

SRHE paper – Conference 2014

Title: Assuring academic standards through inter-university peer review: A sector-wide approach

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Abstract

The Australian higher education sector is experiencing massive legislative and regulatory reform. In this context, the focus on ways to evidence quality and demonstrate assurance of standards has sharpened considerably. This paper reports on a national project, funded by the Australian government through the Office for Learning and Teaching, designed to test an inter-university blind peer review methodology for assuring academic standards in disciplinary contexts. The paper outlines the outcomes of a three-year project involving 11 Australian universities and 12 discipline areas. The aim was to develop and test a relevant and feasible way to assure the validity, reliability and comparability of assessment outcomes and academic standards in equivalent university programs across the nation. The methodology builds on the higher education tradition of robust peer review and tackles the associated Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency imperative to demonstrate sector-level, self-regulated, robust approaches for assuring quality and standards.

Paper

The rationale for this project was threefold: i. 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; ii. 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; and iii. 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.

This 'proof of concept' project tested an inter-institutional blind peer review methodology with a wide and representative range of university partners across different institutional types, including research-intensive 'Group of 8' or 'Russell Group' universities, technology-network universities and newer universities. 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 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.

Findings demonstrate the value of engaging academic staff within disciplinary contexts in peer review of standards across universities. Based on feedback from academic staff and senior university managers a framework for monitoring and assuring standards is proposed, including department-level consensus moderation, external benchmarking and accreditation, and inter-university verification of standards and blind peer reviewed 'arm's length' approaches to monitoring and assuring standards. The need to 'calibrate' (Sadler, 2012) academic staff as part of this process is key. Feedback from academic staff peer reviewers highlights the value of this process as a professional development exercise on several levels. Participants reported the benefits of sharing teaching resources and sample assessment items in a 'non-threatening' way. They also benefited considerably from the opportunity to articulate the reference points they use to guide their judgements about standards. Many commented that these judgements are typically based on tacit understandings of standards and the opportunity to articulate and discuss standards with colleagues was rare.

Overall, there was broad agreement among peer reviewers from a range of university types on disciplinary standards relating to the inputs (i.e., the learning objectives, the assessment tasks etc), and in relation to judgements about threshold Pass/Fail grades. The majority of assessments reviewed by peer reviewers using the blind marking methodology showed strong agreement with the original score and grade. Reviewer comments and grades were returned to each home university for the purposes of internal department-level discussion and review. Participants commented on the value of this feedback for informing intra-university discussions of the importance of peer review and calibration of academic staff, particularly during the grading process

The conference presentation will demonstrate ways in which the project successfully achieved its aim of developing a validated, robust approach for assuring subject achievement standards through inter-university peer review of standards in common final year subjects across disciplines. The project has resulted in a feasible way to assure program achievement standards through the use of final year subjects, building on the range of discipline standards that have been developed by Discipline Scholars of the Office for Learning and Teaching.

Key outcomes of the project include: i. that it is feasible to develop a robust and validated inter-institutional peer review strategy that contributes to the need for universities to demonstrate self-regulated approaches for monitoring and maintaining standards across disciplines; ii. 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; iii. the nature of disciplinary and institutional

differences in processes for managing interinstitutional peer review at subject level and the implications for accommodating such diversity in ongoing implementation; and iv. 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. The presentation will outline the impact of this project on national policy, particularly as it relates to the peer review emphasis underpinning the new Higher Education Standards Framework for Australian higher education.

References

Sadler, R. (2012). Assuring academic achievement standards: From moderation to calibration. *Assessment in education: Principles, Policy and Practice*, 20(1), 5-19.