What …? Consensus moderation? But, you're probably doing it already!

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Theme: Policy

Abstract (150 words)

Consensus moderation has been advocated as a mechanism by which universities can ensure the consistency and appropriateness of its academic standards. Unfortunately, for many academics, the term "consensus moderation" has no tangible meaning, while for others the term has only a narrow meaning. This is unhelpful when attempting to implement broader use of consensus moderation as a central component of academic quality assurance. This paper reports on research that maps the term "consensus moderation" to a time-line of eight levels of activity academics routinely engage in. Example practices are provided as a way to help people to realise that, in fact, many consensus moderation practices are already in common use – without those using them realising. Surfacing this realisation is a key component to reducing the "ad hoc" quality of some of these practices, systematising their use and thereby extracting more purposeful and deliberate benefit from them.

Introduction

Building on earlier work (e.g. Sadler, 1987), Sadler has been recently producing a series of articles that broadly relate to good practice in the assessment of students' learning (Sadler, 2005, 2007, 2009a, 2009b, 2010b, 2010c, 2011). The most recent of these began by saying that one approach to control grading standards would be:

> "…to start with an analysis of the characteristics necessary for a system to exhibit integrity in grading academic achievement and treat the establishment and maintenance of academic standards as a problem to be solved" (p.85).

Sadler further suggested that this be advanced by "… enlarging and repurposing current moderation methods and developing a system based on peer consensus." (p.99)

In his conclusion, Sadler went further:

> "Such an approach would be fundamentally in the right direction, fully consistent with the peer-review practices that permeate most other aspects of academic work and likely to advance a sense of professionalism among academics."

This paper reports on findings from one aspect of a research and development project at Griffith University seeking to follow this lead. Specifically, that when academics are asked about "consensus moderation", many either do not know what the term means, or interpret it narrowly to relate only to the process of adjusting marks obtained from multiple assessors. This finding limits the immediate extent to which Sadler's proposal can be easily implemented.

Approach

To overcome this, the research began by informally surveying, and later interviewing academics from all disciplines at Griffith regarding the consensus moderation activities they used[1]. The process was, by necessity, partly an educative one whereby the broader meaning of consensus moderation was conveyed. It was also a data collection process, whereby the academics involved were able to describe a broad range of practices employed that, to varying degrees, contributed to the formulation of consensus about what comprises 'quality' in respect of students learning achievements.

To guide discussion, a series of six learning and teaching activities academics routinely engage in were derived from a keynote address and subsequent discussion paper (Sadler, 2009c, 2010a). In response to interim findings, this was expanded to eight which may be thought of as a time-line. These were:

1. Program level[2] assessment planning
2. Course level assessment planning
3. Teaching practices
4. Marking
5. Grading
6. Benchmarking course standards
7. Benchmarking inter-institutional standards
8. Ensuring consistency over time

Findings

Although still undergoing refinement, the following table give example practices academics were commonly found to be using to help inform their judgements. (NB Program level assessment planning has been excluded because policy requirements demand that collegial consensus seeking practices be followed.)

Table 1: Example consensus moderation practices commonly used

1. Course assessment planning
a. Scholarly self-review (e.g. By reference to research literature)
b. Internal peer review (e.g. by HOS. Dean/ Discipline head / Colleagues)
c. External peer review (e.g. Professional body/ National Colleague etc)
2. Teaching
a. Pre-teaching briefings of all teaching team members
b. Ongoing monitoring/briefings of all teaching members
c. Benchmarking with teachers/convenors of cognately related courses
d. Peer development/ moderation of teaching materials
3. Marking students' work
a. Cross marking of samples of students work with others
b. Peer development of marking guides/ rubrics
c. Peer review of sample of marking by colleague
d. Peer review of sample of marking by external expert
4. Grading students' achievement
a. A full sample of selected students' works is internally peer reviewed
b. … " … is externally peer reviewed.
c. Marks for students graded at all grade boundaries are all peer reviewed
d. Marks for failing students are all peer reviewed
e. Marks for 'High Distinction' graded students are all peer reviewed
5. Consistency between cognately similar courses

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[1] Research ethics approval number *GIH/08/11/HREC*
[2] Program = Degree. e.g. "The bachelor of Science".

a. Marking of students' work is peer review by other (related) course convenors, a discipline convenor, program convenor and/or head of school
b. Peer review involves a subject area interest group
c. Peer review involves an assessment panel or board
d. Peer review is undertaken through routine program review procedures
6. Consistent with comparable courses in other institutions
a. Peer review by (related) convenors from other institutions
b. Peer review through industry liaison groups
c. Peer reviewed through professional accreditation processes
d. Benchmarking through the use of an internationally recognised text
7. Consistent over time.
a. Using annotated exemplars of students' work from previous years
b. Regular program monitoring and review

Discussion

Several features of this list of practices are noteworthy.

First, many of these practices were elicited from academics who initially claimed to be doing "nothing" to inform themselves of appropriate standards within particular activities. This was most common at levels 6 and 7.

Second, it has become clear that there is significant variation in practices employed from one individual to the next – although sometimes this variation was limited by the impost of institutional requirements. Despite this variability, most academics routinely used one or more practice to 'calibrate' (Sadler, 2009c, 2010a) themselves – that is to say, benchmark the standards they used to some other reference point or points.

Third, it is clear that some practices are less rigorous, less systematic and less potent in helping an individual to achieve an appropriate level of confidence in respect of the standard they employ. However, any practice is better than none, and the cumulative effect of practices both over time, and in variety, helps to achieve higher levels of assurance.

Conclusion

Findings of this research demonstrate that academics routinely engage in practices that enable them to be more confident that the standard of their judgement is:

1. _appropriate_ to the level of student learning under scrutiny.
2. consistent with the standard employed elsewhere by similarly qualified people.

What is less obvious, but also implicit, in these findings is that whilst the prevailing _ad hoc_ use of these practices might have been adequate for assurance of academic standards before now, this is no longer the case. Greater systematisation of the use of these practices is required. Similarly, greater conscious use of these practice _for the explicit purpose of standards setting, sharing and maintenance_, is also now required.

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