What is moderation of assessment?

Moderation refers to a range of quality assurance processes related to assessment that aim to ensure the validity and reliability of assessment tasks in measuring student performance in relation to learning outcomes within and across courses (UniSA Moderation Procedure AB-68 P5 2023, p. 1).

Moderation goes beyond quality control of marking, as marking and reviewing grades alone do not result in quality assessments. As shown in Figure 1, moderation of assessment practices should ideally comprise three phases: 1. Assessment design and development (*before* the implementation of assessment); 2. Implementation and marking (*during* the assessment period); and 3. Review and evaluation (*after* the assessment has been completed).
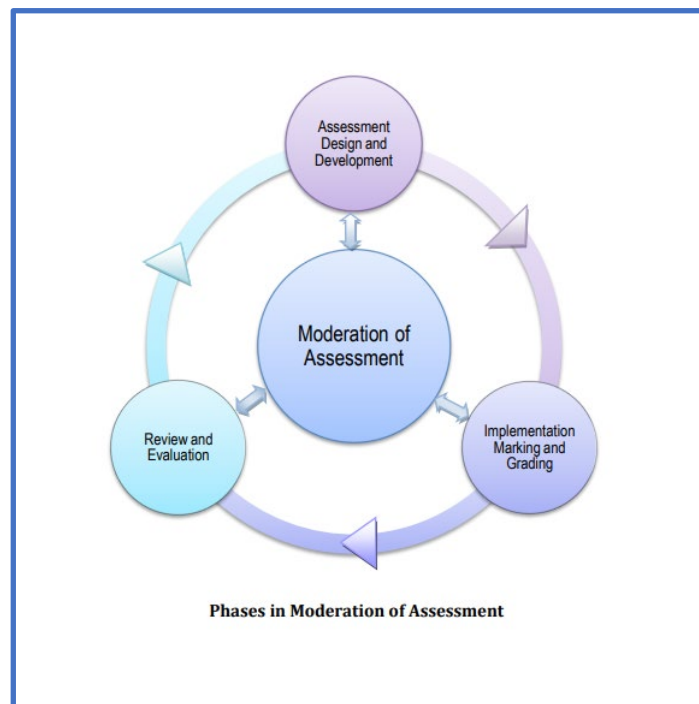

Figure 1. The three phases of assessment moderation

Source: ALTC Moderation for Fair Assessment in Transnational Learning and Teaching Project (2008-2010, p. 2)

Why undertake moderation practices?

Moderation supports high quality assessment practices which are an important element of the University's quality assurance framework, ensuring that consistent, valid, and reliable judgements are made about student performance in relation to learning outcomes within and across courses (UniSA Assessment Policies and Procedures Manual 2022, p. 13). The University of South Australia's assessment moderation practices are underpinned and informed by the following three policies and procedures:

1. **Assessment Policies and Procedures Manual:** https://i.unisa.edu.au/policies-and-procedures/codes/assessment-policies/
2. **Program and course approval and amendment:** https://i.unisa.edu.au/sas/Our-Activities/Programs-and-Courses/Program-and-course-approval-and-amendment/
3. **Quality assurance and improvement: Programs, courses and teaching arrangements:** https://i.unisa.edu.au/policies-and-procedures/university-policies/academic/a-35/

Who should undertake moderation practices?

Table 1 identifies the various roles and responsibilities of stakeholders involved in moderation of assessment.

Table 1. Roles and responsibilities of stakeholders

Role	Responsibilities

Course Coordinator	**It is the responsibility of the Course Coordinator to:**
	a. Plan and implement assessment and moderation processes used in their course. Refer to Table 2 for quality moderation considerations.
	b. Ensure that assessments are valid and are aligned with the course objectives, student workload, PCMS documentation, and where applicable, professional accreditation requirements.
	c. Ensure that valid, reliable, and appropriate standards are being consistently applied to mark students' work and award final grades. Refer to Appendices for examples.
	d. Ensure moderation of the assessment has been completed prior to the deadline set by the Academic Unit.
	e. Recommended practices include:
	    • Review of assessment items prior to them being administered (i.e. checking of exams).
	    • Where a course is being delivered in its entirety by a single individual, that feedback should be sought on assessment criteria and marking rubrics from either staff within the Teaching Innovation Unit (TIU) or another academic staff member with relevant expertise.
	    • Reviews all marks and range of marks for each person marking an assignment to ensure consistency of marking.

Program Director	**It is the responsibility of the Program Director to:** a. Oversee assessment and moderation processes used in their program and ensure consistent, valid, and reliable judgements are made about student performance in relation to learning outcomes within and across courses. b. Work with Course Coordinators to identify appropriate strategies for moderation of their course and ensure they are aware of their responsibilities and the moderation and assessment support services available. c. At their discretion, review the moderation processes for specific courses.
Dean of Programs	**It is the responsibility of the Dean of Programs to:** a. Ensure that appropriate moderation takes place across each course and program and is routinely planned, documented, and reviewed in line with the University's policies and procedures. b. Provide direction to Program Directors and Course Coordinators on the conduct, approach, and responsibilities in terms of moderation, and their supported services. c. Review moderation of courses identified at risk, if applicable. d. Provide an annual report on moderation to the Academic Unit Board and lead a review of the Academic Unit's moderation practices by its Teaching and Learning Strategy Group at least once every three years. e. Include a report on moderation processes and outcomes as part of the program review reaccreditation report in accordance with the Quality Assurance and Improvement Policy. f. Undertake an external moderation process at least once every program review cycle in accordance with the Quality Assurance and Improvement Policy for programs that are not externally accredited.
Academic Services Team	**It is the responsibility of the Academic Services Team member to:** a. Support the administration of the moderation of assessment practices across the Academic Unit as required by the various stakeholders. b. Ensure specific provision for moderation is included in contracts related to the delivery of offshore programs.

Source adapted from: UniSA STEM Guide for Examination Moderation 2021 & Division of Education, Arts and Social Sciences moderation guidelines (2019b)

How to undertake moderation practices

Table 2 presents some strategies that may be used in moderation. It is important to select the most appropriate strategy depending on the assessment or course delivery contexts, such as when they are:

- not common to all students.
- implemented on different campuses.
- marked by multiple markers.
- largely subjective.
- marked by one person.

Table 2. Some moderation strategies and approaches

Make assessment and marking criteria explicit; provide exemplars	• The development and dissemination of appropriate assessment criteria is a key element of consistent assessment procedures. • For criterion-based assessment, grading criteria (broad statements of student achievement associated with each grade band and/or level) must be established prior to students attempting the assessment. • Provide students with clear marking criteria or scoring rubrics prior to commencing any assessment task. Making exemplars available (especially of high-quality pieces of work) is extremely useful, particularly for students from cultural backgrounds and academic traditions which differ from those in Australian universities. • Course Coordinator or lead marker provides other markers with a sample of marked assessments to exemplify the type and amount of feedback and grade attainments at various levels.
Distribute marking key guides	• Marking keys may be collaboratively developed and/or distributed to all markers for comment prior to the assessment being attempted by students.
Self-moderation & sole marking	• Markers can be inconsistent within themselves, especially if there are many assessments to mark and it takes several marking sessions. It is important to check back over assessments that have been marked to ensure that marks and feedback for assessments marked earlier and later have been treated similarly. • Where there is a sole marker another member of the Program team may independently re-mark a representative sample of their assessed work from across the grade ranges to confirm that the marker is marking and providing feedback according to the agreed standard. • If a sole marker is not maintaining a consistent standard, the Course Coordinator should ensure that any work already assessed by that marker is re-marked to the agreed standard and that ongoing assessment of submissions assigned to that marker are also marked to the agreed standard.
Moderators	• Sometimes an independent viewpoint is needed. This person (i.e., moderator) could comment on marks and feedback on samples of student assessments or on borderline or difficult cases, thus providing an independent perspective and overview.
Conduct comparability	• Conducting comparability meetings involves a number of staff meeting together after individually marking the same piece(s) of work to compare

meetings (consensus moderation)	marks and feedback to reach a 'consensus'. This is often necessary even where marking criteria are explicit because some markers tend to mark 'easier' or 'harder'.
Second-marking	• Second-marking involves a sample of marked assessment items being marked a second time by another person. It is used to validate assessment standards across a group of markers. The Course Coordinator or other experienced marker may second-mark a sample of the assessed work from each marker in a team across a range of marks.
Anonymous assessment	• Anonymous assessment attempts to remove marker bias. It only works where the identity of students is not revealed in other ways (e.g., through writing styles, references in the text, etc.)
Double-blind marking	• Two markers independently mark the work of each student. This is preferred for extended assessment high-value tasks such as research projects or where the assessment involves highly subjective judgements. Consistency limits should be set (i.e. 10% difference between markers) and if those limits are exceeded, markers should meet to discuss and resolve differences.
Panel marking	• Involves independent but concurrent assessment by two or more markers. It may be used for oral presentations, practical assessments or other similar assessment tasks. Audio-visual recording of the assessment might also be undertaken. • Comparability of assessment is enhanced if the composition of the panel is the same for all students doing a particular assessment task. If the panel is not the same for all students, then one member of the assessment panel should chair all panels to promote comparability.
External moderation *Note: any assessment items shared externally must be deidentified to maintain student confidentiality*	• Consistency and quality of assessment standards can be established by having some assessment tasks common to those in another course and/or university. • Collaborative or cross-marking with assessors in other courses or universities contributes to maintenance of assessment standards and feedback, as well as students' perceptions of impartiality. • External moderation of assessments may be adequately achieved via whole-course benchmarking with other universities.
Moderation where assignments are not physical products	• In cases where assessment does not involve production of written work or other physical artefacts (e.g., assessment of presentations, laboratory or other practical demonstrations), moderation may be incorporated by the moderator either being present at the time that the assessment is observed or by having access to an audio or video recording of the event.

Source: University of Edinburgh (2019); UniSA (2019a, 2019b, 2021); USQ Learning and Teaching Support (n.d.)

Table 3 provides an overview of considerations for quality moderation and addresses each of the three phases of assessment moderation highlighted in Figure 1. It is intended to guide course coordinators to plan and implement assessment and moderation processes and to ensure that moderation components appropriate to the course have been addressed throughout each of these phases.

Table 3. Considerations for quality moderation at each of the three moderation phases

Considerations for Phase 1: Assessment design and development
1. Does the assessment match the course learning objectives, student workload, course marking time allocation and where applicable, professional accreditation requirements?
2. Are assessments objective and fair, taking into account learning styles, English language, cultural and tacit knowledge?
3. Do you vary assessment types within your course? (e.g., essays, reports, presentations, responding to case studies, short answers)
4. Are assessment criteria and marking keys discussed with the teaching team?
5. Are the assessment criteria and marking keys/ rubrics clear and detailed for students and those marking?
6. Are students and markers familiar with the assessment criteria and marking key?
7. Have the assessment items been subjected to review by an independent person?
Considerations for Phase 2: Implementation, marking and grading
1. Do markers cross-mark assessments from a class(es) in the course other than the one(s) they directly teach?
2. If there are multiple markers, have you held a consensus marking meeting?
3. If markers are marking large numbers of items over an extended period of time, do they review items marked earlier to ensure consistency?
4. Is a sample of assessment items double marked and compared?
5. At the course coordinator's discretion, are students' assessment items anonymous?
6. Do you double mark student work that attains very high or very low marks?
7. Do you compare marking ranges across different markers?
8. Do you give timely and sensitive feedback to markers who may be marking too 'high' or 'low' so they can adjust their marking?
9. Do you provide your markers with a spreadsheet or similar showing all marks and the range of marks for each marker?
Considerations for Phase 3: Review and evaluation
1. Have you avoided post-assessment scaling/ changing of marks? If not, marking practices within the course should be reviewed.
2. Have any potential marking biases been identified and addressed?
3. Resulting from an analysis of moderation, have you identified potential actions for improvement in assessment for the next course offering?

Source: ALTC Moderation for Fair Assessment in Transnational Learning and Teaching Project (2008-2010, p. 2)

References

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