

General Board's Education Committee Guidelines on Marking Standards and Classing Conventions

The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) requires that institutions publicise and implement principles and procedures for, and processes of, assessment that are explicit, valid and reliable.¹ These guidelines have been drawn up by the Education Committee of the General Board to assist Faculty Boards, Degree Committees and comparable bodies in drawing up their marking and classing schemes. What follows applies to all examinations with a taught element. It is in part based on advice given through the University's examinations appeals system and successive rulings of the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA). In all cases it has been made clear that conventions for classing of examinations should be made explicit to examiners, supervisors and students.

Ownership of marking standards and classing conventions

Under the general regulations governing the form and conduct of examinations (2018 Statutes & Ordinances p 251), Faculty Boards and comparable authorities are empowered to issue to Examiners and Assessors details of the conventions and criteria that must be applied in marking written papers and other work and in determining class-lists. Such details and any changes to them should be issued before the end of the Full Michaelmas term preceding the examination.

The Education Committee requires Faculty Boards and comparable bodies, and Degree Committees in the case of masters courses with a taught element, to issue such guidelines for Examiners and to publish this information on the web for the accessibility of students and their advisors.

This guidance should normally be in two parts:

1. marking standards for individual essays, questions or other assessed work
2. classing criteria for determining the class of a candidate or, in the case of masters courses whether the candidate should be awarded a distinction, pass or fail, based on their overall performance in the examination

Faculty Board or Degree Committee ownership of clear guidelines and criteria will help to ensure consistency between years (and between different sets of examiners), provide a basis for resolution of differences of opinion between individual examiners, and will ensure that false expectations are not generated amongst students. It will provide a firm basis for consideration of cases put forward under the relevant appeals process. To be of any benefit, all information should be written in accessible language.

Marking standards

Marking standards for individual questions should include:

- Clear identification and explanation of the ranges of marks available for each question;
- A clear description of what is expected for ranges of marks and, if appropriate, mode of assessment (unseen essay, coursework, dissertation, practical write-up etc). It is good practice to encourage markers to make use of the full range of marks as this will assist in differentiation of candidates when it comes to determining overall performance in the examination.

¹ <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code/the-existing-uk-quality-code/part-b-assuring-and-enhancing-academic-quality>

It might be helpful to consider criteria based on:

- how well candidates have addressed the question/topic;
- the quality of the argument;
- the range of knowledge/understanding displayed;
- and how expectations change as students progress through undergraduate and masters levels.

Marking of individual pieces of work will rely on the academic judgement of individual markers. However, clear guidelines should ensure that marks allocated are fair.

Other information that should be included is:

- the form of a mark – is it numeric, alphabetic, in the form of a class or some other system?
- systems employed to validate marks of individual markers – are answers double marked? A sample, in all cases, at borderlines? Are statistical methods used to review mark profiles for each question or each marker? ;
- how an agreed mark is determined for questions that have been double marked, where the discrepancy is small, and where the discrepancy is large;
- any penalties to be applied for late submission;
- any penalties to be applied for failing to comply with the rubric.

Classing conventions

Boards of Examiners are expected to exercise academic judgement in determining the final classes of candidates. External Examiners have an important role to play in this. However, to ensure continuity between years and fair treatment of all candidates, Faculty Boards and Degree Committees should set out clearly classing conventions for both Examiners and students. In drawing up and reviewing classing schemes, some of the following might be included:

1. How marks for different papers of the examination are combined, including any weighting given to particular elements of the examination.
2. How preliminary class boundaries are determined. This is likely to be based on a simple approach applying the class boundaries used for marking individual essays (in most cases in Tripos 70% for a First, 60 – 69% Upper Second, 50 – 59% Lower Second, 40 – 49% Third Class, and for MPhils the common marking scheme required by the General Board where the pass mark is 60% and the threshold for a distinction is 75%).
3. How final boundaries are determined. This is likely to include a comparison of preliminary distributions with expected percentages based on previous results. It will also involve a detailed review of mark profiles, and comparison of marks, of candidates at the boundaries.

Information on the following might also be included:

- Whether scaling or moderation of marks is permitted (or required) and, if so, how appropriate algorithms are determined;
- Whether marks are rounded and how this rounding is performed;
- How marks for borrowed papers are handled, including any mapping or translation of marks agreed on the basis of a comparison of marking schemes;

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- The degree to which good performance in one element of the exam can compensate for poor performance in another;
- How the profile of marks for individual papers influences the final class.
 - a. Is a candidate classed on the basis of the aggregate mark only, or do examiners look at the mark profile to determining the class?
 - b. Do candidates have to pass all elements of the examination to pass overall?
 - c. Are candidates required to achieve a minimum number of First class (or, in the case of masters courses a distinction) marks in individual papers to achieve a First Class (or distinction) overall?
 - d. Is this at the borderline only, or for all candidates?

In reviewing borderline candidates, examiners should be aware that classing conventions can lead to situations where candidates with the same aggregate mark may be awarded different classes, or candidates with a higher aggregate marks than other candidates are awarded a lower class. Without a clear explanation and objective criteria for classing, such outcomes can, and have been the subject of examination appeals.

Review of classing criteria

In reviewing classing criteria, Faculty Boards and comparable bodies might track the performance of cohorts of students, and compare their own class distributions with those in other Triposes.

Faculty Boards and Degree Committees are strongly encouraged to keep under review data on performance by gender and disability. University-wide data are available for those purposes from the Student Statistics Section of the Planning and Resource Allocation Office.

Cohort Ranking

At its meeting on 13th June 2018, the General Board's Education Committee agreed that all students of undergraduate triposes should be ranked. Further information on the method and timeline will be released in due course.

First Issued by the Education Committee in June 2011
Last reviewed August 2018

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