

Quality assurance of assessment through consensus moderation: A reporting framework for institutional engagement.

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Theme: Management

• League tables, research, teaching and assessment regimes, quality assurance systems, benchmarks and processes, student and staff quality monitoring in higher education

Abstract

This paper proposes a framework for Quality Assurance of Assessment.

The framework:

- provides a common basis for institutions to implement, monitor and improve practices that ensure the quality of student learning and its assessment;
- ensures that academic standards are embedded in the institutional activities academics and students experience throughout their teaching and learning. i.e as an integral, systemic and axiomatic outcome, not through corrective action after-the-fact;
- endorses processes that place responsibility and authority for expert judgment about the quality of students' learning firmly with the academics who are the experts in their fields;
- supports intra and inter-institutional collegial exchange, that places the achievement of informed consensus at the heart of a system that achieves quality;
- offers an approach to cross-institutional benchmarking of standards, and;
- delivers numerical metrics that respect institutional and disciplinary differences, and yet yield meaningful comparative data.

Background

International attention continues to focus on ways universities may demonstrate appropriate and consistent academic standards. Ultimately however, to effectively assure academic standards, it is the rigor of academics' expert judgement of students' work that needs to be assured. How do we *ourselves* know that the standards we employ are appropriate and consistent? Sadler (2009, 2010, 2011) proposes the use of consensus moderation.

This paper builds on Sadler's work to propose a framework that enhances the degree of transparency associated with processes we use to answer this question. Use of this framework helps ensure that academics' expert judgement is applied appropriately and consistently through the embedded use of consensus moderation across a range of learning and teaching activities. Consequential advantages are detailed in the discussion.

The Quality Assurance of Assessment Framework

The framework is in 4 parts.

Parts 1&2 - An 8 level '*timeline*' of learning and teaching activities to be quality assured; and, an associated list of '*reference practices*' each of which comprises some form of consensus moderation.

Level 1 - Program¹ Level Assessment Planning:

ensure the appropriateness of the assessment regime throughout the program; its alignment with intended program level learning outcomes; clarity in the specification of methods used, their type, purpose, timing, sequence, weighting, and (ideally) the task specifications themselves.

e.g. Broad peer consultation about the overall design and structure of the Program, particularly student assessment.

Level 2 - Course Level Assessment Planning:

As for the Program level, plus details of marking criteria.

e.g. Course assessment plan is peer reviewed by the Head of School/Dean L&T/colleague.

Level 3 – Teaching practices:

ensure consistency of teaching philosophy and approach throughout the teaching team and teaching period (or *appropriateness* of approach if the teaching is conducted by an individual).

e.g. Primary course convenor provides course teaching material to all teaching team members; conveys clear guidance about the ways these materials will be used.

Level 4 - Marking Students' Work:

ensure that appropriate standards are being used and consistently applied when judging the level of learning achievement demonstrated by students' work.

e.g. Peer moderation: Co-mark with a colleague, discuss discrepancies and reach a collegial consensus.

Level 5 - Grading:

ensure grades awarded to students are a valid reflection of their overall level of learning achievement in a course, as illustrated by the full collection of their assessment work for that course.

e.g. A group of colleagues from the same cognate area peer-reviews all marked pieces of work associated with a sample of students in one course.

¹ Program = Whole degree. e.g. "Bachelor of Science".

Level 6 – Benchmarking Inter-course standards:

ensure that the level of achievement standards required of students in one course are comparable to the level of achievement standards required in other courses in the same cognate area.

e.g. Share and discuss the standard of student work in courses from the same cognate area.

Level 7 - Benchmarking Inter-institutional standards:

ensure that the level of achievement standards required of students in one course are comparable to the level of achievement standards required in other courses that are in the same cognate area, regardless of institution.

e.g. Exchange samples of students' work with colleagues in other institutions as a cross-marking/ benchmarking aid.

Level 8 - Maintaining standards over time:

ensure that achievement standards applied to students' work are consistent over time.

e.g. When developing assessment tasks and undertaking marking, refer to a repository of annotated course assessment plans and annotated student works.

An extended list of reference practices has been developed through this research & is available on request.

Part 3 – ‘Reference points’ used to guide the ‘reference practices.

"Reference points" are resources, documents and/or processes that the reference practices engage with to ensure that there are components of *independent validation and benchmarking to inform standards* derived and adopted through the reference practices. Examples include: external professional accreditation standards (where applicable); international reference points such as: the UK subject benchmarks, the outcomes of the European *Tuning Project*, OECD's *AHELO (Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes)* project etc.

Part 4 – Institutional profile reports.

Institutional profile reports depend on the implementation of simple data collection activities by institutions. At Griffith University the approach being tested is to include a section in each on-line course profile that requires the convenor to indicate which reference practices will be used at each level of the model. A short-list of selected reference practices is provided: academics only need to tick boxes corresponding to the practices they will use.

Two suites of reports may then be generated. Both begin at the institution level, but can be broken down by faculty, or program etc.

The first makes summary statements relating to each of the 8 learning and teaching activities (Figure 1). The second 'drills down' into each level by making statements relating to each reference practice listed within each level (Figure 2).

Figure 1 – Mock-up report for institution-wide reporting of consensus moderation practices across 7 learning and teaching practices.

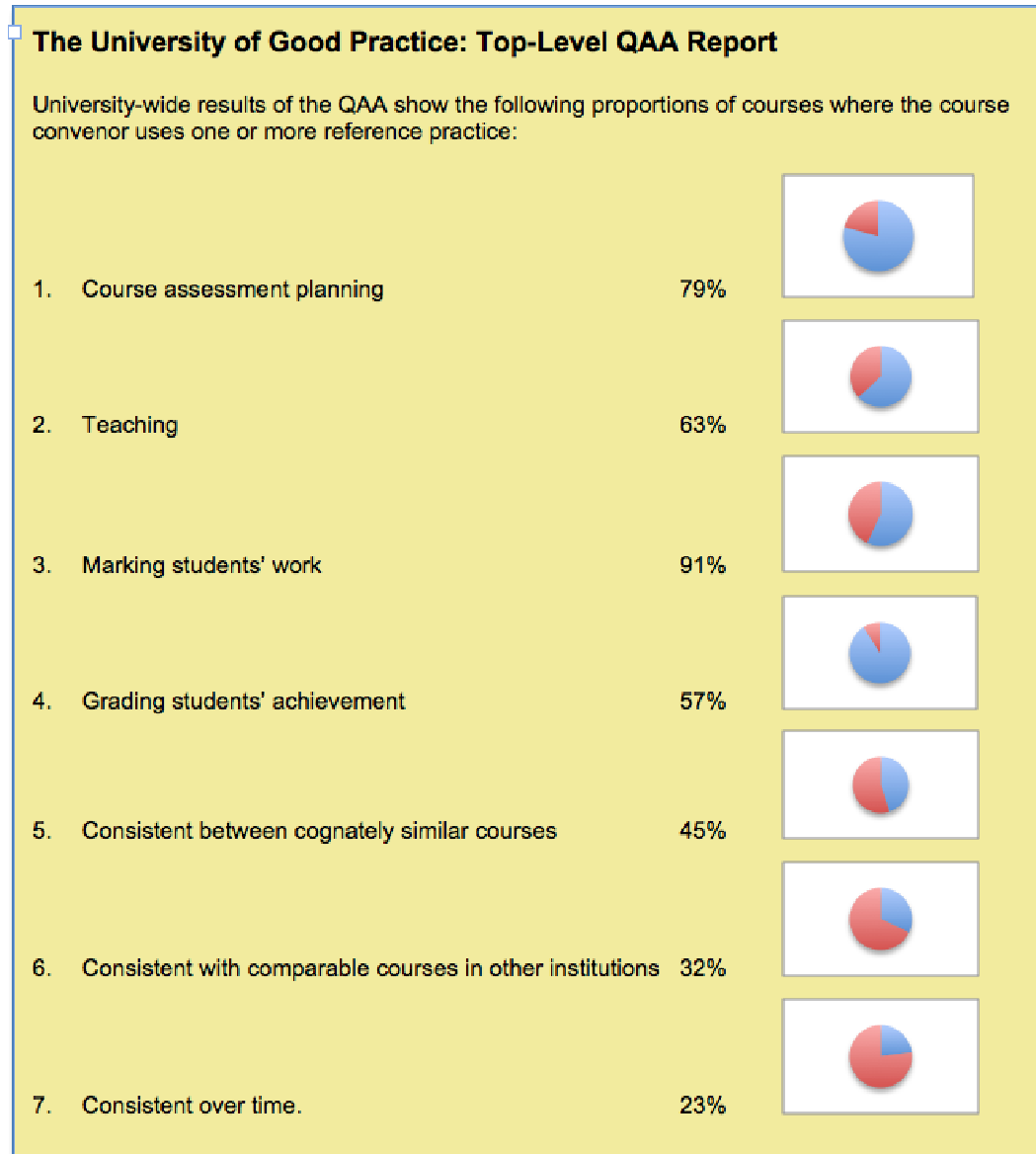
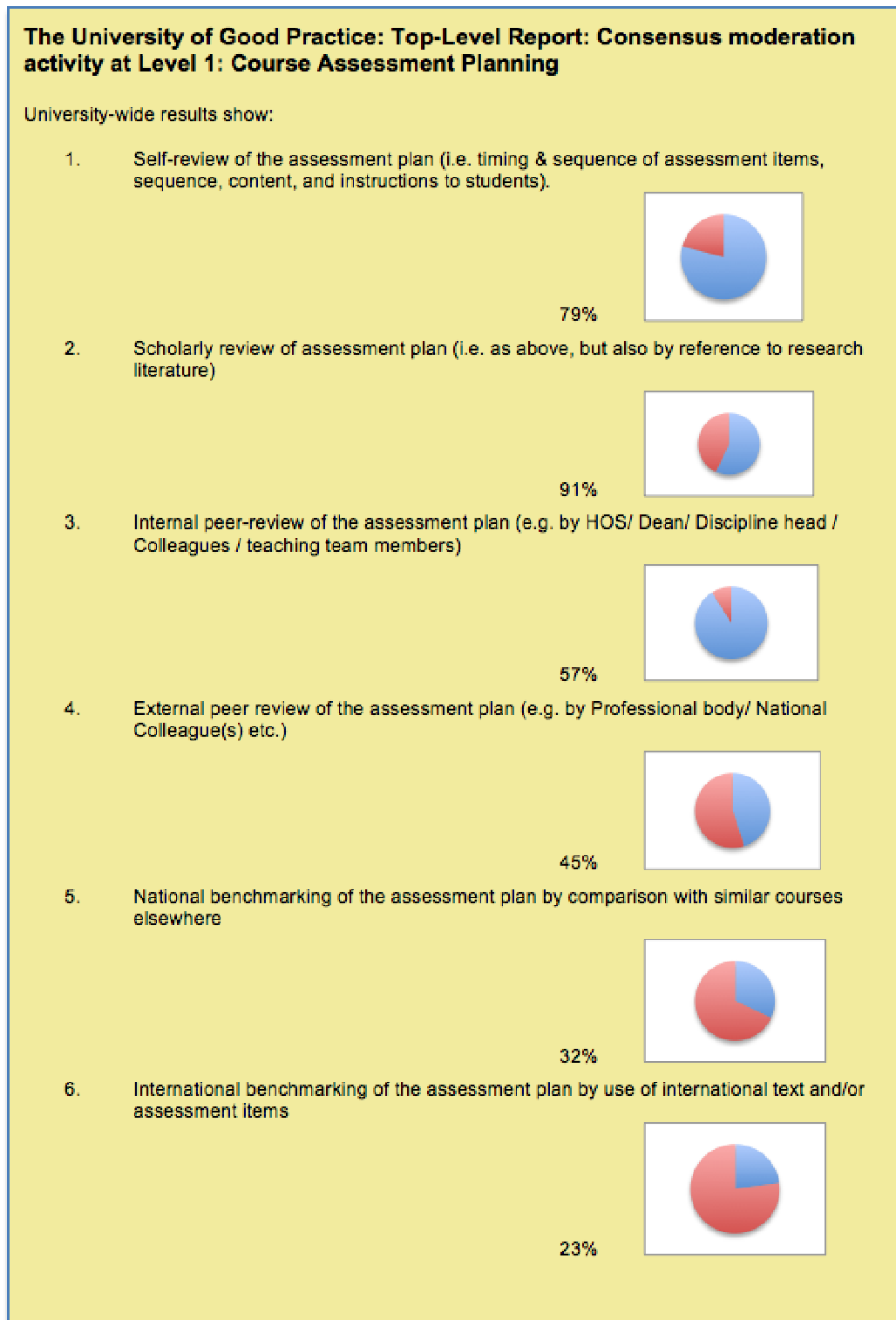


Figure 2 – Mock-up report for institution-wide reporting of specific consensus moderation practices (Level 1, Course assessment planning).



After the first year, the reports can be enhanced to show changes over time.

Implementation Implications

Creating developmental imperatives for institutions to map and manage;

Implementing the data collection strategy alone has an educative function that supports the development of good practice.

Providing indicators for public accountability and information;

This approach demonstrably yields meaningful data about institutional practice to assure quality learning. These can inform the public and be used for cross-institutional benchmarking. The framework provides assurance that appropriate quality management practices are in place, while at the same time allowing for variation in practice.

Maintaining academic integrity.

The framework respects the distinctive nature of learning in universities as distinct from training or lower levels of schooling where knowledge is more declarative. This complex epistemological variable means that it is essential to ensure that those equipped with deep knowledge and understanding of esoteric matters are granted responsibility for exercising their expert judgment in professionally responsible ways. One of the main advantages of the framework is that it supports exactly that: it does not negate or seek to supersede academics' judgments about students' learning, rather it seeks to ensure that these judgments are made by reference to professionally responsible practices that the framework captures – and are therefore *trustworthy*.

References

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