Survival in the academy:
Policy challenges for maintaining academic standards in higher education.

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Abstract (150 words)

This paper derives from research into student assessment policy reforms. These reforms are designed to introduce practices that will allow universities to more effectively demonstrate achievement of appropriate and consistent academic standards. The research has revealed a systemic problem that is common to the Higher Education sector: specifically, that the intersections between student assessment policy and other policies can precipitate behavioural responses from academics that are contrary to the policy intentions.

This paper details this problem by describing a range of conflicting pressures experienced by academics, the interactions between these pressures, and the consequential effects for maintaining academic standards. It helps policy makers to appreciate the interactions that exist between policies that, if viewed discretely are functional, but which when viewed as a collective, may create unintended negative consequences. The paper helps to inform more appropriate policy choices and encourages a systems view of policy implementation.

Background

With international attention continuing to focus on academic standards (e.g. OECD, 2011), and increasing accountability for quality (e.g. HEFCE's research excellence framework and Australia's 'Excellence for Research in Australia') co-occurring with renewed resource constraints in many countries (e.g. Australia's closure of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council, funding cuts for UK tertiary institutions), and increasing international competition in the higher education sector, the work pressures experienced daily by academics are also increasing.

Part of the response at Griffith university (Australia) is a research project that is seeking to develop and implement a new policy for the assessment of student learning which improves the university's ability to validly demonstrate that its academic standards are appropriate. Part of the process involves interviewing academics across the university about the related issues. One particular theme – and problem for the sector – to have emerged from this has, following the words of one interviewee, been dubbed "Survival in the Academy".

This term is used to refer to the behavioural response of academics to the policy milieu we find ourselves in. Such thinking relates well to systems theory (Bertalanffy, 1972), and to game theory. Essentially, the position is this: an academic has a job to do, they make an appraisal of the best way to do that within the available resources (principally their own time). This appraisal involves balancing competing pressures and, inevitably, compromise.

Of course, there is nothing new in this. What is new however, is the magnitude of the pressures relative to the available time for academically rigorous responses. Thus, to illustrate, a perennial problem in academia has been the simple lack of time available for marking of students' work. The validity and reliability – even credibility – of this fundamental academic activity has been compromised for many years (e.g. Warren Piper, 1985, 1993; Warren Piper, Nulty, & O'Grady, 1996).

Policy intersections

The research referred to above has identified that it is not any one policy setting that precipitates problematic behavioural responses, but rather the intersection between policy. This point is important if policy makers, tertiary education managers, and regulators are to steer a path that elicits the kind of behavioural responses desired. The position is similar to students' responses to curricula: there, the 'system' that comprises the curriculum (Biggs, 2006) creates a 'hidden curriculum' (Snyder, 1971) that students respond to in ways that intersect with their own motives and circumstance.

How does this manifest for academics? Let us consider an example:

Common practice is for higher education institutions to have multiple approaches to student evaluation of teaching and courses. It is an institutional requirement (sometimes originating as a Federal Government requirement of institutions) for academics to use these approaches, and to share some portion of the outcomes with their supervisor(s) in the contexts of performance review and/or promotion and tenure decision-making processes. At Griffith, when the overall score for a student evaluation of course falls below 3.5 out of 5 the convenor responsible is asked by their academic supervisor to explain. Depending on the outcome of that exchange, he or she may then be asked to develop and implement a course improvement plan.

On the face of it, this is no bad thing: the student evaluation data are not treated as a definitive indication that a course requires improvement, but as a sign that some closer attention may be required. Where that attention justifies further intervention for improvement, that is asked for. How will academics react to this policy and practice? Clearly, they will seek to avoid a situation in which their course evaluation score is below 3.5. But, how is this achieved? The problem is that *at the same time* as trying to ensure their courses are judged to be of high quality by students, academics are also being asked:

1. To ensure a low rate of student attrition (this statistic links to performance funding)
2. To ensure a low rate of international student attrition (some schools have in excess of 50% international – fee-paying – students)
3. To increase the quantity and quality of research outputs
4. To increase the quantum of external research grant funds won
5. To demonstrate that the grades recommended to the assessment board are derived from the application of appropriate academic standards, consistent with those applied at other institutions.
6. To increase the proportion of students drawn from lower socio-economic backgrounds.
7. Etc. (See figure 1)

Figure 1: Competing pressures on academic behaviour
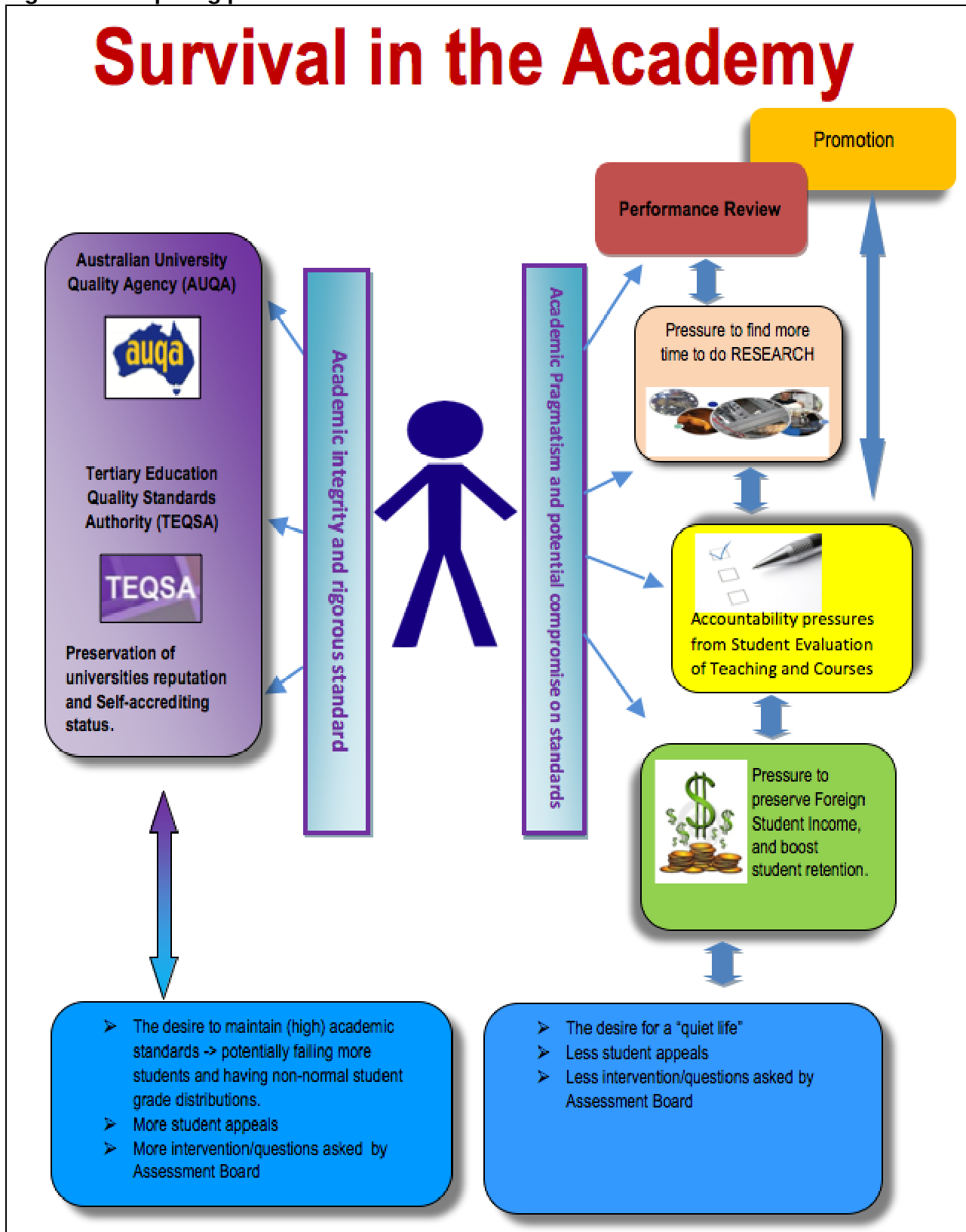
1-6 above, represent formal institutional 'requests'. These come in different forms, some from policy (e.g. Assessment Policy) and others from the institution's broader quality management frameworks (e.g. via its strategic plan, academic plan, learning and teaching plan, research plan etc.).

Consequently, academics ask themselves how to respond, and this is where conflicts manifest.

1. To reduce attrition, one simple path is to lower the standard required for a passing mark. But this conflicts with the need to demonstrate appropriate standards to professional accrediting agencies (without which the degree program may not proceed) and quality audit entities such as Australia's new 'Tertiary Education Quality Standards Authority' – which has the power to close courses and programs, or even institutions if it is not satisfied with standards. It also conflicts with the professionalism of academics whose desire to maintain their own integrity is a correlate of maintaining the quality of their teaching and assessment activities. Thus, a more appropriate path is to invest the time and effort needed to improve the quality of the course and its teaching. But … is that possible?

2. To increase the quantity and quality of research outputs and grants, more time needs to be invested *there*. This conflicts with the need to invest more time in teaching.

The interactions and conflicts go on: promotion decisions (allegedly at least) favour research productivity over teaching excellence, yet operational funding for many schools depends on its ability to attract – and retain – fee-paying international students who demand high quality teaching.

Conclusion

It is incumbent on policy makers and regulators to appraise themselves of the working reality created by the interactions between different, and completing, policy pressures if the necessary compromise between them is to be effectively resolved by academics. In the research work at Griffith, the policy settings of the new Assessment Policy seek to empower academics to exercise their expert judgement of students' work in ways that draw on, and legitimise, a broad range of existing peer-review and benchmarking practices. In this way, at least some of the conflicting pressures are reduced.

References

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