

# THE CONVERSATION

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## Comparing uni grades: is a distinction always a distinction?

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How can students be sure their high distinction would be a high distinction at any other university? Flickr/Alan Rampton Photography, CC BY-SA

Perhaps the biggest concern for students in higher education aside from the cost is their grades. Grades influence retention and attrition rates, scholarships, future employability and a sense of identity and self-worth. But how can a student be sure that the distinction they received is comparable to the distinction their mate received at the university down the road? Or even in the next class?

Australia's national regulator assesses higher education providers against a framework that says a provider must compare its teacher performance, student learning outcomes, graduate outcomes and research with other higher education providers.

With government funding being extended to non-university higher education providers, this raises further questions about comparability of standards.

Governing assessment and academic achievement standards is essential for assuring grade integrity, not only within an institution, but across higher education institutions. This includes the non-university higher education providers.

At the heart of this is grade integrity. Assessment expert Royce Sadler defines this as:

*the extent to which each grade awarded, either at the conclusion of a course or module of study, or for an extended response to an assessment task, is strictly commensurate with the quality, breadth and depth of a student's performance.*

So, with what confidence can we say that the distinction achieved in a course at a given higher education institution in Australia would be comparable with a distinction at any other higher education institution?

## 1. Do different standards exist within and between higher education institutions?

The short answer is, of course, “yes” and “sometimes no”.

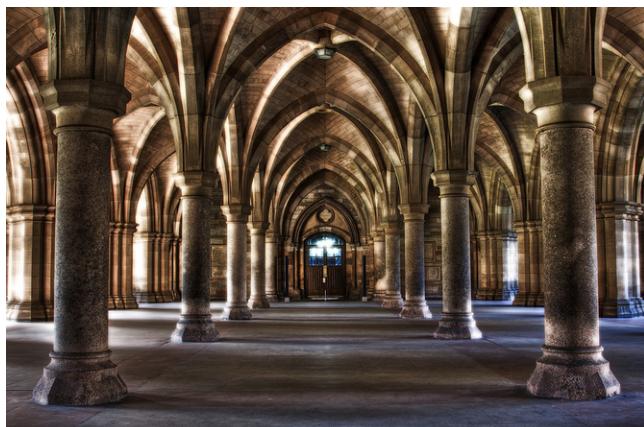
Again, as Sadler has stated:

*Research undertaken over several decades has shown that the underlying standards against which student works are appraised are poorly understood and can vary widely from assessor to assessor.*

This logically extends to variations between assessors within and across higher education institutions. Processes that help assure the quality of higher education by comparing grades are important for, among other things, credit transfers between institutions.

Increasingly, grade integrity is being strengthened in many institutions. Strategies include improving the design of assessment in the first place, and developing processes to help calibrate markers, so they understand there is a required standard of student work.

This is important in assuring students that the grade they are awarded is deserved. But how can we assure students that the distinction achieved at one higher education institution is comparable to that achieved at others? We believe all institutions have to be asking this question.



Do prestigious universities mark the same as middle-tier

universities? Flickr/skynet, CC BY

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## 2. What is the way forward?

Initiatives are underway to improve comparability of standards across institutions. These included processes being trialed by groups of universities and projects funded by the Office for Learning and Teaching.

These new initiatives often moderate samples of student work, as well as the quality of the assessment program.

The Group of Eight universities has trialed a **Quality Verification Process**. This compares with an external institution the grades awarded in two core courses in the final year of an undergraduate degree program. In verification, the original marker's score and comments are visible to the external reviewer. Some make the results of this process public.

The Innovative Research Universities are trialing an **Academic Calibration Process**, which is based on the Group of Eight verification system. The Innovative Research Universities are aiming to embed this benchmarking process into regular program reviews.

Another Office for Learning and Teaching project, **Achievement Matters**, investigates blind peer review of assessment tasks and student achievement standards in the discipline of Accounting, after first calibrating the markers.

Another recent project, **Assuring Learning and Teaching Standards**, developed a model for conducting inter-institutional blind peer review of assessment tasks in 12 disciplines across 11 institutions.

The majority of assessments showed strong agreement with the original mark and grade. Where differences were found, these were returned to the institution for discussion. The key for the future is to ensure that there are robust institutional processes for dealing with feedback about levels of disagreement about grades.

Participants in all of these trials, both the original markers and the external reviewers, evaluated the experience very positively. Academics liked the opportunity to see how others assessed their subject content and appreciated the opportunity to compare their judgements of performance against those of others.

These forms of moderation, while successful in the trials, are new to many in the sector. There are challenges in the implementation – the need for cultural change, workload issues, identifying courses for review and external experts to act as reviewers.

Academics don't usually explain what influences their judgements of standards, so we don't know much about how they go about marking. The process of inter-institutional moderation of assessment may help to build our understanding of these processes.

To take peer review of assessment forward, a new Office for Learning and Teaching project aims to build a national network of peer review of assessment and is undertaking state-based workshops. The project aims to provide a forum for sharing and disseminating good practice, identify key academics experienced in this process, and provide professional learning opportunities for academics and benchmarking partners.

These projects illustrate the ways comparability and grade integrity can improve - so that everyone has confidence that their distinction would have been a distinction at any other institution.