Assessment in Practice

The Peer Review Portal:
Using an Online College of Peers Network and Collaborator Role for Reporting Professional Accreditation, Course Accreditation and Assessment Activity

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A recent review of professional accreditation practices in Australian higher education put forward an option for improving efficiency as well as reducing the regulatory burden in Australia, that is, 'Efficiencies could be achieved if an online tool could be developed and made available for use by all accrediting agencies at low or no cost' (KPMG, 2017, p.99). At the same time of this review, there was a national review of 14 disciplines in the Health profession (Woods, 2017), which noted that the 'development of a single portal would be beneficial, [and] wider use of electronic reporting opens the possibility of a more holistic and unified approach to accreditation reporting' (Woods, 2017, p.71). In addition to these reviews, three national research projects on assuring learning outcomes and improved assessment practices also recommended access to online tools that were cost effective, efficient and secure (Booth, et al., 2015; Freeman & Ewan, 2015; Scott 2016).

This article will provide a brief overview on how to use the online Peer Review Portal to support professional accreditation, course accreditation and other review activity. The Portal was first introduced at a Universities Australia event (March 3, 2017) and it now has over 145 registered higher education institutions and over 615 registered reviewers [as of 12/02/18]. The Portal's motto is to 'support, connect and advance your institution through peer review' [See Figure 1]. The Peer Review Portal [https://www.peerreviewportal.com] was conceptually developed in 2016 by Cyberdesign Works, a small IT company in Sydney in partnership with Online Peer Solutions, a registered company focused on investing in the higher sector with the aim of creating a trust fund to give back to the sector.
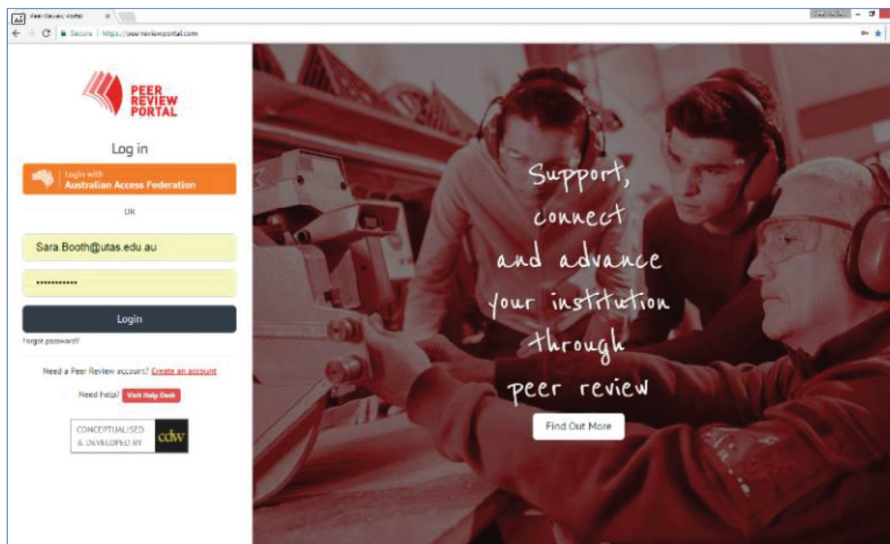
Figure 1. Peer Review Portal

With the release of a revised Higher Education Standards Framework (2015) on January 1, 2017, all higher education providers in Australia are required to demonstrate evidence of external referencing, accreditation and peer review activity with the regulator, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA). As a single state-university, the University of Tasmania (UTAS) has led the development of the Peer Review Portal for its own institutional purposes and strategic needs to find comparable national and international partners.

Five system requirements were flagged in the initial development of a proof-of-concept for the Peer Review Portal:

1. It had to be accessible, secure and flexible enough for varied institutional contexts, different types of review, diverse disciplines and countries;
2. It had to be cost effective and efficient for different sized institutions, depending on their institutional capacity and need;
3. It required a shared, collaborative approach to individual, institutional and cross-institutional reporting and monitoring;
4. It had to include the ability to upload a range of evidence and documentation, including student work samples; and
5. It had to include an online College of Peers Network and broadcast function for seeking reviewers and providing professional learning opportunities.

Paul Ramsden (2007) first coined the phrase 'College of Peers' to refer to the development of new systems to ensure comparability of standards, not only within disciplines but across them which included meetings with academics to come to a shared understanding of standards. The Peer Review Portal has a unique broadcast function which enables individuals and institutions to seek reviewers for their review projects on an online College of Peers Network. See an example of a broadcast function below (Figure 2).

A new Assessment: Inputs/outputs project might interest you.

Project Info

Project Type: Assessment: Inputs/outputs
Institution: University of Tasmania (Faculty of Science, Engineering & Technology)
Course name: Undergraduate (BSc) units / KEA342 Applied Geophysics
Field of education: Natural And Physical Sciences / Earth Sciences
Classification: BACHELOR DEGREE LEVEL / Bachelor Degree Level / Bachelor (Honours) Degree

Hi reviewers/institution coordinators,
Our course team in Earth Sciences has unit ready for review. KEA342: Applied Geophysics. Please let me know if you are able to undertake the review if this is your discipline or can pass this information onto a colleague. The review should take one hour to complete and you will receive a letter of acknowledgement for undertaking the review.
Best wishes, Sara

UTAS Course Handbook Information
KEA342 involves a series of lectures, practical work and geophysical field surveys, which include the integration of data, interpretation of results and the preparation of reports. The unit covers in detail seismic, gravity, magnetic, electrical and electromagnetic methods in geophysics and introduces topics of manual and automated data integration and analysis. Recommended for students planning a career in geophysics, mineral exploration or environmental geoscience.

Primary Contact Person

Dr Sara Booth

Figure 2. Example of a broadcast on the Peer Review Portal

The Peer Review Portal has a unique broadcast function which enables individuals and institutions to seek reviewers for their review projects on an online College of Peers Network.

The costs for the Peer Review Portal is AUD $90 +GST (Australian institutions only) per review project which is about US $70. Review Projects can be paid either by individual project or on a subscription basis [25 review projects or more]. The Portal is both a cost effective as well as a cost-benefit solution for professional accreditation, course accreditation and review.

KEY FEATURES OF THE PORTAL

The Peer Review Portal has a seven-step workflow process outlined in Figure 3. These seven key steps include: 1) Setting up and monitoring the review project; 2) Adding applicants to upload self-review material and evidence; 3) Paying for the review project; 4) Adding collaborators and reviewers to be part of the review; 5) Sending out a broadcast message to the online community on the Portal seeking collaborators and reviewers for the review; 6) The review panel or team completes the review and calibrates the results of the review; and 7) review projects are regularly monitored with completed reports downloadable for reporting purposes.
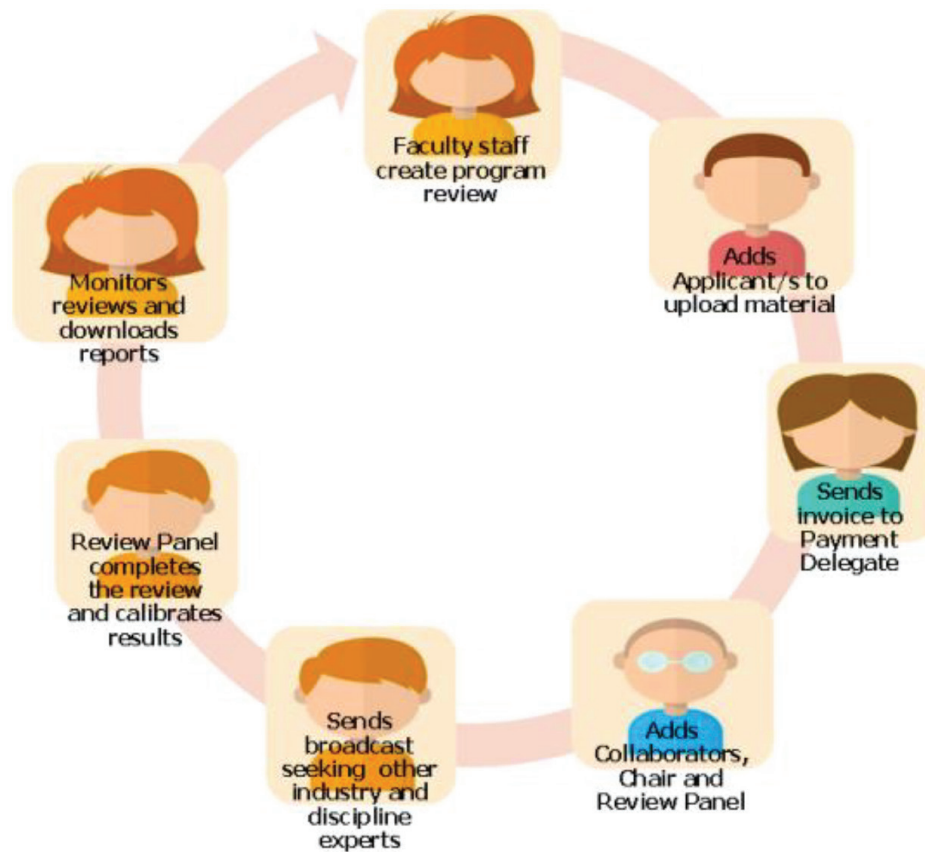
Figure 3. Seven-step workflow process on the Peer Review Portal

College of Peers refers to the development of new systems to ensure comparability of standards, not only within disciplines but across them which included meetings with academics to come to a shared understanding of standards.

To complement this seven-step workflow process, the Portal has a Dashboard and three Review Categories down its red sidebar [My Projects, My Collaborations and My Reviews] [see Figure 4]. The Review Categories are explicitly linked to the purpose of the review and the five roles on the Portal.
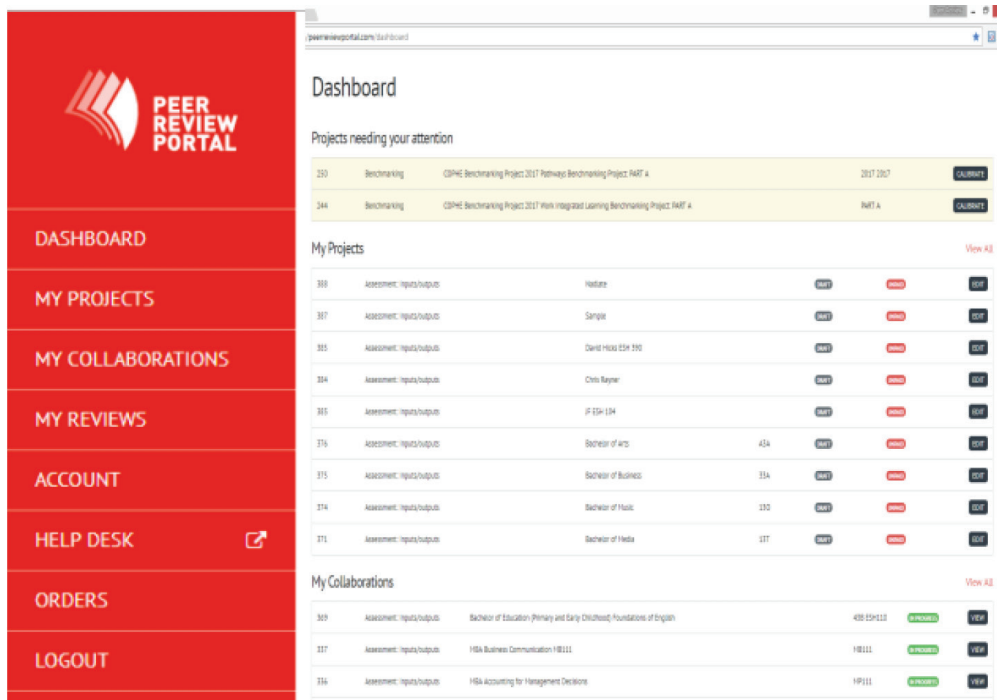
Figure 4. Peer Review Portal Dashboard and Review Categories

FOUR REVIEW PROJECT TYPES

There currently are four review project types on the Peer Review Portal: Assessment Inputs/Outputs; Program Review; Benchmarking and Professional Body Review [coming in 2018] [see Figure 5 below]. Program Review can support professional accreditation and course accreditation. One can visit the Help Desk to find presentations on each of the first three review project types: https://peerreviewportal.freshdesk.com/support/home

Figure 5. Review Project Types

FIVE ROLES ON THE PEER REVIEW PORTAL

There are five roles on the Peer Review Portal: Project Owner, Collaborator, Applicant, Reviewer/Panel/Chair, and Payment Delegate.

1. **Project Owner**
   Faculty and professional staff responsible for organizing reviews [for e.g. program/course accreditation, professional accreditation or review of assessment inputs/outputs] act as the 'Project Owner'. They are responsible for setting up the review project; monitoring and reporting on the review to others *within their institution and across other institutions they are working with*. The Project Owner can invite as many collaborators and reviewers [including Chair and Panel members] to be part of the review project as they want at no extra cost. There can only one Project Owner, however, project ownership will in the near future be transferable [particularly when staff leave a position or a project].

   The Project Owner can take on a number of roles at the same time: Reviewer [including Chair and Panel members], Applicant, and Payment Delegate. An institution can have multiple project owners across all faculties and departments. Each institution can also appoint an institutional administrator for all review projects on the Portal as well as faculty coordinators.

2. Collaborator

The role of the Collaborator, is in essence a *co-partnership with the Project Owner in the review project*. The Project Owner invites the Collaborator to be part of the review project. The Collaborator can be an internal or external contact/s and *they essentially can view all review projects they have been invited to which are in progress or have been completed.*

The collaborator role enables institutions or professional organizations to add faculty or professional staff that have discipline, faculty, or institutional oversight for review projects [such as professional accreditation or program accreditation reviews]. This role also enables professional bodies and industry partners to keep institutional data on their discipline and programs both nationally and internationally [See Figure 6].
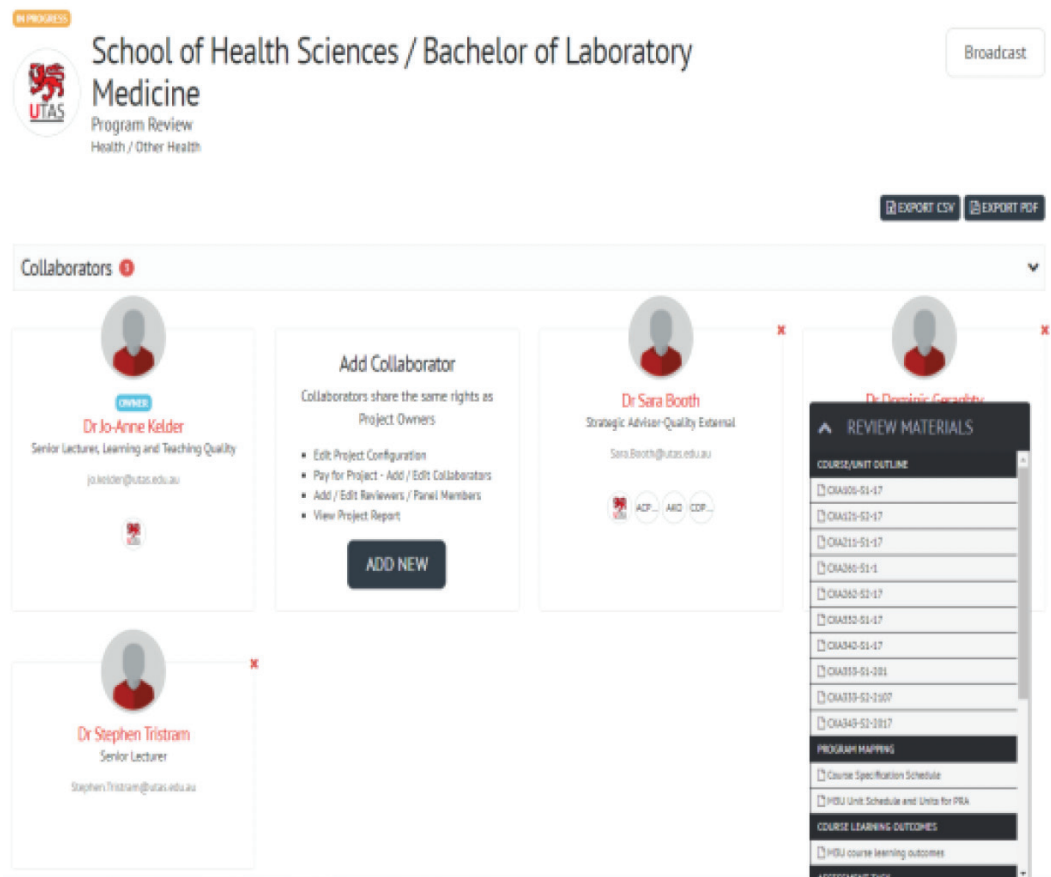
3. Applicant

The applicant receives an email to upload evidence for the review project. They can only access the project upload page on the review project.

4. Payment Delegate

Review projects must be flagged paid by the Payment Delegate before you can add collaborators and reviewers. The Payment Delegate receives an email to pay for the review project.
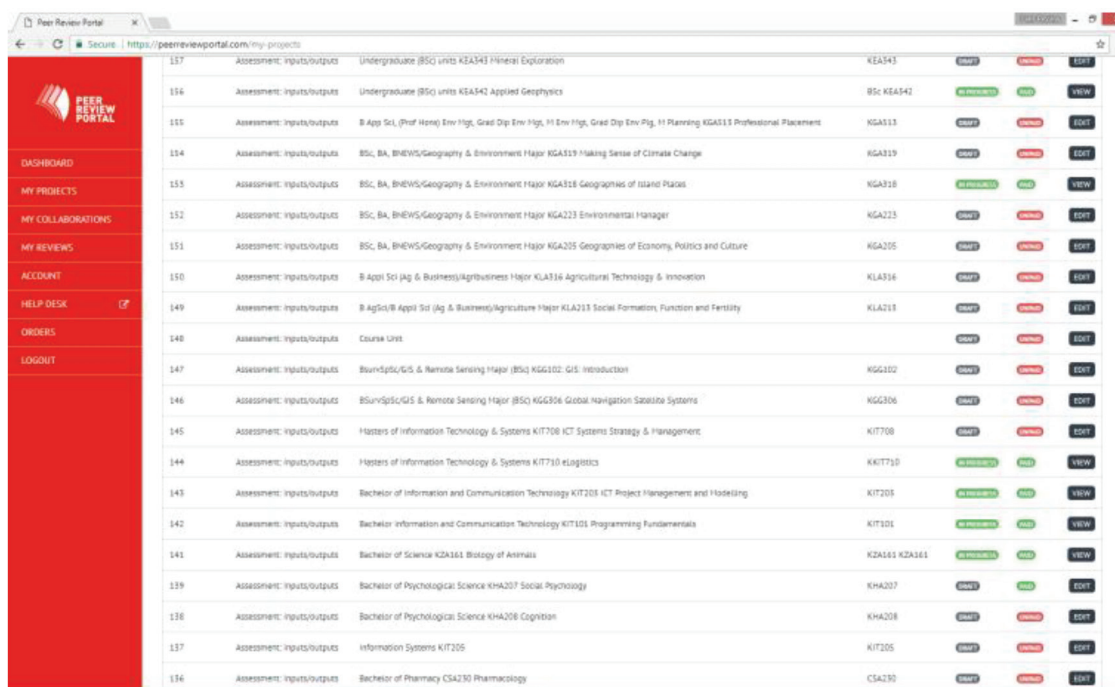
5. **Reviewer [including Chair and Review Panel]**
   A reviewer accepts the invitation to do the review and undertakes the review. A review project can have as many reviewers as required [at no extra cost]. Results are recorded individually and collectively. Reviewers can be students, faculty staff, industry representatives or disciplinary peers and quality assurance agencies.

PEER REVIEW PORTAL CAN BE USED FOR CURRICULUM REVIEW, ACCREDITATION, AND EXTERNAL REFERENCING

The Peer Review Portal can be used by higher education institutions and professional organizations in three ways: 1) as a virtual internal curriculum review system; 2) as a virtual external accreditation review system; and 3) an external referencing system [see Figure 7].

Figure 7. Institutional and cross institutional reporting

VIRTUAL INTERNAL CURRICULUM REVIEW SYSTEM

To explain in more detail, all data on the Portal is stored on a secure server within an Australian data warehouse. The security of each institution's data and intellectual property is paramount to the design of the Portal. All communication between Portal users' web browsers and an Australian data warehouse is encrypted over secure https connections. Using secure http connections, the Portal can, via the Collaborator role, enable higher education institutions to set up a 'virtual internal curriculum review system' for their institution without the significant costs of building an internal curriculum management system or the need to spend more money to upgrade an existing curriculum review system. A number of Australian universities [University of Canberra, Curtin University and James Cook University (Lasen et.al, 2017)] are adopting the Peer Review Portal as their primary internal curriculum review system.

The Peer Review Portal can be used as a virtual internal curriculum review system, as a virtual external accreditation review system, and as an external referencing system.

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VIRTUAL EXTERNAL ACCREDITATION SYSTEM

Another key review function on the Portal, through the Collaborator role, is enabling a higher education institution to record and report, both internally and externally, on all external professional accreditation activity with the various professional accreditation councils, associations and industry bodies. This increasingly complex accreditation process can be captured in the Portal which enables institutions to add various bodies and individuals (via the roles of the Collaborator and Reviewer) to the accreditation review process but also provide 'cross-institutional reporting' for each participating organization. As long as the institution sets up all accreditation review projects and these review projects are paid for, then *the institution and the professional body can monitor and report all accreditation activity across that institution and professional body*.

EXTERNAL REFERENCING SYSTEM

To enable institutions to compare and calibrate academic standards and processes, through the Collaborator role, institutions are able to record and report on all external referencing activity [such as external examiners, peer review of assessment, teaching quality, and broader institutional benchmarking activities]. For example, the Portal was used for two national benchmarking reviews in 2017 [Australian Council for Private Education and Training and the Council of Private Higher Education] involving 38 private providers, which required only one person to calibrate and collate all review material for both national projects.

CONCLUSION

This brief article has demonstrated that the Peer Review Portal is able to support, connect and advance higher education institutions, professional organizations and individuals in professional accreditation, course accreditation and review activity in a cost effective as well as a cost-benefit exercise. The strength of the Portal lies in its growing online Peer Review Portal Network community and the Collaborator function which enables cross-institutional and institutional reporting. A keynote presentation by Emeritus Professor Chris Rust (2017), at the inaugural Australian Assessment and Review Summit, emphasized the important role of collaboration through the role of the critical friend and professional communities of practice in assuring and calibrating professional standards. The portal allows such opportunities to occur.

The strength of the Portal lies in its growing online Peer Review Portal Network community and the Collaborator function which enables cross-institutional and institutional reporting.

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