

Faculty Board of Biology Guidance to Examiners on Double Marking

The following guidance is issued by the Faculty Board of Biology for Senior Examiners in the MVST and NST.

In line with QAA guidance, it is the Faculty Board's expectation that, in the assessment of student work, particular care will be taken to make certain that common standards are applied across all elements of the examinations and across all candidates. Examiners should ensure that

- assessment is undertaken consistently to ensure that standards are set and maintained at an appropriate level and that the learning outcomes are properly considered;
- assessment does not treat any candidate less fairly than another on the grounds of sex (including gender reassignment), marital or parental status, race, ethnic or national origin, age, colour, disability, sexual orientation or religion;
- the principles, procedures and processes of all assessment are explicit, valid, and reliable as far as possible;
- there are robust mechanisms for marking and for the moderation of marks and that assessment is conducted with rigour and fairness and with due regard for security.

There are several ways in which to ensure comparability between markers and/or between candidates; not all of them are appropriate for all forms of assessment and the impact of any one method will depend, in part, on the number of candidates being assessed.

1. Marking criteria

The Faculty Board have issued detailed qualitative criteria for the marking of tripos essays (see <https://www.biology.cam.ac.uk/exams/raven/markings-tripos>) and dissertations (see <https://www.biology.cam.ac.uk/exams/raven/markings-diss>). These guidelines are intended to ensure that subjective interpretation is kept to a minimum, and should be issued to all Examiners and Assessors.

2. Double marking

Blind double marking is currently commonly used, especially at Part II, and is seen as a safe way of ensuring academic judgements are absolute and reliable. However, with large numbers of candidates, double marking is extremely burdensome. There is evidence that it can be just as effective for a second marker to provide a moderating function by marking a sample of scripts, rather than double marking all scripts, and the Faculty Board recommend that examiners consider whether this would be appropriate for their particular examination.

In considering whether to double mark all, or a selection, of scripts, examiners should bear in mind that with double marking of all scripts, in cases when two markers disagree, the process of discussion tends to result in averaging of marks, so moving marks closer to the mean. Furthermore, double making can tend to result in both

markers being initially conservative and less likely to use an extreme mark, so reducing the probability that high marks will be awarded.

Guidance issued by the Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN)¹ is that self-consistency is more important than inter-assessor consistency. If self-consistency is high, marks can be adjusted by appropriate scaling. However, if it is low then no amount of statistical manipulation can improve reliability. The moderator's role would be to check the self-consistency of the marker.

The Faculty Board do not wish to be prescriptive. They agree, however, that examiners should consider whether the benefits of double marking match the effort required. If double marking is used it is imperative that Examiners and Assessors have clear guidelines over what further action is necessary if marking discrepancies arise.

3. Other mechanisms for ensuring consistency in marking

There are other mechanisms available for ensuring standards including the use of outline or model answers, statistical analysis of marking patterns of individual markers, and vivas. The appropriateness of these will depend of the type of questions, level and number of candidates. The active use of an archive of scripts (suitably anonymised) might also help to ensure standards are maintained year on year, and could be useful in the training of new examiners and assessors.

Faculty Board of Biology
26 October 2015

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¹ The LTSN Generic Centre – Assessment Series 2001 No. 3: Assessment: A Guide for Lecturers (ISBN 1-904190-00-6)