

## Moderation article cover page

**Title:** Quality assurance of assessment and moderation discourses involving sessional staff

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**Abstract**

Quality assurance is a major agenda in tertiary education. The casualization of academic work, especially in teaching, is also a quality assurance issue. Casual or sessional staff members teach and assess more than 50% of all university courses in Australia and yet the research in relation to the role sessional staff play in quality assurance of student assessment outcomes is scarce. Moderation processes are a pivotal part of robust quality assurance measures. Drawing upon previous work surrounding four discourses of moderation (Adie, Lloyd & Beutel, 2013) this pilot project reports the results of research into the role and impact sessional staff play in moderation processes at the tertiary level. Qualitative data were gathered through focus interviews. Results, in the form of various moderation discourses, indicate that sessional staff impact the formal quality assurance processes in numerous ways.

## **Introduction**

The influence of sessional (or contract) staff on quality assurance in higher education is a significant issue given that the academic workforce in Australia and internationally, is estimated to comprise anywhere between 50% and 80% of sessional staff (Harvey, 2013). In this paper sessional staff are defined as teachers including any higher education instructors not in tenured or permanent positions, and employed on an hourly, casual or honorary basis (Australian Learning and Teaching Council, 2008). The increased reliance on sessional staff for teaching courses is often termed the ‘casualization of academic work’ and it has a range of potential impacts on the quality of education that university students are receiving. This article examines these impacts from an assessment perspective with a particular focus on the issues that emerge in relation to a shared understanding of assessment expectations and standards to ensure consistency of teacher judgements in evaluating students’ achievements.

Summative assessment is often acknowledged as having a substantial affective impact on learners and learning influencing their motivation and future levels of engagement (Sadler, 2009). As a result, ensuring transparency, equity and fairness of assessment practices is important. However, assessment is one aspect of higher education which has been criticised for its lack of regulation, in particular its subjective nature and persistent use of norm-referenced criteria and standards (Grainger, Purnell, & Zipf, 2008). Our combined university teaching experience shows that this situation is complicated further when a course employs a high proportion of sessional staff as this limits opportunities for sharing assessment expectations especially in relation to the quality of work expected for each achievement standard.

Quality assurance of assessment is a key consideration related to accountability and equity and includes the design of assessment tasks and their accompanying marking rubric or criteria sheet, as well as the processes used to evaluate student performance including moderation. These processes are institutionalised via various university assessment policies, however, in practice assessment is one aspect of an academic’s teaching role which they find challenging. A study by Goos and Hughes (2010) highlights the need to enhance the assessment ‘literacy’ of academic staff as they rely on tacit knowledge obtained through the experience of assessing rather than knowledge derived from assessment scholarship. These observations concur with Sadler (2010) who claims that there is some confusion amongst

academics in relation to shared understandings of criteria, standards and the qualities that provide evidence of a standard. A limited understanding of these fundamental assessment constructs has significant implications for the integrity and purpose of moderating student work. This process is further compromised by limited understanding of the purpose and practice of moderation. According to Adie, Lloyd and Beutel (2013) many academics have a:

... liminal understanding of moderation as an integral part of teaching and learning, and differentiated understanding as to why or how moderation should occur and how circumstances may affect the type of practice adopted (p. 2).

What emerges from this knowledge poor environment is a situation referred to as ‘uninformed professionalism’ (Luke, Weir & Woods, 2008) which entails uninformed professional judgment that often leads to underperformance and idiosyncratic results. Moreover Bloxham (2009) claims there is a general lack of discourse in higher education around assessment procedures and the inherent frailty of marking practices and variability of standards and suggests that this is based on assumptions about the confidence stakeholders have in grading processes, due to the existence of a “whole gamut of procedures designed to support this general confidence: assignment guidelines, assessment criteria, grade descriptors, marking schemes and evidence of moderation” (Bloxham, 2009, p. 210). Conscious or unconscious idiosyncratic approaches to marking undermines the validity and reliability of the assessment and can result in staff ignoring major quality assurance measures due to implicit and tacit understandings and a lack of confidence in official standards represented in the institutionalized processes (Ecclestone, 2001; Price, 2005; Smith & Coombe, 2006).

These issues discussed above are further compounded by the highly situated nature of assessment practices and the status of sessional staff who are often positioned as peripheral to the academic community (Handley, den Outer & Price, 2013). Other factors have been identified as limiting effective communication of assessment expectations between academic staff and sessional teaching staff including:

- the time needed for moderation meetings to achieve their goal of consensus
- the limited allocation of paid meeting time for sessional staff
- the input required by course/unit coordinators to develop shared understandings of assessment

- limited time for inducting new/inexperienced teaching staff into the university assessment 'culture' and the systems that support assessment practice
- the difficulty of communication with sessional staff who are not often on campus (Adie, Lloyd & Beutel, 2013, p. 5).

A number of solutions have been proposed including training of assessors from day one of a course (Kuzich, Groves, O'Hare, & Pelliccione, 2010; Ewens, Andrew & Scott, 2013), greater time allocated to students and staff to discuss standards (Bloxham, Boyd, & Orr, 2011) and shared exemplars of student achievement (Handley, den Outer and Price, 2013). Handley, den Outer and Price (2013) suggest that these solutions need to consider how the situated nature of assessment processes may be addressed through dialogue between sessional staff and tenured and the more experienced academics, as well as the use of exemplars to support these conversations.

It is acknowledged in this paper that advances in information and communication technologies, especially the Learning Management Systems currently employed by universities, have enabled more efficient assessment handling and more effective communication channels between all teaching staff regardless of location. Other digital technologies such as cloud content sharing applications facilitate synchronous online moderation meetings using uploaded student exemplars. For this to occur however all staff still have to 'come together' in 'the cloud' and dedicate time to the process. These changes to assessment resolve a number of the aforementioned issues that limit communication of assessment expectations and moderation. However technology does not resolve the problem of limited understanding of how moderation, assessment, quality assurance and learning are all linked. In some cases technology constrains rather than enables quality assessment to be implemented, for example preferred digital formats of marking rubrics that stifle the capacity to mark student work from an holistic perspective.

The reliance on sessional staff for a significant amount of teaching and learning responsibilities, including assessment, has been the focus of three major Office of Learning and Teaching projects in Australia within the last seven years. These three projects evidence a growing recognition of the important role sessional staff play within the Australian higher education sector. The three projects are commonly known as the RED Report (Percy et al, 2008); the CLASS Project (Le Foe et al, 2011) and the Benchmarking Leadership and

Advancement of Standards for Sessional Staff (or BLASST) Project (Harvey et al, 2014). Whilst these projects focus on sessional staff, there are no projects that have a specific focus on the impact that sessional staff have on quality assurance of assessment through moderation activities. This is despite the “ongoing importance of sessional staff as teachers in higher education in Australia, and internationally” and the need for a “mechanism to identify effective practices and share them more widely” (Harvey et al, 2014, p. 9).

Of the limited extant research around assessment moderation practices involving sessional staff in higher education, the study by Adie, Lloyd and Beutel (2013) is beneficial because it sets up a typology of moderation discourses that were identified in a teacher education faculty. The aim of that study was to investigate existing moderation practices with a view to promote more efficient and effective moderation practices. Their research identified four different approaches to moderation by the predominant discourses that framed academic's discussions around students' work. These were: moderation as equity; moderation as justification; moderation as community building and moderation as accountability.

This typology of moderation practices is utilized in the research reported here to both frame our understanding of how sessional staff experience moderation and how they represent these understandings through discourse. That is, the typology of four discourses is applied as a thematic framework for analyzing participants' responses and is then used to guide our discussion about those sessional staff experiences in moderation practices occurring in a teacher education faculty at a regional university. The research was designed to respond to the following questions:

- Does the same typology apply to moderation processes in other higher education contexts involving large numbers of sessional staff?
- Which moderation processes involving sessional staff are effective in assuring consistency of teacher judgements?
- What are the success enablers and success inhibitors to effective moderation involving sessional staff?

#### *Moderation as a situated social practice*

The overarching model of moderation under consideration here is termed ‘social moderation’ which, as the name implies, involves some form of dialogue among assessors. The key inter-related objectives of any moderation process are:

- Reaching consensus through rich conversations and professional dialogue
- Ensuring consistency of judgements through shared understandings
- Interpreting and applying standards in a common way
- Sharing and grading representative samples of student work across different standards.

Moderation involves teachers matching evidence in student work with a standard descriptor on a criteria sheet and then having a discussion that aims to reach consensus about their judgements of the students' overall level of achievement. It is a significant quality assurance activity that aims for consistency in judgements about students' assessment results.

Moderation is defined in this research as a practice of engagement in which teaching team members develop a shared understanding of assessment requirements, standards and the evidence that demonstrates differing qualities of performance. Its purpose is to ensure that there is consistency of judgements between assessors and that these judgements are aligned with established and visible criteria and standards in order to quality assure assessment processes (Adie, Lloyd & Beutel, 2013).

Social moderation is often interchanged with the term 'consensus moderation' to describe the collaboration and discussion regarding the allocation of marks as described by Sadler (2012):

Academics who share the marking of large batches of student work can collaborate on how marks are allocated. This is the principle behind the approach known as consensus moderation. In its most common form, consensus moderation requires that all assessors mark the same sample of student responses with, or without, prior consultation among themselves. They then discuss the results of their marking in order to arrive at a common view about the grading 'standards' to be used for the whole student group (p. 2).

According to the Queensland Studies Authority (The State of Queensland, 2008) there are three distinctive models for undertaking the process of moderating student work: The 'expert' model, the 'calibration' model and the 'conferencing' model that are explained in some detail in this section. Beginning with the expert model, this process involves markers grading all student responses and then submitting selected samples to an 'expert'. Advice is provided by the 'expert' confirming whether there is consistency in the way the standards are interpreted

and applied or whether markers need to adjust their understanding and why. This advice is used by markers when reviewing judgements about their previously graded student responses.

The conference model is similar to the expert model in that markers grade all of their student responses individually and then select samples of student work that are representative of each available level of achievement. A meeting is then convened in which a ‘conferencing’ process is employed to enable markers to share samples and discuss judgements. Through professional dialogue, markers aim to reach consensus on the interpretation and application of the standards. Markers review judgements about their previously graded student responses applying their shared understanding achieved through this conferencing process.

In contrast to these two processes, the calibration model involves a facilitator selecting a range of student responses that will be used to ‘calibrate’ each level of achievement. Markers individually grade a sample of student work and undertake a discussion with colleagues in an effort to reach agreement about the quality of the sample with reference to the standard for each level of achievement. Through this professional dialogue, markers aim to adjust their interpretation and application of standards to reach consensus about the quality of the sample. This process is repeated for all the student samples. Markers then individually grade the remaining of their students’ responses, applying their shared understanding achieved through this ‘calibration’ process. While these processes of moderation are distinctive often hybrid processes, involving variations or combination of those described here result when assessors come together in moderation practice.

### *Inhibitors to effective moderation*

As with any social practice there are a range of factors that constrain the success or efficacy of the moderation process in reaching consensus about assigning grades to student work. Sadler (2009, 2010, 2012) has identified four interconnected inhibitors to the success of consensus moderation to which he assigns the labels ‘group dynamics’, ‘impost of seniority’, ‘agreeing to disagree’ and ‘conceding to the average’. How each of these inhibiting factors operates to constrain the moderation process is explained briefly in this section.

Firstly, ‘group dynamics’ essentially dictates the reliability of the moderation process in ensuring that scrutiny of student responses are the primary evidence of achievement level. In other words, factors other than student evidence may come into play when professional

relationships between assessors are not ideal. Similarly, a related inhibitor is ‘impost of seniority’ where a marking team is led by a senior academic who, by impost of seniority, decides that the marking of others be adjusted if it does not compare well with his or her marking. Variations of this practice include the ‘impost of authority’ and the ‘impost of expertise’, which as the terms indicate, involve a member of the team holding influence because of expertise or some form of authority. This ensures that judgements by other members are of a secondary concern. The third inhibiting factor is the practice of ‘agreeing to disagree’ when multiple markers fail to achieve consensus on aspects of quality, even with the use of a common grading sheet. Despite this, they may achieve a comparable distribution of marks (and recommended grades). Whilst on the surface there appears to be consensus, the grades may be awarded for different reasons. This issue may arise because markers cannot resolve their different and underlying philosophical conceptualizations of what constitutes quality or aspects of quality in a student’s work. The fourth and final inhibitor to successful moderation is practice of ‘conceding to the average’ when a group of academics cannot reach agreement about what comprises quality in students’ work. Instead, a compromise is reached whereby the final collective on-balance judgment may not in fact represent any of the grades put forward.

According to Bloxham (2009) the most significant constraint to successful moderation is casual markers who adopt ‘risk averse’ practices due to the pressure of unequal power relations. Such practice ultimately poses a risk to the quality assurance of assessment standards. Tensions that arise between casual staff and permanent academic staff are often a result of what Sadler (2009) refers to as the tacit knowledge about what constitutes quality in student work, held by expert assessors who often find it difficult to share these implicit understandings with novice or inexperienced staff. Ecclestone (2001) concurred that this tacit knowledge contributed to experts demonstrating skepticism towards the collaborative moderation process as a way of securing reliable judgements.

Despite the sector’s reliance on casualization of teaching and grading, published research on how sessional academic staff undertake their assessment responsibilities in universities is scarce. However, there is research to suggest that variability and inconsistencies in assessing student work can be overcome by teams of (casual) markers who establish their implicit and explicit understanding of standards over time (Elwood & Klenowski, 2002).

## **Method**

The ten participants in this study were all sessional staff who had taught the same course for a number of iterations. These staff were expected to conduct the tutorial sessions and to mark and moderate their students' work for three assessment tasks during the 10 week semester.

The course coordinator oversaw all teaching and learning processes, including the marking of samples of student work as standard setting, acting as a sounding board for grading decisions, and chairing the moderation meetings. The large number of sessional staff in this course reflected the fact that this course caters for different school subjects such as History, English, Mathematics, Science, Languages, Geography or the Arts and each staff member had the required expertise for each of these learning areas.

The approach in this study utilized a qualitative framework involving structured and semi structured individual interviews with sessional staff which focused on the course implementation, relationships/group dynamics between teaching staff, consensus moderation procedures (how consensus is reached) and the assessment tasks and criteria sheets used to gather evidence of student learning. This phenomenological approach allowed us to answer the research questions by focusing the data gathering directly on the sessional staff experiences in moderation processes. Phenomenology is the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view. The interviews were transcribed and analysed by each researcher independently for thematic patterns. The data were analysed iteratively with broad themes emerging after repeated readings of the data. This process brought inter-rater reliability to our findings. These themes were verified independently by members of the research team.

## **Findings and discussion**

The results of this research are analyzed and discussed using the typology that emerged from the research conducted by Adie, Lloyd and Beutel (2013). This hermeneutic frames our understanding of moderation as an idiosyncratic mix of beliefs and experience espoused through four discourses of equity, justification, community building and accountability (Adie, Lloyd & Beutel, 2013, p. 8). These four discourses guided the thematic analysis of the interview data and are used here to guide the discussion of the findings about sessional staff experiences with assessment moderations process.

The most common theme to emerge from the interview data was that of moderation as a ‘community building’ exercise where “shared understanding” and “shared conversations” are the key to successful moderation meetings. The sessional staff acknowledged the value of the moderation and team assessment discussions to support the development of shared knowledge. They were able to appreciate different perspectives, and had a deeper understanding of task expectations. These and other features of working collaboratively are evident in the following quotes:

*When we have group meetings we get a better “feel” for task expectations against the criteria sheet.*

*Working with peers opens your eyes to new ways of seeing your students' work.*

*The success of the moderation is in large part determined by a shared understanding of the criteria and standards that the task is being assessed against. If the descriptors are not clear, then staff may make individual interpretations of the descriptors that, while valid in their eyes, may not align with the interpretations of others.*

*In my experience consensus is reached through shared conversations, revisiting the assessment task requirements and by discussing the criteria for the assessment task.*

*I think that moderation also becomes more successful when those involved in the process are familiar with one another. This helps to create a more supportive moderation environment which means that people are not afraid to voice their opinion as they can trust that it will be respected and considered by others.*

The data here shows a generally positive disposition to sharing assessment understandings, however this could simply be a reflection of participants’ casual status that affords irregular opportunities to work with other colleagues and be guided by the course academic.

Sessional staff also frequently used ‘equity’ discourses to describe their assessment moderation experiences. For the purpose of our analysis ‘equity’ discourses are those that include notions of fairness, consistency or transparency as essential elements when grading and moderating student work. Typical of this discourse is the term consistency of teacher judgements in relation to standards. This type of discourse was evident in the current study and evidenced by the following comments from the sessional participants:

*I think many times tutors have not fully understood the Lecturer/Co-ordinator's expectations of the task or the criteria sheet. At the point of moderation this becomes problematic and deeply troubling for the tutors who then feel they have not assisted their students enough.*

*Consensus is achieved when there is total agreement on the key criteria and what differentiates the different grading levels and this is effectively informed by working through assessment tasks and establishing shared meaning on what an HD, DN etc looks like.*

*I always try to just bring student scripts that are as clean as possible and do not attach the criteria sheet so that I can hopefully receive feedback on the student task that is based on a person's interpretation of the student work aligned with the criteria sheet rather than their feedback knowing what I have already given the student as a result.*

*Right from the beginning I suppose we need to establish 'rules of engagement' – how will we do this – protocols, procedures, working as a team to ensure the best outcomes for our students – real and relevant results that reflect the student's current position – whether it is good news or bad news - we don't want to delude our students.*

The sessional staff identified that for assessment to be equitable, they needed to understand the coordinator's expectations and purpose of the task so that this could be relayed to their students. Further they acknowledged the importance of moderation procedures to ensure that they marked fairly for all.

Another common theme to emerge from the data was that relating to how sessional staff justify/rationalize their judgements with regard to grading. These discourses of 'justification' are typified by conversations about personal confidence in decision making, provision of quality feedback that supports learning, and responding to students who question the grade or standards applied to their work. These discourses are motivated internally and externally, that is a marker's desire to be able to publically defend a grade to students (external) and additionally, a marker's desire to be comfortable with or convinced by the validity of their decision-making (internal); in short confidence in the validity of judgements. Tutors noted the significance of the social moderation process because working in a team helped to

overcome positive and negative bias towards students, discouraged subjectivity and tunnel vision and encouraged personal detachment from students. This ensured that it was the quality of the work that was graded, not the students, evidenced in the following comments:

*The biggest difficulty that I found was having to write authentic feedback comments that aligned to a grade I didn't agree with.*

*I often use the moderation experience to offer samples that I have doubts about and usually find my intuition confirmed by the second and third opinions offered via moderation. And it offers the same reassurance to my peers.*

Justifying grades to students was made more complex for sessional staff when their grades were overturned as a result of the moderation process. This is possibly a result of the power differential between full time experienced staff and those in contract positions.

Understandably, having others agree with their judgements provided reassurance for sessional staff. This is important if staff continue to teach into a subject, however, the tenuous nature of contract work may inhibit the building of a team with shared understandings of the qualities that evidence a standard.

The final most common theme to emerge relates to power distribution and the locus of authority in the moderation process. This theme is identified by a consistent deference to the expert opinion of the tenured academic who coordinated the course in an effort to gain consensus. The following quotes concur with regard to an 'impost of authority' to reach consensus in the moderation process.

*Seniority has meant that sometimes in moderation a grade was given that I have not agreed with. This has only happened to me a couple of times. I was not comfortable with this, but I accepted that I don't know everything and that there is always more than one perspective on gradation of quality.*

*I will defer to authority/ seniority which enables consensus to be reached.*

*Generally consensus is reached, though sometimes if you don't quite agree with the opinions being given by others, you will weigh this up against the experience that those people have in the subject area.*

*The tutors bow to the assertions of the Course Coordinator.*

These responses suggest that sessional staff readily acknowledge the seniority of the course coordinator and are prepared to acquiesce to that authority whether they agreed or not with final judgements. This theme has links to the discourse of ‘accountability’ and could be interpreted as undermining moderation as a community building exercise. In addition to the above discourses, sessional participants in this study referred to a number of additional themes that could be categorized as the challenges or issues that sessional staff experience with moderation procedures. The findings reveal that sessional participants often made reference to continuity in staffing and the building of relationships between the team members as issues of importance to ensure quality assurance. We would argue that these issues are a direct result of their sessional status. A high turnover in sessional staff is a reality when the workforce is so heavily casualised. The following quote illustrates how inconsistency in teaching teams can inhibit community building:

*With all the swapping and changing of courses and lecturers, the expectations are communicated in very short time frames. It also limits human capacity to build consistency through ongoing communication through moderation in a consistent team over several semesters.*

On the one hand, familiarity amongst markers encouraged consistency over time as all participants in the moderation process had become familiar with the standards. On the other hand, it encouraged complacency. Consistent team members build consistency across semesters but complacency and familiarity can set in whereby personal and professional relationships can get in the way of objectivity, as ‘*some people are precious*’ with big egos and some are rigid/flexible as result of personality and/or seniority.

*I do not believe that the processes of moderation by conferencing I have experienced (throughout my career) have been effective. I believe colleagues can be reluctant to question each other’s judgement too closely in case of causing offence and there is also an aspect of complacency which creeps in: we’re all experienced, we must be “right”.*

*The personalities involved can also inhibit or enable success, depending on their flexibility/ rigidity and each individual’s ability to cope with feedback that calls their judgements into question.*

*Maybe as a group of tutors get to know each other better the level of trust can develop and therefore more meaningful conversations regarding judging standards can happen than has been my experience so far.*

The structure of moderation meetings was also raised as an issue of contention for many sessional participants who called for more structure. This concern is evidenced by the following participants' responses:

*Moderation could be improved by ensuring that you have a clear set of expectations regarding how you will run your moderation meeting. This includes having a clear understanding of the aim of the moderation process, each person's role within the moderation process and an allocated time frame. Each of these elements would be specific to the course.*

*Tighter control by the chairperson over the meeting.*

*Higher status given to the whole process - don't do it when everyone has had "a long day at the office" first!*

The frustration expressed by these sessional staff could be explained by their full time employment in secondary schooling where they regularly engage in highly formalized meetings to moderate senior students' final results. However, they also indicate a lack of formality or consideration of protocols which are essential for establishing a supportive environment for moderation to occur.

In addition to these more negative experiences of sessional staff there was a clear emphasis in all respondents' interview data on the importance of quality criteria sheets as the starting point for discussion between sessional staff with a range of knowledge and expertise across different disciplines. This served to elevate the significance of this tool, in particular the accuracy of the standards descriptors in describing what they were looking for in student work. This observation is validated in the following comments:

*A well written criteria sheet is essential to the process.*

*The clearer the criteria and standard descriptors, the easier it is to mark and moderate because we can't help ending up on the same page.*

*The criteria sheet is everything! The alignment of the criteria with the course objectives is necessary to justify the authenticity of the assessment. I have used this recently to assure a student that the assessment engaged with the full scope of the course when they stated that they had not been assessed on some of their greatest strengths. The standards descriptors allow objective justification of LOA [levels of achievement] and transparency.*

*When the criteria sheet is clear and easy to engage with, moderation becomes easier. Consensus can be reached more effectively as the required behaviour or evidence that needs to be presented within the assessment task has been clearly described within the criteria and standard descriptors.*

*Criteria sheets can be so powerful – they just need to be thoughtfully constructed to ensure shared meaning – very clear and transparent and very strong - alignment with the assessment task. This ensures agreed meaning/shared expectations!!*

*Consistent application of the key criteria - you might believe what you have done - should be easier with a criteria sheet - no platform for a solid argument without a criteria sheet.*

Overall these findings demonstrate that sessional staff experience moderation practices in this particular course as a complex and highly situated social practices in which the quality of the criteria for marking and sharing understandings are pivotal for reaching consensus.

## **Conclusion**

The employment of sessional staff into teaching positions in higher education is increasing. At the same time, quality assurance processes in higher education are also receiving intense scrutiny (Tertiary Education Quality Standards Authority (TEQSA), 2012). Harvey (2013) and others have estimated that sessional staff are involved in at least 50% of the academic work undertaken in tertiary education in Australia and that “Research about the role of sessional staff for learning and teaching in higher education is needed to provide data and insights that can be used to inform the leadership of good practice across the sector” (p. 8).

This study was guided by three research questions:

- Does the same typology apply to moderation processes in other higher education contexts involving large numbers of sessional staff?

- Which moderation processes involving sessional staff are effective in assuring consistency of teacher judgements?
- What are the success enablers and success inhibitors to effective moderation involving sessional staff?

The participants in this study articulated all of the four moderation discourses of equity, accountability, justification and community building during their social moderation meetings. By far the most significant number of responses related to the discourse of community building. This may be partly explained by the fact that this team has been together in this same course for a number of years, amounting to approximately 10 iterations of this same course. The quantity of responses related to community building also highlights the desire of these staff for opportunities for professional dialogue concerning standards.

A number of additional but connected issues emerged, identified as: continuity in staffing, relationships between the team members, structure of moderation meetings and the importance of the criteria sheets. Although these are issues that are important to all academics we believe that these issues are accentuated by the sessional status of these staff and the need to be connected to the community and the knowledge of the community. Hence, this study reaffirms the Adie et al. typology as a valid and reliable framework for analysis and discussion of sessional staff responses in assessment moderation research.

In terms of research question two, consistency of teacher judgements are most enhanced by the development of close relationships between team members, built over time and ensured by consistency of employment. While this was true for this particular group of sessional academics, it is acknowledged that this is not common practice. Ensuring consistency of teacher judgements of sessional staff, particularly when there is a high turnover of staff in a course, remains problematic. However by addressing the issues raised by the sessional staff in this study and the solutions they offered, for example, the establishment of clear protocols and procedures for the moderation meeting, some of these concerns may be reduced.

Finally, research question three addressed enablers and inhibitors. One of these issues is time which is linked to accessibility of sessional staff. The nature of sessional employment can prohibit attendance at moderation meetings for some staff. This finding is in keeping with previous research (Adie et al., 2013) which identified as problematic, the gathering together

of large numbers of staff to participate in meetings such as moderation. In addition, Ewens, Andrew and Scott (2013) reported on the development and implementation of a moderation process involving many sessional staff designed to standardise the marking of assessments. They noted the problem of availability of experienced sessional markers as a major obstacle to guaranteeing consistent assessment standards from semester to semester. The limited accessibility of sessional staff members, also limits the time available to moderate. Sessional staff, who are not full time employees of the university often juggle various responsibilities including other vocational work, personal and family commitments.

Adie et al. (2013) also identified the employment of new staff as an inhibitor to the moderation process due to the necessity to induct staff. They noted that markers who are not involved in the establishment of shared understandings of assessment and standards throughout the semester need much more detailed guidance to ensure consistency of standards is achieved. This was not the case with this course as most staff had already been 'inducted' into the assessment culture of this particular course. However, the stability of the teaching team and the consequent rich relationships already developed between the members over time, evidenced many of the inhibitors identified by Sadler (2009) specifically in regard to group dynamics. Although sessional staff commented that the social moderation process they had participated in was generally characterised by a supportive, professional environment, there was evidence to suggest that staff often agreed to disagree, conceded to the average, were influenced by the imposts of authority, seniority and expertise and identified philosophical differences as barriers to effective moderation.

Many participants in this study commented on the importance of ego and the defensive attitudes of some participants who felt threatened. So while the establishment of a stable team may seemingly support the development of shared knowledge, this did not appear to be the case for the participants in this study. Indeed, the familiarity of participants perpetuated inhibitive rather than supportive factors to community building. While the role of communication was identified as a major factor in ensuring a successful moderation experience for sessional staff, changing expectations of standards as well as relationships amongst markers and between markers and their students was identified as a major inhibitive factor. Sessional staff requested more formalised structures for the moderation meeting to overcome some of these barriers.

As would be expected the criteria sheet was considered a major determinant of a successful moderation experience. Many sessional staff commented on the need for clarity in the criteria sheet and standards descriptors as essential to avoiding different interpretations of the standards. When sessional staff were involved in the development of assessment tasks and criteria sheets, shared understandings developed and the moderation experience was described as more successful.

All of the issues that have been identified in this study suggest an impact on the quality assurance processes operating in tertiary institutions in Australia, given the fact that sessional staff teach and assess more than 50% of these courses. The implications of this are potentially far reaching. This study has added to the scarce evidence surrounding the role of sessional staff in assessment moderation procedures. The limitations of this research are acknowledged particularly in terms of the number of sessional participants and suggest that further large scale investigations involving greater numbers of participants across multiple universities in Australia are needed in order to confirm these findings.

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