Grading: harmonising standards and stakeholder expectations

SAROJNI CHOY (Griffith University, Queensland, Australia) and JOHN LIDSTONE (*Queensland University of Technology, Queensland, Australia*)

Abstract

This paper suggests that when a course is planned within one culture for delivery to members of another culture, appropriate quality control of assessment becomes an issue of major proportions. Based on their experience of presenting an Aid Agency-funded Masters course in a developing country in the Pacific, the authors describe the processes to address the needs and wants of all the stakeholders, with different cultural expectations. Maintaining a balance between the standards required by university processes and equity between domestic and Pacific student cohorts regarding resources and opportunities for study was especially challenging. However, grounding grades in course curriculum and clearly stated objectives permitted the teaching team to meet external requirements while maintaining their professional and academic freedom.

Keywords: tertiary education; assessment of students; international students; cross-cultural assessment; stakeholder interests, quality

Introduction

Assessing the quality of students' academic work is often highly contentious. The concept of 'quality' is not amenable to a single definition and often embraces notions of absolute knowledge and skill acquisition (themselves hard to define); individual performance and progress; comparative knowledge or progress within and between cohorts; the ability, status and professional judgement of the academic; and the reputation of higher education institutions. Furthermore, the distinction between comparative and criterion-based assessment practices is frequently ill-understood by the various stakeholders. When a course designed and implemented in one culture is adapted for and presented in another, assumptions about all these interconnected aspects of assessment are challenged and who is to make the final judgement on the quality of work presented by individual students may become the focus of considerable debate.

This paper is based on the experiences of the authors as academics when their University was funded by a major Australian funding agency (through the inevitable intermediaries) to offer a Masters course to develop leadership capacity of twenty senior education officers in a developing country of the Pacific. The ultimate purpose of the course was agreed by the aid agency, the receiving national government and the university before the involvement of the academics. Once the agreement was signed, the lead author was appointed to coordinate a team of five to deliver the course over a period of two years. Subject to the vagaries of technological access in a developing country, students had access to specifically designed on-line teaching and learning materials and engaged in face-to-face learning activities for two weeks each semester. Each year, one such session was conducted in the capital city of their home country and the other at the university campus in Australia. The academic team had

ultimate authority to grade students in each of the eight units of study according to the criteria for the units previously approved by the Faculty Academic Board. However, local social and cultural contexts required sensitive interpretation of the criteria and decisions once reached then needed to be justified to the stakeholders, including the project steering committee, the aid agency and its agents, the university and, of course, the students themselves. Although discussions were occasionally robust, the academic team was comfortable that they be held accountable for their professional judgements and that the final decisions on each unit reflected a 'fair and true statement' of the students' achievements.

Stakeholder expectations

The traditional culture of the Pacific places great emphasis on hierarchy so the students expected academics to make all decisions about teaching, learning and assessment, thereby displaying a typical pedagogical, as opposed to andragogical (Knowles, 1990) approach to learning. This cultural expectation limited their willingness to contribute to assessment task design but the teaching team appreciated the oral traditions of the culture and introduced an enhanced focus on oral presentations (both individual and group) in addition to the essays and project work more usual in Australia. This surprised both the students and the national department of education representatives who valued and expected formal examinations to assess learning. As explained by one student, 'We are used to exams. How do the lecturers know if we have read the Readings?'

The teaching team noted that the students experienced difficulty with academic writing because English was their third spoken language and they struggled to learn the academic written genre. As supported by Brown (2010), the essays, reports and oral presentations were designed to be culturally responsive and to accommodate complex learning and teaching processes to gather evidence of learning outcomes. The essays were marked and graded by individual academics or the teaching team while the oral presentations (by individuals and groups) were graded by panels of academics. Assessment of the leadership capacity building aspect necessitated the integration of course content into work practices rather than merely the exhibition of knowledge gained by the students. Both students and other cultural representatives were unfamiliar with this approach. On the other hand, some stakeholders had reservations about how academic judgement of oral presentations could be validated other than through the presentation of written work, despite the point made by Brown (2010, p. 276) that reliability of essay scoring is highly problematic, as it relies largely on language and organisational components of writing and that enhanced capacity can be demonstrated better through tasks other than written essays. In this case, academic judgement was supported and proved to be justified since most students performed markedly less well in their essays than in their oral presentations.

Despite explanations of the assessment strategies, students' primary interest was in completing the tasks to ensure they 'passed', with only a few concerned about the grades received. Studying for a Masters degree was a prestigious opportunity for people in their country so they all wanted to pass to maintain a 'face' among peers, work colleagues and their community. Achieving a pass was difficult for all students because they had not

engaged in academic studies for a long time, had minimal or no access to resources, while virtual access to academics was frequently frustrating if not impossible. In response, the academics permitted resubmission of assignments but those in senior positions with more reliable access to technology were able to engage in more frequent 'assessment *for* learning' by responding to feedback on drafts. The others engaged in special telephone interviews with a panel of academics to gather supplementary information that was added to the written work to make the final assessment decision.

While students were most concerned with 'passing', their Education Department representatives on the steering committee were more interested in grades, which they regarded as an important measure of their progress towards the strategic goal of developing the leadership capacity of a critical mass of staff who would be able to take responsibility for the implementation of the country's education reform agenda. Understandably, they were also anxious to ensure that the department's investment in time and support in the students was productive. Finally, they regarded the grades as important indicators of the likelihood of continued aid from Australia for similar programmes in the future. The relatively high proportion of low grades led to demands for an explanation from the course coordinator (lead author), which, once provided, had the positive effect of further student support being committed by the Education Department and the university.

As is the case with all study units, student progress was monitored each semester by the University. Normally, the Faculty of Education assessment committees question a greater than expected proportion of low grades on the grounds of the difficulty level of the assessment tasks and the teaching approach of the academics, as well as greater than expected proportions of high grades in case the assessment tasks were too easy. To many academics, this policy seems contradictory to the university policy of criterion-referenced assessment. Thus, while the policy offers in-principle freedom to academics, they are required to justify their grading when the distribution is skewed from the norm. However, only very rarely will such a committee require regrading, and skewed distributions are drawn to the attention of the academic with a request that the matter be considered in future course offerings.

Standard versus equity

The university's moderation process maintained a quality standard measured on accounts of the mainstream, on-campus students who had the advantage of extensive resources and learning opportunities, unlike the Pacific students. Nevertheless, the grades for the international students were still expected to reflect these standards set for the generic group. Although claiming to be globally responsive, university policies still tend to advantage students from the dominant culture. Such policies are not unusual, as observed by Johnston (2010), and tend to maintain historical inequities. However, since the Pacific student cohort embraced 18 different ethnic cultures (differing not only in language but also, for example, in whether the culture was primarily matrilineal or patrilineal), the question was to which culture should one respond? Accommodating individual workplace cultures was also far from easy because of the complex administrative structures in the education sector, and a workforce that reflected ethnic diversity greater than the student group. Other factors, such as

lack of access to additional learning resources, very remote geographical locations of most students and difficulties with regular communication or contact added to their disadvantages as Masters students who were expected to meet the same university standards as mainstream, on-campus students.

Conclusion

While bound by university standards and processes, the facilitators of this Masters cohort were able to finalise the grades of their students on the basis of their professional expertise and experience and their contextual knowledge of their students. However, the teaching team operated under the guidance of the coordinator who considered the wide range of contexts and interpretations within which the grades would themselves be evaluated. The experience of this project has been that academics can stand by their grading decisions with confidence provided the grades are clearly *grounded in course curriculum and objectives* (Hill, 2010, p. 3), and justifications for the assigned grades are transparent to all stakeholders. Thus, external pressures of audits, conformity to institutional and academic standards and interests of stakeholders requires complex mediation but can be harmonised with academic freedom.

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