The use of assessment hurdles

Pedagogy v. practicality

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THE USE OF ASSESSMENT HURDLES: PEDAGOGY v. PRACTICALITY

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ABSTRACT

The setting of assessment hurdles, i.e. components of assessment schemes that must be passed in addition to passing on aggregate marks, is a common feature of construction courses in Australia. The practice is not endorsed by all staff and is not allowed in two of the schools offering construction courses in Australian universities. A desktop survey of the rules governing the use of hurdles in universities generally was carried out. Construction academics in most of the universities offering construction courses were interviewed in order to gain a greater understanding of how hurdles are used and what the staff perceptions are of any limitations and/or opposition to their use. It was found that most universities made some provision for the use of hurdles and that they were implemented in the majority of the construction courses. Based on the information gathered from the survey and interviews the positive and negative arguments for the use of hurdles are discussed.

KEYWORDS

Assessment hurdles, hurdle assessments, essential component, construction education.

INTRODUCTION

The move from final examinations to continuous assessment is a relatively recent phenomenon; in the UK assessment based to some extent on coursework rather than on examinations alone appeared a little over 40 years ago (Elton and Johnson,

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2002:10). Today a far more common model includes some combination of coursework tasks (projects, assignments, presentations and so on) with or without a formal examination as part of the mix. Before the introduction of continuous assessment the final examination was generally the only hurdle that students had to clear in order to pass a subject[2] or module. The other option was simple: fail the exam, repeat the subject. Nowadays students are generally expected to achieve an arbitrary aggregate mark (usually but not always 50%) simply calculated by summing the marks awarded for each assessment task. It is common, too, that students are offered the chance to resubmit a piece of assessment or resit an exam rather than be expected to do the entire subject again in a following semester.

It is not uncommon, however, for one or more of the assessment tasks to be nominated as an "essential" or "compulsory" component within the assessment scheme or regime for a given subject. Thus it may be that a student achieves an aggregate mark that exceeds the required threshold yet fails the subject due to a failing mark in an essential component.

The use of these hurdle assessments is a contentious issue for many academics. Opinions are strongly divided between those who see such hurdles as being perfectly legitimate and those who do not. In this paper the authors report on part of a study carried out in Australasia and the UK wherein the use of hurdles and attitudes to their use in a number of universities, particularly in construction related courses, was investigated. The research is ongoing and only the Australian leg of the research is reported and discussed here.

ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING OUTCOMES

It is now commonplace for assessment policy in universities to require, for example, that "staff should ensure modes of assessment are specifically linked to the educational objectives of a subject and course" (UTS, 2008:7). It is equally common

[2] Terminology differs between countries and even between universities in the same country – refer to the Glossary at the end of this paper for an explanation of the terms used here.

that the assessment scheme in a subject will contain more than one assessment item and include several different methods of assessment (e.g. a written assignment/essay, an oral presentation and an exam). Diversity of assessment methods in assessment schemes is considered to be desirable as it recognises that students differ as to the kind of tasks at which they are best able to demonstrate competences of one sort or another. It also reflects the fact that different skills or competencies are better assessed using different methods.

Elton (1998) refers to "the inclusion of coursework assessment, which is generally accepted to produce on the whole higher average marks than unseen examinations" and suggests that as more coursework has been introduced students have achieved higher level awards at the end of their courses. Bridges *et al.* (2002) and Simonite (2003) support Elton's view. They show that across a number of disciplines students have generally achieved higher marks in coursework assessment than in exams. Bridges *et al.* (2002) suggest that as a result in some places higher marks in coursework have been offset by heavier weighting of examinations which they say are "commonly regarded as a more reliable test of knowledge and understanding." This last is a bold statement that might be disputed by some.

Questions regarding the appropriateness of particular methods and modes of assessment, or the optimum number of assessment tasks in an assessment scheme are well beyond the scope of this paper; the focus here is simply on the designation of one or more of the tasks as a component of the scheme that must be passed in order to pass a particular subject. In particular, the emphasis is on the inclusion of requirements that students must sit a final exam which is designated as an essential component.

ARE HURDLES NECESSARY?

Competency-based assessment is typical in construction courses largely due to the influence of professional bodies that accredit courses. Where the acquisition of concepts, facts, skills (or attitudes, values or beliefs for that matter) is essential for a student to be considered "competent", assessment methods are needed which produce clear evidence that the student understands the concepts, knows the facts, and has

mastered the skills to a sufficient level. Judgements must be made as to the height of the hurdles, i.e. the threshold for demonstrating *sufficient* competence must be set. While a mark of 50% is typically the threshold this may vary for individual tasks or even for the total mark in a subject.

In addition to achieving an aggregate mark that meets the threshold required, students are often expected to meet at least one other requirement, typically at least a minimum mark in the final exam and/or attendance at or beyond a stated number of classes. The latter is more about compliance than assessment; students are expected to turn up at lectures as it is assumed that if they do not attend they will learn less yet may still achieve an overall pass by barely reaching the required threshold. There is, of course, more to this whole argument.

THE RESEARCH

The research reported here has several parts: a standard literature search, a web search of assessment policies, and a series of semi-structured telephone interviews with academics connected with construction courses in Australia The research is by no means exhaustive although data were gathered via the web and by telephone from the great majority of those Australian universities that offer construction degrees: all eleven of the Australian universities accredited by the Australian Institute of Quantity Surveyors (AIQS), and all but one of those accredited by the Australian Institute of Building (AIB)[3].

Literature review

There appears to have been little written or published on the topic of hurdles. While some papers were identified that look at various aspects of assessment through coursework and examination and compare the outcomes of different methods of assessment, the topic of hurdles within that framework was notably absent. Given that the issue is contentious among academics this was something of a surprise.

[3] Based on the lists on their respective websites.

Web search of assessment policies

The web search of assessment policies, however, showed that ten of the eleven Australian universities included some mechanism for the setting of hurdles in their official assessment policy or manual[4]. Curtin (2008) makes no mention of hurdles, while at QUT the policy published by the Faculty of Built Environment and Engineering (BEE) states specifically that:

> A student's grade in a unit will be aggregated from all their assessment items according to the percentage weighting of the task. Students will not be required to achieve a passing grade or particular percentage grade in any one piece of assessment to pass the unit. [Emphasis added] (QUT, 2008)

Bond University does not have a current university-wide assessment policy, however, the faculty in which the construction disciplines live has its own policy for setting hurdle assessments in individual subjects, and it directs that a mark of 46 (a fail) be recorded in the case of a student achieving a passing aggregate mark but failing a hurdle. While Curtin's policy (Curtin, 2008) does not mention hurdles, staff in their construction course require students to achieve a nominated minimum mark in each piece of assessment as well as achieving an aggregate of at least 50% in all subjects. Although the QUT policy (QUT, 2008) forbids the use of hurdles generally, it can be argued in special cases (e.g. for professional competency reasons) that hurdles should be set and on occasion this does happen; there is, however, no mention in their policy of how marks and grades are awarded in such instances.

Five of the Australian universities have a special grade that is used when a student "passes" on aggregate mark but fails a hurdle assessment (See Table 1). Of those that do not, Curtin awards the aggregate mark with a failing grade (e.g. 55F – the university's assessment policy allows an F grade to be awarded for any mark between zero and 99), UniSA uses its standard Fail Level 1 grade (the same grade awarded for an aggregate mark between 40 and 49), Newcastle awards a standard Fail grade with a mark of zero, Deakin caps the final mark at 44 when a hurdle is failed.

[4] Bond's Assessment Policy is under review

<Table 1 about here>

Where hurdles are used supplementary assessment (a resit of the exam or the setting of some other additional task) is common; this is not mandatory, however, in any of the universities surveyed[5].

Interviews

At least one person directly connected with the teaching and/or administration of construction courses from each of the Australian universities was interviewed, in most cases by telephone, and in one case by e-mail. All interviews were conducted in the period December 2008 to February 2009. The interviews were loosely structured around a short set of questions (Table 2). Individual respondents are not identified here; unless noted otherwise responses are simply identified by university rather than the individual.

<Table 2 about here>

At UniSA the use of hurdles is discouraged. The interviewee at UniSA said:

> In a few of our courses we have insisted on a minimum of 40% in the exam and an overall 50% in order to pass but that is about it. The powers that be don't like that approach.

When asked why he thought the approach was not liked he suggested that it was mostly to do with the difficulties of dealing with students who failed subjects only because of hurdle requirements and subsequently appealed, often to higher levels of management or the student ombudsman or even the vice-chancellor. This suggests that there may not be a philosophical opposition to hurdles but rather, that it is just that dealing with appeals is time-consuming and unpleasant.

[5] Murdoch University, which does not offer any building courses, does require that if hurdles are set, supplementary assessments *must* be set. No similar stipulation was found in any of the universities offering construction courses.

At UTS the use of hurdles was rejected several years ago by the Faculty Board of the faculty where the construction course resides. It is a requirement for their use in each or any subject (as set out in the UTS assessment manual) that such use is approved by Faculty Board (UTS, 2008). The reasons for rejection were largely in line with those listed later as part of "the case against hurdles".

Most of those interviewed, including those at UniSA and UTS, either favoured the use of hurdles or at least were not opposed to their use. Generally, except where they are for whatever reason not permitted, hurdles are routinely used in some or all subjects in the construction courses. Newcastle may be an exception at least partly because the course there is built around problem-based learning and there are no exams. It was suggested, however, that individual lecturers may use some form of hurdle but that they are largely left to devise their own assessment schemes.

THE CASE FOR HURDLES

A variety of reasons for the use of hurdles are advanced by those who use them. Many of them are based largely on practical concerns. The following were suggested by various staff from building courses in Australia:

- ensuring that a major part of the assessment is based on work by students that could only have been done by them, under controlled conditions. An exam set as a hurdle is seen as a quality control mechanism that ensures that students pass on their own merits.
- offsetting the problem of equitable marking of group work. Teamwork is commonly included in generic graduate attributes (e.g. UTS, 2005:3) as well as specifically required in professional competencies (e.g. CIOB, 2007:39). This generally means there will be some group work with group assessment. There are often problems with students who do not contribute satisfactorily, i.e. those who are nominally part of a team/group but who contribute less to the process than the other members of the group
- encouraging attendance at lectures - many students now see attendance at lectures as optional. Many are working, often with fulltime work and study loads, while child-care arrangements and other social and personal

circumstances may also be restrictive. If the material tested in exams is that which is covered in lectures, and assignments or other activities assess other things (such as those specified as self-directed learning), then students are likely to see attendance as being important.

- assessing a wide range of outcomes – other assessment methods may address some outcomes; however, an end-of-session ('synoptic') examination may test a broader cross-section of a subject's syllabus.

THE CASE AGAINST HURDLES

The arguments against the use of hurdles tend to be based more on pedagogical concerns than on the practical problems encountered by teaching staff. Those opposed to the use of hurdles suggest, *inter alia*, the following:

- it is simply illogical to set an aggregate pass mark (of 50, say) and then tell students that, even though they have achieved that mark or better, they fail
- if the hurdle component is of such importance that failing it results in a fail for the whole subject then the other components are irrelevant and so the assessment should be based only on that compulsory component or it should at least be weighted heavily enough that failing it will automatically result in a fail on aggregate regardless of the marks achieved in other components
- making any one component essential disadvantages any student who struggles with that particular method of assessment – this is often put forward as a reason for not having exams as hurdles.
- if there are concerns about the authenticity of students' work, then the problem lies in the setting and management of the assessment task – it is easier, it is suggested, to set a hurdle than to set a proper assessment task
- if there are concerns about individual participation in group work then again this reflects poor management and such shortcomings should be solved, not simply sidestepped, by making some other component a hurdle.
- if students fail to attend lectures, this, too, may be seen as a management issue regarding the stipulation of minimum requirements and the monitoring of attendance. It may also be seen as an indicator of irrelevant lecture content

and/or poor lecturing. In either case, using an assessment hurdle to ensure attendance fails to address the real problem.

DISCUSSION

The argument may appear to be mostly one of pedagogy versus practicality but it is not as simple as that. Elton (1998) puts it bluntly when he says, in respect of overall performance grades, that "assessments ... are ... carried out by people singularly lacking in any knowledge of assessment and measurement theory". Elton's position is echoed, albeit in a slightly different scenario (i.e. in regard to assessment in individual subjects rather across complete courses) by some of the people interviewed for this study, viz. that the problem is really to do with examiners (lecturers) not devising, utilising or properly managing sound assessment procedures. Whether this is due to the lack of knowledge that Elton suggests, or lack of time, or lack of motivation or simply (as one respondent put it) "because it is easier and worked 'back then'" is not clear. Probably it is a combination of them all.

Certainly there is nothing approaching a consensus view on this question. One respondent, a committed "non-hurdler", put it this way:

> "… we have a spectrum of views on hurdle requirements here … and amongst our construction academics. My view is perhaps a near-lone voice at one end against the practice while most of my academic colleagues within the discipline are at the other end."

Some discussion of the pros and cons is warranted.

Thresholds

The suggestion that it is somehow illogical or absurd to require students to achieve a minimum aggregate mark and a minimum mark in one or more nominated assessment tasks strikes us as odd. All that such an assessment scheme does is to set two or more tasks that must be satisfactorily completed instead of one. There is nothing illogical or unreasonable about doing this provided there are rational grounds (such as the tasks assess different skills). Provided the students are fully informed of what is required in each task, it is difficult to see the grounds for objection.

There is another potential way to address this question and that is to reconsider what the threshold for a pass should be. Elton (1998) talks of the need to recalibrate coursework assessment to account for the phenomenon of students generally achieving higher marks in coursework than in exams; a corollary to this may be to lift the threshold for aggregate marks, say to 60% instead of the common 50%. That would take care of all but the most extreme cases (e.g. where a student achieves 40 out of 50 for the course work and just 10 out of 50 (20%) in the exam and scrapes through with a 50% aggregate). The higher threshold would also require students who would otherwise have been content to make the bare 50% pass mark work a little harder in order to pass - in effect, to deliver at the level that would have been required had all the assessment been by unseen written examination. Overall standards would be raised by such a practice, although we might predict more failures in the short term until students generally became accustomed to the higher expectations[6].

Guaranteeing authenticity of student work

Plagiarism and ghost writing are not new and thus guaranteeing that student submissions are entirely their own work has always been a problem. With the free availability of digital resources the potential for students to get inappropriate assistance or borrow material (from electronic resources or from classmates, with or without their knowledge) has increased. Growing class sizes have reduced the opportunity for teachers to know their students and have a feel for the sort of work they are likely to produce as well as increasing the marking load which reduces the time available to check work where plagiarism or other misconduct may be apparent. Many academics see this as primary reason for setting an exam and making it a compulsory component in the assessment scheme. The counter argument is that if assignments are carefully set and managed then the opportunities for cheating can be largely if not totally negated. This is no doubt true to a certain extent but may not be true across the board.

[6] Of course this will not happen if markers simply lower their standards to compensate for the raised threshold. As in all things, the 'human factor' is not easy to control!

If there is still some value in the traditional “research and write” type assignment, at least in the early stages of a course (before students are asked to be more analytical and critical, which can at least reduce if not eliminate the opportunities for cheating) then setting and managing such assessments is a real challenge. Online checking tools such as Turnitin.com are very good but do have their limitations, and using a search engine such as Google to check for matches on the web is a slow business. Additionally, clever students can change a word or two and, in contrast to the ‘Turnitin’ software, that is generally enough to nullify the Google search. In other areas it becomes an even greater challenge to set assignment tasks that make it impossible or even very difficult for students not to get outside assistance or even have someone complete the work for them. Building measurement is a good example; students acquire measurement skills through practice at least as much as through instruction and it is only through assignment work that measurement tasks of the size and complexity of those they will encounter at work can be tackled by students. The authenticity of such work is, however, rather more difficult to verify; should such assignments be scrapped because of this? If they are then many students (probably a large majority) will miss out on a valuable learning experience.

Groupwork

As noted earlier being a team player is regarded as an important attribute for graduates. Ensuring satisfactory participation in tasks that involve group work and then awarding marks for both working in a group and for the output of the group is a management challenge, however, there are tools such as SPARK (UTS, n.d.) that go quite some way towards dealing with the assessment problem. Large classes, however, still make managing groupwork a tricky business not least because again it is hard for lecturers to know who is contributing well and who is not.

Attendance

There is some division amongst the academics surveyed as to whether we should even expect students to turn up at lectures. One view is that if they can pass the assessments then whether they come to all, some or none of the classes is of no consequence. The opposite view is that students who choose to attend only as much as they deem necessary in order to meet requirements and pass assessments are ignoring much of the potential for learning that is available to them. Those of this view add

other concerns such as the loss of staff/student and even student/student interaction and the loss of the richness of learning that live lectures can provide.

It is glib to say, as several interviewees did, that "if your lectures are good enough the students will come." A major factor that contributes to low attendance at classes is the need, real or perceived, of students to do paid work while they are studying. It is common, particularly in construction courses, for students to be working long hours; Smith (2006) reported that 97% of UTS construction students were in some form of paid employment, and of those 42% were working at least forty hours a week during semester. Those who take the view that good lectures will attract students are perhaps unaware of the amount of time pressure that students are under. Until recently there has been added pressure from employers due to the strong construction market and shortages of qualified staff; cadets have commanded salaries that were often in excess of their capabilities and employers have insisted on long work hours in order to justify the salaries they have been paying them. Often students are forced to make a choice between a fight with the boss or getting to lectures. If they feel that they can glean just enough from textbooks and electronic lecture notes to scrape through then it is no surprise if the boss wins.

This is not to say that some, perhaps many lecturers could not or should not lift their game and present classes in a more interesting and engaging way. It must be said, however, that in construction at least there are some subject areas, such as building measurement and structural engineering, that are not easily turned into a variety show. In any case it is likely that there will always be some lecturers who are natural performers and many others who have the knowledge but are less gifted in front of a class; unless universities are going to conduct auditions rather than interviews when recruiting academic staff, or (as is increasingly the case in the UK) put in place compulsory courses of training in pedagogy for professionals who take up university teaching posts, this is unlikely to change.

Weighting tasks

Some who oppose the use of hurdles, particularly the setting of exams as hurdles, suggest that if the hurdle is of such importance that passing or failing it will ultimately

determine a student's fate, then it should be either the *only* assessment or it should be weighted so heavily that good marks in other assessment tasks will never be sufficient to offset a poor mark in the hurdle component. There are several points to be made here. Firstly, having only one assessment in a subject is not accepted as good practice in most places today and is often not allowed. Secondly, if one component is weighted sufficiently to make it a *de facto* hurdle then the other assessment tasks are necessarily devalued and may become optional in the students' view as they carry so little weight in the assessment scheme.

One interviewee discussed this point as follows:

> "If the non-hurdle assessment doesn't really count towards a pass at the end of the semester, why have it at all – is it not important? – is it something we have just done to force you to learn? – is it really just formative assessment in disguise that we attach marks to in order to ensure that you'll do it?"

Implicit in this statement is that it is somehow improper for lecturers either to "force" students to learn and or to treat formative assessment as summative assessment in order to ambush students into improving their education. If students were willing to give formative assessments tasks the same attention that they do to those that attract marks there would be no problem, but students are often assessment-driven, and whether it is ideal or not it is true that if there is not some incentive, such as having marks attached, then students will not do the work. For those construction students working 40+ hours week while studying, these decisions will not require much thought.

If it is accepted that students can do well in early assessments and then need only do the minimum necessary to pass then this gives tacit approval to the view that a bare pass is fine and there is no reason to aspire to anything better. It is difficult to believe that many academics would be comfortable with that yet by arguing against hurdles that may be exactly what they are doing.

Differences in learning styles

Acknowledging that different people perform better in some forms of assessment than in others is only one reason for having a range of assessment methods. Equally important, however, is the notion that different methods test different types of

knowledge and different skills. One argument against using exams as hurdles is that there are people who perform poorly in exams because they become fearful or distressed under exam conditions. There are at least two counter arguments to this. One is that some people thrive on exams and we may ask why they should be disadvantaged if exams are not set or carry a low weighting. The second is that being able to perform under pressure and to tight and immovable deadlines (which, in microcosm, is precisely what a time-limited examination entails) is a natural part of the working life of many people. That is certainly true of people in construction and it can be argued, therefore, that learning to cope with exams is developing a skill that will stand graduates in good stead when they start work.

CONCLUSION

There is clearly no easy answer to the question of whether hurdles provide an appropriate mechanism for addressing any or all of the problems identified here. It is clear that the use of hurdles in some form is common (although not universal) in construction courses in Australia. There is a sharp divide between two groups whom we may call the “hurdlers” and the “non-hurdlers” and both sides advance a range of arguments to support their positions.

There is little doubt that some of the points raised by the non-hurdlers have merit, e.g. there is tendency for people in many walks of life to just do things how they have always been done and that applies to both subject delivery and assessment; no doubt there is room to improve delivery and move away from the so called “sage-on-the-stage” approach that was for so long the standard method of teaching. Assessment, too, can be approached in many ways and there are innovative methods of assessment that can at least ameliorate some of the problems discussed here. It is unlikely, however, that all the concerns raised by those who favour hurdles, and particularly those who favour the designation of a final exam as a compulsory component, will be allayed by some combination of cleverly designed assessment tasks, good management of the assessment procedure and entertaining yet informative lectures.

GLOSSARY

assessment method – an instrument of assessment such as an examination, a research report, a seminar paper, a class test – an *assessment task*

assessment mode – describes the social/contextual/temporal dimension of an assessment method or task, e.g. formative or summative, oral or written, seen or unseen

assessment scheme – the set of assessable items or tasks upon which a student's overall performance in a subject is determined – it may include formative tasks that do not attract marks and/or other *methods* such as class attendance and participation or the satisfactory completion of laboratory or field exercises which may attract marks or be graded on a pass/fail or satisfactory/unsatisfactory basis.

compulsory component – an assessment task for which students must achieve a passing mark in order to pass a subject regardless of their aggregate mark in the whole assessment scheme.

course – a specified set of subjects or modules (which may include unspecified electives) that a student must pass in order to be awarded a degree – often called a *program.*

coursework – in this context, all methods of assessment other than formal examinations (which are defined by Bridges *et al.* (2002:35) as "assessment undertaken in strict formal and invigilated time-constrained conditions").

hurdle – an assessment task that must be passed individually in order for a student to pass a subject regardless of the student's aggregate mark in that subject - a subject may have more than one hurdle assessment.

QUT – Queensland University of Technology

subject – a unit of study within a degree program or course – called a *paper* in New Zealand, a *module* in the UK – sometimes referred to as a *unit* or a *course.*

tutorial – in this context a supervised class wherein students are given tasks (e.g. a building measurement exercise, an oral presentation on a prescribed topic) to do with tutors present to assist with the completion of the work – the term is not used here in the classic sense of a meeting with a student or small group of students, either to help them with a problem they are having with the work, to clarify assignment tasks, to

comment on draft assignments or essay plans and the like – hence in this paper tutorials may represent formative assessment with feedback given but no marks awarded, or summative with marks awarded (for completeness, numerically correct answers and so on) that contribute to the student's aggregate mark for the subject.

UniSA – University of South Australia

UTS – University of Technology, Sydney

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University	Grade	Notes
UTS	X	Use of hurdle in any subject requires Faculty Board approval
RMIT	NN	Hurdles are clearly explained in the university policy
UniSA	Fail Level 1	While in the policy its use is discouraged
UWS	CF	New - previously mark reverted to 42F regardless of actual mark achieved
Newcastle	Fail	Normal fail grade with mark of zero.
UNSW	UF	Mark usually entered as 50UF rather than the actual numeric mark achieved
Deakin	none	Max. mark awarded in the case of failing a hurdle is 44
QUT	none	Hurdles not permitted except in cases where there is a clear reason such as clinical competency
Melbourne	N+	Clearly permitted in both Faculty and University policies
Curtin	none	Not in policy - school decision to use hurdles - actual mark awarded e.g. 58F
Bond	none	Marks of 50 or more with a failed hurdle revert to a 46 Fail

Table 1 An overview of hurdles and grades in eleven Australian universities.

Does your university have a formal mechanism for including hurdle assessments in individual subjects?
Is there a specific grade that is awarded in an instance where a student gains a pass mark overall but fails one or more nominated hurdle assessments?
Do you or have you ever included hurdles in any subjects that you teach or co-ordinate?
If so, why? (Suggest possible reasons: e.g. to offset plagiarism/collaboration in assignment work; to balance marks awarded for group work)
If not, why not?
Have you ever tried to include hurdle assessments and run into opposition from: (a) colleagues, (b) supervisors (c) faculty/university management?

Table 2 Semi-structured interview questions