

## **What Distinguishes a Distinction: The Eyes of the Beholder and Beholdee**

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# What Distinguishes a Distinction? Perceptions of Quality Academic Performance and Strategies for Achieving it

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This paper reports results of a pilot case study on coursework postgraduates' perceptions of and strategies for achieving high quality performance in relation to teaching. The aim was to yield a preliminary database from which a survey questionnaire can be designed and administered to a larger population. Extending from the work by Bartlett and Fletcher (2001) the pilot case study was based on semi-structured interviews of three students. The students were asked about what they did and what they believed helped them get a distinction (D) or high distinction (HD) grade. The interview data were analysed using Leximancer Analysis for their perceptions and qualitative content analysis for their strategies. The results show that there were intrapersonal and interpersonal factors involved, which are reflected in the Leximancer analysis.

## **Introduction: Quality of high academic performance**

The study builds on findings that undergraduate students who have poor levels of know-how about producing assignments will perform poorly in comparison with peers who know more. This is the case particularly when they have difficulty understanding what assignment questions mean and/or what and how staff want them to write, or when they otherwise consider that writing in an "academic genre" is a mysterious phenomenon (Bartlett & Fletcher, 2001, 1997; Fletcher, 2003; Fletcher & Bartlett, 1997; Meyer, Young, & Bartlett, 1993).

Typically, mentoring of students by staff often leaves the literacy aspects of investigation and reporting underdone. The university experience generally is seen *'as a site for students simply to apply the literacy they are assumed to have gained through their schooling and life experiences, and not as a setting for literacy development'* (Nevile, 1996, p. 39). We know also from research nearing completion Fletcher (2003) that staff's views of what and how they should support the literacy elements of undergraduate students' work change depending on factors that include the year-level at which they are teaching.

However, there is hardly any comparable analysis of graduate levels of study. Nor is there clarity about what postgraduate students who achieve high grades have done to prepare and present work of superior standard. At a time when quality audits of Australian universities include close examination of qualitative aspects of their teaching and learning, there is a gaping hole in responses from most to the AVCC's call (1994) for universities to recognise and attend to such problems. McKenzie and Schwetzer (2001) note that the objective remains worthy and purposeful:

Identifying the factors that influence academic performance can improve the targeting of interventions and support services for students at risk of academic problems (p. 21).

However, there is much to do to convert worthy purpose to usable action.

The pilot study reported here is part of a larger plan developed by the researchers to guide a program of systematic long-term study. This study centres on coursework postgraduates' perceptions of high quality academic performance and strategies for achieving it. It involves also lecturers' perceptions and requirements of high quality academic performance and their strategies in communicating these requirements to their students. The aim of the project is to yield a database from which a survey questionnaire can be designed and administered to a larger population. Results from the survey will then be used to design an intervention program that will assist students to articulate experiences in shaping perceptions of high academic performance in their coursework with strategies for achieving it. In this pilot study, the researchers have taken a first step in this sequence. They have explored coursework postgraduates' perceptions of what had distinguished a distinction or high distinction as a marker of high quality work.

### **Research aim and questions**

The aim of the research was to identify and describe students' perceptions of the quality of high academic performance, their attempts to achieve it, and particularly what features of the context in which they operate to produce accessible items they see as watershed factors in access at superior levels.

The key research questions we sought to answer were:

- What distinguishes a distinction?
- What constitutes high quality academic performance?
- How do students achieve quality high performance?
- What factors are involved?

### **Research methodology**

This was a qualitative research using case study method. Three subjects constituted cases. Case studies provide in-depth understandings of particular social units, and of the meanings and contexts of participants (Best & Kahn, 2003; Burns, 2000; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 1984). In this case, the social unit was *postgraduate student*. Framing a rich understanding involves documenting the context within which a social unit is studied. In our study, the *postgraduate student* as social unit was examined within an increasingly widening context of the specific course the student had achieved a grade of D or HD, a specific program in which the course was resident, and a specific faculty and university offering the program. There was descriptive purpose in the deeper exploration of differences in opinion on what makes for D/HD grade performance, and how these differences relate to scholarly beliefs and practices (Merriam, 1998). The case studies also had interpretive purpose. Findings are used to contribute to the field of knowledge by providing insights in the form of suggestions for further research (Merriam, 1998). They were neither designed nor intended to make generalisations about the population.

### Participants

Three students in a master's course in the faculty of education of an Australian university participated voluntarily in this pilot study. The main criterion for recruitment was that volunteers had at least one D or HD in completed courses. All three students were of mature age and had returned to study after a 20-year lapse. None had prior formal knowledge of applied linguistics, the discipline of the master's program. S2 and S3 had taken the first four of eight required courses in summer intensive mode. They were in the second-last semester of the program at the time of the interview. S1 followed the non-intensive mode and was in final semester when the interview took place. At the time of interview, the subjects' records of academic performances were:

- S1 (male) had 6 HDs;
- S2 (female), 3 HDs, 4 Ds, and 1 C; and,
- S3 (female), 4 HDs and one Ds.

### Procedure

Retrospective interview was used as a means of eliciting the students' perceptions. A semi-structured interview was conducted with three volunteer students in the master of Applied Linguistics, a program of the Faculty of Education at Griffith University. There were two sets of interview questions: general and specific. General questions first centered a respondent's involvement in a self-nominated and specific course that had been passed at D or HD level. Various leads were then given to assist the respondent to generate a descriptive reflection. These included: *How did you get that D or HD? What did you need to know? How/where did you get the information? Why was it necessary? What helped or didn't help? In what way and why?*

Specific questions probed subjects' constructions of high quality academic performance, motivation, strategies for achieving results at distinction or high distinction levels, and, convenors' expectations, assessment requirements and positions on assisting them to achieve high levels of academic performance. The interview ended with students invited to give advice - to fellow students who wanted to get a D/HD, and to lecturers who wanted to facilitate students' performances. The length of interview varied between one hour for S1 and S2, who were rather talkative, and half an hour for S3, who was not expansive in responding to either the broad or specific questions.

Recordings of the interviews were transcribed in two formats to accommodate requirements for two types of complementary analyses. The original, unedited version was used for content analysis to identify the relevant elements that contributed to the students' high performance. The transcript was edited to remove the interview questions and linguistic elements that are part of conversations making (e.g., uh um, ah, oh, yes, yeah, yep, no, ok, well, right, you know, I guess, sort of, etc.). The edited version was submitted to Leximancer analysis in order to identify thematic strings in each subject's responses and in all three subjects' responses collectively. The results were used as a basis for comparison among the three cases and for arriving at an overall view about their perceptions as a whole.

## Results

### Qualitative content analysis: Strategies for achieving high academic performance

The strategies for achieving high academic performance can be seen broadly at two levels: internal/intrapersonal and external/interpersonal.

At the intrapersonal level, all three participants indicated *hard work* as the main strategy by all three participants. They saw *extensive reading* as necessary for getting to know the content of a topic, for building knowledge in the new discipline being studied, for learning and using research methodologies, and for writing academic essays. *Enjoyment* in reading and working on the tasks, and *interest* in the topic were shared by all three participants. *Motivation* and *determination* appear to be the main driving force for S1, who wanted good results to impress potential employers. Motivation had become a driving force for S2 only after she had obtained D and HD grades in her initial effort to do well in a new discipline. She had received also a credit for an otherwise 'excellent' essay in which she had not provided references. S3's starting point was motivation to pass the courses in a new discipline was. She said she was unaware of how she managed to get so many Ds and HDs, but attributed it to *hard work, enjoyment* in doing what she did especially reading into a new discipline, better working and thinking strategies that she thought had resulted from age, and working with lecturers whom she liked. Building *prior knowledge* of topics had helped to get the grades. All three shared perceptions that *organisation* and *planning* about their work, studies, and life had been important influences. Therefore, all three participants appeared to have listed self-efficacy, self-confidence, motivation, and ability to plan and organise their studies, read extensively, and enjoy their studies and academic work as their major elements distinguishing distinction-level performances.

At the interpersonal level, all three worked both independently (especially S1) and cooperatively with peers (especially S2 and S3). S1 received moral support from the family. Both S2 and S3 believed that the group work and intensive study in the summer intensive program paved their way into the new discipline and provided peer support. All three sought advice from their lecturers and assistance from the library staff. S1 posed questions to the lecturers in class frequently in order to get further information and clarification. S2 collected information by listening to questions posed by other students in class and reading her peers' postings on the website discussion forum in one course, and sought assistance from lecturers outside class. S3 sought assistance from only one lecturer but 'floundered around' on her own in other courses or worked things out with peers. All three found the feedback and suggestions from their lecturers useful and necessary, but S3 found those from only one lecturer useful. S3 also felt that she needed to enjoy a lecturer in order to enjoy the study.

Their advice for peers who want Ds/HDs typically was similar to how they themselves did it, i.e., work hard; read widely but know when to stop reading and start writing; plan and organise the tasks; seek clarifications from lecturers and peers; address assessment criteria; and, enjoy the work.

### Perceptions of quality of high academic performance

Students' perceptions of high-level academic performance are reflected in the way they worked. All three saw a need to first get the 'ideas' about the topic and the new discipline (its declarative knowledge) by extensive reading, and next to put them together into a sensible essay that addressed the assessment criteria. They were aware of a need to know and to write in the academic genre of the discipline and they worked on it by paying attention to the language used in the required readings. S1 and S2 found the model essay given by one of the lecturers useful with respect to these things.

Their advice for lecturers reflects what each had seen as very important, i.e., clear and consistent task requirements, instructions, and assessment criteria; detailed feedback from lecturers on their performance and suggestions for improvement; and, lecturers' willingness to answer students' questions.

### Leximancer analysis: Perceptions

The Leximancer analysis of the three cases together (see Appendix) shows that *assessment* rotated to align with the x-axis in the right half of the figure, *assignment* and *school* align with the x-axis in the left half of the figure. In addition, *think* aligns with the y-axis in the lower half of the figure. From the perspective of the x-axis, these students spoke about *assessment* in relation to *reading, writing, lecturer, lectures, criteria, and wanted* in the lower left quadrant. Likewise, students spoke about *assignment* and *school* in the right half of the figure in relation to *write, work, subject, semester, and study* in the upper right quadrant, and in relation to *time, found, subjects, ideas, and important* in the lower right quadrant. From the perspective of the y-axis, these students spoke about *think* in relation to *criteria, students, thoughts, reading, and working* in the lower left quadrant and in relation to *ideas, subjects, important, time, week, and people* in the lower right. The upper left and lower right quadrants could be defined as a continuum referring to course-related ideation whereas the upper right and lower left quadrants could be defined as a continuum referring to student-focused ideation. These aggregate responses can be interpreted as focussed, on one hand, on assessment in relation to course topics; and on the other hand, on student work. Likewise, students appeared to discuss the term *assignment* in relation to course topics and students' work on the other hand. Finally, the term *think* appears to apply, on one hand, to student work and, on the other hand, to construction of ideas.

Answers to the key research questions have been suggested, albeit with all the qualifications of case study research:

- What distinguishes a distinction?

Our cases indicated elements on internal/intrapersonal and external/interpersonal dimensions. The former highlighted thinking and working. They included one's willingness to work hard, to read extensively and to enjoy it, and to be determined to succeed. It also involved motivation to do well and doing strategic things such as posing questions to lecturers in order to determine what is required in researching a topic and its presentation as an assignment.

The latter produced dependence to various extents on their lecturers to provide useful and necessary feedback and suggestions.

- What constitutes high quality academic performance?

All three cases indicated the significance of gathering appropriate and sufficient declarative knowledge of the topic and the new discipline. They considered extensive reading should do this, and that ideas should be arranged and organised into assessment items in ways that address the lecturer's criteria. They believed knowledge of the academic genre of the discipline and of the language used in required readings was important.

- How do students achieve quality high performance?

Effort and know-how were needed. The effort included determination and willingness to approach lecturers to corroborate on criteria, writing genre, and field of content. The know-how consisted of content information and interest in topics and procedural knowledge about how to operate on such knowledge in producing quality work.

- What factors are involved?

As indicated in relation to the first question, various factors were indicated and fitted along two dimensions - internal/intrapersonal and external/interpersonal.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

The results show a consistency between the interview data and from the Leximancer analysis. There are intrapersonal or student-focused factors involved across the data as well as interpersonal or course-focused factors.

The participants emphasised a need for clear description of tasks, instructions, and assessment criteria if they were to prepare work of quality, and for lecturers to take seriously the provision of constructive feedback to guide their development. They also stressed addressing the assessment criteria.

Students believed that they needed to be shown how to address assessment criteria in their essays and how to demonstrate it in their writing. To become properly aware of the academic genre and conventions, they need lecturers to attend explicitly to teaching the academic writing required by a particular course. One possibility is to use the prescribed readings as model texts for analysis or deconstruction – and then to illustrate the academic genre. This could be followed by co-construction of various parts of an essay, especially the introduction, development of argument, and conclusion.

We conclude that the pilot study was worthwhile and that student perceptions of the quality of high academic performance and their strategies of achieving it represent sufficient definition, commonality and focus to proceed with further study. The descriptive purpose provided opinion on what for our three respondents had made for D/HD grade performance. It is not clear how these features might relate to scholarly beliefs and practices for the students in other contexts such as different programs, or different universities, or for other students. Additional research using quantitative methods would help to check such generalisation, and numbers of past and current students across various masters' programs in Australia's 39 universities provide a potential database.

Further development of the research program needs to include lecturers as subjects. Their dispositions to assist students to understand and achieve high-levels of academic

performance need to be checked against their actions. The junctures and/or disjunctures between their teaching and what students perceive and do strategically to achieve highly are important information. They are important for interpretive purposes in better understanding the junctures and/or disjunctures between what students and lecturers say and do. They are important also for the induction of new university teaching staff and the ongoing professional development of the old-and-true.

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## Appendix

Leximancer analysis graph

