

# Peer review of curriculum module

## Introduction

Peer review of curriculum is defined here as the practice of colleagues providing and receiving feedback on one another's teaching materials. This could include review of:

- unit outlines, assessment tasks and marking criteria,
- how assessments are graded
- proposals for new degrees or new units

Peer review of curriculum is a useful way to gain feedback that can be used to improve the student learning experience. If it is done via an external process it can provide assurance of the comparability of standards (as required by the Higher Education Standards).

Conducting a peer review of curriculum provides a professional learning opportunity because you learn about educational practices beyond your own, and it sharpens your feedback skills. Peer review of curriculum also promotes reflective practice – thinking critically about your own educational practices. Peer review of curriculum may also foster the development of collegial networks within or beyond your institution.

This module will be helpful if you are planning to become a calibrator for the [Innovative Research Universities academic calibration process](#), provide a peer review to an internal colleague, or are sitting on a committee that reviews proposals for new degree programs and new units.

The module explores six topics:

1. Principles of providing feedback
2. Peer review of unit outlines
3. Peer review of assessment
4. Peer review of degree program proposals
5. Inclusivity
6. Reflecting on and collecting evidence about peer review

The module focusses primarily on peer review of curriculum, as peer observation of teaching practices i.e. observing and giving feedback on a peer's in-class teaching is covered in other resources

**(Design note: please link to these institutional resources as appropriate).**

It is intended as a professional learning resource for reviewers, though it may also be useful for reviewees. It should take around three hours to complete all topics; you may decide to focus on the topics that are relevant to you at this time.

**(Design note: timing needs to be tested by users)**

A glossary of terms, adapted from Wilson, Bedford, & Readman (2019) is provided at the end of the module.

## Learning outcomes

After completing the module, you will be able to:

1. Apply the principles of giving feedback when you are conducting a peer review
2. Describe the different ways in which peer review of curriculum may be applied
3. Explain the importance of ensuring curricula are inclusive
4. Create a plan for your next steps

## Possible institutional adaptations

- Link to your own policies
- Link to your own resources on peer review
- Link to your IRU calibration contact/s
- Add links to the further readings / references via your institution's library
- Change the terminology e.g. unit vs topic vs subject, degree program vs course etc., graduate qualities vs attributes, evaluation instead of review etc.
- Recommend or require it in certain situations / embed into professional learning offerings
- Make it an interactive PDF instead of in the LMS
- The resource doesn't currently cover assessment consensus moderation practices – this is something that could be added, along with any other additional topics you wish.

## Principles of providing feedback

Before considering the different aspects of curriculum that might be peer-reviewed (e.g. unit outline, assessment, new degree proposal), it is useful to discuss some principles of providing feedback.

When crafting your feedback, it is important to keep in mind the overall purpose of the feedback:

'Feedback is about iteration and...the reason for critiquing work is so [your peer can] ...use the insights taken from your feedback' to improve their educational practice and the student learning experience (adapted from Connor & Irizarry, 2015).

Here are some principles to consider when providing peer feedback:

- Feedback should be constructive and focused on improvement. 'We can sometimes have a tendency to focus on negatives...[and] often take the positives for granted. ...Critique should be balanced...it's just as important to talk about what is working and why as it is to talk about what isn't working.' Positive feedback should not be superficial or vague, or used to then introduce negative feedback as people are attuned to this 'sandwich' method of giving feedback. Positive feedback should be about real strengths (adapted from Connor & Irizarry, 2015).
- Feedback should be detailed enough for the reviewee to understand.
- Build in opportunities for reflection by asking questions as part of your feedback.
- Accept that not all variables will be known by you as the reviewer.
- Respect the disciplinary and institutional contexts.
- Maintain confidentiality (i.e. don't discuss the review with others outside the process).
- Use a filter. You may have a strong initial reaction e.g. disagreement, confusion etc. Take some time to think through why you are reacting in this way...if it's not just related to personal preferences but to the principles of curriculum design and assessment, then think of how to express your feedback constructively (adapted from Connor & Irizarry, 2015).
- Ideally, feedback should be conversational, and iterative, though this may not always be possible, for example in formal processes such as a Learning and Teaching committee approving new units. (Please note that the IRU calibration process now has an option which reviewers can select if they are happy to speak with the reviewee directly). Details on a conversational approach are provided below.

Conversational approach to giving feedback (adapted from Wilson, Bedford, & Readman, 2019):

The defining element of a conversational approach is *collaborative dialogue between professionals to promote learning*. The learning that is gained from using the conversational approach is based on the idea of reciprocity, an opportunity for learning when both parties of the review process (the person/institution requesting and the person providing feedback) accept the peer review process as an opportunity for mutual or reciprocal learning.

The work of Earl and Timperley (2009, pp. 1–12), from their text *Professional learning conversations: Challenges in using evidence for improvement* has been adapted to offer a structured pathway to using the conversational approach.

The framework provided by Earl and Timperley (2009) features three distinct elements to a conversational approach to giving feedback to others:

## 1. Establishing a relationship of respect and challenge

- Establish a relationship with the review applicant who provides information on the focus of the review.
- Promote thoughtfulness by building in reflection opportunities by asking questions as part of your review commentary.
- Respectfully challenge ideas behind the rationale for a task, the way a task has been structured or presented, etc. This can be abrupt and abrasive if not done well.
- Introduce alternative viewpoint/s.
- Tackle troubling concepts.
- Change positions if the data and evidence suggest it.

## 2. Adopting an enquiry habit of mind

- Recognise the challenges in developing a recursive, collaborative conversation in a written format.
- Accept that not all variables will be known by you as the reviewer.
- Consider a range of possible reasons for decisions about standards that have been made.
- Be open to difference.
- Seek deep understanding.
- Respect disciplinary context.
- Be mindful of the institutional focus.
- Provide feedback focused on improvement.

## 3. Making use of data and evidence provided by the review applicant

The questions asked of the reviewer set the parameters of the review and areas of feedback.

Ask yourself 'What data exists?' Is the data comparable and relevant to the review? Be mindful of student confidentiality in relation to the information provided. Recognise sound and unsound evidence. Make interpretation paramount. Where are the gaps?

The follow model, adapted from the Pendleton model of giving feedback (Pendleton et al. 1984), via Griffith University's Guidelines for Providing Effective Feedback to Peers, may be a useful way to structure the conversation:

Pendleton Structure	Why it is important
Ask your peer how they felt about their educational practice, as outlined in the documents they have provided	This is to establish any emotions surrounding their educational practice. It is important to discuss these at the beginning of the session, prior to giving your feedback.
Ask your peer what they think worked well	This is important as it encourages the educator to reflect on their practice and identify things that they did well. Ask open questions to prompt reflection if they are having difficulty.

Pendleton Structure	Why it is important
Let your peer know what they did well	This is where as the feedback provider you outline the things you have observed that you felt worked well. You will be confirming what they felt had worked well and adding things that they have not mentioned.
Ask your peer what they would do differently next time	This is where their reflection starts to form an action plan as to what could be improved and how. Ask open questions to prompt reflection if they are having difficulty.
Tell your peer your suggestions for improvement	This is where you highlight areas of their practice that they might not be aware are not effective and suggest ways they may improve. Summarise up to three main things that the educator will consider auctioning. It is important to have an action plan at the end of the feedback session. Boud and Molloy (2013) suggest that feedback should not “end in the telling”. Your peer should be involved in developing and agreeing with the plan.

### Activity: Open response reflection

Think about times when you’ve received feedback that was a) respectful and constructive and b) abrasive / unhelpful. What distinguished the two? What would you like to do more of when giving feedback? Less of?

Jot down your responses below:

### Further reading

These resources about providing feedback are mainly from the students’ perspective, however there are many principles that are applicable to giving feedback to peers:

<https://www.uts.edu.au/research-and-teaching/learning-and-teaching/assessment/formative-feedback>

Boud, D., and Molloy E. (2013). *Feedback in Higher and Professional Education: Understanding it and doing it well*. Routledge.

Nicol, D. (2010). From monologue to dialogue: improving written feedback processes in mass higher education. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 35(5), 501-517.

## Peer review of unit outlines

In sound curriculum design, unit intended learning outcomes are aligned to the course learning outcomes through the principle of constructive alignment (Biggs, 1996) where learning outcomes for students are published before teaching takes place.

**Constructive** is linked to the idea that students construct meaning through their active engagement with learning activities which help them to complete assessment tasks and progress towards the intended learning outcomes.

**Alignment** means ensuring that assessment tasks and learning activities are aligned with the intended learning outcomes.

Learning and teaching activities that help students to undertake assessment tasks need to support students to develop the skills, knowledge and capabilities to demonstrate their own level of achievement of the learning outcomes through the assessment tasks.

Reviewers will need to ascertain if the learning outcomes apply to the appropriate AQF level. Consideration should also be given to how the unit learning outcomes apply to different disciplinary and accreditation standards.

You also need to consider the level of the learning outcomes, the level of the unit and the AQF level. The learning outcomes will vary in the degree of difficulty depending on the level of the unit within the degree course. Most institutions have introductory/foundational, intermediate and advanced level units, sometimes referred to as Level 100, 200 or 300.

The topics and nature of the learning activities will vary significantly between disciplines, so it is always important to consider how performance levels are defined, interpreted and assessed in each discipline.

When reviewing a unit outline, you may be considering to what extent all or some of the following have been met:

- Alignment to the overall degree learning outcomes
- Alignment to institutional and / or departmental policies and procedures
- Clear information about learning activities and assessments, processes etc.
- Clarity around why the content of the unit is important for students to understand
- Learning outcomes, activities and assessments are aligned
- A variety of learning activities and assessment tasks
- Learning outcomes for capstones have a relationship to those of previous years and units within the course
- Contemporary and well-sequenced content
- Ways for students to build evaluative judgement, such as peer and self-assessment
- Authentic assessment tasks that are linked to attainment of graduate qualities
- Assessment tasks are progressively developed to scaffold student learning
- Assessment tasks are appropriately weighted and timed
- Level of learning outcomes and assessment tasks are appropriate
- Readings / resources are up to date and inclusive (see Topic 5 later in this module)

- Ways for students to give feedback on their experiences in the unit
- Closing the loop on previous student feedback
- The rubrics provided for the assessment tasks clearly show what unit learning outcomes are being addressed by the task
- By completing the assessment items the students are able to demonstrate their level of performance in relation to the unit learning outcomes

If you are reviewing a proposal for a new unit, you may also be considering:

- Where it fits within the university's suite of offerings
- Attractiveness to students / demand
- Comparability to similar units at other institutions

Keep in mind that you may also be providing feedback in relation to certain criteria, depending on the purpose of the review. For example, in Griffith University's AdvanceHE accredited program 'Curriculum Design for Learning', participants have their curriculum reviewed by a peer-partner with respect to evidence of practice against particular capabilities criteria and also against the UKPSF dimensions. So, you may be provided with a particular framework against which to provide feedback.

### Activity: Open response reflection

Take a look at one of your recent or current unit outlines, and review it using some of the prompts above. Write down your findings below:

## Peer review of assessment

The Higher Education Standards Framework states that: ‘Review and improvement activities include regular external referencing of the success of student cohorts against comparable courses of study, including... the assessment methods and grading of students’ achievement of learning outcomes for selected units of study within courses of study.’

- [Higher Education Standards Framework \(Threshold Standards\) 2015](#), Section 5.3, Part 4b.

Peer review of assessment may involve providing feedback on assessment design and / or on the grading of student work. Peer review of students’ marked work is a verification process, rather than a remarking process.

Wilson, Bedford and Readman (2019) provide some useful questions to consider when providing feedback on assessment design:

- Does the unit outline provide key information on the assessment task/s to assist students to complete the work?
- Is the assessment task clearly designed for what is being learned? What is the word limit? What is the percentage given to each assessment?
- Are assessment tasks progressively developed to scaffold students’ learning?
- Do the assessment tasks appear too difficult for the students? If that is the case, consider the performance being requested and the scaffolds such as resources and guidance that are provided. The latter can make complex tasks feasible. If either or both conditions are not met, the assessment may be overly-ambitious in its scope. Discuss a more realistic framework for the assessment task.
- Are the assessment tasks appropriately weighted? Are they appropriately timed?
- Are the assessment tasks authentically designed? Does the assessment integrate key personal, interpersonal and cognitive capabilities in the discipline along with the appropriate use of relevant competencies?
- Does the assessment task align to the assessment rubric?
- How detailed is the assessment rubric/marking criteria?
- Are the grade descriptors in the rubric clearly outlined for students?
- Are there the appropriate number of performance standard levels in the rubric?
- Does the rubric/marking criteria include clear, positive language?
- Are there links to national discipline standards and professional standards?
- Do the assessment methods validly assess the achievement of the unit learning outcomes?
- Do the assessment tasks communicate clear expectations of students?
- Are the assessment methods effective for the discipline and/or professional context?
- Are all the learning outcomes assessed by a range of assessment tasks? Is there over-assessment of some of the learning outcomes?
- Do the assessment tasks ask students to apply knowledge rather than simply find and present answers?

- Is there an opportunity for students to act on feedback from a task early in the unit before they undertake the next task?
- Do the assessment tasks combine different assessment methods such as a submitted task combined with a presentation, in class or online?

Below are some prompts to consider when providing feedback on how student work has been graded (Wilson, Bedford and Readman, 2019):

- Does the assessment show a mark/grade?
- Do you agree with the grades/marks given?
- Is there consistency in the marking decisions?
- Do the student work samples identify gaps in assessment design?
- Do the student work samples reflect the appropriate mark/grade?
- Are the grade descriptors aligned to the course learning outcomes and unit learning outcomes?
- Are the grade descriptors aligned to the institution's grade descriptors?
- What are the cut-off scores for assessment grades?
- Do the assessor/s allocate points when they make judgements?
- How do they use the assessment rubric?
- As well as the grade/mark, what qualitative feedback is given to students?
- Do the grades awarded to the students reflect the quality, breadth and depth of the students' performance?
- Are there any cases of grade inflation?

## Activity: Open response reflection

Watch the video below (10 minutes long) about an assessment calibration activity undertaken in a group setting.



<https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/achievement-matters-project-calibration-accounting-education-australia>

Reflect on the challenges of reaching consensus on grading. Write down your thoughts on your understanding of those challenges might influence how you give feedback on a peer's grading:

## Peer review of degree program proposals

As an experienced educator, you may sometimes be requested to provide feedback on a proposal for a new degree, perhaps as part of your role on a Learning and Teaching or Course Approval Committee. You will likely be given a set of criteria against which to assess the proposal.

The questions below, adapted from Totté, Huyghe & Verhagen (2013), Sheffield Hallam University (2014), and Fung (2017), may serve as useful additional prompts:

- Does the description of the educational purposes and instructional philosophy that underlie curriculum decisions reflect the vision and mission of the institution?
- Is the proposed program at a suitable AQF level?
- Are the units sequenced and structured together to form a coherent program of study?
- Has the degree been designed with substantive input from the discipline, the research community, employers, students and alumni?
- Have any accreditation requirements been taken into account?
- Have institutional resources been taken into account (e.g. facilities for teaching, organisational infrastructure, staffing, staff/student ratio, resources for students)?
- Have student characteristics been considered? E.g. student selection, characteristics of incoming students, diverse background of students (such previous knowledge, experience or degrees, equity considerations)
- Are there any gaps in the proposed program or overlaps with existing offerings?
- Will students be prepared for employment or career enhancement through the development of relevant skills?
- Are a range of learning, teaching and assessment methods and approaches provided?
- Are students supported to develop a clear picture / narrative of their overall learning journey and to analyse their personal progress and future goals?
- Does the progression of student assessments, in terms of the content of what is being assessed, look 'joined up'?
- Is the pattern and timing of assessments such that students can receive constructive feedback on formative activities before being summatively tested to allocate marks or grades?
- Is there a clear rationale for structure in terms of increasing levels of difficulty through the phases of the program?
- Are students explicitly challenged to make intellectual connections between different elements of their program?
- Are students required to make explicit connections between disciplinary perspectives?
- Do students have explicit opportunities to prepare for the workplace?

### Activity: Open response reflection

If you have previously had any experience of reviewing degree proposals, jot down your reflections. What went well? What would you do differently next time? How might the process be improved?

If you have not reviewed any degree proposals, find a colleague who has, and ask them these questions.

## Inclusivity

*'Curriculum frames knowledges in particular ways. Some frames are visible, while others are not'* (Anwaruddin, 2016, p. 433).

Many Australian universities are 'embedding Indigenous knowledge and knowledge systems as a core element in all curriculum, exposing all students to Indigenous-specific content and context, and promote a positive sense of Aboriginal culture and heritage' (Universities Australia, 2019, p. 41).

When reviewing curricula, it is important to consider what knowledges are framed. Here are some prompts you might consider when reviewing curricula:

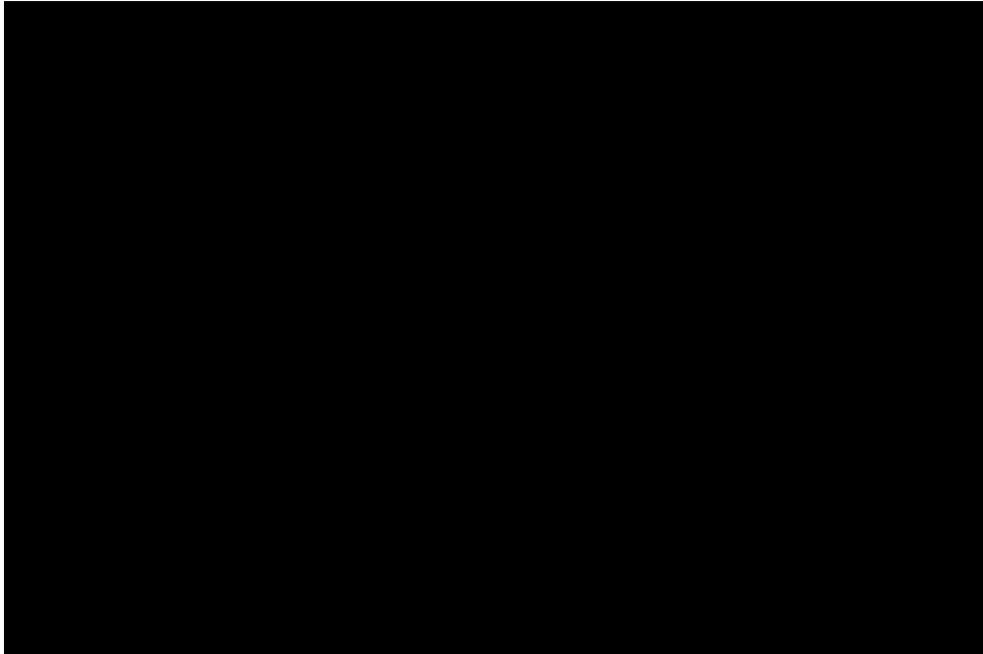
- What sources are used?
- Are there a range of perspectives?
- Do sources reflect scholars from a diverse range of backgrounds?
- What is the gender balance of the sources?
- Are there learning activities that enable students to reflect on diverse perspectives?
- Are there assessments that encourage students to reflect on or incorporate diverse perspectives?
- Is the integration of Indigenous content in curricula both horizontal and vertical? I.e. are issues and concepts introduced in foundational units revisited and integrated into units taken later in the course?
- Are there a wide range of teaching and learning strategies, including the use of authentic case studies?
- Are there reflection and self-awareness activities that provide opportunities for students to explore their understanding of their own cultural values and attitudes?

(Some prompts adapted from Universities Australia, 2011).

### Activity: Open response reflection

Watch one or both of these short videos.

The first video (5:12) shows Kerry Bodle from Griffith University describing how cultural knowledges were embedded in a business course:

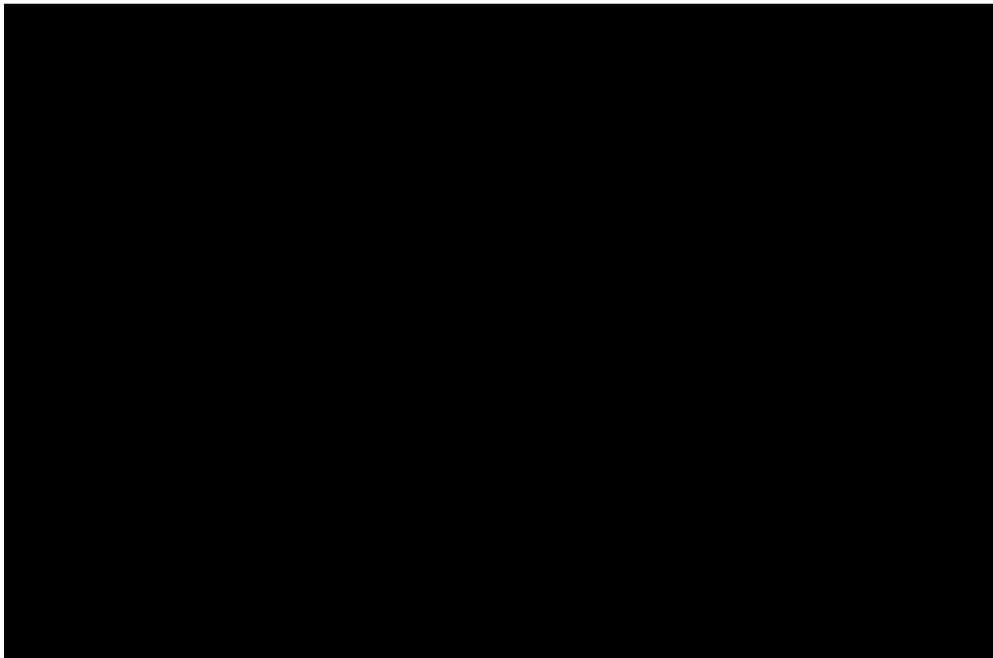


<https://youtu.be/ooAIBQeHEHo>

There is further information about the curriculum design available here

<https://app.secure.griffith.edu.au/exInt/entry/4845/view>

The second video [6:08] shows Brydie-Leigh Bartleet from Griffith University explaining how students were connected to First Peoples communities through collaborative music making.



<https://youtu.be/uM1SkfPchf4>

There is further information about the curriculum design available here

<https://app.secure.griffith.edu.au/exInt/entry/6205/view>

Reflect below on your response to the video/s.

- What do you consider to be the challenges of designing a curriculum that reflects a variety of knowledges?
- Do you know of any examples from your institution where a unit or program has been successfully redesigned to consider diverse sources of knowledge?
- Who might you ask to find out more?

## Reflecting on and collecting evidence about peer review

Here is some feedback from a reviewer in the IRU calibration process:

*It is an excellent process. Evaluating a significant piece of assessment within the context of the subject as a whole and the learning outcomes allows for a thorough evaluation of the task. It encourages reflective practice in that it actually facilitates the assessor in subsequently reviewing their own subject so it has a 'dual effect' even though only one subject is officially evaluated. It enables me to reflect on the assessment in my equivalent subjects in terms of its learning outcomes, assessment process and grading of students' work.*

Below are some questions for reflection once you have completed a review (adapted from Wilson, Bedford, & Readman, 2019)

- Was the process worthwhile?
- Has your experience as a reviewer changed anything in your approach to curriculum design?
- What have you learned about giving feedback to others?
- What would you change the next time you provide peer feedback?
- Is there anything more you'd like to learn about peer review of curriculum (e.g. formal or informal professional learning)?
- What would you change about the process that you were involved in? Please consider providing this feedback to whoever is leading the process, so that enhancements can be made if possible.

### Collecting evidence

Make sure you keep a record of your reviews, and any feedback that you receive from your reviewee. If you are not already a calibrator for the IRU, you may wish to extend your expertise by applying to become a calibrator and gaining experience of external peer review.

Being a peer reviewer is part of service to the discipline / university, and so may form part of the evidence for promotion and job applications and / or applications for AdvanceHE Fellowship (where it fits dimension K6 of the UKPSF - *The implications of quality assurance and quality enhancement for academic and professional practice with a particular focus on teaching*).

You might consider contacting your reviewee after some time has passed (e.g. a semester) to see if your feedback has led to any changes in their practice.

## Activity: Closed response reflection

Which of the following next steps towards peer review of curriculum do you intend to take?

Next steps	This applies to me
I feel better prepared to undertake a peer review	
I will talk to a colleague who has already engaged in peer review of curriculum to learn more about their experiences	
I'm going to do some more reading and thinking on this topic	
I'm going to check out the External Peer Review of Assessment resource – there is an example unit and graded assessments, with annotated peer feedback. Available from <a href="https://hdl.handle.net/1959.7/uws:53024">https://hdl.handle.net/1959.7/uws:53024</a>	
I'm going to contact the Learning Futures team to find out more (change as per your institution)	
I'm going to apply to become a calibrator for the IRU calibration process	
I'm going to collect some evidence about my past reviews	

## Summing up

By completing this module, you have gained an understanding of the principles of giving feedback, the different types of peer review of curriculum, and the importance of considering inclusivity. You have also prepared a plan for your next steps. We wish you all the best with your future peer reviews.

(Design note: You may want to include a brief feedback survey about the module, so we can make improvements in future. E.g. Was this useful? How would you rate the module on a scale of 1 to 10? What were the best aspects? Do you have any suggestions for improvement?)

## Glossary

This glossary has been adapted from Wilson, Bedford, & Readman (2019).

Term	Definition
Academic standards	An agreed specification (such as a defined benchmark or indicator) that is used as a definition of a level of performance or achievement, rule or guideline. Standards may apply to academic outcomes, such as student or graduate achievement of disciplinary knowledge and core discipline skills (known as learning outcomes), or to academic processes such as student selection, teaching, research supervision, and assessment.
Assessment	A process to determine a student's achievement of intended learning outcomes which may include a range of written and oral methods and practice or demonstration. It is expected to fairly, validly and reliably measure student performance of intended learning outcomes. Valid assessment refers to the explicit and clear alignment between intended learning outcomes and the assessment methods used to measure student achievement of those outcomes.
Assessment task	Illustrative task or performance opportunity that closely targets learning outcomes, allowing students to demonstrate their learning and capabilities.
Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF)	The AQF is the national policy for regulated qualifications in Australian education and training. It incorporates the qualifications from each education and training sector into a single comprehensive national qualifications framework.
Calibration	Calibration is a process of peer review carried out by members of a disciplinary and / or professional community who typically discuss, review and compare student work in order to reach a shared understanding of the academic standard which such work needs to meet.
Consensus moderation	The process used to ensure comparability and equivalence of assessment practices within units and courses. Consensus moderation includes examination of the validity and reliability of assessment results and can be broadly defined as peer review that results in calibration and consensus being achieved.

Constructive alignment	When intended learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities and assessment tasks are aligned, based on a constructivist view of learning.
Course	A collection of units of study leading to an award or qualification. Also called Program.
Course Learning Outcomes	These are the expression of the set of knowledge, skills and the application of knowledge and skills a student has acquired and is able to demonstrate as a result of learning across the whole course.
External peer review of assessment	The practice of colleagues giving and receiving feedback on one another's unit / subject outlines, assessment tasks and marking criteria. It may involve providing feedback on assessment design and / or on the grading of student work.
External referencing	A process through which a higher education provider compares an aspect of its operations with an external comparator/s e.g. comparing the design of a unit of study and / or student achievement of learning outcomes with that of a course from another provider.
Performance standard	Specific standards of student performance as required in an assessment task
Rubric	A tool designed to measure the level of student achievement against consistent criteria and to award scored and / or graded outcomes.
Unit	Also known as unit of study. A single component of a qualification, or a stand-alone unit, that has been approved / accredited. May also be known as a topic, subject, course or module.
Unit learning outcomes	These are the expression of the set of knowledge, skills and the application of the knowledge and skills a student has acquired and is able to demonstrate as a result of learning in an individual unit.

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