



Achievement Matters: External Peer Review of Accounting Learning Standards

Interim Report August 2013

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PROJECT OVERVIEW

In 2010, nationally-agreed threshold learning standards for accounting graduates were developed under the ALTC *Learning and Teaching Academic Standards* project. The latter included learning standards built around accounting judgement, knowledge, application skills, self-management and communication and teamwork as depicted in Figure 1.



Figure 1

The five learning standards for accounting graduates

Following the development of the learning standards, a new project, appropriately titled *Achievement Matters: External Peer Review of Accounting Learning Standards*, was initiated by the Australian Business Deans Council.

Accounting was the first discipline seeking to collaboratively develop and implement a national model of expert peer review for benchmarking learning outcomes against nationally-agreed thresholds. This benchmarking project is funded by the Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT), Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC), CPA Australia (CPAA) and the Institute of Chartered Accountants in Australia (ICAA). After the pilot involving accounting departments from ten universities in 2011-12 a further five universities, one TAFE and one private provider were added in late 2012. The project aims

to collaboratively develop and implement a national model of expert independent peer review for benchmarking achieved learning outcomes in all types of accounting higher education providers against nationally-agreed learning standards. Double-blind external peer review applies to two types of evidence: small random samples of completed student work (i.e. outputs) and the actual related assessment specifications (i.e. inputs). The project aims also to build capacity around assessment for learning and assessment design through professional learning.

The project has developed a model peer review process that is inclusive, efficient, and supports rich, reliable, valid information that promotes capacity building, guides enhancement decisions and self-regulation. A critical success factor for the project is the reliability of peers' judgements. Reviewers need to apply a shared understanding of each accounting standard when assessing achievement of learning outcomes. This requires first reaching consensus around the meaning of a standard and then confirming each reviewer is calibrated to that consensus. To this end six workshops have been conducted since July 2011. Benchmark evidence of reviewed assessments has assisted quality enhancement initiatives (e.g. curriculum renewal) and three trials with 'live' data have been conducted to explore how the initiative can assist with quality assurance imperatives (e.g. TEQSA¹ and AACSB²).

Project rationale

In the new standards-based regulatory environment, all Australian higher education courses are required to demonstrate student achievement of course learning outcomes and provide benchmark evidence that intended standards have been met. The project is a tangible example of an inclusive, reliable, and efficient, approach suitable for adoption by the accounting discipline longer term to meet this requirement. Other business disciplines and potentially disciplines beyond business can also use this approach which is a viable

¹ Standard 5.5 "The academic standards intended to be achieved by students and the standards actually achieved by students in the course of study are benchmarked against similar accredited courses of study offered by other higher education providers." Provider Course Accreditation Standards, Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) Act (2011).

² Standard 8 "The school uses well-documented, systematic processes for determining and revising degree program learning goals; designing, delivering, and improving degree program curricula to achieve learning goals; and demonstrating that degree program learning goals have been met." Accreditation Standards for Business School Accreditation, Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (2013).

alternative to standardised tests, thus reducing perverse consequences such as teaching to the test. It also demonstrates to key stakeholders, such as employers and professional bodies who have a stake in the quality of graduates, that Australian accounting providers wish to self-regulate by going beyond current learning and teaching performance indicators and proposed tests of generic outcomes to disciplinary-specific evidence of learning outcomes.

Theoretical approach

The approach adopted in this project is based on the theory of social constructivism and elevates the process of consensus moderation and calibration events. While constructivism recognises learners play an active role in generating their own understandings as they strive to make sense of the world influenced by their context and personal filters including experiences, goals, curiosities and beliefs.³ social constructivism goes further, maintaining that the knowledge construction process is facilitated by interacting and dialoguing with other people.⁴ In their assessment change manifesto, Price, O'Donovan, Rust & Carroll (2008) propose six tenets, including one relating to disciplinary communities collaborating to support the learning outcomes standards agenda.

“Assessment is largely dependent upon professional judgement and confidence in such judgement requires the establishment of appropriate forums for the development and sharing of standards within and between disciplinary and professional communities.” (Tenet 6)⁵

Rust (2009) provides an early example of such a forum for sharing assessments within a disciplinary community to reach consensus around standards through social constructivist

³ Nanjappa, A. and M.M. Grant. 2003. Constructing on Constructivism: The Role of Technology. *Electronic Journal for the Integration of Technology in Education* <http://ejite.isu.edu/Volume2No1/nanjappa.htm>, retrieved 30 June.

⁴ O'Donovan, B., Price, M. & Rust, C. (2008), 'Developing student understanding of assessment standards: a nested hierarchy of approaches', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 13,(2), 205-217

⁵ Price, M., O'Donovan, B., Rust, C. and Carroll, J (2008) Assessment standards: a manifesto for change', *Brookes eJournal of Learning & Teaching*

processes.⁶ For standards to be shared and embedded across the sector, Sadler (2013) argues that such social constructivist processes need to move from a focus on repeated consensus moderation, that seek to resolve differences in grading, to the pursuit of calibrated academics applying shared understandings with only periodic checks for calibration.⁷

⁶ Rust, C.(2009) Assessment standards: A potential role for Subject Networks', *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism Education*, 8(1),124-28.

⁷ Sadler, D.R. (2013) Assuring academic achievement standards: from moderation to calibration, *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 20:1, 5-19.

SUMMARY PROJECT OUTCOMES

On completion, this project will have achieved the following outcomes:

1. External peer-reviewed evidence of accounting learning outcomes in all types of higher education providers, benchmarked against the accounting threshold learning standards.
2. A model process for assessing learning outcomes against standards (that is sustainable, reliable and efficient), satisfying external quality assurance needs and motivating continuous improvement.
3. Professional development of academics about assessment
4. Enhanced understandings in the external environment of our standards model

Outcome 1: External peer-reviewed evidence of accounting learning outcomes in all types of higher education providers, benchmarked against the accounting threshold learning standards.

To date there have been three rounds of live external peer review of learning outcome data (May 2012, October 2012, July 2013). Six calibration workshops have also taken place. These workshops, summarised in Table 1, are an integral part of the *Achievement Matters* project as reaching consensus on the meaning of a standard is a necessary condition for making judgements in applying them. These are detailed in Table 1 below.

| Date | Location | Learning standards assessed | Level |
|----------------|-----------|---|----------|
| July 2011 | Darwin | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Written Communication | Bachelor |
| September 2011 | Melbourne | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Written Communication | Master |
| February 2012 | Adelaide | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Written Communication | Bachelor |
| September 2012 | Sydney | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge • Written Communication | Master |
| February 2013 | Adelaide | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge • Oral Communication | Master |
| July 2013 | Perth | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Application Skills • Judgement • Oral Communication | Bachelor |

Table 1 - Achievement Matters Calibration Workshops

The pilot cycle of *Achievement Matters* started with the first workshop in Darwin in July 2011 involving participation by 21 experienced accounting academics from 10 Australian universities (The University of Adelaide, Curtin University, Deakin University, Griffith University, Monash University, RMIT University, Southern Cross University, University of Southern Queensland, The University of Western Australia and University of Western Sydney). A number of practitioners as well as several representatives of the two major accounting professional bodies also participated.

While it was intended that participants reach consensus on two learning standards (i.e. Judgement and Communication for bachelor graduates), it became apparent very early on that there were major differences in the interpretation of the standards. Due to repeated employer concerns about communication, written communication became the first threshold learning standard of focus for reaching consensus. A major learning at the first workshop was around the design of assessment tasks. The learning was around how to better design assessment task requirements, both for clarity to students so they could understand what was required and also for validity in demonstrating achievement of the communication learning standard. Examples around validity included the importance of each student being able to demonstrate achievement if group assessment tasks were used and that requirements addressed both audiences (i.e. accountants and non-accountants) noted in the wording of the communication learning standard. A further learning was that the tool for collecting reviewers' pre-workshops rating and reasons (SPARK^{PLUS}) was both efficient (i.e. data collection, aggregation and categorization) and effective (e.g. anonymity of judgements).

The second workshop was held in Melbourne in September 2011 where the focus was on written communication for Master graduates. Validity of the task continued to be a major focus: task length was not necessarily an indicator of quality and that judgements could be made with short well-designed assessments that were quicker for markers; the role of prompting and final criteria – how and when to use and distinguish between criteria to prompt their assessment and their final rating overall. In addition to discussing validity issues, participants began to share good practices and resources (e.g. an online tool where

students could get automated feedback on their writing with suggestions for improvement).⁸ Through an exercise where sample feedback comments were shared and participants queried as to the rating that matched it, the project began to make inroads on improving academics' skills in giving feedback to their peers about their assessment tasks. Another major learning was that it was pointless assessing any student work if the assessment task did not lend itself to having the capacity for students to individually demonstrate the standard. This meant that each submitting institution withdrew their work for external review.

The third workshop was held in Adelaide in February 2012 where the focus was again on written communication for Bachelor graduates as we now had access to better designed assessment tasks; that is, assessment tasks designed to provide the opportunity for students to demonstrate their achievement of the threshold learning standards. Not only were reviewers more confident in assessing the student work against the learning standard, but it became apparent that a shared language was emerging in the discourse. Fortunately, considerable efforts to retain anonymity in pre-workshop judgements, facilitated through SPARK^{PLUS},⁹ not only highlighted that there were differences in opinions (and therefore judgements) around assessment artifacts, but the process of small group discussion and subsequently defending arguments to other groups increased the understanding among the community of participants. Two other important outcomes, namely the absence of groupthink and collegial bantering around shared learning, became strong foundations for ongoing commitment to the cause. This was important because we had not yet been able to have any live reviews, first because participants were not fully calibrated and secondly because they had not been able to implement a revised curriculum and have available evidence. Other learnings emerged to make the submission and calibration process more efficient: that podcast instructions worked more effectively than written instructions; that it was valuable to reveal pre-workshop responses to participants, still anonymous, so they could gauge their relative position and scrutinise others' reasonings prior to the workshop.

⁸ Bachelor graduates in Accounting will be able to justify and communicate accounting advice and ideas in straightforward collaborative contexts involving both accountants and non-accountants.

⁹ <http://spark.uts.edu.au/>

In May 2012 one institution had been able to implement a revised assessment task and submit it for live peer review by two external reviewers. The project team learned from this process: that it was important to have a local reviewer who was also calibrated to undertake the review and feed that information back into the local institution; and that an additional third external reviewer might be required in the event that two external reviewers disagree on a particular task or student work. This is culturally compatible since it involves a similar process used in peer reviewing research manuscripts for publication in journals.

The fourth workshop was held in Sydney in September 2012 where the focus was on knowledge¹⁰ and written communication for Master graduates. Broader engagement with the sector saw another five universities, one TAFE and one private provider added resulting in 35 reviewers now participating in the project. The new participants were distributed among the existing groups to assist with peer learning in the small group work. An important outcome from this calibration workshop was that reaching a consensus of understandings around the knowledge learning standard was much easier and quicker. A large part is likely to be due to reviewers traditionally being more familiar with assessing such learning outcomes compared to the communication learning standard in which reviewers had less technical expertise.

In October the second round of reviewing of live data occurred. By this time three institutions had been able to implement changes and provide data for external assessment for knowledge and/or written communication, two at Bachelor and one at Master level. One concern emerged as worth addressing, namely that there might be some slippage following calibration events if reviewers assess live submitted data some weeks after calibration whilst back in their own institution.

The fifth workshop was held in Adelaide in February 2013 where the focus was on knowledge and oral communication for Master graduates. Again, there was considerable

¹⁰ Bachelor graduates in accounting will be able to integrate theoretical and technical accounting knowledge which includes a selection of auditing and assurance, finance, economics, quantitative methods, information systems, commercial law, corporation law and taxation law.

learning around task design for facilitating students to rigorously and independently demonstrate learning outcomes in relation to oral communication. One task validity issue concerned the inappropriate requirement for recorded presentations to include sub-titles even though they did help reviewers gauge what was being said. Again professional practitioners participating in the calibration workshop assisted in developing understandings of what was required. A key focus to emerge was the importance of students being able to go beyond presenting to being able to demonstrate the ability to respond to client queries. Considerable challenges needed to be addressed for oral communication including: technology (file size, format; quality of the audio); length; and confidentiality.

The sixth workshop was held in Perth in July 2013 where the focus was on application (critical analysis) skills¹¹, judgment¹² and oral communication for Bachelor graduates. As with written communication, the sample assessment task used to demonstrate oral communication for calibration was considerably better arising from the previous workshop. Solutions were largely found for technological issues faced by the participant who had provided the sample artifact (i.e. detailed student guidance) and by the project team (e.g. Dropbox). Similarly, issues around confidentiality and length had been addressed in the sample task. Outstanding issues to be adequately addressed include ways for incorporating impromptu questions; scaling; and, easily identifying and recalling key aspects affecting quality assessments (e.g., major errors in fact or deficiencies in spoken or body language).

As the sixth workshop was the first time participants had considered application and judgement learning standards, there were opportunities to leverage previous lessons around coming to a consensus. The two major learnings were: that the judgement learning standard required additional scope of information in the assessment specification; and, that like knowledge, assessors could more quickly reach consensus.

¹¹ Bachelor graduates in Accounting will be able to critically apply theoretical and technical accounting knowledge and skills to solve routine accounting problems.

¹² Bachelor graduates in Accounting will be able to exercise judgement under supervision to solve routine accounting problems in straightforward contexts using social, ethical, economic, regulatory and global perspectives.

The third round of live reviews took place on the day immediately following the calibration event. This was scheduled to address the concern about slippage of reviewers' understandings that might arise due to time and immersion back in an uncalibrated context. Eleven institutions submitted evidence this time. This evidence related to both Bachelor and/or Master degrees and covered learning standards for knowledge, application, judgment and/or written and oral communication. We are currently reviewing the results and will arrange for third reviewers where the two external reviewers disagree before providing the results to the eleven institutions. As discussed above, the calibration events have resulted in some excellent learning amongst reviewers, especially around task design to demonstrate evidence of learning outcomes. A number of participants have changed their assessment tasks based on feedback and learning from the workshop process, including the redesign of assessment tasks to better reflect the learning standards. A key benefit of this project process is that in addition to 35 academics, the project has practising accountants and staff from the professional accounting bodies giving industry feedback – both as workshop participants and through pre-workshop assessment on SPARK^{PLUS}. These professional reviewers provide an independent industry perspective on the sorts of tasks graduates should be able to do and the standards that should be exhibited.

In recognition of the strong collaboration with industry, the *Achievement Matters* project team received the 2012 Business and Higher Education Roundtable Award for Excellence in Accounting Teaching Collaboration at an award ceremony in Melbourne on November 8. The award was presented by the then Minister for Tertiary Education, Skills, Science and Research, Chris Evans. <http://www.bhert.com/award-winners/2012-Award-Winners.pdf>

Outcome 2: A model process for assessing learning outcomes against standards

The model process outlined in Figure 2 has evolved over the two years and six workshops

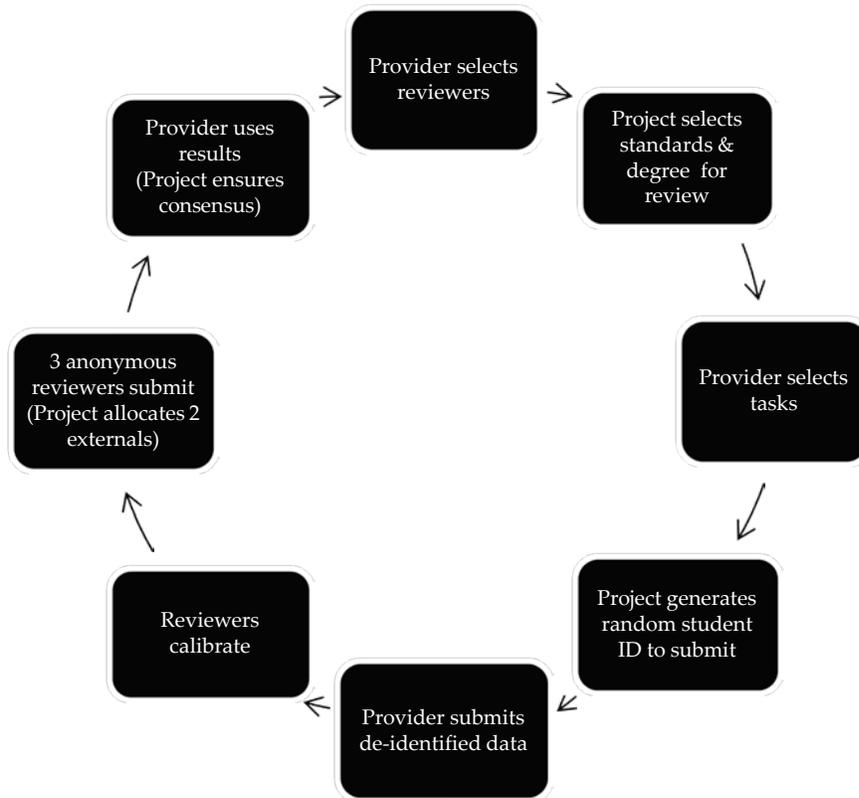


Figure 2

A model process for assessing learning standards

The process adopted in the project follows the suggestions in Sadler (2013).¹³ The project team is happy to share the details of the model with anyone wanting more details and these are available upon request by emailing to Mark Freeman (mark.freeman@sydney.edu.au)

¹³ Sadler, D.R. (2013) Assuring academic achievement standards: from moderation to calibration, *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 20(1), 5–19.

Outcome 3: Professional development of academics about assessment

Participants have been surveyed during each of the six calibration workshops. A major outcome from the surveys is that assessor confidence in judging improves from pre to post workshop. The following tables report the responses from the most recent workshops in Adelaide (February 2013) and Perth (July 2013).

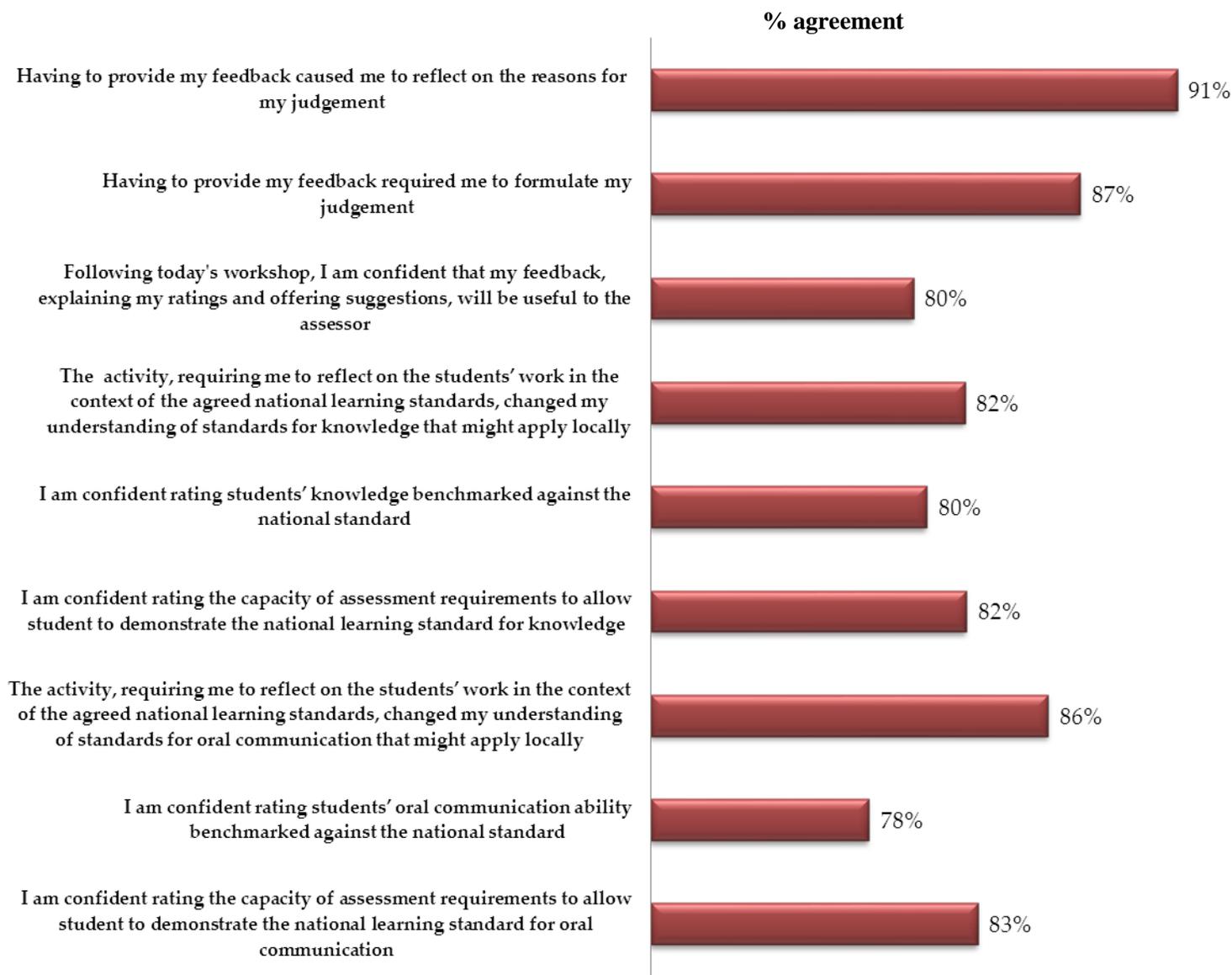
Adelaide workshop February 2013

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Achievement Matters: Feedback

Learning standards assessed: Knowledge and Oral Communication

Adelaide Feb 2013 N=34



Feedback from participants at the workshop held in Adelaide in February 2013

What changes have you made to assessment practices at your university since starting as a peer reviewer on this project?

- Given more thought to the ability of the assessment to help determine if the students have met or not met the standards

- Considered them in relation to national learning standards rather than merely just covering subject matter. Introduced more requirements to students to demonstrate their individual contribution to group projects.
- Aligning assessment style with appropriate courses. Reflection on what is needed and how it can be implemented.
- More thought given to thinking of tasks in the context of the national standards.
- Develop assessment tasks with 'real' world contexts and activities students are likely to encounter in a range of employment situations.
- Communication has become a real focus and is integrated into many of our assessment tasks.
- Give more individual assessment tasks. Engage more staff in designing better assessment tasks.
- Started the process and continuing the process of assessing the relevance and validity of assessment tasks.
- I have revisited my assessment tasks and assessed them against the national standards to identify which learning outcomes are satisfied.
- I have introduced a rubric marking system to written assessment tasks and increased my written communication components.

Other Comments (selected):

- Workshops show great collegiality among academics from different institutions.
- The workshop was very useful and allowed me to reflect on the standards and come to an informed judgement as to assessing task validity and student outcomes.
- An extremely insightful and informative project to be involved with and gives me the confidence to go back and take on board.
- The session went exceedingly well and raised some important and hidden issues relating to oral communication levels that are deemed to be acceptable.
- An interesting discussion/event that shows the value of calibrated moderation process, but concerns about the longevity of the shared understanding beyond and between workshops.

One reviewer recently gave some detailed feedback about the changes implemented to develop a new assessment task to capture evidence about oral communication and arising from the workshop in February 2013. The reviewer reported the following characteristics of the assessment task based on the learning at the February 2013 workshop:

- Setting up an interview scenario similar to that found by liquidation practitioners (i.e., a real world context)
- Specifying fixed roles and a requirement that all participants must contribute equally to the presentation □ Identifying and providing specific guidance to the person taking the role of ‘interviewer’ so that they are not a relatively passive participant in the presentation
- Specifying a very specific viewing audience with specific characteristics (i.e., the demographics of the TV program’s viewers)
- Providing specific guidance to students about appropriate language, dress, and avoidance of the appearance of ‘reading’ from a script
- Engagement with the Faculty’s Professions Learning Centre in the provision of advice on presentations.

Perth Workshop July 2013

Achievement Matters: Feedback

Learning standards assessed: Application , Judgement and Oral Communication

■ Perth July 2013 N=34 % agreement



Feedback from participants at the most recent workshop held in Perth in July 2013

Please describe how your thinking about, and approaches to, teaching and assessment have changed since you started as a peer reviewer on this project.

- I am much more aware of the importance of approaching teaching and assessment - so as to align closely with TLO's.
- First awareness of the standards, second an understanding of how the standards are applied by colleagues.
- I think more carefully about my pieces of assessment and try to make sure my teaching is constructively aligned. I also look more carefully at the standards.
- Greater focus on learning outcomes in teaching curriculum design. Structured assignments to ensure LO are assessed and feedback to student's focus on improvement.
- I will now include the standards and rationale for assessment in the assessment task. Think more carefully in the many different aspects that are covered in each assessment task.
- I have put more thought into designing assessment task that assess development of a range of outcomes and advising students of the importance of this.

Please provide at least one specific example of how your teaching or assessment practices have changed since you started as a peer reviewer on this project.

- Constructing rubrics and linking them to learning objectives. Linking assessment tasks to the learning outcomes - now clearly validates why the assessment task is given.
- I provide more guidance and explanation to students' including a draft rubric so they know what they will be assessed against.
- Now take into consideration learning standards when setting learning outcomes for units and assignments.
- Taking a program approach to align skills to my courses and appropriate assessment - foundation, developing, graduating levels.
- Review the threshold standards prior to finalising the assessment tasks.

Outcome 4: Enhanced understandings in the external environment of our standards model

Project team members have conducted a range of workshops and seminars at their own institution and other organisations and conferences to disseminate the activities of the project. More details about the project can be obtained from the following conference paper “Social moderation, assessment and assuring standards for accounting graduates” submitted for presentation at the AFAANZ Conference to be held in Perth from July 8 – 9, 2013.¹⁴

Sustainability

The survival of the process beyond the life of the Achievement Matters project is a critical issue. In addition to the BHERT award, participant reviewers indicate strong support and value of the project. In July 2013, 93% agreed that the project “will help establish national agreement on learning standards between accounting degree providers” and 80% agreed that it “will help establish national agreement on learning standards between accounting employers and accounting degree providers”

Initial thoughts of the project team about the process and roles of the various stakeholders in a sustainable model are detailed below. Further work on the approach will continue over the coming months.

Higher education providers

1. Provide two peer reviewers and pay the costs of air fares and accommodation to two workshops each year. The workshops will normally be held adjacent to two regular events, namely early February ICAA Thought Leadership Forum in Adelaide and July annual conference of the Accounting and Finance Association of Australia and New Zealand (AFAANZ).
2. Provide evidence of five students’ work, in relation to one or more learning standards at the Bachelor and/or Master level, and the related assessment task for blind peer review held immediately after at each calibration workshop. Evidence is submitted at least two weeks before the workshop.

¹⁴ http://www.afaanz.org/openconf/2013/modules/request.php?module=oc_program&action=view.php&id=99

Peer reviewers

1. Prepare and complete pre-workshop calibration tasks (i.e. peer review sample evidence and submit reviews online).
2. Attend each workshop and participate in the calibration workshop.
3. Review evidence from another institution following each calibration workshop.
4. Encourage institutions to adopt a similar process.

CPAA and ICAA

1. Support the calibration workshops by providing relevant staff to attend and participate in the calibration workshops.
2. Provide venue where possible for a workshop if required.
3. Provide other support for the costs of running each workshop.

AFAANZ or ABDC

1. Oversee a Learning Standards Reference Board (like an Editorial Board)
2. Maintain register of calibrated peer reviewers.
3. Provide administrative support required for each calibration workshop.

Project Officer (attached to the Learning Standards Reference Board)

1. Prepare online site (SPARK^{PLUS}) for pre-workshop reviews, calibration workshops and review of live data post each calibration workshop.

INTERIM EXTERNAL EVALUATION OPINION

Summative Evaluation of the Achievement Matters Project

Patrick Boyle, External Evaluator, July 2013

Preliminary comments

Currently, I believe that the external summative evaluation report, which I am contracted to provide, will now be expected sometime in 2014. While it appears that the Project's work will continue for at least another 12 months, it has already achieved much, including valuable outcomes beyond its objectives. In addition, I had been working towards reporting in late 2013. It is therefore possible at this time for me to provide a clear if synoptic interim evaluation opinion on the Project. I note that my final report (next year) will be influenced by what happens between now and then and in any case it will be far more comprehensive, as the Project and its achievements and challenges are complex.

The Project in brief

Essentially, the Achievement Matters (AM) Project is concerned with enhancing practices in educational measurement *and* evaluation in higher education, particularly in Business Education (BE) disciplines (e.g. Accounting). Its primary focus is the development of improved practices for assessing student achievement and referencing results to explicit learning outcome standards in demonstrably accurate ways. As the Project has evolved, its effects have gone beyond this focus.

The Project is complex and challenging for a number of reasons; conceptual and technical, logistical and political. An ambitious dissemination and buy-in agenda has added to its difficulty index.

Basis for the final summative evaluation

To frame the final summative evaluation of the Project, in 2012 the Project Team worked with me to agree a set of *evaluation questions* which were refined and finalized early this year (see below). The main basis for my final evaluation report in 2014 will be a range of evidence that enables credible answers to be derived to these questions.



Evaluation Questions for the AM Project (Summative)

1. What are the major achievements/results of the Project and how well aligned are these with its main objectives?
2. What are the principal merits of ‘the Model’ developed through the Project for enabling the assessment and validation of student learning standards?
3. How effective has the Project been in terms of dissemination¹?
4. In relation to its principal outcomes and objectives, to what extent has the Project succeeded in generating positive engagement, buy-in and/or support amongst key stakeholders, particularly:
 - a) the Australian higher education community in Accounting; and
 - b) the two key Australian professional bodies in Accounting, ICAA and CPAA?
5. To what extent has the Project enabled valuable learning/professional development for those engaged with its activities?

I have been actively engaged with the Project since its early days and have been pleased to see that much of the evidence needed for helping to derive answers to these questions is being accumulated continually, without the need for much guidance from me. This process will continue and will be supplemented by my more arms-length evidence gathering. Given that the Project has still considerable time to run, I haven’t carried out any systematic review of the available evidence (as a whole). Nevertheless, with the evidence I have knowledge of currently it has been possible for me to align this interim *evaluation opinion* with the evaluation questions.

Evaluative opinion at this stage

At this time, I find it difficult to overstate the overall merit of the AM Project, including its significance, particularly for the disciplines which fit under the broader banner of BE. I base this overall view on my knowledge of its evidence-based achievements to date along with a good understanding of what can typically be expected of similarly resourced OLT innovation and development projects. At this stage I will limit my reporting to a short list of the achievements and merits of the Project, expressed in broad terms, which I believe are highlights.

1. The model and associated processes being developed for assessing and referencing student achievement against learning outcomes-based standards are conceptually and technically sound by international standards for assessment in higher education. In essence, the model and processes provide an effective means for checking and validating the learning standards being achieved by students. It requires the use of student performance artifacts/evidence aligned with explicit learning standards, double-blind assessment by academics of the students' achievement against the standards, ongoing calibration of academics to improve the validity of results (including their reliability) and other processes to reduce measurement and evaluation error. The processes involved yield other valuable information and benefits. For example, knowledge about how to improve the quality of assessment tasks for enabling students to demonstrate the learning/skills that particular standards are concerned with (what the Project Team sometimes calls "task validity"). In addition, representatives from professional associations including ICAA and CPAA and practitioners are invited and participate actively in workshops. This has benefits which include the explicit inclusion of important people outside universities in the validation of learning standards and related processes and discussions.
2. Further to 1), although not original, conceptually or technically, the model and processes can reasonably be seen as leading-edge in the context of international practice in higher education student assessment and verification of learning standards.
3. The Project's leadership and implementation provides an exemplary example of collaborative stakeholder-based practice in change-focused projects. A comprehensive and effective approach to dissemination and stakeholder engagement is a key element of the approach to implementation. This claim is strengthened when the difficulty index of the Project is considered. Amongst other challenges, it has needed to achieve change in embedded thinking amongst academics and deal with a range of political tensions in higher education.
4. The AM Project has had substantial positive impacts, at a national/sector level, beyond its primary/original focus (student assessment and learning standards). Some of these impacts have been in closely related areas of the academic enterprise (e.g. mobilization of change in curriculum design in business schools). Others have been more general but in my view of no less value (e.g. facilitation of changes in important aspects of group cultures, such as

enhanced interpersonal and inter-group communication, across disciplines engagement, critical discussion, learning and participative decision making).

5. Further to 4), the Project has had clearly evident and valued effects on BE and other academics' learning and professional development. Areas of knowledge, policy and practice where learning is most apparent include:
 - a) Understanding of assessment concepts and principles and application of these to the enhancement of policies, practices and task development;
 - b) Evaluation, design and improvement of student learning experiences and
 - c) approaches to teaching in units of study; and
 - d) Curriculum/program level design principles (e.g. the importance of alignment of pedagogical elements and how to achieve this).
6. Through its leadership (in particular) and outcomes so far the Project is continuing to make very important contributions to the broader national debate and developments around standards in higher education, including associated government policies and expectations for the future.

Concluding comment

In my opinion, the AM Project has already achieved far beyond its challenging objectives and has had impacts at the national level that are rarely possible in higher education in such a relatively short timeframe. The Project's leadership is continuing to use the available funding wisely and very productively, particularly in terms of the active and positive engagement of people across the HE sector, who will be critical to sustaining its effects. It is likely that in the future the Project will be recognized by many important stakeholders, including key professional associations, as a genuinely exceptional initiative, given its context, complexity and resources.

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- Curtin University
- Deakin University
- Griffith University
- James Cook University
- Macquarie University
- Monash University
- Queensland University of Technology
- RMIT University
- Southern Cross University
- The University of Adelaide
- The University of Western Australia
- University of South Australia
- University of Southern Queensland
- University Technology, Sydney
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