LANCASTER UNIVERSITY

GUIDELINES FOR THE USE OF ANONYMOUS MARKING

Approved May 2008, Revised March 2010 (approved May 2010)

1. Background

Anonymous marking (AM) is the practice of concealing the identity of the learner from the marker. AM of examinations and some coursework is now widely adopted and considered to be good practice in the sector. Lancaster University introduced the anonymisation of all Part II examination scripts in 1993/94 and a small number of our programmes use AM of coursework where possible.

The University's Learning, Teaching and Assessment Principles state that our students will have the opportunity to "experience fair, transparent and timely summative assessment given by suitably qualified staff'. The Quality Assurance Agency's Code of Practice (Chapter B6 Assessment of students and the recognition of prior learning) does not carry the expectation that Universities implement anonymous marking of assessed work, but does state that "Expectations on the use of anonymous marking, including to which forms of assessment it applies or does not apply are clear."

The published literature on the issue of bias when marking work is somewhat conflicting. Several papers in the 1980s and 90s reported evidence of gender bias (e.g. Bradley 1984[1] and 1993[2]; Belsey 1988[3]) although subsequent contradictory findings have often been published (e.g. Newstead and Dennis 1990[4]; Dennis and Newstead 1994[5]). For institutions which have moved to AM there do not appear to be any reports of the practical issues encountered.

Since 1999, the National Union of Students has argued for the introduction of AM, stating:-

> "Anonymous marking reduces the risk of suspicion on the part of the marker and minimizes the tension between students and tutors. It also increases the level of confidence students have in the impartiality of the system. Ultimately it can be seen as a means of safeguarding both teaching staff and students"[6]

There are potential advantages and disadvantages of expanding our use of AM:-

Main Advantages
- AM eliminates both conscious and unconscious bias on the part of the marker
- AM assures our students that our marking processes are fair and impartial
- AM protects staff from accusations of unfairness and discrimination
- AM contributes in part to our legal obligations to promote equality

Main Disadvantages
- AM potentially depersonalizes the learning experience, making it more difficult for tutors to give feedback targeted to the needs of the learner
- It is difficult (and perhaps undesirable) to implement for all forms of summative assessment
- AM might not provide anonymity in small classes

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[1] Bradley, C. (1984) "Sex bias in the evaluation of students" *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 23, 147-153
[2] Bradley, C. (1993) "Sex bias in student assessment overlooked?" *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 18, 3-8.
[3] Belsey, C. (1988) Marking by Numbers, *AUT Woman*, 15, 1-2.
[4] Newstead, S.E. and Dennis, I. (1990) "Blind marking and sex bias in student assessment", *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 15, 132-139.
[5] Dennis, I. and Newstead, S.E. (1994) "The strange case of the disappearing sex bias", *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 19, 49-56.
[6] National Union of Students (2004) *Higher Education Handbook*, NUS, London

- Previous research has suggested that implementing AM can result in a lowering of average marks, although this mostly appears to affect assessment via examination and this is already in place at Lancaster (in Part II)
- There is an increased administrative cost and processes need to ensure the accurate recording of marks

Student anonymity would not normally be of value for assessment which is wholly formative.

2. Recommendations

2.1   For undergraduate and postgraduate teaching programmes departments should explicitly consider the potential benefits of introducing anonymous marking of coursework. This should apply equally to both Part I and Part II.

2.2   For departments wishing to introduce AM, it is recommended that a pilot project should first be undertaken for selected modules which would allow the department to assess the impact of the change in terms of, for example, the marks awarded, the quality and quantity of feedback and the experience of the markers, students and administrative staff.

2.3   All examinations should continue to be marked with student anonymity.

3. Guidance

3.1   Where anonymity is required for coursework, University ID numbers should normally be used as identifiers [it is recognized that this does not yield a system where it is impossible for the marker to identify the student, but it is a practicable solution which minimizes additional administrative load and potential input errors].

3.2   From academic year 08-09 all examination booklets (Part I and Part II) should be anonymised.

3.3   For some forms of assessment anonymous marking may not be possible or desirable, for example if there is a direct interaction between student and marker. Examples of such assessments are:-
   - Observed assessments, e.g. practice-based, presentations, etc.
   - Laboratory work
   - Fieldwork
   - Oral assessments
   - Work done on placement / work experience
   - Portfolios, projects and dissertations
   - Linked pieces of assessment where earlier marks or feedback contribute to the marking process for a later piece of work
   - Preliminary work which is used as a qualifying hurdle for a later linked piece of assessment, e.g. dissertation pre-reports.
   - Groupwork where the work is submitted individually but the performance of others contribute to the final mark

3.4   For all assessments other than those listed in 3.3 which employ AM, anonymity should normally be preserved throughout the marking process. De-anonymisation earlier in the process may occur if an academic offence is suspected, e.g. plagiarism.

3.5   For submission of work *via* a VLE (e.g. Moodle), University ID numbers should normally be used to identify the submitted work.

3.6   Whether anonymous marking is used or not, for assessments other than examinations, any individual piece of Part II assessed work which is worth more than 25% of a 30-credit module (or relative proportions for

larger/smaller modules) should be subjected to one of the approved methods of moderating marks set out in the University's regulations.

3.7   For dissertations/projects/portfolios second markers should not normally be privy to the mark given by the first marker during the marking process. Departments should also consider if there are benefits to be had in anonymising the submitted work for the second marker.

3.8   The Disabilities Service should provide guidance regarding the submission of work by students with disabilities for assessment tasks where anonymous marking is to be used. This guidance should include students who have adapted arrangements for examinations or coursework deadlines which may mean that their work is identifiable.

3.9   Where anonymous marking is used departments should indicate this within their course/module handbook(s).