

Feedback on academic performance and progression

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1. What constitutes feedback?

Two forms of assessment are carried out in Cambridge:

- i. **Formative assessment** informs future academic performance although the activity does not usually count towards the marks for an award. The main form of formative assessment at Cambridge is the work undertaken in undergraduate supervisions, but it is also provided through practical, project and dissertation work.
- ii. **Summative assessment** measures attainment, understanding or achievement at a particular time and contributes towards the award that students receive. This is the primary form of assessment carried out by the University.

a. College-based feedback methods for formative assessment

The supervision system¹

The supervision system provides opportunities for formative feedback. Supervisions provide an opportunity for students to discuss their strengths and weaknesses and to review progress on a weekly basis.

Supervisors can use a number of techniques to informally assess students' performance, for example:

- discussion;
- set essays;
- worked examples;
- peer group work;
- timed essays;
- identifying appropriate Tripos papers and questions;
- presentations;
- reviewing submitted work.

The format of supervisions varies between subject areas and Colleges, and the resulting feedback differs accordingly. However, the Senior Tutors' Committee recommends that all feedback and reports arising from supervisions should:

- a. enable students to understand what is required to improve or enhance their work;
- b. give students a sense of how they are performing relative to the rest of the cohort.

The success of this approach depends on supervisors being well integrated into the faculty or department's shared understanding of standards and expectations.

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¹ The supervision systems for undergraduates and postgraduates are different. Postgraduate students are supervised within their Faculty or Department, normally on an individual basis, and there is no College involvement. The guidance given here relates primarily to undergraduate students although some of the ideas would also be appropriate for postgraduates.

Supervisors can:

- * attend one of CPPD's training sessions for supervisors (these include induction courses for new supervisors and sessions for experienced supervisors on supervising more effectively): <http://www.ppd.admin.cam.ac.uk/information-academic-staff/training-and-development-academic-staff>;
- * familiarise themselves with the Senior Tutors' Committee's guidance for supervisors: <http://www.seniortutors.admin.cam.ac.uk/university-guidance-and-procedures/supervisions>;
- * ensuring that they are aware of the expectations of their College(s) and faculty or department.

Faculties/departments can:

- * hold regular meetings with supervisors;
- * organise supervisor mentoring programmes to ensure that supervisors are familiar with their expectations;
- * provide discipline-specific written guidance to supervisors

The supervision essay

Supervision essays are often returned with comments and an indication of the standard achieved. These can be discussed during the subsequent supervision and provide a useful resource for students to reflect upon and use as a revision aid.

Supervisors can:

- * relate students' work explicitly to the assessment criteria to familiarise students with the criteria and how to achieve the learning outcomes;
- * review written comments to ensure that they are constructive and provide clear guidance and practical suggestions for improvement (see 2.a).

Faculties/departments can:

- * run workshops for supervisors to discuss how to give effective feedback on essays;
- * hold workshops which encourage students to use the assessment criteria to mark exemplar essays.

Problem sets and Tripos questions

Many faculties and departments provide specific problem sets and/or questions relating to lecture material which supervisors use as the framework for their supervisions, giving students the opportunity to tackle real examination questions and discuss any resulting issues. Some faculties and departments also offer 'examples classes' to go through problem sets in a larger forum.

A number of supervisors in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences include essays questions from previous Tripos examinations in their 'supervision sheets' which direct reading and suggest points for discussion in the next supervision.

Mock exams/timed essays

Mock exams or timed essays can provide valuable formative feedback as supervisors can give students detailed and constructive feedback (often in the form of marked and annotated scripts) in advance of the actual examinations. Mock exams are particularly helpful in highlighting exam technique difficulties (i.e. poor planning, time management or handwriting)..

Extra information

Whereas essay-based mock exams are often set by Colleges, mock practical sessions can only be held by departments.

Practice essays

Some courses, particularly MPhil programmes, offer students the opportunity to complete a practice essay at the start of the academic year which is marked as if submitted for examination. Students receive developmental feedback on the essay which may be particularly valuable to international students and others new, or newly returned, to a UK university environment.

General feedback

Students receive termly supervisions reports via the CamCORS or CamGRAD system. These reports generally form the basis of termly meetings with either the Tutor or Director of Studies who, having an overview of the student's progress to date, is able to make constructive comments.

b. University-based methods to promote formative assessment

Exam paper archives

Archives of past papers for all subjects are available in College libraries and several faculties and departments also publish online archives. If practicable, it may be useful for faculties and departments to make it clear which papers or questions are still relevant to the current curriculum.

Project work

Some students receive feedback on their projects via the CamCORS system.

Placements

Students on industrial or professional placements often receive feedback on their progress.

Laboratory reports

Labwork often results in formative feedback. For example, students generally receive written or verbal feedback on their laboratory reports and may receive informal guidance from demonstrators and technicians in the labs.

Reviews

Faculties and departments have formal review procedures which provide formative feedback to their PhD students.

c. Summative assessment feedback through the Colleges

University transcripts and CamSIS

All Examiners are required to submit marks for official University transcripts. Current students can access their recorded marks for any previous examination through CamSIS.

College markbooks and mark break-downs

Although prepared by examiners, the primary route of feedback on University examinations is through Colleges, where the detailed breakdown of marks is available through College markbooks. The format of College markbooks is determined by Faculty Boards.

Students should receive a mark for each component of an examination, or each question where practicable. This question by question breakdown is relevant for examinations which consist largely of essays and other short pieces of written work: it may be less appropriate for mathematical problems and multiple-choice papers. A detailed mark breakdown helps to ensure that strengths and weaknesses in knowledge and/or skills are immediately evident, and helps students to adapt accordingly and to seek further help as appropriate.

Personalised feedback through Directors of Studies

On request, most Directors of Studies are happy to provide feedback on examination performance although detailed feedback is not normally provided as a matter of course.

Returning exam scripts

The General Board advises against returning exam scripts to students.

Model answers, outlines and sample scripts

In some disciplines, particularly in the Sciences, model answers or outlines can give students an insight into what Examiners were looking for and can be useful for future cohorts.

In the Arts and Humanities it is common practice to publish anonymised and annotated sample scripts with the permission of the original student.

Faculties/departments can:

- * publish anonymised and annotated scripts;
- * retain dissertations (with marks) as models for future students;
- * publish model answers/outlines or essay plans.

External Examiners' and Examiners' reports

External Examiners' reports should be written in a format which enables them to be disclosed to students. The reports highlight areas for improvement and provide information about the performance of the cohort.

Internal Examiners also write reports which often review approaches to individual questions and can help students.

Faculties/departments can:

- * ask their Staff-Student Liaison Committee (SSLC) to consider External Examiners' reports (in addition to the Faculty Board);
- * review the format of any reporting requirements of the Examiners/External Examiners, in order to provide more useful information for future examination candidates;
- * archive all Examiners' reports in a public repository;
- * link the reports to an archive of past papers;

Discussing generic issues with the class

Some faculties and departments may hold briefing sessions in advance of the exams to aid exam preparation, and debriefing sessions if generic issues arise which can be discussed as a group.

2. Reviewing feedback mechanisms

a. Asking students

Involving students in any review of feedback mechanisms will help to ensure that they meet students' needs and are accessible and comprehensive.

Faculties/departments can:

- * ask student representatives/the SSLC for their opinion on current feedback mechanisms;
- * include questions on 'feedback to students' in student questionnaires.

b. Asking Directors of Studies

In most Colleges, Directors of Studies (DoS) are the main providers of examination feedback to students: they rely on the College markbooks provided by the Examiners.

Faculties/departments can:

- * raise the question of examination feedback and College markbooks on any DoS mailing list;
- * ask the DoS Committee to review the current format of College markbooks;
- * suggest that feedback be added as an annual standing item on the DoS Committee's agenda.

c. External Examiners

External Examiners' reports often refer to assessment feedback mechanisms; either to highlight particularly effective means or to suggest refinements to the current system. As impartial observers with experience of feedback procedures in other institutions, External Examiners can provide valuable input into discussions about feedback mechanisms.

d. Reflecting on the purpose of feedback

Feedback can be useful to both students and teaching staff. Constructive feedback can promote academic progression by:

- * motivating students;

- * developing students' understanding and skills;
- * demonstrating how a specific grade was reached with reference to the assessment criteria;
- * identifying areas for development, correcting errors and providing practical tips for improvement;
- * encouraging independent learning by developing students' self-assessment abilities.

e. Helping students to prepare for assessed activities

Reflecting on academic performance and progression with students encourages staff to consider which practical measures could be introduced to help improve future performance.

Faculties/departments can:

- * supply model answers, framework essays, worked questions, and references to lecture notes.

f. Noting the special case of continuous assessment

Continuous assessment is common in the Sciences, where undergraduate students undertake regular practical classes. This assessment often contributes towards the final mark.

Continuous assessment is much more prevalent at postgraduate level. Most postgraduate students on taught courses receive both formative and summative feedback on essays and other exercises submitted for examination throughout the year. Postgraduate research courses involve a dissertation and feedback is built into the preparation of the dissertation in stages through supervision and feedback on drafts of chapters.

In continuous assessment feedback is necessary to improve performance, but should not be so intrusive as to distort the candidate's own performance. The feedback must be provided in time to inform the next assignment and so to improve performance.

3. Communicating with Directors of Studies and Supervisors

a. Clarifying Directors of Studies' roles in disseminating results and feedback²

The role of Director of Studies includes the following:

- * meeting students at the beginning and end of each Term to advise on a programme of work and to monitor progress;
- * arranging supervisions for College teaching;
- * monitoring progress from supervision reports;
- * warning students if they are neglecting their studies;
- * conveying details of examination results to students.

Faculties/departments can:

- * provide guidance for new Directors of Studies on how to interpret the markbook (some subjects have complex marking arrangements);
- * hold termly meetings between Course Convenors/lecturers/Examiners and supervisors so that supervisors are linked into what is being taught through lectures.

Colleges can:

- * issue guidance notes to Directors of Studies.

b. Reviewing what is provided in College markbooks

Faculties/departments can ask Directors of Studies whether the information provided in College markbooks is sufficient and appropriate or whether it would be useful to include further details or to present the data differently (also see 2.b).

² This section only applies to undergraduates. Postgraduate students do not normally have College Directors of Studies; instead, Course Directors are generally responsible for providing feedback to MPhil students in liaison with students' supervisors.

c. Reviewing the provision of resources for supervisions

Faculties/departments can:

- * regularly consult Directors of Studies about the standard and accessibility of any resources provided for supervisions.
- * exploring different, and potentially more effective, ways of providing this material.

d. Promoting mock exams

As mentioned earlier, mock exams can be a useful mechanism for assessing academic performance and providing formative feedback. The decision about whether to provide mock exams is often College-based (also see 1.a).

Mock exams can be very time consuming to prepare and mark so the benefits must be measured against the resource implications and, if they are to be introduced on a large-scale, efforts should be made to minimise the overall costs.

e. Offering guidance on providing effective feedback

All those involved with assessment should be familiar with their Faculty Board's Examination Data Retention Policy. However, faculties and departments may also find it worthwhile to provide guidance (in writing or at a meeting) on the variety of ways that Directors of Studies and/or supervisors can provide assessment feedback to students. By equipping staff with a range of assessment feedback methods they will be able to adapt according to circumstance and students' needs.

4. The General Board's expectations

a. General Board guidance

The General Board expects Boards of Examiners to 'provide candidates routinely with any data which are meaningful or helpful indicators of examination performance'³.

Marking and classing criteria for all Parts of the Tripos and taught postgraduate programmes must be made available to students, Teaching Officers and Examiners, preferably on an open access website. Every Faculty Board should have an **Examinations Data Retention Policy** which, to some extent, may outline how much feedback is provided on summative assessment.

Data which the Faculty Board deems to be a 'meaningful' indicator of exam performance should be released in the final markbook so that Directors of Studies/College Tutors can give individual feedback to students. The General Board advises that this should include (but not be limited to):

- * marks for each question or examination 'unit' (paper, oral, practical, dissertation etc), where practicable;
- * a clear indication of the candidate's position within the student cohort.

In accordance with the Data Protection Act, students can request other data about their examination performance (e.g. comments made on scripts and minutes of Examiners' meetings), but not their examination script, providing that the data have been retained by the Examiners, faculty or department.

Faculties and departments should ensure that all students and Examiners are aware of the relevant Examinations Data Retention policy.

Faculties/departments should:

- * post the Examinations Data Retention Policy, marking and classing criteria, and a statement to manage student expectations of assessment feedback on a dedicated webpage;
- * define, in course handbooks, how students receive their results.

Further information

- * General Board Guidance on Examinations Data and Scripts,

<http://www.educationalpolicy.admin.cam.ac.uk/curricula-and-assessment/retention-examination-data>

- * Data Protection Act: <http://www.information-compliance.admin.cam.ac.uk/data-protection>

³ General Board Guidance on Examinations Data and Scripts,
<http://www.educationalpolicy.admin.cam.ac.uk/curricula-and-assessment/retention-examination-data>
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b. CamSIS transcript requirements

The University is required to provide all graduating students with a formal transcript of their examination performance. This is created from data that is held within CamSIS. All candidates should be provided with:

- * their class (if appropriate);
- * the total mark for the examination;
- * a mark for each element of the examination (papers, portfolios of work, dissertations etc), unless it has been deemed inappropriate or misleading by the Faculty Board;
- * their rank-in-class (if considered appropriate by the Faculty Board).

Examiners are expected to provide the information to the Student Registry on the electronic templates provided by them⁴.

c. External Examiners' reports

External Examiners' reports should be dealt with as unreserved business so that students, via their representatives, can see the reports.

d. Plagiarism

The General Board expects every Faculty Board to publish a statement on plagiarism and/or good academic practice. Examples of these discipline-specific statements, and links to the University-wide statement on plagiarism, are available online at: www.cam.ac.uk/plagiarism.

⁴ <http://www.student-registry.admin.cam.ac.uk/examinations-further-guidance-staff/class-lists-and-grade-rosters>