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**AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF  
DEGREE COURSE OBJECTIVITY AND  
GRADUATE PERFORMANCE**

**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 looks at the issue of degree course objectivity from the perspective of Science and non-Science lecturers. It is an exploratory piece of research, and focuses on a sample of degree courses offered in New Zealand universities. Research was conducted in several steps, and involved the completion of two questionnaires. Participants were also asked to supply a written statement outlining the objectivity of assessment in their own teaching domain. The t-test statistic was used to measure the significance of research findings. In New Zealand, university lecturers recognise that a difference exists in the objectivity of degree course content. Further, they are aware that Science oriented courses lend themselves to greater assessment objectivity than the non-Sciences, despite disagreeing over the exact level of objectivity in the latter field of study. The variance in degree course objectivity has a potential impact on the distribution of 'good' degrees awarded across university departments, yet has not evoked the amount of attention amongst academics that it clearly merits. It is concluded, that in New Zealand, research must continue into the issue of subject matter objectivity as a potential impact on students' degree selection and employee recruitment.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## Overview

Achieving a high level of academic performance is an important marker of educational success. In turn, the recipients of a 'good' degree may accrue particular benefits within higher education, and the wider field of work. For many years however, the consistency and validity of grading practices has generated a great deal of concern (Wainwright, 1977; Foster, 1985; Kennedy, 1990). Repeatedly, studies reveal that discrepancies in the grades that students receive are not the result of differences in intellectual ability and/or attainment. Instead, several studies suggest that the subject matter of degree courses has a substantial impact on the class of degree awarded (Dale, 1959; Bee & Dolton, 1985; Hindmarch & Bourner, 1986; Johnes & Taylor, 1987; Bolger, 1990). Nevin (1972) is adamant that such a factor should not go unchecked, yet little attention appears to have been paid to his recommendation.

In my own research, one aspect of the subject matter phenomenon will be studied in greater detail. That is, the extent to which course material can be designated as 'subjective' or 'objective' is of concern, and whether this factor impacts on the distribution of grades. Answers to these questions will be of interest not only to the taxpayers who fund tertiary institutions, but also to potential university students and employers. Potential students will be interested knowing the extent to which their chances of obtaining a 'good' degree are influenced by their field of study. Employers may wish to know which student groups graduate with a high proportion of first class degrees when recruiting new staff.

Chapter two is an overview of performance evaluation, and looks at the various measurement tools for assessing work behaviour. Much of the research concerning job performance is conducted in the work place, yet, in many respects, is similar to the evaluation of students' academic performance. The chapter concludes with a

discussion on how to interpret evaluation results, and appropriately feed this information back to the recipient.

In Western society, attaining a university qualification confers considerable academic distinction upon the holder. Amongst some employers, certification is also crucially important in obtaining one's first job. In Chapter three, the relationship between society, education and grades is discussed in detail. Desirable psychometric concepts such as reliability, validity and the maintenance of standards is also considered in relation to postgraduate performance.

In Chapter four, several of the studies to address the issue of grade comparability across subject areas are discussed. Also of interest are the factors which may, in part, contribute to the observed variation in degree awards. Much of this research revolves around British data, yet is inconclusive as to why a discrepancy in degree awards might occur.

In Chapter five, an overview of my own research and hypotheses are presented. Of particular concern, is the issue of degree objectivity, and the extent to which this factor impacts on the distribution of grades in Science and non-Science degree courses. A philosophical debate on the meaning of the terms 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity' is presented at the beginning of the chapter.

A description of the subjects and questionnaires which were used in my study are introduced in Chapter six. Research findings are also presented in this section, in both written and diagrammatic form.

Research findings are interpreted in Chapter seven, and some explanations are provided for the observed outcomes. The links between previous studies and my own research are also highlighted and possible reasons for research discrepancies are made. Chapter seven concludes with a reply to the number of concerning issues which were raised by research participants, along with suggestions for future studies.