AAGLO Summary 2: Assurance of graduate learning outcomes through external review

The AAGLO Project
Australia’s new regulatory body, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), has responsibilities for articulating, reviewing and reporting on teaching and learning standards in Australian higher education. In anticipation of the impact of this new regulatory environment on the sector, the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) commissioned a series of projects related to the establishment and assurance of academic standards. One of these, AAGLO - Assessing and Assuring Graduate Learning Outcomes has been funded to investigate:

- What types of assessment tasks are most likely to provide convincing evidence of student achievement of or progress towards graduate learning outcomes? and,
- What processes best assure the quality of assessment of graduate learning outcomes?

The project employs a broad range of consultative processes and the collection of examples of practice in national and international educational contexts.

External review of graduate learning outcomes
One of the areas of interest to the AAGLO project is external review as a strategy for assuring academic standards; the term ‘external review’ here interpreted broadly to encompass practices concerned with the review, verification or moderation of the standard of work produced in taught undergraduate and postgraduate coursework. External review is receiving current attention through inclusion in a TEQSA (2011) discussion paper; several ALTC-funded investigations of forms of peer and expert review; and the Group of Eight (G8) Quality Verification System (QVS) pilot.

The UK QAA external examination system
The UK QAA External Examining system provides a well-established and well-documented example of external review with origins dating to 1832. The UK system has been closely scrutinised through much of its recent history in response to periodic questioning of the capacity of what was once a small ‘elitist’ system to maintain broad comparability of standards across a higher education sector at a time of significant expansion, structural change and greater assessment diversity. A series of reviews of the external examining system has been conducted to ensure its ongoing relevance to quality assurance in the sector, the most recent of which was reported earlier in 2011 (UUK).

In addition to consulting review and research reports, and related practices in the school sector, the AAGLO project team investigated the external examining system in a number of Scottish universities because of the strong emphasis on enhancement which permeates the Scottish QAA approach to quality assurance.

By and large, the external examining system is viewed favourably by those in the sector who associate it with a number of benefits including the evidence it provides of the sector’s willingness and ability to maintain appropriate standards without government regulation. Key strengths of the external examination system can be summarised as:

- enhancement of teaching, learning and assessment standards through a requirement for appropriate and timely senior level responses to external reports
- sharing of effective discipline-specific assessment practice among institutions
- broader perspective on teaching, learning and assessment developed by all participants
- initiation of dialogue around teaching, learning and assessment
- provision of evidence to contribute to regular internal subject and institutional reviews
- affirmation of teaching, learning and assessment strengths
- flexible arrangements to accommodate diverse institutional requirements and practices
- the leverage reports can provide in supporting curriculum leaders and teachers in arguing for assessment reform or appropriate resourcing.

Issues and options
Researchers and reviewers of the UK external examining system have identified important issues to be considered when introducing similar systems of external review elsewhere. The 2011 UUK review highlighted three broad areas of concern: the selection and appointment of external reviewers, consistency of standards and the ways in which review reports are used to enhance practice and communication with all stakeholders groups but particularly with students.

There are options for addressing these issues or concerns and those selected will depend on the outcomes intended for any particular external review scheme and the level of resourcing available.
The selection and appointment of external reviewers

External reviewers can be either appointed directly by program or course coordinators or other appropriate staff in accordance with institutional guidelines, or selected or assigned from a pool of authorised reviewers. The choice of method is largely dependent on the relative importance of factors such as the necessity to avoid the ‘cosy’ relationships that can ‘flavour’ reviewer reports and the administrative implications of establishing and maintaining an up-to-date pool of reviewers with appropriate expertise. The UUK (2011) review rejected proposals for a national register but provided in its report a set of ‘National criteria for the appointment of external examiners’. As the participation of experienced, discipline experts is essential to the validity of an external review process, administrative and remuneration arrangements and institutional recognition should provide an incentive for the regular involvement of senior academics. Broadening participation to include less experienced academics as reviewers is also considered beneficial in providing a professional development experience and in constituting a form of induction to the reviewer role and related processes (e.g. mentoring and team membership) to ensure system sustainability. In addition, broad participation has the potential to forge or strengthen discipline networks and collaboration within the sector, an advantage that to some extent balances concerns that current or future research collaborations may inhibit review reporting.

The conduct of external reviews

External review processes can vary in scope from the extremely comprehensive - program approval, verification of judgement and assessment processes, random sampling of student work, arbitration (QSA) – to ‘light touch’ processes concerned chiefly with the broad comparability of assessment practices and student outcomes.

Review reports will reflect the scope and purpose of any individual external review system. Consistency and comparability of reporting can be boosted through the provision of minimum system requirements (e.g. UUK 2011 “External examiners” report checklist”) while individual institutions are able to retain flexibility through specifying additional reporting requirements that address current priorities and ensuring that these are communicated through institutional induction.

External review arrangements also need to be responsive to the growing repertoire of assessment methods adopted by many disciplines and supported by a range of technologies. The ‘signature’ assessments of some disciplines may therefore require field visits, attendance and interactive oral presentations or access to audio and video files of student performance in clinical or work-integrated learning contexts.

Concerns have been raised about inconsistency of standards applied by reviewers in commenting on the comparability of standards among institutions (Bloxham 2009, UUK 2011). While it is unrealistic to expect guarantees of comparability from external reviewers, the use of common external reference points (e.g. the discipline-specific benchmark statements developed in the UK or the more recently endorsed ALTC threshold learning outcomes) has been proposed as a way of boosting the objectivity or trustworthiness of external reviewer judgements.

Putting external review reports to good use

Institutions also need to consider the matter of “closing –the-loop” on external review reporting through developing processes for responding to both individual external review reports and any themes emerging at a program, school or institutional level. The public release of at least part of external reports has been suggested as a communication mechanism for demonstrating institutional accountability, and for dispelling the many myths about the process that can exist among student populations. Reviewers need to know how their reports are to be disseminated and advised on the inclusion/omission of staff or student names and other confidential details. Processes for raising serious concerns also need to be considered.

Finally, external review is only one of a number of possibilities for the assurance of academic standards. External review policies and practices therefore need to recognise their contributions to other institutional strategies; for example, the inclusion of review reports as formal components of subject and institutional review processes. Exemptions from external review processes might also be appropriate where they replicate information provided through alternative processes such as rigorous peer review undertaken in preparation for promotion.

Some forms of external review can have a positive impact not only on the assurance of broad comparability of standards but more comprehensively in strengthening discipline communities and in providing a worthwhile professional development experience. A TEQSA decision to take the Australian higher education sector in this direction presents a rare opportunity to open teaching, learning and assessment issues to conversations conducted on a national level.

Contribute to the AAGLO Project

This paper has mapped the territory of external review of academic standards as part of the AAGLO project. You are invited to contact the project manager if you would like to contribute further information or opinion or to register your interest in being included in planned project consultation activities.

AAGLO Project Team

Simon Barrie (The University of Sydney):

Geoffrey Crisp (RMIT University):

Anne Bennison (The University of Queensland):

Clair Hughes (The University of Queensland):

a.bennison@uq.edu.au

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Key readings