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# Everything in moderation: A quality improvement initiative

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## Abstract

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# Everything in Moderation: A Quality Improvement Initiative

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## Introduction

This paper describes the early stages of an initiative in which three academics reviewed the moderation of assessment practices in the School of Nursing and Midwifery (SNM) at Edith Cowan University (ECU), Western Australia.

The initial review of current moderation practices within the School's teaching context revealed the need for development of standardised procedures. This context refers to the diverse range of staff, including significant numbers of sessional staff involved in the assessment process. The wide variety of both educational qualifications and experience held by these staff created the potential for variation in understanding and expectations of assessments. The aim of this initiative was to develop a whole of program approach and a sustainable community of practice for moderation within a quality improvement framework, which acknowledges the subjective nature of assessments.

Literature was reviewed to determine the best available evidence around assessment and moderation, in particular, resources that were part of an Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) Learning and Teaching Project (2008-2010) on moderation of fair assessment in all higher education programs (ALTC, 2012). The development process was one of collaboration with the School Executive and other academics. A pilot of the process

was undertaken throughout the second semester of 2013. This paper describes the moderation of assessments process developed.

## Background

Despite the widely held view that moderation is entirely about the marking process there are a variety of existing understandings and practices for moderation of assessment for example processes that include consistency in assessment and marking; processes for ensuring comparability; measures of quality control; processes to ensure equivalence and fairness; and maintaining academic standards as part of quality assurance (ALTC, 2012). Marking and reviewing allocated grades alone does not guarantee quality assessment (Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC), 2012). External quality evaluations are not particularly effective at encouraging improvement, especially when they have a strong accountability, or audit brief (Harvey & Williams, 2010). Holistic approaches are useful and the heart of the holistic approach to moderation is continuous review (Lawson & Yorke, 2009). Moderation helps to raise standards, expectations and levels of consistency (The Scottish Government, 2011).

While moderation of assessment is a critical component of learning in tertiary education, universities in Australia will, from now on, be required to declare details of moderation noting differences in these processes across delivery methods, sites and student cohorts to the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) (Adies, Lloyd, & Beutel, 2013). These requirements instigated consideration and formalisation of moderation practices in the School of Nursing and Midwifery at Edith Cowan University.

Moderation is the processes and activities that occur both before (i.e. quality assurance) and after all assessment (i.e. quality control).  So moderation of assessment encompasses all stages of all assessment (ALTC, 2010, 2012).

Assessment in higher education is usually internally set and marked and as such may be exposed to subjectivity, as tutors and academics may not have the same academic standards (Bloxham, 2009) or interpretation of marking guides and rubrics.

Moderation of student assessment is a process aimed at ensuring that marks and grades are as valid, reliable, and as fair as possible for all students and all markers (Institute of Teaching and Learning, 2012). Students' marks are a representation of their academic achievement and as such require decisions around them to be justified and validated (Bloxham, Boyd, & Orr, 2011).

### Purposes of Moderation of Assessments

There are two main reasons for moderation: accountability and improvement. Moderation of assessment may be categorised as a good practice initiative improvement that lies between risk avoidance and quality enhancement as normative quality assurance (Baird & Gordon, 2009). Learning activities may be continuously enhanced through quality monitoring (such as the internal moderation of student assessments process) in contrast to a compliance culture that does not lead to improvement (Horsburgh, 1997, 1998). The underlying principle of quality monitoring should be the encouragement and facilitation of continuous improvement. ECU's approach to continuous improvement refers to the ECU Excellence Framework which is the suggested method for quality monitoring (Edith Cowan University, 2013). There are several benefits of effective moderation processes: to improve reliability through discussion of differences in markers, to prevent individual marker bias, decrease the effect of 'hard' and 'soft' marking, increase student confidence in marking,

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and develop students' interpretations of criteria and marking schemes and create a community of practice in moderation (Bloxham, 2009).

**Benefits of Moderation of Assessments**

Both staff and students benefit from moderation processes. Students experience reduced effects of 'hard' and 'soft' marking and individual marker bias which will increase their confidence in the assessment process  (Bloxham, 2009). The standardisation of constructive feedback is also a component of the moderation process, supporting the students' learning through assessment. The improvement in inter-marker reliability particularly between novice and experienced groups has the potential to reduce informal enquiries from students and subsequent appeals (Bird & Yucel, 2010). The development of a shared understanding and expectations of the assessment process between markers increases efficiency of marking (Bird & Yucel, 2010).

An integrated moderation of assessment program (IMAP), has been demonstrated to reduce variation between markers with an increase in reliability, particularly when they were divided into novice and experienced groups (Bird & Yucel, 2010). Also time taken to mark tended to decrease so efficiency of marking increased after participation in the professional development (Bird & Yucel, 2010).

## Curriculum Context

Edith Cowan University's School of Nursing and Midwifery (SNM) in Western Australia, has over 2,000 students enrolled in the Bachelor of Science (Nursing) course. The staff profile is one of differing academic backgrounds with many previously working overseas in both tertiary and non-tertiary education sectors including many recently entering academia directly from clinical practice. The large student cohort necessitates a strong reliance on sessional tutors marking assessments. Many sessional markers cannot access on-campus meetings easily due to other work commitments and geographical location.

In SNM, undergraduate units with high enrolments (typically around 600) are partially taught and assessed by a team of sessional markers. The amount of tutoring and marking undertaken by sessional staff in any one unit ranges from none to the majority. Approximately thirty sessional staff are employed within the School at any one time across undergraduate and postgraduate practicum and theoretical units. Some of these staff teach and mark whilst others are employed solely to mark. Whilst the eligibility criteria to become a sessional staff member vary all sessional staff are encouraged to attend two professional development (PD) sessions: an orientation day conducted by the School each semester and also a PD day provided by the university, however these are not mandatory. Assessment and moderation of assessments as a topic are covered at both sessions. However, access to training and on campus meetings can be challenging for some sessional staff due to other work commitments and geographical location. The transient nature of sessional staff employment means the supply of experienced markers cannot be guaranteed on a semester by semester basis.

**Challenges and Drivers**

Ensuring consistency and equity of assessment marks and feedback between markers can be a major challenge involving significant time investment for unit coordinators. The

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implementation of a sustainable and transparent step-by-step process to standardise and guide moderation of assessment is therefore imperative. Another challenge is ensuring that academic staff considers that the moderation process is manageable and has benefits for them and the student cohort. Drivers include potential reduction in overall time taken with student assessment thereby decreasing workload for academic staff during assessment marking periods. Marking periods are significantly work intensive as the ECU Course and Unit Delivery and Assessment policy (Edith Cowan University, 2012) requires a turn-around time of ten working days or less.

## Development and Implementation of the Moderation Process

This collaborative initiative to develop and implement a standardised moderation process within the specific context of the SNM utilised best practice principles, supported by ECU policy and underpinned by the ECU Excellence Framework (Edith Cowan University, 2013).

### Design

All academic staff within the School and the Faculty Associate Dean for Teaching and Learning were consulted throughout all stages of the development process. Engaging all academic staff by using an inclusive approach from the beginning was a conscious decision with the expectation that this may result in academic staff implementing the moderation process.

A clear process providing a system of achievable steps and associated guidelines was required to standardise the moderation process within the School. It was essential that the process was based on current best practice and able to be implemented within existing university systems. The moderation process developed involves clear steps, each with defined purpose underpinned by an ongoing, continuous and collaborative review with improvements to be incorporated into subsequent semesters. A flow chart shows all phases of the moderation process. See Appendix 1.

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### Phase one: Before Teaching Commences

The purpose of phase was is to review all assessment items from the previous semester *before the assessment is set* and make amendments as required. Assessment items that may advantage or disadvantage any students are identified and amended. The unit coordinator ensures that assessment items match the learning outcomes; are as objective and fair as possible; take into account learning styles, English language, potential for cultural bias, cultural and tacit knowledge; and are varied across the unit and course. The coordinator confirms that there is adequate time for students to complete each task. Potential marking biases, cultural issues and subjectivity are identified and amended where necessary. In phase one, prior to commencement of teaching each semester, the unit coordinator checks that the marking guides, criteria and rubrics are clear, detailed and emphasise merit for students in all contexts (e.g. offshore or on different campuses) and for the entire marking team. Issues around standardisation of grades awarded and quality of feedback provided are checked as a response to feedback from sessional markers and students (including complaints, queries and appeals) within this phase. Decisions are made regarding necessary changes to the assessment items to improve quality and thereby increasing student satisfaction of the unit which would potentially reduce unit coordinator administration time from student grievances.

A phase one checklist further facilitates an enhancement of learning activities and assessments by listing actions and questions for the unit coordinator to consider e.g. checking for objectivity, cultural responsiveness and alignment of assessments with unit outcomes.

### Phase One: Unit Team Meeting Before Assessments and Marking Criteria are Set

The purpose of the phase one meeting prior to the marking period is for all markers to share their expectations and understandings about the assessments and marking criteria. The unit coordinator has the responsibility of ensuring agreement of standards and consistency of marking so this meeting should reduce marking inconsistencies. This meeting may be face-to-face or virtual considering geographical location and cross campus teaching, especially for sessional markers. Ideally the unit coordinator sends all documents and focus questions to the markers well before the meeting enabling time for markers to identify areas that may require clarification and discussion.

### Phase Two: During the Marking Period Before Work is Returned to Students

Phase two begins with a consensus check as early as possible during the marking period. The purpose is to ensure both consistency of marking and feedback to students. Ideally, this phase is undertaken each semester irrespective of any changes in the marking team or to assessments and marking guides. The process of the consensus check involves the unit coordinator circulating the same two to three student papers to all markers who mark them individually and return them, ideally within 48 hours. The unit coordinator tabulates the marks, notes any variation between markers and also notes particular questions and answers that demonstrate inconsistency. Any necessary adjustments identified from the review of these marked papers are communicated to the marking team including clarification of understandings and the addressing of marking inconsistencies and feedback quality. A list of possible standardised feedback comments (such as Quickmarks used within Turnitin) may be developed and shared within this process. Once work is marked and returned to the unit coordinator for distribution to students, an analysis of results between markers, campuses and delivery modes is undertaken. Should inconsistencies be identified, the unit coordinator

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should ensure s/he second marks a range of papers across each grade including fails (recommended two papers from each grade from each marker). Further checks the unit coordinator should make within this phase are the arrangement of double blind marking of post graduate projects.

These processes across the first two phases clearly identify roles and responsibilities and expectations and so should reduce inconsistency issues in marking. The unit coordinator should however, ensure s/he second marks a range of papers across each grade including fails (recommended two from each grade from each marker) and anticipate this workload.

### Phase Three: After Marked Work is Returned to Students

The unit coordinator in this stage reflects on the outcomes of phase one and two. It is expected that by completing stages one and two the need for any scaling of marks is reduced. Any scaling requires approval by the course coordinator in consultation with the program director. To aid and record the process of changes needed and to audit the steps and decisions taken, each marker completes a feedback form separate to the assessment or exam moderation report indicating the strengths, weaknesses and suggestions for improvements relating to the assessment they have marked. An assessment or exam moderation report is completed by the unit coordinator and shared with the course coordinator. Changes made to assessment items as a result of the moderation process are recorded in the unit plan for the following semester for the students' reference.

The moderation process was developed to be effectively integrated within the current university marking systems of Turnitin and Gradebook via Blackboard. The use of these systems enables all markers to collaborate by viewing and comparing marked work. Furthermore markers can access and assess work online, provide marks and feedback instantly to students and share unit coordinator Quickmarks and comments within each assignment, further improving standardisation of feedback. The use of a standardised rubric within this system further ensures reliability and validity of feedback and clarity of expectations and outcomes to students.

### Flowchart of Process

In order to provide a clear and easy to follow guide for staff, a flow chart indicating the step by step process of moderation throughout the semester accompanies the written guidelines. Both of these documents were made available to School staff and sessional markers via the School's staff Blackboard site. The flow chart gives clear information regarding the purpose, timelines, responsibilities and expectations within each phase of the moderation process.

## Pilot of New Process

As this new moderation process required a significant change in usual practice it was anticipated that some resistance might be encountered from academic staff within the School especially as workload points have not been separately allocated to the process. However, this was not the case and the opportunity to improve this quality assurance process within the School was welcomed by all staff. The lack of resistance may be in part due to the impetus for the process originated from the course coordinators rather than being mandated from a "top down" approach by more senior academic staff in the School. However, as the process is

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still in its infancy it would be naïve not to anticipate some form of resistance in the future.

This moderation process has been implemented within the School during semester 2, 2013. The process is currently being piloted across undergraduate and postgraduate programs and a review of compliance to the guidelines will be conducted after completion of semester. In-depth analysis of data from the pilot will be undertaken to ascertain the impact of this initiative for academic staff both permanent and sessional and perceptions of its implementation.

## Conclusions

This paper describes how a sustainable moderation process has been developed and implemented within the SNM with the aim of creating a proactive community of practice for moderation. Moderation of assessment aims to ensure assessment validity, reliability, fairness, equivalence and consistency for all students and all markers within and across units. A moderation process should minimise marking subjectivity where multiple markers are involved in marking an assessment. It also demonstrates fairness to students and increases their confidence in the assessment process and associated outcomes. This fairness and quality can also be demonstrated to internal and external auditing bodies through the auditing of the process.

A three phase approach was adopted and a flow chart provides a diagrammatic representation of the process. Prior to the implementation of this initiative widespread discussion was undertaken with academic staff.

This initiative was an example of a successful collaborative approach between academic staff in a School and CLD within the University as evidenced by the development and implementation of a new moderation process within the SNM and the continued collaboration to showcase analysis of data gathered in semester two 2013.

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**Moderation – Flow C**

**Phase 1-**
**Before**
**marking**
**period**

**\*Refer to**
**phase 1**
**checklist**

### Unit coordinator unit review
Unit coordinator to consider any changes necessary to the assessment process within the unit.
Considers feedback from previous year, learning objectives, fairness, contextualization and clarit
Proposed changes to be reviewed by the year or course coordinator and agreed changes reflected
the Course Management System

### Unit team meeting
All markers within a unit meet to discuss marking key/rubrics, assessment criteria and unit
coordinator expectations

### Students complete assessment items

**Phase 2-**
**Before**
**work is**
**returned**
**to**
**students**

**\*Refer to**
**phase 2**
**checklist**

### Consensus check (within 1$^{st}$ week of marking)
All markers will each receive and mark the same two to three student papers. Any inconsistencies
be addressed by the unit coordinator

### Double-blind marking
Post graduate projects only

### Analysis of results
Unit coordinator will check for range and spread of marks and compare grades across different
markers, semesters and cohorts. If concerned the unit coordinator will check two papers from ea
grade range from each marker and feedback to markers

### Adjustment of marks
Adjustments of marks if necessary following analysis of results (collaborative process between cou
coordinator and unit coordinator)

**Phase 3-**
**After**
**marked**
**work is**
**returned**
**to**
**students**

**\*Refer to**
**phase 3**
**checklist**

### Work returned to students

### Review and report
Assessment or exam feedback form will be completed by all markers and forwarded to the unit
coordinator. The unit coordinator will complete an assessment or exam moderation report.

### Record outcomes and changes needed for future delivery of the unit
Any necessary changes identified by the process will be addressed by the unit coordinator for futur
delivery of the unit as part of the moderation process (see phase one, boxes 1 and 2)

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