

**IS THERE A CORRELATION BETWEEN PROVIDING EXEMPLARS AND  
A CHANGE IN STUDENT MARKS? A REPORT ON A LOGITUDINAL STUDY  
DESIGNED TO ANSWER THIS QUESTION**

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**ABSTRACT**

The importance of assessment has been well established, but how to best communicate required standards and criteria to students are a more vexed concern. Students commonly ask 'How can I improve my marks in this unit?' They also commonly ask for examples of assignments or past exams in order to guide them. This article reports on the results of a longitudinal study which aimed to measure the value of using exemplars in terms of the impact that these exemplars have on students' marks. Exemplars which focused on the final exam were provided or withheld from different groupings of students undertaking the same unit of study over a number of years. Results for final exam grades achieved by students over a period of eight years have been recorded in order to provide guidance on what impact exemplars have on students' marks. The findings of this study reported in this article promulgate that exemplars are a highly valuable tool for improving students' marks.

**KEYWORDS:** Exemplars, Best Practices, Student Improvement, Learning

**INTRODUCTION**

Exemplars are not a new concept; they have been in existence for some time. [1][2][3] Although they have some critics, they are commonly regarded as a mechanism by which to demonstrate to students particular concepts or skills which may be difficult to describe by just using an abstract verbal description. [4][5][6] Quite simply they provide examples of work.

Exemplars are often thought of as useful to provide 'real' examples rather than mere hypothetical discussion and are used because assessment criteria and the nature of quality of work may be difficult to understand by novice students in abstract form.[7] A typical example of this may be asking a student to write an essay on a particular topic. An exemplar demonstrates to a student what an essay looks like in context by using a concrete real example.

That students want exemplars is not in doubt and has been explored by many. [8] What has not been sufficiently clear is whether these exemplars can lead to an improvement in the marks that students gain whilst completing a unit of study. Or conversely whether these marks lead to a decrease in student marks or even to any change at all. Exemplars take time for an educator to prepare and that time would be better valued if a link could be sustained between using exemplars and a change in student marks.

So whilst there are many reports that indicate that students' value exemplars,[9][10] other than mostly anecdotal reports, there have been few systematic studies of whether the provision of exemplars to students leads to a change in

marks for either a positive or potentially a negative effect.[11][12][13]

This article reports on a longitudinal study which was undertaken with groups of students over an eight year period who completed an introductory law unit designed for non-law students at an Australian tertiary institution. That study was designed to measure the impact that exemplars had on student's marks. In some years of the units offering exemplars were provided to students whilst in other years exemplars were not provided. The results of students who completed the final exam for that unit of study were compared and analysed to determine whether any material difference between years was evident.

## **WHAT ARE EXEMPLARS?**

In brief exemplars are examples of work produced in a real life context. Sadler provides a very simple definition of an exemplar by stating that they are 'key examples chosen so as to be typical of designated levels of quality of competence'. [14] Carless and Chan provide a more sophisticated definition and limit their definition to exemplars produced from students work when they state: 'we define exemplars as carefully chosen samples of student work which are used to illustrate dimensions of quality and clarify assessment expectations.'[15] Newlyn provides a more complex definition stating: 'Exemplars may indicate a grade range, as it typical at most institutions, such as fail, pass, credit, distinction and high distinction, and they may be annotated so as to indicate how the exemplar satisfies the stated criteria for assessment or they may simply be presented as they were submitted for assessment by the former student.'[16]

Exemplars can take many forms and be constructed in different ways depending upon the unit they are being used in. For a humanities unit which required students to undertake an essay as a form of assessment an exemplar could be constructed by the teacher or could be made by a student. In this context the exemplar could also be annotated by the teacher. The essay example could be from the same topic or a similar topic. For example were a student asked to write an essay on the work of James Joyce, an exemplar could be constructed by the teacher and annotated or not annotated. It could also be constructed from a former students work on James Joyce and annotated or not annotated. And the work could also be constructed by the teacher or a students' former work on a similar but related topic, such as the works of Henry James or Thomas Mann.

In this context, this study has been based on a broad understanding of the exemplar term. So that in this longitudinal study the exemplars were constructed from the exam answers from students who completed the final exam in previous years. These exemplars were de-identified and annotated by the course coordinator.

## **METHOD**

Over the period 2007 to 2014 students undertook a final exam for an introductory law unit. In some years (2007, 2008, 2011, 2012, 2013 and 2014) students who undertook that unit were not provided with any exemplars. In other years (2009 and 2010) students who undertook the unit were provided with exemplars. The choice of whether or not to provide an exemplar was made by the unit coordinator, which changed more than four times over the period 2007 to 2014.

In the years that students were provided with exemplars these exemplars were provided via the online platform accessible to all students enrolled in the unit. That same platform provided relevant materials such as a unit outline, learning guide, lecture notes and details of assessment items. So the online platform was accessed by every student at some

stage during their semester long period of study.

The exemplars that were provided to students were not constructed by the course instructors. Rather these were exemplars which were put together from the work submitted by previous students of the same unit of study. These exemplars had been annotated by the course coordinator to highlight particular characteristics and skills that were considered of value. One example of every possible grade level was provided as an exemplar and these were collated into one document. When made available via the online platform, that document was prefaced with the following instructive comments:

'You should note that the examples presented here are NOT perfect. They are presented exactly as they were submitted at the conclusion of the examination. Each of the answers have been annotated to provide guidance as to what things the markers were looking for in order to assist future students to prepare for the final exam in this unit.

Answers which you prepare to any legal problem question DO NOT have to follow this methodology precisely, instead this document is simply designed to show you what other students' have done and the marks that they were awarded.'

Such instructions to students hopefully made it clear that the exemplars provided did not provide for the only 'acceptable' forms of answers, but rather were intended to show what marks were achieved when former students' had undertaken such activities.

Of course as the examination questions for each year differed, the exemplars were designed to demonstrate skills, rather than specific knowledge that may be relevant to that year's particular exam. This is the perfect basis for an exemplar as knowledge will change, particularly in the area of law as was the subject area of this study. An exemplar is not designed as an opportunity for a student to copy or plagiarism another person's work. Instead it is designed as an opportunity for a student to learn by actually seeing something done in practice.

Examples of how these skills were illustrated to students via the annotated comments contained in the exemplars included the following statements:

'Re-telling the facts of a case are of no value. We are interested in the legal principle (ratio) to come from the case, not the facts of a case.'

and:

'Students had 60 mins to complete this question. The page length for this answer is more than adequate.'

Whilst a record was kept of how many students downloaded the exemplars document, it is not submitted that this is equivalent to how many students read and/or used these exemplars. It is of course possible that students in those years where no exemplars were provided by the course coordinator obtained either those exemplars that had been provided in other years or exemplars from other sources.

## RESULTS

This article reports on the results from the final written exam that students completed over the period 2007 to 2014 (8 complete periods) whilst undertaking an introduction to law course designed for students not completing a law

degree at a tertiary education institute. These results represent the raw, unmoderated and unscaled results students achieved in the final exam. An examination of the percentage of students who achieved a particular grade level has been undertaken. Those grade levels were Fail (0 to 49 marks), Pass (50 to 64 marks), Credit (65 to 74 marks), Distinction (75 to 84 marks) and High Distinction (85 to 100 marks).

The following table indicates relevant characteristics including the number of students completing the final exam and the results achieved for each possible grade level:

**Table 1: Results by Year (Exemplar + No Exemplar)**

| <b>2007 (NO EXEMPLAR)</b> | <b>2008 (NO EXEMPLAR)</b> |
|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| Number of results = 128   | Number of results = 104   |
| F (0-49%) = 49%           | F (0-49%) = 43%           |
| P (50-64%) = 35%          | P (50-64%) = 38%          |
| C (65-74%) = 8%           | C (65-74%) = 9%           |
| D (75-84%) = 6%           | D (75-84%) = 7%           |
| HD (85-100%) = 2%         | HD (85-100%) = 3%         |
| <b>2009 (EXEMPLAR)</b>    | <b>2010 (EXEMPLAR)</b>    |
| Number of results = 95    | Number of results = 130   |
| F (0-49%) = 22%           | F (0-49%) = 11%           |
| P (50-64%) = 45%          | P (50-64%) = 24%          |
| C (65-74%) = 20%          | C (65-74%) = 40%          |
| D (75-84%) = 8%           | D (75-84%) = 15%          |
| HD (85-100%) = 5%         | HD (85-100%) = 10%        |
| <b>2011 (NO EXEMPLAR)</b> | <b>2012 (NO EXEMPLAR)</b> |
| Number of results = 994   | Number of results = 945   |
| F (0-49%) = 37%           | F (0-49%) = 54%           |
| P (50-64%) = 30%          | P (50-64%) = 29%          |
| C (65-74%) = 20%          | C (65-74%) = 12%          |
| D (75-84%) = 10%          | D (75-84%) = 4%           |
| HD (85-100%) = 3%         | HD (85-100%) = 1%         |
| <b>2013 (NO EXEMPLAR)</b> | <b>2014 (NO EXEMPLAR)</b> |
| Number of results = 866   | Number of results = 708   |
| F (0-49%) = 59%           | F (0-49%) = 43%           |
| P (50-64%) = 26%          | P (50-64%) = 48%          |
| C (65-74%) = 11%          | C (65-74%) = 8%           |
| D (75-84%) = 4%           | D (75-84%) = 1%           |
| HD (85-100%) = 0%         | HD (85-100%) = 0%         |

Looking at these figures, a number of features should immediately become apparent. These features include the fact that the number of students undertaking the final exam each year is not homogenous and the number of years that exemplars are used as compared to not used is not equal. Over the 8 periods that this study reports on different members of academic staff coordinated the same unit. Some of those coordinators chose to use exemplars whilst others chose not to use them. To be clear, exemplars were used in 2009 and 2010. Exemplars were not used in 2007, 2008, 2011, 2012, 2013 and 2014. Although the number of students completing the final exam is different for each year, in some years significantly so, this study reports on the percentage of grades achieved, not the number of grades achieved, therefore allowing a fair comparison between the different years where exemplars were used and where they were not used.

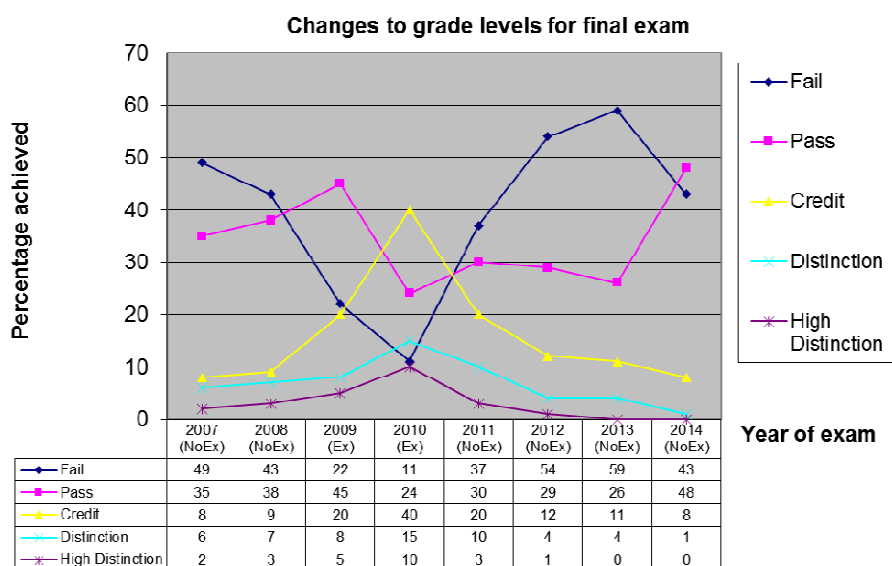
Turning to an examination of the impact of exemplars and using the fail grade as a starting point it is noted that fail grades are lowest when exemplars were used. Fail grades from 43% to 59% are recorded in those years where no

exemplars were used. Whilst the fail grades in the years that exemplars were used ranged from 11% to 22%.

The pass grade shows results of 35%, 38%, 30%, 29%, 26% and 48% in those years where exemplars were not used as compared with 45% and 24% in those years where exemplars were used. The credit grade shows results from 8% to 20% in those years where exemplars were not used as compared with results from 20% to 40% in those years where exemplars were used. The distinction grades awarded for those years where exemplars were used were 6%, 7%, 10%, 4% and 1% as compared to those years where exemplars were used and the results were 8% and 15%. The high distinction grades ranged from 0% to 3% in those non exemplar years to 5% to 10% in years where exemplars were used.

## DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Placing the results as discussed above into a graph form reveals some of the dramatic changes that are evident when comparing those years where exemplars were used against those years when they are not used.



**Figure 1**

After an examination of the results described above, it is apparent that using exemplars has an impact on student's results in a final exam. It could be argued that this impact should be described as significant. Every grade level has been impacted by the provision of exemplars, but this is especially evident when looking at the changes in grades reported at grades at the ends of the spectrum. These being the fail grade and the high distinction grade.

Using the fail grade to illustrate the significant changes you can see that a very high proportion of students failed in those years where exemplars were not used. 59% was the highest proportion of students who failed when no exemplars were used. But figures in non-exemplar years also include 49%, 43%, 37%, 54% and 43%. This compares to 22% being the highest proportion of students who failed when exemplars were used. A significant difference is therefore evident. Many more students failed the same unit of student when exemplars were not provided.

The change in the awarding of high distinction grades illustrates the significant benefit to students when exemplars have been used. In 2013 and 2014, when no exemplars were used, no student received this grade. In all of the years that exemplars were used the maximum number of students to be awarded a high distinction was just 3%.

However in 2009 and 2010, when exemplars were used, between 5% and 10% of students received this grade. When almost three times the number of students achieves the top grade in a year when exemplars were used compared to the best year when exemplars were not used there is significant evidence that exemplars were having a big impact on student's marks. Clearly capable students were better able to understand exactly what was required of them in those years where exemplars were provided and the increase in the level of high distinctions awarded clearly reflect this point.

Significant changes are also evident with the pass, credit and distinction grade levels, but perhaps not as dramatic as those changes already described for the fail and high distinction grade levels. Taking the credit level as an example, you can see that credits in the years where exemplars were used were at least equal to the years where exemplars were not used and in one year credits were significantly higher than in the years where exemplars were not used. Attention is drawn to the credits awarded in 2010 (a year exemplars were used) which were 40% as compared to the years 2007 and 2014 (years where exemplars were not used) where the awarding of credits was just 8%. Again, the changes in results reported have been quite significant. Students that have been exposed to exemplars are accessing high award levels as directly compared to that student who were not exposed to exemplars.

## CONCLUSIONS

The conclusions for this article are made in the context that it will never be possible to be absolutely certain as to the value of exemplars in improving student's results. This must be the case as it would never be possible to say with certainty whether any individual student's marks would have improved or declined if they had or had not been exposed to exemplars during their course of student as no situation would occur in which this could be accurately measured. We may never know if students who used an exemplar would have achieved the same or a different result compared to not using exemplars as the number of variables with that student is infinite. It is also the case that there could be an argument that there were different cohorts of students in each of the years of the study who had different ability levels. All of these are valid criticisms of attempting to prove the value of exemplars.

What this study aimed to achieve was to measure in the best possible way what the impact of exemplars is on student's results, given the stated limitations. On this basis it is concluded without any ambiguity that exemplars have an impact on students' results. It appears that exemplars are especially useful in improving the fail rates of students and ensuring that those capable students achieve their full potential and access the highest grades available in a particular unit. On this basis, all educators should be persuaded to examine the potential to use exemplars in units that they teach and/or co-ordinate as they appear to have significant positive benefits for students.

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