1-1-2014

Moderation of assessments in a School of Nursing and Midwifery; Enhancing student assessment experiences

Lesley J. Andrew
Edith Cowan University

Beverley A. Ewens
Edith Cowan University

Rowena H. Scott
Edith Cowan University

Moderation of assessments in a School of Nursing and Midwifery: Enhancing student assessment experiences

Lesley Andrew. School of Exercise and Health Sciences, Edith Cowan University.
Beverley Ewens. School of Nursing and Midwifery, Edith Cowan University.
Rowena Scott. Centre for Learning and Development, Edith Cowan University.

Abstract

This paper details a quality improvement initiative undertaken in 2013 within a School of Nursing and Midwifery, in Western Australia. The objective of the initiative was to support and enhance commencing student assessment experiences thorough the development of an evidence based, standardised assessment of moderation process.

Background

The School of Nursing and Midwifery (SNM) at Edith Cowan University (ECU) is the largest educator of undergraduate nurses in Western Australia with an approximate annual intake of 600 students into its three year Bachelor of Science (Nursing) degree. Teaching and assessing these large student cohorts is facilitated through teams of permanent academic staff, sessional tutors and external markers.

Edith Cowan University embraces the widening participation agenda in higher education attracting a high percentage of students who enter via non-traditional routes such as portfolio entry; as well as students who originate from non-traditional backgrounds including low social economic status (LSES), first-in-family and international students (ECU 2012a). Nursing studies in particular are a popular choice for non-traditional university students (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace (DEEWR) 2010; Donaldson, McCallum & Lafferty, 2010).

A concern for the university are ECU data demonstrating non-traditional students to be at comparative higher risk of attrition than traditional students (ECU, 2012b) mirroring recent national Australian findings (James, Krause & Jennings, 2010). Edith Cowan University attrition data also concur with international literature identifying first year students to be particularly susceptible (Tinto, 2009), with 33% of attrition at ECU occurring in students who have studied for five months or less (ECU, 2012b). In recognition of the greater vulnerability of their newly commencing students, ECU is highly focused on improving and sustaining first year overall student satisfaction and encourages the development of initiatives that support students' ability to engage and achieve (ECU, 2012b).

The SNM course coordinators have acknowledged the influence of assessment experiences on student satisfaction (Boud, 2012) with Wilson & Lizzio (2011) reporting assessment practices as having a particular influence on commencing student meaningful academic engagement and subsequent successful outcomes. This prompted a review of current assessment practice and the implementation of a standardised moderation of assessment initiative.

The initiative

Project initiation- identification of need

During 2012 and 2013 a review of unit assessment practices by the SNM course coordinators revealed that, whilst all unit coordinators reported they undertook moderation of assessment, a diverse interpretation of this practice was evident. Moderation of assessment practice was considered to be the routine checking of the distribution and consistency of marks awarded at the end of the assessment period, rather than as a continuous process that underpinned and guided assessment design, implementation and evaluation.

Variation in staff interpretation and communication of assessment expectations, the design of assessment marking guides and rubrics was also evident from the review; potentially leading to confusion for both students and marking teams. Inconsistencies also existed in provision of feedback including the amount, quality and comprehensiveness of comments. Furthermore, no standardised system to facilitate and record reflection on outcomes of the previous semester's assessment activities was available to support and demonstrate ongoing improvement.

Although the amount of post-assessment student enquiries were not considered excessive, a significant proportion were related to clarification of mark allocation, the meaning of terminology used in feedback and reassurance around equity of marks awarded where a team of markers had been employed. With team marking a strong and necessary feature of assessment practice within the SNM the need to develop a stronger focus on ongoing team collaboration and communication was identified.

The development of the assessment of moderation process

In response to these findings the course coordinators worked in collaboration with an academic from the Centre for Learning and Development (CLD) to develop a moderation of assessment process which incorporated the University's policies and strategic priorities (ECU, 2013) underpinned by best evidence on commencing student satisfaction and assessment. As a high proportion of commencing students in the SNM fit the non-traditional criteria, the literature around their particular experiences was considered.

Australian and international studies have identified that non-traditional students begin university life with a comparatively limited prior tacit understanding of academic systems (James et al., 2009; Luzeckyj, Scutter, King & Brinkworth, 2011; Thomas & Quinn, 2006), which has the potential to reduce their ability to negotiate academic challenges and therefore their capacity to learn, engage and achieve (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Devlin, 2010 Kuh, Cruce, Shoup & Kinzie, 2008; Tinto, 2009). To address this inequity of access and outcome Wilson & Lizzio (2011) propose academic staff pay particular attention to the process of making sense of assessments with commencing students. According to Adies, Lloyd and Beutel (2013), the development of shared knowledge of assessment requirements can be attained through an unambiguous moderation of assessment process. The explicit demonstration of assessment terminology, expectations and rubric design can enable staff to demonstrate justification of marks awarded to students, thereby increasing student confidence and understanding of university processes around assessment. This transparency has been found to have the additional benefit of enhancing students' belief in the justice of an

assessment (trust in fairness) which is considered to be a key motivator for commencing student engagement and ability to achieve (Wilson & Lizzio, 2011).

The importance of the development of shared knowledge of assessment requirements also applies to the marking team. The encouragement of a system that ensures a consensus of understanding of assessment expectations early in the assessment period improves team efficiency and consistency outcome for students, increasing equity and dependability of outcomes, through strengthening of assessment validity and inter-marker reliability (Bird and Yucel, 2010: Bloxham, Boyd & Orr, 2011). The reduction in assessment- related discrepancies resulting from such consistency decreases the potential for scaling or adjustment of marks, and any associated student confusion, mistrust and distress. Awareness of a collaborative, standardised and universal moderation process may reduce student concerns regarding fair allocation of marks between markers in a team.

The moderation of assessment process discussed here was underpinned and guided by the relevant tenets identified in the literature of equity, transparency and consistency in assessment process.

The implementation of the moderation of assessment process

The design of the moderation of assessment processes incorporates three phases across each semester. Learning from each semester is implemented in the review and revision of successive semester assessment (Scott, Ewens & Andrew, 2013). Checklists to prompt unit coordinators in areas of best practice are incorporated within each phase. A visual representation of this process has been developed in the form of a flow chart (appendix).

Phase one occurs early in the semester, prior to the teaching period. Unit coordinators engage in a reflective review of the outcomes from the previous semester. This learning is informed by a unit coordinator assessment moderation report completed in phase three of the previous semester. The phase one checklist prompts unit coordinators with a list of best practice in assessment design including: avoidance of assumed tacit prior knowledge and consideration of cultural and language differences, explicitness of assessment guidelines and expectations, clarity and standardisation of assessment terminology and assessment rubrics and contextualising of assessment task to unit outcomes. In this phase the unit coordinator also meets with their marking team to discuss expectations and understanding of the forthcoming assessment activities and invites questions and comments to support the development of shared understanding.

Phase two occurs during the marking period. During the initial days following submission, a representative quantity of unmarked student assignments is marked separately by team members. The unit coordinator examines the resultant marks and feedback is shared, to ensure quality and consistency. Re-clarification of expectations are made if required, involving a discussion with all markers to promote further consensus. The phase two checklist prompts the marking team in best practice activities regarding marking and review of marks awarded, such as quality and clarity of feedback, review of fails and very high marks and revisiting early marked pieces in the case of marking a large amount of work over an extended period.

Phase three occurs after marking and moderation of marks is completed and assignments are returned to the students. This phase entails a reflection and review of the moderation of assessment process for the semester. To aid reflection and inform change, each marker provides the unit coordinator with written feedback regarding positive aspects of the assessment process and potential areas for review. The unit coordinator also considers other indicators, including incidences of miscommunication and misinterpretation of assessment requirements by students and markers, student compliments, complaints, appeals and student satisfaction from end of semester unit surveys. The unit coordinator completes a final assessment moderation report, which is used to support and guide the first phase of the moderation of assessment process the following semester and to enable process audit. The phase three checklist reminds and guides the unit coordinator in the gathering and recording of relevant information.

At the commencement of each semester, changes to assessment items resulting from the moderation of assessment process are recorded in student unit plan document.

Conclusion

Following a review of assessment practice across the SNM, a standardised assessment of moderation process was developed guided by the central tenets of transparency, consistency and equity. The process began implementation in 2013 with the anticipated outcome of improved student satisfaction through enhanced understanding, confidence and ability to engage in university assessment processes. An evaluation and review of this initiative is now underway.

References

Adies, L., Lloyd, M., & Beutel, D. (2013). Identifying discourses in moderation in higher education. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education, 38*(8), 1-10. doi:10.1080/02602938.2013.769200

Bird, F., & Yucel, R. (2010). Building sustainable expertise in marking: integrating the moderation of first year assessment. *Paper presented at the ATN Assessment conference.* Sydney, Australia: University of Technology Sydney. Retrieved from http://www.iml.uts.edu.au/atnassessment/poster.html

Bloxham, S., Boyd, P., & Orr, S. (2011). Mark my words: the role of assessment criteria in UK higher education grading practices. *Studies in Higher Education, 36*(6), 655-670. doi:10.1080/03075071003777716

Boud, D. & Associates (2010). *Assessment 2020: Seven propositions for assessment reform in higher education*. Sydney, Australia: Australian Learning and Teaching Council. www.assessmentfutures.com

Collier, P. J., & Morgan, D. L. (2008). "Is that paper really due today?": Differences in first-generation and traditional college students' understandings of faculty expectations. *Higher Education, 55*(4), 425-466. doi:10.1007/s10734-007-9065-5

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. (2010). *Summary of the 2009 Higher Education Student Statistics*. Retrieved from http://www.deewr.gov.au/HigherEducation/Publications/HEStatistics/Publications/Documents/2009/09FullYearSummary.pdf

Devlin, M. (2010). Non-traditional university student achievement: Theory, policy and practice in Australia. *Keynote address: 13th Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference,* 27 June- 30 June 2010. Retrieved from http://www.fyhe.com.au/past_papers/papers10/content/pdf/Marcia_Devlin_keynote_4.pdf

Donaldson, J.H., McCallum, J., & Lafferty, P. (2010). Can we predict successful completion of the common foundation programme at interview? *Nurse Education Today 30,* 649–656. doi:10.1016/j.nedt.2009.12.019

Edith Cowan University. (2011). *ECU Annual Report 2011*. Retrieved from http://www.ecu.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/338156/ECU-Annual-Report-2011.pdf

Edith Cowan University. (2012a). *ECU Annual Report 2012*. Retrieved from http://www.ecu.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0011/455654/ECU-Annual-Report-2012.pdf

Edith Cowan University. (2012b). *Connect 4 success*. ECU Student Services Centre. Retrieved from http://intranet.ecu.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0019/310753/Connect-for-Success-Proposal.pdf

Edith Cowan University. (2013). *The ECU Excellence Framework.* Edith Cowan University, Western Australia. Retrieved from http://intranet.ecu.edu.au/staff/centres/planning-quality-and-equity-services/our-services/excellence-framework

James, R., Krause, K. L., & Jennings, C. (2010). *The first year experience in Australian universities: Findings from 1994 to 2009*. The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. Melbourne, Australia: The Centre for the Study of Higher Education.

Kuh, G. D., Cruce, T. M. Shoup, R, & Kinzie, G. (2008). Unmasking the effects of student engagement on first- year college grades and persistence. *The Journal of Higher Education, 79*(5), 540-563. doi:10.1353/jhe.0.0019

Luzeckyj, A., Scutter, S., King, S., & Brinkworth, R. (2011). The significance of being first: A consideration of cultural capital in relation to "first in family" student's choices of university and program: A Practice Report. *The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education, 2*(2), 91-96. doi:10.5204/intjfyhe.v2i2.89

Scott, R. H., Ewens, B., & Andrew, L. (2013). Everything in moderation: A quality improvement initiative. eCULTURE, 6(1). Retrieved from http://ro.ecu.edu.au/eculture/vol6/iss1/5

Tinto, V. (2009). Taking student retention seriously: Rethinking the first year of university. *Keynote address: The First Year Experience Curriculum Design Symposium 2009,* February 5th 2009. University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia. Retrieved from http://www.fyecd2009.qut.edu.au/resources/SPE_VincentTinto_5Feb09.pdf

Thomas, L., & Quinn, J. (2006). *First Generation Entry into Higher Education: An International Study.* Buckingham, England: Open University Press.

Wilson, K., & Lizzio, A. (2011). *Facilitating commencing students' success with early assessment*. Australian Learning and Teaching Council. Sydney; Australia.