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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Chapter 3

Project approach

The focus of the study was on validating and refining a process of self-regulation through peer moderation that would enable universities and other higher education providers to assure final year subject and program achievement standards, by applying a proven user-centred approach to design and testing.

We placed a premium on collegial peer review processes that built trust, were evidence-based and encouraged academic staff participants to engage in a process that could be applied within their departments and across universities in order to contribute to continuous improvement in the quality of assessment and monitoring of outcome standards.

The ALTC funded eight universities, to undertake the project (University of Western Sydney (lead), Charles Darwin University, Griffith University, La Trobe University, Macquarie University, Queensland University of Technology, The Australian National University, and The University of Melbourne). An additional three universities asked to join the project in Phase 2 (Deakin University, University of Tasmania (UTas), University of Wollongong).

Oversight and quality assurance for the project was provided by a high level national steering committee; leadership was provided by Professors Krause and Scott from UWS; design and implementation was supported by senior leaders from each of the participating universities and day-to-day management was provided by the Project Manager, Kate Aubin. The overall approach to project management and implementation built on a series of earlier Carrick, ALTC and OLT projects undertaken by the two project leaders.

3.1 Background

The methodology adopted in this project was piloted during 2010 by Professor Scott in an initiative funded by the UWS Vice-Chancellor involving six of the project universities. The pilot project compared and evaluated the validity of a range of assessment inputs (subject outlines, assessment items, marking guides etc.), along with the reliability of marking for the outcomes at the final year level and across a range of Fields of Education (FOEs). The present project has expanded upon, validated and sharpened the 2010 pilot by including subjects that do and do not have external accreditation and areas with varying levels of employability. It has also included performance-based subjects in the creative arts, along with common final year subjects in Education as well as in the more traditional disciplines.

3.2 Project methodology

Underpinning the methodology is the process of ‘steered engagement’ (Fullan & Scott, 2009, pp. 85-88), a proven approach for managing change in higher education. The senior university leaders on the project team provided top level direction for project implementation, while academic staff in the disciplines were supported by linking them up with ‘fellow travellers’ who were teaching and assessing the same subjects in different universities. In this way the project combined a focus on summative assessment of standards and outcomes along with practice-based learning and development opportunities for the staff involved. The core focus of this project was on the testing and validation of an inter-institutional process, rather than on the findings per se.

The methodology used involved a form of external peer moderation. In this approach groups of academics teaching the same named unit of study in another university 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) from a partner university teaching the same final year subject.
3.3 Research questions
The following research questions gave focus to the project implementation, data gathering and analysis. They were derived from the original project application and the review of literature (Chapter 2).

1. To what extent can a robust and validated inter-institutional moderation strategy effectively address the need for universities to demonstrate self-regulated approaches for monitoring and maintaining achievement standards across disciplines?

2. To what extent can consensus be reached on achievement standards in terms of input (e.g., assessment focus, criteria, valid assessment tasks and guidelines) and outcomes (i.e., student achievement in subject-level assessment as evidenced in assessment samples) in different disciplines?

3. What processes and resources are required for engaging academic staff in final year subject level moderation across universities and disciplines?

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

5. In developing a proof of concept for assurance of program-level achievement standards, how might inter-institutional final year subject level moderation practices contribute to peer review of whole-of-program threshold learning outcomes in different disciplines?

3.4 Key stakeholders and how they were involved in the project
The collaborative approach taken by the project team involved wide engagement with different stakeholders across the Australian HE sector. This was given focus by the use of the research questions identified in Section 3.3 and a proven set of ‘steered’ engagement strategies tested in earlier Carrick, ALTC and OLT projects which have built upon 30 years’ research and practical experience with effective change management and engagement in higher education (Fullan & Scott, 2009).

3.4.1 Key stakeholders in Australian higher education
Key stakeholders and the nature of the various ‘fit-for-purpose’ ways in which they were engaged with the project are as follows:

- OLT – were kept informed of project progress.
- TEQSA Commissioner Ian Hawke – Steering Group member.
- Chair, Higher Education Standards Panel – was involved in the consultation on this project, received information about the outcomes and the two discussion papers arising from the project.
- Partner Universities – 11 universities were involved in the project, in the ways outlined in the report.
- Members of the Innovative Research Universities (IRU) secretariat – were provided with the project outline and user guide.
- Universities Australia (UA) – information about the project was provided to Dr Gavin Moodie who prepared a UA position paper on the role of peer review methodologies in assuring learning standards. The project leadership also consulted with the UA Conference Organisers to coordinate a forum on assuring achievement standards as part of the UA conference 2013. A follow up forum is also scheduled for the 2014 UA Conference.
• Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) – we have liaised with ACER regarding the AHELO project and to determine the connections between this project and the assessment framework adopted in the AHELO project.

• ALTC/OLT Fellows – a presentation on the project was given at a Fellows Forum. Ongoing updates on the project have been presented to the Fellows by Associate Professor Mark Freeman, a member of our Steering Group along with Associate Professor Heather Alexander, a project team member, both of whom are members of the Fellows network.

• Private provider representatives have been involved in discussions about adopting the methodology used in this project. These include representatives from the Australian College of Physical Education, Think Education Group, Avondale College, Council of Private Higher Education (COPHE) and Tabor College.

• Technical and Further Education (TAFE) NSW Higher Education representatives have been consulted and a benchmarking partnership has commenced with the University of Western Sydney. The project User Guide developed during the project has been shared with the TAFE NSW Higher Education Advisory Group.

3.4.2 Involvement of a representative sample of Australian universities in the project

The project has ensured that a representative sample of Australian Universities of all types and locations has been involved in the project. The final sample of institutions involved is:

• 5 non-aligned universities: University of Western Sydney (lead), Macquarie University, Deakin University, University of Tasmania, University of Wollongong

• 3 Innovative Research Universities: Charles Darwin University, Griffith University, La Trobe University

• 2 Group of Eight universities: Australian National University, The University of Melbourne

• 1 Australian Technology Network university; Queensland University of Technology

Twelve disciplines were reviewed by 52 reviewers, and the review response rate achieved was 93.5%. The number of reviewers in each discipline area is listed below. It should be noted that there were never two reviewers from the same university, thus the number of reviewers is a proxy for the number of universities involved in peer reviewing the respective discipline areas.

• Chinese (4 reviewers)
• Civil Engineering (7 reviewers)
• Economics (3 reviewers)
• Environmental Science (3 reviewers)
• History (3 reviewers)
• Journalism (2 reviewers)
• Law (7 reviewers)
• Marketing (7 reviewers)
• Music (6 reviewers)
• Nursing (4 reviewers)
• Philosophy (3 reviewers)
• Physics (3 reviewers)

Criteria informing the choice of disciplines included the need for representation from: inter-disciplinary fields (e.g., Environmental Science); creative arts (e.g., Music); languages (e.g., Chinese); sciences (e.g., Physics); and accredited areas (e.g., Engineering, Business).
More than 150 academic colleagues involved in the project have given in-depth feedback on the process during the discipline roundtables, focus groups, and interviews which took place after Phase 1 and 2 respectively.

### 3.4.3 Additional partner institutions

Three universities with existing benchmarking partnerships (Deakin University, University of Tasmania, and University of Wollongong) approached the team, expressing an interest in applying the peer review methodology as part of their own benchmarking framework. This initiative was led by Dr Sarah Booth from the University of Tasmania. The moderation and peer review activities of this group have focused on Environmental Science, Nursing, and Economics. Feedback from these additional partner institutions on the usefulness of the project’s moderation methodology has been very positive and it is expected that they will continue to apply it in their benchmarking activities in 2013.

### 3.5 Ethics

As part of the ethics approval process, participants signed ethics consent forms as well as participant agreement forms to ensure that all participants understood the sensitive nature of the project. Participant peer reviewers had the opportunity to see student scripts and internal marking guidelines that typically may not be shared beyond institutions. As part of this process participants were assured that the details of feedback on individual units and student scripts would not be published, other than in an aggregated, de-identified form.

We also undertook to protect individual institutions by keeping the identity of units where there were discrepancies in feedback from peer reviewers confidential. All feedback was provided to partner institutions through the unit coordinators and project team members (i.e., Deputy Vice Chancellor (DVC)/Pro Vice Chancellor (PVC)) as part of the ‘closing the loop’ aspect of the project and for the purposes of assisting the process of continuous improvement within departments and universities.

In order to identify the resource implications of the blind peer review methodology, feedback was sought from participants regarding the time involved in the peer review tasks. The following feedback represents the average number of hours per task.

The project officer took approximately three hours per university, per discipline, to gather, collate and distribute the materials (i.e. subject outlines, assessment tasks, grading criteria/guidelines, and de-identified samples of assessment tasks) to peer reviewers. On average, academic peer reviewers reported that it took them between four and five hours to review one set of unit materials, including reviewing the inputs (unit outlines, program learning outcomes, assessment tasks and marking guides) and marking the four de-identified samples of student work. They allocated a further 3-4 hours for pre-review and post-review debrief meetings. Peer reviewers commented that it was “much quicker the second time round”, once they understood the process. Several commented that this time was well invested and that it would “save time in arguing student appeals”.

Technology assisted the process considerably. The project officer developed an online set of forms and editable PDF documents to assist collection and aggregation of individual reviews. The average turnaround time – that is, time taken for academic peer reviewers to submit their review of materials and for the project officer to process responses and send them to the originating universities – was approximately four weeks; though this varied considerably in some cases where individuals were on leave or unable to complete their submission by the due date due to personal circumstances.
3.6 Project implementation

3.6.1 A multi-level tiered approach

Rather than suggesting an either/or binary approach to peer review methodologies, an alternative is a multi-level, tiered approach that uses a suite of approaches according to the purpose of the peer review process. This is summarised in Table 1 below and is further articulated in the discussion paper Towards a Learning Standards Framework (Deane & Krause, 2012. see Appendix E).

The approach tested and refined in the current project is represented at level 4 in Figure One.

3.6.2 Peer reviewer feedback on unit level inputs

As part of the peer review process, reviewers were asked to address 11 questions which related to their review of the partner university's assessment and achievement standard input materials. The questions covered the review of unit/subject outlines, grading guidelines, assessment tasks, and the peer review process itself.

A peer feedback form, already field tested for ease and clarity of use in the earlier UWS pilot, was used to support this process. It was comprised of three sections:

- Part A: feedback on the unit outline;
- Part B: feedback on grading guidelines; and
- Part C: feedback on assessment tasks.

Part A: Peer reviewer feedback on subject/unit outline

In this aspect of the peer moderation process peer reviewers were asked, from their perspective as a subject expert, to address five questions regarding the subject/unit outline provided for review.

1. To what extent does the curriculum content cover all that a final year undergraduate unit on this topic should cover?
2. To what extent does the unit outline/learning guide explain how the assessment tasks relate to the unit learning outcomes?
3. To what extent does the unit outline/learning guide explain how the assessment tasks relate to the overall graduate outcomes of the degree program?
4. To what extent does the unit outline/learning guide explain clearly the requirements for achieving at various grade levels?
5. What are the best aspects of the unit outline? What suggestions would you make for further enhancement of this subject outline?

Part B: Peer reviewer feedback on grading guidelines

Peer reviewers were asked to comment on the adequacy of assessment grading guidelines provided to students for the assessment task they were marking. They were asked two questions in this regard:

1. To what extent is it clear how student work will be awarded grades at different levels?
2. To what extent are the grading criteria at an appropriate level or standard for a final year undergraduate unit of study in this field of education?

Part C: Peer reviewer feedback on validity of assessment tasks

In this section, peer reviewers were asked for feedback on the assessment task and the extent to which it linked to unit learning objectives (i.e. was ‘fit for purpose’).

3.6.3 Assessing program as distinct from subject level outcomes

In October 2012 the project focus was extended to consider the implications of the project methodology for monitoring and assuring academic standards at the overall program level, using discipline level learning outcomes. Using Law as a case study, 18 legal academics and colleagues convened for a one-day invitational roundtable. Universities represented were: University of Western Sydney, James Cook University, Deakin, Wollongong, University of Tasmania, and the University of Sydney. An OLT representative was also present.

The primary aim of the roundtable was to consider implications of the OLT Peer Review and Moderation Project for monitoring and assuring academic standards at the whole of program level, using Law as a case study. The Roundtable involved collegial peer review in a face-to-face setting and in the context of relevant national academic standards projects, including the Law Discipline Standards project (ALTC/OLT), and the Achievement Matters project (Mark Freeman, University of Sydney).

An address on the project was also given by Professor Scott to a meeting of the Australian Council of Business Deans Teaching & Learning Network on ‘national approaches to consensus moderation’ in February 2012. At this meeting there was strong endorsement of the use of capstone subjects focused on real-world professional problems as one feasible way in which to test program level achievement standards; the use of the inter-institutional peer moderation process of the present project as a way in which to sharpen them was also endorsed.