

School of Population Health

Faculty of Health Sciences

**“Everyone has a voice”:
Developing an Evidence-Based
Framework for Consensus Moderation
in Higher Education**

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**This thesis is presented for the Degree of Doctor of
Philosophy (Psychology)**

Curtin University

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Declaration of Originality

To the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgment has been made. This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university. The research presented and reported in this thesis was conducted in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007) – updated 2018. The proposed research study received human research ethics approval from the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (EC00262), Approval Number HRE2018-0051.

Signature:

Date: 24th March 2022

Abstract

Moderation is an important assessment quality assurance activity to ensure validity, reliability, and consistency in marking. Consensus moderation (also known as social moderation) is an approach to assessment quality assurance where collaboration and discussion take place to agree on mark allocation. There is a paucity of research on the subject of consensus moderation, along with a lack of documented structure and processes on how to carry out consensus moderation practices. Massification of higher education, concepts of efficiency, commercialisation, and marketisation have resulted in the intensification of workload for academics and greater importance is being placed on student satisfaction and quality assurance. It is therefore imperative to develop effective and efficient assessment quality assurance practices.

In response to the lack of understanding of consensus moderation and to improve quality assurance of assessment processes in higher education, this research aimed to develop an evidence-based framework to inform practice. Consensus moderation is a complex and socially situated phenomenon, therefore it is important to recognise the multiple contributors, and understand how the different roles and actors influence the process of consensus moderation, as well as the historical interactions and perspectives that shape the individuals involved. Reflecting the complex social nature of consensus moderation, the research was approached through a social constructivist lens and a socio-cultural theoretical framework, using a sequential exploratory qualitative multiple methods design. The body of research contained four interconnected objectives. Objective One was to systematically appraise and synthesise the extant literature on consensus moderation in higher education, and Objective Two was to critically evaluate the experiences and perceptions of academics who assess students' work and take part in consensus moderation. Objective Three was to identify expert academics' perceptions about consensus moderation, and Objective Four was to develop and pilot an evidenced-based framework for consensus moderation in the higher education setting. The objectives were addressed using four research phases, aligned with the sequential exploratory qualitative multiple methods design.

In Phase One I conducted a scoping review. There were limited empirical studies focused on consensus moderation, although some referred to consensus moderation processes but used the term moderation. Consensus moderation was found to help consistency in marking and provided a learning process for academics, although there were also issues and tensions. These included a lack of structure, different approaches,

difficulties in gaining mark agreement, and concerns that power and seniority may impact the process of achieving consensus.

Phase Two used focus groups to explore sessional academics' ($N=11$) and fixed-term/continuing academics' ($N=14$) experiences and perceptions of consensus moderation in higher education. Data was analysed separately for sessional academics and fixed-term/continuing academics using Foucauldian Discourse Analysis. Analysis of data relating to sessional academics revealed four discursive constructions of consensus moderation: necessary for fairness and consistency; fraught and complicated; confusing and lacking consistency; and time-demanding, situated within the discourses of the vulnerable position of a sessional academic and the paradox of quality assurance in a neoliberal university. The vulnerability of sessional academics along with a lack of support, evidence of hierarchy, and use of power, coercion, and surveillance inhibited collaboration and academic development. As a result, marking behaviour was modified to increase the chance of obtaining future work. Analysis of data relating to the fixed-term and continuing academics' identified three discursive constructions of consensus moderation: consensus moderation as a truly collaborative process; consensus moderation as an illusion; and consensus moderation as a process to manage markers, all situated within the wider discourse of the neoliberal university. Whilst a small number of unit coordinators carried out consensus moderation using positive collaborative behaviours, others utilised and validated managerial behaviours where power and surveillance were used as a form of social control.

Phase Three used semi-structured interviews to explore the perceptions of consensus moderation with academics ($N=12$) who have recognised expertise in consensus moderation. Data was analysed using thematic analysis. The findings indicated the need to recognise consensus moderation as core academic work, requiring adequate resourcing, and a safe environment for discussion. When used alongside calibration to develop and maintain standards, consensus moderation can be a professional learning opportunity. A positive assessment culture was considered to be a fundamental enabler to achieving collaborative and collegial consensus moderation, with changes to current practice requiring a multifactorial approach.

Phase Four integrated the findings from previous phases, utilising a joint display to enable integrated insights which then informed the development of a draft consensus moderation framework to optimise practices in higher education. Academics were engaged in five cycles of action research, testing and modifying the framework. Using action research resulted in the refinement of the framework from a theoretically developed consensus moderation framework to a practical evidence-based solution. Engaging

academics in action research also facilitated early translation and impact of the research findings through dissemination and empowered academics to generate change in their consensus moderation practices. The final framework for consensus moderation in higher education is accompanied by recommendations and implications for changes in practice.

This study has methodological, theoretical, and applied implications. A novel methodological advancement in consensus moderation research was the use of a four-phase sequential multi-method design, a commitment to the integration of the phases, and subsequent piloting of the draft framework through action research. This resulted in a deeper and grounded theoretical understanding of consensus moderation, identified tensions between what is intended to happen with consensus moderation and what happens in practice, enabled the exploration of real-world solutions to barriers and identified the optimal practical process for enabling collaborative and collegial consensus moderation practice. The study has developed a conceptual framework for consensus moderation where professional development, collegial practice and quality assurance are aligned. The framework for consensus moderation has the potential to improve and transform both the environment and experiences of those involved in consensus moderation. The effective application of this framework will ensure students have clear, consistent, and unambiguous information about assessment requirements, inconsistencies in marking will be reduced and learning outcomes will be assured.

Acknowledgments

This research in training journey has been a liberating process for me. I commenced with a pure interest in assessment moderation, having had an extended curiosity in pedagogy from my clinical education days. Whilst an experienced clinical manager and academic I now realise that I started the research quite naive to the impact of policies and organisational practice. It soon become evident to me that consensus moderation practices are more related to the power that operates at an individual level within an organisation. Through my readings, it also become clear to me that the neoliberal conditions of higher education were also too powerful to ignore. Hence my interest in this area expanded. My understanding of the world and how it functions has been affected... The reading of Foucault was a difficult journey for me, and understanding rationality, subjectivity, discipline, and governmentality has made me far more critical of the world. I think I have now found my scholarly home.

A PhD is not something that you do in isolation, and I have been so lucky to have such fantastic support. This work would not have been possible without the support of so many amazing people. Firstly a profound thank you to my incredible supervision team led by Associate Professor Lynne Roberts and Dr Helen Flavell. Your constant support, encouragement, wisdom, guidance, and clarity of vision have been invaluable. Lynne, you have kept me on the PhD path and I am so grateful to you for this wonderful research training. I know that this thesis would not exist without you and I will always be indebted to you - thank you sincerely.

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part of the legacy of this research and are part of how the findings inform education, policy, and practice. Finally, thank you to the Australian Government Research Training Program for funding my tuition.

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Statement of Author Contributors

The purpose of this statement is to detail the nature and extent of the intellectual contribution by the PhD Candidate, Jaci Mason, and all other co-authors of publications. The following author contributions are a requirement for a thesis presentation which contains publications as part of doctoral research at Curtin University. This thesis was supervised by Associate Professor Lynne Roberts and Dr Helen Flavell. The nature and extent of the intellectual input by the candidate and co-authors has been validated by all authors and can be found below.

I, Jaci Mason, am the lead author of these papers, and it was primarily my responsibility to conceptualise, collect and analyse data, write and edit the papers included as chapters in my PhD thesis.

This PhD has been supervised by Associate Professor Lynne Roberts and Dr Helen Flavell. I have led the design, data collection, data analysis and writing of the body of research.

Paper One (Chapter 4) “Consensus moderation and the sessional academic: Valued or powerless and compliant?” Published in the *International Journal of Academic Development*.

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Co-Author 2 Associate Professor Lynne Roberts	√		√	√	√
Co-Author 2 Acknowledgment: I acknowledge that these represent my contribution to the above research output and I have approved the final version. Signed:					
Co-Author 3 Dr Helen Flavell	√		√	√	√
Co-Author 3 Acknowledgment: I acknowledge that these represent my contribution to the above research output and I have approved the final version. Signed:					

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Co-Author 2 Associate Professor Lynne Roberts	√		√	√	√
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Co-Author 3 Dr Helen Flavell	√		√	√	√
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List of Conference Presentations

The following conference posters, presentations, and workshops were carried out as part of this body of research.

Conference Posters:
<i>What does the literature say about consensus moderation?</i> Mark Liveris Student Research Conference, Curtin University, September 2018
<i>Consensus Moderation: what does the literature say?</i> Talking Teaching 2018, Conference on Tertiary Learning and Teaching Practice, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, November 2018
Conference Workshops and Presentations:
Showcase Presentation: <i>Exploring how teaching academics construct consensus moderation: listening to the discourse.</i> Western Australia Teaching and Learning Forum, Notre Dame University, Western Australia, January 2019
Presentation: <i>Exploring how teaching academics discuss consensus moderation: Listening to their voices.</i> Mark Liveris Seminar, Curtin University, March 2019
Workshop: <i>Developing an evidence based framework for consensus moderation practices in Higher Education.</i> Western Australia Teaching and Learning Forum, Edith Cowan University, Western Australia, January 2020
Presentation: <i>Developing an evidence based framework for consensus moderation practices in Higher Education.</i> Advance HE Teaching and Learning Conference 2020, United Kingdom, July 2020
Presentation: <i>Developing an evidence based framework for consensus moderation practices in Higher Education.</i> 2020 SoTL-China International Conference, Beijing Institute of Technology, August 2020
Presentation: <i>Inconsistent moderation: The voices of sessional academics.</i> CRADLE Conference 2020, Deakin University, Australia, October 2020
Presentation: <i>Using an Evidence-Based Framework for Consensus Moderation in Higher Education.</i> Western Australia Teaching and Learning Forum, Murdoch University, Western Australia, February 2022

Other Presentations:

Moderation and online consensus moderation. Education session on moderation practice open to all academics at Curtin University, March 2020, and April 2020 (repeated three times)

Leadership workshop for Unit Coordinators (including consensus moderation practices). Open to all academics at Curtin University, May 2020 (repeated four times)

Best Practices in consensus moderation. A workshop on the evidenced-based framework for consensus moderation practices in Higher Education at the School of Nursing, Midwifery and Paramedicine, Curtin University, June 2020

Using an evidence-based framework for consensus moderation practices in Higher Education. Presentation at Curtin School of Nursing, Curtin University, May 2021

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Glossary of Key Terms

Annotated exemplars - illustrations of the requirements of particular standards, grades or marks annotated with a commentary on how the standard has been applied and decision on mark allocation determined

Assessment tasks - details of the assessment items required to be completed by students in a unit or module

Calibration - Calibration is a process that focuses on the individual marker within the marking team, where the intent is to calibrate their marking through a process of marking a set number of assessments and then obtaining feedback from the unit coordinator before continuing marking

Consensus - agreement developed through discussion and collaboration

Consensus or Social moderation - an agreement on mark allocation achieved through collaboration and discussion between markers, based on explicit standards and quality of work and how it matches the standard

Conferencing moderation - student work is marked by an individual assessor and then samples of the marked work are reviewed and discussed by the marking team. The aim is to reach a consensus and common agreement

Sample moderation - a sample (determined locally) of marked assessment submissions are remarked by a second marker and feedback is provided on the marks allocated and the quality of student feedback. The marks may be adjusted based on this sample review

Collaboration – a working relationship where two or more individuals work together in a collegial way

Comparability - how consistently standards are applied across an assessment context and the reliability of academic judgement

Consistency - the outcome of informed use of the stated standards in a consistent manner

Discourse - a certain way of speaking which represents ways of thinking, speaking, and acting for a particular group of people at a particular point in time

Exemplars - Examples of assessment items that demonstrate a particular standard, grade or mark

Expert moderation - the markers undertake marking/grading of assessments and then submit their marked assessments to an expert. Markers receive feedback on how they have interpreted and applied the required standard compared to how it was intended

Grading standards - the descriptors of standards expected for each grade point

Intuition - the ability to know or understand something instinctively without the need to consciously think about it, based on the unconscious mind using past experiences and knowledge.

Marking criteria - details of performance criteria that result in a particular grade or mark for an assessment item

Moderation - a quality assurance process adopted to align assessment judgements, to ensure judgements are fair and consistent in assessment marking and feedback practices for all students. This occurs across three phases;

Pre-marking moderation - A process that is undertaken before the release of assessment requirements to students/markers, to ensure the assessment task and rubrics/grading forms are rigorous, fair, and consistent

Intra-marking moderation - A process that is undertaken after submission of assessments and before/during marking to ensure consistency, accuracy, and fairness in marking

Post marking moderation - A post marking process undertaken before the release of marks to the students to ensure marking was fair and consistent.

Neo-liberalism - A political rationality that positions education under an economic domain.

Power - power exists as relations and can be in different ways:

Sovereign - domination by supremacy, rank, or authorities to control

Discipline – domination by those in more power (formal or informal) through norms and surveillance to regulate and control individuals into certain behaviours

Resistance - resistance can be overt and covert forms of responding to power relations

Rubric - a matrix or grid used to interpret and grade/mark students' work against set criteria, and standards.

Standards - the expected features or characteristics required at stipulated levels of performance.

Students as partners - a collaborative process in which students have the opportunity to contribute to curriculum activities (for example, conceptualisation, decision making, implementation, design or investigation). This is often also referred to as **co-creation** which recognises the challenge in changing the power dynamics of the lecturer/student interactions.

Subject, Subjectivity - subject to someone else by control and dependence and also tied to his/her/their conscience. Subjectivity is a process of becoming related to what we can do.

Tacit knowledge - tacit knowledge is knowledge, skills, and ability gained through experience. This is also referred to as implicit knowledge as it is difficult to communicate.

Chapter 1 Introduction and Thesis Overview

"Quality is not an act, it is a habit"
Aristotle

1.1 Chapter Introduction: Pre-Chapter Moderation

In this introductory chapter, I provide background information on consensus moderation and a rationale for this body of research. I then describe the research aims and objectives. The research aim was to develop and pilot an evidence-based framework for consensus moderation in higher education. Consequently, this body of research intends to transform the experience and environment in which consensus moderation practices in higher education is carried out, to improve the experience for all involved in consensus moderation. I then conclude this chapter by providing an overview of the structure of this thesis and the significance of this body of research.

1.2 Background

Students attending university generally enrol in degrees that comprise of multiple smaller units of study managed by academics who are referred to as 'unit coordinators' (Pepper & Roberts, 2016), or module coordinators/subject leaders in other countries. The smaller units each contain one or more assessments where students are required to demonstrate their achievement of the learning outcomes (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2021). In these units, it is the unit coordinator who is responsible for overseeing the assessment process (Holt et al., 2013; Roberts et al., 2011). The grades that students achieve whilst in university have consequences for future employability and further education (Johnson, 2015). However, designing quality assessments that accurately measure student achievement, and ensuring reliable and consistent marking judgement is considered to be a complex process (Bloxham et al., 2016).

Whilst marking criteria and rubrics have been used to describe assessment expectations, variations in mark allocation have been identified (Bloxham et al., 2015; Grainger et al., 2016; Grainger et al., 2008; O'Connell et al., 2016). The reasons for variations in mark allocation are complex and multifaceted and are discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis. As a result of marking variation, countries have adopted different approaches to assuring the

quality of higher education assessment processes (Bloxham, Hudson, et al., 2015; Bloxham et al., 2016).

In Australia, quality assurance processes provide confidence in a university and are considered a determining factor of a university's reputation (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2015). The latest Australian university threshold standards view assessment quality assurance as a university requirement and prescribe that a university should have *“mature and advanced processes”* for institutional quality assurance (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2021, p. 19). Specifically, for assessments they require that *“methods of assessment are consistent with the learning outcomes being assessed, are capable of confirming that all specified learning outcomes are achieved and that grades awarded reflect the level of student attainment”* (p. 5). Subsequently, how each university approaches assessment quality assurance is determined by their individual processes.

Most universities, according to Tuovinen et al. (2015), have policies on assessment quality assurance that focus on some form of moderation to assure the quality of the assessment process. The importance of moderation has been widely documented due to the known complexity in achieving consistency in marking (Barrie et al., 2014; Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al., 2016; Dill & Beerkens, 2013; Hunter & Docherty, 2011; Orr, 2007). Assessment moderation is considered to be *“a process for assuring that an assessment outcome is valid, fair and reliable and that marking criteria have been applied consistently”* (Bloxham, 2009, p. 212). There are other ways of viewing moderation, although most are focused on comparable notions such as reliability and consistency (McDonald, 2016), equity and fairness for students (Adie et al., 2013; Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al., 2016; McDonald, 2016; Tuovinen et al., 2015), accountability (Adie et al., 2013; Tuovinen et al., 2015), and mark justification (Adie et al., 2013). An exception to these views is using moderation for normalisation of assessment grades, fitting grades into a predetermined ‘normal’ grade distribution for the cohort (McDonald, 2016). Within individual units, it is the unit coordinator who is responsible for assessment quality assurance including moderation (Holt et al., 2013; Roberts et al., 2011). Unit coordinators have reported that establishing and maintaining assessment standards is the greatest challenge for them in their role (Holt et al. 2013).

Whilst there are clear definitions of moderation, there are a variety of approaches to carrying out moderation (Adie et al., 2013; Beutel et al., 2017; McDonald, 2016). These include sample moderation, blind second marking moderation, conference moderation, expert moderation, consensus moderation or social moderation, or combinations of these approaches (Beutel et al., 2017). There are also different ways of selecting assessment papers

to moderate, including those that are borderline decisions, controversial assessments, or those that were difficult to allocate a mark for (Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al., 2016). In this thesis, the focus is on consensus moderation.

Consensus moderation is where the markers collaborate, discuss and negotiate to reach a consensus on the mark to be allocated for an assessment (Sadler, 2013). There are, however, different approaches to how consensus moderation have been espoused. One approach is to consider consensus moderation only as a form of second marking, where the allocated grades are discussed and agreed upon (Bloxham et al., 2016). Another is where consensus moderation forms part of the assessment planning, marking, and grading of work, and involves looking at the standards across the course and time periods (Australian Catholic University, n.d.). It is generally recognised that the moderation process should include the planning and design of the assessment, through to the marking and a review of the judgements made (Mahmud & Sanderson, 2011); in other words, it should include pre-marking moderation, intra-marking moderation, and post-marking moderation. This is the approach to consensus moderation being focused on for this body of research.

Whilst consensus moderation assures the validity of the mark being allocated for an assessment item, it also provides a learning and professional development opportunity (Adie et al., 2013; Boyd & Bloxham, 2014; Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al., 2016; Grainger et al., 2016; Tuovinen et al., 2015). Pre-marking moderation acts as a community-building experience amongst the markers (Adie et al., 2013; Cathcart & Neale, 2012). Conversations and discussions on the assessments requirements and the expected standards help to develop a shared understanding and build the markers tacit knowledge (Cathcart & Neale, 2012; Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al., 2016; Grainger et al., 2016; Grainger, Crimmins, et al., 2019). Markers can learn from more experienced colleagues through shared conversations and then by receiving feedback on their marking (Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al., 2016; Grainger et al., 2016).

Academic time, staffing continuity, relationships, the structure of moderation meetings, the use of rubrics (also known as criterion sheets), and the ability to attend moderation meetings have been suggested as factors that enable or inhibit the moderation process (Grainger et al., 2016). Price (2005) also identified that pre-marking moderation meetings tended to be used more to disseminate standards, rather than develop the markers' understanding of the assessment standards. Other authors have illustrated benefits in using collaborative consensus-building moderation activities (such as calibration) to develop the marker's understanding of the assessment standards and requirements (Bloxham & Boyd, 2012; Grainger & Weir, 2016; O'Connell et al., 2016; Watty et al., 2014). Calibration is a

process that focuses on the individual marker within the marking team, where the intent is to calibrate their marking through a process of marking a set number of assessments and then obtaining feedback from the unit coordinator before continuing marking (O'Connell et al., 2016). This is considered to be an efficient approach to helping markers understand the expected assessment standards resulting in more consistent marking (Grainger & Weir, 2016; O'Connell et al., 2016; Watty et al., 2014). In contrast, consensus moderation is focused on the community of markers.

To maximise the potential of consensus moderation activities, markers need to engage in collaborative discussions (Sadler, 2013), where novice markers receive mentoring, guidance, and support from more experienced academics. The social interactions of individuals in the consensus moderation process, including reflection and dialogue, are vital to the construction of new knowledge and skills (Zavershneva & van der Veer, 2018). As such consensus moderation is a socially constructed process through which social processes have the potential to increase or decrease collaboration (Glaveanu et al., 2020).

On the surface, consensus moderation appears to be a positive process to achieve assessment quality assurance. However, several authors have identified a lack of structure and documented process for moderation (Adie et al., 2013; Krause et al., 2014; McDonald, 2016; Nulty, 2011) resulting in academics developing their processes for implementing moderation according to their understanding of the requirements (Adie et al., 2013; Beutel et al., 2017; Tuovinen et al., 2015). There are suggestions that this can be seen as an administrative process rather than a quality assurance process (McDonald, 2016), and a call for professional development for those involved in the process (McDonald, 2016; Tuovinen et al., 2015). Other authors have proposed that power and seniority may impact this process, especially for academics that are on sessional, casual, or fixed-term contracts, with suggestions that markers defer to those in power or with more experience (Grainger et al., 2016; Orr, 2007).

There is a large body of research on assessment practices in higher education (Boud, 2020; Dawson et al., 2019; Molloy et al., 2020; Winstone & Boud, 2020), and moderation in the school sector (Klenowski & Wyatt-Smith, 2013; Wyatt-Smith & Klenowski, 2013), although limited research on moderation in the higher education setting (Bloxham et al., 2016). In addition, assessment moderation in higher education is less developed than moderation practices in the school sector (Bloxham, 2009), and there has been a call for more empirical research on moderation practices (Bloxham et al., 2016). Academics have been cautioned from viewing moderation as a simplistic process (Adie et al., 2013), with multiple inherent complexities being identified by Bloxham et al. (2016). These authors also express concerns that our current moderation processes provide only an image of checking of standards. As

such, we need to understand the social interactions of consensus moderation through the multiple perspectives of academics who take part in consensus moderation and develop an evidence-based approach to consensus moderation.

1.3 Rationale

Consensus moderation has the potential to be a positive process for achieving assessment quality assurance. However, research findings have highlighted both positive and negative features of consensus moderation, and there is a lack of research that specifically examines the social interactions of consensus moderation through the multiple perspectives of academics who take part in consensus moderation in higher education. It is therefore essential to undertake further research into consensus moderation practices. Understanding the views of academics who take part in consensus moderation practices, and seeing how the different roles and actors influence the process will provide an improved understanding of the processes, as well as any barriers to achieving positive consensus moderation. This can then be used to develop and test an evidence-based approach to consensus moderation.

1.4 Research Aims and Objectives

This body of research aimed to develop and pilot an evidenced-based framework for consensus moderation in higher education. The four objectives guiding this research were:

1. To systematically appraise and synthesise the extant literature on consensus moderation in higher education
2. To critically evaluate the experiences and perceptions of academics who assess students' work and take part in consensus moderation
3. To identify expert academics' perceptions in relation to consensus moderation
4. To integrate findings from the previous phases and then develop and pilot an evidenced-based framework for consensus moderation in the higher education setting

Objective One focused on systematically appraising and synthesising the existing literature on consensus moderation in higher education. Objective One was addressed in Phase One through a scoping review, to recognise the findings of previous research undertaken in this area and to inform the questions for the focus groups in Phase Two.

Objective Two was addressed in Phase Two, which was to critically evaluate the experiences and perceptions of academics who are involved in consensus moderation practices in higher education. To meet this objective, Phase Two adopted a qualitative approach to explore the lived experience of academics taking part in consensus moderation activities through focus groups. The focus group guide was informed by the scoping review in Phase One.

Objective Three was to identify expert academics' perceptions in relation to consensus moderation and was addressed in Phase Three. To achieve this objective, Phase Three utilised qualitative semi-structured interviews. The interview guide was informed by the findings of Phase One and Phase Two. The findings from Phase Three were then utilised to identify actions that could be taken to both enhance the positive findings and address the key challenges identified through the focus groups in Phase Two.

The final objective, **Objective Four**, was addressed through Phase Four. In this phase, the findings of the previous phases were integrated and an evidence-based framework for consensus moderation in the higher education setting was developed and piloted. Using independent data from each of the previous studies ensured that different perspectives of consensus moderation were included, and promoted the theoretical development of the framework (Morse, 2010). Once the draft framework had been developed, action research engaged academics in cycles of development and testing the framework as a way of improving agency, empowerment, and generating change (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This phase resulted in a final framework for consensus moderation in higher education, refined by academics, and recommendations and implications for practice. Figure 1 below presents the objectives for this body of research and the phase of the research where it was addressed.

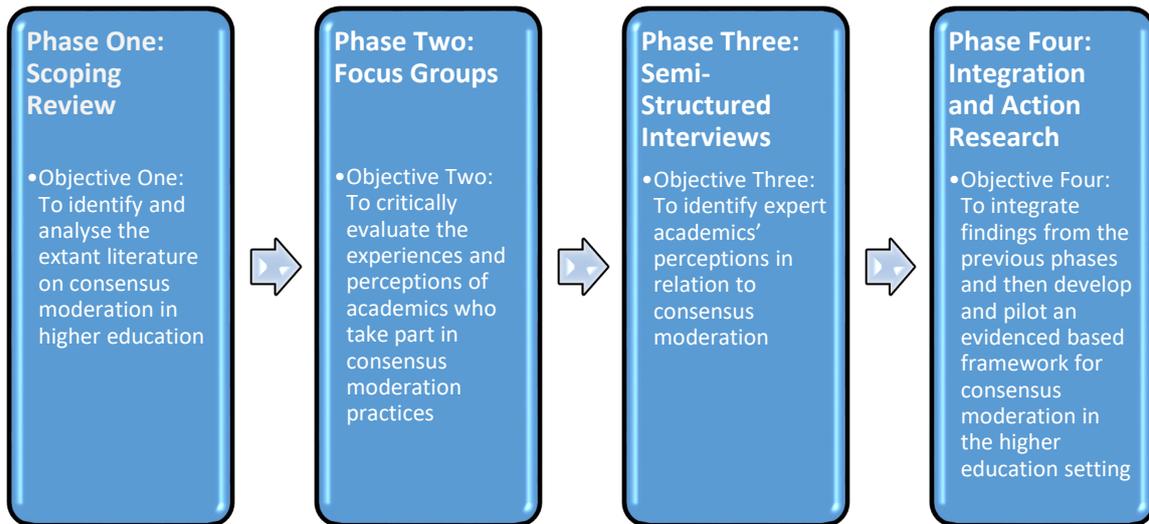


Figure 1.

Diagram of the Phases and Objectives of this Body of Research

1.5 The Organisation of this Thesis

I approached this body of research from a socio-cultural theoretical framework, acknowledging that reality is a product of human interaction with world experiences and that there are multiple and varied individual interpretations or realities of comparable experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). After establishing the extent of previous studies in this subject area, I examined the current situation of consensus moderation processes, including the challenges and opportunities in one higher education establishment, directly informed by academics who take part in consensus moderation. Whilst this research explored the experiences and perceptions of academics who took part in consensus moderation, the focus was on the overall picture of consensus moderation practice, and therefore this research also took into account the wider social-cultural and environmental conditions which impacted the situation. The process of determining the individual experiences and perceptions of consensus moderation, along with the challenges, the opportunities, and the wider environmental contributions, resulted in the development of an evidence-based framework for consensus moderation. Through focusing on what can be implemented to enhance the process of consensus moderation, this research aims to have a positive, strengths-based focus collaborating with academics as co-producers in the final framework development.

As highlighted in the aims and objectives, this thesis is organised in four phases, with related objectives (see Figure 1). To achieve the overall aim of developing and piloting an evidenced-based framework for consensus moderation in higher education, a four-phase

sequential exploratory qualitative multi-method design was adopted. Although each of the phases are described in individual chapters, they remain mixed in several ways. For example, the analysis of the first three phases (the extent of literature on the subject, the sessional academics, fixed-term/continuing academics, and the expert academics) was conducted separately before being integrated as part of Phase Four. In this way, the findings from Phase One informed Phase Two, and the findings from Phase Two informed Phase Three (for more information on the Methodology refer to Chapter 2).

To acknowledge the early first phase of the consensus moderation process, and to ensure the reader understands what is included in each section, each chapter commences with an introduction entitled 'Chapter Introduction: Pre-Chapter Moderation. Likewise, each chapter closes with a summary titled 'Conclusion of this Chapter: Post-Chapter Moderation'; to signal the review of the core components of the chapter and what should happen next. These are fundamental aspects of consensus moderation practices and include planning and designing what should be in the assessment, through the design and implementation and marking, to reviewing the judgements made (Mahmud & Sanderson, 2011), or in other words pre-marking moderation, intra-marking moderation, and post-marking moderation.

I will now briefly describe each chapter as an introduction to how the thesis is organised. The structure of this thesis is provided below in Figure 2 as a visual model of the thesis structure in relation to the different chapters and phases.

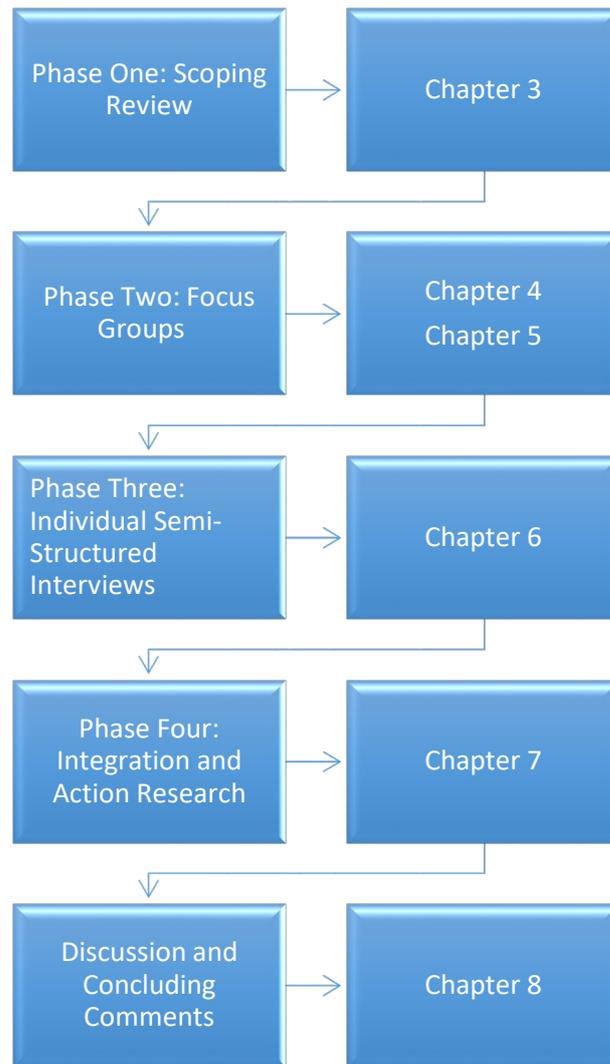


Figure 2.

Flow Diagram of Thesis Structure with Phases and Chapters

Chapter 2, describes the methodology which has guided this body of research. This chapter commences with a discussion on how my epistemology, ontology, and researcher positioning informed the research design process. I then discuss the theoretical perspectives of the research, project design, and methodology. This research utilised a sequential exploratory qualitative multiple methods approach, with each phase following the steps of scientific inquiry (Anguera et al., 2018). Chapter 2 also includes my approach to ensuring rigor in this body of research. Whilst Chapter 2 provides an overview of the methodology for each phase of the research, the related methods for individual studies are detailed in each phase chapter.

Chapter 3 comprises a scoping review on consensus moderation. It addresses the first objective, which was to systematically appraise and synthesise the existing literature on

consensus moderation in higher education. A research protocol was developed which included the research questions, search terms, and inclusion and exclusion criteria along with the databases being explored. The findings informed the questions for the focus groups as part of Phase Two (Chapter Four and Chapter Five).

Chapter 4 and **Chapter 5** address the second objective of this body of research, which was to critically evaluate the experiences and perceptions of academics who take part in consensus moderation practices. In this phase, I used the findings from the first phase to develop the questions used for data collection. Data in this phase was analysed using Foucauldian Discourse Analysis. Given the assertions in the literature of issues with power differentials impacting on consensus moderation, and the relative position of participants in focus groups (for example, status and hierarchy) impacting on discussions (Hollander, 2004), I held separate focus groups for sessional academics and for continuing/fixed-term contract academics. They were also analysed and reported separately. **Chapter 4** focuses on the sessional academics' experiences and perceptions of consensus moderation in higher education, and **Chapter 5** focuses on the experiences and perceptions of academics who are on a fixed-term or continuing contract and take part in consensus moderation practices in higher education.

Chapter 6 addresses the third objective of this body of research. To enrich our understanding of consensus moderation, provide a different perspective of consensus moderation, and more fully capture the complexity of this phenomenon (Henrich et al., 2010), this phase explored the perceptions of consensus moderation from academics with recognised expertise in consensus moderation. Potential participants were identified through their expertise in consensus moderation either by position or through research/publications on consensus moderation (identified through Phase One). Semi-structured interviews were used for data collection and analysis was carried out using the six stages of thematic analysis defined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Chapter 7 focuses on the integration of the previous research phases, before using action research to develop and pilot a framework for consensus moderation in higher education with academics. This is where the framework for consensus moderation was taken from an ideal theoretical proposal to a practical solution and was designed to meet the fourth objective of the research. The multiple viewpoints from the first three phases provided a comprehensive understanding of consensus moderation (Brechin & Sidell, 2000): from the perspective of the extent of literature on the subject, sessional academics, fixed-term and continuing academics, and from expert academics. Using an analytical framework for the integration ensured that all findings were valued and considered together (Woolley, 2009).

This chapter describes the process of development and subsequent piloting of the draft framework. By adopting the fundamental principles of action research I was able to engage academics in cycles of development and testing the framework to improve agency, empowerment, and generate change (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This chapter then presents the final framework as well as recommendations and implications for practice change.

Chapter 8 provides an update on recent research on consensus moderation, published since the scoping review. It then provides a discussion on the overall findings of this body of research. and summarises and integrates the wider methodological, theoretical, and applied implications of this thesis. This chapter then provides information on the action taken so far on translating these research findings into practice, before exploring the limitations of this body of research and suggestions for future research that arise from the findings.

1.6 Significance

The research findings presented in this thesis increase our understanding of the experiences and perceptions of academics who engage in consensus moderation practices. Understanding the views of academics who take part in consensus moderation practices, and seeing how the different roles and actors influence the process, provides a deeper understanding of the process. The multiple viewpoints from the first three phases of this body of research (the extent of literature on the subject, the sessional academics, fixed-term/continuing academics, and the expert academics) provide a comprehensive understanding of consensus moderation. In particular, it highlights the tensions between the way we should behave when carrying out consensus moderation practices and the ways academics do behave.

Engaging academics in cycles of development and testing the framework aimed to improve the academic agency, provide empowerment, and generate change. The feedback from academics on the draft framework was considered important, as the knowledge gleaned was necessary to take a theoretical framework for consensus moderation and make it into a practical evidence-based framework for consensus moderation. The framework for consensus moderation aligns professional development, collegial practice, and quality assurance, and can be used to inform future policy. This has the potential to enhance practice for all academics engaging in consensus moderation, and support fairness and equity in the marking process for students. Without this knowledge and understanding, it will be difficult to create long-lasting sustainable change.

1.7 Conclusion of this Chapter: Post-Chapter Moderation

This chapter has provided an introduction both to consensus moderation and to this body of research. It has described the overall aim of this research and outlined the specific objectives and how these related to the different phases and chapters. The next chapter will detail the research paradigm for this body of research, to explain how this research was approached. This includes a discussion on my ontology, epistemology, research positioning, theoretical perspectives, multi-method research, research design as well as the strategies adopted to ensure the quality and rigor of the research.

Chapter 2 Methodology

“Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much”

Helen Keller

2.1 Chapter Introduction: Pre-Chapter Moderation

In this chapter, I will describe the systematic approach to the body of research presented in this thesis and the alignment and rationale for the selection of methodology and methods to address the research aims and objectives. The overarching aim of my research was to develop and pilot a framework for consensus moderation in higher education. It was, therefore, important to explore the multiple perspectives of the phenomenon being investigated - consensus moderation - to ensure a holistic picture was obtained. The resultant four phases of this research are explained in this chapter so that the elements of this research are defined, including my ontology, epistemology, research positioning, theoretical perspectives, multi-method research, research design and the approach to ensure rigor in the research. The chapter commences with a discussion on how my epistemology, ontology, and researcher positioning informed the research design process.

2.2 Ontology, Epistemology, and Researcher Positioning

Research paradigms guide enquiry and contain the ontology, epistemology, methodology and methods espoused by the researcher (Abdul Rehman & Alharthi, 2016; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Consequently, these determine the research steps taken to explore a phenomenon and meet the aims and objectives of the study. As research paradigms guide and influence how the research process is conducted they should be acknowledged (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This section of the chapter will discuss my ontology, epistemology, and researcher positioning before exploring the theoretical perspectives of this study.

2.2.1 Ontology

Ontology, according to Crotty (1998), is concerned with ‘being’ or the nature of reality. It is important to establish the researcher’s ontological position on the nature of reality (Scotland, 2012), as their beliefs inform how they view and act in the research process. I

believe that there are multiple constructed realities, in keeping with relativist ontology (Lincoln et al., 2013). It is purportedly impossible to differentiate an individual's reality from an individual's subjective experience (Lincoln et al., 2013). Consequently, reality is based on human experience and the numerous interpretations of the experiences result in multiple realities. Relativist ontology aligns with the constructivist paradigm (Lincoln et al., 2013).

2.2.2 Epistemology

I believe that knowledge and reality are constructed by human interaction and their world, developed by and conveyed through the social environment in which the individual is in (Crotty, 1998). My epistemological position aligns with the social constructivist view, accepting that reality is a product of human interaction with world experiences and that there are multiple and varied individual interpretations or realities of comparable experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This view postulates that meanings and understandings are created by people and their subjective interaction with other individuals and the world environment, being dependent on human disposition and how we relate to the world around us (Scotland, 2012). It can therefore be said that whilst individuals and temporal entities have differing attributes, the symbiotic nature of them converging culminates in the subjective meanings being influenced and defined by one another (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Research conducted within constructivist paradigms aims to explore and understand the meaning within the context where participants find themselves using qualitative methodologies (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

I also drew on Michel Foucault's work to guide my understanding, recognising the impact that power can have on human interaction, based on the premise that power and knowledge are intrinsically intertwined (Foucault, 1972, 1975-1977/1980), and sources of power in the social world are expressed through discourse (Given, 2008). Being parallel to social constructivism, Foucault considered that discourse is constructed through our individual history and socio-cultural experiences, consequently, there are at any one time multiple discourses about a discursive object (Foucault, 1971/1972). Higher education has previously been identified as a sector that prized and desired to protect the autonomy of those who worked as academics (Bryman, 2007). Yet tensions have been reported in the way that leadership power is used, often being obscured in a range of managerial strategies (Lumby, 2019; Manning, 2017). The assessment process contains power (Raaper, 2016), and the amount of power and ability to influence others with that power is dependent on the individual's role in the assessment process (Leach et al., 2000, Raaper, 2016). Several authors

have proposed that power may impact moderation activities (Adie et al., 2013; Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al., 2016; Grainger et al., 2016).

Consensus moderation within higher education is a complex and socially situated phenomenon, and as a result required a methodology that recognised the multiple contributors to and factors that impact consensus moderation practices, whilst recognising the historical interactions and perspectives that shape the individuals involved. I believe that there are multiple possibilities of reality, constituted and located within their cultural and historical context. It was, therefore, important to explore the experiences of all involved in consensus moderation practices, as the experiences can only be understood by individuals who participated in consensus moderation. This allowed the complexity of consensus moderation to be studied in-depth and recognised the complex nature of the phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

2.2.3 Researcher Positioning

It is important to acknowledge my positionality regarding the research (Holmes, 2020). Having commenced my earlier career in the field of mental health nursing, I have always had an interest in cognition, emotion, motivation, agency, self-determination, and the socio-cultural environment in which we live. My later years in clinical practice, before joining academia, were focused on the professional development of clinical staff. Since joining academia, I have had a keen interest in assessment practice and its associated pedagogy, holding a deep commitment to the learning and teaching of students and the student experience. Accordingly, my PhD research was always going to focus on an area connected to the student experience. I have previously held the role of Director of Learning and Teaching in a large school in an Australian university and have observed a range of approaches to both moderation and consensus moderation. During this time I have also been witness to, and part of, the changing landscape of university life. As a result, I found myself seeking more information about consensus moderation and how it is carried out. I wanted to know how I could assist academics to provide assessment quality assurance, whilst in the challenging world of the university with limited resources and a growing consumer focus.

I appreciate that having been immersed in higher education for the past 16 years I have had personal experiences in moderation and consensus moderation practices which have informed my views on consensus moderation. As I have only been involved in positive experiences of consensus moderation practices, I can appreciate the value that can be obtained from taking part in effective consensus moderation practices. This may place me in

the position of an insider for research purposes, as I have similar lived experiences to some of the participants (Gair, 2012). However, having experienced consensus moderation, although my experiences may differ from some of the participants in my research, enabled me to have a greater critical awareness of the process. I, therefore, consider that I was a partial insider, as described by Watts (2008). This meant I had inside knowledge and understanding of the processes but I was not one of the participants. I also consider myself a partial outsider in this research. I was not working, teaching, or marking with any of the academics who took part in this study. I believe this provided the necessary distance to enable me to maintain a critical stance during the research (Gair, 2012). I was therefore an insider-outsider, occupying a third space, rather than being purely an insider or an outsider for this research (Corbin Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, 2018).

The research project has required me to negotiate several potential conflicts arising from some of the findings. In particular, the meaning that I place on respecting and valuing individuals, human wellbeing, the qualities and characteristics of good leadership. My faith in human beings and social connections have been challenged and, at times, were conflicted. Advocating for improved processes may empower those who do not have any positional power and can result in an improved experience for all academics and an improved outcome for students. Managing my influence on this research was key and I used a pragmatic approach to dealing with these conflicts to maintain quality and rigor. The approaches adopted to maintain quality and rigor have been explored later in this chapter.

2.3 Theoretical Perspective

To fully understand the phenomenon under study, I needed to explore the larger context in which the phenomenon occurs as well as the associated and connected theories (Mogashoa, 2014). Theoretical perspectives are used in many ways within qualitative research. They provide a general explanation for behaviours and attitudes; provide the lens through which the research is studied; and an endpoint in the form of an inductive approach to a model or theory (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Whilst social science can be seen as the overarching theoretical framework for mixed or multiple method research, this science is drawn from a range of different theories (Creswell, 2018). My research is informed by social-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1935/1978). In this theory, the essence of what makes us human beings (an individual's cognition, emotion, motivation, agency, and self-determination) is shaped by and within the socio-cultural environment in

which we live (Chirkov, 2020). With consensus moderation, two or more markers discuss and collaborate to agree on the mark to be awarded for an assessment (Sadler, 2013), and it is, therefore, a socially constructed process.

Social-cultural theory (SCT) of learning and development focuses on how teachers develop their professional knowledge and skills, based on cognitive, affective, social, and contextual factors (Shabani, 2016). Whilst this theory originally focused on teacher education, this may be applicable to higher education more broadly. Consensus moderation has been recognised as providing professional development in the form of informal professional learning opportunities (Adie et al., 2013; Boyd & Bloxham, 2014; Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al., 2016; Tuovinen et al., 2015; Watty et al., 2014). Vygotsky's SCT provides a framework for how individuals construct new knowledge and posits that the development of individuals is on a continuum where speech, thought, and motivation impacts our higher-level psychological functions (Vygotsky, 1935/1978).

Whilst contested by some authors, such as Newman and Latifi (2021) on the grounds of it being translated from multiple works so it is "*difficult to be sure of the nuances*" (p. 6) and assertions that the theory includes some assumptions, this theory has been proposed as a robust interpretation of cognitive development (van Lier, 2008; Negueruela, 2008). Whilst focused on learning, Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development also relates to development (Vygotsky, 1929/1998), as internalisation and transformation of learning and social behaviour takes time and requires the engagement of more than one person in a practical activity (Vygotsky, 1935/1978). The key to SCT theory is the Zone of Proximal Development [ZPD], described as

“. . . the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1935/1978, p. 86).

Vygotsky's SCT identified how knowledge construction is co-constructed through social interaction as a socially mediated process, impacted by physical and psychological tools and sociocultural constructed artefacts, including language (Vygotsky, 1935/1978). As embodied human beings participating in a social-material world, language plays a key role as we "*build on and respond to the views, knowledge, and expectations of other people*" (Glaveanu et al., 2020, p. 742). Consequently, through interactions within our community structures, our human minds and socio-cultural environments continually construct and co-construct each other, (Chirkov, 2020). From this, it can be seen that an individual's social interactions and interactions with the environment are vital to constructing new knowledge and skills,

recognising the impact of thinking and speech (Zavershneva & van der Veer, 2018). With consensus moderation, the tools and artefacts include the individuals taking part in consensus moderation, the expert guidance and assistance provided by those with more experience, and the dialogue and discourse that is present in the consensus moderation discussions.

Consequently, the relevance of SCT to this study is that consensus moderation is a socially situated activity that has a clear purpose and goal achieved through dialogue with multiple academics.

An academic's zone of proximal development has been likened to a learning space for collaborative knowledge creation between their current theoretical and pedagogical knowledge and their future possible theoretical and pedagogical knowledge made possible through guidance or collaboration with peers (Kuusisaari, 2014). In this study, this is applied to the collaboration and the learning that takes place through taking part in consensus moderation practices, as consensus moderation has been identified as a professional learning opportunity (Adie et al., 2013; Boyd & Bloxham, 2014; Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al., 2016; Tuovinen et al., 2015; Watty et al., 2014).

There are many different models which describe how professional learning and development takes place, for example; the heuristic model of professional development (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986), the five stages of teaching development (Orrell, 2019), or through a community of practice (Wenger, 1999, 2000). Whilst professional learning is considered a continuous process (Thomson & Trigwell, 2018), one common component of these models is the emphasis placed on social interaction as the 'instigator' of development and change (Shabani, 2016). This has the essential cognitive, affective, social, and contextual factors for learning, a bridge exists between sociocultural theory and professional development. There is ample literature supporting informal workplace learning taking place through conversation (Boud & Brew, 2013; Boud et al., 2009; Eraut, 2004; Thomson, 2015; Thomson & Trigwell, 2018; Waring & Bishop, 2010). Whilst studying teacher education, Shabani (2016) identified several professional development collaboration activities which can impact the development of knowledge, skills, and expertise (for example, training, observation, mentoring, and inquiry) which he refers to as a model of "*involvement in the development process*". Whilst a commitment to collaboration is required for such knowledge creation (Tillema & Van Der Westhuizen, 2006), the collaborative learning process has been identified as being very powerful and effective when compared to individual learning opportunities (Rigelman & Ruben, 2012; Vescio et al., 2008).

A vital part of consensus moderation is the discussion and collaboration that takes place to agree on the mark to be awarded (Sadler, 2013). New or 'novice' academics taking

part in consensus moderation will be looking to more experienced academics to mentor, guide, and support them in the process until they become more competent, proficient, or expert. As such consensus moderation is a socially constructed process where the social processes may over time become habituated by individuals who “play out” different roles (Galbin, 2014). These same social processes also have the potential to increase or decrease collaboration, for example, if a personal conflict occurs (Glaveanu et al., 2020). In considering collaboration and how roles or ‘ways of being’ are created and play out in consensus moderation practices, my work is also informed by the work of Michel Foucault (Foucault, 1971/1972, 1975/1977, 1972, 1975-1977/1980, 1976/2008; Foucault et al., 1988). As outlined earlier in this chapter, Foucault recognised the impact that power can have on human interaction, based on the premise that power and knowledge are intrinsically intertwined. Whilst Foucault’s ideas informed this research, rather than focusing on the theories of Foucault, I have used Foucauldian Discourse Analysis to analyse discourse and how power is used through language when participating in consensus moderation practices.

2.4 Multi-Method Research

Qualitative methodology was adopted for this study as this is bounded by a constructivist paradigm and seeks to understand, interpret or make sense of a phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Studying social phenomena is complex and one of the challenges considered by Anguera et al. (2018) is collecting different sources of data to enhance our understanding of complex social behaviour. Morse (2010) considers that having multiple methods provides a more comprehensive, richer understanding of the subject through gaining different perspectives and data that may not be available if only one method was utilised. I, therefore, utilised a multi-method approach to this research design, based on the premise that the multiple findings/multiple observations made during the study will provide an enriched understanding of consensus moderation (Malterud, 2001). Obtaining different world views aims to more fully capture the complexity of this phenomenon (Henrich et al., 2010).

There is often confusion between the terms mixed-method and multi-method research (Anguera et al., 2018), although Creswell and Creswell (2018, p. 215) refer to the term ‘multi-method’ as one of many “*different terms*” used to describe mixed methods research. A straightforward definition by Plano Clark and Ivankova (2016, p. 59), is that multi-method research is a “*combination of two or more methods.*” Whilst a multi-method approach may include qualitative and quantitative research methods, it is not considered a necessary

feature and multi-methods may combine multiple qualitative approaches or multiple quantitative approaches (Plano Clark & Ivankova, 2016). An example of multiple qualitative approaches is the use of qualitative participant observation and qualitative in-depth interviewing (Johnson et al., 2007). In contrast, mixed methods research typically consists of the integration of both quantitative and qualitative methodologies (Plano Clark & Ivankova, 2016).

Whilst there are many mixed-method and multi-method approaches, Morse (2010) describes sequential qualitative methodology (QUAL +/- \rightarrow *qual* designs) as an approach that can be used where one method is supplemented by a different method when the gap between different research projects is sufficiently large to require multiple methods. Morse described multiple benefits of this approach, all of which apply to this body of research: it provides additional perspectives on the subject under study; it is particularly beneficial when one approach may not have been able to obtain all the required information; it enables more comprehensive research and assists in moving a research project towards implementation. This is the method being adopted in this research.

This research, therefore, utilised a sequential exploratory qualitative multiple methods approach, with each phase following the steps of scientific inquiry (Anguera et al., 2018). In this approach, each of the different phases utilised a different qualitative methodology and different methods of analysis. The analysis of each phase was conducted separately before being combined (Morse, 2010). This research was designed with careful consideration of the sequencing of the different phases to optimise the strengths of the research. Using a sequential approach enabled the refinement of each phase based on the findings from the previous phase. This has been referred to as a three-lens framework whereby the multiple lenses overlay and also represent different viewpoints of the phenomena under study (Brechin & Sidell, 2000). This enables greater theoretical development and has the additional benefit of removing any technical difficulties in combining quantitative (numerical) and qualitative (textual) data (Morse, 2010).

In my research, the data from each study was analysed individually and then integrated as part of Phase Four, before piloting and testing the framework. The research, therefore, included a multianalysis approach following a monoanalysis approach (Anguera et al., 2018). Whilst Plano Clark and Ivankova (2016) report that integration is not necessarily a requirement of multi-method studies, integration of the findings in this research was of central importance as the aim was to develop an evidence-based framework for consensus moderation (as discussed in Chapter 7). Three forms of integration identified by Bazeley (2018) were used in this research: using data to inform the design of a subsequent phase and to

extend learning from other data (used in Phase Two, and Phase Three), integrating separate sources of data with previous findings (used in Phase Four), and integration during the process of analysis where more than one source of data is required (used in Phase Four). The design of each of these phases are discussed in more detail below.

2.5 Research Design

This research used a four-phase sequential multi-method design. Each of the four phases is detailed below.

2.5.1 Phase One

The first phase was designed to meet the first objective of this study which was to identify and analyse the extant literature on the topic of consensus moderation in higher education. A scoping review, rather than a systematic review, was chosen as it was known that there was a limited amount of published empirical studies. Scoping reviews are “*useful when examining areas that are emerging*” (Tricco et al., 2016, P. 2), as such they are useful in areas where there is limited research literature and insufficient for a systematic review. The scoping review was conducted in accordance with the standards outlined by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews (Tricco et al., 2018). A research protocol was developed which included the research question, search terms, and inclusion and exclusion criteria along with the databases being explored. Studies were located and analysed against quality criteria and synthesised. A final sample of ten publications were included on which we could focus to make meaning of the data. The process was documented and transparent so that it can be replicated. The purpose of this phase was to inform the questions being asked in Phase Two.

2.5.2 Phase Two

Phase Two (Chapter 4 and Chapter 5) employed a qualitative approach exploring the perceptions and experience of academics taking part in consensus moderation activities using Foucauldian Discourse Analysis [FDA]. This phase was designed to meet the second objective of this study which was to critically evaluate the experiences and perceptions of academics who take part in consensus moderation practices. The findings from Phase One was used to develop the guide/questions for data collection. Focus groups were chosen to collect data as

they have been found to elicit rich and detailed descriptions of experience with more personal and sensitive disclosures than individual interviews (Guest et al., 2017), possibly due to the synergistic potential of group members' engagement (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013). Face-to-face focus groups were chosen rather than online focus groups as, although these do not offer anonymity within the focus group, they have been found to generate more expression (Richard et al., 2021). Further, participants in focus groups can provide support to one another, inspire others to speak, and can validate or corroborate experiences (Barbour, 2018).

This phase was undertaken at one large Australian metropolitan university (more than 50,000 students and 3,000 staff) during 2018/2019, following ethical approval (Appendix A). The university contained a policy of mandatory moderation, which included the use of consensus moderation. Optional online and face to face professional development was available for course and unit coordinators. Assessment moderation was reported biannually through an Assessment Quality Process, at a unit, course, and school, and faculty level. A university-wide invitation to take part in the focus groups was circulated to all academics (Appendix B). Once potential participants had made contact, then a participant information statement that outlined important information about the study, participants' rights, data storage, and how the data provided would be used, was provided prior to participation (Appendix C). This sampling resulted in participants from a range of positions and areas across the university enabling a wide variety of perspectives on consensus moderation to be heard (Gobo, 2007). Nine focus groups were held ($N=25$) with academics from a wide range of subject areas. The relative position of participants in focus groups (for example, status and hierarchy) can impact the discussion (Hollander, 2004), and so for this reason I held separate focus groups for continuing/fixed-term contract academics ($N= 11$) and for sessional academics ($N=14$). This resulted in participants being in common academic positions, although had sufficiently differing personal experiences and perspectives for discussion to occur (Barbour, 2018).

Consent was obtained from all participants (Appendix D), and demographic information was obtained using a demographic questionnaire (Appendix E). Using open questions provided greater control for the respondents to use terminology they felt appropriate (Braun et al., 2020). The focus group guide was informed by the scoping review and followed the pattern of inquiry advocated by Namey et al. (2016), commencing with broad introductory questions to build rapport, which then funnelled to the more specific questions (Appendix F). It was important to establish rapport with the participants so that they were comfortable enough to feel safe in sharing their personal experiences (Liamputtong, 2007). It was deemed that this was achieved as participants shared experiences freely. The focus groups

were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim, using pseudonyms for participant anonymity. The rich data obtained through the focus groups was sufficient to provide data saturation, as described by Flick (2009), and meaningful insights into the ways academics experienced consensus moderation in higher education. Previous work has identified that three to six focus groups result in 90% of themes being discovered and three capture the most prevalent themes (Guest et al., 2017). Data collection continued until no new information was being obtained (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Data saturation in this phase was obtained through four focus groups for sessional academics (Chapter 4) and five focus groups for the continuing and fixed-term contract academics (Chapter 5).

Data was analysed separately for continuing and sessional academic focus groups using the six-stage approach to FDA outlined by Willig (2013). Discourse is a term that refers to “*a certain way of speaking*,” being impacted by historical social practices (Foucault, 1971/1972, p. 193). In this context, discourse is defined by Parker (1994, p. 28) as “language organised into sets of texts,” and discourses as “sets of statements” (p. 245) used to construct objects. These sets of statements have power associated with them (Parker, 1992) and, in turn, these statements or constructions result in certain ways of thinking, speaking, and acting (Foucault, 1971/1972). They offer particular ways of seeing and being in the world (Willig, 2013). This, in turn, yields subject positions or “ways of being” for individuals, and these subject positions, when adopted, have experiential and subjective consequences (Foucault, 1971/1972; Willig, 2013).

The FDA approach was adopted as it focuses on language and the context in which the language is used by participants when describing and discussing the process of consensus moderation, based on the premise that the social world is affected by multiple sources of power expressed through discourse (Given, 2008). Data analysis commenced with listening and re-listening to the transcribed audio files of each focus group, and reading and rereading the transcripts. For each focus group, analysis commenced by identifying how consensus moderation was constructed (both implicitly and explicitly). The identified constructions were then positioned within wider discourses. This was followed by examining what was gained by participants from constructing consensus moderation in the different ways, their functions, and how these relate to each other. The subject positions were then identified along with the relationship between the discourses and practice. Finally, the relationships between the discourses and subjectivity (how individuals think and/or feel) were explored.

Foucault (1972, 1975-1977/1980) described power as something that is everywhere, circulating within and around us through social relations, rather than as a top-down process. Power was considered by Foucault (1975/1977) to be similarly restrictive and productive.

Foucault also purported that “where there is power, there is resistance” and this can take many forms (Foucault, 1976/2008, p. 95), consequently Foucault (1975/1977) proposed that any analysis of power must focus on the point of application. In consensus moderation practices it is those involved and the discourses they produce that can be regarded as the effects of power. It was, therefore, important to understand the experience of those taking part in consensus moderation practices before Phase Three, which explored the expert academics' perceptions of consensus moderation.

2.5.3 Phase Three

Phase Three (Chapter 6) explored the perceptions of consensus moderation from academics with recognised expertise in the field of consensus moderation. This phase was designed to meet the third objective of this study which was to identify expert academics' perceptions in relation to consensus moderation. A series of one-to-one semi-structured open-ended interviews were held with those identified as experts on consensus moderation, either through a position held, or research/publications in this subject area. Semi-structured interviews were chosen for this phase of the study as they have many strengths, such as flexibility and observable interaction, as well as providing an opportunity to expand on answers, time to think, and the use of non-verbal methods of communication (Heath et al., 2018). Experts were contacted via email correspondence (Appendix G) to arrange a convenient date and time for the interview, share information about the interview (Appendix H), obtain informed consent (Appendix I) and obtain demographic information (Appendix J). Using open questions in the demographic questionnaire provided greater control for the respondents to use terminology they felt appropriate (Braun et al., 2020).

Participants were offered a choice in the mode of data collection (for example, telephone, skype, or face to face). Where face-to-face interviews were not possible, due to the geographical location of the participant which is a known disadvantage of face-to-face interviews (Heath et al., 2018), the interviews were conducted online via Skype. Online synchronous interviews are an alternative option to face-to-face interviews, rather than an inferior approach (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). Adopting this approach provided the ability to reach experts both internationally and across different states in Australia, resulting in enriched data and increased perspectives. This mitigated the issue of participants being located in different geographical locations and reduced the need for travel and the associated costs (O'Connor & Madge, 2017). The use of Skype, as a medium for online interviewing also provided greater flexibility (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). In this phase of the study, several

participants were in a different geographical world time zone, meaning that online interviews could be carried out at a convenient time for the participant, regardless of what time zone they were in. Video was used for all online interviews, with audio being recorded, to improve the quality of the interview (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). This provided the ability to appreciate body language and other non-verbal communication, which is not possible with telephone interviews (Heath et al., 2018), and is useful to develop and maintain rapport during the interview, as well as to identify where responses could be queried further. The interview guide was developed based on the findings of Phase One and Phase Two (Appendix K). The total number of questions did not exceed ten and these were prepared in advance into an interview protocol. Utilising this approach allowed refinement based on previous findings and the experts represented a different viewpoint of consensus moderation (Brechin & Sidell, 2000). I carried out all interviews and used the same open questions, in the same sequence for all participants, with responses being queried inductively.

Twelve interviews with experts were conducted, three male and nine female participants. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim with the participants' names being replaced by pseudonyms for anonymity before being analysed. The transcribed interviews were analysed using the six stages of thematic analysis defined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis was chosen due to its flexibility and ability to “identify patterns within and across data” about “views and perspectives, and behaviour and practices” (Clarke & Braun, 2017, p. 297). This inductive thematic analysis identified, analysed, organised, and interpreted patterns of meaning (themes) within the qualitative data (Clarke & Braun, 2017). The six-stage approach started with the familiarisation of the data, whereby the transcripts were read and re-read, and initial codes were noted. The codes were then identified in a systematic way across the data set. The next stage of the process involved collating codes into potential themes. This was followed by a review of the themes. Defining and naming the themes was carried out before the findings were written up. Nvivo 12 (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2018) was used as a data-management tool in the analysis.

Interviews were conducted until data saturation was achieved, where no new insights or information were obtained (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Previous research suggests between 8 to 16 individual interviews per population of interest should adequately address a specific evaluation research question (Namey et al., 2016). Guest et al. (2006) suggest that six interviews may be sufficient for identifying overarching themes, and 12 interviews would be sufficient for understanding perceptions. In this research, the rich data resulted in all codes being obtained after the 11th interview and a final interview was conducted to check that saturation had been achieved. Following the process meticulously is considered necessary to

obtain trustworthy findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The findings identified the expert academics' perceptions of consensus moderation and possible solutions to the issues identified by the participants in Phase Two.

2.5.4 Phase Four

The final phase (Chapter 7) of the research was designed to meet the final objective which was to integrate findings from the previous phases to develop and then pilot an evidenced-based framework for consensus moderation in the higher education setting. Whilst integrating data is considered by some authors to be complicated and time-consuming (Bartholomew & Brown, 2012), integration of the findings in this research was of central importance as the aim was to develop and pilot an evidence-based framework for consensus moderation. The multiple viewpoints from the first three phases (the extent of literature on the subject, the sessional academics and fixed-term/continuing academics, and the expert academics) provided a comprehensive understanding of consensus moderation (Brechin & Sidell, 2000). By utilising sequencing it was possible to build on each stage of the study. Using the independently developed findings from each of the previous studies ensured that the different perspectives from the different groups of participants could be compared, thus promoting the theoretical development of the study (Morse, 2010). Utilising a joint display in Phase 4 enabled transparency and authenticity in the process, thus enabling careful attention to ensure that all findings were valued and considered together (Woolley, 2009).

Once the draft framework for consensus moderation in the higher education setting had been developed, action research was implemented to pilot and enhance the framework. Translating research into practice is complex and so it was felt important to have the voices of a wide range of academics in the validation of the proposed framework. Therefore, this phase drew on the fundamental principles of action research through engaging academics in cycles of development and testing the framework as a way of improving agency, empowerment, and generating change (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This was achieved through a series of workshops facilitated at large higher education conferences, where a wide variety of academics were invited to provide feedback on the framework and its associated recommendations. Through this process, academics could provide feedback on the framework, explore real-world solutions to the issues identified, and also enhance their own body of knowledge and professional practice (Stringer & Aragón, 2020).

A questionnaire (Appendix L) was developed to be used at the end of each research cycle. The questionnaire consisted of two sections. The first section asked participants to rate

the importance of ten principles, which were obtained through the insights of integration and identified as key changes required for good practice in the framework for consensus moderation, through a 6-point Likert scale ranging from “Not at all important”, to “Extremely important.” The second section was four qualitative open-ended questions, focused on advantages and barriers to using the framework.

A Likert scale was chosen as it is one of the most commonly used psychometric scales for examining self-reported perceptions and attitudes (Ho, 2017; Kandasamy et al., 2020). It was economical, easy to administer, and enabled straightforward data collection in a standardised way (Rattray & Jones, 2007). The number of options to provide on a Likert scale is debateable and there is a view that more information is obtained with more options (Wu & Leung, 2017). Wakita et al. (2012) stated that most Likert scales include four to seven categories and, according to Green and Rao (1970) a six or seven-point scale is appropriate. It was important to avoid a neutral anchor in the scale (Wakita et al., 2012), as I wanted to elicit participants’ opinions on the principles of consensus moderation, and subsequently chose to use an even number of points with a six-point scale.

The final decision on the number of questions to be included was a pragmatic decision, based on having a questionnaire that was simple enough to complete to encourage responses (Lefever et al., 2007), and ensuring it was accessible, and not too onerous (Braun et al., 2020), whilst addressing all areas of the insights from the integration and key changes identified as being necessary for the framework for consensus moderation. This resulted in ten Likert scale questions in the first section, rating the importance of principles of consensus moderation that underpin the framework. The Likert scale items do not elicit narrative information, due to their closed format (Li, 2013; Maul, 2013). Therefore to counteract this limitation, four open-ended questions were included at the end of the questionnaire. These questions focused on the advantages and barriers to using the framework. The data collection tool was piloted before use.

Respondents were free to choose whether or not to participate in the research and could continue to participate in the workshop regardless. For the first workshop, an information sheet was provided to all potential participants (Appendix M). Informed consent was obtained (Appendix N), and demographic information (Appendix O) was obtained through open questions, as these provided greater control for the respondents to use terminology they felt appropriate (Braun et al., 2020). For subsequent workshops/presentations these were all then placed online with the online questionnaire.

In the planning period for this phase, it was proposed that a series of workshops would be facilitated at large higher education conferences. Unfortunately, after the first conference

workshop in January 2020, the pandemic (COVID-19) meant that face-to-face workshops were no longer possible. Following an ethics amendment (Appendix P), this phase of data collection was then carried out online through a series of online conference presentations and workshops with an online questionnaire for data collection using Qualtrics (an online survey hosting platform). This was a pragmatic decision as it was uncertain how long the pandemic and need for social distancing and avoiding non-essential travel would last.

Online methods of data collection have many benefits including time, cost, ease of access and data collection, automation, and improved data quality (van Gelder et al., 2010). They are able to produce rich deep information (Braun et al., 2020), and have been associated with equal or better reliability compared with traditional approaches to data collection (van Gelder et al., 2010). Given the COVID-19 restrictions and academics' increasing familiarity with online environments and workshops, this approach was an efficient and convenient method of data collection, and provided an opportunity to access participants from different locations, thereby enhancing diversity (Braun et al., 2020; Salvador et al., 2020). This diversity enabled enrichment of the data, increased perspectives to be obtained and ensured the framework development has relevance internationally.

To enhance the process I adopted the following strategies. First, the questionnaire design had to be simple to complete to encourage responses (Lefever et al., 2007). I was guided by my supervisors who had a wealth of expertise in this area and the data collection tool was piloted before use. Second, the web-based questionnaire was asynchronous, allowing participants to consider their responses before completing the questionnaire (Salvador et al., 2020). Third, the weblink to the survey was provided only to participants at the session in the conference, ensuring it was only available to the closed group who participated in the session (Solanki et al., 2020). This also addressed any issues of the respondents not representing the intended study population (Solanki et al., 2020). This convenient sampling methodology allowed me to reach the required sample population (Janssens & Kraft, 2012). Fourth, academics were already working online during COVID-19, were at an online conference, and had the equipment required to respond using online data collection methods, demonstrating the ecological validity of the switch to online data collection. Further, the participants had already chosen to attend a workshop or presentation on consensus moderation so had the required respondent interest in the subject. Finally, the survey provided a high level of anonymity, as whilst IP addresses were captured, respondents' names were not collected. Online collection and anonymity also reduced the possibility of socially acceptable or social desirability responses (Braun et al., 2020).

To encourage a high response rate a handout of the presentation, a portable document format (PDF) copy of the framework, which contained a weblink plus QR code to the online web-based questionnaire, were provided. The action research resulted in 461 academics being included in five cycles of development and testing the framework for consensus moderation in higher education (see Table 1). Unfortunately, whilst the use of online data collection has the potential of collecting large amounts of data (Lefever et al., 2007; Salvador et al., 2020), this approach did result in a lower questionnaire response rate ($N=23$) than anticipated when I had planned to collect completed questionnaires during the in-person conference workshops. Low response rates have been identified as a risk with this approach to online data collection (Lefever et al., 2007; Salvador et al., 2020; Solanki et al., 2020). Whilst the responses were lower than anticipated they did, in conjunction with the online conference written comments and oral feedback, provide a range of views from across several different countries. This feedback was used iteratively following each cycle to enhance the refining of the framework. This enabled redistribution of power in the research process (Rose, 2018), and provided dissemination of the research findings, as a form of early impact.

Table 1.

Phase Four Action Research Participation Rates

Workshop	Number of Workshop Participants*	Number of completed questionnaires	Additional comments
2020 Teaching and Learning Forum: Western Australian Network for Dissemination (Western Australia)	19	9	This was a face-to-face workshop, consequently, comments were received during the workshop and then also in the questionnaires. Feedback was also received through one email and one telephone consultation.
Curtin School of Nursing, Midwifery and Paramedicine: Curtin University (Western Australia)	17	7	11 online written feedback comments.
Teaching and Learning Conference 2020: Advance HE (England, Great Britain)	250	0	51 online written feedback comments. Feedback was also received through two emails.
2020 SoTL-China International Conference: Beijing Institute of Technology (China)	40	0	One request to translate the framework into Chinese to use the framework.
CRADLE Conference 2020: Centre for Research in Assessment and Digital Learning (Melbourne, Australia)	135	7	53 online written feedback comments.
Total	461	23	118 written comments Plus additional verbal comments received

*Excluding presenters/facilitators

2.5.5 Summary of phases and objectives

A summary of the four phases and objectives of this body of research can be seen in Figure 3. Each of the phases mapped directly to one of the study objectives. The use of a sequential qualitative multi-method design was justified by the need to investigate each participant group separately before integration of the findings (Morse, 2010). This not only

allowed me to refine each phase, based on the findings from the previous phase but also provided different viewpoints of the phenomena under study (Brechin & Sidell, 2000). This approach was further strengthened by including participant dialogue, through the different phases and particularly in the final interpretative stage (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The phenomenon under study was complex, and therefore through the use of multiple phases, I was able to obtain a rich understanding of consensus moderation, as this provided a greater insight than an isolated quantitative or qualitative study.

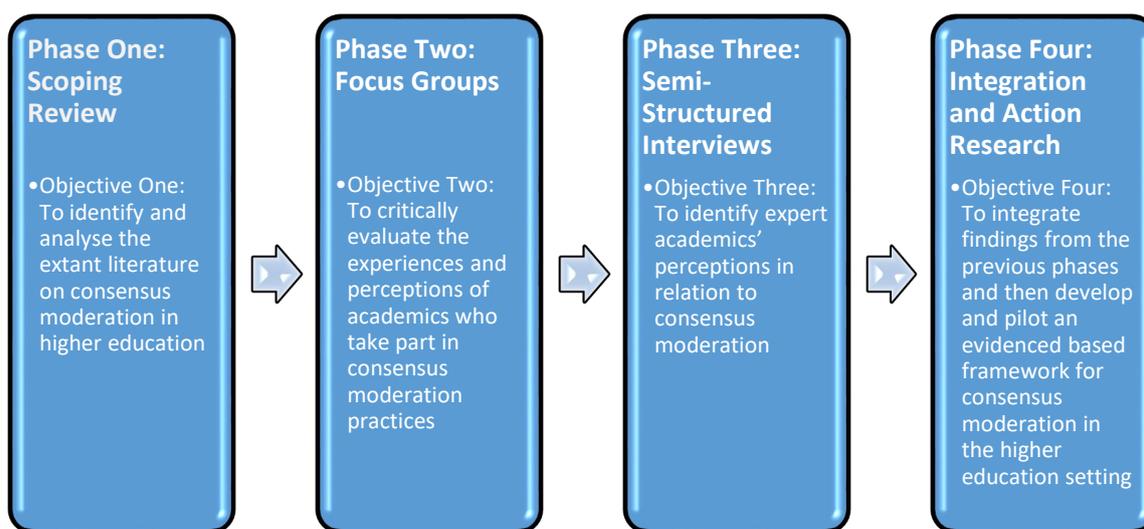


Figure 3.

Flow Diagram of Project Phases and Objectives

2.6 Maintaining Quality and Rigour

To ensure the quality of this research, care has been taken to establish credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), as well as authenticity (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). These elements will be discussed in more detail through this section of the chapter.

Credibility refers to “*whether the findings are well presented and meaningful*” (Kitto et al., 2008, p. 243) or the confidence in the truthfulness of the data, analysis, and findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The credibility of this research has been enhanced by attending to the integrity of the methodology, interpretative rigor, and the integration of different findings from the multiple phases (Appelbaum et al., 2018; Levitt et al., 2018), as well as adopting the recommendations for reporting qualitative research in psychology (Levitt et al., 2018). Quality and credibility were upheld through the alignment of the methodology components, as

outlined in this chapter. The approach adopted for this research optimised the research findings, as the phenomenon under study, consensus moderation, was complex and lent itself to the multi-method design.

Prolonged engagement, to enhance credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), was achieved with me, as the primary researcher, conducting all of the focus groups, interviews, and workshops over a prolonged period, both in the duration of engagement with the participants in each phase and of the research process itself. More information about the prolonged engagement is outlined in the associated chapter for each phase. This also resulted in a consistent approach to the data collection. Establishing an early connection and rapport with participants was considered important in both the focus groups (Phase Two) and individual interviews (Phase Three), enabling the participants to personally feel comfortable enough with me and the research content to enable sufficient sharing of information which may have been personal or sensitive in nature (Heath et al., 2018). This commenced with the participants contacting me directly to enquire and volunteer to take part in the research, providing a choice in date and time of the data collection, and a choice of location for data collection. The focus groups commenced by setting the scene for the research, followed by introductions, and a discussion on ground rules, which included within-group confidentiality and the need for respect (Barbour, 2018). Facilitating the focus groups meant actively encouraging and being attentive to group interactions and moderating discussions so that differences in views were explored (Barbour, 2018). Additionally, in the interviews (Phase Three) there was a choice offered in the method of data collection (for example, telephone, Skype, or face to face).

Strategies were also adopted to increase my immersion in the research process, such as digitally recording the focus groups and interviews, which were then transcribed verbatim. This allowed me to follow the discussions, rather than trying to write notes, thus proving a more complete immersion without any distractions. Data saturation, as a dynamic process, was obtained in each phase of this study whereby participant recruitment ceased and no further data collection for that phase was carried out (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Fusch & Ness, 2015; O'Reilly & Parker, 2013). Combined, these strategies resulted in rich, thick descriptions and robust capture of the phenomenon under study – consensus moderation (Levitt et al., 2018).

Interpretative rigor relates to how the research provides a full representation of the data (Kitto et al., 2008). This includes triangulation in the analysis to ensure valid interpretation and reliability of the findings so that they demonstrate the full picture of the findings. Triangulation can enhance credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This study adopted two triangulation approaches to enhance credibility and trustworthiness (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018;

Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This study used data triangulation, through the range of types of participants across the studies, so that a comprehensive perspective of consensus moderation was achieved. Investigator triangulation, the use of more than one researcher in the data analysis, resulted in an increased understanding of the complex phenomena (Malterud, 2001). Researcher credibility for this research was also enhanced through the research supervision team having extensive experience in qualitative research.

Giorgi (2008, p. 5) considers that research “*is knowledge for the discipline, not for the individual.*” Therefore, when considering credibility, it is also useful to consider how findings should be distributed for critique, review, and acceptance by the scholarly community. The findings from this research have been disseminated through conference presentations and publications as documented in the front of this thesis. The final phase (Phase Four) of this study focused on engaging academics in cycles of development and testing the framework, thus further enhancing credibility.

Confirmability and dependability of the data are also dependent on the credibility of the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Morse, 2015). Engaging in regular supervision throughout the research process was fundamental (Ortlipp, 2015). I analysed each transcript in each study and an initial simultaneous analysis of a transcript was conducted by at least one other member of the research team. Team meetings were held where discussions on data analysis were undertaken and any variations found were taken back to the team for a consensus decision on the final analysis. The multiple cycles of analysis and discussion were documented as an audit trail, to enhance transparency and rigor (Greckhamer & Cilesiz, 2014; Levitt et al., 2018; Morse, 2015).

During this research, I integrated the different phases in several ways. The focus group guide for Phase Two was developed from the findings of the scoping review (Phase One). The interview guide for Phase Three was developed to specifically explore the findings from Phase Two and to explore possible solutions to the issues previously identified. The final phase (Phase Four) then focused on the integration of the findings to develop a draft framework for consensus moderation in higher education. Using independent findings from each of the previous studies ensured that different perspectives were compared (Morse, 2010), and a joint display enabled transparency and authenticity in the process, whereby careful attention could be made to valuing and considering the findings collectively (Woolley, 2009). This phase then focused on piloting the draft framework with academics through action research and small cycles of change. This not only improved the framework and its associated recommendations, but also acted as a way of improving agency, empowerment, and generating change (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Intrinsic to this research was the use of reflexivity (Malterud, 2016). A reflective journal enabled me to be sensitive and reflect on prior experiences (Malterud, 2016; Ortlipp, 2015). Reflecting on my positionality enabled me to recognise and address any issues or tensions that had the potential to impact on the research process, as well as acknowledge the wider socio-cultural environment of the research (Kitto et al., 2008; Levitt et al., 2018; Malterud, 2001, 2016). This, in combination with the supervision, enabled me to share preconceptions and establish meta positions (Malterud, 2002). The findings of each phase have been supported by participant quotations, this further enhances authenticity by providing a full portrayal of the experiences and context of realities as experienced by the participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Finally, transferability considers how the research findings may be applied to different settings or groups (Creswell, 2018). In this study, a rich and detailed description of each phase of the research has been provided along with the findings. The detailed and thorough portrayal of the research process enables the reader to determine the transferability of this research to their setting. The involvement of academics from a range of universities across a range of countries in the final phase of this study further enhances both the credibility and transferability of this research, as these academics were involved in further shaping the framework. Through action research, academics could provide feedback on the framework, explore real-world solutions to the issues identified, and enhance the body of knowledge and professional practice (Stringer & Aragón, 2020). Translating research into practice is complex, therefore the purpose of including academics in developing the framework would enable the translation of the research findings, as well as improve agency, empowerment, and generate change (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Stringer & Aragón, 2020).

2.7 Conclusion of this chapter: Post-Chapter Moderation

This chapter presented my epistemology, ontology, researcher positioning, theoretical perspectives, multi-methods approach to the research, and the study design as well as the strategies adopted to ensure the quality and rigor of the research study. The next chapter will present the first phase of this body of research, a scoping review of the extant literature on consensus moderation.

Chapter 3 Phase One: Scoping Review

“Creativity is the power to connect the seemingly unconnected... It shows us what was always there while we weren't creative enough to see it”

William Plomer

3.1 Chapter Introduction: Pre-Chapter Moderation

In this chapter, I present the first phase of this body of research, a scoping review of the extant literature on consensus moderation. The objective of this phase was to identify and analyse the extant literature on consensus moderation in higher education (Figure 4). Scoping reviews follow a systematic approach to answer broad questions about what is known on a particular subject (Tricco et al., 2018). Using a systematic approach enables the identification of quality literature and provides a formal synthesis of the research, thereby reducing the need for others to redo the literature search (Bearman et al., 2012). Specifically, a scoping review brings together what is known about a “conceptual or empirical question” (Gough, 2007, p. 226), and identifies any gaps in the existing body of research (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005).

As the objective of this phase of this body of research was broad - to identify and analyse the extant literature on consensus moderation in higher education - a scoping review was selected as the appropriate approach. This phase was carried out in preparation for subsequent phases of this research as a systematic approach would bring together what is known about consensus moderation in higher education, and identify any gaps in the current research. The scoping review was carried out in June 2018, an update to this review can be found in Chapter 8, carried out in December 2021. This chapter provides information on the method, data collection, data analysis, and findings from the scoping review.

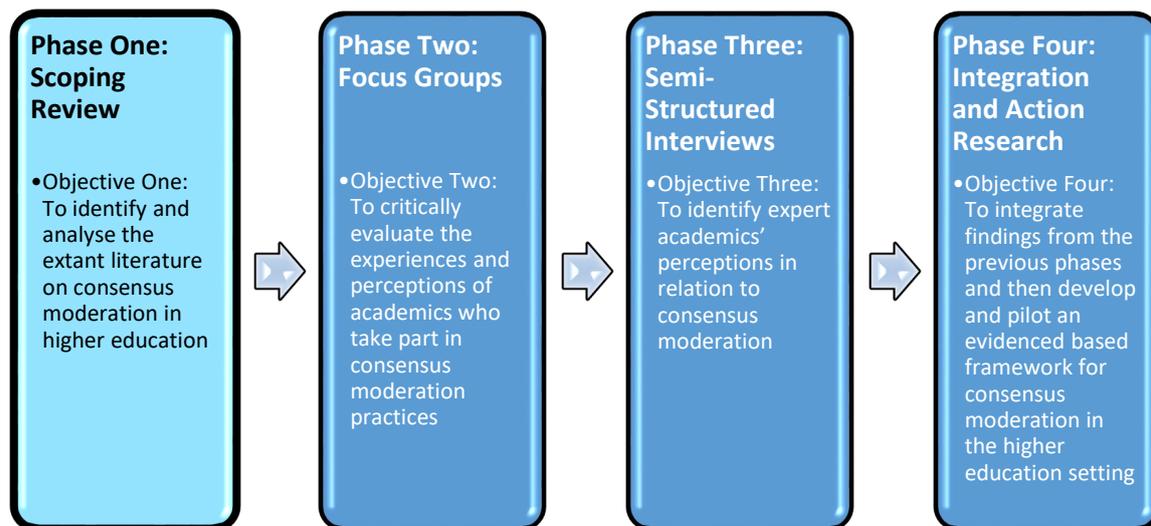


Figure 4.

Flow Diagram of Project Objectives Highlighting Phase One and Objective One

3.2 Introduction to Consensus Moderation

Higher education requires students to submit multiple assessments during their course of study to evidence their achievement and further their learning (Carless, 2009). Assessment motivates student learning (McDowell et al., 2011; Race, 2010), and is seen as critical to enhancing the student experience (Deneen & Boud, 2014). A challenge in the assessment process is to ensure that the mark allocated is a true reflection of the quality of the work as there is evidence that assessors' judgements vary, with multiple studies finding variations in the allocation of marks for the same papers (Baume et al., 2004; Bloxham, 2009; Brooks, 2012; Grainger et al., 2016; Hunter & Docherty, 2011; Orr, 2007; Orr & Bloxham, 2013; Price, 2005; Read et al., 2005; Shay, 2005; Smith & Coombe, 2006; Van der Schaaf et al., 2012; Webster et al., 2000).

The reasons for the variation in assessors' judgement is complex and relates to the assessment process being a "context-dependent, socially situated interpretive activity" (Bloxham & Boyd, 2012, p. 3). Variations may be based on the assessor's expertise, previous experiences, differing professional knowledge, individual value, and preconceptions of how others would judge the work as well as the marker's expectations (Read et al., 2005; Sadler, 2010; Shay, 2005; Smith & Coombe, 2006). The variation may also be because marking is considered to be inherently intuitive, due to the tacit knowledge which is brought to the marking by individual markers (Bloxham, 2009; Hunter & Docherty, 2011). Furthermore, it has

been identified that academics may use personal criteria to mark assessments rather than the grading criterion provided (Baume et al., 2004; Price, 2005; Read et al., 2005).

Some studies have reported that prior knowledge of a student has influenced marks (Annetts et al., 2013; Bloxham et al., 2011; Orr & Bloxham, 2013). This includes potential biases which may affect decision-making; such as student behaviour, work habits, gender, ethnicity, the halo effect, and anchoring on previous performance (Brooks, 2012; Chira et al., 2011; Read et al., 2005). This further adds to the intricacy and complexity of achieving reliability and whilst it is expected that more experienced markers would have greater consistency in marking, studies have found that this is not the case, with novice markers paying greater attention to marking criteria and marking guidance (Price, 2005).

Changes in higher education have resulted in an increased focus on student satisfaction (O'Donovan, 2017). With students being seen, and increasingly seeing themselves as consumers of higher education (O'Leary & Cui, 2020; Tomlinson, 2017), there is a greater need for transparency, accountability, and consistency in assessment marking (Bearman & Ajjawi, 2021; Boyd & Bloxham, 2014). From a student's perspective, the assessment process can impact their desire to learn and confidence (Leach et al., 2000). Assessment outcomes reflect the student learning that has taken place (Crossouard, 2010), and for graduates, this demonstrates achievement of specific assumed standards of skills, knowledge, and attitudes (Leach et al., 2001). The allocation of grade marks in assessments or "examinations" result in a final grade classification of degrees, enabling the classification of individuals, and making it possible to classify the "gaps between individuals" and their distribution in society (Foucault, 1975/1977, p. 190). Consequently, assessment outcomes can determine a student's future, they enable access into professional careers (Harman & McDowell, 2011), and employers make judgements on achievement based on grades enabling them to determine a candidate's suitability for employment (Leach et al., 2000; Yorke, 2015). As a result of this, there is an increased need for quality assurance in the assessment process.

Assessment quality assurance is key to ensuring accountability and equity (Grainger et al., 2016). In Australia, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (2015) have outlined the requirement for sector-level, self-regulated, robust approaches to the assurance of quality standards. Moderation, a process whereby marked work is checked for consistency (Mahmud & Sanderson, 2011), is considered by Sadler (2013, p. 5) to be a process that ensures that the mark allocated for an assessment is "*independent of which marker does the marking.*" This process is designed to ensure the assessment judgements and feedback provided are fair and consistent. The importance of this has been widely documented (Barrie et al., 2014; Dill &

Beerens, 2013; Hunter & Docherty, 2011; McDonald, 2016; Orr, 2007; Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2015).

There are a variety of approaches adopted to carrying out moderation in higher education (Adie et al., 2013; Barrie et al., 2014; Bloxham & Boyd, 2012; Krause et al., 2014; McDonald, 2016), and one approach is consensus moderation. Consensus moderation (also known as social moderation) has been described by Sadler (2013) as a process whereby markers independently mark a sample of student's work, compare provisionally allocated marks, and then the decisions and rationales are discussed "*until consensus is reached*" (p. 8) on the mark to be allocated. Sadler (2013) identified five steps in the consensus moderation process 1) trial marking of a sample of study work 2) comparing marks between markers 3) a discussion on how the marks should be allocated 4) reaching agreement on the achievement standard, and 5) markers mark all remaining student assessments independently. This process thus enables a review of marking discrepancies (Sadler, 2011). Other authors recommend adopting calibration activities to enable markers to sufficiently understand the required academics standards so that they have sufficient shared information on the required standards to make consistent marking decisions (Bloxham, 2009; O'Connell et al., 2016; Watty et al., 2014).

With consensus moderation, discussion and collaboration are the essential elements through which two or more markers reach a consensus on the grade mark (Sadler, 2013). This process provides the opportunity to discuss judgements and share interpretations of what is required, thereby assisting the markers to acquire meaning and develop their understanding and interpretation of the assessment criteria (Watty et al., 2014; Wyatt-Smith & Klenowski, 2013). In this way, consensus moderation provides an opportunity to develop both individual and collective capacity and collegially held knowledge, with learning taking place through the process of socialisation, debate, and discussion (Boyd & Bloxham, 2014; Sadler, 2011; Tuovinen et al., 2015). Consensus moderation is a socially situated process (Grainger et al., 2016), yet preconceptions, values, beliefs, and the role of social structures are rarely explicit or discussed although considered to be at the heart of assessment (Delandshere, 2001). Several authors have identified a lack of documented processes for moderation (Adie et al., 2013; Krause et al., 2014; Nulty, 2011), and others have proposed that power relationship could be an issue, especially when considering academics that are on sessional, casual or fixed-term contracts (Adie et al., 2013; Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al., 2016; Grainger et al., 2016; Orr, 2007).

While assessment and moderation in higher education are recognised as important, and consensus moderation identified as a potential means of providing quality assurance of

the assessment, to date no systematic review of the empirical literature on consensus moderation has been conducted. This scoping review was carried out in preparation for the subsequent phases of this body of research as the systematic approach would bring together what is known about consensus moderation in the higher education setting, and identify any gaps in the current research. Specifically, the scoping review addresses the following research question: What is known about consensus moderation in the higher education setting?

3.3 Method

Scoping reviews are designed to summarise and synthesise the evidence focusing on the breadth of evidence (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005), and are useful to identify the location and magnitude of literature on a topic (Rumrill et al., 2010), clarify concepts and report on types of evidence (Decaria et al., 2012). The systematic searching, selection, and synthesis of existing knowledge enables replication and thus strengthens the rigor of the process (Colquhoun et al., 2014). Scoping reviews are becoming an increasingly popular methodology for synthesising research (Daudt et al., 2013; Levac et al., 2010), and are appropriate to answer broad questions about what is known on a particular subject, rather than a systematic review which answers a more clearly defined question (Tricco et al., 2018). As the objective for Phase One was broad - to identify and analyse the extant literature on consensus moderation in higher education - a scoping review was the appropriate approach.

I followed the five-stage framework for scoping reviews originally outlined by Arksey and O'Malley (2005) with the optional sixth stage involving consultation with stakeholders as recommended by Daudt et al. (2013) and Levac et al. (2010), using the reporting guidelines for scoping review by Tricco et al. (2018). This framework was considered appropriate to use due to the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) inclusion of this original framework in their recommendations for scoping reviews (Peters et al., 2017; Peters et al., 2020). The stages are detailed below.

3.3.1 Stage 1: Identifying the research question

The research question for this scoping review was: What is known about consensus moderation in higher education? Taking into consideration the objective of this phase, boundaries, and type of research (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005), this was considered sufficiently generic and non-discipline specific in nature to provide a broad scope for the review. It also

enabled the examination of the range and nature of different types of research that have been carried out in this subject area.

3.3.2 Stage 2: Identifying relevant studies

To ensure all relevant studies were identified and the search terms maximised the potential for capturing publications on consensus moderation, a consultant health research librarian was engaged to assist with refining the search strategy. Inclusion and exclusion criteria were developed to include appropriate studies whilst balancing time and resources. The main inclusion criterion was empirical studies on consensus moderation in higher education in peer-review journals written in English, although this was extended to include reports and a thesis identified in the search. Acknowledging that scoping reviews can include all types of literature, as suggested by Peters et al. (2020), it was decided to limit the types of evidence included. The decision was made to only use empirical sources as it was felt that primary sources of research would be best placed to provide the information required to answer the broad research question. This would enable the identification of research in this area, current concepts as well as previous research approaches (Munn et al., 2018). No date range was included as this maximised the publications, other than up to and including the date of the scoping review - which was June 2018. A range of exclusion criteria was also applied to ensure that the reviewed publications were focused on consensus moderation in higher education, rather than primary or secondary school or external examiner moderation. The full inclusion and exclusion criteria can be found below (see Table 2).

Table 2.

Scoping Review Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion	Exclusion
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Empirical studies in English in the higher education setting - A population of lecturers, academics, sessional academics - Focus on consensus moderation or social moderation - Included marking consensus - Calibration with consensus moderation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Empirical studies not written in the English language - Primary and secondary school research - External peer review of assessment - Preschool teachers learning to mark and moderate – unless focused on consensus moderation - Blind marking – unless focused on consensus moderation - Inter-marking reliability - Inter-marking consistency - Double marking – unless focusing on consensus moderation - Transnational marking – unless focused on consensus moderation - External review of academic standards - External examiners - Conference papers where the full paper was not available via email

A comprehensive search protocol was designed based on the recommendations of the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses) statement (Moher et al., 2009). The protocol was not registered. Search terms and combinations were entered into the following electronic databases: Scopus, Informit (98 databases), Proquest (36 databases), and Wiley online. The search terms combinations were narrowed to ‘consensus moderation’ OR ‘social moderation’ OR ‘marking consensus’ OR ‘marking calibration’ AND ‘University’ OR ‘Higher education’ OR ‘tertiary’ OR ‘College’ AND ‘assessment’. Boolean operators were used as each database recommended. A scan of the reference lists was also undertaken to obtain any additional sources.

3.3.3 Stage 3: Study selection

The initial search yielded 290 peer-reviewed publications. There were duplicates across the databases, which resulted in 28 sources being removed. This resulted in 262 records for initial screening. The title and abstract of each publication were screened, and then the full text of each was reviewed for relevancy. At this point, a further 189 were excluded as they did

not meet the inclusion criteria (predominantly publications that only mentioned consensus moderation in passing and/or non-empirical publications). I then reviewed the full body of the remaining 73 publications, both for context and content. A further 51 were then excluded, predominantly publications that focused on consensus moderation taking place in primary or secondary schools rather than higher education and/or were non-empirical.

This resulted in 22 remaining publications. Of these 22, four publications were identified and confirmed, via email by the original primary author, as being duplicates from a further study identified in the scoping review (Adie et al., 2013; Bloxham & Boyd, 2012; Orr & Bloxham, 2013; Watty et al., 2014). These four publications were retained to support the review although the most recent publication was deemed the primary article to include in the review (see Table 3).

Table 3.

Scoping Review Duplicate Publications

Primary Publication used in the Scoping Review	Duplicate Publication(s) from the Same Study
Beutel et al. (2017)	Adie et al. (2013)
Boyd and Bloxham (2014)	Bloxham and Boyd (2012) Orr and Bloxham (2013)
O'Connell et al. (2016)	Watty et al. (2014)

In keeping with the recommendation of assessing the quality of studies to be either included or excluded in the scoping review, my two supervisors and I independently reviewed and assessed the full text of the final 18 publications using the respective qualitative (Critical Assessment using QARI) or quantitative (Critical Assessment using MASTARI) Joanna Briggs Institute critical appraisal tools (Lockwood et al., 2015; Tufanaru et al., 2017). Initially, a minimum score of 8 out of 10 in the appropriate critical appraisal criteria, by a minimum of 2 reviewers, was deemed to provide a sufficiently detailed publication for inclusion. The research team met to review the initial independent review of the 18 publications, using the relevant critical appraisal criteria and identified that only a small number of publications were deemed appropriate to include due to insufficient information being included in the publication on which criteria scoring could be applied ($N=4$). A further discussion took place on the minimum inclusion score, and by consensus, it was agreed that a minimum score of six out of 10 in the appropriate critical appraisal criteria provided a more generous score threshold. This enabled a more comprehensive overview of the limited literature available being included in the scoping review. I met with my supervisors on multiple occasions, where we compared

and discussed the 18 publications, thereby increasing reliability and ensuring concordance was achieved on which publications to include in the scoping review. This resulted in eight publications being excluded due to insufficient information and low scoring in the critical appraisal process, and a final sample of ten publications on which we could focus to make meaning of the data. To enhance transparency and auditability in the process of study selection, the process is represented in the flow diagram below (Figure 5).

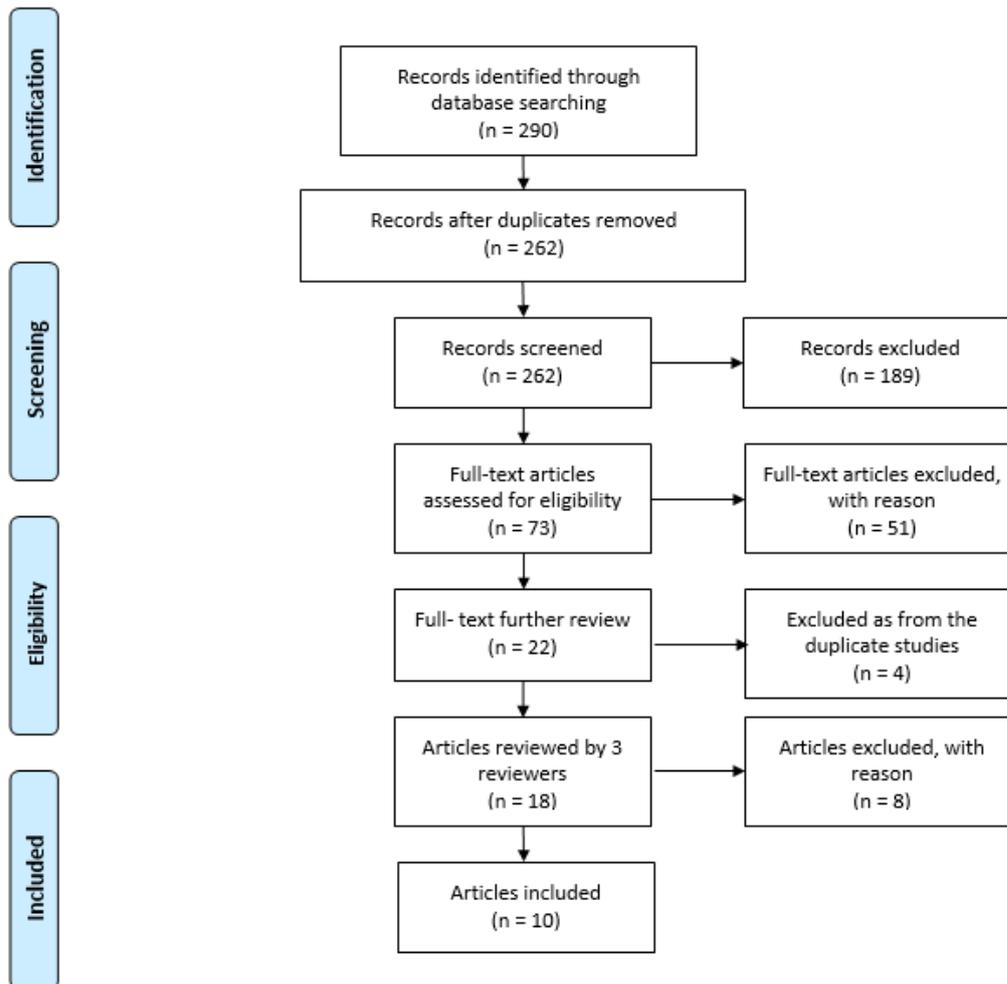


Figure 5.

PRISMA Flow Diagram of Study Selection

3.3.4 Stage 4: Charting the studies

The final 10 publications were read and re-read to gain an overall impression. Then a comprehensive chart was developed in Excel following the recommendations of Arksey and O'Malley (2005), to assist in identifying and capturing both high-level data and micro-level

data. This was used in tandem with Nvivo (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2018), which helped to organise and make sense of the data. A summary of each of the ten publications was developed, and this included the publication's primary author, country of origin, year, publication type, data collection method, and sample size within the study (see Table 4).

Table 4.

Final Publications included in the Scoping Review

First Author and Year	Country of Origin	Title	Publication Type	Data Collection Method	Sample Size
Beutel, 2017	Australia	Assessment moderation in an Australian context: processes, practices and challenges Note: this study included an earlier publication by Adie, Lloyd & Beutel in 2013	Teaching in Higher Education (Journal)	Semi-structured interviews	25
Boyd, 2014	United Kingdom	A situative metaphor for teaching learning: the case of university tutors learning to grade student coursework Note: this study included earlier publications by Orr and Bloxham in 2013, and Bloxham and Boyd in 2012	British Educational Research (Journal)	Think aloud recording and semi-structured interviews	25
Crimmins, 2016	Australia	Can a systematic assessment moderation process assure the quality and integrity of assessment practice whilst supporting the professional development of casual academics?	Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education (Journal)	Instrumental case study - focus group (pre and post moderation)	18
Grainger, 2016	Australia	Quality assurance of assessment and moderation discourses involving session academics	Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education (Journal)	Structured and semi-structured interviews	10
Krause, 2014	Australia	Assuring learning and teaching standards through inter-institutional peer review and moderation Note: whilst this did focus on peer moderation across institutions it also focused on consensus moderation	Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching (Report)	Peer moderation	52

First Author and Year	Country of Origin	Title	Publication Type	Data Collection Method	Sample Size
McDonald, 2016	Australia	Assessment moderation as a quality management process in non-self-accrediting higher education institutions in Australia	PhD Thesis	Semi-structured interviews	21
Orr, 2007	United Kingdom	Assessment moderation: constructing the marks and constructing the students	Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education (Journal)	10 hours of Semi-structured observations	Not specified
Shay, 2005	South Africa	The assessment of complex tasks: a double reading	Studies in Higher Education (Journal)	Case Study Interviews	15
Tuovinen, 2015	Australia	Developing and testing models for benchmarking and moderation of assessment for private higher education providers Note: whilst this did focus on peer moderation across institutions it also focused on consensus moderation	Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching (Report)	Interviews and institutional document analysis	40
O'Connell, 2016	Australia	Does calibration reduce variability in the assessment of accounting learning outcomes Note: this study included an earlier article by Watty et al. (2013).	Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education (Journal)	Experimental – treatment and control group	30 + 15 (control group)

3.3.5 Stage 5: Collating, summarising, and reporting the results

The ten publications in this scoping review covered seven studies conducted within Australia (Beutel et al., 2017; Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al., 2016; Grainger et al., 2016; Krause et al., 2014; McDonald, 2016; O'Connell et al., 2016; Tuovinen et al., 2015), two in the United Kingdom (Boyd & Bloxham, 2014; Orr, 2007), and one in South Africa (Shay, 2005). Regarding the Australian studies, three were conducted in Queensland (Beutel et al., 2017;

Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al., 2016; Grainger et al., 2016) and one in New South Wales (McDonald, 2016). The remaining three Australian studies were all conducted across different states and territories. One was conducted across New South Wales, Victoria, and Queensland (Tuovinen et al., 2015), one across New South Wales, Western Australia, Victoria and South Australia (O'Connell et al., 2016), and one across New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria, Australian Capital Territory and Northern Territory (Krause et al., 2014).

All but one of the included studies (O'Connell et al., 2016) used qualitative methodologies, including semi-structured interviews, think-aloud recording, case study, focus groups, document analysis, and observation. The one quantitative study, by O'Connell et al. (2016), used an experiment with a control group. The publications chosen for inclusion contained independent samples, although, as previously indicated, a further four publications used the same cohorts from an overarching study (Adie et al., 2013; Bloxham & Boyd, 2012; Orr & Bloxham, 2013; Watty et al., 2014).

The earliest publication included in this review was a case study with interviews conducted in South Africa, where Shay (2005) explored the multiple subjectivities that shape academics' interpretations of students' performance when 'blind' double marking. The first publication in the United Kingdom was from Orr (2007), who used an observational approach (ten hours) to study how art and design academics discuss students' grades in moderation meetings, reporting on the different ways academics co-construct meaning about the practice of agreeing on marks. Boyd and Bloxham (2014) then examined professional knowledge and learning of academics when grading by using think-aloud protocols and semi-structured interviews across three universities. This was part of a larger research project and data set that included earlier publications (Bloxham & Boyd, 2012; Orr & Bloxham, 2013).

The earliest publication identified in Australia was an Office for Learning and Teaching funded study (Krause et al., 2014). Whilst this study explored peer review and moderation from an inter-institutional approach, it also included reference to consensus moderation. A further publication supported by the Office for Learning and Teaching (Tuovinen et al., 2015) used a triangulated approach to examine opinions and practices in assessment moderation in private higher education providers. There were four Australian publications in 2016 (Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al., 2016; Grainger et al., 2016; McDonald, 2016; O'Connell et al., 2016). Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al. (2016) conducted descriptive research using think-aloud recordings and semi-structured interviews with 18 sessional academics focusing on systematic moderation practices and assurance of quality and integrity of assessment practices. Grainger et al. (2016) interviewed ten sessional academics exploring their experiences and the discourse of moderation. The PhD work of McDonald (2016) investigated understanding, and

implementation, of moderation in the context of the non-self-accrediting higher education sector through interviewing 21 academics from four universities. O'Connell et al. (2016) tested the impact of a calibration moderation workshop designed to reduce grader variability. This publication was also part of the same study reported by Watty et al. (2014). The most recent publication at the time of the scoping review was by Beutel et al. (2017), where they explored the discourses of moderation processes and practices across a faculty by undertaking interviews (data collected from the same study as an earlier publication by Adie et al. (2013).

3.3.6 Stage 6: Consultation exercise

The optional sixth step of the scoping review process involves consultation with stakeholders outside of the research team (Daudt et al., 2013; Levac et al., 2010). Stakeholder consultation (with a consultant health research librarian) was carried out as part of developing the inclusion and exclusion criteria, and the comprehensive search protocol, to ensure relevant studies were identified and the process captured publications on consensus moderation. In addition, I was the primary researcher for this scoping review and met frequently with my two supervisors whilst determining the publications to include in this review. Stakeholder consultation was also carried out in the reporting of findings from this phase, with academics at conferences in Australia, China and the United Kingdom. This was considered important to ensure early translation of the research findings. More information regarding the translation of the scoping review findings can be found in Chapter 8.

3.4 Findings

In this section, I discuss the synthesis of findings from the ten publications to answer the research question: What is known about consensus moderation in higher education? The most significant finding was that there were only a small number of studies that have been published with a focus on consensus moderation practices (Grainger et al., 2016; O'Connell et al., 2016). These two publications, and the earlier publication by Watty et al. (2014) from the same study as O'Connell et al. (2016), were disparate in both their focus and findings. Grainger et al. (2016) explored sessional academics' discourse on consensus moderation, focusing on the discourses previously identified by Adie et al. (2013) of community building, equity, justification, and accountability. Grainger et al. (2016) identified that the most common theme from the interviews was that moderation was a community-building exercise. These authors

identified that the dialogue in the meetings was key to developing the shared knowledge, as they could “*appreciate different perspectives, and had a deeper understanding of task expectations*” (p. 553). However, they also identified the need for more structure in the moderation meetings, issues with a high turnover of academics impacting marking and moderation, complacency when academics were too familiar with the assessment, and issues of deference to the expert in the moderation process. In contrast, O’Connell et al. (2016) used a treatment and control group to look at a calibration intervention with consensus moderation. These authors found that calibration workshops increased the markers’ confidence and resulted in greater marking consistency. Using a Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree), O’Connell et al. (2016) found an increase in marker confidence – from 3.4 to 4.1 in skill application and from 3.6 to 4.3 for assessment judgement. Whilst comparing assessor’s scores they found a 50% reduction in the variation of mark allocation for the group who had had a calibration intervention, identifying that the calibration workshops were able to reduce variability.

Five other publications included reference to consensus moderation or social moderation (an alternative name for consensus moderation) as one approach to moderation (Beutel et al., 2017; Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al., 2016; Krause et al., 2014; McDonald, 2016; Tuovinen et al., 2015). The final three publications discussed elements of consensus moderation (each marker independently marked and then met, shared, and discussed their marking) without using the term consensus moderation or social moderation. These articles focused on obtaining consensus on mark allocation through discussion (Shay, 2005), strategies to agree on marks through moderation (Orr, 2007), and professional learning through moderation discussions (Boyd & Bloxham, 2014).

Given the disparate ways that the publications referred to consensus moderation and elements of consensus moderation practices, this synthesis focuses on the moderation themes found in the review that relate to the different elements of consensus moderation. This will commence by focusing on moderation as a quality assurance activity before exploring moderation practices, how moderation aids the learning processes, and moderation as a community-building activity, before looking at issues and tensions in moderation practices.

3.4.1 Moderation as quality assurance

Moderation was identified in seven publications as supporting quality assurance in the marking process (Boyd & Bloxham, 2014; Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al., 2016; Grainger et al., 2016; Krause et al., 2014; McDonald, 2016; O’Connell et al., 2016; Tuovinen et al., 2015).

This was also a feature of the earlier publications by Adie et al. (2013), Bloxham and Boyd (2012), and Orr and Bloxham (2013). The sole publication that identified moderation as a process to normalise grades was McDonald (2016), whereby the moderation process ensured the marks resembled predetermined grade distributions. In contrast, Adie et al. (2013) referred to how moderation was used to examine (rather than determine) the distribution of grading marks, with the unit coordinator being responsible for the marks as the standard-setter, final arbiter, and expert. These authors highlighted a potential issue if the emphasis was on the normative representation of performance (with a predetermined grade distribution), and the marker is asked to adjust the marks.

As part of the quality assurance process, moderation was considered necessary for accountability, although in two different ways. First, moderation provided accountability in the marking process to ensure equity and fairness for students (Adie et al., 2013; Beutel et al., 2017; Bloxham & Boyd, 2012; Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al., 2016; Grainger et al., 2016; McDonald, 2016; O'Connell et al., 2016; Tuovinen et al., 2015). Second, moderation provided accountability in justifying the awarded mark to the unit coordinator and/or the student (Adie et al., 2013; Beutel et al., 2017; Bloxham & Boyd, 2012; Grainger et al., 2016; McDonald, 2016; Tuovinen et al., 2015). Moderation as accountability to ensure equity and fairness for students, and accountability in justifying the mark appear interrelated (Adie et al., 2013; Grainger et al., 2016). These aspects will now be discussed in more detail.

The publications discussed equity and fairness in varied ways, although all were related to consistency in the marking process (Adie et al., 2013; Beutel et al., 2017; Bloxham & Boyd, 2012; Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al., 2016; Grainger et al., 2016; McDonald, 2016; O'Connell et al., 2016; Tuovinen et al., 2015). Bloxham and Boyd (2012) found accountability, voiced by markers, as a responsibility to take grading seriously and be fair in their grading. In contrast, Adie et al. (2013) focused on confidence, reporting how moderation processes provide academics with confidence in their interpretation of the standards to ensure fairness. Both Grainger et al. (2016) and Tuovinen et al. (2015) referred to fairness and transparency, as well as checking for consistency, whereas Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al. (2016) reported that moderation supports academics to engage in fairer, more objective quality teaching and marking. Whilst McDonald (2016) did not use the term 'fair,' they did report how moderation was necessary for consistency in the assessment process, highlighting the need to treat students fairly and equitably.

Moderation as a process to justify markers' grading judgement was a common feature in the theme of moderation as quality assurance (Adie et al., 2013; Beutel et al., 2017; Bloxham & Boyd, 2012; Grainger et al., 2016; McDonald, 2016; Tuovinen et al., 2015). These

authors reported how academics were accountable in justifying their judgements both internally (where the validity of their grade allocation provides them confidence), almost as an affirmation of their understanding and measurement of the required standards, and externally (where the confirmation helps to externally defend a grading decision). Other publications identified how academics viewed moderation to be a process for checking their capability as a marker and their correct interpretation of the assessment requirements (Beutel et al., 2017; Bloxham & Boyd, 2012).

3.4.2 Moderation practices

Whilst moderation was considered to be a valuable quality assurance process, several publications reported how academics had differing understandings of the processes involved (Adie et al., 2013; Beutel et al., 2017; Krause et al., 2014; McDonald, 2016; Tuovinen et al., 2015). Back in 2014, Krause et al. called for key terms to be defined, so that all involved had clarity of understanding. Further to this, Tuovinen et al. (2015) found that universities had clear policies on moderation, however, there was a minimal understanding and acceptance of the process by academics. This was reiterated in other publications that also described finding different moderation processes (Adie et al., 2013; Beutel et al., 2017; Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al., 2016; Krause et al., 2014; McDonald, 2016; Orr, 2007; Tuovinen et al., 2015), and different structures for moderation meetings (Grainger et al., 2016). Unsurprisingly, given the many different approaches to moderation, several publications identified the need for professional development on moderation (Beutel et al., 2017; Krause et al., 2014; McDonald, 2016; Tuovinen et al., 2015). This was considered most important for part-time academics who were disadvantaged by not being included as part of any moderation meetings (McDonald, 2016; Tuovinen et al., 2015).

Two publications (Grainger et al., 2016; O'Connell et al., 2016) named and focused on consensus moderation practices and five other publications included reference to consensus moderation or social moderation (an alternative name for consensus moderation) as one of multiple approaches to moderation (Beutel et al., 2017; Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al., 2016; Krause et al., 2014; McDonald, 2016; Tuovinen et al., 2015). The only publication which examined how agreement on the mark allocation was achieved through consensus moderation discussions was Orr (2007). This author identified a range of different approaches and a series of rhetorical moves that took place between markers until an agreement was reached on the mark to be awarded. The initial exchange identified the markers' general territory and the degree of agreement that existed. Following this, views were exchanged and the focus of the

discussion narrowed until a mark was agreed. If markers disagreed then this discussion becomes a 'skirmish' and agreement would take place through funnelling, convergence, bargaining, splitting the difference, averaging the first and second mark, or agreeing to move the mark closer to either of the marks.

Beutel et al. (2017) reported a variety of distinctly different approaches to moderation, including sample marking, blind double marking, and conference marking. In sample marking, each marker independently marks an agreed number of assessments and then meet to discuss their marking, comparing it to the required standards before continuing to mark the rest of their allocated assessments. In blind double marking, all markers mark the same task and then they meet and negotiate an understanding of the required standards. In conference marking, all markers mark and bring samples of their marking to a moderation meeting where they discuss and come to a consensus on the mark to be awarded. Finally, a variation of this may be where a marker sends the first few marked assessments to the unit coordinator for calibration. In this latter approach, any moderation discussions only occurred directly between the marker and the unit coordinator, rather than between markers, with the unit coordinator acting as an "arbiter. (p. 6)" Other publications discussed elements of consensus moderation without using the term consensus moderation or social moderation: focusing on obtaining consensus through discussion on grading (Shay, 2005), and professional learning through moderation discussions (Boyd & Bloxham, 2014).

Calibration activities were described as being important to achieving consistency in judgements across multiple assessors in five publications (Beutel et al., 2017; Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al., 2016; Krause et al., 2014; O'Connell et al., 2016; Watty et al., 2014). Specifically, O'Connell et al. (2016) and Watty et al. (2014) reported how pre-marking calibration workshops resulted in greater confidence and increased consistency in grade allocation, although Watty et al. (2014) used the term social moderation and found this, combined with calibration, was effective in achieving consistency.

There was also variation in the approach used to select which assessment submissions to moderate (Beutel et al., 2017; Bloxham & Boyd, 2012; Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al., 2016). Beutel et al. (2017) reported conference marking was reserved for fails, borderline marks between grades, and the highest grades. Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al. (2016) reported that markers select assessments for moderation if the assessment resulted in a borderline mark, the assessment marks are mid-range, the marker wants to check their own marking, the marker wishes to gain feedback on their marking, the marker considers the assessment is controversial, or the marker wants to relieve themselves of making a judgement on a difficult assessment.

3.4.3 Moderation aids the learning process

Moderation was recognised as supporting learning and teaching in most of the publications (Adie et al., 2013; Beutel et al., 2017; Boyd & Bloxham, 2014; Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al., 2016; Grainger et al., 2016; Krause et al., 2014; Tuovinen et al., 2015; Watty et al., 2014), and was considered to be a professional development learning opportunity (Boyd & Bloxham, 2014; Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al., 2016; Krause et al., 2014; Tuovinen et al., 2015). Academics learn from more experienced colleagues through the social experience of moderation was a common feature in the publications (Boyd & Bloxham, 2014; Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al., 2016; Grainger et al., 2016; Krause et al., 2014; O'Connell et al., 2016; Tuovinen et al., 2015; Watty et al., 2014). The social experience of moderation was found to promote self-reflection and learning (Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Liebergreen, et al., 2016; Watty et al., 2014), and develop the markers' assessment identity which is then reinforced in the moderation process through the comparison of marked work (Boyd & Bloxham, 2014; Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al., 2016).

A shared understanding of the assessment requirements was reported by Grainger et al. (2016) as pivotal for reaching consensus in moderation, as the markers need to understand the unit coordinator's expectations of the assessment task. It was recognised that assessment standards are not necessarily understood just through the use of written explicit assessment criteria standards (Boyd & Bloxham, 2014). Though assessment exemplars were identified as useful in developing the shared understanding of assessment requirements (Beutel et al., 2017). Communication was identified by Grainger et al. (2016) to be the major factor in a successful moderation process. This was supported by other authors who reported that the collaborative conversations and subsequent shared learning that takes place, as part of the moderation process, was considered key to developing a shared understanding of the assessment requirements (Adie et al., 2013; Beutel et al., 2017; Bloxham & Boyd, 2012; Boyd & Bloxham, 2014; Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al., 2016; Grainger et al., 2016; Krause et al., 2014; McDonald, 2016; O'Connell et al., 2016; Watty et al., 2014).

A number of the publications referred to assembling the marking team so that they could collectively review and discuss the assessment task, criteria, and standards (Adie et al., 2013; Beutel et al., 2017; Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al., 2016). Whilst technology has enhanced the process of sharing assessment information (for example, through the use of learning management systems or video conferencing platforms), Beutel et al. (2017) identified that if the sharing of this information is not carried out face to face then it can result in communication issues. Furthermore, they identified how developing the shared understanding

of assessment requirements is further inhibited when moderation discussions occur directly between a single marker and the unit coordinator, as this results in a lack of dialogue across the team and minimises the development of a shared understanding across the marking team (Beutel et al., 2017).

3.4.4 Moderation as a community-building activity

Adie et al. (2013) identified how collaborative conversations and reviewing assessment tasks, criteria, standards, learning experiences, and teaching strategies were characteristic of community building. Moderation, as a community-building activity, was reported in many publications (Beutel et al., 2017; Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al., 2016; Grainger et al., 2016; McDonald, 2016; Shay, 2005). Moderation, both the process of developing a shared understanding and interpretation of the assessment requirements and checking of consistency in the marking process, resulted in increased marker confidence (Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al., 2016; Grainger et al., 2016; O'Connell et al., 2016; Tuovinen et al., 2015; Watty et al., 2014). Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al. (2016) reported how markers welcomed moderation feedback, so that they could enhance their marking practice and found it developed a feeling of connectedness and inclusivity. However, it was found that receiving feedback can also lead to an increase in self-doubt and insecurity (Boyd & Bloxham, 2014; Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al., 2016). Positively, Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al. (2016) also identified that the more a marker took part in moderation the greater the sense of collegiality and connectedness.

3.4.5 Issues and tensions in moderation practices

As a social practice, moderation is complex and challenging. In addition to the lack of clear procedures and practices, as identified in the themes of Moderation practices and Moderation aids the learning process, there was a range of other issues identified. Time for moderation practices (including time for moderation meetings and time to obtain consensus) was an issue identified in several publications (Adie et al., 2013; Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al., 2016; Grainger et al., 2016; Krause et al., 2014; O'Connell et al., 2016; Tuovinen et al., 2015). Boyd and Bloxham (2014) identified how marking is often carried out in isolation with minimal time allocated for discussion on grade allocation. This is then exacerbated by the current increased use of sessional academics in higher education, who are brought into the unit purely for marking and then paid hourly for marking (Adie et al., 2013; Crimmins, Nash,

Oprescu, Alla, et al., 2016; Grainger et al., 2016), and are often not on campus (Adie et al., 2013).

In 2005, Shay found that new markers require time to become socialised into a unit and adapt to the marking requirements. Although Adie et al. (2013) found there was limited time for inducting new academics into the assessment culture and practices. Likewise, Beutel et al. (2017) identified the need for a stable marking team and recognised how new unit coordinators and new markers inhibit the development of a shared understanding of assessment requirements as they require time to develop their understanding. Taking part in moderation processes during the teaching period, in conjunction with induction and guidance developed a familiarity with assessment requirements, built relationships and a shared understanding of assessment requirements (Beutel et al., 2017). However, whilst Grainger et al. (2016) also found that a high turnover of academics impacted on marking and moderation, they cautioned that when academics become too familiar with an assessment as this may result in complacency where relationships, egos, and rigidity can then impact the process.

Clearly described assessment criteria and standard descriptors have been found to support the moderation process and enhance the markers' ability to reach consensus (Grainger et al., 2016). Conversely, the use of ambiguous criteria has been identified as a barrier for markers in interpreting and understanding the assessment requirements (Beutel et al., 2017; Boyd & Bloxham, 2014; Grainger et al., 2016). This, therefore, highlights the importance of developing a shared understanding of the assessment through collaborative conversations, as identified in the theme of Moderation aids the learning process (3.4.3).

Many publications identified a range of difficulties in gaining agreement in mark allocation through consensus or social moderation (Boyd & Bloxham, 2014; Grainger et al., 2016; Krause et al., 2014; Orr, 2007; Watty et al., 2014). The unit coordinator reportedly tends to develop the assessment requirements in isolation from the teaching and marking team (Beutel et al., 2017). This isolated activity may be the result of some universities' more recent tendency to have small teaching teams and then employ a greater use of sessional academics to mark assessments. This presents issues in moderation practices as developing the assessment requirements in isolation impacts the markers' ability to understand the requirements and consequently consistency in the marking process.

It was found that power differentials can interfere with gaining agreement (Adie et al., 2013; Boyd & Bloxham, 2014; Grainger et al., 2016; Krause et al., 2014; Orr, 2007; Shay, 2005; Watty et al., 2014), with Krause et al. (2014) stating this can sometimes disadvantage students. Boyd and Bloxham (2014) highlighted the risks of being open when dealing with disagreement over grades, which is further exacerbated when the markers are sessional academics who are

in precarious employment and require ongoing support from the unit coordinator for future employment. This may have been why Grainger et al. (2016) found that sessional academics identified the need for more structure in the moderation meetings.

Whilst Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al. (2016) found that markers tended to welcome moderation feedback, other authors have found issues with personalities, egos, seniority and defensive attitudes impact and inhibit the process (Grainger et al., 2016). Shay (2005) identified how markers will try to avoid conflict, by assigning their moderation mark according to who marked the paper first, for example using reverse adjustment if the first marker is known to be generous. Both Orr (2007) and Grainger et al. (2016) found that markers were reluctant to challenge marks, tending to defer to those with more experience and status, such as the unit coordinator, highlighting the need for academics to be confident in their understanding and knowledge of the assessment requirements.

3.5 Discussion

This scoping review focused on a research question: What is known about consensus moderation in higher education? The scoping review aimed to identify and analyse the extant literature on consensus moderation in higher education. Unexpectedly, the most significant finding was that only two studies (Grainger et al., 2016; O'Connell et al., 2016), and the earlier publication by Watty et al. (2014) from the same study as O'Connell et al. (2016), focused on consensus moderation practices. This dearth of published studies highlights consensus moderation is a neglected aspect of moderation practice thus supporting the need for this body of research. Given the disparate ways that the studies referred to consensus moderation and elements of consensus moderation practices, the synthesis focused on themes in the publications which related to the different features of consensus moderation. These were moderation as a quality assurance activity, moderation practices, moderation aids the learning processes, moderation as a community-building activity, and issues and tensions in moderation practices. The rest of this chapter provides a discussion on the themes.

The publications included in the scoping review identified that moderation is an important quality assurance activity, although they highlighted that there are different levels of understanding of what moderation entails and different moderation practices being carried out. Quality assurance processes in Australia provide confidence in a university and are considered a determining factor of a university's reputation (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2015). The latest Australian university threshold standards view assessment

quality assurance as a university requirement and prescribe that a university should have processes for institutional assessment quality assurance (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2021, p. 19). Subsequently, how each university approaches assessment quality assurance is determined by their individual processes, and according to Tuovinen et al. (2015), most universities have policies on assessment quality assurance that focus on some form of moderation to assure the quality of the assessment process. In this scoping review, some publications found that academics tend to focus on post-marking moderation, as a simplistically post-hoc comparison of assessment results (Barrie et al., 2014; Mahmud & Sanderson, 2011), rather than calibration or early discussions on the required standard, which was advocated by others (Beutel et al., 2017; Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al., 2016; Krause et al., 2014; O'Connell et al., 2016; Watty et al., 2014). The devolving of responsibility for quality assurance processes to individual universities by the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (2021) could account for the disparities in approaches to, and understanding of, moderation across universities. This demonstrates a need for a more standardised approach if we are truly using consensus moderation to achieve assessment quality assurance.

As a quality assurance process, moderation was considered by markers to be necessary for accountability in the marking process, although accountability was viewed in different ways. Moderation was found to be necessary for accountability to demonstrate equity and fairness in marking, responding to the need for transparency (Boyd & Bloxham, 2014). It was also found to be necessary as accountability in justifying the mark allocation both internally to the marker (so that the marker is comfortable in the validity of their mark allocation), and externally to the unit coordinator and/or student (as a defence of the markers marking judgement). These conflicting yet interrelated aspects reflect some of the marking tensions that currently exist in higher education. Issues with moderation supporting learning and teaching, and addressing accountability have previously been identified in the literature (Bloxham et al., 2015; Bloxham et al., 2016; Sadler, 2010, 2013). To understand these conflicting and interrelated aspects, it is useful to examine changes in higher education and the role of the student, along with the current context of the learning and teaching environment.

Higher education was initially formed to serve a universal interest of intellectual engagement, transmitting, studying, and creating knowledge (Barnett, 2005; Marginson, 2011b). Originally considered to be highly selective and elite, strategies of fairness and inclusion have now been adopted to enhance equity and accessibility of higher education (Marginson, 2011a). Consequently, the traditional purpose of a university - for intellectual knowledge creation and debate, has been exchanged with a focus on performativity, quality

assurance measures, and academic audits (Olssen, 2016). These strategies have also resulted in a greater diversity of students attending university, availability of subject disciplines, and pedagogical experiences, which has been referred to as the massification of higher education (Evans et al., 2021). As a consequence, universities have become more business-focused with a higher level of management autonomy (Radice, 2013). Further neoliberal reforms resulted in a new approach to university management called new public management (NPM) and created greater political and economic rationalisation, with concepts of efficiency, commercialisation, and marketisation becoming key drivers in the sector (Marginson, 2004, 2013). Being business-focused has led to the marketisation of higher education, based on the premise that competition creates more efficiently functioning institutions (Naidoo & Williams, 2015). The most important public good in higher education, according to Marginson (2011b, p. 416), is *“knowledge and information”*, yet concepts of efficiencies and the need to generate profit or surplus income have led to the commodification of higher education, where education, previously a social or public good, has been turned into a commodity (Nadolny & Ryan, 2015; Naidoo & Williams, 2015), and used for economic growth (Doherty, 2007). Universities, aiming for surplus budgets, respond to market-driven demands (Jankowski & Provezis, 2014).

These changes have also resulted in students being seen as consumers (O’Leary & Cui, 2020; Tomlinson, 2017), and whilst this has been a driver to cultivate high-quality academics and courses (Naidoo & Williams, 2015), it has also resulted in a commercial necessity to become increasingly customer-focused (Marginson, 2013). Education is now considered to be a future-focused investment (Brown, 2015), and students want a strong return of their investment as a *“paying customer”* with *“the degree qualification as a passport to a ‘better job’ divorced from a learning experience”* (Nixon et al., 2018, p. 933). Assessment is an important part of the student experience, although often results in frustration and disappointment (Price et al., 2011). It has been reported to be a *“teacher-controlled activity interpreted as an act that is a necessary, but not enjoyable, part of the educational experience”* (Crisp, 2012, p. 38). Consequently, the consumer-focused higher education environment is interested in enhancing student satisfaction (O’Donovan, 2017), responding to student preferences (Nixon et al., 2018), and providing student complaint mechanisms (Naidoo & Williams, 2015). As a consumer or paying customer, students care about their summative marks and have identified concerns with marking standards and consistency in mark allocation (Francis et al., 2019). This has created tensions in the marking and moderation process between providing equity and fairness in the awarded grade mark, and accountability in justifying the grade mark awarded both internally, to themselves, and externally, to the unit coordinator and the customer (student). These tensions are further exacerbated by a greater focus on performance

indicators (Kenny, 2018), particularly with academic performance being measured on student satisfaction (Nixon et al., 2018).

The changes in higher education have been driven by economic need and have changed the role of academics (Raaper, 2016). Acknowledging the conflict between the recent changes in research and teaching academic roles, the need to manage budgets has resulted in less tenured academics and greater use of sessional academics. This casualisation of academic labour is considered part of the managerial drive for efficiencies and rationalisation and provides flexibility to cope with increasing and fluctuating student numbers (Brown et al., 2010; Leathwood & Read, 2020; May et al., 2013). Short-term and casual contracts, which were once considered preparation for a more secure academic position, are now a substitute for a more secure tenured position (Noonan, 2015; Read & Leathwood, 2018). This has resulted in a large amount of assessment marking being carried out by sessional academics (Ryan et al., 2017), yet new markers require time to become socialised into a unit and adapt to the marking requirements (Adie et al., 2013; Shay, 2005). This impacts the ability to have collegial consensus moderation practices as a stable marking team reportedly ensures familiarity with assessment requirements, builds relationships, and develops that all-important shared understanding of assessment requirements (Beutel et al., 2017). Whilst this may indicate the need for a more stable marking team to support the development of a shared understanding of assessment requirements, Grainger et al. (2016) found that familiarity, egos and defensive attitudes could inhibit the process and identified that communication was a major factor in a successful moderation process.

Unfortunately due to the current economic climate and the recent changes in higher education, it seems unlikely that the situation of casualisation of the academic labour is going to change, whilst the sector is struggling with an ongoing drive for efficiencies and increasing need for flexibility. Consequently, the ongoing use of sessional academics impacts the ability of current consensus moderation practices to achieve true quality assurance. It, therefore, supports a need for further research in this area to optimise consensus moderation processes with sessional academics.

The drive for efficiencies has also impacted on time being available for the moderation process, with time for moderation activities being identified as an issue in this scoping review (Adie et al., 2013; Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al., 2016; Grainger et al., 2016; Krause et al., 2014; Tuovinen et al., 2015). Recent changes in the higher education sector have impacted the time available for moderation activities. Neoliberal changes have not only focused on quality assurance and finance but also on audit measures (Kenny, 2018). As a result, measurements and quantification are now a regular feature in academic life (Leathwood &

Read, 2020), and a feature of contemporary capitalism (Peters, 2015). Academic time is quantified and measured, and considered a “*technology of governance*” (Leathwood & Read, 2020, p. 3). Time is institutionally structured, constructed through context, positionality, and experience, and formed by disparate socio-political, economic, and cultural contexts (Bennett & Burke, 2018). To maximise efficiencies, university workload models are used to specify the time allocated for every aspect of teaching, including marking and moderation, although, according to Burrows (2012) the allocations do not reflect the actual time taken to carry out such activities. The lack of time has been intensified by the massification of higher education, which has resulted in a highly complex educational environment with students from diverse backgrounds with more wide-ranging needs and requiring greater support (O'Leary & Cui, 2020). This is exacerbated by the use of sessional academics who are paid hourly for marking (Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al., 2016; Grainger et al., 2016), and are often unable to attend moderation meetings, and further exacerbated by a situation where a small number of tenured academics manage large number of sessional academics with little preparation for this role (Ryan et al., 2013). Consequently, most marking is now often carried out in isolation with minimal time available for moderation discussions on mark allocation (Boyd & Bloxham, 2014). The changes in workload allocation and time availability makes it more challenging for the discussions needed to obtain consensus on mark allocation. Given the current context of the learning and teaching environment, in the time-driven climate of higher education with the casualisation of the academic workforce, there is a need for a refocused streamlined process of consensus moderation to take into account the constraints experienced by academics.

This scoping review identified how moderation can aid the learning process (Adie et al., 2013; Beutel et al., 2017; Boyd & Bloxham, 2014; Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al., 2016; Grainger et al., 2016; Krause et al., 2014; Tuovinen et al., 2015; Watty et al., 2014), and was considered to be a professional development learning opportunity (Boyd & Bloxham, 2014; Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al., 2016; Krause et al., 2014; Tuovinen et al., 2015). There is an abundance of literature identifying how informal workplace learning takes place through conversation (Boud & Brew, 2013; Boud et al., 2009; Eraut, 2004; Thomson, 2015; Thomson & Trigwell, 2018; Waring & Bishop, 2010), although one common component of teacher professional learning is the emphasis placed on social interaction (Shabani, 2016). The social experience of moderation enables academics to learn from more experienced colleagues (Boyd & Bloxham, 2014; Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al., 2016; Grainger et al., 2016; Krause et al., 2014; O'Connell et al., 2016; Tuovinen et al., 2015; Watty et al., 2014). Consensus moderation has previously been identified as a process through which we can formalise academic learning through the cultivation of a community where dialogue, trust, and

participatory relationships occur (Price, 2005). Consequently, consensus moderation can provide informal professional learning opportunities. Formalising this process would support the call for more professional development on assessment and moderation practices, as was identified as necessary in this review (Beutel et al., 2017; Krause et al., 2014; McDonald, 2016; Price et al., 2011; Tuovinen et al., 2015).

Whilst consensus moderation can provide informal professional learning opportunities, the scoping review identified issues regarding power relations. Power differentials impacted gaining mark agreement (Adie et al., 2013; Boyd & Bloxham, 2014; Grainger et al., 2016; Krause et al., 2014; Orr, 2007; Shay, 2005; Watty et al., 2014), and would consequently impact the learning that could take place. Academics are reported to bring previously learned behaviour and power relations into assessment practices (Tan, 2004, 2009). As consensus moderation requires social interaction, as a socially constructed process, this may result in a situation where individuals adopt different roles (Galbin, 2014), which have the potential to either increase or decrease collaboration (Glaveanu et al., 2020). Whilst Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al. (2016) found that markers tended to welcome moderation feedback, both Orr (2007) and Grainger et al. (2016) found that markers were reluctant to challenge marks, tending to defer to those with more experience and status, such as the unit coordinator. This highlights the need for academics to be confident in their understanding and knowledge of the assessment requirements to have a genuine discussion on mark allocation. One solution to building confidence appears to be using moderation as a community-building activity (Beutel et al., 2017; Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al. 2016; Grainger et al., 2016; McDonald, 2016; Shay, 2005). Through this process, academics can develop a shared understanding and interpretation of the assessment requirements, through checking of consistency in the marking process, can result in increased marker confidence (Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al., 2016; Grainger et al., 2016; O'Connell et al., 2016; Tuovinen et al., 2015; Watty et al., 2014). Although as identified in several of the publications included in this review (Adie et al., 2013; Beutel et al., 2017; Grainger et al., 2016), for this to be successful requires more structure in the moderation meetings.

This review has identified issues and tensions that impact the moderation process. Tuovinen et al. (2015) reported that the current enactment of moderation means that the value gained from the process is merely superficial, and according to Bloxham et al. (2016), is focused on accountability and mark justification purposes, rather than quality assurance. So whilst moderation, and consensus moderation, in particular, were considered to be valuable quality assurance processes, the different practices, and divergent understanding, all point to the need for a more formalised process to be developed. There is also a need for professional

development on moderation (Beutel et al., 2017; Krause et al., 2014; McDonald, 2016; Tuovinen et al., 2015). Pre-marking moderation meetings are an important part of the moderation process for the marking team (Cathcart & Neale, 2012), where calibration activities can be used to diminish inconsistencies in marking (Beutel et al., 2017; Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al. 2016; Krause et al., 2014; O'Connell et al., 2016; Watty et al., 2014). It may also be time for universities to be more transparent, provide students with information, and engage them in the marking and moderation process (Francis et al., 2019; Joseph et al., 2020; Price et al., 2011).

3.6 Conclusion of this Chapter: Post-Chapter Moderation

This chapter has identified and analysed the extant literature on consensus moderation in higher education. The findings of this scoping review indicate that there is currently limited knowledge on the process of consensus moderation, and there is limited evidence that can guide practice. Although themes surrounding moderation were developed from the available publications, further research is required to understand the nature and consequence of consensus moderation as a whole. Much remains unknown about the process of consensus moderation in the complex socio-cultural environments of higher education, and the effects of these consensus moderation processes in terms of consistency in mark allocation. Generating new knowledge for academics, academic developers, and policymakers will enable a more effective and efficient approach to consensus moderation practices. As such, the need for more research to be focused on this area cannot be overlooked. Consensus moderation practices have the potential to guide assessment quality assurance practices and provide a vehicle through which we both educate academics and students. Further research is required, with a specific focus on areas that may inform academics', academic developers', and policy makers' approaches to embedding consensus moderation practices in the higher education context.

Scoping reviews explore literature over a specified time period and therefore, there is the potential that literature has been published since this review was conducted. An updated search of the literature since the scoping review was conducted is presented in the final chapter (Chapter 8). In the next chapter, I discuss the findings from a series of focus groups exploring the perceptions and experiences of taking part in consensus moderation in higher education.

Chapter 4 Phase Two: Focus Groups with Sessional Academics

“Forces beyond your control can take away everything you possess except one thing, your freedom to choose how you will respond to the situation”

Viktor E Frankl – Auschwitz survivor

4.1 Chapter Introduction: Pre-Chapter Moderation

This chapter contains the manuscript of the findings from a series of focus groups with sessional academics, “Consensus moderation and the sessional academic: valued or powerless and compliant?” which was published in the *International Journal of Academic Development* (Mason et al., 2022). The focus groups were carried out as part of Phase Two (Figure 6). Readers wishing to cite this paper are encouraged to source the final published version available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2022.2036156>.

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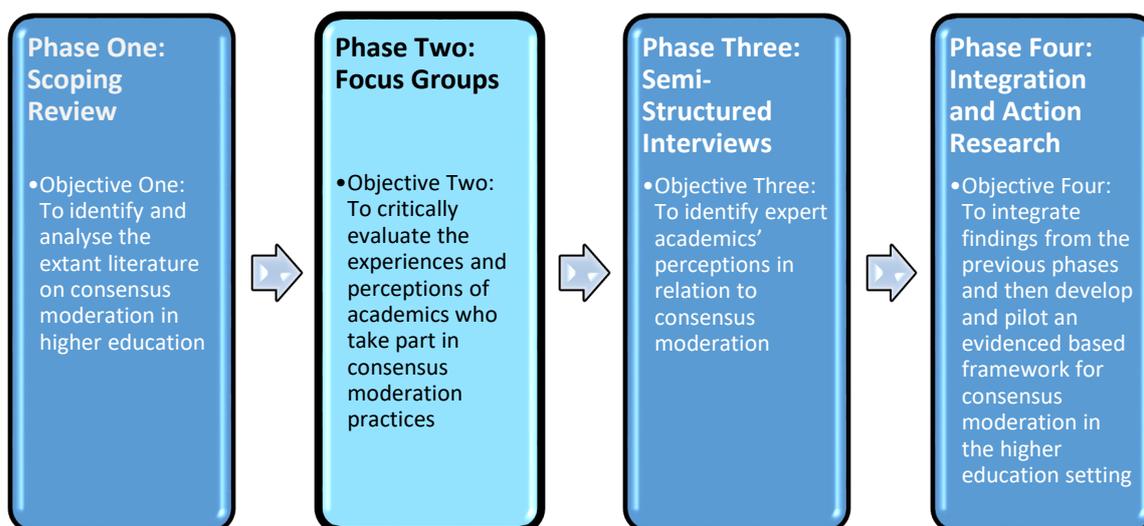


Figure 6.

Flow Diagram of Project Objectives Highlighting Phase Two and Objective Two

Consensus moderation and the sessional academic: valued or powerless and compliant?

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Consensus moderation and the sessional academic: valued or powerless and compliant?

Abstract:

Consensus moderation is an approach to quality assurance where collaboration and discussion take place to agree mark allocation. This study explored sessional academics' perceptions and experiences of consensus moderation in higher education. Data from four focus groups was analysed using Foucauldian Discourse Analysis. The findings reveal four discursive constructions of consensus moderation: necessary for fairness and consistency; fraught and complicated; confusing and lacking consistency; and time demanding. Situated within the discourses of the 'vulnerable position of a sessional academic' and the 'paradox of quality assurance in a neoliberal university.' The findings highlight the need for academic development on moderation processes.

Key words – Consensus Moderation, Sessional Academics, Foucauldian Discourse Analysis, Neoliberal University

Introduction

All university students submit assessments, and a key challenge is to ensure the allocated mark reflects the standard of work submitted. Marking consistency is difficult to achieve as judgement varies across markers (Bloxham et al., 2015; Grainger et al., 2016; O'Connell et al., 2016). Variations are attributable to the tacit knowledge of individual markers (Bloxham, 2009; Grainger et al., 2019a), their expertise, previous experiences (Grainger et al., 2019a), and individual biases (Orr & Bloxham, 2013). Achieving consistency is further compounded by the number of markers (Watty et al., 2014), and their understanding of the required assessment standards (Grainger et al., 2019b).

Moderation is an important quality assurance activity to check marking consistency (Mahmud & Sanderson, 2011) and is used to ensure the validity and reliability of allocated marks (Sadler, 2013). Consensus moderation (also known as social moderation) is one model whereby collaboration and discussion take place between markers to reach a shared understanding of assessment standards and agreement on mark allocation (Sadler, 2013). This is a commonly adopted approach to quality assurance and fairness, yet the process can be complex and fraught (Beutel et al., 2017) as it involves a complicated process of social learning and decision making (Hipkins & Robertson, 2011).

Many academics responsible for marking are not ongoing employees (Ryan et al., 2013). The casualisation of academic work is a global issue and there are various terms used to

describe casual employment (e.g., teaching associate, tutor, casual or sessional academic; Crawford & Germov, 2015). Here, the term 'sessional' is adopted as the common term in Australia for academics employed on an hourly basis with no leave entitlements (May et al., 2013).

Higher education in Australia has always employed sessionals, although there has been a noted recent growth in the number employed (Baré et al., 2020). Baré et al. (2020), citing the Department of Higher Education, Skills and Employment, noted that 31% of the total teaching academic workforce were employed casually. The increased use of sessionals provides greater flexibility to cope with increasing and fluctuating student numbers as well as reducing costs, considered to be part of neoliberalism in higher education (Brown et al., 2010; May et al., 2013). With the introduction of competition, corporatism and consumerism in higher education (Marginson, 2004), neoliberalism focuses on a market/quasi-market economy (Marginson, 2018). One where the *“human capital value of education has been recontextualised as a private good which is tied to a market-orientated commodification of knowledge within universities, underpinned by a repositioning of universities as entrepreneurial enterprises”* (Guion Akdağ & Swanson, 2018, p. 67).

Despite the growing reliance on sessionals for teaching and marking, there is limited research on sessionals and moderation practices. Crimmins et al. (2016) and Lekkas and Winning (2017) found that moderation can support quality assurance, enhance sessionals' understanding of assessment standards, and help to facilitate engagement and feelings of belonging and inclusion. Grainger et al. (2016) identified moderation contributes to building communities through discussions that support the development of a shared understanding of the assessment requirements, however, they also identified issues of power and deference to the unit coordinator. Marking moderation is an important quality assurance process, and consensus moderation is a known method for achieving reliability and consistency in marking. Given the increasing role of sessionals in marking and consensus moderation, there has been little investigation into the social factors that impact the decision-making processes in consensus moderation. This paper aims to expand the sector's knowledge to improve consensus moderation practices involving sessionals by exploring their perceptions and experiences of consensus moderation.

Methods

Study Design

Based on the premise that what makes us human is shaped by the socio-cultural environment (Chirkov, 2020), and given that consensus moderation is a highly social activity, we adopted a socio-cultural theoretical framework for this research. Specifically, the study is informed by the work of Foucault (1980) on the dynamic relationship between discourses, power, and the subject, to explore the experiences of sessionals in consensus moderation. Discourses are defined by Foucault as “*a certain way of speaking,*” impacted by historical social and institutional practices, which form knowledge and how individuals view and understand the world (Foucault, 1972, p. 193). Therefore, in recognition that power influences human interactions and that the social world is affected by multiple sources of power expressed through discourses (Given, 2008), data was analysed using Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (Willig, 2013).

Data collection

The research was conducted within one Australian university in 2019 following ethical approval (HRE2018-0051). A university-wide email invitation was circulated to sessionals through the Directors of Learning and Teaching. Participation was voluntary with participants ‘opting in’ by making direct contact with the primary researcher. The authors are continuing academics in higher education and therefore acknowledge their perspectives of consensus moderation informed the study design. To limit the impact of power differentials, the focus group facilitator did not work with any of the participants. This created distance from the research subjects and supported a critical stance (Gair, 2012). For consistency, the same researcher carried out all data collection.

Focus groups explored the personal experiences of sessionals involved in consensus moderation and were selected to examine the intersections between pedagogy, politics, and inquiry (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013). Focus groups elicit more personal and sensitive disclosures than individual interviews (Guest et al., 2017), building on the synergistic potential of group member engagement (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013).

Four focus groups were conducted in a quiet private location on-campus. Eleven sessionals took part, eight female and three male, with ages ranging from 26years to 59years. Participants had been teaching in higher education for a total of 58years (range 1.5years - 9years); two had teaching qualifications and one a PhD. The focus group guide, informed by a scoping review on consensus moderation, commenced with an introductory and rapport-

building phase to ensure participants felt comfortable in sharing their personal experiences (Liamputtong, 2007). The sessionals were forthcoming in sharing their experiences suggesting that the rapport-building approach was successful.

The open-ended focus group questions began with broad questions on knowledge, experience, and perceptions of moderation and consensus moderation, before funnelling to more specific questions. This encouraged free expression and interaction to facilitate rich content. Data saturation was realised with four focus groups, in keeping with Guest et al. (2017) who identified that three focus groups are sufficient to capture the most prevalent themes. The focus groups were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

Data was analysed using the six-stage approach to Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) outlined by Willig (2013). The process started with listening and re-listening to the audio files of each focus group and reading and rereading the transcripts. For each focus group, analysis commenced by identifying how consensus moderation was constructed (both implicitly and explicitly). The identified constructions were then positioned within discourses. This was followed by examining what was gained by participants from constructing consensus moderation in the different ways, their functions, and how these relate to each other. The subject positions were then identified and the relationship between the discourses and practice identified. Finally, the relationships between the discourses and subjectivity (how individuals think and/or feel) were explored. Individual focus group findings were then collated.

The analytical process was a fluid iterative process, with the authors meeting to facilitate analysis, consistent with FDA method, and to enhance the validity of findings. To enrich transparency and rigour the analysis was tabulated and the multiple cycles of analysis and discussion were documented (Greckhamer & Cilesiz, 2014). Triangulation was achieved by comparing analysis from two or more researchers. A reflexive journal and audit trail were used to record issues or tensions that may impact the research process and any subsequent decisions taken (Kitto et al., 2008). The results have been structured consistent with the analysis process: that is, discursive constructions, discourses, action orientation, positioning, practice, and subjectivity. For this paper, we have reported on Stage 1 and Stage 2 of the FDA analysis, in order words, the discursive constructions of consensus moderation and the discourse in which the discursive constructions were situated.

Results

Four discursive constructions related to consensus moderation were identified. The first was fairness and consistency, with sessionals making frequent reference to *“keep[ing] it fair for students.”* Sessionals discussed how consensus moderation helped create a shared understanding of the marking criteria so they could do *“the right thing for the student.”* It gave them confidence in their marking and reassured them that, should there be an appeal, a defensible rationale and process had been followed.

The second discursive construct was that consensus moderation was fraught and complicated. One participant used the analogy of *“peeling an onion”* and went on to say that *“at the end of it, you know, what everyone wants to do is cry.”* They cited a lack of training, large student numbers, issues with different personalities, and egos as impacting on the dialogue and engagement with consensus moderation. As one participant stated, *“It’s fraught with all sorts of outside influences that um, make it quite difficult to achieve.”* They stated that it *“felt like the unit coordinator sees moderation as a hassle”* reporting how unit coordinators say *“ugh we’ve got to do marking moderation”* and *“we’ll get through it.”*

Third, consensus moderation was constructed as confusing with descriptions such as *“chaotic and unwieldy.”* Sessionals identified that there was a lack of consistency and interchangeable terminology used by unit coordinators (particularly moderation and consensus moderation), which added to the confusion. They identified the irony inherent where they were *“expected to be consistent”* in their marking. Some participants described meetings between the unit coordinator and sessionals as ineffective as they were *“silent kind of things [and] I feel like I was in no place to have such input.”* Others reported the unit coordinator looked at marker averages to see if they were marking consistently, *“some unit coordinators really focus on the average,... whereas others as long as you’re not, you know, twenty percent average different to someone else it doesn’t really matter.”* Others spoke of how unit coordinators looked at the number of failing students: *“and say, okay, your percentage is this and this is how many people have failed versus the other markers.”* The sessionals identified this as illogical: *“someone might have loads of bad assignments and loads of fails and... if you get some extreme ones it’s gonna bring that average down.”* It was clear that participants struggled with the inconsistencies or contradictions between practices and the purpose: to agree on the allocation of marks.

Finally, consensus moderation was constructed as time-demanding. All participants described how marking and consensus moderation took much more time than their allocated paid workload, *“We expect you to mark this assignment in 20 minutes even if it’s 15 pages long and it’s a really complex essay.”* The time allocated to consensus moderation varied by unit

coordinator. Some unit coordinators spent time to help the sessional markers to *“get the jist of how to kind of like, how harsh to be, how not harsh to be.”* On these occasions, the sessional described how they marked several assignments and then had *“a meeting with the unit coordinator and you go through and you discuss how certain questions are answered”* and then *“you get the go-ahead.”* They referred to working additional unpaid hours *“we’re not paid for the moderation process.”* However, in other units, sessionals stated that the unit coordinator invested no time moderating with the sessionals, *“I’ve just had to figure it out of like how I could be consistent.”* Some sessionals reported that moderation was carried out with minimum time, as a tick box exercise, as *“part of the rules.”* They described how, when unit coordinators took this approach, consensus moderation was cursory or tokenistic, often being carried out before results were released in a *“panicked day.”*

Discourses

The four discursive constructions were situated within two interwoven discourses. The first discourse illuminates the vulnerable position of the sessional academic. Sessionals spoke about how the majority of assessment marking was being carried out by sessionals, yet they were *“at the mercy of other people’s ideas.”* The majority of sessionals (both experienced and inexperienced) voiced feeling unheard and powerless, repeatedly expressing how they *“have like barely any rights”* and *“we don’t really get a lot of support.”* It was described as *“we really like do the bulk [of teaching and marking]... but we have no power at all.”* Whilst not common, some of the more experienced sessionals found their opinion was, at times, acknowledged yet not respected *“because if it doesn’t fit the bigger picture of what they’re after, it will be thank you for your opinion, we really appreciate that, we can think about it further, but it’s not actually, nothing is done.”*

The precarious position of sessionals was palpable. Sessionals expressed a desire for continuing work and described how, if they wanted work, they were reliant on the unit coordinator to employ them in a subsequent study period, and consequently they felt pressure to agree and not *“rock the boat.”* It was evident that sessionals internalised this status and modified behaviour to increase their chances of obtaining future work. Participants reported how they *“consciously mark to the middle-grade space where everyone is”* or *“slide it up to a pass.”* They reported that they *“don’t want to stick out,”* and so modify their marking by grading *“to where everyone is.”* What is more, they directly identified a *“power disparity”* and because they *“want the work”* they *“accept and say I’ll go with that.”*

The sessionals described how the unit coordinator undertook hidden surveillance through checking their marking, which they found to be *“scary”* and *“daunting.”* They feared

constantly being judged: *"having moderation is sort of like, "Yes we're watching you and like you need to do a good job."* The unequal power was tangible with sessionals describing the need to *"be on the ball all the time,"* resulting in feelings of frustration, confusion, and vulnerability. The lack of power was further exacerbated by instances of sessionals' grade allocation being changed by a unit coordinator (through *"unit coordination moderation"*) without any discussion or communication: *"they get bumped up and then they pass – no dialogue – just bumped up."* As one sessional noted, this *"makes it clear that there's a hierarchy."*

The second discourse focused on the paradox of quality assurance in a neoliberal university. Large student numbers, issues with different personalities, and the dynamics of the teaching team all impacted engagement and the opportunity for dialogue in the moderation processes, resulting in reduced capacity to achieve the intended quality assurance outcomes (i.e. consistency in marking). Sessionals stated that consensus moderation was difficult to achieve when the allocated resources, particularly paid time, were limited. Ultimately the business need and the constraints imposed by the university result in the moderation quality assurance processes lacking rigor, at times being carried out as quickly as possible, as it was considered to be *"not optional from a university point of view."*

Whilst consensus moderation was constructed as necessary for 'fairness and consistency,' the sessionals discussed conflict between maintaining academic standards and student retention, with a focus on *"retention, pass rates, and dollars."* They raised concerns about market forces shaping higher education, *"the business model, the pandering to passing students when like they don't deserve it or they just haven't demonstrated a pass"* They reported being *"told to find marks"* and *"there's too many fails, we need to go through all the fails and try to bump them up by a mark or two."* This impacted on them: *"I feel like the strongest emotional reaction I get is like frustration when students are passed, when they should fail."* Yet, despite these concerns, a number of the sessionals appeared to understand the pressures placed on academics, *"We're all fighting the same system."* The hierarchy between the unit coordinator and sessional combined with the use of surveillance impacts behaviour, bringing sessionals into line to ensure the consumers of higher education are satisfied and workflow maximises profits: *"they really don't want to fail people... and moderation process I've found was kind of complicit in that."*

Discussion

This study explored sessionals' perceptions and experiences of consensus moderation in one Australian university. The findings reveal significant challenges to achieving quality

assurance through moderation. Whilst sessionals are committed to fairness and consistency, consensus moderation is fraught and complicated, confusing, lacks consistency, and is time demanding. Sessionals' precarious employment within the neoliberal university highlights the paradox inherent in committing to using consensus moderation for quality assurance, and the failure to allocate appropriate resources to ensure consensus moderation can be meaningfully undertaken.

Participants' construction of consensus moderation as necessary for fairness and consistency was identified in previous studies (Adie et al., 2013; Crimmins et al., 2016; Grainger et al., 2016), however, this study identifies tensions between what is intended and what happens. All sessionals expressed that they cared about students, yet, sessional behaviours (such as modifying their marking) appeared driven by a desire to maintain their employment, further revealing the tensions between wanting to do the right thing by students and the limitations imposed by the university business model. Drawing on Foucault's notion of the "*normalising gaze*" (Foucault, 1977, p. 184), it appears sessionals internalised their situation and modified their marking behaviour to increase their chances of future work. Whilst the sessionals are able to choose whether or not to modify their behaviour, the normalising gaze becomes a mode of social control and self-regulation in which the sessionals become compliant.

The vulnerable subject position of the sessionals identified in this research echoes other studies where they were reported to lack a voice, having to fend for themselves with limited support and a degree of isolation (Richardson et al., 2019; Richardson et al., 2020). Concerns about job security is consistent with findings from earlier studies (Hitch et al., 2018; Richardson et al., 2019). Whilst job insecurity applies to the wider academic community, it is more marked for sessionals as precarious employees. This situation is unlikely to change while research holds greater prestige and recognition than teaching (Cretchley et al., 2013, Parker, 2012). Recent drives for cost efficiencies and cutbacks have tended to focus on teaching resulting in cheaper sessional academic labour to deliver education and mark assessments (Halffman & Radder, 2015). Both here and in previous studies there is evidence of limited orientation and professional development opportunities (Baik et al., 2018; Hitch et al., 2018; Percy et al., 2008; University of Sydney Casuals Network, 2020), compounding the sessionals' invisibility position in the workforce, although the benefits of such programs are well documented (Fredericks & Bosanquet, 2017; Matthews et al., 2017). Given that sessionals undertake large amounts of marking, they need to understand the quality assurance processes required to deliver reliable and valid courses. Academic developers are ideally situated to provide this practice perspective of professional development (Boud & Brew, 2013).

A key aspect of consensus moderation is how the mark or grade is agreed upon through discussion and collaboration (Sadler, 2013), as a result, this can be a valuable source of both informal and formal professional development (Adie et al., 2013; Boyd & Bloxham, 2014; Crimmins et al., 2016). For new or novice markers this can result in a shared understanding of the assessment requirements and grade standards (Adie et al., 2013), and a sense of collegiality and support (Bloxham et al., 2016; Crimmins et al., 2016; Lekkas & Winning, 2017). As consensus moderation is a socially constructed process, these processes over time become habituated by individuals who “play out” different roles (Galbin, 2014) and, as seen in this research, the process also has the potential to decrease or increase collaboration.

We found that only a small number of unit coordinators invested time in developing the marking capability of the sessionals, supporting earlier research by Richardson et al. (2020). In this study, the timing and amount of discussion varied and mostly focused on post-marking moderation, rather than early discussion of the required standards or calibration activities, whereby sessionals mark a set number of assessments and then obtain feedback from the unit coordinator. Calibration has been found to be time efficient and enhances the reliability of assessment judgements (O'Connell et al., 2016). These early conversations and discussions as part of the consensus moderation process contribute to a shared understanding of assessment standards, practices, and tacit knowledge (Crimmins et al., 2016; Grainger et al., 2019b), and should be encouraged. These findings support earlier work by Bloxham et al. (2015) who identified that the current process of moderation does little to help calibrate markers to the required standards.

Consensus moderation, whilst identified as a quality assurance activity, is also reported to provide validation and confidence in marking, thereby giving reassurance to sessionals (Adie et al., 2013; Bloxham et al., 2016; Crimmins et al., 2016; Grainger et al., 2016; Grainger & Weir, 2016). In our study, however, most sessionals reported that current processes led to increased stress and decreased confidence. They reported how unit coordinators used surveillance, in the form of hidden checking, to meet the quality assurance requirements. This surveillance, along with reports of marks being changed without discussion, aligns sessionals with unit coordinator marking expectations; this is achieved through the unequal power relationship and resonates with Foucault's notion of the normalising gaze (Foucault, 1977). The sessionals recognition of this unequal power appeared to trigger agency, described by Foucault et al. (1988, p. 18) as “*technology of the self*,” resulting in the sessionals building their own networks and relationships to counter the lack of support provided by the unit coordinator. Through their peer networks, the sessionals in this study found confidence,

collegiality, and support, and undertook their own calibration activities within informal mentoring arrangements, similar to the community of practice for sessionals described by Dean et al. (2017).

Some authors have suggested that power may impact moderation activities (Adie et al., 2013; Crimmins et al., 2016; Grainger et al., 2016). The discourses within this study highlighted the nature and structure of power-knowledge relationships and hierarchies, with sessionals stating they were powerless and unheard. This is in strong contrast to the construction of consensus moderation as necessary for fairness and consistency or as a process of quality assurance, neither of which can be achieved if there is no authentic agreement between markers due to a power imbalance stemming from insecure employment. Perceived coercion in mark allocation was evident, through the hidden threat of no future work. This has a far-reaching potential impact on students and highlights the paradox of neoliberal quality assurance practices in this context. Taking this to the extreme, students could be graduating with degrees when they have not met the requirements or could be awarded lower degree classifications than they deserve. Mitigating this risk, unit coordinators are responsible for the coordination, moderation, and quality assurance of the unit and assessments (Pepper & Roberts 2016). However, unit coordinators have limited preparation or recognition for this role (Ryan et al., 2013) and, as highlighted in this study, the effect of power and dominance in consensus moderation on sessionals' marking behaviour may impact the marks awarded, and students' marks may not reflect their true achievement.

All sessionals in this study reported that consensus moderation was time demanding and resulted in many additional unpaid hours of work, confirming previous findings (Herrera, 2019; Kampmark, 2020; Richardson et al., 2019; University of Sydney Casuals Network, 2020). Consequently, either sessional staff work beyond their workload allocation or consensus moderation becomes a tick box exercise. This highlights the higher education sector's focus on efficiencies of scale and speed, regardless of the learning that takes place and the impact on working conditions.

Conclusion

We aimed to study sessional academic' perceptions and experiences of consensus moderation in higher education. The constructions of consensus moderation raise several concerns. . The vulnerability of sessionals along with the lack of support, evidence of hierarchy, and use of power, coercion, and surveillance inhibited collaboration and academic development. Subsequently marking behaviour was modified to increase the chance of obtaining future work. This study was carried out in one university in Australia, which may

potentially limit transferability, however, the findings echo the growing concerns in the literature about the support of sessionals. There is a need for additional research on processes to support effective moderation practices, and the development and evaluation of a framework for consensus moderation as a more formalised process to manage power differentials. We call for targeted strategies to support sessionals and the provision of adequate resources for moderation. Specifically, it is recommended that academic developers provide professional development for sessionals and unit coordinators in assessment quality assurance, including the process of calibration and collaborative consensus moderation practices.

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4.2 Conclusion of this Chapter: Post-Chapter Moderation

In this chapter, I have provided a manuscript of the findings from a series of focus groups with sessional academics, which was published in the *International Journal of Academic Development*. The next chapter presents the findings from a series of focus groups with fixed-term and continuing academics.

Chapter 5 Phase Two: Focus Groups with Fixed Term and Continuing Academics

“The wisest mind has something yet to learn”
George Santayana

5.1 Chapter Introduction: Pre-Chapter Moderation

This chapter contains the manuscript of the findings from a series of focus groups with fixed-term and continuing academics carried out as part of Phase Two (Figure 7). The Manuscript entitled “A Foucauldian Discourse Analysis of Unit Coordinators’ experiences of Consensus Moderation in an Australian university” was published in Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education (Mason et al., 2022). The focus groups were carried out as part of Phase Two (Figure 7). Readers wishing to cite this paper are encouraged to source the final published version available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2022.2064970>

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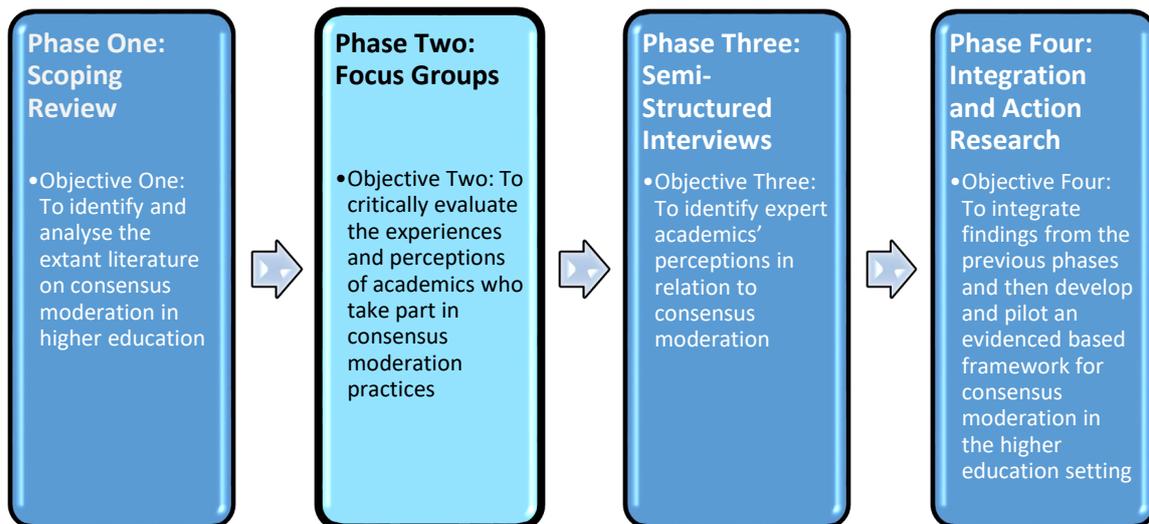


Figure 7.

Flow Diagram of Project Objectives Highlighting Phase Two and Objective Two

A Foucauldian Discourse Analysis of Unit Coordinators' experiences of Consensus Moderation in an Australian university

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A Foucauldian Discourse Analysis of Unit Coordinators' experiences of Consensus Moderation in an Australian university

Abstract:

Consensus moderation, where collaboration and discussion take place to reach an agreement on mark allocation, is a frequently used approach to quality assurance in higher education. Unit coordinators play a vital role in facilitating consensus moderation, yet limited research has focused on their role in moderation practices. This study explored unit coordinators' perceptions and experiences of consensus moderation in Australian higher education through five focus groups. Using Foucauldian Discourse Analysis, data analysis identified three discursive constructions of consensus moderation situated in the wider discourse of the neoliberal university: as a truly collaborative process, an illusion, and a process to manage markers. Unit coordinators in this study were positioned as either supportive, compliant but ineffective, or powerful. In contrast, markers were positioned as helpful and compliant although inexperienced and needing support; uncooperative, resistant, troublesome and demanding; or inexperienced and malleable. This paper provides new considerations to consensus moderation practice, it has identified varied knowledge and understanding of consensus moderation processes and practice. These findings can inform moderation policy and practices and unit coordinator professional development.

Keywords – Consensus Moderation, Unit Coordinators, Foucauldian Discourse Analysis, Neoliberal Universities

Introduction

University degrees in Australia comprise of discrete units of study coordinated by academics known as ‘unit coordinators’ (Pepper and Roberts 2016), or module coordinators/subject leaders. Whilst unit coordinators do not necessarily recognise themselves as leaders, they play a significant leadership role in coordinating, supporting, and mentoring the teaching team (Holt et al. 2013). They oversee unit assessments and moderation (Pepper and Roberts 2016), a quality assurance process to check for consistency in assessment marking (Mahmud and Sanderson 2011).

Ensuring consistency is challenging, with variations in mark allocation being due to the markers’ understanding of assessment requirements (Sadler 2010), tacit knowledge (Bloxham 2009), expertise and experience (Bloxham et al. 2015), prior student knowledge and individual biases (Orr and Bloxham 2013). The complexity of achieving consistency is exacerbated by recent economic and neoliberal changes in the higher education sector, affecting most of the western world (Olssen 2016). These changes have resulted in a market/quasi-market higher education economy (Marginson 2018), the massification of education (Evans et al. 2021), and increased corporatism with a focus on efficiencies and consumerism (Marginson 2013). It has been suggested that Foucault would view these changes as part of neoliberalism as they embody “*economic discourses of competition.*” (Raaper 2017, 322).

There are now large student cohorts with sessional academics undertaking the marking, supervised by unit coordinators (Ryan, Connell, and Burgess 2017). This casual workforce is designed to help with fluctuating enrolments (Norton, and Cherastidtham 2018), improve efficiencies and increase profit margins (Thomas, Forsyth, and Bonnell 2020). Casualisation also increases the complexity of achieving consistency in the marking process, as markers need to socialise into the unit and understand the marking requirements (Adie, Lloyd, and Beutel 2013, Grainger, Adie, and Weir 2016).

Assessment outcomes are important, they reflect the student learning that has taken place (Crossouard 2010), and determines a student’s future (Harman and McDowell 2011). The effect of power is evident in the assessment process with different academic roles, or subject positions, having more or less power (Leach, Neutze, and Zepke 2000). For example, in consensus moderation, there is a power imbalance not only between students and those marking their assessments (Raaper 2017) but also between the unit coordinator and the sessional.

The neoliberal changes position students as consumers of higher education (O’Leary and Cui 2020), with a focus on student satisfaction (O’Donovan 2017), transparency, accountability, and consistency in assessment marking (Boyd and Bloxham 2014). Australia,

the setting for this study, has adopted a self-regulated approach to assessment assurance (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency 2021), predominantly using internal moderation (Barrie et al. 2014), whereas other countries, for example, the United Kingdom, use external assessment moderation in addition to internal moderation (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2018).

Consensus moderation (also known as social moderation) is one approach to moderation where markers mark a piece of work and then collaborate, discuss and negotiate to reach a consensus on the mark allocation (Sadler 2013). Consensus building, through calibration activities and conversations before marking, helps to develop a shared understanding of the required standards (Crimmins et al. 2016; Grainger, Crimmins, and Burton 2019; O'Connell et al. 2016) and increases confidence and consistency in both judgements and marks across multiple markers (Beutel, Adie, and Lloyd 2017; Crimmins et al. 2016; O'Connell et al. 2016).

Consensus moderation has the potential to provide quality assurance of assessments and professional development, with markers learning from more experienced colleagues through receiving feedback and taking part in shared conversations (Crimmins et al. 2016). The unit coordinator should lead and facilitate consensus moderation activities and, to maximise the potential of consensus moderation, needs to engage in collaborative discussions with the markers (Sadler 2013). However, previous studies have suggested not all unit coordinators take this opportunity to develop markers' capability (Richardson, Suseno, and Wardale 2020). Power and seniority may impact the consensus moderation process, as markers may defer to those in power or with more experience (Grainger, Adie, and Weir 2016). Sessionals are vulnerable in the moderation process, with reports of intimidation and coercion by unit coordinators resulting in sessionals marking to a safe space to reduce the chance of their assessment being selected for moderation (Mason, Roberts, and Flavell 2022).

Unit coordinators play a vital role in facilitating consensus moderation, yet limited research has focused on their role in assessment practices (Holt et al. 2013). Given the conflicting research findings highlighting both positive and negative features of consensus moderation, along with the lack of research examining the unit coordinator role in this process, it is essential to undertake further research into unit coordinators' experiences with consensus moderation practices. This paper explores the following research question: What are the perceptions and experiences of unit coordinators taking part in consensus moderation in higher education? Findings from this study can be used to inform future policy and enhance practice for all academics engaging in consensus moderation, to support fairness and equity in the marking process for students.

Materials and Methods

Study Design

This qualitative study explored unit coordinators' construction of consensus moderation through a Foucauldian discourse lens. Whilst there are different ways of interpreting and applying Foucault's work, we have used Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) as described by Willig (2013) to guide our understanding of the discursive constructions (axis of knowledge) related to consensus moderation and the subjectivities (axis of ethics) that are enabled or constrained through the creation of desired or positive behaviours (axis of power). Acknowledging Foucault's focus and views changed over time (Graham 2011), this study is underpinned by Foucault's theorisation of subjectification (Faubion 2000), which "*frames the process of becoming a subject within a discursive power/knowledge production*" (Lehn-Christiansen 2011, 312).

Foucault referred to discourse as "*a certain way of speaking*" being impacted by social and historic practices (Foucault 1972, 193). Language plays a key role in how we build and respond to others (Glaveanu et al. 2020), and through interactions and discourse, we continually construct and co-construct each other (Chirkov 2020). In this way, the 'subject position,' or 'subjectification' has the potential to be created, accepted, negotiated and transformed (Allan 2013). The notion of 'subject position' includes some form of power or control (Foucault 1982). Foucault (1980) described power as something that is everywhere, intertwined with knowledge and circulating within and around us through social relations. Power is considered both restrictive and productive and has the capacity to be resisted (Martin, Gutman, and Hutton 1988). It is for this reason that Foucault (1977) proposed that any analysis of power must focus on the point of application. In consensus moderation practices, it is those involved and the discourses they produce that transmit and produce knowledge, ethics and power. This study, therefore, explores the perceptions and experiences of academics in higher education in one Australian university, based on the premise that this microcosm may reflect what is happening globally within neoliberal universities.

Data collection

This research was undertaken at one large Australian metropolitan university (more than 50,000 students and 3,000 staff) during 2018/2019, following ethical approval (HRE2018-0051). The authors are all academics working in higher education. Two are unit coordinators and acknowledge that the design of this study was informed by their previous experiences.

A university-wide email invitation was circulated to all academics who were unit coordinators. Participation was voluntary, and there was no power relationship between the authors and the participants. Data was collected through five focus groups (participants ranged from two to four per focus group) exploring the unit coordinators' personal experiences of consensus moderation. Focus groups provide richness of social interaction and group dynamics, revealing the way individuals position themselves with each other as they process and discuss the topics being presented, enabling investigation into the connection between pedagogy, politics, and inquiry (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis 2013). The focus group questions explored perceptions and experiences of consensus moderation.

Data saturation was obtained with five focus groups, in keeping with Guest et al. (2017) who reported that 90% of all themes are identified with three to six focus groups. All focus groups were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim and were of a duration (average approximately one hour) to achieve prolonged engagement (Lincoln and Guba 1985). The focus groups included 14 tenured and fixed-term unit coordinators (age range 28 to 54 years) from a range of discipline areas, and all faculties in the university were represented. Participants had been teaching at a university for a total of 145.5 years (range 4 to 20 years).

Data analysis

Willig's (2013) six-stage approach to conducting FDA guided the analysis. Familiarisation included listening repeatedly to audio files and re-reading transcripts. The analysis required close textual analysis processes to examine the language used in the context of contemporary Australian higher education and the relationship between the meaning/knowledge constructed of consensus moderation, the subject positioning, power, and broader discourses. Data analysis was performed initially for each focus group and then collated across focus groups. The analytical process was conducted in a fluid iterative process with multiple cycles of analysis and discussion, documented to enhance transparency and rigor and to provide an audit trail (Greckhamer and Cilesiz 2014). A reflective journal enabled recognition of potential issues or tensions that had the potential to impact the research process so that they could be addressed (Ortlipp 2015).

Findings

Three discursive constructions of consensus moderation were identified: consensus moderation as a truly collaborative process, consensus moderation as an illusion, and consensus moderation as a process to manage markers. The three discursive constructions

were situated within the wider discourse of the neoliberal university. This results section presents the three discursive constructions and the resulting subject positions within the discourse of neoliberalism. Quotations are followed by a reference to the focus group number (e.g., FG1).

Collaborative consensus moderation

First, consensus moderation was constructed as a truly collaborative process by a small number of unit coordinators: *“So we had a collaborative meeting with them [the markers] and then we took a sample of, I think, two papers and talk about how we would each mark it”* (FG5). Unit coordinators identified they were responsible for the unit and the moderation process, *“but not in an authoritative way”* (FG2), more *“we're just all in there together, generally, as partners, in those discussions”* (FG3). They described how *“moderation does need to be an open process so that it's not just whatever you say as the unit coordinator... you do have to be able to have that open relationship with your staff”* (FG5). These discursive accounts denote that the unit coordinators recognise the discipline power that comes with their role and devolve this through collaboration.

These unit coordinators reported consensus moderation as a positive process and acknowledged the benefits of a stable marking team: *“It's always been a productive conversation. I tend to work with people who are on the corridor with me so we already have existing relationships”* (FG2), and *“my markers' are the same markers' that I've been using for a long time”* (FG1).

Through fostering collaborative relationships, these unit coordinators seemed to recognise the complexity of marking and enable negotiation to take place: *“I think marking is definitely one of the hardest things that we do, and it's certainly an imperfect art, and nobody's ever right, and, and we talk a lot, it's all really valuable to hear each other out”* (FG3). Inherent to this approach was the respect for markers, *“You have to respect their autonomy because you know what that, that might feel like to be overridden by the unit coordinator”* (FG4).

The language used in this discursive construction implies consensus moderation was seen as a responsibility and commitment to quality: *“It's a commitment to the quality of the programme that we're delivering, a commitment to the profession, to the discipline, to our external relations”* (FG3). Unit coordinators appeared to feel a duty to ensure the allocated mark reflected the student's achievements *“If it's not been moderated pre, post, intra, how can you say that in the end, whatever mark you're giving is a true reflection of the student's ability and achievement of you know learning outcomes”* (FG2).

Within this discursive construction, there was clear evidence of consumerism in higher education and the powerful role of the student as customers: *"It makes moderation particularly important, to make sure that there's that consistency amongst all..., because otherwise we get crucified, you know, both through student complaints, as well as appeals"* (FG3). A number of participants used the term 'crucified' implying an onslaught of additional work and reputational damage for academics resulting from complaints and appeals. Accordingly, these academics recognised the importance of calibration activities before marking:

"That's what pre-moderation is really about, and... when you have sessionals marking, that process of going through a couple in the beginning and, and getting everyone on the same page, tends to eliminate many of those big differences [in marking]" (FG2).

Whilst serving the purpose of calibration, it was also considered a social activity facilitating team building:

"I think my team see it...as a bit of a team-building, sort of bonding meeting, with a bit of lunch and it's a bit of a catch up as well. And then they seem to have a laugh but then an argument, and then a whinge about students... I find most staff quite look forward to it actually... it's just a bit of a catch up I think with other colleagues... especially with sessionals" (FG4).

Within this discursive construction, the unit coordinators positioned themselves as experienced, caring, and supportive. They used phrases, such as, *"offer support to your teaching staff... they're actually supported throughout the marking process as opposed to a kind flying blind"* (FG5), and *"it's capacity building and sort of mentorship in the sense of markers wouldn't necessarily know what is good or better practise unless someone tells them"* (FG2). With this nurturing approach, they positioned their markers as helpful and compliant, but inexperienced and in need of support. They described the markers as *"open to having consensus and being able to say I was wrong, I made a mistake"* and described having a collegial discussion *"Okay. I understand what you're saying. However, this is why I reviewed it this way...Does this make sense?"* (FG5). Whilst only a relatively small number of unit coordinators engaged in this discursive construction, it does suggest that consensus moderation can be an effective approach to providing assessment quality assurance with unit coordinators adopting an inclusive leadership approach.

An illusion of consistency

Second, consensus moderation was constructed as an illusion of consistency, where unit coordinators positioned themselves as compliant with university expectations of

moderation and consensus moderation, but ineffective in facilitating collaborative processes. For some unit coordinators, this involved lengthy or awkward discussions, whereas others reported that markers were *“willing to be very malleable and sort of...conceding to the expertise of the unit coordinator”* (FG2). In particular, they reported difficulties trying to engage junior staff in collaborative discussions, as those markers appeared to defer to seniority:

“I do find that tension, and... you know, the line manager to most of those staff and course coordinator, there's been that complexity where I want someone to argue with me, I want someone to tell me that I'm not seeing it the right way, but depending on the combination, some of them aren't shy, but there are definitely certain combinations where I know I'm being told, “Yes, yes, I'm happy with that,” when actually they're, they're appeasing the manager...we aren't reaching consensus on something. They're saying yes to me” (FG3).

Whereas for others, the discourse illustrates how the process was chaotic and frustrating:

“And the results can be dramatically different, and we'll discuss why they're dramatically different and we'll have a whiteboard and tables and all sorts of things... and those differences don't seem to get resolved... there's still this big differences, even though we've been through this process of all talking about how they're going to be marked” (FG4).

Some unit coordinators pointed to more negative experiences, where they were unable to reach consensus on the mark allocation: *“It's like a kind of a court of law on who has the stronger argument”* (FG4) and *“...it was a bloodbath... I mean, ranting, people ranting and raving and yelling at each other... you know, like people feeling suicidal, maniacal... it was really a bloodbath”* (FG3). These unit coordinators reported how they responded to the variation in mark allocation, seeming to lack the skills or processes to resolve the different perspectives: *“If no one is giving in, we usually go the halfway point”* (FG2) or use a *“third opinion which would usually fall closer to one or the other. And that generally solves the arguments”* (FG4). The choice of words (for example, ‘ranting and yelling’, ‘bloodbath’ and ‘if no one is giving in’) suggest the exertion of random power and chaotic approaches to resolving the differences in mark allocation.

The discourses in this construction, positioned markers as uncooperative, resistant, troublesome and demanding. It was evident that, for some, consensus moderation increases the visibility of biases, status and power:

“I just find that the personal element comes into it really strongly when a tutor loves or dislikes a student, and where they happened to be moderating that student. And

sometimes it's... that tutor tends to get right behind the student and argue their point to the death that that student is a distinction student and not a pass student or shouldn't be a fail or whatever" (FG4).

These dynamics appeared to be more intense with high stakes assessments such as final year research projects, honours, and thesis marking:

"We have had such a significant issue with that kind of underpinning culture associated with...moderation management of our honours...we've seen this absolute clash in the way they think about it... to the point where, I've had to almost say, "I will arbitrate marking this... because the students were becoming the pawns. "No, I am not ... I'm not budging from my mark of 60." It's like, "Yeah, but you're not God, are you? It's the most peculiar thing, because these same groups are teaching other units, and it's not like that at all...they become very vested ... in competing for their own student...somehow or other, knocking down the one... like there's a podium. It's the weirdest thing, because these are otherwise very experienced grownups, who get on very well, and moderate well in other units" (FG3).

Within this discursive construction, some of the unit coordinators wanted to avoid conflict and it was evident that they internalised this and made changes to their behaviour to maintain their working relationships:

"It's very, very, very challenging because you've got lots of different personalities...people that are very set in their ways... I don't understand... what their course is about, so it can be really, really challenging. I tread very carefully because I don't like to make enemies, I like to keep friends. I have to work with everyone... and people need to understand that it's not about them" (FG1).

A process to manage the markers

The third discursive construction of consensus moderation was as a process to manage the markers, with some indicating their power by referring to themselves as *"the boss"* (FG3). Many of these unit coordinators discussed an expert-led model of consensus moderation, where they were confident to use their knowledge and positional power:

"I will communicate with the tutors about where we all sat and who could maybe go up or down or whatever...I feel much more comfortable taking a position of sort of authority on it... you know having taught the unit for four years in a row" (FG2).

This discursive construction indicated how they used their positional power to ensure or force compliance:

"I think you're (the unit coordinator) an arbitrator, that you have the final say, which might not be right, but that's what the perception is and that you will lead the moderation process" (FG4).

For other participants, this was more extreme: *"Well at the end of the day, the unit coordinator's decisions is final [laughs]. That's that. That's pretty much what happens in my area [banged table with hand]" (FG4).* Other unit coordinators referred to *"academics who really get off on the power" (FG3),* as though this was understood to be common practice.

The unit coordinators indicated how the online marking environment facilitated surveillance on marking behaviours and enabled them to utilise power to force compliance with their expectations. For example, some unit coordinators would email the marker directing them to change the mark:

"I've moderated and they [the markers] haven't even changed the marks for those students that I've moderated. And ... one came back and said, "Oh, well, I thought that was a suggestion." And I've had to explain that as a unit coordinator, it's not a suggestion, but it's actually instruction" (FG5).

The use of the word *'instruction'* implies that the original marker has no part to play in the consensus moderation process, a process applied to them by the unit coordinator. Other unit coordinators would adopt different approaches: *"At any time of day I can jump on and see what my markers are doing, what comments they are giving, I can make adjustments and then email them [the marker]" (FG2).* Other unit coordinators would change the marker's allocated mark with little or no contact with the initial marker, reporting *"if you want the marks changed, you're going to have to do it yourself" (FG5),* and *"the poor old unit coordinator often has to spend a lot of time manually moderating going through them to change them" (FG4).* This implies they find consensus moderation burdensome and perceive their needs are subsumed or overridden by the requirements of the university.

The discursive accounts indicated that the unit coordinators justified their forceful behaviour by positioning the markers as inexperienced and malleable: *"when our markers perhaps don't have that fundamental understanding..., and then that consensus can happen within the group, but it might not necessarily be correct, so it's kind of along the lines of that group think" (FG5).* This was confirmed in another focus group when a participant stated: *"I want to be collaborative, but...I'll just ... I have to pull rank because they'll get it wrong" (FG3).*

The unit coordinators in this discursive construction were very aware of and modified their behaviour to be strongly aligned with the neoliberal drivers, rationalising their behaviour towards the markers: *"It was really going to have a big impact if she didn't [change marks] because if she didn't there would be a lot of fails" (FG4),* and *"There were quite big*

implications, and our international students, you know, fee implications and things” (FG4). Some of them openly acknowledged that “it’s a business, you’re looking at viability.... It’s a competitive market so sometimes it’s a bit of a balance” (FG1). Whilst the unit coordinators may find it difficult (‘it’s a bit of a balance’), they evidently felt pressured by the university to keep students enrolled, whilst trying to maintain academic standards “You’ve got time constraints, budget cuts, you need dollar in the bag” (FG1). Statements such as these imply they see themselves as mere workers subject to neoliberal pressures and their role is to pass students to ensure the university is financially viable with satisfied customers.

Time

Across all three discursive constructions were issues of time. All acknowledged that moderation is “*time-consuming,*” taking more time than the workload allocation “*I spend way more hours moderating than I am actually allocated*” (FG1). Many recognised the importance of carrying out consensus moderation, “*I still see it as a necessary important part, so I do it...*”, “*But I recognise that it’s in my own time...I’m doing it for free*” (FG2). They acknowledged that “*maybe you’re not doing all the things that you’re supposed to be doing, but with workload... sometimes it’s just not practical*” (FG2). Those that spend time reducing the inconsistencies rationalised it as saving time later on, as one stated:

“I think that comes into play actually is anticipating the student emails, comes into play in any of this consensus moderation, in terms of minimising future workload. Let’s just give them a lump set, put them in 79, 80, who cares? It’ll stop the emails coming through” (FG4).

Other unit coordinators had a different view, “*it’s a tick box exercise*” stating “*I’m sorry, I don’t have any time to do it [consensus moderation]*” (FG1). The choice of language used appears to indicate self-preservation, suggesting a tension between wanting to do the right thing and complying with the university requirements, combined with the reality that the workload is prohibitive.

Discussion

This study explored unit coordinators’ perceptions and experiences of consensus moderation in higher education. Three discursive constructions of consensus moderation were identified situated in the wider discourse of the neoliberal university: as a truly collaborative process, an illusion, and a process to manage markers. The findings from the study have implications for assessment quality assurance within contemporary higher education which is

characterised by ongoing academic workforce casualisation and staffing reduction. The findings indicate that consensus moderation was considered necessary to achieve fairness and consistency, provide quality in the marking process, and reassure the unit coordinators of the marking standard. However, the way that this was carried out and what was achieved varied as evidenced by the three discursive constructions. The unit coordinators demonstrated varied knowledge and understanding of moderation processes and how to facilitate consensus moderation practice. The requirement for professional development in consensus moderation, including how to be collaborative and 'manage' the power differential was evident.

The small number of unit coordinators who constructed consensus moderation as a truly collaborative process, held calibration meetings before marking where they discussed marking requirements and expected performance standards. This has been reported to develop markers' tacit knowledge (Crimmins et al. 2016), with discussions and feedback on initial marking further enhancing consistency (O'Connell et al. 2016). The importance of relationships between team members in enhancing consistency in the marking judgements has previously been acknowledged (Grainger, Adie, and Weir 2016). In this study, the collaborative unit coordinators tended to work with stable marking teams where relationships had previously been developed and assessment standards were understood. The collaborative unit coordinators discussed the holistic process of moderation regardless of the time required which resulted in long hours well above the allocated workload. They viewed consensus moderation as necessary to reduce inconsistencies in marking and as a form of self-protection against complaints and appeals, which aligns with Foucault's concepts of agency and resistance (Foucault 1980). The strong focus on catering to students' needs, as customers of higher education, highlights increasing consumerism (neoliberalism) in higher education (Burrows 2012).

In the discursive constructions of consensus moderation as an illusion and as a process to manage markers, the unit coordinators appeared to be focused on the post-judgement aspect of quality assurance. This is a commonly held view of moderation (Barrie et al. 2014; Mahmud and Sanderson 2011) and neglects the need for calibration activities and early discussions on the required standards before marking (O'Connell et al. 2016; Watty et al. 2014). The construction of consensus moderation as an illusion meant that unit coordinators appeared compliant with meeting policy requirements, although they were ineffective at obtaining genuine consensus. Establishing and maintaining assessment standards has previously been reported as a significant challenge for unit coordinators (Holt et al. 2013). This research provides evidence of bias and power, consistent with previous research findings proposing power differentials may interfere with gaining consensus (Boyd and Bloxham 2014;

Crimmins et al. 2016; Grainger, Adie, and Weir 2016). The construction of consensus moderation as a process to manage markers was evident where unit coordinators employed the power they perceived came with their role. The changing of marks by unit coordinators in this study is clear evidence of the power and academic ranking, acting as a trade-off between potential self-advantage compared to the advantage gained by others (Attari, Krantz., and Weber 2014). This enables the unit coordinators to carry out the corporate requirements of top-down control, reinforcing neoliberal behaviours, similar to the notion of governmentality to control conduct (Foucault et al. 1991). The unit coordinators can then control the marker, as a form of responsabilisation (Martin, Gutman, and Hutton 1988) and create expected marking behaviours that have a number of benefits for the unit coordinator. With consensus moderation, these unit coordinators are able to act in their own self-interest, for example, reduce the number of complaints and appeals as well as improve potential evaluations from students, in addition to providing an economic advantage for the university in the competitive market environment.

These findings echo an earlier study exploring the sessional experiences of consensus moderation, which identified tensions between what is intended to happen with consensus moderation and what happens in practice (Mason, Roberts, and Flavell 2022). It also earlier work calling for more structure to the process of moderation (Beutel, Adie, and Lloyd 2017). To manage the markers, some of the unit coordinators used the online environment for surveillance on marking behaviours to force compliance with their expectations of the markers, similar to Foucault's panopticon metaphor (Foucault 1977, 208), where power and surveillance are used as a form of social control. Not only do unit coordinators change their behaviour in response to the challenges of consensus moderation and the neoliberal university, but markers are also aware of the surveillance that takes place and modify their marking to a safe space where they had a reduced chance of their marked assessment being selected for moderation (Mason, Roberts, and Flavell 2022). It can be seen that this use of power closes opportunities for collegial working and collaborative discussions.

Earlier studies identified that few unit coordinators take time to improve markers' capability and provide feedback on marking (Richardson, Suseno, and Wardale 2020, Ryan, Connell, and Burgess 2017), and even when feedback is provided, it has been identified that this does not help consistency, as a lack of dialogue across the team minimises the development of a shared understanding of the requirements (Beutel, Adie, and Lloyd 2017). The findings of this study were no different, although Grainger, Adie, and Weir (2016) found there were limited opportunities for providing such feedback. In this study, the issue of time was identified confirming earlier work on the neoliberal universities' focus on finance,

performance indicators, and quality assurance (Kenny 2018), with increased casualisation, and a drive to increase profit margins (Nadolny and Ryan 2015). Consequently, a nominal time is allocated for marking and moderation, with time for moderation activities being identified as an issue in multiple studies (Mason, Roberts, and Flavell 2022, Tuovinen et al. 2015).

This research was conducted in one site, typical of large public universities in Australia, and subject to the same neoliberal pressures as universities across the western world. Whilst the use of a single site potentially limits transferability, the findings do echo other concerns in the literature about consensus moderation practices both in Australia and internationally, suggesting our findings have wider applicability across the higher education sector. However, some unit coordinators resisted the constraints and drivers of neoliberalism, suggesting resistance and the possibility of collegial consensus moderation practices.

Conclusion

This paper has presented the findings from five focus groups which revealed three discursive constructions of consensus moderation: a collaborative process, an illusion, and a process to manage markers. Whilst a small number of unit coordinators carried out consensus moderation through positive collaborative behaviours, others utilised and validated powerful managerial behaviours. It appears that the institutionalisation of consensus moderation practices in a neoliberal higher education setting does little to help calibrate markers to the required standards and meet the aim of quality assurance. For consensus moderation to be an effective quality assurance activity, it needs to be inclusive and collaborative for all involved. The inclusion of pre-moderation calibration activities will ensure those marking understand the requirements and expected standards. The findings can be used to inform future research on assessment moderation, and policy and practice, whilst supporting the need for professional development on moderation practices and leadership development for unit coordinators.

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5.2 Conclusion of this Chapter: Post-Chapter Moderation

In this chapter, I have provided a manuscript of the findings from a series of focus groups with fixed-term and continuing academics, which has been published in *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* (Mason et al., 2022). The next chapter will present the third phase of this body of research, designed to meet the third objective of the research, which was to identify expert academics' perceptions in relation to consensus moderation.

Chapter 6 Phase Three: Semi-Structured Interviews with Expert Academics

“One of the most sincere forms of respect is actually listening to what another has to say”
Bryant McGill

6.1 Chapter Introduction: Pre-Chapter Moderation

In this chapter, I present the third phase of this body of research. As represented in Figure 8, this phase was designed to meet the third objective of the research, which was to identify expert academics’ perceptions in relation to consensus moderation. By utilising sequencing of different phases in this research, it was possible to build on previous phases which have explored the sessional academics' experiences and perceptions of consensus moderation, and the fixed-term/tenured academic experiences and perceptions of consensus moderation. To enrich our understanding of consensus moderation, provide a different perspective of consensus moderation, and more fully capture the complexity of this phenomenon (Henrich et al., 2010), this phase explored the perceptions of consensus moderation from academics with recognised expertise in consensus moderation. This chapter provides information on the method, data collection, data analysis, participants, and findings of this phase.

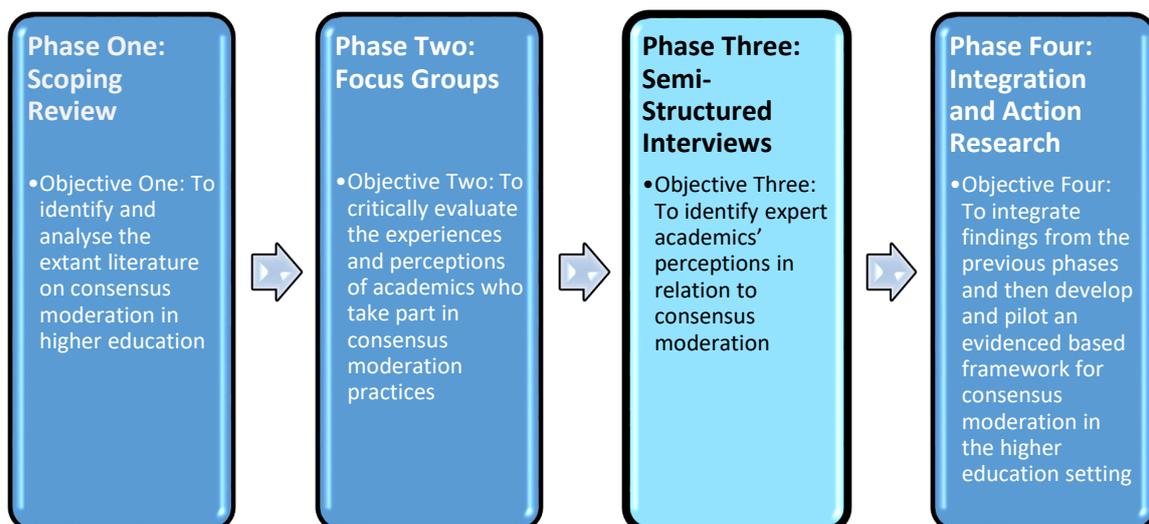


Figure 8.

Flow Diagram of Project Objectives Highlighting Phase Three and Objective Three

6.2 Method

6.2.1 Study Design

Qualitative methodology was adopted for this phase of the study, as this seeks to understand, interpret or make sense of a phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), which in this body of research is consensus moderation. Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were chosen as the data collection method for this phase of the research. Participants were offered a choice in the mode of data collection (for example, telephone, skype, or face to face). Where face-to-face interviews were not possible, due to the geographical location the interviews were conducted online via Skype. To maintain the sequential qualitative design, the findings from Phase Two informed the semi-structured interview guide for Phase Three. Utilising this approach allowed refinement based on previous findings and represented different viewpoints, from what has been previously studied in this body of research, of consensus moderation (Breachin & Sidell, 2000). The questions were designed to enable a critical examination of how to facilitate enhanced consensus moderation practices and explore possible solutions to the challenges identified in carrying out consensus moderation in Phase Two to identify what could be changed in the future. This design was viewed as appropriate to meet the research objective and gather a rich and detailed picture of the experts' perceptions. See Chapter 2 for the full description of the research design.

6.2.2 Data Collection

Approval to conduct this research was obtained from Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC approval number HRE2018-0051). Potential participants were identified through their role and expertise in consensus moderation identified by either position or through research or publishing on consensus moderation (identified through Phase One). An email invitation to take part, along with a participant information statement that outlined important information about the study, participant's rights, data storage, and how the data provided would be used (Appendix E), was sent to the identified potential participants.

Participants registered their interest through a response email and were then resent the participant information statement, a consent form (Appendix F), and a demographic questionnaire (Appendix G). Time was provided for the interested participant to review the information statement and ask any questions before completing the formal consent form and demographic information form. A mutually convenient date, time, and location for the

interview was then arranged. This email exchange and negotiation of the date, time, and location of the interview, also assisted in building rapport with participants prior to the interview being conducted.

Either face-to-face or online synchronous semi-structured interviews were conducted. Video was used for all online interviews to improve the quality of the interview (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014), and enabled the appreciation of body language and non-verbal communication (Heath et al., 2018). I interviewed all participants using the same interview questionnaire (Appendix H), prompting further exploration of responses inductively. The interview questionnaire included an area to record significant notes and capture observations during the interview (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), such as reactions, facial expressions, and gestures (Holloway & Galvin, 2017).

Before commencing each interview I also verbally reiterated the information from the participant information statement regarding confidentiality and anonymity. Once the participant was prepared to begin the interview it was conducted using the interview and observation questionnaire guide. All interviews were digitally recorded with permission from the participants and transcribed verbatim. Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and enabled prolonged exposure (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Interviews were conducted until data saturation was achieved, where no new insights or information was obtained (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The rich data resulted in all codes being obtained after the 11th interview and a final interview was conducted to check that saturation had been achieved.

Following each interview memos (field notes) and a self-critical account of the process was documented as a reflexive diary. This process helped to shape the codes and later themes, as well as enabled reflection on the process and the recording of any concerns (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Holloway & Galvin, 2017). For more information on researcher positioning and reflexivity please refer to Chapter 2.

6.2.3 Participants

Twelve experts in the area of consensus moderation were recruited for individual semi-structured interviews. An email invitation to take part in this phase of the study was sent to 20 potential participants and this resulted in twelve interviews being conducted (60% response rate). Interviews were conducted with three male and nine female participants. Ages ranged from 53 to 66 years and the median age was 60 years. They had been working in academia for 10 to 36 years, with a median length of experience in academia of 20 years and a total of 268 years. A range of academic levels were represented including Senior Lecturer (3),

Associate Professor (2), Professor (4), and Dean (3). All participants had a teaching qualification and a PhD (10) or Doctorate (2) qualification. At the time of the interviews, nine participants were located in various states across Australia and three were located in the United Kingdom.

6.2.4 Data Analysis

The digital audio recordings from interviews were transcribed verbatim with the participants' names being replaced by pseudonyms for anonymity before being analysed. The transcripts of interviews were entered into NVivo (v.12) qualitative data analysis software for coding (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2018). The transcribed interviews were analysed using the six stages of thematic analysis defined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This inductive thematic analysis identified, analysed, organised, and interpreted patterns of meaning (themes) within the qualitative data (Clarke & Braun, 2017). The six-stage approach started with prolonged engagement with the data to provide familiarisation of the data, whereby the transcripts were read and re-read, and thoughts were documented on the potential codes. Next, the initial codes were noted and reviewed by my supervisors. The codes were then identified in a systematic way across the data set, and this resulted in 132 codes. The next stage of the process involved collating codes into potential themes utilising researcher triangulation with my supervisors. The themes were then reviewed, defined, and named. Consensus on the naming of the themes was carried out with my supervisors, before the findings were written up, with selected quotations from the data supporting the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Whilst this may appear to be a linear process, it is more iterative and required reflection and movement between the phases (Nowell et al., 2017). Throughout this process, Nvivo 12 was used as a data management tool in the analysis (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2018), notes were made, team meetings were documented, and an audit trail was upheld.

6.3 Thematic Findings

The most notable aspect of the interviews was that consensus moderation was considered a complex activity. The experts identified many challenges with carrying out consensus moderation activities. Many of these challenges appeared to be either as a result of work conditions or culture and in many ways, this was considered the way things are at present in the higher education setting. There was, however, consideration of practice improvement and these are also represented in the themes. The thematic map (presented in

Figure 9) displays the six themes and one subtheme. The six themes are: accept that marking is subjective; moderation is core academic work; consensus moderation is a learning process; use calibration to develop and maintain standards, resources are needed to enable consensus moderation, and different moderation practices are needed for different moderation purposes. The theme of consensus moderation is a learning process had a subtheme of dialogue facilitates the learning process. The following description of the themes provides quotations drawn from the full sample of expert participants.

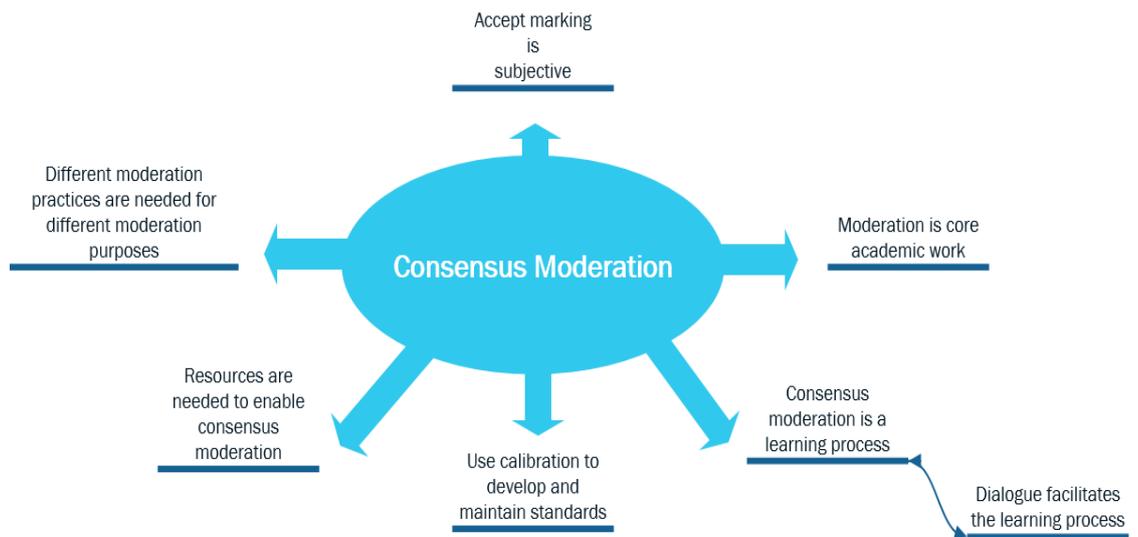


Figure 9.

Thematic Map of the Themes found in Phase Three

6.3.1 *Accept that marking is subjective*

The first theme strongly voiced by the experts is the need to accept that marking is subjective and based on human judgement. As one expert noted, we have a belief that “we can mark to that particular level of accuracy and that's just a fallacy because it's a human judgement” (P1). Intuition and tacit knowledge were indicated by the majority of experts as a fundamental aspect of marking and moderation practice whereby more experienced markers use expert judgement to mark holistically rather than relying on the rules or criterion of the rubric, “it's also an issue of, making what is internal or tacit, explicit for others to actually understand your thinking and your reasoning”(P8) and “The cognitive dissonance that occurs between a person's holistic impression, and what comes up from a process that asks them to make specific judgements about specific things... Oh, I'll have to put them in this category of this thing, even though they don't meet the criteria” (P12).

Accepting that marking is subjective concentrates the focus on developing the markers' understanding of the assessment requirements and standards to enhance fair and consistent marking. As experts stated, *"make people feel okay about the fact that their marks might be different from other people and then help them think about how to do something about it"* (P2), as *"there's nothing to fear from your marks being different, and that it's actually a learning point"* (P4).

Some experts highlighted how multiple judgements across the degree lead to the overall degree outcome; not just one expert marked assessment. Accordingly, there is safety in the variety of marks allocated across the degree from multiple markers, *"we're getting a lot of judgements on what they're worth from experts"* (P2). Taking this pragmatic approach perhaps it is possible *"not to worry about being perfect for every single item"* (P2) but to focus on developing the markers' understanding of the assessment requirements and standards. As one participant said, *"Now if we were gonna really be serious about moderation, we'd focus more on what are the qualities of work that we are looking at and valuing and what we need rather than how do we get them as close as we possibly can"*(P1).

6.3.2 Moderation is core academic work

Experts identified that moderation must be viewed as important academic work, rather than merely an administrative task. This requires *"acknowledgment from the people in the leadership team in terms of teaching and learning that moderation is a very important process"* (P11). What is needed is an assessment culture that recognises the importance of moderation within the unit, course and/or discipline, and positions the course coordinator role as vital to lead assessment quality assurance processes. The course coordinator needs to maximise opportunities for using moderation to benchmark and evaluate across units to assure consistency. From a student's perspective, regardless of which unit they are in *"they should be experiencing something similar in different units"* (P3) and, as one expert stated *"so that they [the course coordinator] can honestly say that, as far as they're concerned, there's some shared understanding of standards within their program"* (P6).

6.3.3 Consensus moderation is a learning process

All experts agreed that consensus moderation is *"an important site of learning"* (P4) for both academics and students. Ideally, this learning commences early in the study period so that academics can develop a shared understanding of the assessment requirements and

standards before teaching commences. A common misconception by academics is considering moderation as an intra-marking or post-marking activity only, *“it's that post-marking moderation that most people in their mind, and from other institutions, think is moderation”* (P12). Developing this shared understanding begins with pre-moderation, *“So we have continued to develop and reinforce that notion of moderation happening throughout the lifecycle”* (P12). This development should be carried out through a range of early moderation activities (online, face to face, or through sharing annotated resources or exemplar assignments).

The experts agreed that this shared understanding of the assessment requirements should inform the learning and teaching activities across the teaching team during and after the study period. This was seen as providing consistent information to students and facilitating their understanding of the requirements. Having open transparent discussions was viewed as helping to provide equity and fairness as well as reducing hidden assessment criteria as *“you've been having those conversations with the students because everybody understanding the standard is the goal”* (P12). Additionally, it was suggested that these discussions with students will assist them to understand the subjective art of marking and appreciate it is not always an exact science with a right or wrong mark (see the previous theme: Accept that marking is subjective). Then at the end of the study period, the experts discussed how this moderation as a learning process informs assessment development for the next iteration of the unit, as part of a continuous quality cycle: *“So we have continued to develop and reinforce that notion of moderation happening throughout the lifecycle”* (P12).

Whilst the process of consensus moderation was identified as an important site of learning, the majority of experts also stated that there is a need for professional development so that academics can develop a greater understanding of assessment and marking principles, including moderation processes. As one professor stated *“It's the best professional development I've ever had teaching people how to do my job. It actually made me better at my job”* (P7).

6.3.4 Dialogue facilitates the learning process

A subtheme of moderation as a learning process is that dialogue facilitates the learning process. Whilst moderation is a learning process, dialogue facilitates the learning process and consideration should be paid to developing policy to support the process. The experts were clear that a vital aspect of developing this shared understanding is dialogue: *“So actually it is collegial, we learn from each other, we share ideas, so it creates that space”* (P7). To moderate

“purposefully and meaningfully” (P8) everyone must have a voice. All experts discussed how it is fundamental for the teaching team to engage in in-depth discussions before the teaching commences to develop a shared understanding of the assessment requirements to inform the learning and teaching. This dialogue must then continue over the study period to enhance the understanding in readiness for marking and moderation. *“...moderation should start at the beginning of the assessment cycle that is in your design and your creation of criteria, so the discussion needs to be there and then all the way through as you implement, revise and work with the students so that... because assessment is not just an endpoint”* (P7). With dialogue commencing before the study period and continuing during the study period, further dialogue in post-marking moderation may only be needed for the special cases, such as those assessments that have failed to meet the requirements for a pass.

Essential to this dialogue is a safe environment. An important area raised by almost all experts was how dialogue is impacted by power differentials and expertise, nevertheless, the dialogue is imperative. Feelings of insecurity or fear of being wrong, being judged, or being challenged was considered to hinder the process, as one participant stated, *“I was really confronted by that [a disagreement in mark allocation] but then I took a deep breath and I listened to what they had to say and I learned from that experience”* (P8). There may also be tensions between those with expertise, and those who are novice markers and may be afraid to voice concerns and be heard. In these situations, they may defer to the more experienced marker during consensus moderation, *“because as the head of that department, people just say yes to whatever you say”* (P8). Having a safe environment for consensus moderation should encourage dialogue and provide learning opportunities. The more experienced marker or unit coordinator can use their positional ‘power’ appropriately to explain and have a collaborative and collegial discussion on how they made their decision on the mark allocation, so that they *“share that with this new novice marker who has just come on board”* (P5).

It is therefore vital for everyone to have a voice as this in-depth discussion is essential to develop an agreed shared understanding of the requirements and standards. As one expert stated *“collectively, as an academic teaching team, as a body of academics, whether we're part-time, full-time, black, white, or whatever we [are], we have a say in that judgement of the quality of the student work”* (P6). By giving everyone a voice, unintentional biases, prejudices and/or hidden grading criteria can be heard and addressed before it disadvantages anyone in the marking period as *“then you can address those sorts of biases, and that's the value of moderation”* (P8). Whilst some may find dissonance uncomfortable it is important to recognise that discord is often the best learning experience, and as one expert stated, *“it's actually where there's a lack of consensus is where there's a really, really, rich developmental*

opportunities” (P4) and “I think these key sites of dissent, whether there's disagreement about marks....they are the sites that are the most revealing and are the most powerful for people to learn from” (P4). Or, as another expert stated, “We do need to have those conversations, they do need to be quite intense, what happens then is that staff continues online or, um, incidentally, to keep talking about those sorts of things as the semester (study period) goes on” (P8).

Teaching leadership roles (both unit coordination and course coordination) continued to be important to effective consensus moderation. In this case the unit coordination was essential to facilitate a collegial approach to assessments by *“accepting the perceptions and views of all of your staff, evenly and fairly, and not putting yourself above anybody else's view” (P10). Unit coordination leadership development was identified as needed, including the development of protocols or procedures for the process of consensus moderation so that everyone's voice is heard, “so if we do that purposefully and meaningfully and we've got protocols of how we allow people to speak and have their turn and explain against the standards why they're making that judgement” (P8).*

6.3.5 Use calibration to develop and maintain standards

Calibration is an approach to working with markers to calibrate the marking team, including sessional academics or casual academics, with the required standard for the assessment. The majority of experts discussed using calibration to help control marking, maintain standards, pre-empt problems and save time, *“Now if that's something that's built with your teaching team, by the time you get to marking, you've straight away have probably improved your prospects of getting reasonable agreement as to what, you know, what, what you're going to value” (P1).*

There were several strategies identified that could be adopted to assist in the calibration of markers. All experts highlighted that, if possible, a face to face meeting to facilitate communication and feedback on sample marking is key for consistency as *“marker bee meetings”* where *“the group discusses that sample in relation, together with the rubric, I find that's much more helpful than if it's discussed in an abstract way” (P3).* However, it was also acknowledged that it is not always possible for a unit coordinator to meet with markers before marking for a variety of reasons (examples given included geographical location, use of sessional academics/casual markers who tend to work from home and financial constraints).

To overcome these constraints two experts suggested online meetings, *“All of these video-based, um, web conferencing tools, um, could be used to share, um, screens, to show the*

rubric that's been developed without having to send things out as well" (P12). Others highlighted how advances in technology has resulted in the opportunity to use online resources (for example, Blackboard Collaborate, WebEx, Zoom, or Skype) to assist markers in developing their understanding of assessment requirements and standards, and marker judgement against grade allocations. Acknowledging that, while this may not provide the same opportunity for dialogue as a face to face meeting, it is *"...accommodating the circumstances that we're working under and trying to find ways through technology, to support people, you know, in what they're doing in, still understanding the standard"* (P8). Greater use of technology and online marking was seen to enhance marking and moderation processes with the marked work being easily accessible. This means *"you can also give them feedback at that point, can't you? If they mark a few scripts and they come back and they're way off you can say, well, we think you're giving it too generous here and because of or we think you're being too harsh and maybe your feedback needs to be a little bit more detailed or you're not working, you're not giving enough feedback against the criteria or whatever"* (P2). An example was provided where online moderation may help to reduce power differentials between markers when disagreement on mark allocation has been identified, *"It was interesting when we took, um, you know, that label of that person away (through online moderation), and they could just discuss"* (P7).

The use of online resources suggested by experts included using marked exemplar sample assessments, samples of marked assessments from previous study periods, and samples of mock assessment papers. The use of multiple resources was suggested, *"I think it's very difficult to do it without examples of student work to shift peoples, um, understanding of ... a standard. So, if I have a sample of a C student work, and the group discusses that sample in relation, together with the rubric, I find that's much more helpful than if its discussed, um, in an abstract way"* (P3). The resources alone however were considered insufficient and the need to include annotation so that the decision-making process is visible and transparent to the markers was noted. As one expert stated, *"To help people understand, so you can't just put up an exemplar, you definitely need to be annotated to explain how you combined features to make your judgement, so it's about looking at, um, the number of resources that, you know, go on top of one another to then enable somebody to understand your thinking of how you formed a judgement"* (P8).

Of most significance was the need to provide feedback to each marker on their early marking, before they continue to mark the rest of their allocation, so you are *"working with staff early on to let them do things like example marking so they get feedback on their standards"* (P2). This not only helps in setting the standards but *"it gives them feedback and it*

gives them confidence too, so, they've got a sense of whether their standards are right or not" (P2). There were a number of strategies for this proposed, although all involved calibrating the marking by agreeing on the standards and then giving feedback and having a discussion on initial marking before going on to mark the rest of the assessments, *"So the moderation could be, let's all mark this one common sample, turn it around, let's see if we all agree on the mark, looks to me we're on the same standards, so let's go off now and let's just do our marking"* (P8). Other approaches suggested were:

- Mark an agreed number of assignments, then receive feedback through a calibration meeting (either face to face or online) before markers continue to mark papers
- Mark several sample assignments and then discuss as a group the marking either face to face or online
- Mark an agreed number of assignments early and then compare the marking to the same papers marked by an expert marker for calibration (usually the unit coordinator – known as the expert model of moderation)
- A combination of exemplar sample marking and expert model of moderation either online and/or sent to the unit coordinator and discussed online
- A combination of markers marking two or three sample assignments and then two or three submitted assignments before discussing the judgements either individually with the unit coordinator or as a marking group
- Expert unit coordinator marks first and then shared to enable a discussion on the required standards
- Expert unit coordinator marks first and sends marked samples to sessional academics to demonstrate the required standards.

Whilst the experts spoke of moderating a sample of marked papers to provide quality assurance to students, they also highlighted *"another challenge of moderation is...students shouldn't be disadvantaged or advantaged by being part of a moderation sample* (P4). Consensus moderation is all about the *"equity and the fairness to students"* (P11), so, whilst sample moderation shouldn't advantage or disadvantage the students whose work is moderated compared to students who have not had their work moderated, *"ensuring equity of standards is, of course, a challenge"* (P7) and *"if we're doing consensus moderation on a sample of work, and we don't then lift all of the marks, or lower all of the marks, then there's a real equality issue"* (P4).

6.3.6 Resources are needed to enable consensus moderation

Marking, moderation, and consensus moderation require resources and, if academics genuinely want to aim for consistency and fairness, then consensus moderation takes additional time, *“it does take time to moderate assignments, and um, and I think you know, consensus moderation ah, takes a little bit more time as well”* (P11). So whilst the workload of academics has increased recently, it was felt that *“the time set aside for it, we’ve got to defend that, and we’ve got to rescue it from somewhere else”* (P6). Therefore, in keeping with the theme moderation is core academic work, the importance of allocating the time required has to be acknowledged even though the *“cost is not trivial”* (P1).

The experts provided strategies that could enhance the use of time and reduce associated costs. The first was to focus resources on high-quality assessments at key points of the study period, rather than spread across a large number of low stake assessments. The second was to introduce the use of triggers or shortcuts linked to grade points, *“so you’ve got to develop the shortcuts, otherwise you just will die”* (P5). The third was to facilitate calibration activities so that we can ensure all markers understand the required standards, and whilst this may take time early in the study period it has the potential to reduce the time needed later on in the study period through improving consistency amongst the markers, *“the investment of time would be really early on, but then possibly less needed later on”* (P2). Finally, many experts identified how a stable team is the key to achieving consistency in marking, *“that’s the key, a stable marking team”* (P5), although they cautioned against the team becoming too stable and complacent whereby *“you don’t give it the true, you know, the diligence that it needs”* (P5). The consequence of a stable marking team working together over a long period of time results in an enhanced understanding of the subject, with intuition and tacit knowledge being used in marking and moderation. Thus this shared expertise provides consistency: *“it takes a lot of time particularly when you’ve got a new teaching team. And I think this is where partly the problem and the solution ... or one of the possible solutions lies, and that is it does take an awful lot of time, and if you set things up with a team that then becomes a regular team, you’ll find that the time spent in moderation becomes a lot less overtime”* (P1).

6.3.7 Different moderation practices for different moderation purposes

Experts noted that different moderation practices are needed for different purposes to suit the circumstances and the timing of assessments. In essence, moderation purposes change with the study period: *“I really think that moderation takes different, um, forms*

depending on the purpose and the timing of it” (P8). Furthermore, different assessment types often need different moderation approaches, for example in comparing a piece of art compared to a written critique, one expert commented “where it’s more likely to be a kind of consensus marking as opposed to consensus moderation. And I think that’s quite particular to studio based subjects...with text based subjects I think there’s a much crisper um, better distinctions between first and second and third marks being allocated” (P4).

As noted above in the theme on resources, a number of the experts suggested that we should focus moderation practices on high stake pieces of assessment that have a large impact on student progression or outcome. They acknowledged that many academics undertake moderation for administration or accountability purposes, because *“a unit leader has got to show that they moderated the markers” (P2)*. However, for moderation to be purposeful then it has to have a purpose beyond administration or accountability, *“I think that moderation takes on, um, different processes and practises, dependent on the purpose, so you really have to understand why you’re doing it, and if you’re doing it because it’s a requirement, so we need to do moderation because, you know, it’s part of the process if we’ve got to tick a box to say we’ve done moderation, then it’s probably not going to achieve a purpose” (P8)*.

When considering the timing of moderation all experts agreed that early moderation or pre-moderation is important and needs greater attention, *“If they were more involved in the early stages, particularly beginning of the semester (study period) when ideally, you know, we have tutors meetings” (P9)*. They identified that this early pre-moderation has the greatest impact on the assessment process, *“if they put that moderation at an early point where they’re actually giving feedback and helping people get their standards right, this, they do the moderation they’re doing it in a place where it perhaps has more impact” (P2)*. With this enhanced understanding before and during marking, then the end of study period moderation can be reserved for the complex cases and random checks for consistency, *“then come to the end of the semester (study period) and we talk about the really tricky ones” (P8)*.

6.4 Discussion

Phase 3 explored the expert academics’ perceptions of consensus moderation and examined how opportunities to enhance consensus moderation practices can be facilitated. Six themes were identified: accept that marking is subjective, moderation is core academic work, consensus moderation is a learning process, use calibration to develop and maintain standards, resources are needed to enable consensus moderation, and different moderation

practices are needed for different moderation purposes. The theme of consensus moderation is a learning process had a subtheme of dialogue facilitates the learning process. It was clear from the interviews that consensus moderation is a complex activity and there are many challenges with carrying out consensus moderation. Many of these challenges appeared to be either as a result of work conditions or culture and have implications for assessment quality assurance within contemporary higher education.

The findings from this phase indicate that those working in the higher education sector need to accept that marking is subjective. Accepting that marking is subjective will enable a focus on developing a shared understanding of assessment requirements. Previous studies have identified that consistency in marking is complex and difficult to achieve, with individual marker judgement varying (Bloxham, den-Outer, et al., 2015; Grainger et al., 2016; O'Connell et al., 2016). This may be due to the use of tacit knowledge (Bloxham, 2009; Grainger, Christie, et al., 2019; Hunter & Docherty, 2011), expertise (Grainger, Christie, et al., 2019; Wyatt-Smith & Klenowski, 2013), prior knowledge of the student (Annetts et al., 2013; Bloxham et al., 2011; Brooks, 2012; Orr & Bloxham, 2013), individual marker biases (Annetts et al., 2013; Orr & Bloxham, 2013), and the markers understanding of the assessment requirements and expected standards (Grainger, Crimmins, et al., 2019; Sadler, 2010).

Achieving consistency has been further complicated with the number of markers in the marking team (Watty et al., 2014). This is often the case when large volumes of assessment marking is carried out by sessional or casual academics, rather than tenured academics (Crawford & Germov, 2015; Ryan et al., 2013; Ryan et al., 2017). It has been estimated that between 40% to 80% of undergraduate teaching and marking is carried out by sessional/casual academics (Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al., 2016; May et al., 2013). This can result in the marker being unaware of the unit content and assessment requirements. Whilst far from ideal for marking and moderation, the increased casualisation of the academic workforce (Guion Akdağ & Swanson, 2018; Thomas et al., 2020), helps the contemporary university to cope with the increasing and fluctuating student numbers (Norton et al., 2018; Whitchurch, 2019).

By accepting that marking is subjective, time can be used to focus on developing markers' understanding of the assessment requirements through consensus moderation activities. As the experts identified, however, this requires moderation to be recognised as core academic work. Current moderation activities have been described by Bloxham et al. (2016) as being focused on accountability and mark justification purposes, rather than quality assurance. To enhance the process, moderation needs to be recognised as a crucial quality assurance process, rather than for administrative, accountability, and mark justification purposes, and this will require adequate workload allocation. Whilst neoliberal universities do

focus on quality assurance, they also focus on finance (Kenny, 2018), and profit margins (Nadolny & Ryan, 2015). With these competing priorities, marking and moderation receive minimal time allocation in the workload distribution (Nadolny & Ryan, 2015; Richardson et al., 2019). It is, therefore, necessary for time to be identified in the workload allocation for moderation if genuine collaborative and collegial consensus moderation activities are to be carried out. Recognising the contemporary university has issues with time provision for marking and moderation, the experts described strategies that could enhance time management and associated costs, such as focusing resources on high-quality assessments, use of marking shortcuts, having a stable marking team, use of calibration activities, and using technology (for example, Blackboard Collaborate, WebEx, Zoom, or Skype) and online resources (for example, annotated resources or exemplar assignments). Technology has previously been found to be useful, when used in conjunction with pre-marking moderation, to improve identification of marker variation, increase confidence in the markers and reduce postmarking moderation requirements (Cathcart & Neale, 2012). One of the benefits of COVID-19 is a reported enhancement of academic digital skills (McGaughey et al., 2021; Watermeyer et al., 2020), and this can be used to enhance the consensus moderation process.

The experts in this phase all agreed that consensus moderation is a learning process. Moderation has previously been recognised as a valuable source of both informal and formal professional development in several earlier studies (Adie et al., 2013; Boyd & Bloxham, 2014; Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al., 2016; Tuovinen et al., 2015; Watty et al., 2014), however, in this phase, additional themes were identified that would be key to enhancing the process of consensus moderation and the professional learning that could be gained from carrying this out. In particular, the experts identified how calibration activities and dialogue were key to this learning process, so that everyone involved (students, teaching academics, and marking academics) understands the assessment requirements and expected standards.

Calibration has previously been acknowledged as developing the markers' understanding of the assessment requirements and the expected standards as well as the markers' tacit knowledge and has been found to enhance consistency in the marking process (Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al., 2016; Grainger et al., 2016; O'Connell et al., 2016; Watty et al., 2014). The experts in this phase emphasised how calibration activities need to be carried out early in the study period before teaching and marking commences. In this way, early discussions on the assessment requirements and expected standards, including students, teaching academics, and marking academics, can then inform the teaching and assessment processes throughout the study period. Then, when assessments are submitted markers can receive and discuss feedback on early marking of assessments or marking of exemplars to

enhance consistency in the marking, and save time in post-marking moderation. In this, the experts agreed that early pre-moderation activities, such as calibration and feedback on early marking, has the greatest impact on the assessment and moderation process. Previous research has found that academics tend to focus on post-marking moderation (Barrie et al., 2014; Mahmud & Sanderson, 2011), rather than early discussions on the required standards (O'Connell et al., 2016). To maximise the use of calibration activities in moderation processes will therefore require academics to refocus from moderation as a postmarking activity to moderation as a pre-marking activity.

Dialogue was identified by the experts as key to the process of consensus moderation and professional learning. Through these discussions, markers can learn from more experienced colleagues (Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al., 2016; Grainger, Christie, et al., 2019), reflect upon, and improve their performance as a professional learning opportunity (Krause et al., 2014; Watty et al., 2014). This not only develops the shared understanding of requirements but also provides collegiality and support for new or novice markers (Adie et al., 2013; Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al., 2016; Lekkas & Winning, 2017). Unfortunately, whilst the experts identified that dialogue is key to this process, previous studies have identified how only some unit coordinators spend time providing such guidance (Ryan et al., 2017), whereas others do not provide feedback on marking or spend time developing the markers' capability (Richardson et al., 2020; Ryan et al., 2017). Taken together these findings suggest that there is a need to enhance the process of dialogue in consensus moderation. This requires professional development/education for all involved and a formalisation of consensus moderation processes.

The experts discussed how a safe environment for discourse is necessary and crucial for the dialogue aspect of consensus moderation to be effective. Previous research has suggested that disparities in power may impact consensus moderation processes (Boyd & Bloxham, 2014; Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al., 2016; Grainger et al., 2016), and the experts in this phase identified how power, expertise, and fear of being judged or challenged can impact the process. Unit coordinators have previously been identified as playing a substantial role in supporting and mentoring the teaching team (Holt et al., 2013), as well as overseeing the assessment process (Johnson, 2015; Pepper & Roberts, 2016; Roberts et al., 2011). This phase identified how the unit coordination and course coordination roles are key to facilitating the assessment culture and collegial approach to managing assessments and consensus moderation practices within a course and/or unit. The findings of this phase complement those of earlier studies by McDonald (2016) and Tuovinen et al. (2015), who previously identified how professional development is needed for moderation practices.

Whilst acknowledging that this phase only explored the expert academics' perceptions of consensus moderation, and was exploratory in nature, the findings offer valuable insights into how we can enhance the process of consensus moderation. This study has both strengths and limitations. Regarding strengths, this chapter has provided a narrative on a series of one-to-one semi-structured open-ended interviews with experts identified as leading authors on consensus moderation, identified through either position or research/publication in this subject area. Semi-structured interviews provided flexibility, opportunity to expand on answers, and observable interactions (Heath et al., 2018). The same open questions were asked in the same sequence for all participants, with the interviewer (the same interviewer for all interviews) promoting for further information based on responses provided. Interviews were conducted until data saturation was achieved, and enabled prolonged exposure. In this phase, the rich data resulted in all codes being obtained after the 11th interview and a final interview was conducted to confirm that saturation had been achieved. The data analysis followed the process of thematic analysis meticulously, which is considered necessary to obtain trustworthy findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Some limitations of this phase however are acknowledged. One limitation is that face-to-face interviews were not possible with all participants, due to the geographical location of the participants and my inability to travel as a result of the pandemic. In these instances, the interviews were conducted online via Skype as an alternative option (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014), thereby providing greater flexibility (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014), and mitigating the different geographical locations of participants (O'Connor & Madge, 2017). Video was used for all online interviews to improve the quality of the interview (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014), and enable appreciation of non-verbal communication (Heath et al., 2018). Whilst a range of academic levels were represented, I initially contacted 20 potential participants with 12 agreeing to take part in the interviews (60% response rate). Four potential participants did not respond to my initial email, one potential participant did not respond to a subsequent email, two potential participants declined and a further declined after they retired. Participants were only from two countries, although, as can be seen in Phase One (the scoping review in Chapter 3), this reflects the findings of the scoping review when all but one publication in this field were from Australia and United Kingdom.

6.5 Conclusion of this Chapter: Post-Chapter Moderation

This chapter presented the third phase of this study which was designed to meet the third objective of this study; to identify expert academics' perceptions about consensus moderation. A range of challenges associated with consensus moderation were highlighted by experts in this field along with opportunities to enhance consensus moderation practice. It was evident that consensus moderation is a complex activity and there are many challenges, either as a result of work conditions or culture that have implications in achieving collaborative and collegial consensus moderation practices. The findings contribute to our current understanding of consensus moderation, and information on which we can enhance consensus moderation practices. Moderation as core important academic work requires appropriate workload allocation to be provided. Accepting that marking is subjective can refocus attention to developing markers' understanding of assessment requirements, enhancing consistency in marking, and using calibration to develop and maintain standards. This can result in consensus moderation being a professional learning opportunity, with dialogue and a safe environment for discourse key to this process. Developing a formalised process and providing professional development, for all involved, will enhance the process.

The next chapter will describe how the findings of the first three phases have been integrated to develop a draft framework for consensus moderation in higher education, which was then piloted with academics in higher education.

Chapter 7 Phase Four: Integration and Action Research

"The secret of change is to focus all of your energy not on fighting the old, but on building the new"

Socrates

7.1 Chapter Introduction: Pre-Chapter Moderation

In this chapter, I present the fourth phase of this study. This phase was designed to meet the fourth objective of this study, which was to develop and pilot an evidence-based framework for consensus moderation in higher education (see Figure 10). The multiple viewpoints captured in the first three phases provide the opportunity to develop a comprehensive understanding of consensus moderation (Brechin & Sidell, 2000), covering the extant literature (ten publications), the experiences and perceptions of sessional academics ($N=11$), fixed term and continuing academics ($N=14$), and the perceptions of expert academics ($N=12$). I begin this chapter by presenting the integration of the findings from the previous phases, using a joint display to enable transparency and authenticity in the process (Guetterman et al., 2015). Using the joint display as an analytical framework ensured that all findings were valued and considered together (Woolley, 2009). Following the integration, I then describe the process of developing the initial draft versions of the evidence-based framework for consensus moderation in higher education, and subsequently the piloting of the draft framework using action research. By adopting the fundamental principles of action research I was able to engage academics ($N=461$) in cycles of development and testing the framework to improve agency and empowerment of academics, to generate change (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). I then conclude this chapter by presenting the final framework and recommendations/implications for practice. An important consideration for the framework and recommendations/implications is the context in which academics undertaking consensus moderation are situated. The recommendations of the framework intend to develop and transform the context in which consensus moderation practices in higher education are carried out, and to improve the experience for all involved in consensus moderation practices.

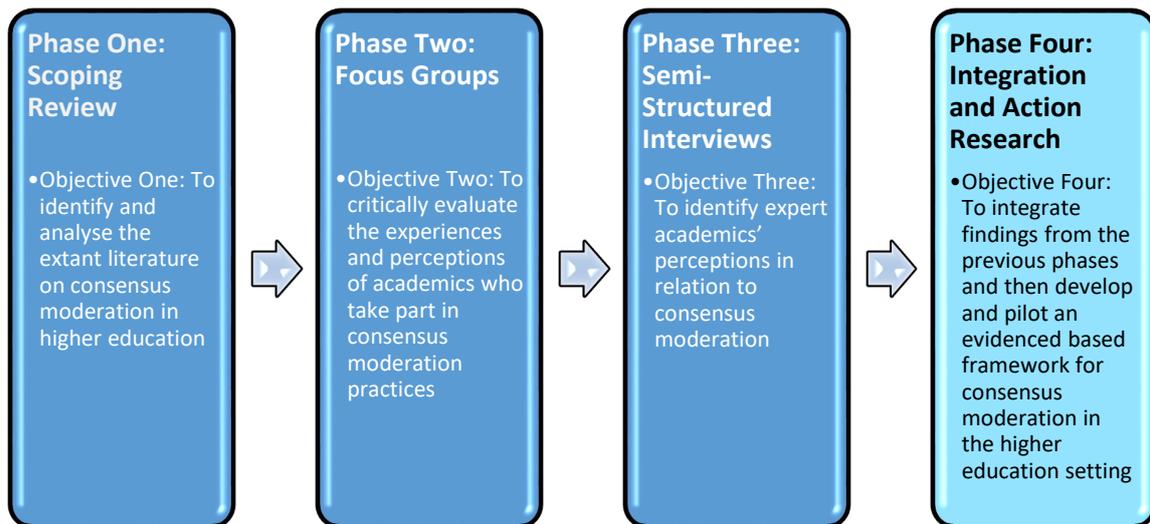


Figure 10.

Flow Diagram of Project Objectives Highlighting Phase Four and Objective Four

7.2 Integration of Previous Phases

7.2.1 Integration Approach

Integration of the findings from the three previous phases was of central importance for this research, as the aim was to develop and pilot an evidence-based framework for consensus moderation. The first step in this phase required the integration of the separate sources of data (Bazeley, 2018). The data from each of the previous phases (the scoping review, the sessional academics and fixed-term/continuing academics, and the expert academics) had previously been analysed as individual data sets, and in this phase, the findings were integrated so that interpretations could be obtained (Creswell, 2018). Using the independently developed findings from each of the previous studies ensured that the different perspectives from each phase could be compared. This valued the contribution of each phase, thereby promoting the theoretical development of this study (Morse, 2010).

Many authors discuss the integration of mixed-methods research (Fetters et al., 2013; Guetterman et al., 2015; Plano Clark & Ivankova, 2016), and there are various examples and principles available that can assist in the process (Fetters et al., 2013; Guetterman et al., 2015). Given that this research is a sequential qualitative multiple methods design, and considered to be part of the continuum for mixed methods research (Morse, 2010), it was deemed appropriate to utilise a mixed-methods approach of integration in the form of a joint display (Guetterman et al., 2015). Guetterman et al. (2015, p. 558) identified that the most common

method of using joint displays are “*statistics-by-themes or side-by-side comparisons.*” The side-by-side comparison approach was adopted for this phase, as it provided a framework for consideration of the findings whilst enabling transparency, authenticity, and thoroughness in the process (Guetterman et al., 2015). The joint display provided order and organisation, as well as facilitated linking of the findings from the different phases so that all findings are valued and considered together (Woolley, 2009). Having a visual image of the findings also provided an opportunity to identify any findings that did not integrate meaningfully (Uprichard & Dawney, 2019). Divergent findings, rather than being seen as a threat, were used to further question and consider the overall findings (Woolley, 2009).

7.2.2 Integration

As I was bringing together multiple sources of information, the joint display needed to capture the overall story of the findings and demonstrate the linkage so that the overall claims were represented in the display. The integration, whilst appearing linear, was a flexible iterative process (Woolley, 2009). Being interpretative it was approached in the same manner as qualitative analysis, requiring rigor, reflection, and reflexivity. Maintaining an audit trail and reflexive journal, as well as engaging in triangulation discussions with my research supervisors maintained transparency and supported rigour in the process. For more information on the approaches adopted to maintaining quality and rigour refer to Chapter 2 (Section 2.6). The process of the integration is captured in Table 5.

Table 5.

Process of Integration

Step	Integration Activity
1	Summarise and contemplate the key findings from Phase One. Order according to themes, and additional key findings.
2	Summarise and contemplate the findings from Phase Two – Sessional Academics. Connect findings from Phase One and Phase Two to provide further explanation and depth of understanding.
3	Summarise and contemplate the findings from Phase Two – Fixed Term and Continuing Academics. Connect findings from Phase One and Phase Two to provide further explanation and depth of understanding.
4	Summarise and contemplate the findings from Phase Three – Expert Academics. Connect findings from Phase One, Phase Two and Phase Three to provide further explanation and depth of understanding.
5	Analyse the insight gained from Phase One (scoping review), with regard to the findings from Phase Two (both Sessional Academics and Fixed Term and Continuing Academics findings) and Phase Three (Expert Academic findings). This interpretation process provides an entire perspective of the three data sources. The process is interpretative and requires rigor, including reflexive journaling and triangulation.
6	Contemplate divergent findings to ensure these are considered, in the overall findings.
7	Use the integrated insight from the three data sources to identify the key areas which require attention. Reflection on the different data sources and linkage provides further insight and interpretation of the linked findings. This focused on the totality/meaning of the findings across the phases of this body of research, as an entire perspective, rather than being focused on individual phases.
8	Contemplate the key areas requiring change so that recommendations and implications for practice can be identified.
9	Draft the initial and then preliminary framework for consensus moderation in higher education, including recommendations and implications for practice, in readiness for piloting.

A joint display table was developed to incorporate findings from Phase One, Phase Two, and Phase Three. The format was based on examples in the literature (Guetterman et al., 2015), and recommendations by Fetters et al. (2013) and Woolley (2009). The descriptions of the table columns can be found in Table 6, and the joint display can be found in Table 7.

Table 6.

*Description of Table Column Titles in the Joint Display**

Table Column Title	Description
Phase One: Scoping Review	Contains summarised findings from the scoping review.
Phase Two: Sessional/Casual Academics	Contains findings of Phase Two from the Sessional/Casual Academic (in the form of discursive constructions related to consensus moderation and the wider discourse in which these were situated).
Phase Two: Fixed-Term and Continuing Academics	Contains findings of Phase Two from the Fixed-Term and Continuing Academics (in the form of discursive constructions related to consensus moderation and the wider discourse in which these were situated).
Phase Three: Expert Academics	Contains findings of Phase Three from the Experts (in the form of themes related to consensus moderation).
Integrated insights	Contains reflections on how the sequential findings provide additional insights. This highlights the linking and interpretation of the findings across the body of research.
Key areas to be addressed	Contains key areas identified as the basis for recommendations and implications for practice, to enhance the current situation.

**Note.* The integration reflects how this body of research was carried out as a sequential qualitative approach

Table 7.

Joint Display of Findings of Phase One, Phase Two and Phase Three, Integrated findings and Key Changes Required

Phase One: Scoping Review	Phase Two: Sessional/Casual Academics	Phase Two: Fixed-Term/Continuing Academics	Phase Three: Expert Academics	Collective insight*	Key changes required*
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moderation is an important quality assurance aspect of assessments – for fairness, consistency, and transparency. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consensus moderation is necessary as quality assurance to ensure fairness to students and consistency in marking. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A small number of unit coordinators viewed consensus moderation as necessary for quality (fairness and equity) and to ensure the mark reflected the quality of work submitted. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moderation must be recognised as core academic work. • Different moderation practices are needed for different moderation purposes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consensus moderation is necessary for quality assurance, however, there are complexities to carrying consensus moderation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sector-wide need for recognition of the importance of moderation and consensus moderation. • A formalised process/framework for consensus moderation needs to be implemented.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are differing definitions and understandings of consensus moderation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consensus moderation is confusing and complicated due to different processes being followed and a lack of consistency in approach. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There were different definitions and processes. • Some unit coordinators used the terms moderation and consensus moderation interchangeably. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consensus moderation is complex and there is a lack of understanding. • Unit coordinator and course coordinator leadership is key to moderation activities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A greater understanding of the process of consensus moderation is required by academics involved in the marking. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Universities need to develop an organisational culture where consensus moderation is recognised, understood, and promoted.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consensus moderation is weighted towards accountability and justifying the grade. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consensus moderation helped create a shared understanding of the criterion for marking • Consensus moderation gave makers confidence in their marking and helped them to justify grade allocation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A small number of collaborative unit coordinators identified how consensus moderation can be a collegial learning opportunity rather than accountability or justification of grade. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional development is required on the process and benefits of consensus moderation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academics need to recognise that consensus moderation is an important quality assurance activity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A formalised process/framework for consensus moderation will assist academics to focus on the quality assurance aspect of moderation rather than an accountability focus.

Phase One: Scoping Review	Phase Two: Sessional/Casual Academics	Phase Two: Fixed-Term/Continuing Academics	Phase Three: Expert Academics	Collective insight*	Key changes required*
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consensus moderation is an important formal and informal professional learning activity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some markers received support from unit coordinators and others received no support or development. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some unit coordinators supported sessional markers and others invested no time in developing the markers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consensus moderation is a learning process. • Dialogue facilitates the learning process. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consensus moderation can be an important formal and informal professional learning activity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formalising processes will ensure consensus moderation can be used as a professional learning activity.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a lack of training. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence of confusion due to different terminology being used and different processes being followed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence of confusion due to different terminology being used and different processes being followed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional development is required. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a need for professional development for all academics who are involved in marking and moderating assessments. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a need for the provision of professional development for all academics involved in consensus moderation.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared understanding and conversations lead to collegiality, connectedness and feelings of inclusion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The dynamics of the team impact on engagement and dialogue. • Evidence of collegiality and connectedness amongst the sessional academics, and for some sessional academics with a small number of unit coordinators. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consensus moderation was a truly collaborative process for a small number of unit coordinators only. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dialogue is key to facilitating successful consensus moderation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared conversations lead to a collegial and collaborative process which increases feelings of connectedness and inclusion, however, this is not evident in all areas of practice. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A formalised process needs to be implemented for consensus moderation to ensure the voices of all academics are heard and respected. This will require professional development for all academics.

Phase One: Scoping Review	Phase Two: Sessional/Casual Academics	Phase Two: Fixed-Term/Continuing Academics	Phase Three: Expert Academics	Collective insight*	Key changes required*
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenge of time and resources. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of allocated paid time to carry out consensus moderation activities. • Issues with the availability of specialist and part-time academics. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consensus moderation takes more time than workload allocation, resulting in either additional work beyond the allocated workload (as self-preservation) or a tick box superficial approach resulting in the quality assurance processes of moderation lacking rigor. • A stable marking team with developed relationships results in less time being needed to understand the assessment requirements and for consensus moderation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resources are required to enable consensus moderation. • A stable marking team enhanced the process of consensus moderation – although we should be cautious of complacency. • Use technology and strategies to maximise time required for marking and moderation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a need to recognise that consensus moderation is a core part of assessment quality assurance, with adequate provision of resources/ workload to ensure that consensus moderation can be carried out. • A more stable, rather than transient workforce (sessional markers), will support this process. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide acknowledgment of the role of consensus moderation in the academic workload model. • Use technology to enable discussion and ensure the strategies for consensus moderation are effective and efficient, as well as provide a platform for feedback and dialogue.

Phase One: Scoping Review	Phase Two: Sessional/Casual Academics	Phase Two: Fixed-Term/Continuing Academics	Phase Three: Expert Academics	Collective insight*	Key changes required*
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Challenges with securing consistency, due to relationships and suggestions of power differentials impacting the process. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Issues with different personalities (egos, hierarchy, and use of power/coercion) impact the consensus moderation dialogue and engagement. Reports of hidden surveillance and changing of marks without discussion impacted collaboration. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evidence of conflict, power, bias, and resistance impacting consensus moderation. Some unit coordinators used their power to use consensus moderation as a process to manage markers and obtain the marking results which benefited the unit coordinator. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accept that marking is subjective and work on developing individual markers' understanding of the process. Protocols or procedures are required for ensuring all voices are heard. Use calibration to develop and maintain standards before marking takes place. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unit coordinator and course coordinator leadership roles are vital for successful consensus moderation activities. All academics can contribute to the development of the safety culture for discussion, and engage in calibration activities and professional conversations with the teaching team. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Need to focus on inclusive leadership which values all contributions and provides a safe environment for discourse. Need for a positive culture for assessment moderation. The unit coordinators can use expertise in a non-threatening 'expert model' of consensus moderation to avoid intimidating sessional/ other academics.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tension between maintaining standards and retaining students. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evidence of grade inflation to avoid having too many fails, including marks changed without discussion. Markers mark to a safe pass grade to avoid having marking moderated, due to their vulnerable position. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evidence of mark allocation being changed without discussion to increase pass rates. Evidence of grade inflation to avoid having too many fails. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use calibration to develop the required marking standards before marking takes place. Use annotated exemplars or expanded marking guides to guide markers and achieve consistency. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Moderation practices can be used for grade inflation in a neoliberal consumer-focused university. There is currently a marking lottery for students, depending on who is marking your assessment submission. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A formalised process/ framework for consensus moderation needs to be implemented for consensus moderation to assist academics to maintain their integrity at all times (to address grade inflation and safe marking practices).

Phase One: Scoping Review	Phase Two: Sessional/Casual Academics	Phase Two: Fixed-Term/Continuing Academics	Phase Three: Expert Academics	Collective insight*	Key changes required*
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many different ways to select papers for moderation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Different unit coordinators were following different processes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Different unit coordinators were following different processes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Different moderation practices are needed for different moderation purposes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is confusion and a lack of clarity on the process of marking and consensus moderation. • Sample moderation shouldn't advantage or disadvantage any particular student. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarity is needed on the process of moderation.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calibration activates help with maintaining standards. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A small number of unit coordinators did some form of calibration activities whereas others spent no time calibrating markers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A small number of unit coordinators used calibration activities before marking commenced. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use calibration to develop and maintain standards before marking takes place. • Various calibration activities can be used to inform the teaching and marking processes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calibration is a useful activity to assist in developing an understanding of assessment requirements and expected standards. • Calibration can enhance consistency in marking although not all academics use this in their marking. • There are many ways that calibration activities can be implemented and technology can enhance this process. • All academics need to be open to embracing feedback received on example/initial marking and engage in a two-way professional conversation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calibration should be implemented in all units of study. This will result in a greater understanding of the marking requirements and standards by the teaching and marking team, which can then be shared through a consistent message regarding assignment requirements with the students during the teaching period. • Unit and course coordinators should facilitate calibration activities (using annotated exemplars) with discussion on early marking.

Phase One: Scoping Review	Phase Two: Sessional/Casual Academics	Phase Two: Fixed-Term/Continuing Academics	Phase Three: Expert Academics	Collective insight*	Key changes required*
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Failure of formalised processes have resulted in superficial value in moderation as a quality assurance activity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Markers struggled with the inconsistencies in moderation terminology and moderation processes. • Markers noted confusion when noting grade changes on marked papers and should seek feedback if they notice marking grades have changed. • Evidence of contradictions between practices and the purpose of consensus moderation. • Sessional academics reported unit coordinators focused on post-marking moderation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most unit coordinators focused only on intra-marking or post-marking moderation practices rather than any pre-moderation/calibration activities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formalising the process of consensus moderation can make this a valuable quality assurance activity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consensus moderation is a valuable quality assurance tool in assessment moderation although current processes lack rigor and so the benefit of consensus moderation is not achieved. • Informed academics can provide a more consistent approach to marking and moderation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need for development and publication of consensus moderation guidelines /a framework for consensus moderation that is accessible to all universities. • Consistency in marking using consensus moderation will result in greater fairness and equity in assessments for students. • Markers who note grade changes post moderation without consultation should seek feedback from the moderation process.

Phase One: Scoping Review	Phase Two: Sessional/Casual Academics	Phase Two: Fixed-Term/Continuing Academics	Phase Three: Expert Academics	Collective insight*	Key changes required*
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Failure of formalised processes have resulted in superficial value in moderation as a quality assurance activity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Markers struggled with the inconsistencies in moderation terminology and moderation processes. • Markers noted confusion when noting grade changes on marked papers and should seek feedback if they notice marking grades have changed. • Evidence of contradictions between practices and the purpose of consensus moderation. • Sessional academics reported unit coordinators focused on post-marking moderation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most unit coordinators focused only on intra-marking or post-marking moderation practices rather than any pre-moderation/calibration activities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formalising the process of consensus moderation can make this a valuable quality assurance activity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consensus moderation is a valuable quality assurance tool in assessment moderation although current processes lack rigor and so the benefit of consensus moderation is not achieved. • Informed academics can provide a more consistent approach to marking and moderation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need for development and publication of consensus moderation guidelines /a framework for consensus moderation that is accessible to all universities. • Consistency in marking using consensus moderation will result in greater fairness and equity in assessments for students. • Markers who note grade changes post moderation without consultation should seek feedback from the moderation process.

*Note. Some areas in the joint display of findings (in particular the collective insights and key changes required) were repeated, although for simplicity the implications have been placed where they are strongest. This will be elaborated on within the framework.

7.3 Development of the Initial Draft Framework

7.3.1 Drafting the Framework

The next stage, following the integration, was to create a draft framework for consensus moderation in higher education. In this process, it was important for the findings identified in the integration to be the foundation of the initial framework for consensus moderation. This ensured the proposed changes to consensus moderation practices were connected to the issues identified in this body of research.

It was considered important when designing the framework to take into account the many disparate actors, systems, and processes involved in the assessment and consensus moderation process in higher education. Using principles of action research, academics were engaged in five cycles (Figure 11) of development and testing the framework as a way of improving the individual academics' agency and empowerment, and generating initial changes to current practice (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

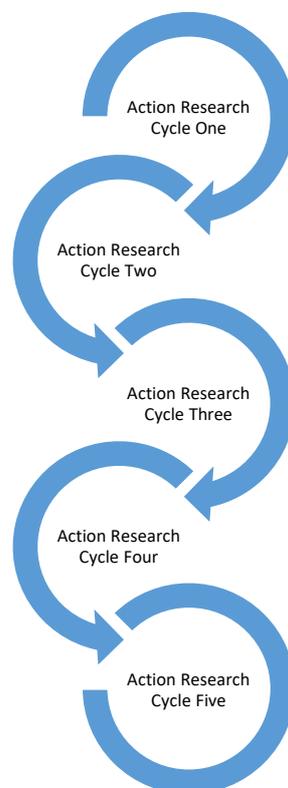


Figure 11.

Visual Representation of the Five Cycles of Action Research

The process of action research also enabled elements of service design thinking to be considered in the development and refining of the framework. Service design thinking is considered to holistically be a vehicle for organisational change (Junginger, 2008). In this way the drafting and subsequent piloting of the framework was user-centered (through the qualitative research findings being used in the designing of the framework), co-created (using academics in action research designing and modifying the process), sequenced (by breaking down the processes of consensus moderation into the different sections of the assessment journey) and holistic (took into account all interactions through the assessment process). The key findings from this body of research, as collective insights and key changes required in practice, were synthesised into the draft framework Version 1 (Figure 12). Version 1 was then revised, following feedback and discussion with my supervisors, into Version 2, a more visual representation of the assessment cycle (Figure 13).

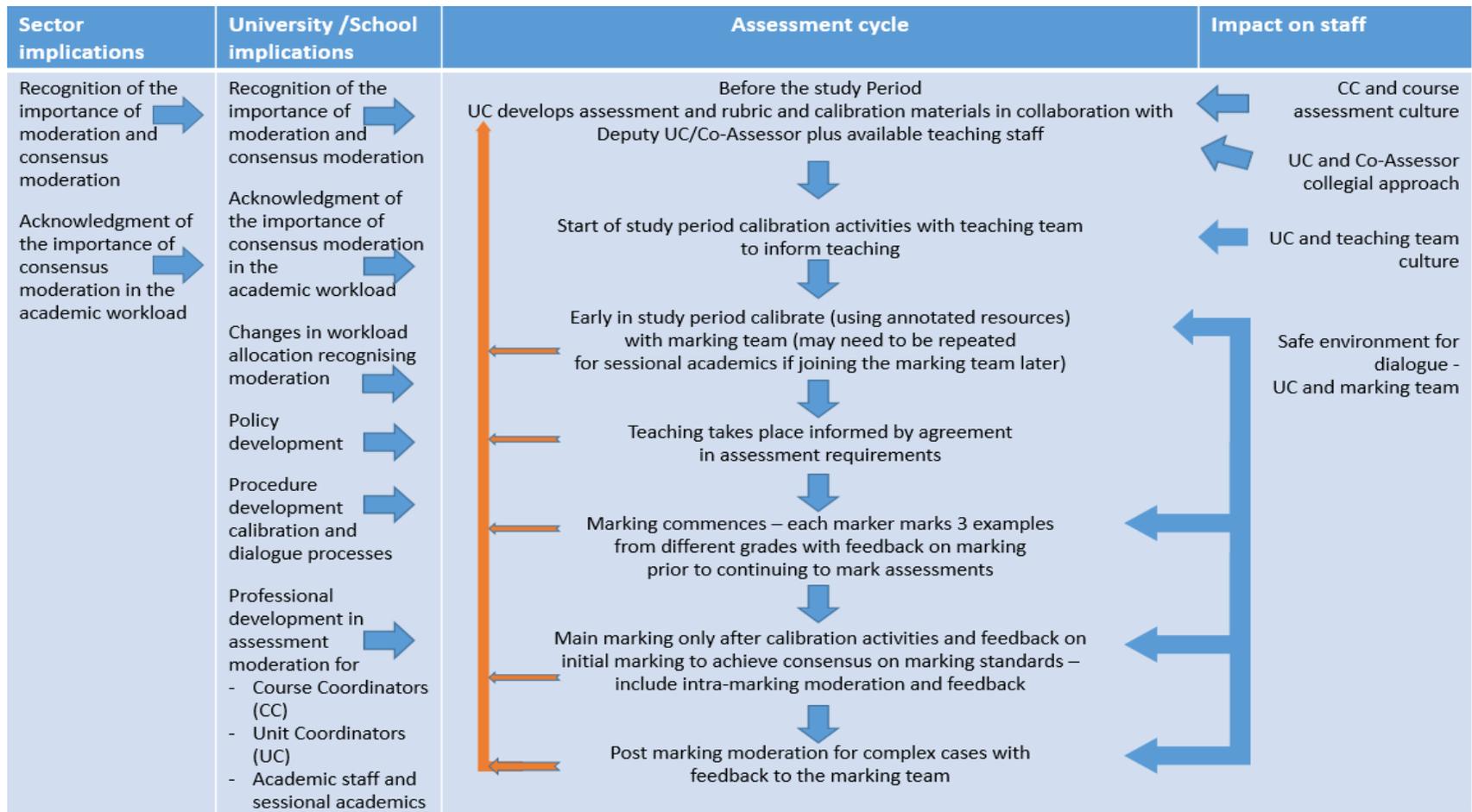


Figure 12.

Draft Framework for Consensus Moderation in Higher Education (Version 1)

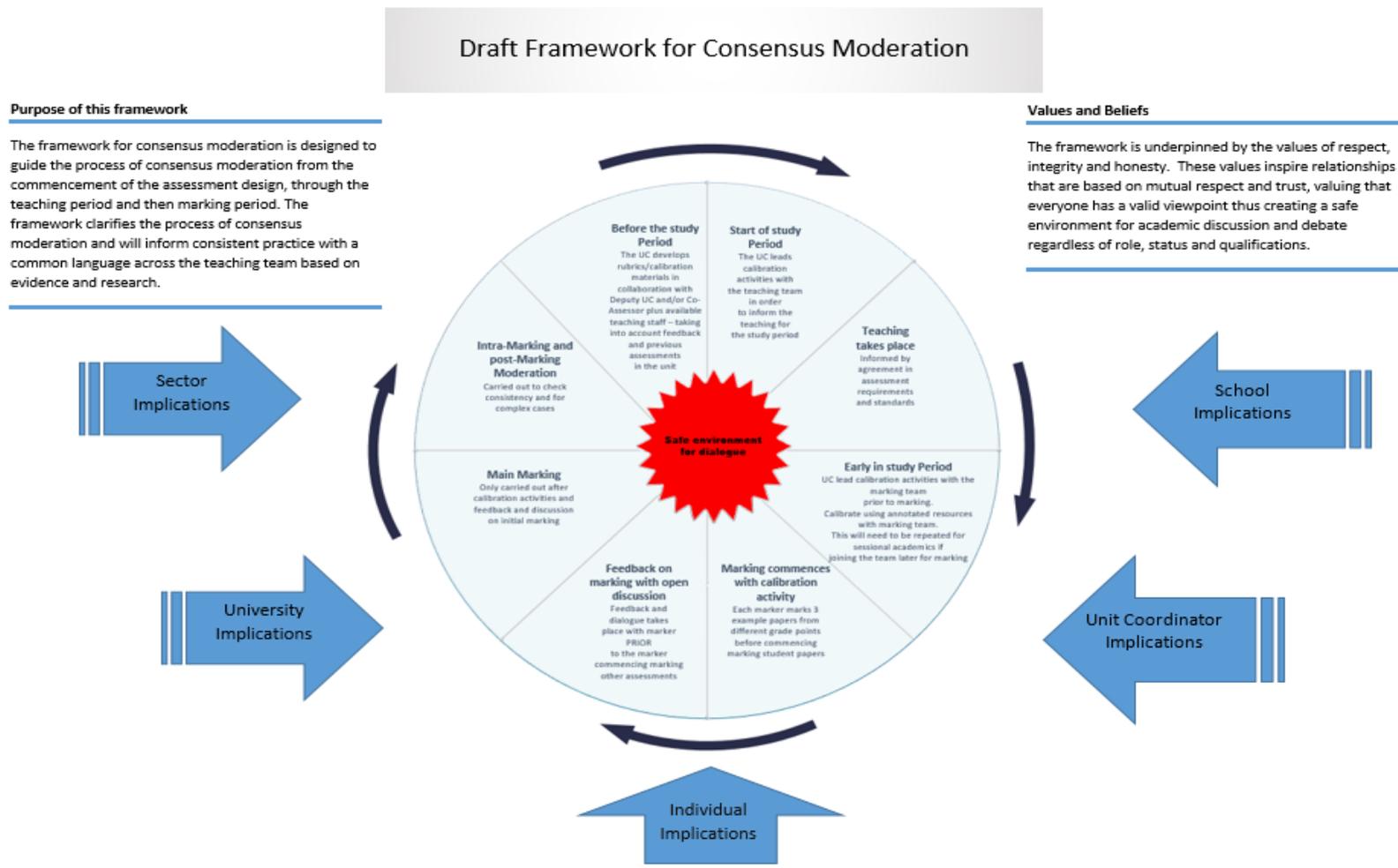


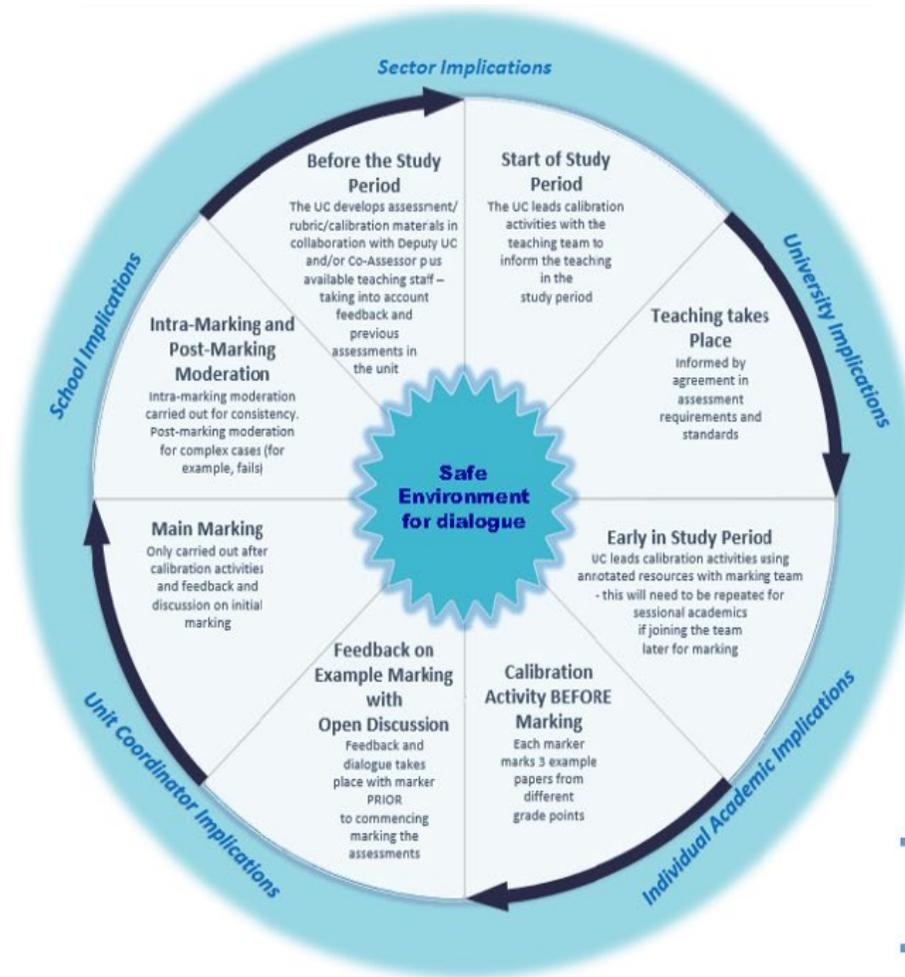
Figure 13.

Draft Framework for Consensus Moderation in Higher Education (Version 2) as a Visual Representation of the Assessment Cycle

The framework was then revised further, following additional feedback and discussion with my supervisors, into a draft framework Version 3 (Figure 14) ready for piloting through action research. Version 3 provided an enhanced visual representation of the assessment cycle and included recommendations and implications for practice (Figure 15). The framework for consensus moderation informs consistent practice across the teaching and marking team, is designed to guide the process from the commencement of the assessment design, through the teaching period and then the marking period. It moves the emphasis from intra-marking and post-marking moderation to earlier pre-marking calibration activities.

Purpose of this framework

The framework for consensus moderation is designed to guide the process of consensus moderation from the commencement of the assessment design, through the teaching period and then marking period. The framework clarifies the process of consensus moderation and will inform consistent practice with a common language across the teaching team based on evidence and research.



Values and Beliefs

The framework is underpinned by the values of respect, integrity and honesty. These values inspire relationships that are based on mutual respect and trust, valuing that everyone has a valid viewpoint accordingly creating a safe environment for academic discussion and debate regardless of role, status and qualifications.



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Figure 14.

Draft Framework for Consensus Moderation (Version 3), Ready for Piloting

Recommendations and Implications in regard to the preliminary framework

Sector Implications	University implications	School implications	Unit Coordinator Implications	Individual academic Implications
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognition of the importance of moderation and consensus moderation Development and publication of consensus moderation guidelines accessible to all universities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognition of the importance of moderation and consensus moderation Develop a positive organisational culture for assessment moderation Provide written acknowledgment of the role of consensus moderation in the academic workload Amend workload model to ensure provision of adequate time for consensus moderation Develop policy as guidance on process for consensus moderation Provide professional development for assessment moderation and consensus moderation for <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Course Coordinators Unit Coordinators Academics Sessional academics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognition of the importance of moderation and consensus moderation Prioritise working with Course Coordinators to develop a positive course or discipline culture for assessment moderation Inclusion of time for moderation and consensus moderation in the workload allocation Recognition of the benefits of calibration Development of School procedure for dialogue processes with consensus moderation Provide and support staff to attend professional development for assessment moderation and consensus moderation for <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Course Coordinators Unit Coordinators Academics Sessional academics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prioritise working with the Course Coordinator, teaching and marking team to develop a positive culture for assessment moderation Focus on inclusive Unit Coordinator leadership; valuing all contributions and providing a safe environment for discourse Facilitate calibration (using annotated exemplars) with discussion Use technology to enable discussion and dialogue for those marking away from campus Use expertise in a non-threatening 'expert model' of consensus moderation to avoid intimidating sessional or junior academics Ensure that sample moderation doesn't advantage or disadvantage particular student 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on working with the teaching and marking team for each unit to develop a positive culture for assessment moderation Contribute to development of the safe culture for discussion Engage in calibration activities Engage in professional conversations with the unit coordinator and academic team Embrace feedback received on example papers and engage in a two way professional conversation Maintain integrity at all times Seek feedback if marks are changed Ensure that sample moderation doesn't advantage or disadvantage particular student

If you adopt this in your area, please let me know as I would love to hear how it goes.

If you would like further information please contact Jaci Mason - j.mason1@postgrad.curtin.edu.au



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Figure 15.

Draft Framework for Consensus Moderation (Version 3) Recommendations and Implications

7.4 Piloting the Framework

This section of Phase Four drew on the fundamental principles of action research through engaging academics in five cycles of development and testing the framework (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Through this process, academics provided feedback on the framework and explored real-world solutions to the issues identified (Stringer & Aragón, 2020). This enabled me to disseminate the research findings for early impact and, as an agent of change, to have direct engagement in the real-life setting of where this body of research would have the greatest impact (Coghlan & Shani, 2017). Using action research enabled a redistribution of power in the research process (Rose, 2018), thus empowering academics and providing agency, as a form of commencing the process of generating change in assessment moderation practices (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Feedback was obtained both through the collection of discussions within the workshop and then through a questionnaire at the end of the workshop.

Feedback was collated from participants in each cycle and used iteratively to refine the framework. Each action research cycle included reflection, contemplation, and discussion with my supervisors, both before and following each cycle. Using this process ensured that the results of each cycle and any subsequent changes were based on the contributions and outcomes from all participants that contributed to each of the five cycles of change.

7.4.1 Questionnaire Development

A questionnaire (Appendix) was developed to be used to gain feedback from participants at the end of each cycle of development and testing. A questionnaire (Appendix L) was developed to be used at the end of each research cycle. The questionnaire consisted of two sections. The first section asked participants to rate the importance of ten principles, which were obtained through the insights of integration and identified as key changes required for good practice in the framework for consensus moderation, through a 6-point Likert scale ranging from “Not at all important”, to “Extremely important.” The second section was four qualitative open-ended questions, focused on advantages and barriers to using the framework. Further detail on the questionnaire can be found in the Methodology Chapter (Chapter 2, Section 2.5.4).

7.4.2 Data Collection

It was initially proposed that a series of workshops would be facilitated at higher education conferences, focusing on learning and teaching, where a wide variety of academics would be invited to provide feedback on the framework and its associated recommendations and implications for practice. The first workshop was held in January 2020 and then, unfortunately, the pandemic of 2020/2021 (COVID-19) meant that face-to-face workshops were no longer possible. Following an ethics amendment, this phase of data collection was then carried out online through a series of online conference workshops and presentations, with data collection through an online web-based questionnaire. For further information on the online approach to data collection please refer to the Methodology Chapter (Chapter 2). This section presents an overview of the action research cycles, and then details on the action research cycles. Participants and questionnaire respondents can be found in Table 8.

Table 6.

Phase Four Action Research Participation Rates

Workshop	Number of Workshop Participants*	Number of completed questionnaires	Additional comments
2020 Teaching and Learning Forum: Western Australian Network for Dissemination (Western Australia)	19	9	This was a face-to-face workshop, consequently, comments were received during the workshop and then also in the questionnaires. Feedback was also received through one email and one telephone consultation.
Curtin School of Nursing, Midwifery and Paramedicine: Curtin University (Western Australia)	17	7	11 online written feedback comments.
Teaching and Learning Conference 2020: Advance HE (England, Great Britain)	250	0	51 online written feedback comments. Feedback was also received through two emails.
2020 SoTL-China International Conference: Beijing Institute of Technology (China)	40	0	One request to translate the framework into Chinese to use the framework.
CRADLE Conference 2020: Centre for Research in Assessment and Digital Learning (Melbourne, Australia)	135	7	53 online written feedback comments.
Total	461	23	118 written comments Plus additional verbal comments received

*Excluding presenters/facilitators

7.4.3 First Action Research Cycle**7.4.3.1 Western Australian Network for Dissemination (WAND) Workshop, Perth, Western Australia**

The first cycle of action research was carried out at the WAND annual conference on 30th January 2020, which had the theme of *'Learning Without Limits: Educational Excellence and Equity.'* This was an interactive 90-minute workshop entitled *'Developing an*

evidence-based framework for consensus moderation.' A member of the supervision team was present at the workshop to take notes on discussion points and also provide feedback on the workshop process so that any required enhancements could be made before the second action research cycle. The workshop comprised the following:

- A welcome and introduction to the workshop
- An overview of the findings from the scoping review (Phase One) followed by a consensus moderation activity using a fictitious assessment and rubric (activity one)
- A group discussion focused on the challenges of interpretation of assessment requirements and associated rubrics, and the need for discussions to take place on each criterion/requirement
- A presentation of the academics' experiences and perceptions of consensus moderation (Phase Two) followed by small group activity focused on reflections on their own consensus moderation experiences – both positive and negative experiences (activity two)
- A presentation on the experts' perceptions of consensus moderation (Phase Three) followed by a group activity on questions posed from the findings of the phase (activity three)
- A presentation on the draft framework for consensus moderation (Version 3), followed by a question and answer session.

Participation in the research was voluntary and participants were advised that those who did not wish to take part could leave at this point of the workshop. Those that stayed were provided with a further explanation of the purpose of the research, given time to review the information statement (Appendix L), and asked to complete a consent form (Appendix M) and demographic questionnaire (Appendix N), before completing the questionnaire (Appendix K).

Workshop Discussions and Data Collection

Throughout the workshop, many participants stated they could relate to the findings from the different phases of this research, whilst others nodded their heads in agreement with the information being presented. Activity one, a consensus moderation activity using a fictitious assessment and rubric, resulted in a discussion on the challenges of consensus moderation. There seemed to be a general acceptance that consensus moderation was a challenge. Activity two asked the participants to discuss, in small groups, their most memorable positive experience and their most vivid negative experience of

consensus moderation. The activity level in the room was high and each table engaged in deep discussion. Participants were asked to document one positive and one negative experience on butchers' paper and then they were asked to share these with the other workshop participants. One volunteer offered to share first, describing a positive experience, and then they were followed by a participant from each table who shared a different positive experience – this didn't generate very much discussion. We then moved on to the negative experiences, again starting with a volunteer from one table and then moving to a participant from each of the other tables. The negative experiences appeared more abundant and provoked a more vibrant discussion. The room became lively with numerous participants nodding their heads and murmuring agreement; many participants in the room stated they had experienced negative moderation practices. Whilst this was reassuring for the purposes of this research, it was also disappointing that so many academics have had negative experiences of consensus moderation.

There was a lot of discussion throughout the workshop, both in the larger workshop group and in the smaller group activities. Following the presentation on the draft framework for consensus moderation (Version 3), the following key points were suggested for consideration in the next iteration of the framework were:

- Accept marking is subjective, but the aim should be to make it intersubjective
- Consider creating a community of practice and identify what policies would be needed
- Consensus moderation needs to go beyond each unit and should also be looked at across a whole course, with reporting to the board of examiners
- Consider scaling it up to join communities of practice for benchmarking
- The workload for consensus moderation should be quarantined and written into sessional contracts
- Consider the scale – different needs with small and large units
- Consider the implication of the framework for students
- The current model is 'ideal' but probably not feasible in the current climate, therefore it is important to highlight what can be done within the current workload restrictions.

Survey Respondents

There were 19 participants in the workshop and nine participants completed the consent form, demographic form, and questionnaire. There were two females and seven

male participants, with a median age of 43 years (range 34 to 56 years). They collectively had 116 years of teaching in higher education, with a median of 12 years of teaching experience in higher education (range 5 years to 24 years). The respondents came from three universities in Western Australia. The participants held a variety of roles including Lecturer (4), Senior Lecturer (2), Head of Division (1), Information Technology Consultant (1), and Learning Designer (1).

Quantitative Results

All of the workshop participants who completed the questionnaire rated the questions posed as 'Somewhat important', 'Very important' or 'Extremely important' with the majority of participants rating all statements to be 'Extremely important' or 'Very important.' Table 9 below provides an overview of the responses to the ten confirming actions for consensus moderation.

Table 7.

WAND Conference: Responses to Confirming Actions for Consensus Moderation

	Question	Not at all Important	Not very important	Not important	Somewhat important	Very important	Extremely important
1	Accept marking is subjective and focus on developing a shared understanding of assessment requirements					3	6
2	Moderation/consensus moderation should be viewed as core academic work and have recognition with workload					2	7
3	A course assessment culture is needed for consistency and to ensure achievement of course learning outcomes					3	6
4	Consensus moderation should provide opportunities for learning from peers					4	5
5	Communication is needed before teaching begins so that the teaching team can understand the assessment requirements for teaching purposes				1	1	7
6	Leadership is required to ensure that everyone has a voice in moderation discussions				1	2	6
7	Policy and protocols are required to aid in developing a safe environment where everyone's opinions are valued				2	2	5
8	Calibrating all markers before marking begins is required to ensure consistency of marks and fairness to students					3	6
9	Annotated exemplars and feedback on initial marking aid in developing consensus on the assessment requirements				1	2	6
10	Professional development is needed to enhance understanding of assessment and moderation principles				2	1	6

Qualitative Feedback

The open-ended questions yielded interesting points. Eight respondents were interested in implementing this approach to consensus moderation with six of these stating they were “*very interested*”. The advantages identified to implementing this type of framework were calibration, consistency, developing collegiality, and fairness to students.

Barriers to using the framework within their own teaching team focused on time and workload (six respondents), as well as cultural aspects such as attitude and previous poor practice (three respondents). The overall feedback was positive, “*Awesome work*”, “*I love the pre-marking moderation emphasis*”, and “*Great work*”. Overall the feedback concluded that the framework is ideal (complex and coherent) but needs to be developed into a more operational way of taking it into practice due to the economic climate.

Post-Workshop Reflection and Discussion

Following the workshop, I documented a reflexive account of the cycle based on a personal reflection, written primary supervisor feedback from the workshop, and a post-workshop one-hour discussion with a recognised expert in higher education who was also a workshop participant (this was a Dean of Learning and Teaching from another Australian university).

The workshop was successful in developing engagement and a large amount of discussion, which was a barrier to completing all activities within the time constraints. All activities worked well and would be retained, although future workshops would require a refocus to maximise the time for discussion. The presentation of the academics’ experiences and perceptions of consensus moderation (Phase Two) was condensed, as it was identified that this could be presented more succinctly without detracting from the main findings. This would provide the additional time required to discuss the participants’ reflections on their consensus moderation practices, as well as additional time for further discussion on the framework for consensus moderation.

Interesting points identified in post-workshop discussions included how objectivity in marking is a protection fallacy and the act of accepting marking is subjective could potentially impact on personal and professional identities. The term ‘right mark’ is a construction and has many different interpretations yet within the power relationship the ‘right mark’ is expected by the unit coordinator (the sessional markers’ line manager). There is also a ‘right mark’ from the student’s perspective which is linked to passing and appeals, and the ‘right mark’ which is right to the community in which you are marking and

a 'right mark' to retain future employment. It was noted by the Dean that the framework presented at this workshop was 'ideal' but probably not feasible due to the economic situation in higher education, and a recommendation was made to also consider the implications for the students.

Based on this workshop, I was approached to present my findings at three Western Australian Universities by a Dean of Learning and Teaching and two Directors of Learning and Teaching. I was also asked if I would be interested in being involved in future work on moderation by a Director of Strategic Projects at one university. More information about the involvement in these projects can be found in Chapter 8, where I discuss research translation and the impact of my research.

Changes to the Framework

The following changes were made to the framework following this workshop. First, whilst many comments were made during the workshop about the lack of a safe environment for discourse on moderation practices, there was a notable absence of comments or discussion on how a safe environment for discourse was represented in the framework for consensus moderation. Therefore, to emphasise the culture and safe environment for discourse, the reference to this was removed from the centre of the framework and placed in a circle around the framework. By encircling the framework it was hoped that this would be more prominent. Through giving everyone a voice, unintentional biases, prejudices, and/or hidden grading criteria could be heard and addressed before the biases, prejudices, or hidden criteria disadvantage anyone in the marking period.

Second, students had been omitted from the framework, despite there being significant implications for them (for example, delivery of a consistent message regarding assignment requirements and standards during the teaching period, a consistent approach to marking by more informed markers, and removal of the marking 'lottery', with marks depended on who was marking their assignment). The recommendations and implications were updated to include implications for students.

Finally, it was evident from the discussions and feedback that the framework needed to be simplified as the ten segments of the framework were felt to be complex. This was achieved by simplifying the framework to a core framework with additional layers of information for frequently encountered scenarios, such as large units where there is frequently sessional academics joining during the study period purely to mark. This resulted in Version 4 of the draft framework (Figure 16), including the recommendations and

implications for practice (Figure 17). This is a more streamlined framework encircled by the need for a culture and safe environment for consensus moderation discourse. Additional information was provided for when sessional academics are involved in the marking period, later in the study period.

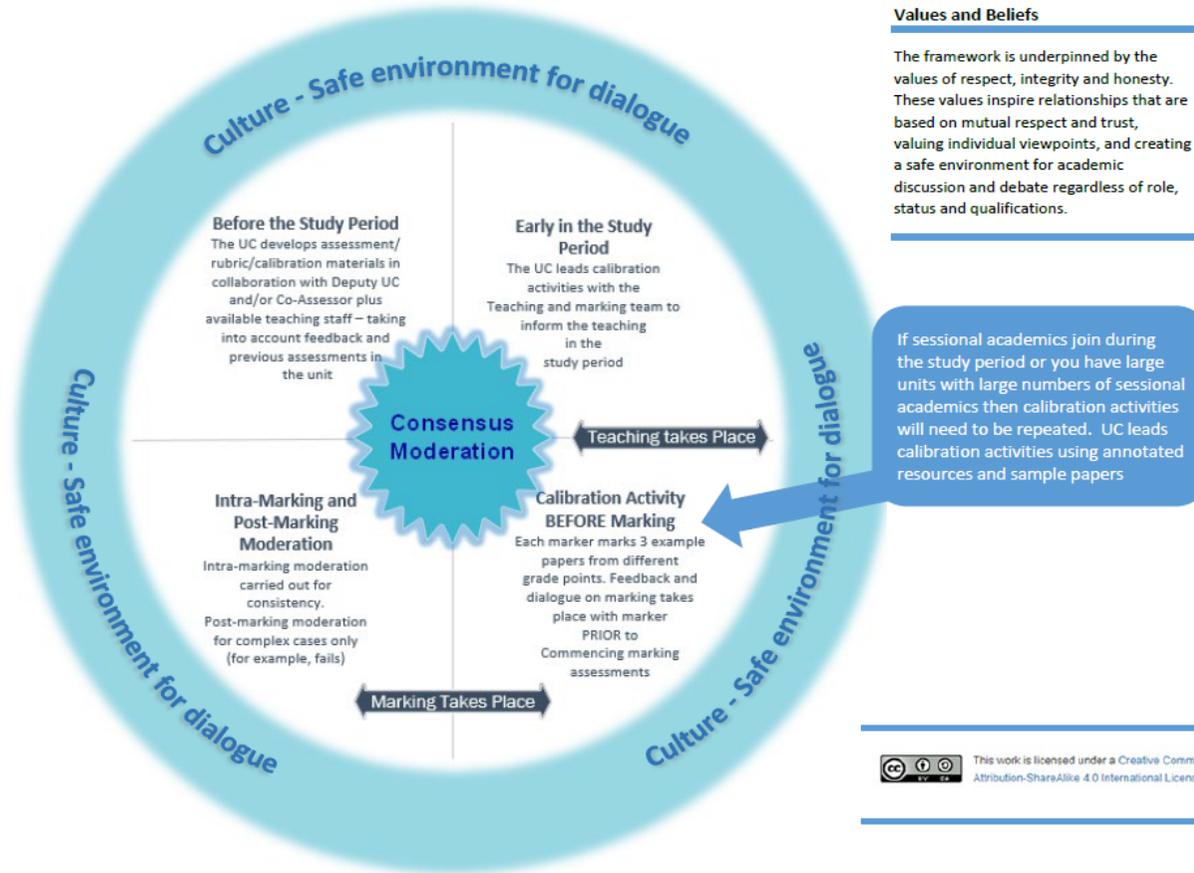
Framework for Consensus Moderation

Purpose of this framework

The framework for consensus moderation is designed to guide the process of consensus moderation from the commencement of the assessment design, through the teaching period and then marking period. The framework clarifies the process of consensus moderation and will inform consistent practice with a common language across the teaching team based on evidence and research.

Values and Beliefs

The framework is underpinned by the values of respect, integrity and honesty. These values inspire relationships that are based on mutual respect and trust, valuing individual viewpoints, and creating a safe environment for academic discussion and debate regardless of role, status and qualifications.



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Figure 16.

Framework for Consensus Moderation in Higher Education (Version 4)

Recommendations and Implications in regard to the preliminary framework

Sector Implications	University implications	School implications	Unit Coordinator Implications	Individual academic Implications	Student Implications
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognition of the importance of moderation and consensus moderation • Development and publication of consensus moderation guidelines accessible to all universities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognition of the importance of moderation and consensus moderation • Develop a positive organisational culture for assessment moderation • Provide written acknowledgment of the role of consensus moderation in the academic workload • Amend workload model to ensure provision of adequate time for consensus moderation • Develop policy as guidance on process for consensus moderation • Provide professional development for assessment moderation and consensus moderation for; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Course Coordinators ○ Unit Coordinators ○ Academics ○ Sessional academics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognition of the importance of moderation and consensus moderation • Prioritise working with Course Coordinators to develop a positive course or discipline culture for assessment moderation across the course • Inclusion of time for moderation and consensus moderation in the workload allocation • Recognition of the benefits of calibration • Development of School procedure for dialogue processes with consensus moderation • Support staff to attend professional development for assessment moderation and consensus moderation for; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Course Coordinators ○ Unit Coordinators ○ Academics ○ Sessional academics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prioritise working with the Course Coordinator, teaching and marking team to develop a positive culture for assessment moderation • Focus on inclusive Unit Coordinator leadership; valuing all contributions and providing a safe environment for discourse • Facilitate calibration (using annotated exemplars) with discussion • Use technology to enable discussion and dialogue for those marking away from campus • Use expertise in a non-threatening 'expert model' of consensus moderation to avoid intimidating sessional/other academics • Ensure that sample moderation doesn't advantage or disadvantage particular student 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on working with the teaching and marking team for each unit to develop a positive culture for assessment moderation • Contribute to development of the safe culture for discussion • Engage in calibration activities • Engage in professional conversations with the unit coordinator and academic team • Embrace feedback received on example papers and engage in a two way professional conversation • Maintain integrity at all times • Seek feedback if marks are changed • Ensure that sample moderation doesn't advantage or disadvantage particular student 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater understanding of the marking requirements and standards by the teaching and marking team • Delivery of a consistent message regarding assignment requirements and standards during the teaching period • A consistent approach to marking by more informed markers • Removal of the marking lottery, which previously depended on who was marking your assignment • Consistency in marking resulting in fairness and equity

If you adopt this in your area, please let me know as I would love to hear how it goes.
 If you would like further information please contact Jaci Mason - j.mason1@postgrad.curtin.edu.au



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Figure 17.

Framework for Consensus Moderation in Higher Education Recommendations and Implications (Version 4)

7.4.4 Subsequent Action Research Cycles

As noted earlier, due to the pandemic of 2020/2021 (COVID-19), future cycles of action research were carried out through a series of online conference presentations and workshops with an online questionnaire. The questionnaire contained the same content as the one used in the first workshop, although for the remaining action research cycles, data was collected using Qualtrics (an online survey hosting platform). Under the conditions of a pandemic, online data collection was considered efficient, convenient, and provided an opportunity to access participants from different geographical locations (Salvador et al., 2020). Strategies were adopted to encourage a high response rate, including providing participants with an electronic copy of the presentation, a pdf copy of the framework, and a weblink plus QR code to the online questionnaire.

As the action research cycles were conducted in the online environment participants were able to provide feedback immediately either via their microphones (except in the one pre-recorded presentation in the third cycle) or through the chat functionality. Feedback could be provided verbally, whilst online, through online 'chat' functionality, via my email address and through the online questionnaire. Following each presentation, I provided information on the data collection process and a further explanation of the purpose of the data collection. Participants were provided with an electronic copy of the framework and a link plus QR code to the online questionnaire. Participants could also contact me through email, with the email address provided on the electronic version of the framework for consensus moderation in higher education.

Following each workshop, I documented a reflexive account of the cycle based on a personal reflection, the collated feedback, and a discussion with my supervisors. The following section will now explore the further four cycles of action research and the associated changes to the framework for consensus moderation in higher education.

7.4.4.1 Second Action Research Cycle: School of Nursing, Midwifery, and Paramedicine, Curtin University, Perth, Western Australia

The next cycle of action research was an online workshop for the School of Nursing, Midwifery, and Paramedicine at Curtin University on the 10th of June 2020. This was an interactive 60-minute workshop entitled '*Best Practices in consensus moderation.*' The workshop followed the same format as the first cycle of action research, although group work was reduced to take into account the reduced available time and online format. The

revised framework for consensus moderation in higher education (Version 4) was used for this workshop.

Workshop Discussions and Data Collection

Throughout the workshop participants confirmed how they could relate to the findings. Again, at this workshop there appeared a general acceptance that consensus moderation was a challenge with more discussion on the negative rather than positive experiences of consensus moderation. This confirmed the need for a change in both culture and process.

Survey Respondents

There were 17 participants in the workshop and seven participants completed the online questionnaire (41% response rate). All respondents were female, and they collectively had been working in higher education for 129 years, with a median of 18 years and a range of one to 32 years. At the time of the workshop, they were all working at Curtin University and held roles of Lecturer (six) and Senior Lecturer (one).

Quantitative Results

All of the workshop participants who completed the questionnaire rated the questions posed as 'Very important' or 'Extremely important' with the majority of participants rating all statements to be 'Extremely important' (Table 10).

Table 8.

School of Nursing, Midwifery, and Paramedicine: Responses to Confirming Actions for Consensus Moderation

	Question	Not at all important	Not very important	Not important	Somewhat important	Very important	Extremely important
1	Accept marking is subjective and focus on developing a shared understanding of assessment requirements					1	6
2	Moderation/consensus moderation should be viewed as core academic work and have recognition with workload					2	5
3	A course assessment culture is needed for consistency and to ensure achievement of course learning outcomes					2	5
4	Consensus moderation should provide opportunities for learning from peers					3	4
5	Communication is needed before teaching begins so that the teaching team can understand the assessment requirements for teaching purposes					2	5
6	Leadership is required to ensure that everyone has a voice in moderation discussions					2	5
7	Policy and protocols are required to aid in developing a safe environment where everyone's opinions are valued					3	4
8	Calibrating all markers before marking begins is required to ensure consistency of marks and fairness to students					1	6
9	Annotated exemplars and feedback on initial marking aid in developing consensus on the assessment requirements					2	5
10	Professional development is needed to enhance understanding of assessment and moderation principles					2	5

Qualitative Feedback

The verbal and written feedback in the session included positive affirmation of the usefulness of the framework from all present. The 11 online written feedback comments during the workshop were all positive about the framework and the need for such a framework. The overall feedback on the day was that the draft framework was practical and useful, *“this is very helpful, really practical.”* There was a positive discussion on the requirement for a supportive culture and the need for a safe environment in which discussion/discourse could take place, suggesting that moving this aspect to encircle the framework for consensus moderation was successful in raising the emphasis of this aspect of the framework. An email received after the session stated *“this is awesome, the culture point SO important.”* Useful feedback was to change the outer circle from repeating “Culture – Safe environment for dialogue” to a range of messages to affirm the need for a safe environment. Use of words such as respect, integrity, and honesty were suggested.

The framework was considered to be straightforward (confirming the streamlining of the version was successful) and able to be integrated into policy and procedures, *“when this work makes it into the arena that’s going to be amazing.”* The implications for students were also noted in the framework. As one participant stated, *“consensus moderation gets better results for students and always helps me reflect, grow and learn as an educator - this is such great work!”*

The open-ended questions in the questionnaire indicated that five respondents were very interested or extremely interested in implementing this approach to consensus moderation. They identified that benefits of this type of framework include formalisation of the process of consensus moderation, and improving the quality and consistency of marking. Barriers to using the framework within their teaching team focused on time and workload (three respondents), as well as cultural aspects such as personal opinions of academics and a lack of supporting policy (one respondent). The overall feedback was positive, *“Very good that it is being developed,”* and *“The framework is easy to understand and can be integrated into existing policy and procedures.”*

Post Workshop Reflections and Discussion

Following the workshop, I documented a reflexive account of the cycle based on a personal reflection and the collated findings. An interesting point identified in my post-workshop reflection was how group work is challenging to manage online and detracted time from presenting the framework.

Changes to the Framework

Following a period of reflection and subsequent discussions with my supervisors, it was decided that the statement 'Culture – Safe environment for dialogue' would remain on the outer circle, and a further statement of 'Respect, Integrity, and Honesty' was added at the base of the outer circle as this reflected the values and beliefs that underpinned the framework. This resulted in a new version of the framework for consensus moderation in higher education (Version 5) which can be seen below (Figure 18), along with the recommendations and implications for the framework (Figure 19).

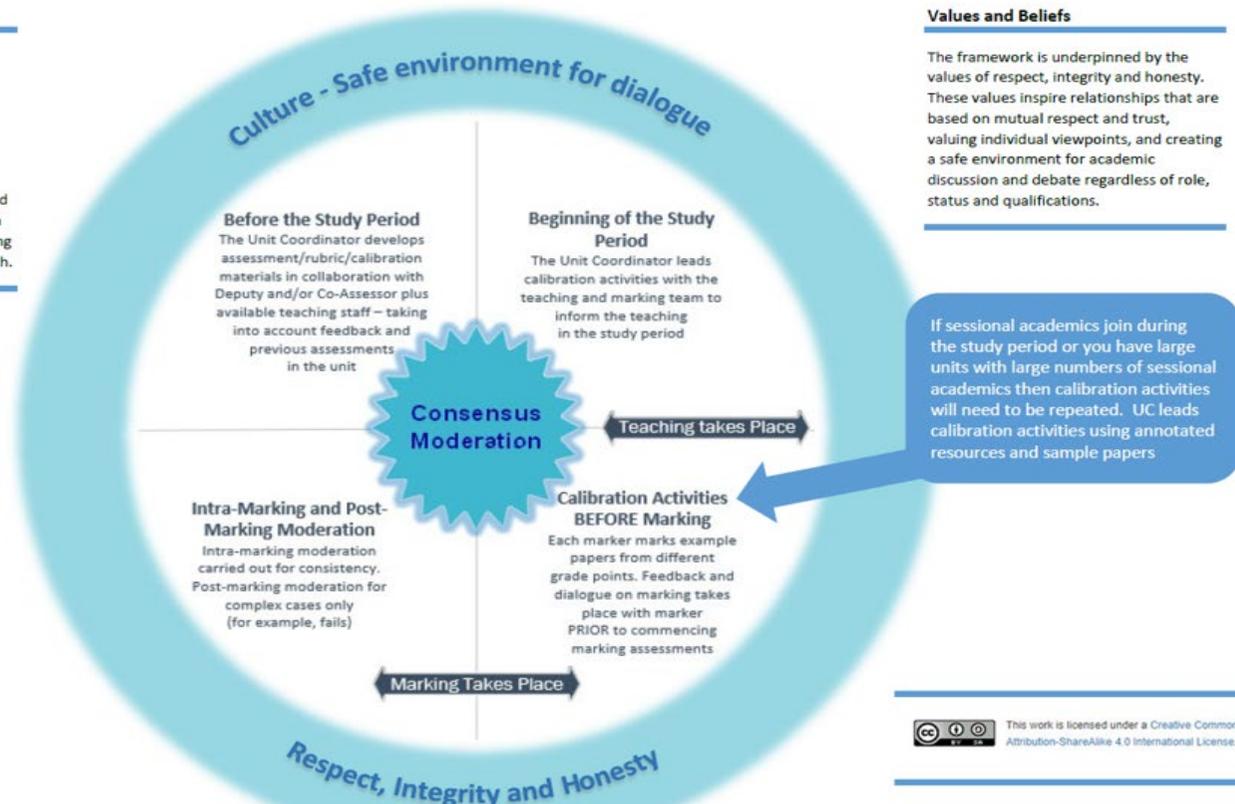
Framework for Consensus Moderation

Purpose of this framework

The framework for consensus moderation is designed to guide the process of consensus moderation from the commencement of the assessment design, through the teaching period and then marking period. The framework clarifies the process of consensus moderation and will inform consistent practice with a common language across the teaching team based on evidence and research.

Values and Beliefs

The framework is underpinned by the values of respect, integrity and honesty. These values inspire relationships that are based on mutual respect and trust, valuing individual viewpoints, and creating a safe environment for academic discussion and debate regardless of role, status and qualifications.



Feedback is sought on the feasibility of this framework. Survey link: https://curtin.au1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8ldasqheSgsLnT

Figure 18.

Framework for Consensus Moderation in Higher Education (Version 5)

Recommendations and Implications in regard to the preliminary framework

Sector Implications	University implications	School implications	Unit Coordinator Implications	Individual academic Implications	Student Implications
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognition of the importance of moderation and consensus moderation Development and publication of consensus moderation guidelines accessible to all universities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognition of the importance of moderation and consensus moderation Develop a positive organisational culture for assessment moderation Provide written acknowledgment of the role of consensus moderation in the academic workload Amend workload model to ensure provision of adequate time for consensus moderation Develop policy as guidance on process for consensus moderation Provide professional development for assessment moderation and consensus moderation for; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Coordinators o Unit Coordinators o Academics o Sessional academics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognition of the importance of moderation and consensus moderation Prioritise working with Course Coordinators to develop a positive course or discipline culture for assessment moderation across the course Inclusion of time for moderation and consensus moderation in the workload allocation Recognition of the benefits of calibration Development of School procedure for dialogue processes with consensus moderation Support staff to attend professional development for assessment moderation and consensus moderation for; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Coordinators o Unit Coordinators o Academics o Sessional academics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prioritise working with the Course Coordinator, teaching and marking team to develop a positive culture for assessment moderation Focus on inclusive Unit Coordinator leadership; valuing all contributions and providing a safe environment for discourse Facilitate calibration (using annotated exemplars) with discussion Use technology to enable discussion and dialogue for those marking away from campus Use expertise in a non-threatening 'expert model' of consensus moderation to avoid intimidating sessional/other academics Ensure that sample moderation doesn't advantage or disadvantage any particular student 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on working with the teaching and marking team for each unit to develop a positive culture for assessment moderation Contribute to development of the safe culture for discussion Engage in calibration activities Engage in professional conversations with the unit coordinator and academic team Embrace feedback received on example papers and engage in a two way professional conversation Maintain integrity at all times Seek feedback if marks are changed Ensure that sample moderation doesn't advantage or disadvantage any particular student 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Greater understanding of the marking requirements and standards by the teaching and marking team Delivery of a consistent message regarding assignment requirements and standards during the teaching period A consistent approach to marking by more informed markers Removal of the marking lottery, which previously depended on who was marking your assignment Consistency in marking resulting in fairness and equity

Feedback is sought on the feasibility of this framework. Survey link: https://curtin.au1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8ldasqheSgsLnT

If you adopt this in your area, please let me know as I would love to hear how it goes.
 If you would like further information please contact Jaci Mason - j.mason1@postgrad.curtin.edu.au



Figure 19.

Framework for Consensus Moderation Recommendations and Implications (Version 5)

7.4.4.2 Third Action Research Cycle: Teaching and Learning Conference 2020, Advance HE, England, United Kingdom

The next cycle of action research was an online presentation at the Teaching and Learning Conference 2020 with Advance HE, in England on the 7th July 2020. This was originally intended to be a face-to-face workshop however was changed to a recorded online presentation by the conference organisers due to the pandemic. This presentation was entitled '*Developing an evidence-based framework for consensus moderation practices in Higher Education.*' The presentation followed the same PowerPoint presentation as the first cycle of action research although there was no group work. Version 5 of the framework was used for this cycle of action research (Figure 18 and Figure 19).

Participant Feedback

250 participants attended the conference, although as this was a pre-recorded session it was not possible to obtain statistics on how many participants watched the presentation. There were 51 online written feedback comments and two emails received following the conference. All of the online and email feedback was positive, as one participant stated, "*I love love the layout and design, and am really looking forward to reading this in more depth.*" There were no completed questionnaires for this cycle of action research.

Post Presentation Reflection and Discussion

Following the presentation, I documented a reflexive account of the cycle based on a personal reflection and the collated findings. I was disappointed by the absence of completed questionnaires but do appreciate that low response rates have been identified as a risk with this approach to online data collection (Lefever et al., 2007; Salvador et al., 2020; Solanki et al., 2020). Whilst there were no completed questionnaires, the rich discussion and written feedback comments were positive and useful in confirming the content of the framework for consensus moderation. I noted that the feedback received indicated the framework was considered to be practical and easy to understand.

Changes to the Framework

There were no changes identified as necessary to the framework for consensus moderation following this cycle of action research.

7.4.4.3 Fourth Action Research Cycle: 2020 SoTL-China International Conference, Beijing, China

The next cycle of action research was an online presentation at the 2020 SoTL-China International Conference in Beijing China on the 22nd of August 2020. This was originally intended to be a face-to-face workshop, however was changed to an online presentation by the conference organisers due to the pandemic. This presentation was entitled '*Developing an evidence-based framework for consensus moderation practices in Higher Education.*' The presentation followed the same process and the same framework for consensus moderation in higher education (Version 5) as the previous cycle of action research.

Participant Feedback

There were 40 participants in this presentation, although this presentation received the least comments of all of the presentations and workshops. There was one verbal comment, which was positive, stating that the layout was clear. Another participant asked if they could translate the framework into Chinese, to which I provided consent for them to do so. There were no written feedback comments and no participants completed the online questionnaire.

Post Presentation Reflection and Discussion

As with the previous cycles, I documented a reflexive account of the cycle based on a personal reflection and the collated findings. I noted the request to translate the framework for consensus moderation into Chinese as a positive outcome.

Changes to the Framework

There were no changes identified as necessary to the framework for consensus moderation following this cycle of action research.

7.4.4.4 Fifth Action Research Cycle: CRADLE Conference 2020, Centre for Research in Assessment and Digital Learning, Melbourne, Australia

The final cycle of action research was a live online presentation carried out at the CRADLE Conference 2020, at the Centre for Research in Assessment and Digital Learning in

Melbourne on the 20th of October 2020. This presentation was entitled '*Inconsistent moderation: The voices of sessional academics.*' The presentation focused on the findings from the focus groups before exploring the framework for consensus moderation in higher education. The framework presented at this conference was Version 5.

Presentation Discussions and Data collection

This presentation generated a large amount of discussion as well as 53 online written feedback comments. Throughout the presentation, participants confirmed how they could relate to the findings from the different phases, with a general acceptance that consensus moderation was a challenge but was required for quality assurance purposes. This confirmed the need for a change in the culture and process for consensus moderation.

Survey Respondents

There were 135 participants in the presentation and seven participants completed the online questionnaire (5% response rate). This was a disappointing response rate although the verbal and online comments were valuable and rich in nature. All respondents were female and collectively had been working in higher education for 102 years, with a median of 18.5 years and a range of five to 25 years. One respondent did not provide details of how long they had been working in higher education. They were all currently working at a variety of different universities across Australia, and they held a variety of roles including Lecturer (one), Senior Lecturer (two), Associate Professor (one), Sessional Academic (one), Senior Education Manager (one) and Academic Developer (one).

Quantitative Results

The participants who completed the questionnaire rated most questions posed as 'Somewhat important', 'Very important' or 'Extremely important' (Table 11). It was interesting to note the one respondent who stated that calibration was not important.

Table 9.

CRADLE Conference 2020: Responses to Confirming Actions for Consensus Moderation

	Question	Not at all important	Not very important	Not important	Somewhat important	Very important	Extremely important
1	Accept marking is subjective and focus on developing a shared understanding of assessment requirements				1	2	4
2	Moderation/consensus moderation should be viewed as core academic work and have recognition with workload					2	5
3	A course assessment culture is needed for consistency and to ensure achievement of course learning outcomes					3	4
4	Consensus moderation should provide opportunities for learning from peers					5	2
5	Communication is needed before teaching begins so that the teaching team can understand the assessment requirements for teaching purposes				2	5	
6	Leadership is required to ensure that everyone has a voice in moderation discussions				1	4	2
7	Policy and protocols are required to aid in developing a safe environment where everyone's opinions are valued				3	3	1
8	Calibrating all markers before marking begins is required to ensure consistency of marks and fairness to students			1	1	2	3
9	Annotated exemplars and feedback on initial marking aid in developing consensus on the assessment requirements				2	2	3
10	Professional development is needed to enhance understanding of assessment and moderation principles				2	2	3

Qualitative Feedback

This presentation generated a large amount of discussion as well as 53 online written feedback comments. The open-ended questions in the questionnaire indicated that three respondents were very interested in implementing the framework for consensus moderation, and one was somewhat interested. The advantages identified to implementing this type of framework were consistency, equity, and transparency in practice, increased assessment literacy, and the focus on dialogue helps to make the marking more sustainable. One respondent stated, *“It should be a necessary part of higher education teaching staff induction to ensure consistent quality of marking and feedback provision.”*

Barriers to using the framework within their teaching team focused on time and workload (4 respondents), as well as cultural aspects such as existing culture where staff do not question their own practices (1 respondent). As one respondent stated, *“Not enough time to ensure all staff will engage unless it’s part of a supportive, caring, student-centred culture (fostered through financial incentives and workload recognition).”* The overall feedback was positive, *“it is absolutely critical to build in moderation and sessional community of practice time into sessional paid hours”* and another stated, *“How do we turn a great idea into compulsory practice?”*

The verbal and written feedback during the session included positive affirmation of the benefits of a framework for consensus moderation. The overall discussion and feedback on the day was that the draft framework was useful. There was a general consensus that calibration should be *“part of good moderation,”* and how the *“exemplar marking calibration process, works very well.”* There were a lot of comments about paying sessional academics for moderation before marking, *“sessional staff must be PAID for the essential work of assessment moderation, which is best done with exemplars PRIOR to marking students work.”* There was also a lot of discussion on the impact of *“power structures of university governance”* and the need for a positive assessment culture.

Post Workshop Reflections and Discussion

Following the workshop, I documented a reflexive account of the cycle based on a personal reflection and the collated feedback. I was disappointed by the response rate to the questionnaire but appreciated the rich discussion that took place as part of the presentation.

Changes to the Framework

There were no changes identified as necessary to the framework for consensus moderation following this cycle of action research.

7.5 Overall Findings and Recommendations

7.5.1 Overall Findings

This action research engaged 461 academics across five cycles of development and piloting the framework for consensus moderation in higher education. Adopting this approach enabled academics to provide feedback on the framework, as well as explore real-world solutions to the issues identified. Adopting cycles of action research, reflection, contemplation, and discussion with my supervisors enabled changes to be made to the framework based on the contributions of the participants in each cycle.

Whilst the COVID-19 pandemic meant that face-to-face workshops were no longer possible, I was able to obtain feedback through online conference workshops and presentations, and data collection through an online web-based questionnaire. This was efficient and convenient (Salvador et al., 2020), and strategies were adopted to encourage a high response rate. Whilst the workshops and presentations resulted in rich discussions and feedback, the response rate for the online questionnaire was disappointing and much lower than anticipated. Low response rates have been identified as a risk with this approach to online data collection (Lefever et al., 2007; Salvador et al., 2020; Solanki et al., 2020), although attention needs to be placed on the richness of the dataset and its ability to answer the questions being asked (Braun et al., 2020). In this research, whilst the completed questionnaire response rate was lower than anticipated, when used in combination with the online comments and verbal feedback, the rich data is sufficient for use.

Across the five cycles, 23 questionnaires were completed, all of which endorsed the proposed actions for consensus moderation. As can be seen in the summary table (Table 12), most proposed actions were rated 'Very important' or 'Extremely important.' For all but one proposed action, the majority of respondents indicated the proposed actions were 'Extremely important.' 'Consensus moderation should provide opportunities for learning from peers' was considered 'Very important' by the majority of respondents.

Table 10.

Collated Responses to Confirming Actions for Consensus Moderation

	Question	Not at all important	Not very important	Not important	Somewhat important	Very important	Extremely important
1	Accept marking is subjective and focus on developing a shared understanding of assessment requirements				1	6	16
2	Moderation/consensus moderation should be viewed as core academic work and have recognition with workload					6	17
3	A course assessment culture is needed for consistency and to ensure achievement of course learning outcomes					8	15
4	Consensus moderation should provide opportunities for learning from peers					12	11
5	Communication is needed before teaching begins so that the teaching team can understand the assessment requirements for teaching purposes				3	8	12
6	Leadership is required to ensure that everyone has a voice in moderation discussions				2	8	13
7	Policy and protocols are required to aid in developing a safe environment where everyone's opinions are valued				5	8	10
8	Calibrating all markers before marking begins is required to ensure consistency of marks and fairness to students			1	1	6	15
9	Annotated exemplars and feedback on initial marking aid in developing consensus on the assessment requirements				3	6	14
10	Professional development is needed to enhance understanding of assessment and moderation principles				4	5	14

These responses, along with the qualitative feedback received in the questionnaire, workshops, and presentations, indicate the importance that academics, who participated in the action research, place on the proposed consensus moderation activities. All feedback was considered, and there were no further alterations to the framework after the fifth cycle of action research. Version 5 of the framework became the final version (Figure 20), accompanied by recommendations and implications for the sector, universities, schools, or

departments including course coordinators, unit coordinators, individual academics, and students (Figure 21).

Framework for Consensus Moderation

Purpose of this framework

The framework for consensus moderation is designed to guide the process of consensus moderation from the commencement of the assessment design, through the teaching period and then marking period. The framework clarifies the process of consensus moderation and will inform consistent practice with a common language across the teaching team based on evidence and research.

Values and Beliefs

The framework is underpinned by the values of respect, integrity and honesty. These values inspire relationships that are based on mutual respect and trust, valuing individual viewpoints, and creating a safe environment for academic discussion and debate regardless of role, status and qualifications.

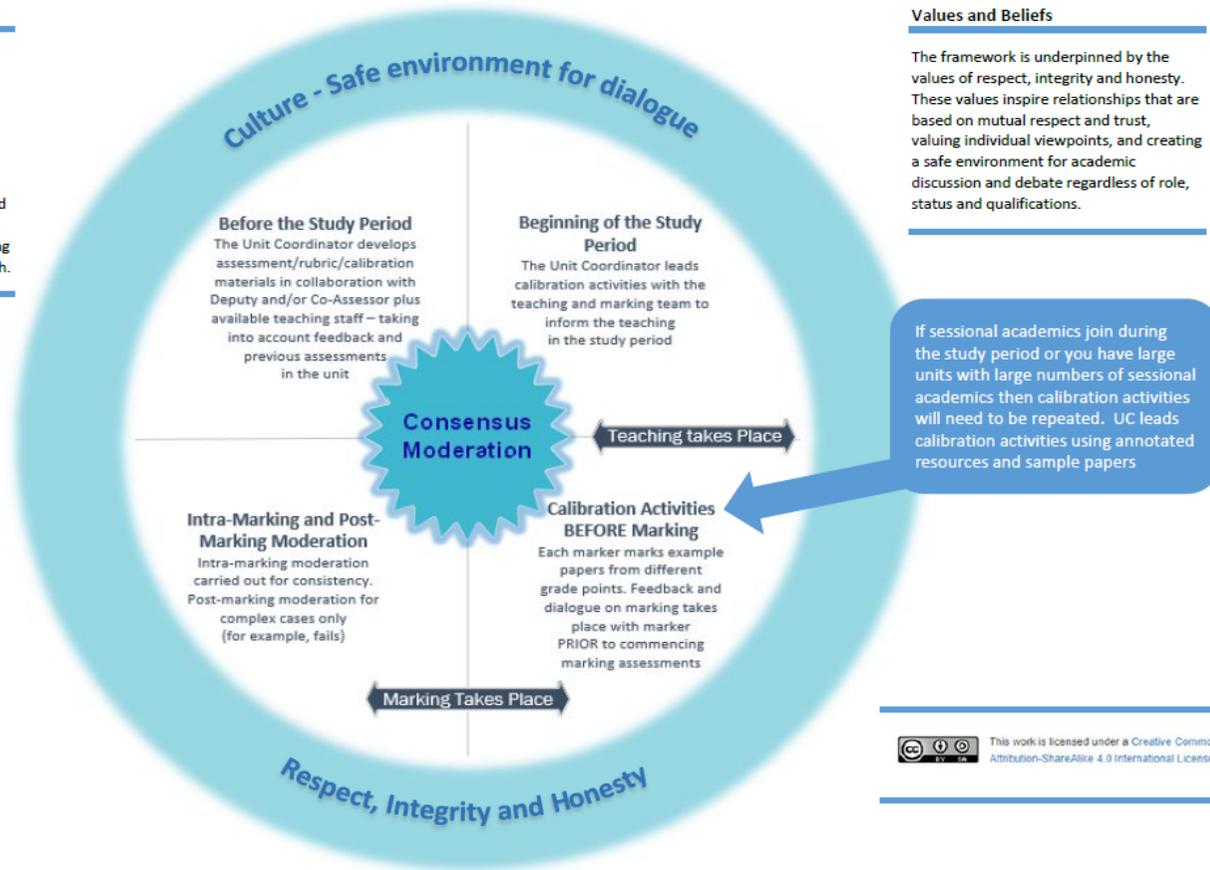


Figure 20.

Final Framework for Consensus Moderation in Higher Education

Recommendations and Implications in regard to the preliminary framework

Sector Implications	University implications	School implications	Unit Coordinator Implications	Individual academic Implications	Student Implications
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognition of the importance of moderation and consensus moderation • Development and publication of consensus moderation guidelines accessible to all universities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognition of the importance of moderation and consensus moderation • Develop a positive organisational culture for assessment moderation • Provide written acknowledgment of the role of consensus moderation in the academic workload • Amend workload model to ensure provision of adequate time for consensus moderation • Develop policy as guidance on process for consensus moderation • Provide professional development for assessment moderation and consensus moderation for; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Course Coordinators ○ Unit Coordinators ○ Academics ○ Sessional academics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognition of the importance of moderation and consensus moderation • Prioritise working with Course Coordinators to develop a positive course or discipline culture for assessment moderation across the course • Inclusion of time for moderation and consensus moderation in the workload allocation • Recognition of the benefits of calibration • Development of School procedure for dialogue processes with consensus moderation • Support staff to attend professional development for assessment moderation and consensus moderation for; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Course Coordinators ○ Unit Coordinators ○ Academics ○ Sessional academics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prioritise working with the Course Coordinator, teaching and marking team to develop a positive culture for assessment moderation • Focus on inclusive Unit Coordinator leadership; valuing all contributions and providing a safe environment for discourse • Facilitate calibration (using annotated exemplars) with discussion • Use technology to enable discussion and dialogue for those marking away from campus • Use expertise in a non-threatening 'expert model' of consensus moderation to avoid intimidating sessional/other academics • Ensure that sample moderation doesn't advantage or disadvantage particular student 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on working with the teaching and marking team for each unit to develop a positive culture for assessment moderation • Contribute to development of the safe culture for discussion • Engage in calibration activities • Engage in professional conversations with the unit coordinator and academic team • Embrace feedback received on example papers and engage in a two way professional conversation • Maintain integrity at all times • Seek feedback if marks are changed • Ensure that sample moderation doesn't advantage or disadvantage particular student 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater understanding of the marking requirements and standards by the teaching and marking team • Delivery of a consistent message regarding assignment requirements and standards during the teaching period • A consistent approach to marking by more informed markers • Removal of the marking lottery, which previously depended on who was marking your assignment • Consistency in marking resulting in fairness and equity

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Figure 21.

Final Recommendations and Implications for the Framework for Consensus Moderation in Higher Education

7.5.2 The Final Framework

I will now describe the final framework in detail. The collegial and collaborative evidence-based framework for consensus moderation is designed to guide the process from the commencement of the study period, through the assessment design, teaching period and then the marking period. The framework informs consistent practice across the teaching and marking team.

A Safe Environment for Dialogue

The framework is encircled by the culture of a safe environment for discourse based on respect, integrity and honesty. These values inspire relationships of mutual respect and trust, valuing individual viewpoints, and creating a safe environment for academic discussion and debate regardless of role, status and qualifications. The need for a safe environment in which to carry out dialogue was evident in Phase Two (Chapter 3 and Chapter 4), Phase Three (Chapter 5) and during the action research aspect of this phase (Phase Four). Having an environment that is safe for dialogue is key to the consensus moderation process and provides an opportunity for a catalytic reaction, where the markers can create new insights and a detailed understanding of the assessment requirements, and expected standards. It was therefore clear that in this body of research, as in keeping with previous studies, employees perceived psychological safety as vital for effective dialogue (Detert & Burris, 2007; Newman et al., 2017; Xu et al., 2019).

Psychological safety defines a situation in which *“human beings feel (1) included, (2) safe to learn, (3) safe to contribute, and (4) safe to challenge the status quo—all without fear of being embarrassed, marginalized, or punished in some way”* (Clark, 2020, p. 2). In this way, psychological safety requires an environment in which mutual respect is characterised by an individual being able to express different opinions (Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009), and feels safe to take interpersonal risks (for example, to speak out or ask questions) without fear of negative consequences (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson et al., 2016; Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Newman et al., 2017). With consensus moderation, this includes an environment where markers feel safe to ask questions during calibration activities, safe to learn from colleagues, safe to have collaborative discussions on mark allocation, and/or safe to explore dissonance/constructive conflict on marking judgements.

Whilst acknowledging that the responsibility for being collaborative cannot be placed purely on the tenured academic or unit coordinator, these behaviours (for example,

asking questions during consensus moderation, learning from colleagues, being collaborative or exploring dissonance/constructive conflict on marking judgements) can be considered 'risky' from an interpersonal perspective, and subsequently, psychological safety is needed to enable such behaviours (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Similarly, for effective consensus moderation, the marker must have trust in the other parties involved in the consensus moderation process so that the marker can manage the uncertainty of the discussion and/or the unit coordinator's response to their mark allocation. Trust refers to the confidence that the marker holds in the behavioural expectations of not being harmed or exploited by their vulnerability (Edmondson, 2011; Jones & George, 1998).

Having high psychological safety will result in more open communication (Morrison, 2014; Pearsall & Ellis, 2011), increased sharing of knowledge (Newman et al., 2017), enhanced learning (Carmeli & Gittell, 2009; Carmeli et al., 2014; Edmondson, 1999, 2004; Edmondson et al., 2016; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006; Newman et al., 2017), and increased performance (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Newman et al., 2017). These are all vital elements of consensus moderation. Therefore with having high psychological safety, open communication, increased sharing of knowledge, enhanced learning and increased performance (in terms of marking time and consistency) will enhance the process.

One of the key features in consensus moderation is that there is usually a hierarchical status between the unit coordinator and the marker, with unit coordinators being tenured academics and most markers being sessional academics. It is known that differences in hierarchical status impact perceived psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999, 2004; Edmondson et al., 2016; Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). In addition, tenure status and length of experience in a role has been found to increase psychological safety (Edmondson et al., 2016; Plomp et al., 2019). In this research, sessional academics were employed on a casual basis and were early in their career. This has practical implications for successful consensus moderation practices as, "*the human need to feel safe at work in order to grow, learn, contribute, and perform effectively in a rapidly changing world*" (Edmondson & Lei, 2014, p. 41).

As seen in this body of research, when there are issues with power differentials combined with low psychological safety, rather than being empowered to ask questions or have open communication, the individual's ability to question or challenge is replaced with survival instincts (Clark, 2020). As discussed in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, the relationship between the unit coordinator and marker is unique, as the unit coordinator is the direct supervisor and is responsible for future employment in the unit. To this end, the supervisor

can exercise a degree of power, influence and control (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). The tensions, originating from differences in status, need to be managed to enable effective collaboration (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). Reducing the perceived power differential can increase psychological safety (Appelbaum et al., 2020), subsequently, power differentials need to be overcome by cultivating an environment that has high psychological safety (Edmondson & Lei, 2014).

Whilst my research has identified a need for psychological safety in the consensus moderation process, this research did not specifically focus on the construct of psychological safety or the degree of psychological safety required for consensus moderation, as this was not the aim of the research. The evidence supporting the need for psychological safety was obtained from a variety of academics across a university (Phase Two - Chapter 3 and Chapter 4), and across different universities (Phase Three - Chapter 5 and Phase Four – this Chapter). There may indeed be differences in the perceptions of context and degree of psychological safety depending on their work pressures or roles, as suggested by Edmondson et al. (2016). Further research on interrelationships in an assessment marking team, in a unit teaching and marking team and also in a course teaching and marking team would provide further insight into the phenomenon of psychological safety and consensus moderation.

Leader effectiveness has been recognised as an important element in the perception of psychological safety and the ability to develop psychological safety (Edmondson et al., 2016). The supportive leadership behaviours (for example, leader inclusivity, support, trustworthiness, openness and behavioural integrity) which can positively influence perceptions of psychological safety have been well documented (Carmeli et al., 2009; Carmeli & Gittell, 2009; Detert & Burris, 2007; Hirak et al., 2012; Mitchell et al., 2015; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006; Newman et al., 2017; Xu et al., 2019). These supportive leadership behaviours, which have the potential to create psychological safety, have been linked with a variety of leadership styles, for example, transformational (Carmeli et al., 2014), ethical leadership (Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009), shared leadership (Liu et al., 2014), and inclusive leadership (Choi et al., 2017; Javed et al., 2019; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006).

However, inclusive leadership is reported to be different to other leadership styles (Choi et al., 2017; Jolly & Lee, 2021; Mitchell et al., 2015; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006; Randel et al., 2018), as a result of the leader's openness, accessibility, and availability (Carmeli et al., 2010; Choi et al., 2017; Mitchell et al., 2015; Nembhard & Edmondson,

2006). These facets not only encourage individuals to value themselves and each other (Carmeli et al., 2010; Hirak et al., 2012; Mitchell et al., 2015; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006), but also invite contribution and participation (Randel et al., 2018), and can reduce the impact of differences in status (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006).

Inclusive leadership is considered a motivational leadership style with leader characteristics of advocacy and humility (Randel et al., 2018). In turn, inclusive leadership develops high-quality relationships and results in a safe social environment in which the voices of all individuals are valued (Carmeli & Gittell, 2009; Carmeli et al., 2010; Choi et al., 2017; Hirak et al., 2012; Javed et al., 2019; Jolly & Lee, 2021; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006; Randel et al., 2018), with leaders having a positive impact on individual well-being (Choi et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2014). Concerning consensus moderation, this would result in a social context in which unit coordinators were available for the markers, willing to listen to their markers, pay attention to the needs of the markers and the markers would feel safe to engage in the discourse required for consensus moderation practices. Based on the tenet that high-quality relationships will enhance the moderation process, and inclusive supportive leadership behaviours influence perceptions of psychological safety, one of the recommendations and implications in the framework is the need for a supportive inclusive leadership approach by unit coordinators. In line with Choi et al. (2017) and Carmeli et al. (2010), I recommend professional development on the practices of inclusive leadership for those in supervisory positions, so that unit coordinators can exhibit the necessary behaviours for supportive inclusive leadership, developing high psychological safety and facilitate collaborative consensus moderation practice.

Pre-Moderation - before the Study Period Commences

The collegial and collaborative evidence-based framework for consensus moderation in higher education starts before the study period commences. The unit coordinator, in collaboration with a deputy unit coordinator, co-assessor, and available teaching and marking team, commence the pre-moderation process by collaboratively developing the assessment guidance, marking rubrics, exemplars, annotated resources, and calibration resources. There is a plethora of literature available on developing marking criteria and rubrics that can be used to inform this process, for example, Bamber (2015); Bearman and Ajjawi (2018, 2021); Bearman et al. (2020); Bearman et al. (2017); Bell et al. (2013); Jonsson (2014); O'Donovan et al. (2004) and Tai et al. (2018). This development process must take into account feedback from students and markers in the previous study

period, and be cognisant of recommendations for reducing issues of contract cheating (Dawson & Sutherland-Smith, 2018, 2019; Harper et al., 2021).

In advocating the pre-moderation activities commencing before the study period, I recognise the body of work that supports students as partners in the co-creation of assessments (Colson et al., 2021; Deeley & Bovill, 2017; Doyle et al., 2019; Mačiulienė et al., 2018; Meer & Chapman, 2015), and advocate co-creation across other aspects of the curriculum as described by Dollinger and Lodge (2020). Having an individual student-focused co-created assessment would undoubtedly provide the benefit of collaborative working between the academics-student (Deeley & Bovill, 2017). Nevertheless, achieving this is challenging in the current climate of political shaping of the higher education sector, increased casualisation of the academic workforce, and significant workload time constraints. A consistent assessment across the student cohort will enable the framework for consensus moderation to provide genuine quality assurance. Consequently, attention must be paid to the authentic design of assessments to ensure student engagement, as having relevance and flexibility has been identified as increasing assessment engagement (Tai et al., 2019).

Pre-Moderation Calibration - before Teaching

At the beginning of the study period, the unit coordinator should lead calibration activities with the teaching and, if available, the marking team. The teaching and marking team can then develop their understanding of the assessment requirements. This will result in students experiencing learning and teaching activities facilitated by a teaching team who are genuinely informed about the assessment requirements and the expected standards. Thus students will receive consistent information about the assessment requirements across the study period (Boud & Molloy, 2013), and student inquiries will be responded to by an informed teaching team. The importance of this calibration cannot be overemphasised as students have previously identified how they would like more transparency about assessment requirements and assessor expectations (Bloxham, den Outer, et al., 2015; Francis, 2008; Francis et al., 2019; Higgins et al., 2002; Price et al., 2011). The key here is the dialogue that takes place to ensure that everyone understands the assessment requirements and expected standards.

Pre-Moderation Calibration - before Marking

Once the assessments have been submitted then the unit coordinator should lead calibration activities for all markers, before marking. These calibration activities should include the use of annotated resources (for example, marking criteria annotated with information on criterion description and/or expanded annotated rubrics demonstrating how assessment grade judgements should be made, and/or annotated previously marked assessments) and sample marking (marking a small number of sample assessments). Whilst having a marking criterion (such as a rubric) can help with obtaining consensus (Grainger et al., 2016), solely having a rubric is considered unlikely to achieve marking consensus and highlights the importance of the discourse that needs to take place. Research studies have found that training on rubrics increases assessor interrater reliability and student understanding (Bird & Yucel, 2013; Hansson et al., 2014; O'Connell et al., 2016; Villa et al., 2020). This calibration process should also include markers receiving development on what is required for student feedback and the strategies that should be adopted to ensure the feedback provided to students has a positive influence on their learning (Boud & Molloy, 2013). Having a clear understanding of the assessment requirements, expected standards, how judgements should be made, and the feedback to provide will enhance consistency in the marking. Taking part in this form of training also has the additional benefit of increasing the markers' ability to successfully identify any cases of contract cheating (Dawson & Sutherland-Smith, 2018, 2019), and should therefore be a part of the consensus moderation calibration process. Acknowledging the time constraints and often disparate location of markers, online virtual meetings can be used to provide the training and facilitate the dialogue that is necessary for calibration.

Sample marking is a necessary aspect of calibrating the markers and each marker should be asked to mark sample assessments (clean copies) from different grade points of previously marked assessments, or if not available, then to mark a few of the newly submitted assessments. These marked assessments will then require review by the expert unit coordinator, with feedback on the marking and discussion on the judgments being made, before any further marking takes place. Marking team discussions will enhance the process and share the learning so that the impact of feedback is not restricted by the lack of dialogues across the marking team (Beutel et al., 2017). In many ways, this process is similar to the community of practice required for the development of students (Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Liebergreen, et al., 2016; Higgins et al., 2002), or those described by Wenger (1999, 2000).

Well established professional development of academics is associated with receiving feedback as part of peer review of teaching (Zeng, 2020). With consensus moderation, receiving feedback on marking should be viewed as an alternative form of peer review of teaching - as marking is part of the academic role. Yet few unit coordinators take time to improve individual marker capability and provide feedback on marking (Ryan et al., 2017), and feedback on marking is necessary for addressing discrepancies in the marking process. Providing feedback and facilitating the discussion is therefore a vital part of calibrating the markers and achieving consensus in the understanding of assessment requirements and standards. This is where informal learning takes place and integrity in the marking process is maintained. It is also where marker biases, prejudices, and/or hidden grading criteria can be addressed before they disadvantage anyone in the marking period.

Despite the potential benefits of giving and receiving feedback, this has not always been carried out positively, and many authors have discussed the emotional pain, fears and negative responses associated with giving and receiving feedback (Clark & Sousa, 2018; Forsythe & Johnson, 2017; Gormally et al., 2014; Gravett et al., 2020; Jeffs et al., 2021). Hence the process of providing feedback and any subsequent discussions needs to be collaborative and constructive, without intimidation or threatening behaviour, so that discussion and individual learning can take place. One approach to enhancing this process is for everyone involved to understand the aims, purpose and process of the feedback, and to develop skills in both providing and receiving feedback (Anseel et al., 2015). This process is well known with students and referred to as feedback literacy (Carless & Boud, 2018). Professional development on consensus moderation practices is required, and this needs to include development on feedback literacy.

It is important to note that when there is a large unit with several sessional markers joining at different parts of the study period, calibration activities may need to be repeated to capture all markers. Whilst this may appear time-consuming, it is more time-efficient than having to remedy inconsistent marking in the post-moderation process, including addressing student appeals and complaints.

Intra-Marking and Post-Marking Moderation

Having invested time in pre-moderation activities to enhance consistency, intra-marking moderation and post-marking moderation can be carried out to check for consistency and to focus on complex cases (for example, those that fail). Greater consistency in marking, through calibration, should result in a need for less intra-marking

moderation and post-marking moderation. This is where time can be saved in the busy academic workload. Whilst carrying out consistency checking as part of intra-marking and post-marking moderation, the unit coordinator should collaborate and discuss any inconsistencies identified with the original marker so that they can achieve consensus on the mark to be allocated. It is also important to note that consensus moderation is all about “equity and fairness to students.” Accordingly, care must be taken to ensure that sample moderation doesn’t advantage or disadvantage the students whose work is moderated compared to students who have not had their work moderated.

7.5.3 Recommendations and Implications of the Final Framework

The framework for consensus moderation is accompanied by recommendations and implications for the sector, universities, schools or departments, including course coordinators, unit coordinators, individual academics, and students (Figure 21). An important consideration for the framework and recommendations is to consider the context in which academics in higher education are situated. The recommendations are intended to develop and transform the experience and environment in which consensus moderation practices in higher education are carried out, to improve the experience for all involved in consensus moderation practices. In this section, I will provide information on the recommendations and implications of this body of research.

Sector Recommendations and Implications

There is a need for the sector to recognise the importance of moderation and consensus moderation, as well as develop and publish consensus moderation guidelines that are accessible to all universities. The disparate approach to devolving responsibility for quality assurance to the individual university seems to have resulted in assessment policies that allow flexibility, and subsequently inconsistent and confusing approaches to moderation. Whilst the need to recognise the importance of consensus moderation, and the development and publication of consensus moderation guidelines accessible to all universities remains a recommendation in the framework for consensus moderation, I must acknowledge the greater political forces, as identified in Chapter 3 and Chapter 8, that have impacted the higher education sector. The impact of neoliberalism has resulted in economic rationalisation of the higher education sector, with drivers of efficiency, commercialisation, and marketisation (Marginson, 2004, 2013), and a devolved level of

autonomy (Radice, 2013). There is clearly a paradox between wanting to provide high-quality education, in an environment where there is rationalisation and increasing efficiencies. Transformational change is required in the sector to enable genuine assessment quality assurance. Whilst it is beyond the scope of this work to address the forces being placed upon the higher education sector, the framework for consensus moderation, with its emphasis on psychological safety and creating a safe space for discourse is one approach to mitigating these forces.

University Recommendations and Implications

I recognise that each university has to respond to the political forces within the sector to survive in such a highly competitive neoliberal market. Yet, for the framework for consensus moderation in higher education to provide quality assurance, there is a need for each university to recognise the importance of consensus moderation as a quality assurance activity. The importance of consensus moderation as a quality assurance activity can be achieved through the development of policies for consensus moderation, as guidance on the process, along with written acknowledgment of the role of consensus moderation in the academic workload to ensure the provision of adequate time for consensus moderation practices. Whilst it must be acknowledged that this has cost implications, the framework would enhance the process, reduce inequities and reduce the need for additional post-marking moderation – which has a large cost implication. These changes would go some way to achieving a positive organisational culture for assessment and consensus moderation.

As has been identified in Phase Two of this study (Chapter 3 and Chapter 4), there is a vast need for the provision of professional development for assessment moderation and consensus moderation throughout the academic workforce (including course coordinators, unit coordinators, academics, and sessional markers). However, in the current economic climate where the sector is struggling with an ongoing drive for efficiencies, it seems unlikely that the situation will change unless this is seen as a funding priority, reputational issue or mandated by the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency.

School and Department Recommendations and Implications

The next set of recommendations are focused at the school or departmental level (referred to here as the school). With university policies guiding the process of consensus moderation and the recognition of this in the workload model, then the school also needs

to recognise the importance of consensus moderation. This can be achieved through the allocation of sufficient time in the workload model for consensus moderation. When considering workload allocation, it is also important to recognise that consistent team members can enhance psychological safety within a team (Appelbaum et al., 2020), and as a consequence, a consistent team can enhance the consensus moderation process.

At a school level, it is evident that there is a need for the development of school procedures to enable collaborative dialogue processes with consensus moderation, and to recognise the benefits that can be realised by employing calibration. As found in this body of research, assessment cultures and subsequently discipline marking cultures vary between courses (Bloxham, den-Outer, et al., 2015; Gibbs & Dunbar-Goddet, 2009; Jessop & Maleckar, 2016; Ylonen et al., 2018), highlighting the need for **course coordinators** to develop a positive course or discipline culture for assessment moderation across each course. Students should experience the same assessment culture and consensus moderation approach across the units in the course. Finally, at a school level, there is a need for the provision of professional development for assessment moderation and consensus moderation and the school needs to be proactive in supporting the academic workforce to attend the professional development. In addition, for sessionals, this professional development needs to be paid professional development so that the sessionals have the remuneration process that has previously been called for (see Baik et al., 2018; Crimmins, Nash, Oprescu, Alla, et al., 2016; Crimmins, 2017a, Fredericks & Bosanquet, 2017; Hitch et al., 2018; Matthews et al., 2017).

As was identified in Phase Two (Chapters 3 and Chapter 4), the **unit coordinator** plays a vital role in facilitating collegial and collaborative consensus moderation. In turn, there is a need for the unit coordinator to prioritise working with the Course Coordinator, as well as the teaching and marking team to develop a positive culture for assessment, assessment moderation, and consensus moderation. Working collaboratively, whilst an integral aspect of most academic roles and within organisations can pose challenges and create complexities at an interpersonal level (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). For consensus moderation to be collaborative and collegial, unit coordinators need to provide high psychological safety, value all contributions, facilitate calibration, and provide a safe environment for discourse. I also propose that calibration, currently recommended by (O'Connell et al., 2016) to develop and maintain standards of individual academics, should be expanded to include calibration across the whole marking community. It is therefore important to recognise the unique relationship between the unit coordinator and marker,

as the unit coordinator is the direct supervisor of those working in a unit for all aspects of unit coordination, and is responsible for future employment of sessional markers in each unit. Thus, the leadership style adopted affects the markers and their behaviour and needs to be considered. Whilst in the framework I propose the need for more inclusive supportive leadership, further research is required to explore the effect of and perceptions of inclusive leadership with sessional academics. Research in this area will have practical implications and enable professional development to be delivered that can maximise the benefits to the organisation.

The unit coordinator's expertise must be used in a non-threatening 'expert' approach to consensus moderation to avoid intimidation of sessional academics and others. Whilst I acknowledge that unit coordinators are often time-poor with the current intensification of the academic workload, time-efficient approaches to consensus moderation can be adopted through the use of technology to enable discussion and dialogue for those marking away from campus. It is also important to note that it is the unit coordinator's responsibility to ensure that sample moderation practice does not advantage or disadvantage any particular student. If any issue(s) in the marking is identified then the issue(s) need to be resolved through a collaborative discussion between the unit coordinator and marker, and a consensus agreed on the mark allocation. Following this, all assessments that have been affected by the discussion outcome will need to be reviewed and the mark allocation either lifted or reduced accordingly.

The **academics** who work as markers also have a responsibility to contribute to the development of a safe culture for discussion. They should work collaboratively with the unit coordinator, the teaching, and the marking team in developing a positive culture for assessment moderation. The markers need to actively engage in calibration activities, as informal professional development to ensure they understand the assessment requirements before going ahead with the main marking. This will necessitate the engagement in two-way professional conversations with the unit coordinator and the wider academic team. Whilst sometimes difficult, the marker needs to be encouraged to embrace feedback received on the example or initial marking and engage in a two-way professional conversation, as through dissonance most learning takes place. The individual marker also has a responsibility to maintain the integrity of mark allocation. If they note that a mark has been changed, then the marker should seek feedback so that a discussion on the marking can take place and a consensus on the mark to be allocated is achieved. In this way, the

individual marker also plays a role in ensuring that sample moderation does not advantage or disadvantage any particular student.

The **student** in this assessment process should benefit by having a more detailed understanding of the assessment requirements and expected marking standards by the teaching and marking team. Dialogue in this process is key, and the delivery of a consistent message about the assessment requirements and the expected standards by the teaching team will provide students with the opportunity to create more informed insights and understanding about the assessment requirements. Then, once an assessment has been submitted, they will benefit through a consistent approach to the marking and provision of feedback by more informed markers. It will remove the marking lottery which previously depended on who was marking their assignment. Greater consistency both in delivering the assessment message and the marking requirements will genuinely result in enhanced fairness and equity in the assessment process, thereby assuring achievement of the learning outcomes.

7.6 Conclusion of this Chapter: Post-Chapter Moderation

This chapter has discussed the process of integration and piloting the draft Framework for Consensus Moderation, meeting the fourth objective of this research. This phase commenced with the integration of the previous phases using a joint display, and then described the process of developing and piloting the framework through five cycles of action research. Whilst the online data collection response rate was disappointing, the interactions and rich data obtained through conference workshops and presentations enabled the ongoing refinement of the framework. The recommendations and implications for practice accompanying the framework are intended to develop and transform the experience and environment in which consensus moderation practices in higher education are carried out. In the next chapter, I will provide the final discussion on this body of research.

Chapter 8 Discussion and Concluding Comments

“When two people talk with mutual respect and listen with a real interest in understanding another point of view, when they try to put themselves in the place of another, they change the world, even if it is only by a minute amount, because they are establishing equality between two human beings”

Theodore Zeldin

8.1 Chapter Introduction: Pre-Chapter Moderation

In this final chapter, I first provide an update on recent developments in consensus moderation and the higher education sector, to situate the discussion of the findings of this research within the current higher education context. I then recap the main findings from this body of research before discussing how these contribute to the knowledge on consensus moderation in higher education. I then discuss where I have had opportunities to make an impact on consensus moderation practices in the translation of these research findings to practice, before exploring the strengths and limitations of the research, possible future directions, and providing concluding comments. The evidence-based framework promotes a connected, collegial and collaborative approach to consensus moderation and has the potential to have multiple benefits for all involved.

8.2 Recent Development in Consensus Moderation

In Phase One (Chapter 3), I presented a scoping review on the extant literature on consensus moderation carried out in June 2018. This update on publications relating to consensus moderation in higher education provides context for the discussion of the findings from my research. The scoping review in Phase One found limited empirical studies published on consensus moderation, and this trend continues. There continues to be a plethora of research on moderation in the primary and secondary school sector (Adams & Anderson, 2019; Cumming, 2020; Koh et al., 2018; Smaill, 2020), and external moderation/cross-institution moderation and national calibration (Higher Education Academy, 2018; Palermo et al., 2018; Sefcik et al., 2018; Syme et al., 2021; Wyatt-Smith et al., 2020; Wyse et al., 2020), as well as research examining moderation of competencies in the Australian VET sector (Gillis,

2020). However, there has been limited research on consensus moderation within programs or units of study in the higher education setting.

In repeating the search employed in the scoping review (the same inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied as described in the original scoping review protocol), five new studies were identified (Broadbent, 2018; Grainger, Crimmins, et al., 2019; Grainger, Heck, et al., 2019; Haskins, 2018; Manasi & Maiyo, 2020). Out of these five studies, only Haskins (2018) directly referred to consensus moderation, and this study examined an automated multi-marker consensus moderation process with computer program assessments. The other four studies included reference to moderation within programs or units of study in the higher education setting, although none of these focused on consensus moderation (Broadbent, 2018; Grainger, Crimmins, et al., 2019; Grainger, Heck, et al., 2019; Manasi & Maiyo, 2020).

Haskins (2018) applied an online majority vote 'rule' to individual rubric items, and item errors, to obtain a consensus mark for each assessment. In this process, the consensus moderation discussion for 92 assessments was replaced by multiple markers voting online on 37 rubric items to obtain consensus or agreement in the rubric mark allocation. Each vote was considered an expert opinion and each assessment was marked by at least two markers with some assessments being marked by four markers. Whilst this reportedly increased marking reliability, it required more assessment marking and hence increased the marking costs, and, as it focused on correct coding of computer programs, it may only apply to specific assessment situations, such as computer programming/coding assessments.

Manasi and Maiyo (2020) studied examination practices in Kenya, comprising a desktop review of 74 university examination policies and guidelines. The review found that all universities had policies and guidelines on moderation, which involved both internal and external moderation of examination drafts and marked scripts, although the policies did not specify what model of moderation should be used.

A case study by Broadbent (2018) described the process of establishing moderation in a large class. In this study, the author did not refer to consensus moderation but highlighted some of the common processes involved in consensus moderation. This included the need to use shared resources (such as marking guides, exemplars, and examples of feedback) and communication to facilitate a shared understanding and interpretation of the marking criteria, methods of checking marker performance (in this instance the author used double marking) and the importance of developing the markers' capability early through feedback on their initial marking.

Communication was also identified as key in the two other recent studies (Grainger, Crimmins, et al., 2019; Grainger, Heck, et al., 2019). Grainger, Crimmins, et al. (2019) referred

to consensus moderation in a case study when exploring how consensus planning could achieve consistency in curriculum development, maintenance, and monitoring in one faculty across two campuses. In this study, the authors identified how communication was vital although, as within my own body of research, these authors also found issues of mistrust and defensive behaviour, leading to a lack of collegiality and issues in achieving consensus. Grainger, Heck, et al. (2019) explored the use of a criteria sheet from a qualitative perspective with seven teachers, and, whilst a small study, also found that communication was key whilst examining the inter-connectedness of grading, moderation, and feedback using criteria sheets/rubrics. In this study, Grainger and colleagues also found that the use of criteria sheets/rubrics enhanced the moderation process, supporting one of the key findings from an earlier study by Grainger et al. (2016), which was included in the initial scoping review.

Whilst there were only a small number of studies that referred to consensus moderation practices, a further article by Schoepp et al. (2018) described a process of '*norming, calibrating or moderating rubrics*' (p.1) for use with computing assessments. The authors described a nine-step process using rubrics as a way of collaborating when grading assessments, with moderation briefly mentioned in Step 5 (developing initial consensus and consensus-building discussions) and Step 9 (the development of consensus and adjusting of results). Thus, this article highlighted the collaborative nature of gaining consensus. Other studies have found that collaborating and training with rubrics can improve marker reliability (Hansson et al., 2014; O'Connell et al., 2016; Villa et al., 2020), although a study by Williams (2018) found that collaborative development work on a shared rubric did not result in increased interrater reliability. However, Williams did acknowledge that this resulted in a more positive assessment culture and preparedness to learn from others' experiences and accepted that the training intervention used in the study may not have been sufficient to increase interrater reliability.

To conclude, there remains a dearth of recent research on consensus moderation, with the newer studies confirming earlier findings. As found in the initial scoping review, the recent studies which referred generally to moderation within programs or units of study in the higher education setting, found communication, criterion sheets/rubrics, and exemplars to be useful in developing the markers' shared understanding of the assessment requirements and standards. However, whilst these can enhance the feelings of collegiality, they could also lead to issues in achieving consensus.

8.3 Recent Developments in Higher Education

The context of higher education appears to be almost like 'shifting sand', continually responding to political and market pressures. Chapter 3 (Phase One) has discussed some of the changes in higher education that have resulted in a greater need for moderation, as well as those that have impacted moderation and consensus moderation practices. This section of this chapter will explore the recent changes in higher education, specifically those occurring since the commencement of my PhD, at the end of 2016.

As I commenced this research, the Australian higher education sector remained immersed in the massification of higher education, providing greater and more diverse ways in which students could enter university. This has resulted in an exceedingly complex higher education environment that has further evolved to include a greater diversity of students, with more wide-ranging needs and needing greater support (Evans et al., 2021; O'Leary & Cui, 2020). With continued political and economic rationalisation, a cap was placed on student commonwealth contribution funding with a refocus to funding courses to meet the future labour market needs, all of which has resulted in universities limiting enrolments to low-income generating courses and subsequently increasing student numbers to those courses that generate a high-income (Lloyd, 2020)". As most of Australia's public universities did not have the surplus funding to support these financial cuts, this has increased the casualisation of the workforce (Baré et al., 2020a). Over 13 years ago the 'RED Report' (Percy et al., 2008) focused on the recognition, enhancement and development of sessional teaching, and identified how attention needed to be focused on the casualisation of the academic workforce as they were largely a hidden part of the academic workforce. Yet, this situation has been further intensified by the fluctuation in student enrolments in the 'uncapped courses' which have resulted in a further increase in casual employment (Norton et al., 2018). This has been referred to as a *"reserve army of labour, fulfilling contemporary structural imperatives for a flexible, cheap teaching workforce"* (Thomas et al., 2020, p. 38), raising greater concerns about academic job security (Crimmins, 2017b; Hitch et al., 2018; Richardson et al., 2019; Whitchurch, 2019).

These changes have also resulted in a greater student-to-academic ratio, and, as a result, academics have experienced an intensification of work with ongoing drives for efficiency, control, measurements, and accountability (O'Leary & Cui, 2020). Where traditionally academics were able to control their work and self-manage their time between teaching and research, now these allocations are controlled by the management to serve the

interest of the market (McCarthy et al., 2017), resulting in a further increase in teaching and administrative responsibilities (Kenny, 2018). As a result of these political pressures to change, and to demonstrate a commitment to teaching quality, there has also been a reshaping of academic roles, with the advent of newly created teaching-focused positions, being dedicated to teaching, rather than the traditional teaching-research position (Flavell et al., 2018). Unfortunately, this has resulted in a conflict between teaching and research, with the belief that it is really research that is important and counts towards your future career (Whitchurch, 2019). The intensification of work and reduced academic staffing has also resulted in less time being available for academics to be innovative and creative in their pedagogy (Leathwood & Read, 2020), with the economics of efficiency impacting assessment design choices (Bennett & Burke, 2018). Caution has been called for with claims that universities have limited capacity to maintain these financial benefits in the long term (Baré et al., 2020b).

Whilst acknowledging that these neoliberal changes to the higher education sector were already occurring at the beginning of my research, more recently COVID-19 has further impacted the higher education sector. In March 2020, the World Health Organisation declared the novel coronavirus COVID-19 to be a global pandemic (Adhanom Ghebreyesus, 2020). This resulted in 'lockdown' procedures aiming to restrict movement and transmission of the virus. Consequently, face-to-face teaching activities became restricted and resulted in universities having to adapt as a result of restrictions (McGaughey et al., 2021). COVID-19 also impacted student mobility and resulted in a drastic reduction in international students (Gamage, Silva, et al., 2020; Mok et al., 2021; Ross, 2020). Higher education in Australia, like many other developed nations, has been commercially designed as an export where borders were routinely crossed by students who temporarily moved as full fee-paying students (Marginson, 2006). Whilst the degree to which universities produce and compete in global higher education varies, Marginson (2006) reported that all Australian universities were engaged in this global competition. Consequently, prior to COVID-19, the higher education sector had become reliant on a large number of international students and, subsequently, with the reduction in international students, many universities were in financial crisis, struggling to be financially viable and having to adapt to mitigate the financial consequences (Gamage, Roshan Pradeep, et al., 2020; Gamage, Silva, et al., 2020; Marginson, 2020; McGaughey et al., 2021).

In response to the financial crisis, universities acted in a variety of ways to manage the unforeseen constrained budgets. This included further reducing tenured and sessional academics, reducing course availability, deferring building projects, and making redundancies (Baré et al., 2020b). In response and in very short timelines, universities also effectively and strategically moved to fully online delivery and alternative remote forms of assessments

(Gamage, Roshan Pradeep, et al., 2020; Mok & Montgomery, 2021). Whilst intensification of the academic workload had occurred before COVID-19, to further meet the financial crisis occurring as a result of COVID-19, many universities further increased teaching loads, which resulted in many academics who previously focused on research, having increased teaching commitments and a reduction in research workload (Rapid Research Information Forum, 2020). This caused further stress for academics, who had previously been able to balance their research time after teaching and administrative duties (Kenny, 2018), and was further exacerbated by the ongoing conflict between teaching and research, with the belief that research is considered more important than teaching and counts more favourably towards your future career (Whitchurch, 2019). Whilst these changes were effective in continuing the delivery of higher education, they also placed an increased amount of pressure on the reduced number of tenured academics (Gamage, Roshan Pradeep, et al., 2020; Gamage, Silva, et al., 2020; McGaughey et al., 2021; Watermeyer et al., 2020), and there was little preparedness for developing and administering remote online assessments (Gamage, Silva, et al., 2020). Notwithstanding concerns regarding academic integrity or grade inflation during this time, the development of the robust online provision of assessment and quality assurance processes takes a lot of time, work, and investment (Gamage, Roshan Pradeep, et al., 2020).

Whilst the reported changes that were imposed on academics as a result of COVID-19 tend to be negative (Al-Taweel et al., 2020; Baré et al., 2020a; Baré et al., 2020b; Gamage, Roshan Pradeep, et al., 2020; Gamage, Silva, et al., 2020; McGaughey et al., 2021; Rapid Research Information Forum, 2020; Ross, 2020; Watermeyer et al., 2020), there are some reported benefits, such as the development of digital skills, greater flexibility and a reduction in travel (McGaughey et al., 2021; Watermeyer et al., 2020). Universities will continue to struggle with further reductions in revenue and increasing drives for rationalisation and efficiencies, whilst the impact from the COVID-19 pandemic continues for some time to come (Baré et al., 2020b; Rapid Research Information Forum, 2020). The drivers of efficiency and results of rationalisation heighten the need for a more formalised approach to consensus moderation and can help to meet student/customer expectations, deliver high-quality education, and provide assessment quality assurance with equity and fairness in the assessment process. Achieving such changes in challenging times requires transformational changes in the sector. The evidence-based framework for consensus moderation in higher education can make a positive change to achieving a positive organisational culture for assessment through enhanced consensus moderation practices and quality assurance.

8.4 Summary of the Findings from this Body of Research

My research aimed to develop and pilot an evidence-based framework for consensus moderation in higher education. I approached this from a socio-cultural theoretical framework, acknowledging that reality is a product of human interaction with world experiences and that there are multiple and varied individual interpretations or realities of comparable experiences. To achieve the overall aim of developing and piloting an evidenced-based framework for consensus moderation in higher education, a four-phase sequential exploratory qualitative multi-method design was adopted. This ensured the different realities of comparable experiences were taken into account. The research was conducted in four phases to meet four objectives (Figure 22). Although each of the phases are described in individual chapters, they are also integrated. The findings from Phase One informed Phase Two, and the findings from Phase Two informed Phase Three. Phase four integrated the findings from the previous phases, developed and then piloted the framework for consensus moderation in higher education. I will now provide a summary of the key findings from each phase of research.

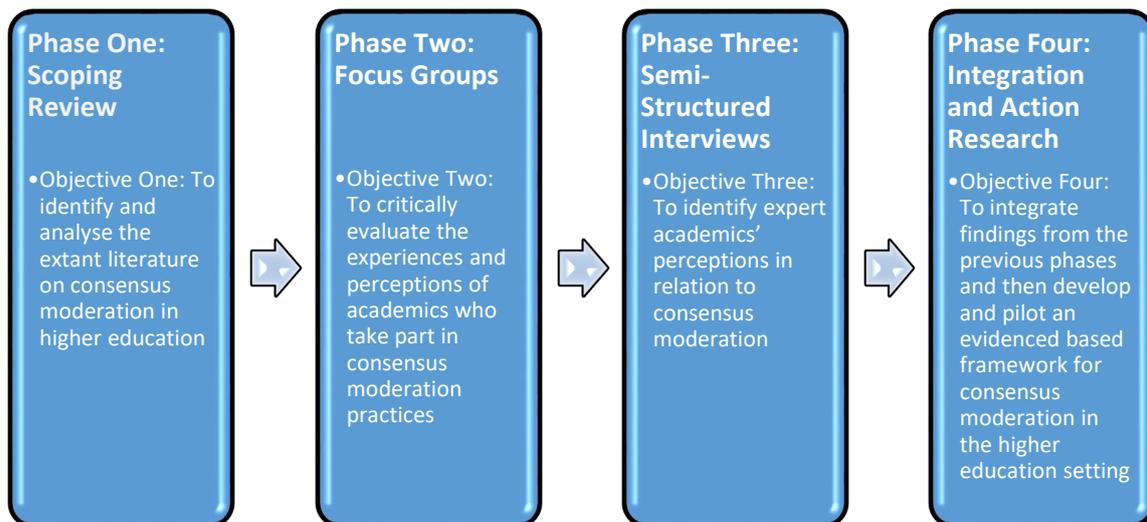


Figure 22.

Diagram of the Phases and Objectives of this Body of Research

In Phase One (Chapter 3) I conducted a systematic scoping review. One key finding was that most studies focused on moderation and made reference to consensus moderation, but limited empirical studies focused on consensus moderation. Moderation was felt to be necessary for quality assurance, both for accountability and for consistency, equity, and fairness to students, as well as justification of mark allocation. Whilst consensus moderation

appeared to have positive aspects to achieving assessment quality assurance, such as consistency in marking, professional development for markers, and developing communities of practice, there were also issues and tensions. There was a lack of structure and documented process resulting in different approaches and difficulties in gaining mark agreement. There were also concerns that power and seniority may impact the process of achieving consensus. The findings from the first phase then informed the questions to be asked in the second phase of this body of research.

Phase Two (Chapter 4 and Chapter 5) encompassed the first empirical work in this body of research, and it is here that, as a researcher, I felt responsible for ensuring the voices of the participants were heard. Chapter 4 consisted of a paper outlining the findings from a Foucauldian Discourse Analysis of a series of four focus groups with sessional academics. The findings revealed four discursive constructions of consensus moderation: necessary for fairness and consistency; fraught and complicated; confusing and lacking consistency; and time-demanding. These four discursive constructions of consensus moderation were situated within the discourses of the 'vulnerable position of a sessional academic' and the 'paradox of quality assurance in a neoliberal university.' The findings echoed the growing concerns in the literature about the use and support of sessionals and raised several concerns. The vulnerability of sessionals along with the lack of support, evidence of hierarchy, and use of power, coercion, and surveillance inhibited collaboration and academic development. Subsequently, marking behaviour was modified to increase the chance of obtaining future work. The findings highlighted the need for professional development for all staff involved in moderation processes.

In Chapter 5, the second part of Phase Two. I presented a paper outlining the findings from a Foucauldian Discourse Analysis of a series of five focus groups with fixed-term and continuing academics. Three discursive constructions of consensus moderation were identified: consensus moderation as a truly collaborative process, consensus moderation as an illusion, and consensus moderation as a process to manage markers. These three discursive constructions were situated within the wider discourse of the neoliberal university. Unit coordinators in this study were positioned as either supportive, compliant but ineffective, or powerful. In contrast, the academics marking the students' work, under the leadership of the unit coordinators, were positioned as helpful and compliant although inexperienced and needing support; inexperienced and malleable; or uncooperative, resistant, troublesome, and demanding. academics and students but also makes them self-governing and less resistant to policy. Whilst the evidence of neoliberalism was apparent there were indications of resistance with some academics being collaborative and taking the additional time to carry out collegial

consensus moderation practices. The findings highlighted the need for unit coordinators to be more prepared for their role in terms of inclusive leadership, as well as the need for professional development on consensus moderation practices.

In Phase Three (Chapter 6) I explored the perceptions of consensus moderation from academics with recognised expertise in consensus moderation through semi-structured interviews, analysed using thematic analysis. The experts identified a range of challenges associated with consensus moderation, including the need to accept that marking is subjective and that moderation should be considered as core important academic work. They suggested that consensus moderation can be utilised as a professional learning opportunity, although identified that this requires a safe environment for discourse. The experts also identified opportunities to enhance consensus moderation practices. This included using calibration to develop and maintain standards, although noting that this will require additional resources in terms of time and that different moderation practices may be needed for different moderation purposes. The issues identified indicate a culture that acts as a fundamental obstacle to achieving collaborative and collegial consensus moderation and suggests that change requires a multifactorial approach.

In Phase Four (Chapter 7) I focused on the integration of the previous phases, before using action research to develop and pilot a framework for consensus moderation in higher education with academics. The multiple viewpoints from the first three phases provided a comprehensive understanding of consensus moderation (Brechin & Sidell, 2000). Using an analytical framework for the integration ensured that all findings were valued and considered together (Woolley, 2009). I then developed the draft framework for consensus moderation, building on the findings from the integration of the previous phases. Then the framework for consensus moderation was taken from an ideal theoretical proposal to a practical solution. Academics who worked in higher education were engaged in action research through five cycles of testing and modifying the framework. This resulted in early impact through the dissemination of the research as well as improving agency, empowerment, and generating change in assessment practice. The final framework for consensus moderation in higher education was presented in this chapter, accompanied by recommendations and implications for practice change.

8.5 Research Implications

The findings from this research contribute to the body of knowledge on consensus moderation in three distinct areas: methodological implications, theoretical implications, and applied implications of this research. The methodological implications centre on the innovative multiple methods sequential study design focusing on consensus moderation in the higher education setting. This has extended previously used study designs for empirical consensus moderation research. The theoretical implications identify where this body of research has advanced the knowledge base on consensus moderation. The applied implications are of key importance, as the aim was to develop and test a framework for consensus moderation in higher education. Through identifying tensions between what is intended to happen with consensus moderation and what happens in practice, I have been able to use a holistic and strengths-based approach in developing and testing an evidence-based framework for consensus moderation in higher education.

8.5.1 Methodological Implications

This body of research employed a four-phase sequential multi-method design. In the context of consensus moderation, this is novel and innovative. Consensus moderation within higher education is a complex and socially situated phenomenon, and as such required an approach that recognises the multiple contributors, as well as the historical interactions and perspectives that shape the individuals involved. Studying social phenomena is complex and one of the challenges is to collect different sources of data in order to enhance our understanding of complex social behaviour (Anguera et al., 2018). The four phases provided a more comprehensive, richer understanding of the subject through gaining different perspectives and data that would not have been available if fewer methods were utilised (Morse, 2010). Existing studies have predominantly used singular qualitative methodologies (see Chapter 3), and the few existing studies that used multiple methods tended to use only two methods of data collection (e.g., Boyd & Bloxham, 2014 and Tuovinen et al., 2015).

This body of research was designed with careful consideration to the sequencing of the different phases to optimise the strengths of the research. The sequencing incorporated a flow of intent, from the broader understanding of the current literature on the subject of consensus moderation to the experiences and perceptions of the academics (both sessionals and fixed-term/continuing academics), and then experts' perceptions. The final phase specifically involved a wide range of academics through action research in piloting and refining

the framework for consensus moderation in higher education. Using a sequential approach enabled refinement of each phase based on the findings from the previous phase, enabling multiple lenses overlay and a different viewpoint of the phenomena under study (Brechin & Sidell, 2000). This approach enabled greater theoretical development and removed any technical difficulties in combining quantitative (numerical) and qualitative (textual) data (Morse, 2010).

The use of integration was also a methodological advancement in empirical studies focusing on consensus moderation. Whilst integration is not necessarily considered a requirement of multi-method studies (Plano Clark & Ivankova, 2016), integration of the findings in this research was of central importance as the aim was to develop an evidence-based framework for consensus moderation. Three forms of integration identified by Bazeley (2018) were used in this research: data from each phase informed the design of each subsequent phase and extended the learning gleaned from previous phases (used in Phase Two, and Phase Three), integration of separate sources of data with previous findings (used in Phase Four), and integration during the process of analysis where more than one source of data is required (used in Phase Four). The use of a joint display in Phase Four was novel in empirical studies on consensus moderation. Using a joint display enabled greater transparency and authenticity of the integration (Guetterman et al., 2015), ensured that all of the findings were valued and considered together (Woolley, 2009), and provided transparency and authenticity in presenting the research findings. The commitment to the integration of the phases and subsequent piloting of the draft framework for consensus moderation through action research has resulted in a deeper and grounded understanding of consensus moderation. The collected insights provided a base to guide considerations and identify where change was required, resulting in recommendations and implications for practice being posed.

The novel use of action research in the final phase enabled academics to provide feedback on the draft framework and explore real-world solutions to the issues identified (Stringer & Aragón, 2020). The choice to involve academics, who are currently entrenched in the context of higher education, enabled direct engagement in the real-life setting of where this body of research will have the greatest impact (Coghlan & Shani, 2017). By focusing on what could be implemented to enhance the process of consensus moderation, this research had a positive, strengths-based focus collaborating with academics as co-producers in the final framework development. The feedback from academics enabled the framework to be taken from a theoretical framework into a practical evidence-based framework for consensus moderation. This resulted in the research findings having an early impact through dissemination, enabled a redistribution of power in the research process (Rose, 2018), and

empowered academics with an agency in generating change in assessment moderation practices (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

8.5.2 Theoretical Implications

The findings of this research have advanced the theoretical knowledge base on consensus moderation practice. The research was informed by social-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1935/1978), whereby the essence of what makes us human beings (cognition, emotion, motivation, agency, and self-determination) is shaped by and within the socio-cultural environment in which we live (Chirkov, 2020). This body of research has demonstrated that consensus moderation is a complex activity, and has identified tensions between what is intended to happen with consensus moderation (two or more markers discuss and collaborate to agree on the mark to be awarded), and what happens in practice.

Discourse is key to how academics responded to “*the views, knowledge, and expectations of other people*” (Glaveanu et al., 2020, p. 742), with dialogue and the interactions between the marker and unit coordinator having the potential to either increase or decrease collaboration. Phase Two (Chapter 4 and Chapter 5) confirmed how the socio-cultural environment could have an impact on individuals. As a socially constructed process, it was evident that the marking and consensus moderation environment is inhabited by sessional academics and unit coordinators who “play out” different roles (Galbin, 2014).

It was clear in Phase Two (Chapter 4 and Chapter 5) that the socio-cultural environment, in which consensus moderation practices took place, had a direct impact on the shaping of an individual's cognition, emotion, motivation, agency, and self-determination. This influence was particularly evident when considering the impact of students as consumers and the vulnerable position of the sessional academic within a neoliberal university. In this research, academics changed their practice as a result of the power exerted on them and the social interactions they experienced as part of the moderation process. This Phase, therefore, demonstrated the influence and control unit coordinators can have on sessional academics through their use of power, and also supports how, as found by Shabani (2016) when studying teacher education, social interaction can be an instigator of change.

Phase Three (Chapter 6) and Phase Four (Chapter 7) then identified the socio-cultural features required to enable collaborative and collegial consensus moderation in higher education. Dialogue, discussion and collaboration are features of achieving consensus, and in both of these phases, a safe environment for discourse was identified as being vital to facilitating collegial and collaborative consensus moderation practices. This significant finding

provides a link to the theory on psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999, 2004; Edmondson et al., 2016; Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Newman et al., 2017; Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009). In consensus moderation practices individuals need to be able to express different opinions and feel safe to take interpersonal risks (for example, to speak out or ask questions) without fear of negative consequences. Hence, this research has identified how psychological safety is required for effective consensus moderation practices.

This research has demonstrated that the unit coordinators are generally poorly prepared for their leadership role specifically regarding consensus moderation practices. Whilst reducing the perceived power differential can increase psychological safety (Appelbaum et al., 2020), other studies have recognised that leadership styles and supportive leadership behaviours can positively influence perceptions of psychological safety (Detert & Burris, 2007; Newman et al., 2017; Xu et al., 2019). Consequently, one of the recommendations and implications in the framework relates to the need for a supportive inclusive leadership approach by unit coordinators. This is based on the tenet that high-quality relationships and supportive leadership behaviours (for example, leader inclusivity, support, trustworthiness, openness and behavioural integrity) have the potential to create the conditions for effective consensus moderation practices. It is therefore recommended that unit coordination and inclusive leadership merits further attention. There is a need for professional development which includes the necessary behaviours to develop high psychological safety and facilitate collaborative consensus moderation practice.

The findings from this research extend the theoretical understanding of consensus moderation as a learning and professional development opportunity. It has identified how collaborative and collegial consensus moderation practices can provide the essential cognitive, affective, social, and contextual factors for developing professional knowledge and skills. This supports previous work which recognised how informal workplace learning takes place through conversation (Boud & Brew, 2013; Boud et al., 2009; Eraut, 2004; Thomson, 2015; Thomson & Trigwell, 2018; Waring & Bishop, 2010). Shabani (2016) provided examples of professional development activities which can impact the development of knowledge, skills, and expertise in teaching education (referred to as a model of *involvement in the development process*), and now consensus moderation can be added to the examples. Consequently, this research extends current theory and provides a bridge between sociocultural theory and professional development. It is recognised that the collaborative learning process has the potential to be very powerful and effective (Rigelman & Ruben, 2012; Vescio et al., 2008), and this research has provided clear evidence that a commitment to collaboration is required for positive knowledge creation.

This research supports previous findings in that using a rubric alone does not guarantee reliability in the marking process (Menéndez-Varela & Gregori-Giralt, 2018a). Whilst the original approach to consensus moderation, proposed by Sadler (2013), involved comparing initial marking and engaging in discussion, this body of research provides clear evidence of the need for more active processes in calibrating the markers to increase consistency in the marking process. Collaborating and training with rubrics can improve marker reliability (Grainger et al., 2016; Hansson et al., 2014; O'Connell et al., 2016; Schoepp et al., 2018; Villa et al., 2020), and therefore calibration has been included in the evidence-based framework for consensus moderation in higher education. However, interventions that can be used to maximise calibration processes and assessor inter-rater reliability was outside of the remit of this research and requires further attention.

Several studies have critiqued neoliberalism (Broucker et al., 2018; Callender & Dougherty, 2018; Dougherty & Natow, 2020; Edwards & Roy, 2017). This body of research supports this earlier work by identifying some of the unintended impacts of neoliberalism, such as; changes in the academic workforce, rising inequity, issues with motivation, lack of resources/funding issues, issues with compliance and quality. There is a clear contradiction between the desire to provide high-quality education and meet student/customer expectations and fulfil the political and economic drivers impacting higher education. Whilst academics may wish to espouse the traditional academic values, such as collegial relationships, they are pressured to conform to their employer's requirements and managerial outputs (Shams, 2019). Whilst these two demands are not necessarily exclusive, they can, at times, be at odds and result in conflicting self-interests (Dougherty & Natow, 2020; Teelken, 2012). Consequently, this may result in individuals acting independently against requirements (Dougherty & Natow, 2020), with academics 'gaming the system' in a disguised form of resistance, for example, by reducing course demands so that students can pass more easily/use grade inflation to achieve increased student evaluation scores (Dougherty & Natow, 2020; Edwards & Roy, 2017). This was apparent in this research (Chapter 4 and Chapter 5), where academics reported how student marks were changed during the moderation process to increase pass rates and gain positive student evaluations.

In summary, this research has provided insight and direction regarding consensus moderation as a social-cultural activity. This research has extended the theoretical understanding of consensus moderation as a learning and professional development opportunity and has identified how collaborative and collegial consensus moderation practices can provide the essential cognitive, affective, social, and contextual factors for developing professional knowledge and skills. It has also demonstrated the need for a more active

calibration approach to consensus moderation. Although the framework can provide the context and conditions for consensus moderation and has been identified as positive and having multiple benefits, further research on the interventions that can be used to maximise calibration processes and assessor inter-rater reliability is required.

Whilst this framework is suitable for guiding the practice of consensus moderation, when looking at further implementation it will be vitally important to be cognisant of the organisational cultural context in which the assessment practices are situated. The changing context of the higher education environment has resulted in greater and more complex political and economic rationalisation, with concepts of efficiency, commercialisation, and marketisation as key drivers in the sector (Marginson, 2004, 2013). Alone, this framework will not provide the changes necessary to assure assessment quality assurance. Consequently, instead of small incremental changes to the environment in which consensus moderation is undertaken, we need to focus on changing the approach to consensus moderation practices.

8.5.3 Applied Implications

This research has strong applied implications. Students submit many assessments for marking during their higher education and ensuring that the allocated assessment marks are a true reflection of the quality of the work submitted remains a challenge due to a variation in assessors' judgements (Baume et al., 2004; Bloxham, 2009; Brooks, 2012; Grainger et al., 2016; Hunter & Docherty, 2011; Orr, 2007; Orr & Bloxham, 2013; Price, 2005; Read et al., 2005; Shay, 2005; Smith & Coombe, 2006; Van der Schaaf et al., 2012; Webster et al., 2000). As a result of these variations, quality assurance of the assessment process is key to ensuring accountability and equity to ensure that assessment judgements and feedback provided are fair and consistent (Grainger et al., 2016). The driving forces for assessment quality assurance along with the complexities of consistency in marking have been discussed in detail in Phase One (Chapter 3). However, given the variation in marking, it is difficult to be confident in assessment outcomes if adequate moderation practices have not been employed.

The significance of this research is the insight and direction it provides in assuring assessment quality. I have developed and piloted an evidence-based framework for consensus moderation in higher education using a strengths-based approach. This has the potential to enhance practice for all academics engaging in consensus moderation, and support fairness and equity in the marking process for students. Consequentially, this research has practical applications for assessment quality assurance processes, and wider cultural change locally, nationally, and beyond. For example, consensus moderation can create collegial collaborative

learning opportunities for academics, reduce inconsistencies in marking and assure learning outcomes. For this to occur, however, changes in practice are required (see recommendations and implications of the framework for consensus moderation in higher education, Chapter 7).

The higher education sector has demonstrated its commitment to quality assurance through the need for periodic (as a minimum every seven years) comprehensive course reviews, benchmarking and external referencing, as per the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021 (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2021). The standards recognise moderation as a form of external referencing (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2019), however, do not specify consensus moderation. So, whilst the higher education sector has generic policies on assessment quality assurance (as discussed in Chapter 3), there is a need for the sector to provide more detailed guidance and direction, in particular more guidance on the process of moderation and consensus moderation internally within an institution. To achieve genuine quality assurance of assessments and learning outcomes, the importance of moderation and, in particular, consensus moderation needs to be recognised within the sector. This can be achieved through policy or additional guidance in the Higher Education Standards Framework (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2021) or Guidance Notes for Academic Quality Assurance (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2017).

Each university must also recognise the importance of moderation in general, and consensus moderation in particular, in providing assessment quality assurance. This can be achieved through the development of university policy as guidance on the process to be followed for consensus moderation, including the role of calibration practices. This will support consistency in the process and alleviate the confusion that exists due to the variety of approaches currently adopted.

Vital to carrying out consensus moderation is the provision of time and payment. Time was a consistent issue found in this body of research, thus the provision of time to carry out consensus moderation is necessary. This will need to be acknowledged through the allocation of recognised time for consensus moderation in workload allocation models. If we are requiring assessment quality assurance practices to be carried out to ensure equity and fairness for students, then we need to resource the workforce accordingly. It is inappropriate and unreasonable to expect anyone in the academic workforce to carry out moderation unpaid, in their own time, and sessionals need to be paid for this activity. Whilst this time and payment is not insignificant, having a more structured approach to consensus moderation, including developing consistency of marking through calibration activities, will result in time

efficiencies and less need for postmarking moderation (to check and amend marking for consistency) by the unit coordinator.

Phase Three (Chapter 4 and Chapter 5) highlighted the need for having school and/or department discourse procedures so that academics are guided on how to work collaboratively and collegially to carry out consensus moderation. Without such procedures, it is difficult to ensure that the dialogue includes valuing everyone's opinion regardless of their position. Being inclusive will assist in developing a positive organisational culture for assessment moderation whereby assessment processes are valued by all staff (academics and professional staff) and led by the course coordinator. Schools and/or departments should develop procedures for academics on how to take part in the dialogue that is a necessary part of consensus moderation. Whilst this is recognised as having merit, developing the procedures was outside of the remit of this body of research and therefore warrants further investigation.

Phase One (Chapter 3) and Phase Two (Chapter 4 and Chapter 5) identified how academics view moderation and consensus moderation as necessary for fairness and equity, and for self-protection against complaints and appeals. Rather than considering consensus moderation as necessary for self-protection against complaints and appeals, the framework for consensus moderation in higher education can support a more positive culture towards assessment as well as support genuine assessment quality assurance. However, when looking at the implementation of this framework, it will be vitally important to be cognisant of the cultural context in which the assessment practices are situated. By culture of assessment, I am referring to the deeply embedded values and beliefs that are collectively held by those academics who influence the assessment process (Banta & Associates, 2007), or, as described by (Fuller, 2013, p. 20), the *“system of thought and action reinforcing what ‘good’ conduct of assessment looks like.”*

Whilst assessment culture is often referred to as being at an institutional level (Fuller et al., 2015; Fuller, 2013; Fuller et al., 2016; Holzweiss et al., 2016), it was evident in this research, and previous research (Gibbs & Dunbar-Goddet, 2009), that assessment cultures and environments vary between courses rather than just at the institutional level. Accordingly, the course coordinator, in conjunction with the unit coordinators, must focus their attention on developing a positive assessment culture within the course. The research by Fuller et al. (2015, p. 348), resulted in three themes of advice by assessment leaders in developing a positive campus assessment culture, *“(a) clarity of assessment’s purpose, (b) open, trustworthy engagement of respected colleagues and leaders, and (c) open dialogue about tensions between assessment and accountability.”* These three themes are all applicable to consensus moderation practices at the level of an individual course.

A positive assessment culture will ensure that assessments are viewed by academics (teaching and marking teams) and students as a useful resource, rather than a time-consuming necessity. This will provide a context in which assessment consensus moderation practices will flourish. Changing culture takes time (Holzweiss et al., 2016; Kezar & Eckel, 2002; Schein & Schein, 2016) and requires planning for the intended change (Holzweiss et al., 2016). Yet, concerning assessment, Sadler and Reimann (2018) found that only small changes are made. Whilst assessment culture was not the focus of this body of research, it is evident that further exploration of assessment culture is necessary. As Kezar (2013, p. 202) has stated “we need studies that penetrate the veneer, allow understanding to surface, and unearth key insights.”

It is evident from the findings that the lack of professional development needs to be addressed at a range of different levels within universities (e.g., sessional academics, unit coordinators, and course coordinators). Whilst focusing initially on the non-tenured or sessional academics, it was evident in Phase Three (Chapter 4) that there is a lack of orientation and professional development for this important section of the workforce. Whilst the neoliberal impacts of higher education continue to focus on efficiencies, it appears the growing use of sessional academics as a main part of the academic workforce is here to stay. Providing paid orientation and professional development, including education on quality assurance and consensus moderation practices, for this area of the workforce can only enhance the quality of teaching and assessment provided by them. Professional development has been found to increase the feelings of collegiality and inclusiveness in the organisation (Crimmins, Nash, Opreescu, Alla, et al., 2016; Fredericks & Bosanquet, 2017; Lekkas & Winning, 2017; Matthews et al., 2017). The provision of professional development in quality assurance and consensus moderation practices, for this marginalised group of the workforce, has the potential to increase the integrity of the marking process, and result in a more effective and efficient workforce.

Of central importance to an improved consensus moderation process, is professional development for course coordinators and unit coordinators. They are fundamental to the assessment culture within a course. According to Goos and Hughes (2010), course coordinators have limited opportunities to prepare them for their roles. Whilst there have been formal programs developed and successfully implemented, workplace factors have reduced the efficacy of such programs (Ladyshevsky & Flavell, 2012). This can only have been further exacerbated with the increased intensification of academic work post-COVID-19 and must be addressed.

Unit coordinators do not necessarily recognise themselves as leaders although they play a significant role in the assessment process (Holt et al., 2013; Roberts et al., 2011), and a

vital role in facilitating collegial and collaborative consensus moderation practices. In Phase Two (Chapter 5) it was evident that some unit coordinators required professional development in how to work collaboratively and collegially. For this, there needs to be a focus on inclusive unit coordinator leadership, which values contributions from all academics regardless of their role, and the skills to provide a safe environment for discourse. The expertise of a unit coordinator must be used in a non-threatening 'expert model' to avoid intimidation and develop collegial and collaborative consensus moderation practices. Similar to course coordination, whilst unit coordination was previously addressed through formal leadership programs, this is one focus area that appears to have been lost as part of the efficiency measures and is now considered a neglected role requiring attention (Holt et al., 2013).

The cost of professional development cannot be underestimated, however it is a necessity to ensure quality assurance in a consumer-focused environment. There are approaches to delivering professional development that are cost-efficient and could be considered, such as formal mentoring programs for academic/subject leaders (Nick et al., 2012). This could lead to a personalised professional development experience called for by Offerdahl and Tomanek (2011). Another approach to consider could be training the trainer. Using this approach the unit coordinators, following their own professional development, could be key trainers leading and cascading professional development for markers and sessional academics in consensus moderation practices. In this way, informal conversations between the unit coordinator and marker could provide more informal 'just-in-time' opportunities for professional learning (Thomson, 2015; Thomson & Trigwell, 2018).

The framework will also enhance the student experience, as when implemented, students will receive consistent, clear, and unambiguous information about the assessment requirements, which has previously been identified as necessary (Boud & Molloy, 2013; O'Donovan, 2017). Students will then benefit from a consistent approach to the marking process by more informed markers. It will remove the marking lottery, where marks were previously dependent on who was marking the assignment. This has the potential to achieve fairness and equity in the assessment process and assurance of achievement of the learning outcomes.

In combination, the findings from this body of research have advanced our understanding of consensus moderation practices, and the evidence-based framework for consensus moderation in higher education provides direction in achieving genuine assessment quality assurance. In this way, the framework for consensus moderation can develop and transform the experience and environment in which consensus moderation practices in higher education are carried out.

8.6 Translation of Research Findings to Practice

When commencing this body of research I identified the importance of delivering research that had a translational impact. Whilst I acknowledge that managing change is challenging in higher education (Deneen & Boud, 2014), it is, therefore, significant that a key contribution of this research is the translation of research findings to practice. As I developed a greater understanding of the key forces within consensus moderation practices, my academic position enabled me to focus on practical research translation, which aligned to my epistemology, theoretical perspective, and research design.

In addition to the five action research cycles in Phase Four, I have presented locally (two seminar/workshop presentations and three invited presentations), nationally (conference poster, conference presentation), and internationally (conference poster, conference presentation, one publication and one manuscript under review following minor amendments). I was also invited to present my finding and facilitate workshops in person at two universities in the United Kingdom and one in Western Australia, although unfortunately, due to COVID-19, this was not possible. The expert participants and workshop participants, who expressed an interest in receiving feedback from the research, will receive the final framework.

During the period of research, I also had opportunities to have an impact on consensus moderation practices within the university in which I work. Whilst the university provides minimal workload allocation for moderation practices in the generic workload allocation model, I was instrumental in amending workload allocations in my school to be commensurate with the student numbers in each unit and moderation requirements.

As a result of the work on assessment moderation, I was seconded into a centralised area of learning and teaching in the university for 18 months. This secondment enabled me to have an impact on moderation practices at the university. In 2019, I was instrumental in the development of moderation and consensus moderation questions in the Assessment Quality Process survey, completed twice a year by each unit coordinator. This includes questions on calibration and consensus-building as part of pre-marking moderation, and consensus agreement on mark allocation, intra-marking moderation, and post-marking moderation. In January 2020, I was instrumental in developments in the Unit Outline Builder (an online application used to create, review, approve and publish unit outlines for academics and students) on a list of moderation activities (pre-marking moderation, intra-marking

moderation, and post-marking moderation) that is now included in the unit outline for each unit. This was based on the research findings from this body of research.

As part of this secondment, I was responsible for developing unit coordination and course coordination handbooks, resources, and professional development sessions. This included moderation information and activities informed by the findings of this body of research. I was also fundamental in developing an online professional development program called 'Teaching at Curtin', which included resources on assessment for learning and moderation practices. I also developed a quick tip sheet for use in Curtin University entitled 'Give me five on Moderation' and presented an additional ten professional development sessions on moderation, all informed by this research.

8.7 Strengths and Limitations

The strengths and limitations of each of the phases within this body of research have been addressed within the discussion sections of the relevant chapters. This section focuses on the strengths and limitations of the project as a whole.

A clear strength of the research was the methodological and theoretical approach adopted. The body of research used multiple methods sequential design, with the integration of findings to develop a draft framework for consensus moderation in higher education. It then engaged academics in five action research cycles of piloting and refining the framework. This positive and action-oriented approach to the project enabled the overall findings to be useful to academics, researchers, the higher education sector, and policymakers in informing and directing their efforts to cultivate change in the sector. Data collection for Phase Two and Three included a diverse sample of sessional academics, fixed-term academics, continuing academics, and expert academics recruited for the research, in addition to the academics involved in the final phase (Phase Four) of action research. This provided ecological validity and a comprehensive lens through which consensus moderation was viewed. A further strength of this research is that it adds to the dearth of research on consensus moderation in higher education. The significance of this research is the insight and direction it provides in achieving assurance of assessment quality. Finally, this research has already had an impact though being translated into practice. The use of action research has resulted in early impact through the dissemination of the research as well as improving agency, empowerment, and generating change in assessment practice. In the previous section of this chapter, I have outlined further achievements to date in translating the findings into practice.

There are also limitations in this research. First, the findings are based on self-selected samples. It is therefore important to acknowledge that participants' motivations for being involved in this research may include having particularly positive or negative opinions and experiences associated with consensus moderation. Accordingly, the sample population in this research may not be representative of the broader higher education academic population. In addition, the participants for Phase Two were drawn from one university, which may not represent the substantial diversity of experience and perceptions associated with consensus moderation in the wider academic population. Whilst this was addressed through incorporating expert academics in Phase Three and a broader range of academics from across a range of locations in action research in Phase Four, it is a possibility that should be considered. It also has to be acknowledged that whilst Phase Four included action research, it was not able to be completed as planned due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The findings from this research have therefore advanced the knowledge base on consensus moderation practice by developing and piloting the first evidence-based framework for consensus moderation in higher education. There was however a notable change in the higher education sector during the period of this research, as described earlier in this chapter. The importance of context and taking into consideration the nature and changes within the sector cannot be underestimated when conducting such research and may have a bearing on the implementation of the framework for consensus moderation in the higher education setting. However, using the framework for consensus moderation in higher education, workload efficiency can be achieved. In particular, it is anticipated that time invested in the early stages of the framework (calibration) can result in time-efficiencies measured through increasing consistent marking and subsequently improving student satisfaction. Finally, due to the targeted nature of the study with a distinct focus on consensus moderation in higher education, the transferability of the findings is limited to the higher education sector.

8.8 Future Directions

A range of future directions have been identified in the Research Implications section of this chapter:

- Investigate the interrelationships of an assessment marking team, a unit teaching and marking team, and a course teaching and marking team to provide further insight into the phenomenon of psychological safety and consensus moderation.

- Explore and develop professional development on inclusive leadership for unit coordinators on the necessary behaviours to develop high psychological safety and facilitate collaborative consensus moderation practice.
- Investigate and implement professional development for sessional academics, unit coordinators, and course coordinators for consensus moderation practice, including feedback literacy.
- Examine the interventions that can be used to maximise calibration processes and assessor inter-rater reliability.
- Develop the procedural content required for academics on dialogue within collegial collaborative consensus moderation.
- Explore key aspects required in a course to develop a positive assessment culture so that these can be incorporated into professional development opportunities.

Several other areas can also be considered for future research.

The first is an evaluation of the framework. The evidence-based framework for consensus moderation in higher education has been piloted through action research, and feedback on the framework has shaped the framework for consensus moderation in higher education into what academics have considered is a practical solution. The next stage of further refining the framework is implementation so that a systematic evaluation can take place. This should include evaluating the potential benefits identified in the applied implications section of this chapter (including a positive assessment culture, enhanced consensus moderation practices, creating collegial collaborative learning opportunities for academics, providing consistent messages on assessment expectations for students, supporting fairness and equity in the marking process, and providing genuine assessment quality assurance by reducing inconsistencies in marking and assurance of learning outcomes). The evaluation should include an exploration of the time efficiencies obtained through the formalised process. Following validation of the framework, a potential area for further research could be on the growing Higher Education Academy Fellowship Scheme (<https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/fellowship>). In this scheme, teaching fellowships are awarded on decisions made by panels of peers across the world, who reach the decision as to whether the standard is met by consensus.

The second area for further research is student perceptions. Whilst data was obtained from a diverse sample of academics in this research, it would also be useful to engage with students to consider student perceptions of consensus moderation and how the process of consensus moderation could support their learning. Students have previously identified that

they would like more transparency about assessment requirements and assessor expectations (Bloxham et al., 2015; Francis, 2008; Francis et al., 2019; Higgins et al., 2002; Price et al., 2011), and could therefore add a valuable perspective and contribution to the assessment and moderation process. This group of stakeholders were not considered in the initial scoping of this research, however, a recent study has demonstrated that student participation in the rubric design and moderation discussions helped students to develop assessment skills (Menéndez-Varela & Gregori-Giralt, 2018). In considering how the process of consensus moderation could support student learning, there is merit in exploring how self-assessment could be incorporated into the moderation process. Ultimately self-assessment promotes deep learning (Nieminen et al., 2021), provides students with more power over their assessments (Taras, 2016), and results in students having greater agency over their learning (Nieminen, 2020; Nieminen et al., 2021; Tan, 2009).

The third area for further research is assessment marking. Whilst this research focused on the consensus moderation process, one area that emerged was how academics learn to mark. There is little on the subject of how academics learn to mark, and what literature is available is relatively dated. Having more in-depth evidence about how academics learn to mark will enhance our understanding of this process. Understanding the process of learning to mark will enable the development and delivery of tailored professional development focusing on the most effective techniques of learning to mark, which will subsequently result in more consistent marking.

The fourth area for further research is regarding the quality of assessment feedback. Whilst this body of research has predominantly been focused on consistency in mark allocation, there is merit in considering how future research using this framework can focus on the quality and focus of feedback provided to students.

The final area for further research is academic identity. Whilst this research did not focus on academic identity, the findings indicate that exploring academic identity in light of the unintended consequence of the neoliberal changes in higher education is an area that would benefit from further exploration. Shams (2019), exploring tensions in Canadian academic identity and managerialism, found academics adopted different approaches and meanings to navigating the identity contradictions they encountered. Whilst academics appeared to value the traditional academic values, such as collegial relationships, there was clear evidence of 'gaming' the system occurring, as academics were pressured to increase pass rates and attain positive student evaluations. Therefore, in light of these pressures and the more recent changes in higher education, further research is warranted.

8.9 Concluding Comments: Post-Thesis Moderation

When commencing this research, I believed it was important to deliver research findings that had a translational impact through informing the direction of future practice. In the current higher education setting, characterised by marketisation, intensification of academic workload, and increasing consumerism, the findings from this research are particularly well-timed. The higher education sector is going to be impacted by financial drivers and an economic shift for many years, and there is a need for support to enable academics to adapt to the changing landscape and deliver a quality assured experience for students. Quality assurance of our assessment practices is of great importance if we are going to deliver a high-quality higher education experience for students. The support of academics, who are fundamental to the student higher education experience, need to be at the centre of how we carry out future consensus moderation practices. The evidence based framework for consensus moderation in higher education has the potential to transform the consensus moderation process to be a collaborative collegial experience that can have multiple benefits for all involved. The framework for consensus moderation in the higher education setting has the potential to create long-lasting sustainable change. However, this will not be achieved through small and localised changes. We need to fundamentally reconceptualise, reorientate and re-centre the way we think, talk, and critically the way we educate academics and implement consensus moderation practices to provide assessment quality assurance.

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2020.100333>

Every reasonable effort has been made to acknowledge the owners of copyright material. I would be pleased to hear from any copyright owner who has been omitted or incorrectly acknowledged.

Appendices

Appendix A: University Ethical Approval



Office of Research and Development

GPO Box U1987
Perth Western Australia 6845

Telephone +61 8 9266 7863
Facsimile +61 8 9266 3793
Web research.curtin.edu.au

12-Feb-2018

Name: Lynne Roberts
Department/School: School of Psychology
Email: Lynne.Roberts@curtin.edu.au

Dear Lynne Roberts

RE: Ethics Office approval
Approval number: HRE2018-0051

Thank you for submitting your application to the Human Research Ethics Office for the project **Developing an evidence based framework for consensus moderation practices in Higher Education**.

Your application was reviewed through the Curtin University Low risk review process.

The review outcome is: **Approved**.

Your proposal meets the requirements described in the National Health and Medical Research Council's (NHMRC) *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007)*.

Approval is granted for a period of one year from **12-Feb-2018** to **11-Feb-2019**. Continuation of approval will be granted on an annual basis following submission of an annual report.

Personnel authorised to work on this project:

Name	Role
Roberts, Lynne	CI
Flavell, Helen	Co-Inv
Mason, Jacqueline	Student

Approved documents:

Document

Standard conditions of approval

1. Research must be conducted according to the approved proposal
2. Report in a timely manner anything that might warrant review of ethical approval of the project including:

- proposed changes to the approved proposal or conduct of the study
 - unanticipated problems that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project
 - major deviations from the approved proposal and/or regulatory guidelines
 - serious adverse events
3. Amendments to the proposal must be approved by the Human Research Ethics Office before they are implemented (except where an amendment is undertaken to eliminate an immediate risk to participants)
 4. An annual progress report must be submitted to the Human Research Ethics Office on or before the anniversary of approval and a completion report submitted on completion of the project
 5. Personnel working on this project must be adequately qualified by education, training and experience for their role, or supervised
 6. Personnel must disclose any actual or potential conflicts of interest, including any financial or other interest or affiliation, that bears on this project
 7. Changes to personnel working on this project must be reported to the Human Research Ethics Office
 8. Data and primary materials must be retained and stored in accordance with the [Western Australian University Sector Disposal Authority \(WAUSDA\)](#) and the [Curtin University Research Data and Primary Materials policy](#)
 9. Where practicable, results of the research should be made available to the research participants in a timely and clear manner
 10. Unless prohibited by contractual obligations, results of the research should be disseminated in a manner that will allow public scrutiny; the Human Research Ethics Office must be informed of any constraints on publication
 11. Approval is dependent upon ongoing compliance of the research with the [Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research](#), the [National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research](#), applicable legal requirements, and with Curtin University policies, procedures and governance requirements
 12. The Human Research Ethics Office may conduct audits on a portion of approved projects.

Special Conditions of Approval

Please remove mobile number from the recruitment material and email a revised copy to ORD-ethics@curtin.edu.au.

This letter constitutes low risk/negligible risk approval only. This project may not proceed until you have met all of the Curtin University research governance requirements.

Should you have any queries regarding consideration of your project, please contact the Ethics Support Officer for your faculty or the Ethics Office at hrec@curtin.edu.au or on 9266 2784.

Yours sincerely



Amy Bowater
Acting Manager, Research Integrity

Appendix B: Focus Group Recruitment Information



Advertisement/email recruitment information (Focus Groups)

Are you currently;

1. A Curtin University staff member (sessional, fixed term or on an ongoing contract) who undertakes assessment marking?
2. Taking part in the moderation of assessments?

If the answer is yes to these two questions then I would like to invite you to participate in this study

What is the purpose of the study?

- To explore the perceptions and experiences of academics who undertake consensus moderation in higher education and to develop an evidenced based framework for consensus moderation.

What is the benefit to you?

- There is no immediate direct benefit to you for participating although this study gives academics the opportunity to express an opinion and describe perceptions and experiences of taking part in consensus moderation.
- You will be contributing to knowledge around the experience of consensus moderation and help with developing an evidenced based framework for consensus moderation.

What is expected of you if you choose to take part?

The focus groups will take approximately 50 minutes and will be held at a time and place convenient to you. The focus groups will consist of a small number (6-10 people) of similar academics who all take part in consensus moderation. We are aiming to have four focus groups for fixed-term/ongoing academic staff and four focus groups for sessional academic staff. During the focus group, you will be asked to describe your perceptions and experiences of taking part in consensus moderation.

How do I participate?

Easy! Please contact Jaci Mason (PhD candidate) via email j.mason1@postgrad.curtin.edu.au. Jaci will then send you more information and a consent form.

Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) has approved this study (HREC number HRE2018-0051)

Appendix C: Focus Group Participation Information Statement



FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT INFORMATION STATEMENT

HREC Project Number:	Approval number: HRE2018-0051
Project Title:	What are the assessing academics' experiences and perceptions of a consensus moderation review process?
Principal Investigator:	Associate Professor Lynne Roberts
Student Investigator:	Jaci Mason
Version Number:	Version 2
Version Date:	22.01.18

What is the Project About?

There is growing recognition that variations in judgement affect the assessment and moderation of student work in higher education. Given increasing participation in higher education and regulation of the sector, it is paramount that consistency in assessment is achieved. Consensus moderation (also known as social moderation) is a process where collaboration and discussion take place to reach an agreed consensus regarding the allocation of marks. It is a commonly adopted approach to quality assurance and fairness in marking, yet the process is complex and fraught with challenges. Furthermore there is a scarcity of research studying the factors which may impact on the decision making processes during consensus moderation.

The aim of this project is to explore the perceptions and experiences of academics who undertake consensus moderation in higher education with the aim of developing and piloting an evidenced based framework for consensus moderation.

As part of this project we will be conducting focus groups with teaching staff at Curtin University.

Who is doing the Research?

The project is being conducted as a PhD project, supervised by Associate Professor Lynne Roberts and Dr Helen Flavell, with Jaci Mason as the PhD Student.

Why am I being asked to take part and what will I have to do?

You have been invited to participate in this study because you are a Curtin University staff member with marking responsibility. If you choose to participate you will be asked about your current knowledge and experiences of consensus (social) moderation.

Focus group meetings will be held on Curtin University's Bentley campus. The focus group should last approximately 50 minutes. Refreshments will be provided. All focus groups will be audio recorded with the recordings later transcribed for analysis.

Are there any benefits' to being in the research project?

There are no direct benefits to you in being involved in this research project; however it will provide the opportunity for you to learn more about consensus moderation, and have your say about how you think this approach to moderation can best be used.

Are there any risks, side-effects, discomforts or inconveniences from being in the research project?

There are no foreseeable risks from participating in this research project.

Who will have access to my information?

The information collected in this research will be non-identifiable (anonymous). Names or other identifying information will not be included in transcriptions of the focus groups. Any information we collect and use during this research will be treated as confidential. The research team and the Curtin University Ethics Committee will have access to the information we collect in this research:

The audio recording will be placed in locked storage, whilst the transcribed data will be stored on a password protected computer. Your information and data will be kept under secure conditions at Curtin University for 7 years after the research has ended and then it will be destroyed.

The anticipated outputs for this research include a thesis as well as articles in peer review journals as part of the PhD. You will not be identified in any results that are published or presented.

Will you tell me the results of the research?

A summary of the findings from the focus groups will be sent to all staff members who participate in the project.

Do I have to take part in the research project?

No, taking part in a research project is voluntary. If you chose not to take part or start and then withdraw from the study, it will not affect your relationship with the University, staff or colleagues

What happens next and who can I contact about the research?

If you decide to take part in this research you will be asked to sign the consent form; this indicates you have read and understood the information sheet and agree to participate in the project. Please feel free to take your time and ask any further questions prior to signing.

If you would like further information and any questions answered, please contact Jaci Mason by emailing j.mason1@postgrad.curtin.edu.au.

Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) has approved this study (HREC Approval number: HRE2018-0051). Should you wish to discuss the study with someone not directly involved, in particular, any matters concerning the conduct of the study or your rights as a participant, or you wish to make a confidential complaint, you may contact the Ethics Officer on (08) 9266 9223 or the Manager, Research Integrity on (08) 9266 7093 or email hrec@curtin.edu.au.

Appendix D: Focus Group Consent form



CONSENT FORM

HREC Project Number:	Approval number: HRE2018-0051
Project Title:	What are the assessing academics' experiences and perceptions of a consensus moderation review process?
Principal Investigator:	Associate Professor Lynne Roberts
Student Investigator:	Jaci Mason
Version Number:	Version 1
Version Date:	12.01.18

- I have read the information statement version listed above and I understand its contents.
- I believe I understand the purpose, extent and possible risks of my involvement in this project.
- I voluntarily consent to take part in this research project. I agree to the focus group being audio-recorded.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and I am satisfied with the answers I have received.
- I understand that this project has been approved by Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee and will be carried out in line with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007) – updated March 2014.
- I understand I will receive a copy of this Information Statement and Consent Form.

Participant Name	
Participant Signature	
Date	

Declaration by researcher: I have supplied an Information Letter and Consent Form to the participant who has signed above, and believe that they understand the purpose, extent and possible risks of their involvement in this project.

Researcher Name	
Researcher Signature	
Date	

Appendix E: Focus Group Demographic Questionnaire



Study 2 (Focus Groups) Demographic Questionnaire

Please complete each question within the line/space provided.

1. What is your age?

2. What is your gender?

3. Where were you born?

4. Country of longest residence?

5. What is your highest level of education?

6. Have you a teaching qualification? If so please specify which qualification

7. How many years have you been teaching at University?

8. Please indicate the level of your academic role (for example ALA or ALB)?

9. Please indicate the contract that you have with Curtin University:
 - a. Fixed term contract

 - b. Casual/sessional contract

 - c. Ongoing contract

Appendix F: Focus Group Interview Guide



Study 2 Focus Group Guide

Rapport building

- Could you tell me what motivated you to participate in this research?

Understanding participants' moderation knowledge

- Could you tell me what you know about moderation?
- What do you know about consensus moderation?
- How do you know about this?
 - o What is your main source of information relating to marking and moderation?

Perceptions of own practice and self

- Could you tell me about your own experiences of consensus moderation?
 - o Why do you engage in these?
 - o How do you feel before/during/after?
 - o How would you feel if you did not engage?
 - Why would you feel this way
 - o How do you think other people perceive your participation?
 - Why do you think that?

Perceptions of others practices

- Could you tell me about how you perceive others feel about consensus moderation?

Appendix G: Recruitment Information



Advertisement / email recruitment information (Interviews)

What is the purpose of the study?

- To explore the perceptions and experiences of expert academics who undertake research into consensus moderation in higher education and to develop an evidenced based framework for consensus moderation.

What is the benefit to you?

- There is no immediate direct benefit to you for participating although it will provide you with an opportunity to describe your perceptions and experiences of taking part in consensus moderation.
- You will be contributing to expanding the knowledge around the experience of consensus moderation and help with developing an evidenced based framework for consensus moderation.

What is expected of you if you choose to take part?

Interviews can be conducted face to face at a mutually convenient date and time or may be conducted by telephone/skype/Facetime. With permission, the interviews will be digitally audio recorded. Interviews are expected to last between 30 and 60 minutes and during the interview process, the researcher will also take notes to capture the ideas. During the interview you will be asked to describe your perceptions and experiences of consensus moderation.

How do I participate?

Easy! Please contact Jaci Mason (PhD candidate) via email j.mason1@postgrad.curtin.edu.au. Jaci will then send you more information and a consent form.

Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) has approved this study (HREC number HRE2018-0051)

Appendix H: Interview Information Statement



INTERVIEW INFORMATION STATEMENT

HREC Project Number:	HRE2018-0051
Project Title:	What are expert academics' perceptions of consensus moderation?
Principal Investigator:	Associate Professor Lynne Roberts
Student Investigator:	Jaci Mason
Version Number:	Version 2
Version Date:	30.01.19

What is the Project About?

There is growing recognition that variations in judgement affect the assessment and moderation of student work in higher education. Given increasing participation in higher education and regulation of the sector, it is paramount that consistency in assessment is achieved. Consensus moderation (also known as social moderation) is a process where collaboration and discussion take place to reach an agreed consensus regarding the allocation of marks. It is a commonly adopted approach to quality assurance and fairness in marking, yet the process is complex and fraught with challenges. Furthermore, there is a scarcity of research studying the factors which may impact on the decision making processes during consensus moderation.

The aim of this project is to explore the perceptions, experiences and opinions of 'expert' academics who either undertake research into consensus moderation within higher education or are considered to be an expert on assessment/consensus moderation. As part of this project we will be conducting individual semi-structured interviews with 'expert' academics in the field of assessment/moderation.

Who is doing the Research?

The project is being conducted as a PhD project, supervised by Associate Professor Lynne Roberts and Dr Helen Flavell, with Jaci Mason as the PhD Student.

Why am I being asked to take part and what will I have to do?

You have been invited to participate in this study because you are considered to be an expert in the subject of assessment and moderation based on your publication record or recognised expertise in this area.

If you choose to participate you will be asked about your current knowledge, experiences and opinions of consensus moderation.

Interviews can be conducted face to face at a mutually convenient date and time or may be conducted by telephone/skype/Facetime. With permission, the interviews will be digitally audio



recorded. Interviews are expected to last between 30 and 60 minutes and during the interview process the researcher will also take notes to capture the ideas.

Are there any benefits' to being in the research project?

There are no direct benefits to you in being involved in this research project; however it will provide the opportunity for you to share your knowledge on consensus moderation, and have your say about how you think this approach to moderation can best be used.

Are there any risks, side-effects, discomforts or inconveniences from being in the research project?

There are no foreseeable risks from participating in this research project.

Who will have access to my information?

The information collected in this research will be non-identifiable (anonymous). Names or other identifying information will not be included in transcriptions. Any information we collect and use during this research will be treated as confidential. The research team and the Curtin University Ethics Committee will have access to the information we collect in this research. The audio recording will be placed in locked storage, whilst the transcribed data will be stored on a password protected computer. Your information and data will be kept under secure conditions at Curtin University for 7 years after the research has ended and then it will be destroyed.

The anticipated outputs for this research include a thesis as well as articles in peer review journals as part of the PhD. You will not be identified in any results that are published or presented.

Will you tell me the results of the research?

You will be offered the opportunity to have a summary of findings from the research to those individuals who take part.

Do I have to take part in the research project?

No, taking part in a research project is voluntary. If you chose not to take part or start and then withdraw from the study, it will not affect your relationship with the University, staff or colleagues

What happens next and who can I contact about the research?

If you decide to take part in this research you will be asked to sign the consent form; this indicates you have read and understood the information sheet and agree to participate in the project. Please feel free to take your time and ask any further questions prior to signing.

If you would like further information and any questions answered, please contact Jaci Mason by emailing j.mason1@postgrad.curtin.edu.au.

Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) has approved this study (HREC number HRE2018-0051). Should you wish to discuss the study with someone not directly involved, in particular, any matters concerning the conduct of the study or your rights as a participant, or you wish to make a confidential complaint, you may contact the Ethics Officer on (08) 9266 9223 or the Manager, Research Integrity on (08) 9266 7093 or email hrec@curtin.edu.au.

Appendix I: Interview Consent form



INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM

HREC Project Number:	HRE2018-0051
Project Title:	What are the perceptions and experiences of expert academics who undertake research into consensus moderation in higher education?
Principal Investigator:	Associate Professor Lynne Roberts
Student Investigator:	Jaci Mason
Version Number:	Version 1
Version Date:	31.01.18

- I have read the information statement version listed in the interview information statement and I understand its contents.
- I believe I understand the purpose, extent and possible risks of my involvement in this project.
- I voluntarily consent to take part in this research project. I agree to the interview being audio-recorded.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and I am satisfied with the answers I have received.
- I understand that this project has been approved by Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee and will be carried out in line with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007) – updated March 2014.
- I understand I will receive a copy of the Information Statement and Consent Form.

Participant Name	
Participant Signature	
Date	

Declaration by researcher: I have supplied an Information Letter and Consent Form to the participant who has signed above, and believe that they understand the purpose, extent and possible risks of their involvement in this project.

Researcher Name	
Researcher Signature	
Date	

Appendix J: Interview Demographic Questionnaire



Study 3 (Interview) Demographic Questionnaire

1. What is your age?
2. What is your gender?
3. Where were you born?
4. Country of longest residence?
5. What is your highest level of education?
6. Have you a teaching qualification? If so please specify which qualification
7. How many years have you been teaching at University?
8. Please indicate the level of your academic grade or role (for example ALD or ALE or Professor)?

Appendix K: Interview Guide



Study 3 Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to participate in an interview for this part of my study.

I am currently conducting research on consensus moderation for my PhD and so far have conducted a scoping review and a number of focus groups with continuing academics and session staff.

This is the third part of a study, where I will be asking targeted questions to find out more about what I've learned from the focus groups in study two.

Rapport building:

- Could you start by explaining to me what your experience has been with consensus moderation and how this relates to your role?

Questions:

- What do you think are the key challenges for staff undertaking moderation and consensus moderation?

- What do you think is needed to address these challenges?

I have recently conducted a series of focus groups which have identified some positive and some undesirable aspects of consensus moderation. The following questions are to ask about some patterns identified in the focus group results:

- How do you think the challenges of taking part in consensus moderation are different for sessional academic staff and continuing academic staff?

- What particular support so you think are needed for each of these staff groups to undertake consensus moderation?

- A number of key challenges with consensus moderation have been identified and it would be useful if you could describe any experiences you have encountered relating to these challenges along with strategies that may overcome these challenges;
 - lack of consistency in the approach being undertaken to moderation and consensus moderation

 - power imbalance between the unit coordinator (UC) and sessional markers

 - time consuming and resource intensive aspect of consensus moderation (staff have reported that it takes “way beyond workload allocation” and consequently this can result in consensus moderation becoming a ‘tick box’ exercise)

For those that published:

- What changes have you seen take place since you wrote your paper on moderation?

Summary Question:

Final question: Are there any other comments you would like to make about the challenges or support needed to facilitate rigorous consensus moderation?

Appendix L: Action Research Questionnaire



Study 4 – Workshop Questionnaire

Developing an evidence based framework for consensus moderation practices in Higher Education

Questions:

How important are the following principles for consensus moderation?

	Not at all important	Not very important	Not important	Somewhat important	Very important	Extremely important
1. Accept marking is subjective and focus on developing a shared understanding of assessment requirements	<input type="radio"/>					
2. Moderation/consensus moderation should be viewed as core academic work and have recognition with workload	<input type="radio"/>					
3. A course assessment culture is needed for consistency and to ensure achievement of course learning outcomes	<input type="radio"/>					
4. Consensus moderation should provide opportunities for learning from peers	<input type="radio"/>					
5. Communication is needed before teaching begins so that the teaching team can understand the assessment requirements for teaching purposes	<input type="radio"/>					
6. Leadership is required to ensure that everyone has a voice in moderation discussions	<input type="radio"/>					
7. Policy and protocols are required to aid in developing a safe environment where everyone's opinions are valued	<input type="radio"/>					
8. Calibrating all markers before marking begins is required to ensure consistency of marks and fairness to students	<input type="radio"/>					
9. Annotated exemplars and feedback on initial marking aid in developing consensus on the assessment requirements	<input type="radio"/>					
10. Professional development is needed to enhance understanding of assessment and moderation principles	<input type="radio"/>					

Summary Question;

1. How interested are you in implementing this type of consensus moderation in your teaching area?
2. What advantages would you see in implementing this type of framework?
3. Are there any barriers to using this framework within your own teaching area?
4. Are there any other comments you would like to make about the proposed framework?

*Thank you for agreeing to participate in this part of my study
If you are interested in receiving the final framework document, please leave your email address on the document
provided*

Appendix M: Action Research Information Statement



Study 4: WORKSHOP PARTICIPANT INFORMATION STATEMENT

HREC Project Number:	HRE2018-0051
Project Title:	Developing an evidence based framework for consensus moderation practices in Higher Education
Principal Investigator:	Associate Professor Lynne Roberts
Student Investigator:	Jaci Mason
Version Number:	Version 1
Version Date:	22.01.18

What is the Project About?

There is growing recognition that variations in judgement affect the assessment and moderation of student work in higher education. Given increasing participation in higher education and regulation of the sector, it is paramount that consistency in assessment is achieved. Consensus moderation (also known as social moderation) is a process where collaboration and discussion take place to reach an agreed consensus regarding the allocation of marks. It is a commonly adopted approach to quality assurance and fairness in marking, yet the process is complex and fraught with challenges. Furthermore, there is a scarcity of research studying the factors which may impact on the decision making processes during consensus moderation.

I am currently conducting research on consensus moderation for my PhD, aiming to develop an evidence based framework for consensus moderation practices in Higher Education. So far I have conducted three earlier studies focusing on consensus moderation (1. Scoping review on consensus moderation, 2. Interviews with academics on current practices in consensus moderation, 3. Interviews with experts in the field of higher education on how they perceive consensus moderation). Based on my previous studies on consensus moderation I have developed a draft consensus moderation framework. This workshop will demonstrate the draft framework and I am seeking feedback on the framework in order to refine the framework further.

Who is doing the Research?

The project is being conducted as a PhD project, supervised by Associate Professor Lynne Roberts and Dr Helen Flavell, with Jaci Mason as the PhD Student.

Why am I being asked to take part and what will I have to do?

You have been invited to participate in this study because you are attending a workshop on consensus moderation at a Conference which focuses on assessment in higher education or within your university. You are welcome to attend the workshop, whether or not you wish to participate in data collection. Data collection will be during the final activity in the last five minutes of the workshop. Data collection will be voluntary and if you do not want to participate you can leave at this point of the workshop. If you choose to stay you will be provided with a further explanation of the purpose of the data collection, given time to review the information sheet and asked to complete a consent form, prior to completing the questionnaire.

Are there any benefits' to being in the research project?

There may be no direct benefits to you in being involved in this research project; however it will provide the opportunity for you to learn more about consensus moderation, and have your say about how you think this approach to moderation can best be used. Further, the final version of the framework will be made freely available for all universities to use upon completion of the project. If you are interested, you may choose to use this framework within your own university/teaching area.

Are there any risks, side-effects, discomforts or inconveniences from being in the research project?

There are no foreseeable risks from participating in this research project.

Who will have access to my information?

The information collected in this research will be non-identifiable (anonymous). Names or other identifying information will not be included in the data analysis. Any information we collect and use during this research will be treated as confidential. Only the research team and the Curtin University Ethics Committee will have access to the information we collect in this research.

The data will be stored on a password protected computer. Your information and data will be kept under secure conditions at Curtin University for 7 years after the research has ended and then it will be destroyed.

The anticipated outputs for this research include a thesis as well as articles in peer review journals as part of the PhD. You will not be identified in any results that are published or presented.

Will you tell me the results of the research?

A summary of the findings from the study will be sent to all participants who request it.

Do I have to take part in the research project?

No, taking part in a research project is voluntary. If you chose not to take part or start and then withdraw from the study, it will not affect your relationship with the University, staff or colleagues and does not affect your attendance at the workshop.

What happens next and who can I contact about the research?

If you decide to take part in this research you will be asked to sign the consent form; this indicates you have read and understood the information sheet and agree to participate in the project. Please feel free to take your time and ask any further questions prior to signing.

If you would like further information and any questions answered, please contact Jaci Mason by emailing j.mason1@postgrad.curtin.edu.au.

Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) has approved this study (HREC number *HRE2018-0051*). Should you wish to discuss the study with someone not directly involved, in particular, any matters concerning the conduct of the study or your rights as a participant, or you wish to make a confidential complaint, you may contact the Ethics Officer on (08) 9266 9223 or the Manager, Research Integrity on (08) 9266 7093 or email hrec@curtin.edu.au.

Appendix N: Action Research Consent form



Study 4
WORKSHOP DATA COLLECTION CONSENT FORM

HREC Project Number:	HRE2018-0051
Project Title:	Developing an evidence based framework for consensus moderation practices in Higher Education.
Principal Investigator:	Associate Professor Lynne Roberts
Student Investigator:	Jaci Mason
Version Number:	Version 1
Version Date:	21.11.19

- I have read the information statement version listed in the workshop information statement and I understand its contents.
- I believe I understand the purpose, extent and possible risks of my involvement in this project.
- I voluntarily consent to take part in this research project.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and I am satisfied with the answers I have received.
- I understand that this project has been approved by Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee and will be carried out in line with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007) – updated 2018.
- I understand I will receive a copy of the Information Statement.

Participant Name	
Participant Signature	
Date	

Declaration by researcher: I have supplied an Information statement to the participant who has signed above, and believe that they understand the purpose, extent and possible risks of their involvement in this project.

Researcher Name	
Researcher Signature	
Date	

Appendix O: Action Research Demographic Questionnaire



Study 4 (Workshop) Demographic Questionnaire

1. What is your age?
2. What is your gender?
3. Which University do you work at?
4. Your current role (for example, lecturer, academic developer?)
5. How many years' experience do you have in learning and teaching in higher education?

Appendix P: Ethics Amendment



Research Office at Curtin

GPO Box U1987
Perth Western Australia 6845

Telephone +61 8 9266 7863
Facsimile +61 8 9266 3793
Web research.curtin.edu.au

03-Dec-2019

Name: Lynne Roberts
Department/School: School of Psychology
Email: Lynne.Roberts@curtin.edu.au

Dear Lynne Roberts

RE: Amendment approval
Approval number: HRE2018-0051

Thank you for submitting an amendment request to the Human Research Ethics Office for the project **Developing an evidence based framework for consensus moderation practices in Higher Education**.

Your amendment request has been reviewed and the review outcome is: **Approved**

The amendment approval number is HRE2018-0051-10 approved on 03-Dec-2019.

The following amendments were approved:

The addition of a fourth study which is to collect data from participants attending conferences and workshops in Western Australian and United Kingdom Universities. The workshops will provide an overview of three earlier studies focusing on consensus moderation.

Any special conditions noted in the original approval letter still apply.

Standard conditions of approval

1. Research must be conducted according to the approved proposal
2. Report in a timely manner anything that might warrant review of ethical approval of the project including:
 - proposed changes to the approved proposal or conduct of the study
 - unanticipated problems that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project
 - major deviations from the approved proposal and/or regulatory guidelines
 - serious adverse events
3. Amendments to the proposal must be approved by the Human Research Ethics Office before they are implemented (except where an amendment is undertaken to eliminate an immediate risk to participants)
4. An annual progress report must be submitted to the Human Research Ethics Office on or before the anniversary of approval and a completion report submitted on completion of the project
5. Personnel working on this project must be adequately qualified by education, training and experience for their role, or supervised
6. Personnel must disclose any actual or potential conflicts of interest, including any financial or other interest or affiliation, that bears on this project
7. Changes to personnel working on this project must be reported to the Human Research Ethics Office
8. Data and primary materials must be retained and stored in accordance with the [Western Australian University Sector Disposal Authority \(WAUSDA\)](#) and the [Curtin University Research Data and Primary Materials policy](#)
9. Where practicable, results of the research should be made available to the research participants in a timely and clear manner
10. Unless prohibited by contractual obligations, results of the research should be disseminated in a manner that will allow public scrutiny; the Human Research Ethics Office must be informed of any constraints on publication
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Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Amy Bowater', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Amy Bowater
Ethics, Team Lead

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