Quality Verification System
Review of HSTY2690 Australia's Underworld: Stories and Methods

An external assessor – a senior History academic from another Go8 university – reviewed a sample of marked assessment items awarded grades of Below Pass, Pass, Credit, Distinction, High Distinction in the Unit HSTY 2634.

Below are his ratings of the extent to which he agreed with the level of grade awarded. For all the grades there was agreement with the grades awarded.

History response: The Sydney history department thanks the reviewer for their thoughtful and valuable comments. We would like to make several points about local policies or practices that are relevant to the reviewer’s comments, and about the fit between the review process and the department’s curriculum. See below for comments.

Subject Review Coversheet
(Prepare one of these reports for each subject or capstone project reviewed)

| Go8 University: University of Sydney               |
| Field of Education: History                       |
| Subject reviewed (Subject Code): HSTY2690 Australia’s Underworld: Stories and Methods |
| Sample size (number of student work assessed): 20 Research Essays |

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<tr>
<th>Number of assessments</th>
<th>Below Pass</th>
<th>Pass</th>
<th>Credit</th>
<th>Distinction</th>
<th>High Distinction</th>
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<tr>
<td>Reviewed in total</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Agree with grade awarded</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Believe grade awarded to be unduly high</td>
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<td>Believe grade awarded to be unduly low</td>
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Please tick one of the following three options for your overall summary judgement of the subject you have reviewed

The learning outcomes, assessment tasks and assessment processes set for the subject I have reviewed were appropriate.

Any recommendations made are for the purposes of enhancement to the subject and its assessment.

The learning outcomes, assessment tasks and assessment processes set for the subject I have reviewed were appropriate.

HOWEVER, there are some risks to the future quality assurance of the subject and its assessment, as outlined in my recommendations.

There are immediate concerns or risks relating to the learning outcomes, assessment tasks and/or assessment processes set for the subject I have reviewed.

These require immediate action on behalf of the University to prevent reoccurrence in the next review.

Comments (optional)
If you wish, please include further comments which may be used by the associated Faculty or Department in its marketing materials.

Not Applicable

1 Adapted from the University of Cambridge’s Report Coversheet for External Examiners (2009), retrieved 10 May, 2011, from http://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/offices/education/examiners/eecoversheet.pdf
Review of specified learning objectives
1. To what extent is the information provided about learning objectives clear and sufficient? (Please mark the box that best represents your view).

Not at all ⃝ Somewhat ⃝ Adequately ✓ Very Well ⃝ Completely ⃝

The faculty/university generic objectives were duly noted. Specific guidance regarding the research project and its aims was very good, clear and sufficient.

2. To what extent are the specified learning objectives appropriate for a final year subject? (Please mark the box that best represents your view).

Not at all ⃝ Somewhat ⃝ Adequately ✓ Very Well ⃝ Completely ⃝

A course focused on developing research skills achieved principally through a guided research project is an appropriate task for a final year (or Upper Level) course.

3. How do the specified learning objectives compare with those of final year subjects from similar universities?

Most final year (or Upper level) subjects put a focus on research skills and working with primary sources, however, making it effectively the sole piece of assessable work in the course is probably unusual.

History response: The reviewer was obliged to comment on the appropriateness of learning outcomes for a final-year course, but the Department of History does not have final-year courses, as we explained in the lead-up to the exercise.

Review of assessment tasks
1. To what extent are the assessment tasks suitable for the specified learning objectives? (Please mark the box that best represents your view).

Not at all ⃝ Somewhat ⃝ Adequately ✓ Very Well ⃝ Completely ⃝

The assessment tasks are entirely appropriate for the learning objectives. The course guide makes clear that the primary intention of the course is to develop the students’ skill in the conduct of independent research, to enhance their understanding of the necessary conceptual and methodological issues, and to improve their capacity to critically reflect upon and improve their scholarly writing. I am parroting this from the course guide, but it does distil the critical skills that an Upper level course like this should endeavor to teach. The assessment tasks are all directed at giving the students a chance to develop those skills. The tutorials provide exemplars for the students’ own projects, and they are an opportunity to discuss and reflect upon the important conceptual and methodological issues they need to understand. The assessment tasks are almost entirely focused on a single research project which is made up of a 500 word Research Proposal and the 4000 word Research Essay. This is an appropriate way to develop the ‘specified learning objectives’ that have been outlined.
2. To what extent are the assessment requirements and the marking criteria explained clearly? (Please mark the box that best represents your view).

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The generic assessment requirements and marking criteria of the institution are all effectively explained, more importantly the expectations specific to the work undertaken in the course are carefully explained. The students should be in no doubt about what is expected of them.

3. To what extent are the assessment tasks and the marking criteria appropriate for a final year subject? (Please mark the box that best represents your view).

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As indicated above, the assessment tasks and marking criteria are appropriate for a final year (or Upper level) subject. By this stage of their studies students should already have a basic understanding of historical skills and methods and should be given an opportunity to put them into practice. It is entirely appropriate that they be given the challenge of writing history, rather than just reading history, or writing about reading it. The assessment tasks guide them through the various dimensions of this process and the marking criteria clearly spell out what the examiners are looking for.

My single concern is the extent to which their final result effectively hinges on ONE piece of work: a very brief research proposal (500 words/10%) and a long research essay (4000 words/80%). This is unusual for either 3rd year or Upper level subjects. It is what one might expect of a Capstone course, but even then, I would regard it as an unusual degree of concentration. By this stage of their studies students should already have a basic understanding of historical skills and methods and should be given an opportunity to put them into practice. It is entirely appropriate that they be given the challenge of writing history, rather than just reading history, or writing about reading it. The assessment tasks guide them through the various dimensions of this process and the marking criteria clearly spell out what the examiners are looking for.

Experience tells me that primary research essays such as this, where the student is essentially expected to produce an original piece of research, can produce quite polarized results: the good students tend to do very well while the poorer students can flounder. The essays themselves tended to indicate this. The very best essays were superb, beautifully written, impressively researched and well contextualised. The poorer essays (and this accords with my own experience) either floundered when faced with the challenge of using primary sources, or were not genuinely based on primary sources. I note that the spread of grades tended toward the higher end of the scale, but I would expect this in a course where the students are extensively ‘tutored’ in the development of the project.

Bearing these significant reservations in mind I was nonetheless impressed by the guidance given to the students. There was a very detailed – week by week – timeline guiding students through the stages of the research and writing process. It is made clear, for instance, that students should have their research proposal completed by week 5, and a first draft ready by the end of week 9. It is made very clear that students are given constant guidance, in both lecture and tutorials, regarding the general issues they will confront but also guidance specific to their individual projects.

This gives rise to an issue that benchmarking exercises such as this are not necessarily very good at capturing; the degree of informal, sometimes spontaneous, ‘learning and teaching’ that occurs. While teachers make every effort to put in writing clear instructions and advice about tasks and objectives, issues will often arise as a course progresses which need to be addressed. It may become apparent, for instance, that some students don’t quite understand what a ‘literature survey’ entails, so this may become the subject of discussion in a lecture or tutorial. It is not captured in the course guide, but it exists in the real world. This is especially the sort of thing that occurs in courses such as this where the focus is on formative rather than summative knowledge.

I would note, by the way, that the batch of essays I received included a marked up draft of one essay, along with a final draft. It wasn’t indicated in the course guide (unless I missed it) that the teachers would review drafts, simply that they would be discussed in class, but apparently this was done (at least in some cases?). I was impressed by the written feedback provided to the students.
History response: The reviewer's 'single concern' about HSTY 2690 was that the extent to which students’ final result ‘effectively hinges on ONE piece of work’. However, under our Faculty’s rules, 6000 words is the maximum we can ask of students in a unit, and the value of each assessment has to be proportionate to the fraction of the total wordage it accounts for. Consequently, an essay of the length set for the major assessment in 2690 had to be worth most of the unit’s final mark.

4. How do the assessment tasks and the marking criteria compare with those of final year subjects from similar universities?

With its focus on the development of research and writing skills, the assessment and marking criteria are comparable to those of similar universities, although I think it is unusual that so much of a student’s final grade is determined by a single piece of work. More commonly, the students would be expected to submit a short essay first, to provide the teachers with an opportunity to give the students some initial feedback on the standard of their work, alert them to issues that they might need to address, and spread their assessment over a broader array of tasks. In this instance, however, that is compensated for by the level of guidance that is provided in lectures and tutorials during the course.