Assuring Learning and Teaching Standards through Inter-Institutional Peer Review and Moderation: Final Report of the Project

A sector-wide model for assuring final year subject and program achievement standards through inter-university moderation 2014

www.uws.edu.au/latstandards

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Referencing details:
This report may be referenced as follows:

Note: Griffith University was the lead institution in Year 1. The Project Leader moved to UWS in October 2011 when the institutional leadership was transferred to UWS, as negotiated with the institutions and OLT.

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Executive summary

This report documents the outcomes of a sector-wide project focused on assuring final year subject and program achievement standards through inter-university moderation supported by the Australian Government’s Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT).

Need and rationale

Australian higher education requires a relevant and feasible way to assure the validity, reliability and comparability of assessment outcomes and learning standards in equivalent university programs across the nation. This project addresses this need. It builds on the higher education tradition of robust peer review and tackles the associated Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) imperative to demonstrate sector-level, self-regulated, robust approaches for assuring quality and standards.

The specific rationale for this project is threefold:

a. It addresses ethical and educational imperatives to ensure that Australian universities have demonstrably effective processes in place to assure the quality and comparability of assessment processes and outcomes for students across the sector.

b. It supports social and economic imperatives associated with demonstrating to key stakeholders, such as industry and community members, that universities have robust approaches for assuring assessment quality and standards that are aligned to agreed, whole-of-program graduate capabilities and learning outcomes.

c. It takes account of the current higher education policy and regulatory environment which requires the sector to make explicit its processes for assuring the quality of assessment processes and outcomes through a combination of institution-level systems and policies, as well as inter-institutional benchmarking and assessment validation practices. Explication of this kind adds value to the Australian tertiary sector, both nationally and internationally, as student mobility increases and as credit transfer arrangements in the context of processes such as Bologna become increasingly important.

Approach

This ‘proof of concept’ project tested an inter-institutional blind peer review methodology developed earlier by the University of Western Sydney (UWS) with a wide and representative range of university partners. In the approach, groups of academic staff undertook a blind review of both the assessment inputs (subject outlines, assessment tasks and marking criteria) and assessment outcomes (de-identified samples of assessment at different grade levels) of equivalent final year units in two partner universities.

Eleven Australian Universities representative of the sector were involved in the project with extensive feedback nationally and internationally on what emerged from a wide range of additional higher education institutions, academics and leaders. Each partner university identified common final year subjects covering twelve discipline areas. They then provided the subject outline, assessment tasks, marking guides and a de-identified sample of a fail, pass, credit and distinction assessment item in the subject to a trained review group of colleagues in two partner universities teaching a similar final year subject. The review groups did not know the universities from which the assessment inputs and outcomes came and the assessment samples were cleaned of all comments and grades. The process unfolded so that all partners both provided assessment materials for review and undertook a blind review on two partners’ materials.

The project team was particularly interested to refine the original UWS pilot project guidelines and to determine if, through a process of action research and user-centred design, the whole approach was seen by those who participated to be both a feasible and constructive way in which to assure comparable standards in common assessment areas across the sector whilst maintaining sector diversity and the higher education tradition of peer review.
Outcomes

The project has successfully achieved its aim of developing a validated, robust approach for assuring subject achievement standards through inter-university peer review and moderation in common final year subjects across disciplines. It has also identified a feasible way to assure program achievement standards through the use of final year subjects, building on the OLT (formerly Australian Learning and Teaching Council) discipline standards; producing a range of practical, user-tested resources, support materials and procedures to enable others interested in the approach to implement it consistently and effectively.

Specifically it has established:

- That it is feasible to develop a robust and validated inter-institutional peer review and moderation strategy that contributes to the need for universities to demonstrate self-regulated approaches for monitoring and maintaining standards across disciplines.
- That general consensus can be reached on assessment input (e.g., assessment focus, criteria, valid assessment tasks and guidelines) and outcome standards (i.e., student achievement in subject-level assessment as evidenced in assessment samples) in a comparable final year subject being taught in different universities.
- The processes and resources necessary to engage academic staff in final year subject level peer review and moderation across universities and disciplines.
- The nature of disciplinary and institutional differences in processes for managing inter-institutional moderation at subject level and the implications for accommodating such diversity in ongoing implementation.
- An initial, feasible way to assure and test program level assessment outcomes on the basis of final year and capstone subjects across discipline areas.

Importantly, the project has identified broad agreement among peer reviewers from a range of university types on the comparability and standards of the assessment inputs being used in common units of study and on the grading of the assessment outputs, particularly concerning the assessment judgements made about “threshold” (Pass/Fail) grades.

Deliverables and dissemination

The project has produced the following, user-tested resources

- a website – www.uws.edu.au/latstandards – which includes all of the user-tested materials produced by the project;
- moderation guides, step-by-step strategies and user guidelines for reviewing subject-level assessment quality and practices in the context of program-level outcomes and standards;
- recommendations on how to improve institutional and national policy and practice;
- suggestions on capacity building for academic staff;
- investigation of the potential to use IT-enabled systems to gather, discuss and review sample assessment items to assist in the standards-setting process and capacity-building for academic staff across disciplines;
- evaluation of user views on the utility, feasibility and validity of the proposed inter-institutional moderation model in assuring quality in different fields of education. Key motivators have been explored through a survey of participants including their views about the connection between inter-institutional moderation activities and leadership in learning and teaching;
• a report on key findings, with recommendations for systemic implementation. This report includes an overall framework within which to locate this project and shows how it links to and complements parallel projects and initiatives including OLT-funded projects, TEQSA developments, institutional consortia moderation activities and Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) developments;

• two national Assessment Quality and Standards (AQS) Summits, involving senior university leaders, state and national government policy makers, OLT, Australian Universities Quality Assurance Agency (AUQAA) and AUQA/TEQSA representatives, school and vocational education and training (VET) representatives. The AQS Summits discussed the following elements:
  – models for assuring quality and standards in assessment and program-level outcomes across the sector;
  – issues relating to operationalising these models and their implications for cross-sectoral collaborations; and disseminating examples of good practice.

Referencing details
Based on the findings and outcomes of this project, it is recommended that:

1. The Chair of Australia’s Higher Education (HE) Standards Panel advocate for the use of the project’s ‘blind’ peer review methodology as a means to efficiently monitor and objectively assure the quality and comparability of disciplinary learning and assessment standards across Australia’s HE system.

2. The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) endorse the process tested in this study as an efficient and effective way in which to externally assure the assessment standards of Australian higher education at the disciplinary, subject and, over time, the institutional level; further, that this endorsement apply to both self-accrediting and non self-accrediting institutions of higher education.

3. The Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT) create a position for a National Assessment Quality and Standards Fellow/Advisor to
   a. assist the HE sector to establish the policy and practice frameworks to embed inter-institutional peer review of teaching and learning standards and
   b. identify and disseminate the most effective assessment practices identified through peer review in each professional or disciplinary area.

4. Higher education providers collaborate with peak disciplinary and professional bodies, under the coordination of the proposed OLT Advisor/Fellow (see Recommendation 3) to ensure that academic staff develop skills in articulating and using the full range of reference points now available for the purpose of monitoring and assuring learning outcome standards and relevance.

5. Higher education providers ensure that their assessment policies and quality frameworks are reviewed to include requirements for regular inter-institutional peer review of standards for final year undergraduate units, including review of unit inputs and assessment; further that priority be given to ensuring that academic staff, including sessional staff, have appropriate professional development to normalise consensus moderation and calibration activities within academic departments.

6. Higher education providers review academic workload policies and role statements for academic staff with teaching, coordination and assessment responsibilities to reflect expectations regarding regular involvement in consensus moderation and calibration activities.

7. The project team liaise with the OLT and experts across the sector to discuss establishing a national resource bank of validated assessment items by discipline, based on positive ratings from peer reviewers involved in peer review activities across the sector, that could be used as a resource by academics.

8. Further investigation be undertaken to determine if the use of final year capstone units of study and assessment tasks are a valid and feasible way to evaluate graduating students’ capability to integrate and appropriately apply to real world problems what they have learned in individual units of study in their selected discipline or profession.