unit other than the overall mark) are to be applied, they must be stated in the unit documentation. Some common hurdles are:

- Exam mark: a common hurdle here is 40%, ie. if a student fails to score 40% in the exam they will fail the unit, no matter how small a proportion of the overall mark it comprises. Exam hurdles are particularly relevant where assignments could be of dubious origin, or where group work is used extensively. Setting an exam hurdle below 50% can be comforting to nervous students, who might expect to perform below their ability under exam conditions.
- Practical performance: passing a competency test on some vital skill may be essential to passing the unit, particularly in health and allied disciplines.
- 3 Attendance as a hurdle: Caution must be applied to setting unrealistic hurdles on eg. attendance at class. Note that, while attendance at lectures is not compulsory (although desirable), attendance at other scheduled classes (tutes, practicals) is normally expected. Note that attendance and participation are not synonymous.
- Equity and hurdles: The need for equity must be borne in mind when setting and applying hurdles.

Monash University, Faculty of Business and Economics

The faculty's policy on assessment is available at <http://www.buseco.monash.edu.au/student> but is outlined below, and the procedure to be followed should be made clear to students at the start of the semester in the unit outline.

- A student should normally achieve at least 50 per cent in total to pass a unit, including a mark of at least 40 per cent in the final invigilated examination, although departments can increase this latter minimum requirement. For third-year and higher-level units, exemption from this final examination requirement may be approved by Faculty Board on a unit-by-unit basis.
- A 'hurdle' is an additional requirement needed to pass a given unit. Hurdle requirements are given in the unit outline that is distributed in the first week of the teaching semester. A 'marks hurdle' is a requirement to achieve a certain mark in a specified component or components of the assessment of the unit. Examples of other hurdles include a minimum attendance requirement or a requirement to complete all components of assessment. In situations where the faculty discipline committee or the chief examiner disallows a piece of work submitted for a unit, the student will not be considered to have completed that component of the unit.

North Melbourne Institute of Technology

All assessment tasks counting towards 30% or more of the total assessment for the subject, and all hurdle requirements, will be moderated prior to setting the task.

- If hurdles (conditions for passing a subject other than the overall mark) are to be applied, they must be stated in the Subject Outline and the Subject Guide.
- Normally, attendance at lectures is not compulsory whereas attendance at other scheduled classes may be expected. Notwithstanding these expectations, if attendance is conditional for passing the subject, this must be stated in the Subject
- A student who has obtained 50% or more in a subject but who has failed to meet a
- hurdle requirement shall be offered supplementary assessment (code SAH) in order to meet this requirement, unless it is impractical to provide this assessment.

- Upon successful completion of the supplementary assessment task, the original mark will stand

La Trobe University: Science, Technology and Engineering

An undergraduate or postgraduate coursework student who has obtained 50 per cent or more in a unit but who has failed to meet a compulsory (hurdle) requirement shall be offered supplementary assessment in order to meet this requirement, unless it is impractical to provide this assessment. Upon successful completion of the supplementary assessment, the original mark will stand. (See point 3.4 of the supplementary assessment policy.)

In these circumstances, your grade will be recorded as "SAH-A"1 or "SAH-E" with no mark shown.

Upon successful completion of supplementary assessment, the original mark will apply.

Otherwise, the grade will be amended to "N".

You should check with the relevant Department to find out what minimum performance level must be met in a hurdle area in order for supplementary assessment to be made available.

1SAH-E May present for supplementary assessment in a compulsory (hurdle) component - which will include a centrally administrated Examination.

SAH-A May present for supplementary assessment in a compulsory (hurdle) component - which will not include a centrally administrated Examination.