

A GUIDE TO **PARITY IN ASSESSMENT** IN TRANSNATIONAL EDUCATION

In transnational education parity in assessment is important for quality assurance, equivalence, and comparability between offshore and onshore provision.

When we talk about parity in assessment we refer to the assessments being equivalent, meaning essentially the same in quality and value. When more than one marker is involved, markers may not necessarily share a common understanding of the assessment question. Being able to achieve well in an assessment task depends, to some extent, on the level of explanation and discussion given by the teacher; the usefulness of feedback on work prior to final submission; and the marker's expertise in making judgements about the quality of work in relation to the assessment criteria.

Parity in transnational education depends on a process of moderation across sites. Moderation is intended to ensure that marks awarded to assessed work will be independent of the marker - that is, the same mark would be received if the assessment task was marked by a different marker.

Sadler (2009a) suggests the concept of calibration of academics. "The goal is for academics to be confident in their own informed and calibrated judgements" (p18) and trust their colleagues to do the same.

A higher education program may be identical, tailored but equivalent, significantly tailored, or completely different from the version on another campus. Moderation of assessment is therefore particularly important for the quality assurance of transnational education with the goal of equivalence and comparability between offshore and onshore provision.

Sometimes a different assessment task may be justified. An example is where professional bodies have differing expectations in different countries. Any substantive differences would need formal approval.

Equivalence and comparability

The concepts 'equivalence' and 'comparability' are important to parity in transnational offerings. A subject delivered at an offshore campus may be designed to be comparable and/or equivalent to the home campus delivery.

- **Equivalence** is a measure of quality determined by maintaining defined academic standards with regard to learning outcomes, assessment strategies, resources, etc. The general nature of assessment and the specific criteria in the subject outline are equivalent.
- **Comparability** is observed when a subject has been contextualised and customised to local factors and the student profile while maintaining equivalence with the subject offered on the home campus. Comparability is achieved by:
 - » Contextualisation - the adaptation of one or more elements in a subject, for example, assessment, to increase its cultural, personal, professional, and global relevance to the students.
 - » Customisation - the alignment of a subject with its student profile to promote effective learning. Assessment tasks and activities may need to be adapted for students' language proficiency and preferences. For example, an individual assessment task requiring a written reflective journal at the home university becomes a group video with students sharing individual reflections at the offshore campus.
 - » Higher-order assessment criteria - designing generalisable and identifiable assessment criteria involving evaluating, analysing, designing and creating.

Strategies to support parity

Moderation of student assessment is aimed at ensuring that similar standards are applied. Moderation involves checking through the process to ensure fairness - before, during and after the assessment.

Research undertaken over several decades has shown that the underlying standards against which student works are appraised are poorly understood and can vary widely from assessor to assessor.

Royce Sadler 2009a

A consensus moderation exercise (see Sadler, 2009a) involves the teaching team leader gathering a sample of student assessments and distributing to the team for independent marking. The leader then guides a group discussion on the marks and comments awarded and seeks agreement on the final mark to be awarded. Following this exercise markers independently mark the rest of the assessments with some cross-checking.

Collaborative decision-making in design of assessment tasks and criteria

- Ask co-teachers to read and comment on assessment criteria before finalising:
 - » discuss the criteria with an experienced peer
 - » test the criteria, for example, by asking a co-teacher to have a student paraphrase the criteria
 - » identify assessment items that may advantage or disadvantage any students, potential marking biases, language and cultural issues, tacit knowledge and amend where necessary.
- Negotiate with co-teachers the allocation of marks to the various criteria.
- Explain and discuss what is expected, the marking criteria, and the marking scheme with co-teachers. Discuss how criteria are to be interpreted, standards of work that should receive a particular mark, and expectations for grading level across all sites.
- Discuss mock submissions or samples of student work and related marks from previous semesters.
- Explain and discuss purposes, styles, provision, and timing of feedback on tasks.

- Consider breaking assessment tasks into smaller tasks for transnational students.
- Provide formative assessment to all students prior to final submission.
- Provide models or exemplars from all cultures to all students - these might be on a different topic.

In transnational education moderation is about compatibility or equivalence between what happens on the home campus as compared with the offshore campus. Moderation of offshore assessments in Australian universities is achieved in the same way as onshore assessments. The principle is one of comparability or equivalence between what happens in the Australian University and the offshore delivery.

(Sanderson, Yeo et al. 2010)

Guidance and moderation in marking

- When assessments are submitted conduct a consensus marking exercise.
- Double mark a sample of anonymous items and compare marks.
- Cross mark assessments from students across sites.
- Compare marking ranges across different sites and markers.
- If marking large numbers of assessments over an extended period of time review earlier items.
- Mark together as a teaching team.
- After the assessment process, evaluate the assessment tasks and criteria, and elements of the process.

Critical issues

- What are students' prior experiences of assessment?
- Will the assessments be designed by a subject coordinator located in Australia or by a subject coordinator at the transnational location?
- How will the other institution have input into assessment design, for example, through quality assurance, sign-offs, discussions?

- Will assessment tasks be exactly the same for all student cohorts regardless of location, or different at different locations?
- How will assessment be moderated across locations?
- If there are extra stages involved in assessment design due to multiple institutions being involved (for example, exam paper sign-off), how will this affect timelines?
- What are the transnational partner's processes for approving any major changes to assessment?
- How will the partner institution return marked work to students?
- Have markers been trained in giving feedback to students?
- Do you need assistance or training in developing marking rubrics?
- Will there be a process for checking that assessment tasks are explained clearly and that criteria are clear?
- Will the subject coordinator and transnational teachers and students be required to meet (eg through Skype) before major assessments, to address any questions and clarify expectations?
- Is additional support needed to help some students reach the required standard?

Programme delivery should be responsive to culturally-determined teaching and learning practices.

(O'Donaghue 2010)

Principles of Assessment

Below is an example of a set of institutional guidelines.

Good Practice Assessment - UOW Guidelines

Regardless of location, the design of assessment tasks for learning at UOW relies on the same principles:

- Assessment needs to be primarily about learning rather than grading, and should offer a holistic rather than a fragmented experience.

- Students learn more from tasks that engage them in creating responses, rather than replicating answers.
- Authentic, real-life problems help students transform learning into practice and underpin their transition into professions.
- Students need to be active agents in their own learning. For example, by finding ways to allow them to initiate aspects of tasks rather than merely responding to instructions and prompts.
- For students to succeed, they need to develop a capacity to judge their work which is similar to that of their teacher – feedback and opportunities to evaluate samples of work are critical.

From the literature

- Assessment involves intense student effort and engages their emotions and motivations. It needs to be primarily about learning rather than grading, and should offer a holistic rather than a fragmented experience (Boud, 2009).
- Students learn more from tasks that engage them in creating responses, rather than replicating answers (Joughin, 2009).
- For students to succeed, they need to develop a capacity to judge their work. Feedback and opportunities to evaluate samples of work are critical (Sadler, 2009b).
- Encountering unfamiliar assessment tasks can be a demotivating experience if the stakes are too high (Dochy, 2007).
- Authentic, real-life problems help students transform learning into practice and underpin their transition into professions (Boud, 2009).

The goal [of consensus moderation] is to produce course grades which are: based on academic achievement standards; commensurate with the respective levels of achievement they represent; comparable over time and across boundaries; and consistent with disciplinary, professional and societal expectations of higher education graduates.

Royce Sadler 2009a

Key References

Much of the material above has been extracted or adapted from:

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Professional Development Principles

A set of professional development principles for transnational teaching teams informed, and were refined through, the work of the participatory action learning groups in this project.

The principles can be accessed at: transnationalteachingteams.org



Professional development for quality enhancement of learning and teaching

For further information please contact:

Associate Professor Geraldine Lefoe
Learning, Teaching and Curriculum
University of Wollongong
Email: glefoe@uow.edu.au

Dr Lynne Keevers
Faculty of Social Sciences
University of Wollongong
Email: lkeevers@uow.edu.au

Developed by Maureen Bell

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