

Academic Calibration Project

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Overview

- Context
- Background
- Principles underpinning the Project
- The QVS
- The proposed model
- Next Steps

Context for the project: an increased focus on setting and monitoring academic standards

- A view expressed following the Bradley report (2008), that there was a crisis of confidence in Higher Education, including concern about the standards of graduates.
- Investment by the (old) ALTC in the LTAS project (2010-2011) identifying threshold learning standards or minimum discipline standards for graduates of a range of disciplines and its setting of *External moderation and coursework assessment* as a strategic priority
- The revision of the AQF to to describe each qualification in terms of the level of knowledge, skill and application a graduate should possess

Context for the project: an increased focus on setting and monitoring academic standards

- Richard James' 2010 presentation to AUQA Auditors meeting arguing that:

“If academic standards are primarily defined by academic attainment, the quality and robustness of processes for assessing, grading and reporting individual and group attainment are paramount.”

- Carol Nicols' warning to the Chairs of Academic Boards at UA Conference in 2011 that:

“Assessment is the elephant in the room”

Context for the project: an increased focus on setting and monitoring academic standards

- The introduction of a Standards framework for regulation of Higher Education providers under the TEQSA Act effective 29/1/2012
- Course Accreditation Standard 5.5:

“The academic standards intended to be achieved by students and the standards actually achieved by students in the course of study are benchmarked against similar accredited courses of study offered by other higher education providers”

- The Higher Education Standards Panel is presently establishing a new Higher Education Standards Framework that will include Teaching and Learning Standards for quality assurance .

...and it continues

The Australian HES

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External assessing of results on way

ANDREW TROUNSON

ASSESSMENT practices are set to come under fresh scrutiny, as the head of the new standards panel pushes for the introduction of external exams or moderation of student results, in line with nations such as Britain and Denmark.

Controversy over an alleged incident of soft marking of international students at the University of Canberra has put the spotlight on marking practices. It has strengthened calls for independent assessment of student work as universities are expanding and necessarily lowering school entry scores.

Alan Robson, chairman of the Higher Education Standards Panel, said much work already had gone into developing academic standards but more needed to be done.

"The public does need to know that if they employ someone with a degree that person is of a particular standard," he said.

"There needs to be some mechanism for assessing learning outcomes and I believe external assessment is a good way to go."

Graham Webb, who wrote the report into the 2010 incident at UC's journalism school, recommended the university externally benchmark student assessments and make benchmarking a requirement across the institution.

Professor Webb, a former deputy vice-chancellor at the University of New England, found that there had been no breach of process in the decision of a supervisor to bump up the grades of two Chinese students to a pass. In doing so, he overruled the marks given by a tutor, who determined the English was of too low a standard to pass a written assignment in journalism.

The supervisor, former Canberra Times editor Crispin Hull, in an email to then-tutor Lynne Minion said that while their English would be unacceptable in a

domestic student, they should be passed because they would be returning to China.

"It is a question of grinning and bearing it," he wrote.

When the email was leaked to *The Australian* in April it reignited tensions that academics are put under pressure to pass lucrative international students. These wider concerns were reinforced last year by a report from the Victorian ombudsman and statistical evidence of soft marking from the work of University of NSW economist Gigi Foster.

While Professor Webb held Mr Hull's comments to be unacceptable, he found that the correct process had been followed and that English proficiency had accounted for just 20 per cent of the overall mark.

But Professor Webb's report has highlighted the uncertainty over defining academic standards in the absence of additional, independent scrutiny.

"That may be disappointing for those who would seek a 'correct' academic standard, which could be determined over and above the conventional academic process," Professor Webb said.

"The fact is, however, that there is no all abiding or super-human measuring stick of standards to which reference can be made for a dispute to be clearly and irrevocably settled."

RMIT policy adviser Gavin Moodie said both the standards applied and the marking criteria were issues that would have been picked up and resolved if there had been external assessment.

There are two pilot projects under way testing systems of peer reviewed external assessment, one by the Group of Eight and another involving a range of universities, led by University of Western Sydney pro vice-chancellor Kerri-Lee Krause.

Professor Robson said preliminary results from both had been promising. He said a system of some external assessment was likely to be one or two years away.

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Background to the project:

- The IRU forum on Assessment and Moderation in September 2011.
- At the time two main projects underway:
 - Kerri-Lee Krause’s multi-institutional ALTC project *A sector-wide model for assuring final year subject and program achievement standards through inter-university moderation*
 - The Go8 announced their plans for a *Quality Verification System (QVS)*
- Following the forum, the IRU DVC(A)s hosted a “Calibration Project” aimed at developing “an effective, efficient and affordable way for IRU universities to meet Course Accreditation Standards 5.5”
- Project commenced in January 2012

Background to the project:

- Standard 5.5 requires universities to benchmark at two levels:
 - The academic standards intended for students and
 - The academic standards achieved by students
- Former largely achieved through regular quality reviews of academic programs (tho' some increased focus on curricula)
- Latter was the significant gap:
 - moderation between units within universities was limited
 - External moderation of assessment outcomes restricted to some professionally accredited courses

Background to the project:

- What do we calibrate? **Course learning outcomes**
- How do we calibrate across universities?
- When is the best point to calibrate – middle, end?
- What is the expectation of the outcome of the calibration – how will the loop be closed?
- How and what will we communicate to various stakeholders (parents, prospective students, industry) – the standard and equivalence of our graduate learning outcomes?
- Collated a range of information and identified a number of principles

Principles underpinning the project:

- The IRU universities will take a calibration approach to benchmarking academic standards achieved by students
- Between IRU universities calibration will occur utilising the main assignment in a final semester unit (and where possible a formal capstone unit) that best captures the course learning outcomes
- The outcomes of the calibration exercises between IRU universities will not lead to the adjustment of student's marks but to the subsequent alignment of academic standards over time
- Publication of the outcomes of calibration exercises will be at a level of generality that protects the students and academics involved

QVS



May 2012, UA DVC(A) meeting, the outcomes of the Go8 trial of their QVS system was presented.

- many similar elements between the two
- had already advanced to trial stage
- outcomes were positive (😊 demonstrated a high degree of calibration in academic judgement, but more importantly there had been useful and productive feedback between academics involved)
- willing to cooperate with a range of materials to share

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The proposed model

- Purpose (with grateful acknowledgement to the Go8 QVS):
 - to demonstrate the appropriateness of the standards of learning outcomes and grades awarded in IRU universities;
 - to maintain and improve the academic standards of IRU universities
 - to enable comparisons of learning outcomes in similar subjects across IRU universities; and
 - to promote discussion on good practice in teaching and learning in the IRU universities.
- Approach:
 - retrospective verification of grades awarded (not moderation of grades; reviewers not expected to design assessment tasks, remark student work or standardise student grades)

The proposed model

- **Timing:**
 - Aligned to regular (5 yearly) course quality reviews
 - Within that cycle, each university sets its own schedule for the calibration exercise and the time allowed for completion of the task
- **Scope:**
 - Bachelor degrees (not Honours unless sensible to do so)
 - Exempt professionally accredited courses where explicit and high quality review of marked student work can be demonstrated (outcomes will still be reported)
 - Focus is on calibrating standards at the endpoint of course – Generally conducted on a formal capstone or best proxy final year subject/unit (c.f. QVS which, if there is no capstone, takes $\frac{1}{4}$ of final year subjects/units)

The proposed model

- Scope (cont):
 - Some variation to accommodate disciplinary differences is appropriate (e.g. modalities other than written work may be appropriate in creative arts)
 - Within capstone/proxy, the most appropriate* assessment task/s will be selected for calibration (c.f. QVS which uses 25% of assessment requirements amenable to review)
 - Randomly selected, de-identified sample of 3 marked assignments across four grade levels – i.e. to a maximum of 12 (c.f. QVS which uses minimum of 5, maximum of 25 for each assessment item spread across 4 grade bands)

* i.e. best demonstrates *course* level learning outcomes

The proposed model

- **Reviewers:**
 - Normally Level D, not less than Level C (c.f. QVS which only uses level D and E).
 - Relevant disciplinary background
 - From IRU universities, but also from other universities including overseas
 - Paid at AUQA auditor rate (\$600/day – anticipate 1 day of work)
- **Reviewers provided with**
 - Induction pack, conflict of interest declaration, standard forms
 - Range of materials to contextualise assignment/assessment (e.g. degree/course structure and learning outcomes, relationship between unit and course, unit guide, marking guides, institutions grading scale etc)

The proposed model

- Reviewers will:
 - Review the appropriateness and comparative quality of the specified learning outcomes, assessment tasks, assessment criteria and assessment processes set for final year sample
 - Report on the appropriateness of the grades awarded to stratified random samples of student work
 - Are the learning outcomes appropriate for a final year unit/subject?
 - Are the learning outcomes comparable to those of final year subjects in similar universities?
 - Are assessment processes and the determination of grades sound and fairly conducted based on the materials that have been provided for the review?

The proposed model

- **Reporting:**
 - Report to university for inclusion in course review
 - At minimum, participating institutions will publish the model used for calibration, the rest is at the university's discretion (although TEQSA may request information)

- **Adverse Outcomes**

Depending on the scale/significance of the disparity:

- Discussion amongst peers about reason for grades
- Involvement of a third party reviewer (from a different institution) to determine which academic standards need adjustment
- Repeating calibration exercise in the following year to ensure level of confidence in academic standards
- Undertaking a Kerri-Lee Krause style/scale exercise

Next tasks

- Establish a Register of IRU academics
- Develop materials (standardised with QVS materials)
- Develop clear definitions and guidelines for selection of capstone/proxy subject/unit
- Trial process in conjunction with up-coming course quality reviews
- Evaluate trial

QUESTIONS?