

# **ASSESSMENT MODERATION IN LARGE TRANSNATIONAL UNITS: A CASE STUDY**

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## **ABSTRACT**

All students taking the Bachelor of Commerce course offered by Curtin Business School (CBS) are required to complete seven common or core units. This results in large student enrolments in first year units and a corresponding increase in the use of sessional staff to teach the curriculum. Additionally, CBS delivers these courses in various modes to many locations in metropolitan and regional Australia and to several offshore locations including Singapore, Malaysia, Mauritius and Vietnam. For each first year common core unit, there are approximately 1000 students enrolled at the West Australian campus and another 1000 enrolled at other locations or through distance education. The number in second semester is approximately half this. This paper describes a consensus moderation activity undertaken in a first year introductory law unit. This activity was part of a larger project to enhance the teaching and learning experience of first and second year business students. The aims of the activity were to train sessional staff in the area of assessment, assist tutors in providing feedback to students, ensure valid and equitable assessment through moderation and establish clear and accountable assessment processes for the development of assessment criteria and rubrics to inform students and for the appeals process. This paper will also briefly consider the literature regarding current thinking in assessment moderation, particularly in relation to transnational education. In conclusion, the paper reflects on the efficacy of the materials and processes developed from this activity for use across all locations in 2008.

## **KEYWORDS**

Assessment moderation, consensus moderation, assessment criteria, rubrics, introduction to law, marking grids, transnational moderation, large units, sessional tutors

## **BACKGROUND**

In 2007 the Curtin Business School (CBS) funded a project aimed at improving the first year student experience on campus. There was also a desire to continue improving CBS'

performance in teaching and learning. As part of this project, the School of Business Law and Taxation trialled a consensus moderation activity in the first year introduction to law unit Legal Framework 100. There are approximately 1000 enrolments at Curtin's Bentley campus and another 1000 at other locations in first semester. The number enrolled in second semester is approximately half this. This unit is delivered overseas through twinning programmes with other universities in Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, Mauritius, Indonesia and also at Curtin's Sarawak campus in Miri. The unit is also available to students at Curtin's regional Western Australia and Sydney campuses, as well as to distance education students and through Open Universities Australia.

In the first semester there were in excess of 30 staff (full-time, sessional and in-country) teaching Legal Framework 100. The project sought to enhance the teaching experience for sessional staff and develop materials and procedures to support their work.

The Australian federal government has been keen to ensure the quality and sustainability of transnational programmes and promotes equivalence and comparability between offshore and onshore provision (Department of Education, Science & Training (DEST), 2002; DEST 2005; Connelly et al., 2006). The International Education Association of Australia (IEAA) has promoted moderation as a key practice in ensuring comparability (IEAA, 2006). This project adopted Harlen's view of moderation as processes and activities that occur before assessment (quality assurance) and after assessment (quality control) (Harlen, 1994).

Thus the aims of the consensus moderation activity were to:

- contribute to the training sessional staff in the area of assessment;
- assist tutors in providing feedback to students;
- ensure valid and equitable assessment through moderation; and
- establish clear and accountable assessment criteria and rubrics to inform students and for use in the appeals process.

This in turn assists with the workload and quality monitoring for the unit controller at the Bentley campus, who is responsible for the delivery of the unit in varied modes to several locations.

## **CONSENSUS MODERATION TASK & PROCESS**

In November 2007 sessional staff conducting Legal Framework 100 tutorials on the Bentley campus were invited to attend an assessment moderation workshop to prepare for the marking of the final examination scripts. Seven tutors participated in the workshop.

At the beginning of the workshop, the group was introduced to assessment matters relating specifically to Legal Framework 100, stressing the importance of providing feedback to students to enhance their learning and for use in any appeals process<sup>1</sup>. Participants were given an overview of the general aims of moderation practice, which is the use of one or more of a number of strategies to achieve consistency and comparability in marking between different assessors. Further, moderation aims to ensure validity, reliability and equity for all students. Importantly, in the context of delivering transnational education, it is an imperative that the marks awarded by different assessors should be comparable across different classes and locations.

### ***The consensus activity***

A typical assessment task for Legal Framework 100 was selected for individual marking by sessional staff. The results were then compared and discussed in order to reach agreement on and a common understanding of appropriate standards ('consensus').

The student scripts to be marked were taken from a previous semester's examination. All markings and comments on the original scripts were removed and the papers de-identified. Staff were supplied with copies of the question and the marking guide, which provided written instructions on what should be included in the answer but had no breakdown of how the marks should be allocated. Staff awarded marks of between 0 and 10 to six student texts answering the same question.

The following instructions were given to the participants:

1. Read and mark independently the six answers to question 2A.
2. Award a mark of between 0 and 10 to each answer. Please try to use the full range of marks available.
3. If you have time, feel free to write comments, but the purpose is to come to agreement about a numerical score.
4. When you have finished you will be asked to discuss your numerical score with the members of your group.
5. When all have completed the marking task, there will be a discussion about marks awarded.
6. If time is available, questions 2B and 3 will also be marked in the same way.

### ***Discussion***

In the 90 minutes allowed for the whole activity, there was time to mark only one set of student texts (six scripts in all). Participants were asked to indicate the marks they had awarded out of 10 to each text and the differences were then discussed with the whole group. Although a marking guide was supplied, there were some marked differences in this group, with texts scoring marks varying between 2.5 and 6. This was of some concern, since all the sessional tutors had taught this unit previously, some for a number of years. It was also evident that some tutors used only a restricted range of marks, while others used the whole range of marks available.

It was also noted that since there could be such variation among a group of tutors using the same marking guide, students may also have different interpretations of the marking criteria.

### ***Resulting materials and processes***

As a result of the consensus moderation activity, it was clear that all staff had to be responsible not just for assessing but also communicating expectations regarding assessment as well as understanding and agreeing upon the marking criteria. This includes staff teaching in locations other than Bentley who are not involved in the marking process.<sup>2</sup> To this end, other tools for the marking process were designed, including more detailed marking guides and marking 'grids'. Markers were instructed to use the template and also give 'global consideration' to the total marks they award to ensure that the paper does, in fact, sit within the University's marking levels (i.e. Pass, Credit, Distinction and High Distinction).<sup>3</sup>

A marking rubric was also developed and provided to students in a separate workshop prior to their mid-term assessment and the final exams.<sup>4</sup> Clarity regarding expectations in relation to assessment can only enhance the students' learning experience.<sup>5</sup>

In 2008 the consensus moderation activity was mandatory for all staff involved in teaching Legal Framework 100 at Bentley and other metropolitan Perth locations. To allow for more discussion during the workshop, staff were asked to complete the marking exercise prior to the workshop. The marking grids and more detailed marking guides were provided to staff in the other locations. The workshop was also conducted at the Sydney campus as it was considered likely that there would be similar variations with tutors from the other locations. The experience with the Sydney teaching staff reflected the experience at Bentley and there are plans to repeat the activity at other offshore locations.

## CONCLUSIONS

Participants found the exercise very useful, which illustrated the need for an ongoing moderation process, particularly in large units. It is anticipated that students' classroom learning experience also improved through the provision of materials to assist sessional staff in coursework delivery and in developing their teaching skills. The student surveys are yet to be released. The development of the consensus moderation workshop and materials to assist tutors in the marking process has led to fairer assessment practices in various ways. First, the moderation activity ensures student confidence about consistency in marking across different classes in different teaching and learning contexts. Second, it supports tutors in the provision of feedback to students. Third, the process assists the development of clear and appropriate assessment criteria and rubrics which are clearly communicated to all students irrespective of their location or mode of study. Finally, it ensures transparent and accountable processes essential during a formal appeals process.

## ENDNOTES

1. A copy of the feedback memo developed by Joan Squelch and Lisa Goldacre which was given to the attendees will be presented at the conference.
2. Arrangements with partners regarding whether the assessments are marked at the Bentley campus or the offshore location varies from programme to programme.
3. Samples of the marking guide and grids will be presented at the conference.
4. An example of the marking rubric, in the context of answering a legal problem question using the '4-step process' a traditional and wide spread methodology used in teaching law to students (Taylor, 2006). A sample of the marking rubric will be presented at the conference.
5. An example can be found in 'Developing appropriate assessment tasks', Chapter 5 of *Teaching and Learning at Curtin 2008*, from the Office of Teaching and Learning, Curtin University of Technology. Retrieved 21 October 2008, from <http://lsn.curtin.edu.au/publications/tlbookchap5.pdf>

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