

NARRATIVE 3

Moderation and assessment practices

Melanie's story

Melanie is unit coordinator for a unit delivered to three offshore locations. The unit is mostly delivered online (iLectures and all materials are provided) and local tutors are employed to run tutorials and provide local support for students. Several years ago there were over 700 students in the unit which was offered twice a year.

A year ago, a new partner organisation in Asia had negotiated to deliver the course which included Melanie's unit, which would bring the number of students enrolled to about 1000. Melanie requested financial support to visit the four new partner staff prior to the start of semester but this was turned down due to financial constraints. Several other staff however were sent to visit the campus and they managed to meet up with Melanie's four local tutors and brief them about the new arrangements.

After several attempts at email communication, Melanie felt some concern at the level of English proficiency of the tutors, so she arranged a Skype communication session whereby she was able to meet the tutors face to face. Technical problems prevented an ideal connection; however, they were able to discuss some issues related to delivery of the unit, assessment and other administrative procedures. The tutors spoke reasonably good English and appeared to understand everything. While Melanie felt that she had established a valuable connection with the new local tutors, she remained concerned that they seemed unaware of the bigger picture surrounding offshore delivery of Australian courses and units.

They agreed to attempt a face-to-face meeting once a month but to use email for most day-to-day communication. In the ensuing semester, they only managed one other face-to-face meeting due to both technical and logistical problems. The local tutors were heavily committed in the teaching of other units and could seldom be available for meetings. Their English language expression in emails continued to worry Melanie.

The assessment arrangements in the unit were that Melanie would provide all assessment items and marking keys and that local tutors in all locations would mark assignments and examination and send mark distributions to her. They also sent copies of marked examination papers: three good (i.e. the best 3), three average and three that were a bare pass (i.e. about 50%). Melanie then compared the marks distributions and quality of papers with her own and the other offshore locations before deciding whether mark adjustments, if any, should be made. Melanie felt that this practice had mostly been working well.

The first two assignments that were conducted in the new location resulted in a distribution of marks that was not unlike the others. However, as a precaution, Melanie requested some marked copies of the second assignment. She was really concerned at the unacceptably low quality of the students' English and felt that the marks were over-inflated. She expressed this concern to the program coordinator and also to the tutors and suggested that they needed to make sure that students did in fact understand the concepts that they were writing about before awarding marks.

The final examination and marked scripts indicated a similar problem. Melanie again expressed concern to the program coordinator that the local tutors themselves did not have the English skills need to teach or mark assignments and that she would have to scale the marks down considerably. This was met with some resistance and in the end a compromise was reached. The local tutors however, claimed that Melanie was too harsh in her requirement that students must express answers clearly in English. They argued that this was unfair on the students and that the tutors should just look for meaning, and not mark the English expression.

The following semester, Melanie requested copies of marked assignments as well as the final examination and determined that the marking standards being employed at the new location were below those of the home campus and other locations and so she scaled down the marks again. This resulted in complaints from the new location and a 'please explain' from the program coordinator. Melanie felt she could provide clear evidence to back her assertions. Melanie is currently making arrangements for all final examinations to be sent to her and she will arrange for marking to be done by her own tutors.

Question: What is your view of Melanie's actions?

Question: If you were Melanie, would you have done differently? The same?

Question: What are the main issues and lessons to be learnt from this?