UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
Education Quality and Policy Office

Document cover sheet

Title	Guidelines on Marking Standards and Classing Conventions
Purpose	
Owner	EQPO
Contact within EQPO	Jane Clare
With effect from	October 2025
Next review due	None planned
Version	V 1.1
Comment	Updated as fit for purpose

General Board's Education Committee

Guidelines on Marking Standards and Classing Conventions

Contents

Introduction

Students must be informed about the format of their assessment to understand what is expected of them and how to pass their course and achieve the learning outcomes. Higher Education Institutions are expected to publicise and implement principles, procedures and processes around assessment that are explicit, valid and reliable.[1] Effective assessment also forms part of the Conditions of Registration with the Office for Students, which requires the University to ensure that assessment is valid and reliable, and that relevant awards are credible. It also requires the University to have 'regulations' which govern the assessment of students' work, the requirements for relevant awards, and methods to determine classifications.[2]

These guidelines have been issued by the General Board's Education Committee (GBEC) to assist Faculty Boards, Degree Committees and comparable bodies in drawing up their marking and classing schemes. What follows applies to all awards 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 for Higher Education (OIA).

GBEC requires the conventions for classing examinations to 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[3], Faculty

[1] https://www.qaa.ac.uk//en/quality-code/advice-and-guidance/assessment
[2] Office for Students Condition of Registration B4 Quality and standards conditions of registration (officeforstudents.org.uk)
[3] Chapter III in the University's Statutes and Ordinances

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 General Board's Education Committee requires Faculty Boards and comparable bodies, and Degree Committees in the case of postgraduate courses with a taught element, to issue such guidelines for Examiners and to publish this information online 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 and, in the case of Tripos subjects, the scheme of weighting that will be used to determine an overall degree classification or, in the case of taught postgraduate 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 among 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.

Communication with students

It is the expectation of GBEC that the way in which awards are marked and classed will be clearly communicated with students. Information about marking, classing and the overall degree classification formula (in the case of Triposes) should sit alongside information about assessment in Course web pages and handbooks.

The scheme of weighting used to calculate the overall degree classification of an award should also be included in the Programme Specification

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.

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;
- how expectations change as students' progress through undergraduate and taught postgraduate levels,, with reference to 'sector recognised standards'[4] .

Marking of individual pieces of work will rely on the academic judgement of individual. 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.

Where possible, work should be marked anonymously in line with established good practice across the sector.

Classing Conventions

Boards of Examiners will provide a class for each part of an award and, in the case of Triposes, an overall degree classification. Boards of Examiners are expected to exercise academic judgement in determining the 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 clear 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 undergraduate courses 70% for a First, 60 – 69% Upper Second, 50 – 59% Lower Second, 40 – 49% Third Class, and for postgraduate taught courses the

[4] Sector-recognised standards

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 and set. 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.

4. The scheme of weighting of each academic year in determining a candidate's overall degree classification for Tripos subjects as approved by GBEC.

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;

- The degree to which good performance in one element of the examination can compensate for poor performance in another;

- How the profile of marks for individual papers influences the class.

  a) Is a candidate classed on the basis of the aggregate mark only, or do examiners look at the mark profile to determine 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 postgraduate taught 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.

Student transfers and overall degree classifications

1. Students should not find themselves to be disadvantaged by transferring to a different Tripos and Examiners should not be exercising academic judgement on a student's performance in a subject outside of their Tripos.

2. Where a student is transferring into a course they should be classed in line with the rest of that course's cohort. This is outlined in the table below and should be clearly communicated with students by their College.

Original Tripos	New Tripos	Final Classification
0:30:70	0:30:70	0:30:70
0:30:70	0:0:100	0:0:100
0:0:100	0:30:70	0:30:70
0:0:100	0:0:100	0:0:100

3. Students in Medical Sciences and Veterinary Sciences completing a Part II should be classed in line with the rest of that course's cohort.

Review of classing criteria

Faculty Boards and comparable bodies are encouraged to regularly review their classing criteria. In reviewing the 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 or taught postgraduate courses.

Faculty Boards and Degree Committees are strongly encouraged to keep under review data on performance by gender, disability and other protected characteristics.

University-wide data are available for those purposes from the Business Information Team of the Academic and Financial Planning and Analysis Office.

Changing to overall degree classification scheme of weighting

1. As outlined in the Joint Report of Council and General Board on the introduction of a final degree classification[5], Triposes are expected to adopt one of the schemes listed below for the overall class:
    - Year 1: 0%, Year 2: 30% and Year 3: 70% (0:30:70 weighting)
    - Year 1: 0%, Year 2: 0% and Year 3: 100% (0:0:100 weighting)

2. Faculty Boards may apply to GBEC to change the scheme that they have adopted on clear academic grounds.
3. Where a Faculty Board wishes to change to one of the schemes listed above (1), permission should be sought from Academic Standards Enhancement Committee (ASEC) who will consider the request under delegated authority from GBEC.
4. ASEC will consider the request to change the scheme of weighting as a minor course modification. Requests should be submitted using the Minor Course Modification Form which can be found on the Education Quality and Policy Office (EQPO) website. Meaningful student consultation must be completed before the request is submitted to ASEC.
5. Where a Faculty Board wishes to adopt a scheme that is different from those listed

[5] Cambridge University Reporter No 6574, Thursday 23 January 2020, Vol 150, No 16

above (1), permission should be sought from GBEC via a written paper outlining the proposed new scheme of weighting, the rationale and academic case behind such a weighting, and evidence of student consultation.

6. Faculty Boards are not permitted to change the scheme of weighting for students during the course of their studies.
7. Requests to change the scheme of weighting should be made *at the latest* to the first meeting of ASEC or GBEC- (see (4) and (5)) in Lent Term preceding the application round for the cohort affected by the change.

Cohort Ranking

At its meeting on 13th June 2018, GBEC agreed that all students of Triposes should be ranked within each Part.

Ranking should be across the entire cohort by Boards of Examiners, with the highest achieving candidate being ranked number 1. Candidates deemed to have performed at an equivalent level should be accorded the same rank, and the ranks of subsequent candidates adjusted accordingly (this will entail some skipping of rank numbers). Once the rank has been approved, the individual rank of the majority should not be affected by changes to the rank of individual candidate's consequent on examination appeal, correction of marks or any consideration applied by the Examination Access and Mitigation Committee (EAMC).

As with marking and classing criteria, detailed ranking criteria, within the standard framework, should be determined by Faculty Boards, for implementation by Examiners.