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

Kerri-Lee Krause, Geoff Scott, Kate Aubin, Heather Alexander, Tom Angelo, Stuart Campbell, Martin Carroll, Elizabeth Deane, Duncan Nulty, Pip Pattison, Belinda Probert, Judyth Sachs, Ian Solomonides, Suzi Vaughan

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This section addresses Research Question 4.

What disciplinary and institutional differences are evident in processes for managing inter-institutional peer review and moderation at subject level and what are the implications for accommodating such diversity in ongoing implementation?

The findings reported in Chapter 4 highlight different views about approaches to curriculum design and assessment across disciplines in final year units. A single unifying theme, however, is the importance of putting in place discipline-responsive, systematic, accountably led institutional approaches to monitoring and assuring standards. All universities have internal quality assurance frameworks which set overall strategies and standards whilst supporting diversity. The findings of this study reinforce the value of using these frameworks to underpin approaches to benchmarking standards among institutions (see Figure 1).

During the course of the project the assessment policies of each university partner were collated and analysed, along with numerous exemplars from other universities. The aim was to gauge the extent to which university policies already included references to standards-related matters such as use of reference points to inform academic judgements about standards, and fostered moderation, peer review of learning standards within and between universities and benchmarking of teaching and learning standards.

The following checklist is the result of the combined analysis of these policies. Sample policy statements are included to assist institutions interested in embedding peer review approaches for the purposes of monitoring and assuring learning achievement standards. The checklist below is also included in the handbook for practitioners and policy makers that has been developed during this project.

5.1 Policy checklist and exemplars: Embedding peer review of standards in policy and practice

Following are 10 policy checkpoints to guide the review of existing assessment and related policies and guidelines to assist institutions in the design and implementation of policies and practices that reflect a commitment to collegial peer review among academics in disciplines to monitor and assure teaching and learning standards. They are consistent with three decades of research on effective change leadership and implementation in higher education (Fullan & Scott, 2009).

- Checkpoint 1: Define key terms.
- Checkpoint 2: Develop an institutional standards framework to provide a rationale and context for peer review of teaching and learning standards.
- Checkpoint 3: Articulate the benefits of collegial peer review and moderation.
- Checkpoint 4: Build professional development into the peer review process for all staff with teaching and assessment responsibilities, including sessional staff.
- Checkpoint 5: Clarify expectations of staff.
- Checkpoint 6: Ensure that peer review and moderation responsibilities are included in position description and workload allocations.
- Checkpoint 7: Adopt a tiered approach to monitoring and assuring teaching and learning standards that emphasises local, department level peer review, as well as inter-institutional approaches.
- Checkpoint 8: Integrate peer review into course quality assurance and enhancement cycles.
- Checkpoint 9: Design systems, policies and guidelines to enable sharing of student assessment samples.
• Checkpoint 10: Review benchmarking policy and partnership arrangements to ensure that they include scope for benchmarking teaching and learning standards.

Expanded policy checkpoints with exemplars from Australian universities follow.

Policy Checkpoint 1: Define key terms.
• Key terms may include: moderation, consensus moderation, teaching standards, learning standards. See the Glossary of Terms (Appendix B) in this report for definitions.

Examples from Griffith University:
Moderation of assessment is defined as the process used to ensure the quality of assessment and its outcomes; it ensures that the judgements of students’ performance are consistent and have the same ‘meaning’ irrespective of time, place or marker.

Consensus moderation is defined as follows: Consensus moderation of assessment is the process used to reach a general agreement about what quality assessment and its outcomes ‘looks like’; it ensures that the judgements of students’ performance are consistent and have the same ‘meaning’ irrespective of time, place or marker.

Examples from the University of Tasmania:
Performance standard: A clearly articulated description of the level of attainment that acts as a stable reference point or recognised measure for the purposes of reaching a decision on the quality of a student’s work (source: University of Tasmania, 2009).

Benchmark: A point of reference against which something may be measured. Benchmarks are data comparisons.

Benchmarking: The systematic comparison of an organisation’s inputs, systems, processes and outputs both against those of external bodies and internally against previously collated in-house data (source: University of Tasmania, 2011).

Policy Checkpoint 2: Develop an institutional standards framework to provide a rationale and context for peer review of teaching and learning standards.
• The goal is for academics to be confident in their own informed and calibrated judgements, and able to trust their colleagues’ abilities to make routine appraisals of student works with an appropriate degree of detachment and self-regulation. Furthermore, the way in which academic achievement standards are assured needs to be transparent to colleagues, students, quality assurance agencies and the wider society (Sadler, 2012, p. 14).

An example of a comprehensive framework is the University of Western Sydney Academic Standards and Assessment Framework (see Figure 2 in Section 4.4.2 below).

The University of Tasmania has developed a University Standards Framework which has been tested and endorsed. It comprises six domains: Research, Research Training, Curriculum, Learning, Teaching, and Student Experience. Online resources and publications are available at: http://www.utas.edu.au/student-evaluation-review-and-reporting-unit/academics-standards-projects

Policy Checkpoint 3: Articulate the benefits of collegial peer review and moderation.
Sample statements include:
• Consensus moderation processes are used to develop a common disciplinary understanding of the course standards that underpin comparability and ensure consistency of marking.
• Consensus moderation is most commonly conducted via a peer review process, where the aim is to reach agreement. At its best, the process will also facilitate the resolution of any minor objections, resulting in agreement and consent by all participants.

• As a part of the assurance of quality, consensus moderation is also used to ensure there is no ‘slippage’ of assessment standards and judgements over time i.e. that consistency is maintained over time. Furthermore, we want to ensure that the standards required of students are essentially equivalent across related courses (and institutions), i.e. those standards are comparable. (source: Griffith University)

• Moderation assists academic staff to work towards judgements that are valid, reliable and consistent, fair and equitable, and actively improve learning and teaching. (source: Charles Darwin University)

Policy Checkpoint 4: Build professional development into the peer review process for all staff with teaching and assessment responsibilities, including sessional staff.

Sample statements include:

• All academic staff, including sessional staff, with teaching, unit coordination and assessment responsibilities will have access to a peer review and feedback guide (online) to be used as the basis for peer review of teaching and learning standards within their academic department.

• The academic development unit (or equivalent) will facilitate professional development activities to support staff skill development in the area of peer review of standards, consensus moderation and calibration of academic staff to assist in the assurance of academic standards. Professional staff development in the area of peer review and consensus moderation may be integrated into sessional staff induction programs, academic staff introductions to university teaching programs or in graduate certificate in higher education programs, or the like.

• In addition to centrally supported professional development, each Department will be responsible for facilitating academic calibration professional development activities at least once per year for each course/program. This calibration process includes staff ‘tuning’ staff ‘judgement-making ability’ (Sadler, 2012, p.14) to ensure that grading is valid, reliable and self-regulated. The aim of department-based professional development in the area of calibration is to build academic and sessional staff confidence in their own informed and calibrated judgements, and to build trust in their colleagues’ abilities to make routine appraisals of student works with an appropriate degree of detachment and self-regulation.

Policy Checkpoint 5: Clarify expectations of staff.

Sample statements include:

• Moderation should be based on a commitment to open communication and quality improvement.

• Moderation should take a holistic approach, based on the best available data and using a range of appropriate techniques. (source: Charles Darwin University)

• Consensus moderation processes are used to develop a common disciplinary understanding of the course standards that underpin comparability and ensure consistency of marking. One or more of the following approaches to moderation are conducted every time a course is offered:

  • Course level planning e.g. self and peers (internal or external to the course) review the assessment plan to ensure the assessment regime and tasks are appropriate to the learning objectives of the course (Refer Section 3.1).
• Individual student work e.g. examiners (internal or external to the course) develop and use marking guides/rubrics specifying predetermined criteria so the bases for marking are consistent and communicated to both students and examiners.

• Recommended course grades e.g. examiners (internal or external to the course) review assessment exemplars across different grades at the end of a course to assure consistency of assessment judgements.

• Course standards over time e.g. examiners (internal or external to the course) review assessment exemplars and marks awarded to current students with those awarded for comparable exemplars from previous course offerings.

• Cognate courses e.g. Griffith colleagues, colleagues external to the University or through professional accreditation processes, review marks and/or grades awarded to assessment exemplars to assure comparability of course standards within the degree program, across the qualification level and across like programs offered by other providers.

• The Course Convenor documents the moderation process with the teaching team, in conjunction with the recommended grades, for consideration by the School Assessment Board. (source: Griffith University)

• The Comparability of Assessment (Moderation) Guidelines require that: a sample of assessment is moderated where there is more than one instance, or more than one person marking assessment tasks by (for example):
  • Double marking of ‘A’s and Fail grades.
  • Exchange marking of examination scripts.
  • Exchange marking of a major piece of assessment (source: La Trobe University.)

• The Macquarie University Assessment Policy requires that: “all assessment tasks undergo regular cycles of moderation.”

• The assessment guidelines expect: ‘a shared understanding of standards and expectations in regard to assessment of learning’.

• Staff of the university are expected to have: ‘sound connections with related professional and accrediting bodies and employer groups to establish a clear and shared understanding of the standards of achievement implied in graduates’ credentials they receive from the University’. (source: Macquarie University)

**Policy Checkpoint 6: Ensure that peer review and moderation responsibilities are included in position description and workload allocations.**

Sample statements include:

• Academic staff are expected to: “seek external expert moderation of assessment design and grading practices to gain feedback on the academic and disciplinary standards they entail”. (source: Macquarie University)

**Policy Checkpoint 7: Adopt a tiered approach to monitoring and assuring teaching and learning standards that emphasises local, department level peer review, as well as inter-institutional approaches.**

Sample statements include:

• While the development of well-designed criteria and standards will invest the assessment process with greater objectivity, of necessity the process must also rely on the professional judgement of the assessors. For this reason, internal and external moderation are critical to assure validity and reliability of assessment practices including the awarding of grades.
Unit coordinators are required to internally moderate all units to ensure that marks awarded between tutorial groups and by different teaching staff are internally consistent, comply with the QUT Grading Scale and meet appropriate academic standards. Course coordinators are responsible for external moderation of assessment to assure academic standards of the course are appropriate. (source: Queensland University of Technology)

The assessment tasks and the judgements made of student learning in the University's courses are subject to periodic benchmarking to ensure the maintenance of appropriate academic standards.

Benchmarking involves comparing academic standards in one course with the academic standards applied (a) in the same course at different times, (b) in different courses in the same institution or (c) similar courses in other institutions. (source: The Australian National University)

**Policy Checkpoint 8: Integrate peer review into course quality assurance and enhancement cycles.**

Sample statements include:

- Moderation is central to the quality assurance processes built into programs of learning development, implementation and monitoring
- Moderation at the University, including monitoring and adjustment of the quality of assessment, will be built into quality control processes throughout the program of learning life-cycle. (source: Charles Darwin University)

The Course Quality Assurance Policy states that:

- Course cycle, external review and accreditation contribute to Course Quality Assurance through the independent validation of professionally recognised standards, and facilitates benchmarking. Faculties with courses that are not covered by professional accreditation are expected to include course cycle and external review approaches as part of periodic curriculum approval and review between corporate review cycles. (source: Queensland University of Technology)

**Policy Checkpoint 9: Design systems, policies and guidelines to enable sharing of student assessment samples.**

Sample statements include:

- Colleges are responsible for keeping examples of anonymous student work at different levels of achievement and records of learning outcomes, assessment processes and the outcomes of assessment. (source: The Australian National University)
- All graded assessment will be submitted electronically and stored in the nominated repository to facilitate sharing of de-identified samples of student work for the purposes of peer review within and beyond the institution.
- Student assessment cover sheets will include a statement indicating that de-identified assessment samples may be distributed to peer reviewers within and beyond the university for the purposes of quality assurance.

**Policy Checkpoint 10: Review benchmarking policy and partnership arrangements to ensure that they include scope for benchmarking teaching and learning standards.**

An example from the draft benchmarking policy of the University of Tasmania, 2011:

- Benchmarking can take a number of forms, and may be characterised on three dimensions: the nature of the benchmarking exercise; the organisational level at which it is undertaken; and the partnership arrangements involved.
3.1.1 Nature of benchmarking:

i. **Data comparison**: the phenomenon in question is compared against some sort of reference point or benchmark; this might be quantitative (e.g. the attrition rate) or qualitative (e.g. threshold standards for learning outcomes).

ii. **Investigative**: a detailed investigation is carried out to understand the phenomenon in question, the level of performance, the reasons for that performance, and means of improving performance.

3.1.2 Organisational level:

i. **Whole of organisation**.

ii. **Organisational sub-unit**, e.g. faculty, school, university institute, division, campus.

3.1.3 Partnership basis:

i. **Informal relationship** often deriving from personal connections and usually involving an agreement to undertake one benchmarking exercise.

ii. **Formal relationship** that may involve one benchmarking exercise or an ongoing series of exercises, and is often codified into a formal memorandum of understanding.

iii. **Membership relationship** where the organisation participates in collecting and sharing information on one or more phenomena as a result of belonging to a particular organisation (e.g. CAUL, CAUDIT).

iv. **Internal** benchmarking where the benchmarking occurs across organisational units within the one organisation

• There are many kinds of benchmarking methodologies, including process, outcome, sector/functional, strategic, activity, internal, performance, public information, competitive, horizontal and vertical benchmarking. More details are provided in *Benchmarking Procedures*.

• Benchmarking exercises will often involve a partnership with one or more other organisations or organisational units. Such partnerships may be reflected in a formal agreement such as an inter-institutional memorandum of understanding, a membership agreement or a less formal arrangement. Formal agreements require approval at the appropriate level in the University, determined by Governance and Legal.

5.2 Academic achievement standards within an academic quality and standards framework for Learning and Teaching

The UWS Academic Standards and Quality Framework for Learning and Teaching can be used to enable staff to see where the current project fits into the broader set of activities and services that optimise student retention and productive learning in a University. The framework in Figure 2 emphasises that it is the total student experience that counts and an underpinning quality management policy, leadership and accountability system is necessary to enact it. The framework shows that it is the combined effect of sound learning design (1), aligned support (2) and effective delivery (3) that optimizes productive learning and positive outcomes for students (4). It notes that the quality of inputs (high quality design, support and delivery) are all important but that the key test of academic quality and standards resides in the impact which all this effort has on students’ development of the capabilities that count for successful early career professional/disciplinary performance and leadership. It is on level 4 in the framework that the current project is focused.

The UWS framework attracted a commendation in the University’s Cycle 2 quality audit and is now being adopted and adapted by a range of universities around the world.
The framework is used to ensure that the total student experience and its impact are tracked and that data from the tracking system based on this framework (see UWS Annual Course Review process and dashboard tracking system) are used to provide consolidated diagnostic reports and suggestions for improvement. This system repeatedly identifies assessment quality and feedback as being of top priority to students. The framework acknowledges that everyone at a University plays an important role in retaining students and engaging them in productive learning with positive outcomes.

Participants in this project and a wide range of parallel projects around the world have noted that overall frameworks are very important as a means to enable everyone to ‘see the forest for the trees’, to locate particular initiatives within a broader framework and to identify the importance of their role in ensuring the total student experience is engaging and productive.