

Moderation in Higher Education: Four Discourses

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Higher education environments

- Increasing accountability
 - Demands on institutions to
 - provide evidence of quality and the achievement of standards that assure that quality

Moderation is one quality assurance process that plays a central role in the teaching, learning and assessment cycle in higher education institutions.

Moderation: A definition

- *a process in which members of a teaching team develop shared understandings of assessment requirements, criteria, standards, and the evidence that demonstrates differing qualities of performance*

(Adie, Lloyd & Beutel, 2013)

Purpose of moderation

To ensure that

- assessment aligns with established criteria, learning outcomes and standards;
- processes are equitable, fair and valid; and
- judgements are consistent, reliable, and based on evidence within the task response

The overall aim should be to improve the quality of the teaching/learning experience.

What does the literature say?

- Validity and reliability are difficult to attain (Watty et al., 2013)
 - markers not necessarily agreeing with the learning outcomes they are assessing (Baume, Yorke & Coffey, 2004);
 - assessment grading criteria being ignored by markers (Price & Rust, 1999);
 - differing interpretations of standards and criteria between markers (Price, 2005).
 - Bloxham (2009) also argues that developing rigorous moderation procedures add to the workload of academics without necessarily contributing significantly to the accuracy and reliability of marking.

Current policy for Australian universities

Mandated through university policy and through national university accreditation authority, Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA, 2012).

Moderation of assessment is undertaken to support **appropriate and consistent assessment**

(TEQSA, 2012, p. 23)

Examples of moderation procedures include:

- **multiple marking** of the same paper by either the same assessor or by two different assessors
- use of **external examiners** and assessors
- **blind marking** of papers
- assigning **markers to mark the same question** in assignments or tests composed of multiple sections using **computer-aided marking** (for example, machine-readable multiple-choice quiz sheets)

(TEQSA, 2012, p. 31)

Details of moderation and any other arrangements that will be used to support consistency and reliability of assessment and grading across each subject in the course of study, **noting any differences in these processes across delivery methods, delivery sites, and/or student cohorts.**

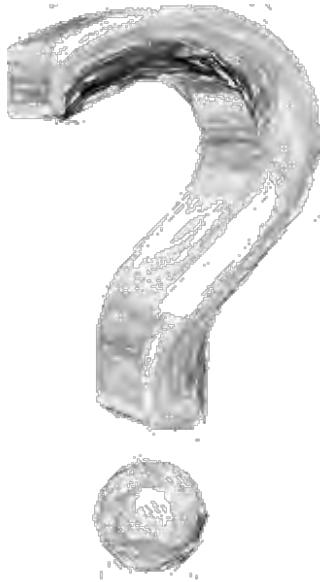
(TEQSA, 2012, p. 32)

The study

Funded by a faculty teaching and learning grant

- Participants were academic teaching staff (n=25) within a Faculty of Education
 - Unit coordinators (n=21) and tutors (n=8) with some participants having dual roles
- Qualitative
 - Semi-structured interviews
 - Frequency, nature and topics of moderation discussion
 - Current practices
 - How consistency of judgments could be improved

Research questions



1. What understandings of moderation are held by unit coordinators and tutors in the large core units and within the small single class units?
2. What moderation practices, processes and procedures are currently employed within the faculty?
3. How can the consistency and comparability of assessment judgements be improved within the units in education courses?

Discourses of moderation

Four discourses

- Moderation as **equity**

- consistency, fairness for students

“moderation is for ensuring fairness in marking across a cohort ... the fairness element is for me the biggest point of moderation.” (Unit coordinator of large unit)

- *Problematic with small units with sole person responsible*

This view is prevalent in higher education institutions

“concerns quality assurance processes to ensure that every student receives fair treatment with regard to assessment processes” (Curtin University, 2013)

Discourses of moderation

- Moderation as **justification**
 - confidence in decisions, providing quality feedback, and support to respond to student queries

“For me individually it [moderation] is about professional justification. ... I need to be able to justify the grades I have given, so if a student comes back to me with a query about it I have a professional justification for why that grade has been given”.

Discourses of moderation

- Moderation as **accountability**
 - distribution of marks; unit coordinator as standard setter, final arbiter and expert
- *“[moderation] puts me on very solid ground when I come to talking to any student about their result and indeed when it comes to reporting to my supervisor about the result”.*

Discourses of moderation

- Moderation as **community building**
 - collaborative establishment and review of assessment tasks, criteria, standards, learning experiences, and teaching strategies
 - Mentoring of new staff
 - Challenges related to teaching team size, structure, turnaround times, and geographical location

Interestingly...

- No participant spoke to all 4 discourses.
- Silence around discussions of teaching and learning
- Some linked moderation to outdated performative measures such as distributing grades to fit normal distribution curves
- All convinced their way was best.

Conclusion

- Moderation is currently an idiosyncratic mix of beliefs and experiences espoused through one or more of the discourses
 - Equity
 - Justification
 - Accountability
 - Community building
- Need to be wary of inducting staff into existing practices based on one discourse only
- Moderation should not be viewed in a singular way

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