

Focus On: Collaborative Activity

Managing Quality and learning communities at a distance

Case study - Developing International Academic Moderators



Where: Queen Margaret University

Date: Started January 2016 - ongoing

Impact

The practice was introduced across some of our International Partnerships in Nepal, Singapore, India and Greece

Number of students affected:

Approximately 700 students

Contact:

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Others involved:

Moderators Lorna Hunter and Yiorgos Vazakis

Further information:

Please use this space to insert links to websites/resources etc.

Abstract:

The aim of the project was to develop new academic roles within the Division of Business, Enterprise and Management at Queen Margaret University to reduce the workload of academic staff based in Edinburgh who were heavily involved in module delivery in international partnerships.

The main objective was to develop new roles focused solely on the moderation of student work across a range of programmes in several different countries.

What developed rapidly was a system that provided a faster service to partners and their students from the 'home' institution. A Moderator template was constructed that could be utilised across any module being reviewed by the team. This provided greater clarity on decision making, transparency, consistency and opportunities for two way communication between partnership teaching teams and the home institution.

Early feedback suggests that the students appreciate quicker response time on marks and feedback. Staff like greater communications and praise received from external examiners who find the process easier to understand and it clarifies why certain decisions were made by markers.

The project has freed up academics who were previously feeling overburdened by excessive moderation requests and now have the opportunity to focus on other areas of interest to them, for example, research, knowledge exchange etc.

In future we anticipate the recruitment of at least one more moderator in the coming academic term.

Description:

What was the rationale behind this work? As international partnerships grew within the Division, there was no exponential growth in academic resources. This resulted in staff becoming increasingly challenged by the workload generated by coordinating their associated modules running in international partnerships. The task of moderating student work was a source of some frustration to colleagues given the added time required to deal with moderation duties. Additionally exam boards were occasionally rescheduled due to the late moderation of student work. There were also a small number of inconsistencies in how academics approached the moderation task which resulted in occasional concerns being raised in partner institutions by both staff and students.

How was the work developed and implemented? As the academic charged with coordinating these activities I could see that there were increasingly problems arising from our moderation system and the lack of resources we were utilising in the international programme delivery. My proposed solution to these problems involved developing a proposal, which was approved by senior management, for establishing the role of International Academic Moderator. After it was agreed, I considered and developed the parameters of the job role and responsibilities and subsequently advertised the posts. The International Academic Moderators are not necessarily subject experts but similarly to external examiners have solid academic backgrounds and they are in addition to the module teaching team. The cooperation and communications between moderators and module coordinators has been key to the success of this work. Once the moderators were in place I designed a training programme for them after reflecting upon exam board minutes and external examiner observations over previous years in relation to international partnerships. Key themes in the training include: marking consistency, plagiarism, etc.

What resources were needed? People! First of all there was the challenge of trying to find the appropriate individuals who were interested in such a role and who had, what I had hoped, was appropriate experience. I also requested one of moderators was a fluent speaker in the language of one of the partnerships host countries. Thereafter working with our IT staff to determine the most effective way of using our Blackboard (the University's virtual learning environment (VLE)) resources, Turnitin and Grademark to best effect within the project.

What enablers helped the work to succeed? The enthusiasm of the team involved in the background to help get the project started. I relied on many colleagues including IT and administrative for both support and advice on how we might develop a system that would be practical but also work within our usual quality and academic regulations.

What advice would you provide to others trying something similar?

Don't panic if you cannot find the appropriate applicants at first time of asking. I eventually advertised these posts 3 times and interviewed a substantial number of candidates before I found the people that I had in mind. Additionally when making a case to senior management of the benefits of implementing such a system, make clear the opportunity costs involved and remove any emotive pleas for help - It doesn't work!

Outline any potential improvements/enhancements that you would like to make or are planning to make since first developing the work/project?

I am seeking to make a further appointment to the moderation team and this time I hope to attract a subject specialist in an arena that we are short of subject expertise. Again the successful applicant will need to be fluent in another language (programme delivery is not in English). The original moderators and I have already reflected on what has gone well/not so well and how we improve the new system. We are also reviewing feedback from partners and lecturers to consider their views and how we develop our service delivery in the next academic year.

Perceived benefits:

For students

- Feedback is faster
- Feedback and grades awarded are more likely to be consistent

For staff

- Partnership staff like the new system because they know the two moderators, have open communication channels with them and ease of access.
- Home academic staff are happy that endless moderation is not put upon them, which regularly arrived at inconvenient times and with a short turnaround expected.
- Administration and support teams in the institutions are delighted that the new system provides transparency and timely moderation of work resulting in smoother internal processes leading to exam boards.

For the institution

- We now have a more thorough approach to a Quality process that formerly caused us some challenges
- Greater transparency with partners and external examiners
- Ability to free up academics from endless marking so that they can focus upon intellectually challenging academic endeavours that ultimately feed back into the institution in a positive manner.

Issues/challenges:

For students

- The moderation process is a meticulous, quality driven approach, therefore some students may fail work that was viewed favourably by the first marker.

For staff

- Some Queen Margaret University staff feel that they are no longer involved in any part of the international delivery
- Some overseas staff share insecurities that the moderators will override their decisions
- A potential future problem I am concerned about it that the process of constant moderation will eventually become tiresome to the international academic moderators, so I am currently looking at potential ways of breaking up their routines and duties.

For the institution

- The financial investment in these positions is considerable
- The investment will be finite unless new partnerships are developed and additional income generated