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**AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF  
FINAL GRADES AWARDED TO BACHELOR WITH  
HONOURS AND MASTERS STUDENTS**

**A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts  
in Psychology at Massey University.**

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the final grades awarded to Bachelor with honours and Masters students in New Zealand universities from 1960 to 1989 as a function of students' gender, the university attended, the degree completed, and the subject studied. These grades were also compared with the grades awarded to Bachelor with honours students in England and Wales from 1974 to 1989. Chi-square test statistics were used to measure the significance of these relationships. In New Zealand women were awarded significantly more first class degrees than men. In England and Wales men were awarded significantly more first class degrees than women. Science students were awarded a higher percentage of first class degrees than other students in both New Zealand and England and Wales. In New Zealand Bachelor with honours students were awarded first class degrees more frequently than Masters students. Political and historical developments, the nature of the grading procedures used, and institutional and departmental variance provide partial explanation for some of the results. It is clear that no single factor is responsible for these variations in degree performance, but rather a complex interaction of several factors. It is concluded that in New Zealand and England and Wales, gender, university, the degree undertaken, and the subject studied, all have an effect on the final grade a student is awarded.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## OVERVIEW

The degree class awarded to a student is an important marker of achievement. Yet the reliability of assessment in higher education has been the subject of concern for some years (Hartog & Rhodes, 1935; Dale, 1959; Cox, 1967; Foster, 1985; Johnson, 1988). Research continues to highlight discrepancies in the grades that students receive that are not the result of differences in students academic ability. Differences have been noted in the awarding of honours degrees between institutions (Bee & Dolton, 1985; Connolly & Smith, 1986; Johnes & Taylor, 1987), between courses of study (Bourner & Bourner, 1985; Smith, 1990), and between males and females (Rudd, 1984; Kornbrot, 1987; Clarke, 1988). Further there is still no uniform opinion as to why these differences occur.

Answers to these questions are likely to be of interest not only to the universities themselves, but also to potential university students and to employers. Potential students are likely to be interested in discovering the extent to which their chances of obtaining a "good" degree might vary between institutions and departments. Employers may be interested to know where they are most likely to recruit graduates with "good" degrees. It is the purpose of this research to investigate whether degree results vary between institutions, the subject studied, and between males and females who have completed postgraduate degrees in New Zealand in the last thirty years. New Zealand grades will also be compared with those of England and Wales.

Grading is a form of performance appraisal, and as such a great deal of the research in this area is applicable to grading and assessment within education. Chapter two is an overview of performance appraisal. Nearly

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In chapter eight the results are interpreted, and some explanations for the outcomes observed are provided. Contrasts and similarities between the results of New Zealand's universities and those of England and Wales are examined. The implications of these results for postgraduate students from both New Zealand and England and Wales are discussed, along with suggestions for future research.