USING CONSENSUS MODERATION TO ENSURE APPROPRIATE ACADEMIC STANDARDS WHEN GRADING

A Case Study by Deborah Delaney¹, Dianne English¹, Duncan Nulty²
¹ Department of Accounting, Finance and Economics, Griffith University
² Griffith Institute for Higher Education, Griffith University

Introduction

The consensus of moderation practice described here will examine the steps taken to ensure that marking of exams and assignments are consistent across campuses and markers and to ensure that students would achieve the same grade irrespective of the campus or marker.

Context

The subject used in this case study is 1101AFE Accounting Principles which provides students with core accounting skills and is a pre-requisite for a number of subjects in the Bachelor of Commerce program. This subject is taught as part of the Bachelor of Commerce offered by the Griffith Business School, Department of Accounting, Finance and Economics. This subject is scheduled as a first year course with the largest class numbers in first semester of each year. There are approximately 150 students at the Gold Coast campus and approximately 250 students at Nathan per semester.

There is a team of three core lecturers who are responsible for the design and teaching of this course. These staff members have worked together for approximately six years and hence there is a high level of collegial consensus. The course is reviewed by an external accreditation body every three years, which provides incentive to the teaching team to continue to be innovative and up-to-date with industry requirements. The external accreditation process ensures an additional level of consensus in respect of the appropriateness of the standards of teaching and assessment in this course. In addition, the teaching team are members of professional bodies, have worked in the profession and in other academic institutions and therefore are familiar with both academic and professional requirements. This also helps to ensure the appropriateness of the academic standards applied in this course relative to these external benchmarks or “reference points”.

Production of this paper was supported by a Strategic Griffith Grant for Learning and Teaching 2011-2012 titled “Developing consensus moderation practices to support comprehensive Quality Assurance of Assessment Standards.” Leaders: Dr Duncan D. Nulty and Dr Kevin Ashford-Rowe. Team members: Nicola Shapland, Michael Garner, Lainie Groundwater, Di Selzer.
Description of Consensus Moderation Practices

The assessment in Accounting Principles comprises:
1. a mid-semester exam,
2. an assignment,
3. weekly on-line quizzes and
4. a final exam.

The weekly on-line quizzes have been set with consensus between the teaching team members and are computer marked. Marking of the other assessment components requires more effort to ensure we are consistent.

Consensus moderation when marking

There are three main consensus of moderation practices that ensure all manually marked assessment is marked with appropriate and consistent standards:

1. With all manually marked assessment items a marking scheme is developed with the solution. This is done at the time the assessment item is drafted. Assessment development is shared between the two campus convenors to ensure a balanced workload. Once an assessment item is developed it is sent to the other convenor for comment and moderation.

2. The marking scheme agreed in (1) above is used to mark 10 papers on each campus. The two markers then communicate to ensure the marking scheme is working satisfactorily, is correct, and to make any modifications that may be required. The marker at GC and the marker at NA swap their 10 papers (i.e. 20 papers in total) to moderate and ensure consistency of application of the marking scheme.

3. Once marking has been completed and marks have been input to the grade centre the overall marks are compared. We would expect to see a comparable range of marks with a similar proportion of high marks and fails. If this is not the case the markers discuss how they marked, what they told the students about the exam, how they lectured/tutored the topic, and any other factors that might affect the range of marks.

The outcomes of these practices has been twofold:

1. In terms of student outcomes, we feel confident that students would achieve the same mark irrespective of the campus or lecturer/tutor they had.
2. In terms of the subject, we feel confident that we are all “on the same page” which results in a strong team. We are proud of the subject and how well it runs. This is reflected in student views of the staff and subject.
Consensus moderation when grading

There are four practices that ensure consensus in relation to grading outcomes for students. First however, a vital pre-cursor to those practices is ensuring that we are confident of the validity and accuracy of the student’s marks. In our case we have achieved this because of the consensus moderation practices used throughout this course. These practices begin with the course planning, include assessment planning, consistency of teaching approach, and the three consensus moderation practices described above when marking. As a result of our confidence in marks the following practices can be used when grading:

1. Add up the marks for all assignments to determine provisional grades based on the normal percentage mark \( \Rightarrow \) grade cut-offs.

2. Check the cut-offs. In practice this means looking at the distribution of provisional grades to see that the proportions of students receiving any one grade are within normal expectations (remember that this is a course with a large student enrolment, and so the proportions of students receiving particular grades is not expected to vary much from year to year as it might with a smaller course).

3. For all students whose overall mark places them within 2 or 3% of a grade cut-off, review the marking of the students work. In practice, this is generally limited to a review of the marking of the final examination paper – which, in this course, is the assessment item with the largest weighting.

4. Completely avoid the use of “Pass Conceded” for any student. To achieve this we review the work and circumstances of any student whose provisional grade is Pass Conceded in a borderline fail. That is to say, any student with a total mark of 45% up to the cut-off for a “Pass” grade. In this review, the objective is to make a clear and justified decision to either pass the student, or to fail them – not to leave any on the borderline.

The outcomes of these practices are:

1. We have a very high level of confidence in the appropriateness of the grades students are recommended by us as course convenors (to be formally confirmed by Assessment Board).
2. No student receives a grade based on marks that place them near a grade border.
3. No student receive a grade of “Pass concede”
4. We are confident all students get the grade the standard of their work justifies.
5. We as markers are able to say that our standards have been calibrated with each other – they are entirely consistent.
What's Good about the Practices

The practice ensures consistency across campuses in terms of marking and grading. Students feel confident that they could attend either GC or NA and get the same information and outcomes.

Critical Factors

*Communication is vital.* The most critical factor for success with this practice is a strong team who communicate openly, honestly and respectfully. When a team co-operates this works. For example, when a team member writes an exam question with the accompanying solution and marking scheme the other team members give constructive feedback. Where the team members discuss objectives and issues, for instance why they believe a certain topic should be examined in a certain way, then the way it is taught in classes will easily be reflected in the exam questions.

Our team has benefitted greatly from having worked together for a long period and from being understanding of the other team members’ time commitments and other priorities. Time is an issue as this requires a team effort.

Failure occurs when communication breaks down. There can also be an issue when a new team member comes on board that is not familiar with the way it has worked in the past. In terms of academic standards, it is appropriate to ensure that new team members are appropriately informed and inducted into the same understandings, and practices as the established team. Although the team is open to new ideas and ways of doing things there is a resistance to change for the sake of change when what we do works so well, and when one considers that the standards applied by the long standing team are so well informed by the broader benchmarks and reference points described earlier. A situation occurred recently where a marker decided the marking scheme was not suitable and marked all papers with a new scheme. This individual failed to communicate this with the other campus. Following discussions all papers had to be remarked – a time consuming learning experience for all!