

# The road to loss of academic integrity is littered with SET: A hypothetical dilemma



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Since the rise of audit culture within Australian tertiary institutions, Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET) questionnaires are widely used to provide evidence of quality teaching and to provide feedback about teaching effectiveness of academic teaching staff. Whilst the literature pertaining to SET as a tool for measuring teaching quality is extensive, enquiries pertaining to the relationship between SET, academic integrity, and ethical and professional obligations are lacking. Anecdotal evidence exists to support the notion for a potential loss of academic integrity amongst academic teaching staff, especially when SET questionnaires are used as performance management tools that can determine employment and career paths. For nursing academics, there is an obligation to both the profession and to society in general to ensure that their graduating students will be safe and competent practitioners. Using an ethical principles framework, this paper presents a hypothetical ethical dilemma in order to highlight what could happen if teachers of undergraduate nursing students were to manipulate SET in order to demonstrate their individual teaching quality.

Keywords: Student evaluation of teaching (SET), ethics, audit culture, quality, nursing

## Introduction

Perhaps one of the greatest dichotomies in the Australia university sector is that of the dual requirements for academic integrity, specifically ethical teaching practices, and the increasing demand for quality assurance processes that affect teaching and learning. In this paper we hypothesize there is more than a slight tension existing between these two concepts. In particular, the relationship between the use of Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET) questionnaires as quality audit tools, and teaching practices which are at best unethical and at worst contradictory to the stated quality aims of the university, needs further exploration.

The key aims of this paper are to explore some of the existing literature relating to the rise of audit culture, quality control measures within the tertiary sector and in particular the increasing use of SET as a quality control tool, particularly as a part of performance management for staff. Whilst the literature pertaining to SET as a tool for measuring teaching quality is extensive, enquiries pertaining to the relationship between SET, academic integrity, and ethical and professional obligations are lacking. However, anecdotal evidence supports the notion for a potential loss of academic integrity amongst academic teaching staff especially when soft marking and grade inflation are employed as techniques to improve SET as part of performance reviews. An ethical principles approach will be taken in order to examine a hypothetical ethical dilemma which nursing academics may face in order to progress their careers within academia.

The professional example chosen and used in this paper does not denote that the prevalence or otherwise of challenges to ethical teaching practices is more prolific in nursing programs. Rather, teachers of undergraduate nursing students provide a good example of how academics need to remain dually focused on their obligations not only to student learning but also their profession and society in general because of the possible implications of graduating students who in a very real sense, may have people's lives in their hands. We begin with an overview of the rise of what Strathern (2000, p.2) has defined as 'audit culture'.

## The context: Audit culture and quality

The concept and phenomenon of audit culture provides the context in which national and international tertiary education institutions have increasingly placed importance on use of the

SET as an instrument for measuring individual teaching quality and the subsequent use of this information to inform academic career promotion and progression. In relation to the concept of audit in the university sector Strathern (2000, p.2) suggests that it:

...has broken loose from its moorings in finance and accounting: its own expanded presence gives it the power of a descriptor seemingly applicable to all kinds of reckonings, evaluations and measurements.

Thus it could be said that by applying what was once merely a financial accountability tool reserved for finance departments across the entire university, including teaching activities, has enabled and embedded a 'culture of audit' within tertiary institutions. Geertz (1973, p. 89) writes that traditional culture:

denotes a historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which [people] communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.

Therefore, if one indicator of culture is language, then one needs to look at the use of the following examples of terminology, invading contemporary academic life. Shore and Wright (2000, p.60) note in particular a number of terms including 'performance,' 'quality assurance', 'quality control', 'discipline', 'accreditation', 'accountability', 'transparency', 'efficiency', 'effectiveness', 'value for money', 'responsibility', 'benchmarking', 'good practice', 'peer review', 'external verification', 'stakeholder' and 'empowerment'. George Orwell in his classic novel "1984" wrote that language is a powerful tool for determining how people view and then interact in their world (Orwell, 1949). The language of audit culture requires shifting the mindset and culture of a collegial academic workplace to one where the culture becomes 'a focus of management and oversight' (Berglund, 2006, p 29). Managerial culture according to Kezar and Eckel (2002, p.439) 'focuses on the goals and purposes of the institution and values efficiency, effective supervisory skills, and fiscal responsibility'. At the heart of the attempt to change academic culture is an emphasis placed on quality. However the once traditional view of quality as 'excellence' (Anderson, 2006) as applied in tertiary education has been infused or replaced with new perspectives (Harvey & Knight, 1996, cited in Law, 2010, p.66) and new measuring processes have been implemented or old ones adopted with renewed vigour. These processes nonetheless are far from benign. What is disguised by audit culture is the reliance upon '...hierarchical relationships and coercive practices' (Shore & Wright 2000, p.62). According to these authors,

the self directed, self managed individual is encouraged to identify with the university and the goals of higher education policy: challenging the terms of reference is not an option (2000, p.62).

In essence, being part of a particular culture or becoming enculturated into any organisation or system means accepting the objectives, mission and processes of quality initiatives within that organisation without exception. Audit culture is the overarching context for a new emphasis on quality and in particular quality teaching practices, measured by, amongst other processes, the use of the SET instrument.

In the Australian context, all tertiary institutions are now regularly audited by the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA). AUQA was formally established by the Ministerial Council on Education, Training and Youth Affairs in March 2000, to oversee quality audit processes of Australian tertiary institutions (AUQA, viewed 25/3/11). Short et al (2008) identify that in the Australian university context, the use of student surveys as quality assessment tools for programs and courses have a long history though they had essentially been in-house initiatives. In relatively recent times however, a number of external factors have impinged significantly on the need to increase student input into university quality processes. Short et al (2008) identify amongst these pressures, the Australian Graduate Survey, the Learning and

Teaching Performance Fund and AUQA. Consequently greater emphasis is placed on student generated evaluation data, especially as this relates to teaching, in order to demonstrate the 'quality' of the education experience at individual universities.

The AUQA Good Practice Database (viewed 25/3/11), demonstrates clearly its influence on contemporary Australian university policies and practices by highlighting the University of Tasmania's (UTAS) use of SET to demonstrate quality teaching processes. Whilst information is given relating to unit and course evaluation, good practice in teaching and learning identified by individual student evaluation of their teachers, is given the highest priority. On the same AUQA website under the heading of Supporting, Enhancing and Rewarding Teaching Practice (viewed 25/3/11), the success of the UTAS initiatives is said to be demonstrated by and include,

The number of academic staff being promoted on the basis of their teaching performance and improved results against the Student Evaluation of Teaching and Learning (SETL) student feedback system.

Whilst the above information is based on the UTAS experience, the increasingly mandated use of SET across many Australian universities and their use as tools for promotion and reward is a contemporary reality. For example, at the University of South Australia (UniSA) the key criteria for being considered eligible for a Supported Teacher Award, requires that the applicant demonstrate excellence in SET in the previous two years and this criteria is weighted at 70% of the total weighting (UniSA, viewed 23/8/11).

### **SET in the literature**

The use of SET has come far from their origin in the 1960's as an informal appraisal of faculty staff undertaken by 'enterprising college students' (Huemer 2007). Lomas (2007) acknowledges that in response to the rise in audit culture and the way in which tertiary institutions are managed and funded, learning and teaching strategies, which were once the domain of academics, have increasingly become tools of quality assurance developed by managers, rather than tools for quality enhancement. Indeed Anderson's research indicated that 'many academics [in her study] argued that the existence of a system of quality assurance had assumed more importance than the actual goal of assuring quality' (Anderson, 2006, p. 168). The contemporary use of SET is thus contentious. Indubitably, whilst most academics agree with and are committed to quality teaching and learning (Anderson, 2006, Huemer, 2007), opinion concerning the value of SET as a tool for evaluation is divided amongst academics, university management, quality agencies and governments alike. As indicated by Anderson (2006) and Short et al (2008), despite a portion of academic literature that ratifies SET, when properly designed, as a reliable and valid tool for measuring teaching quality, many authors still question the validity and usefulness of the ratings. In particular, Anderson (2006) notes the scepticism towards and resistance to SET by academics in a variety of Australian universities. In her study, criticisms levelled at SET are related not to the principles embedded in SET but rather to the process which can be manipulated by either staff or students contributing to what Crumbley and Reichelt (2009, p.378) describe as 'misleading, dysfunctional and/or invalid' evaluations.

Slade and McConville (2006, p.45) suggest that for SET to be effective it is 'necessary to understand the system of teaching in its entirety'. Indeed, they comment that the first step in setting up a system of evaluation of teaching would be to identify the operational definition of the constructs or phenomena applicable to the system. Herewith lies one key criticism of the SET process. Inherent in the literature is the notion of a lack of universally accepted definitions of quality or good or effective teaching (Clayson, 2009, Sproule & Vaslan, 2009, Anderson, 2006). This in itself is fraught with difficulty as Skowronek, Friesen and Masonjones (2011) identified. In their attempt to define what qualities were essential to be an effective teacher they found that what could be seen as essential components of quality in one discipline were not necessarily critical elements in another. This highlighted that 'effective teaching is a complex,

dynamic issue that varies by subject matter' (Skowronek, Friesen & Masonjones 2011, p.3). Slade and McConville (2006, p.46) also postulate that even if an operational definition was developed, whether or not, students would be the best candidates to judge quality. They question whether it is logical to expect that a typical student could judge the currency and relevance of knowledge of a subject and the theory that may underpin a set of knowledge, course content and teaching strategies. In addition, Sproule and Vaslan (2009) in their analysis of the methodological underpinnings of SET contend that perhaps teaching quality is not measureable because it is not a unitary concept and its meaning is 'relative to the user of the term and the circumstances in which it is invoked' (Harvey & Green, cited in Sproule & Vaslan 2009, p. 131).

In addition to inconsistencies in understandings of 'quality teaching', SET has come under criticism for permitting bias to pervade the ratings. As reported most recently in Skowronek, Friesen and Masonjones (2011), Crumbley and Reichelt (2009), and Sproule and Vaslan (2009) factors that may give rise to a bias in judgement and distort SET results include:

1. *Administration and procedural factors*: includes factors such as the purpose of the ratings, the timing of the evaluation, the anonymity of students, staff presence, characteristics of the course, the time of the class or evaluation, the difficulty level of the course, the class size, the subject areas, the workload of the course, the format and content of the SET tool, university entry requirements and standards,
2. *Characteristics of the lecturer*: includes age, gender, teaching experience, reputation, personality, physical appearance, presentation abilities (showpersonship or educational seduction<sup>1</sup>),
3. *Characteristics of the student*: includes, age, gender, course level, prior learning experiences, maturity, personality, course/subject interest, emotional state, grade expectations, purpose for undertaking study, class attendance, study effort
4. *Teaching conditions*: include factors as class size, workloads, course difficulty, available equipment, available technology, adequacy of resources, teaching room appropriateness.
5. *The reactions of students and staff to the use of SET*: this refers to the reaction by lecturers and students to dissemination and publication of the SET ratings.

From the above, it is of little wonder that academics have little confidence in the accuracy of SET as a key measure of teaching performance. Despite the concerns of academics, it is a reality that SET results are often used as performance management tools and therefore lecturers are under pressure to 'prove' they are good teachers using this mechanism. The results of SET have significant and personal impacts on the livelihood of teaching staff. They can determine success or failure, tenure, reappointment, promotion and wages (Neal & Elliott, 2009). Unfortunately, this reality may encourage lecturers to consider and/or use various tactics to influence the evaluation rating to be achieved (Pounder, 2007, Simpson & Siguaw, 2000, Sproule & Vaslan, 2009). Some of the tactics reported to be successful include, offering students chocolate before SET is completed (Youmans & Jee, 2007), telling students how to do the exam before administering the SET (Anderson 2006), becoming 'utterly undemanding and uncritical' of students (Sacks, in Huemer, 2007, p. 4), letting students out of class early, complimenting the class on its achievements and having 'fun' activities in class (Simpson & Siguaw 2000).

For Pounder (2007, p. 185) many of these tactics 'at best have little educational value and at worst, are actually detrimental to the educational process'. Further, Pounder (2007) cites Crumbley, Henry and Kratchman (2001, p. 197), who suggest that the SET system 'causes professors to manipulate students and students in turn to manipulate teachers'. A key concern for Crumbley, Henry and Kratchman's (2001) and Simpson and Siguaw (2000, p.201), is the notion that academics choose to 'teach to SETs' rather than 'facilitating learning' and therefore

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<sup>1</sup> Otherwise known as the 'Dr Fox' effect (Naftulin, Ware & Donnelly, 1973)

dumb down course standards or inflate student grades in courses to improve ratings. Indeed in a study conducted by Simpson and Siguaw (2000, p. 207), faculty staff reported that they believed grade leniency or inflation to be the most common method used to manipulate SET results. As both Katiliute (2010, p.574) and Clayson (2009, p.18) point out ‘grades are valuable for students’ and studies such as that of McPherson and Jewell (2007) have found that ‘instructors can ‘buy’ better evaluation scores by inflating students grade expectations.’

The notion that SET may contribute to the real or potential outcome of ‘grade inflation’ is perhaps the most significant concern to the educational process. Short et al (2000, p. 10) cite Krautman and Sander (1999) who postulated that ‘...if evaluations can be increased by giving higher grades, then they are a flawed instrument for the evaluation of teaching’. An implicit assumption of this paper is that good teachers and good teaching cannot be identified by SET and whilst they are only one instrument for assessing teaching quality, they hold inordinate power in quality assessment processes. Further, the notion that students, who may be looking for different things in different teachers, can somehow adequately judge the effectiveness of tuition at the end of a course or program needs to be challenged. Indeed, Benner (1984) in her seminal work, “From novice to expert – excellence and power in clinical nursing practice” identified that the true effectiveness of teaching, regardless of the educational setting, cannot be measured until the new professional nurse moves beyond being a novice in the clinical setting.

This then becomes the foundation of a hypothetical ethical dilemma. The conscientious educator of professionals faces an unpalatable choice. The choice is between:

1. refusing to compromise teaching standards by indulging in grade inflation or other tactics, and accepting the consequence of receiving relatively low SET scores that can impact negatively upon their career, OR
2. maximising their teaching evaluations by compromising their professional standards to the extent of watering down course content, lowering academic course requirements, or implementing grade inflation, thereby compromising the long-term professional development of students, and helping to qualify nurses who possibly are not fit to practise.

### **Grade inflation: A hypothetical ethical dilemma**

Calling on the Greek derivatives of these words, Thompson, Melia and Boyd (2000) draw a distinction between ethical ‘problems’ and ethical ‘dilemmas’. An ethical ‘problem’ is a doubtful or difficult matter requiring solution, whilst a dilemma is ‘a specific situation in which a choice has to be made between alternatives that are both undesirable...’ (Thompson, Melia & Boyd, 2000, p.7). We would contest that because there is actually a choice to be made here, with consequences for either option chosen, that this situation poses an ethical dilemma rather than a problem, and that this dilemma confronts many more academic teachers than one would suppose.

Ethical dilemmas and problems do not occur in a vacuum. This dilemma, is a direct result of the imposition of inappropriate quality processes demanded by those who unquestioningly support and promote audit culture within the tertiary teaching sector via the mandated use of the SET instrument. Freeman (2000, p.22) cites Sieber (1982) who outlined six common conditions that result in ethical problems or dilemmas:

1. an ethical problem may simply be unforeseen;
2. an ethical problem may be inadequately anticipated; the magnitude of the problem may be underestimated;
3. an ethical problem may be foreseen but there is no way to avoid it;
4. in a variation of the anticipated ethical problem, what to do may be unclear because of ambiguities of the consequences involved;

5. an ethical problem may arise when guidelines are inadequate or nonexistent relative to the situation; and
6. an ethical problem may arise when institutional policy or even ethical principles conflict with the welfare of clients.

When applied to this hypothetical situation, one might consider the following. It was probably never intended that the SET instrument be used in any punitive manner and its initial use was for the personal reflection of individual teachers. However this is not the case in contemporary Australian university policy (Anderson, 2006). Whilst numerous authors have alluded to the ethical issue embedded in the relationship between SET and inflated grades, very few have actually identified the ethical components of the dilemma or considered how wide spread this problem might be (McCormack, 2005; Simpson and Siguaw, 2000). There is a way of course to avoid this particular dilemma by ceasing to use the SET instrument as a performance management tool. However the issue may still remain if similar methods of collecting feedback from students on what they perceive to be 'quality teaching' takes its place. In this case, the consequences might well be the same. Simply providing guidelines relating to the use and purpose of the SET instrument to both students and teachers, will not remove the essential ethical dilemma in this situation. Finally, it can be demonstrated that in this case, institutional policy relating to quality teaching and the use of SET may indeed conflict with the welfare of students, or in audit speak, customers!

### **Applying an ethical principles framework to grade inflation**

As a result of Sieber's work several authors have developed models for ethical decision making (Freeman, 2000). According to Harrison (1954 cited in Johnstone 2004) ethical principles make up a framework for general standards of conduct, or a behaviour guide which entails particular imperatives. The work of Beauchamp and Childress (1983) cited in Johnstone (2004) is most often applied as an ethical principles approach to working through ethical problems and dilemmas in health care. They call on the principles of autonomy (the person's ability to exercise a self determining choice), non-maleficence (at the very least to do no harm), beneficence (to do good), and justice, in particular justice as fairness (cited in Johnstone 2004). In relation to the latter, Thompson, Melia and Boyd (2000, p.307) give further insight into this principle and suggest that:

Justice has to do, above all, with the ability to act always with the good of others in mind...However, it also has to do with the need to exercise authority where it is necessary, to ensure the interests of others and the moral community are protected from harm.

Before applying any of the above ethical principles to this dilemma, its various parts arising from information gained from the literature, as well as questions such literature generates, should be identified. In particular, the key participants involved, as well as those who may be affected by the real or potential consequences of any actions arising, must also be identified. This can be done by positing a number of statements and questions. These include:

1. The main participants are: individual and collective groups of students, academic teachers in undergraduate nursing programs, the university, the profession of nursing, recipients of nursing care and society in general.
2. The SET tool is a flawed tool and ineffective way of measuring teaching quality.
3. The teacher may be fair and just in all interactions with students but still attract poor SET results.
4. As a result of poor SET the teacher may not progress in their career.
5. The teacher has within their power the ability to inflate student grades.
6. The teacher knows that there is a strong link between inflated grades and good SET results.
7. If the teacher inflates the grades, who will benefit?
8. If the teacher inflates the grades, who might be harmed?

9. Does the teacher have an overriding responsibility to their profession, the university and society in general?
10. What happens when the moral but disenchanted teacher quits because of failure to progress in their career related to poor SET results?
11. If all the moral teachers leave, what happens to the quality of undergraduate programs?
12. If the quality of undergraduate programs is hidden behind inflated grades for students, how might this impact upon the quality of nursing graduates and the reputation of the university?
13. If the quality of graduating nurses is poor yet unrecognised, what impact might this have on the profession and patient care?

The list of questions and statements that could be generated here is endless, however these, we believe, are some of the key issues within this dilemma.

## **Autonomy**

Included in the principle of autonomy is the notion that autonomous persons should be free to perform whatever action they wish. This is so regardless of whether that action results in possible harm or risk of harm to their self, and even if, others consider the action foolish, providing that such action does not infringe upon the autonomous rights of others (Beauchamp and Walters, 1992 cited in Johnstone, 2004). Therefore, the question should be asked: if the teacher chooses to inflate students' grades, are they infringing on the autonomous rights of students who may choose not to have this happen? It is not apparent in the literature relating to SET that anyone has ever asked this question of students. Alternatively if the question has been asked, what was the response?

## **Beneficence and non-maleficence**

When applying the principles of beneficence and non-maleficence, one needs to consider which of these principles are foremost in a given situation. Beauchamp and Childress (2001 cited in Johnstone, 2004, p.39) suggest that:

Obligations not to harm others are sometimes more stringent than obligations to help them, but obligations of beneficence are also sometimes more stringent than obligations of non-maleficence.

So, the question should be asked and answered, if the teacher inflates grades to get good SET who will be harmed or benefited?

If the measurement of quality teaching relies to any great extent on good results from the SET instrument, then the university would ultimately benefit from its use by achieving a good report from AUQA and others such as the Good University Guide, thus enhancing its reputation for providing a 'quality' education. This would seem to be promoting good, at least as far as the university goes. More students and therefore income would be provided to the university to address issues such as infrastructure, technology and staffing levels. Ultimately this might improve the quality of student education, in actuality. Good, or beneficence could also emit from the teacher's actions of inflating grades if in fact the teacher was good at their job and thus retained their position or progressed to a more influential position within the university.

On the other hand, the real or potential harms in this dilemma might, in the first instance impact on the teacher who either by their own moral reasoning or by others discovering their grade inflation activities, lose, or at the very least fail to progress in their career. Harm might also occur to the student who graduated with a heightened and unrealistic sense of their own abilities brought about by teachers who fail to give critical comment and appropriate grading of their knowledge and ability. In the health care setting, neophyte graduate nurses lacking professional insight may at best be deemed incompetent, which impacts upon the reputation of their university, or they may be identified as being dangerous to those in their care. The Australian

Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA) has prescribed sanctions against those nurses who fail to adhere to, or maintain their competency standards as determined by the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia (NMBA). Such sanctions might include anything from compulsory re-education, temporary or permanent removal from the national register, or in the case of actual harm to a person in their care, legal sanctions such as imprisonment (AHPRA, 2011).

On a broader scale, the profession of nursing is held in high esteem and trust by a majority of the Australian public (Chaperon, 2010). A breakdown of this trust would have a significant impact on the profession and the Australian health care system in general. Ultimately, the imposition of harm, whether real or potential, caused by a nurse to anyone in their care, gives great weight to the principle of non-maleficence. Thus the potential outcome for failing to apply rigorous standards of teaching in undergraduate nursing programs by inflating a student's grades, could in actuality cause harm to the teacher, the student, the university, the nursing profession, the recipients of nursing care and the wider Australian health care system.

## Justice

Is there justice or fairness in this dilemma for anyone? It is not fair or just for students to be given less than truthful evaluations of their progress and learning just to enhance teacher evaluations and quality audits within a university. Justice also requires and demands that the recipients of nursing care, the profession of nursing and the wider Australian health care system are entitled to the services of competent graduates in whom they can have trust. Finally, it is surely not fair that good teachers who do not inflate student grades in order to get more positive feedback in their SET are at any disadvantage in their academic careers. Indeed such teachers should be rewarded for their efforts to uphold high standards in teaching regardless of how this is reflected in students' evaluations of their teaching quality.

Applying ethical reasoning to this particular dilemma should highlight some of the hitherto hidden issues involved. Whilst it is not the intention of this paper to suggest that any nurse academic in this country would or has inflated grades to secure better SET results, nevertheless we submit that the potential to do so, exists. Other guiding principles and professional requirements, namely the Code of Ethics for Nurses in Australia (ANMC, 2008a), Code of Professional Conduct for Nurses in Australia (ANMC, 2008b) and the National Competency Standards for the Registered Nurse (ANMC, 2006) are also established to guide the ethical and legal practice of all nurses. For example, Value Statement 1 point 2 in the Code of Ethics states that 'Nurses recognise that people are entitled to quality nursing care, and will strive to secure for them the best available nursing care...Nurses also question, and where necessary report to an appropriate authority, nursing and health care they consider on reasonable grounds to be unethical, unsafe, incompetent or illegal' (ANMC, 2008a, p.4). These guidelines and principles exist in order to guide nursing practice, uphold professional standards, safeguard the public and apply equally regardless of the setting, including the teaching environment.

## Conclusion

This paper has sought to raise a number of key issues impacting on academic integrity in the university sector at large and the Australian tertiary sector in particular. In the first instance, the rise of audit culture imported from economic disciplines has been identified as the context for new imperatives to demonstrate so called 'quality' processes and outcomes in tertiary teaching. One aspect of this increasing quest for quality has been a shift in the utilisation pattern of the SET instrument from one of voluntary use by academics to inform their own teaching practices, to that of mandated use by management in order to 'judge' academics for progression and promotion of their position and indeed overall job security. This shift in focus and usage has the potential to invite academics to inflate student grades, in order to achieve good SET results.



The hypothetical example of nurse academics teaching at the undergraduate or pre-registration level has been given in order to demonstrate the potential for an ethical dilemma to arise from the practice of grade inflation. In conclusion, this paper has highlighted the relationship between audit culture, quality teaching processes, the mandated use of the SET instrument, the potential for grade inflation and the potential ethical dilemma that this engenders.

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