Moderation of Assessment in Transnational Higher Education

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Introduction[1]

The significance of assessment in determining the quality of student learning in higher education has been acknowledged by many (Ramsden, 2003, Race, 2004). While there exists a growing body of assessment research (Knight, 1995, Boud and Falchikov, 2007, Ramsden, 2003, Biggs and Tang, 2007), the process of moderation of assessment in higher education remains relatively unknown (Orr, 2007) . With transnational education (TNE) research, moderation of assessment is covered more generally under research on quality assurance and details of the moderation process are lacking (Coleman, 2003, van Damme, 2001, Stella and Gnanam, 2004). TNE processes and practices are starkly under-represented in the literature on the internationalisation of higher education. This is confirmed by McBurnie and Ziguras (2007) who indicate that the majority of the limited entries in the literature are "informal, anecdotal papers" that draw on the experiences of Australian transnational teaching staff.

This paper fills a gap in literature on TNE practices by reporting the preliminary findings from a research study on moderation of assessment in TNE involving Australian universities and their offshore partner institutions. The research project, funded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) investigates processes that ensure fair and equitable assessment both before it is administered and after it has been completed, viewing moderation as a quality assurance and quality control measure. Overall, our research aims to collate moderation-related information, develop a transnational community of practice through the research framework and create a critically negotiated framework of inclusive practice for moderation of assessment in TNE settings resulting in an online, downloadable toolkit available to universities.

This paper discusses trends emerging from the initial interview data regarding moderation of assessment collected from onshore (staff located in Australia) and offshore (staff employed by partner institutions outside of Australia) academic and administrative staff associated with the transnational academic programs of three Australian universities. While there is a developing body of knowledge on TNE from the perspective of those involved from the Australian university there is far less information from the transnational partners regarding their experiences and perceptions of TNE (Dunn and Wallace, 2008). This research offers some redress to that imbalance.

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[1] The first two sections of this paper draw from the literature review prepared by Dr. Saadia Mahmud for this project

Need for Quality Assurance in TNE

Transnational Education is widely referred to as education "in which learners are located in a country different from the one where the awarding institution is based" (UNESCO and Council of Europe 2001:1 cited in McBurnie and Ziguras 2007:22). Within the university sector in Australia and New Zealand the term "offshore programs" is generally used. In Australia there had been steady growth of TNE programs from 307 in 1996 to 1569 in 2003, with a reduction to 1002 in 2007 (Universities Australia, 2007).

As the transnational higher education programs involving Australian universities have matured, the assessment of student learning has been identified as a neglected but key component for scholarly investigation. The Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) identified that assessment of student learning and moderation in particular are key components of quality assurance (Carroll and Woodhouse, 2006).

The principle promoted to Australian universities to ensure quality and sustainability is one of 'equivalence' or 'comparability' between onshore and offshore provision (Connelly et al., 2006, DEST, 2005). Australian universities are encouraged to develop consistent processes for transnational learning and teaching. According to IEAA (2006), moderation of assessment is a key practice underpinning assessment equivalence. Both Nuttall (2007) and Bloxham and Boyd (2007) agree that comparability and consistency are especially important when there are multiple learning sites. The literature provides generalised advice on assessment in transnational education programs, such as the use of marking guides by offshore staff (Castle and Kelly, 2004), but studies on how assessment and moderation activities are being conducted are lacking.

Methodology

Our two-year project adopts a mixed-methods approach (Creswell and Clark, 2007) obtaining information from three sources. Firstly, face-to-face interviews are being undertaken with a sample of TNE academic and professional staff in three Australian universities and nine of their TNE partner institutions. Secondly, an anonymous online survey of a larger number of TNE academic and professional staff within the three Australian universities and their nine TNE partner institutions is being undertaken as well as an anonymous online survey for all Australian-based TNE academic staff in universities across Australia (excluding the three universities involved in this project). Thirdly, analysis of secondary data in the form of moderation-related documentation at all three Australian universities and their nine TNE partner institutions will be collated and analysed.

The interviews are being conducted using a common semi-structured interview protocol. All staff were asked about their conceptions of moderation, comparability and equivalence, their experiences teaching in or administering a transnational program and their role and practices in moderation. The

interviews are digitally recorded and selectively transcribed. The sample of academic and professional staff is drawn from a number of academic programs across the universities with a mix of undergraduate and graduate programs, disciplines and geographical locations of TNE partner institutions.

This paper reports on the initial 25 interviews with academic and administrative staff at three TNE partner institutions in the Asia-Pacific area that are involved in educational collaborations with three Australian universities and the initial 29 interviews with academics and administrative staff in those three Australian universities. At least one third of the Australian staff held course leader or subject co-ordination roles and all were directly involved with the teaching, assessment and student management in transnational higher education partnerships. The transnational programs in focus were Business/Management, Social Sciences and Engineering related. One transnational partner site was a branch campus whereas the other two sites were partnerships with existing educational colleges and institutes in two other countries. Interviewers travelled to or were situated in the offshore sites in the Asia-Pacific region. Further interviews will be conducted at a number of other transnational sites and findings will be reported elsewhere.

Research Findings

What has particularly struck the research team is the great variability between the sites and among individuals within those sites. This has made it more difficult to discern common themes. This paper thus cautiously examines emerging themes relating to conceptions of moderation, consistency and comparability and moderation processes.

Conceptualisations of Moderation, Consistency and Comparability

Australian academics and administrative staff offered a range of conceptualisations regarding moderation:

> Validity, reliability, consistency … just *making sure* that in assessing what you want to assess and you are being fair to students in various classes over time and across locations.

> Moderation is a process where we are looking for equivalence between cohorts; no one is advantaged or disadvantaged. It's a *form of quality control.*

> Moderation means *to make sure that the tutor is accurate*, is on the ball, is correct and the other one is to ensure we're consistent.

> (Italics added for emphasis)

While moderation as it is generally practised appears to be well understood, the language used here is one of control and consistency. Others discussed, 'The need to get them to mark in line with our standards' … 'so that we can compare that they are consistent - teaching and assessing the same things in

the same manner'. While the researchers acknowledge that the degrees taught are Australian degrees, much of the discussion was strongly from an Australian perspective with little acknowledgement of 'local' perspectives in relation to curriculum design and assessment.

However, many of the Australian academics identified with a broader concept of moderation, which included ensuring that assessment standards as well as content and delivery methods are well understood by all staff and students from the very beginning, 'It's more than sample marking'. A few also mentioned that offshore staff should ideally be included in design of assessment but admitted that this would be difficult due, largely, to time and distance constraints. At two universities there had been active funding support for research into moderation practices.

> It's more the big picture stuff, setting the scene at the beginning of the unit, explaining unit aims, the assessment plus being very open with communication with all staff.
>
> Moderation is not an end product. The process starts at the beginning developing the skills and abilities of the tutors, developing the partner to mark in line with our university's standards. It is about consistent agreement, not scaling.

These responses evidence a more holistic understanding of moderation that is much closer to the scholarly ideal that moderation processes occur both before and after assessment (Harlen, 1994). Unsurprisingly, moderation was seen as more clear-cut when objective subjects such as accounting or finance were involved but much more problematic when subjects such as communication or people and culture are involved.

In each case, the Australian university had a set of faculty or university-wide policies and guidelines regarding moderation of transnational assessment and these were often embedded in other teaching and learning policies. These were usually well articulated by Australian staff; however, there were wide variations in articulating this by offshore partner staff. At one offshore site most academics provided functional definitions, describing various processes relating to ensuring high standards, equality of marking and that students were assessed fairly and to the same standards. The academics interviewed did not voluntarily indicate an awareness of the existence of moderation guidelines although all complied with the expected processes in practice, submitting either assessments or marked papers to the home campus for approval. At another site staff saw moderation as ensuring standards set for subjects are achieved but also saw it as a check on their work – 'They are just fitting us into their mould'. However, these staff were also aware of the need to conform to accreditation requirements in Australia and their own country.

In contrast, academics at the third off-shore site had very robust conceptions of moderation and felt they had a more developed understanding of moderation concepts and practices than their Australian counterparts:

> Pre-moderation is Quality Assurance - a degree of fairness in assessment, - those who set and mark know exactly what they and the students are meant to be doing and have the skills to pass judgment on someone else's work. We can't put any item of assessment before a student unless another academic has moderated it. Post-moderation is Quality Control - making sure that the marking is done in line with the philosophy of the course and in line with the learning objectives at the right level of difficulty.
>
> Moderation is similar to an internal audit, a measure of quality control, consistency in awarding marks. It builds confidence that markers are not too subjective in awarding marks. It is about consistency and fairness as the moderator has a view of all the students' work.

Clearly, there are very different concepts of moderation and attitudes towards it across the Australian universities and their transnational partners. There is not a shared or consistent view about moderation, its purpose or processes. It also seems that some partner institutions may not have been comprehensively inducted into the need for, philosophy, policy and practices of moderation.

Issues of comparability and consistency were also discussed. Some staff felt strongly that curriculum and assessment should be identical to ensure that there was equity between students and that standards could more visibly be assured; the term 'mirroring' was used. However, the majority of responses recognised the need for teaching and assessment that was comparable, linked to the learning objectives and assessing the same skills and knowledge.

Moderation was also seen as keeping academics accountable and as a form of assurance of fairness for students.

> The moderator is in the position to compare. One student was not happy with his grade in the final exam and sent me an email and I could reply that there is a moderation process in place and somebody at the university has checked my marking. I could tell him that the moderator has agreed with the grade.

Most Australian staff discussed consistency in terms of having the same standards across cohorts so that students obtaining a certain grade in an assessment item would have presented work of a similar standard.

Australian academics thus conceptualised moderation in terms of accuracy and consistency of marking across tutors with different student cohorts and saw it very much in terms of quality, which is unsurprising given the recent AUQA focus on international aspects of higher education. However, moderation was also seen as involving the realities of teaching and marking across cultures, a whole of subject approach, relationship building and trust, standards and communication to students and staff.

Moderation in Practice

In some cases there was negotiation of the assessment regime and marking standards prior to the teaching period. However, in the majority of cases the curriculum and assessment was designed by the Australian academic up to six months before the delivery of the subject. In the most successful cases this was communicated to the transnational partner at the commencement of the teaching period. Australian staff presented a range of marking guides to the research team. Most Australian staff emphasised the need to impose such structure early on in the teaching period and provide their counterparts, in addition to the course content material and resources, with model answers, exemplars and marking guidelines. While transnational staff appreciated this, there were concerns that there was little room to negotiate any of the parameters.

> Some subjects, if the counterpart has confidence in the lecturer, they may ask for feedback for the questions and then they finalize the assessment. Some they do not ask. Once they finalize they feel that we ought to follow given that we are an offshore program.

However, in less optimal cases transnational staff complained that marking guides and other support regarding making judgements on assessment were not forthcoming.

> Some counterparts (onshore) give you everything (marking scheme, answer key, exemplars etc.) whereas there are those who tell you to 'figure it out yourself.' I never got an answer key although they set the assignment questions. When we pushed for it, we were made to feel that we are not qualified to lecture if we cannot figure out the answers.

Processes around marking also varied. In one partnership the transnational partners marked the assignments and the exams were marked at the Australian campus. In another partnership a sample of five per cent of assignments and exams were marked by the transnational partner. This was communicated to Australia and then moderated by Australian staff. Once moderation feedback was received (four day turnaround) the offshore marker could proceed with marking. At the branch campus all marking was undertaken there and then moderated by Australian staff.

One relatively simple process that could aid moderation and a shared understanding of standards is cross marking. This seems almost never to occur. Transnational staff reported that they seldom get to see how the marking at the home campus is undertaken.

The use of online marking was seen as facilitating this process and one partnership is doing this. The Unit co-ordinator and all members of the teaching team can view all uploaded assignments and each other's marking. This process can support common understanding of standards, cross-marking (which is not being undertaken) and facilitates turnaround time for moderation.

The processes outlined above are essentially 'post' processes and occur in a compressed time frame, where there is pressure to get feedback to students or to submit grades to Boards of Examiners. At their best they assist with common standards, at their worst they lean towards a moderation that effectively norms transnational academic's behaviour to lower their marks. The most extreme version of post-processes is where post-hoc lowering of marks occurs after grades have been submitted. This was mentioned by some transnational staff as a practice that had occurred recently. In at least one case Australian academics discussed using the exam to 'balance out' grades that were a result of what they saw as generous marking of assignments by some offshore academics. This practice was viewed very negatively by these transnational staff and as evidence of lack of trust.

> We have a high level of capable, upwardly mobile students who, from time to time, score very well. We find that often we get, 'Please reduce your marks across the board by 5%'. What does some lecturer sitting in Australia know about my cohort?

While post-hoc scaling was almost universally seen as undesirable there was recognition that it still occurs. The effects on the relationship with partners and the disappointment of students was recognised as highly unfortunate but part of the reality. Post hoc moderation of marks (scaling/adjustment) is seldom justified to the transnational staff. The transnational partners may or may not get feedback on why adjustments are made but expressed a desire for this as a way of ensuring more consistent standards. Generally, transnational staff saw the 'back end' moderation process as not offering them specific enough feedback to fine tune their marking, 'They say everything is fine', 'They say the marking is not of the right standard and to lower the marks'.

At least two of the Australian universities require moderation reports at the completion of the study period. In one case the transnational academic also contributes their perceptions of the process to the moderation report. In another case the transnational academics receive a report from the Australian academic. In general transnational academics did not find the report helpful as it lacked specificity - 'The moderation report comes in at the end and it is not very interesting to look at. I've learned nothing from the exercise'. The offshore TNE staff were also concerned that they received no moderation feedback on their exam marking.

From the perspective of the Australian staff there were workload issues with moderation reports:

> I can satisfy myself pretty quickly by looking at samples of marking to get an idea of how the tutor is marking and about whether I need to make changes/adjustments but then there's the writing up. I've got to spend two hours leaving evidence of the moderation behind. That's one of my biggest challenges.

There was also recognition from most Australian academics that moderation of subjects taught on up to eight sites with up to 1,000 students did pose a logistical and workload challenge. Delays in marking from transnational staff

were of concern to Australian staff and delays in moderation feedback from Australian staff were of concern to transnational academics. Administrative staff were impacted by such delays when students complained to them about late feedback on assignments and late receipt of final marks, which in turn impact on their employers' reimbursement of fees. The use of online assignment submission, which could speed up the process, was seen as having the potential to leave administrative staff out of the loop where in a more manual system they had a role in ensuring that the moderation flow continued and could inform students of its progress.

In summary, there appears to be a tension between the need for the Australian university to maintain **contro**l of the assessment for the sake of quality and standards and the need for **trust** by the transnational partners. The imperative for control involves perceptions held by Australian staff of transnational staff relating to lenient marking, not penalising loose referencing and plagiarism, not marking to the full scale of marks (nobody fails), in some cases giving only summative feedback rather than the formative feedback expected, and 'teaching to the exam' if it was received early - an overall surveillance of people and processes.

From the perspective of the transnational partner staff there are perceptions of having their work, and by implication their professionalism, checked up on, lack of role definition and lack of clarity of what support is provided in the partnership, huge variability in the amount and type of communication and support from Australia, delays in moderation feedback, lack of specificity in moderation feedback or no feedback and, in several cases, a desire to input into assessment design and marking criteria/standards/guides. The TNE staff expressed an overall need for trust and recognition of professionalism.

These issues are closely tied up with tensions between what is involved in attaining **comparability** of standards across sites. Does comparability mean that courses, tuition and assessment have to be **exactly the same**, or is there some flexibility to accommodate local needs within carefully defined parameters? Is more flexibility possible in some courses than others? Will any flexibility put at risk the validity of standards espoused by the Australian university?

Conclusion

This study has thus far found that there are very different concepts of moderation and attitudes towards it across the Australian universities and their TNE partners. There is not a shared or consistent view about moderation, its purpose or processes. On the issue of consistency and comparability, while some staff felt strongly that curriculum and assessment should be identical to ensure that there was equity between students and that standards could more visibly be assured, the majority of responses recognised the need for teaching and assessment that was comparable, linked to the learning objectives and assessing the same skills. There is great variability in moderation practices and while it is too soon to identify 'better

practices' definitively, the project is documenting moderation approaches that are potentially examples of good practice. Clearly, the tensions between control and trust as they impact on moderation of assessment warrant further investigation.

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