

Assessment for Learning at King's

Standardisation of marking

Definitions

The terms moderation, standardisation (and sometimes harmonisation) can be confusing and are often used interchangeably in the literature. For the purposes of this resource:

Standardisation is the process of checking to ensure markers have a clear understanding of the marking scheme/criteria BEFORE marking occurs, i.e. the standard. This can also be referred to as harmonisation to reflect the inevitable difficulties of interpretation.

Moderation is the process of double marking, calibrating scores or checking accuracy of marking, parity of feedback AFTER assignments have been marked.

Why is standardisation important?

Degree awards and the individual assessments of which they comprise are subject to quality control through external benchmarking through QAA frameworks. Marking and feedback then, need to adhere to rigorous procedures in order to ensure parity and fairness amongst cohorts.

King's College London has a clear policy for post-hoc moderation, double marking and turnaround for assignments to be returned to students.¹ Yet currently, pre-marking standardisation procedures seem to vary, which is consistent with findings across the higher education sector (Smith and Coombe, 2006). This lack of formal process can place academic standards at risk (Percy et al., 2008). Disparity between markers can lead to student complaints, perceptions of bias, and lower module satisfaction.

Dialogic procedures (such as consensus or social harmonisation) are recommended to help develop shared understandings of criteria and standards across large marking teams (Hunter and Docherty, 2011; Bloxham, et al. 2016a). Crimmins et al. (2016) suggest that systematic standardisation processes provide an opportunity to professionally develop sessional educators, VLS and GTAs, and that sessional educators recognise and appreciate standardisation feedback as a valuable chance to develop their marking practices.

Reliability cannot be guaranteed by marker training and standardisation, but the aim is to move towards a common understanding of a departmental standard for particular assignments. Standardisation helps to build students' confidence in the assessment process and understand assessment as an exercise in evaluative judgement rather than a fixed right or wrong (Bloxham et al, 2016b).

¹ <file:///G:/Kings/markings%20policies/Marking.%20College%20Framework.pdf>

Ways to consider implementing standardisation

Subjects with large numbers of students typically require multiple marking staff, and ensuring consistency amongst a team of educators can be challenging for educators-in-charge (Beutel et al., 2017; Saunders & Davis, 1998). The challenges of coordinating standardisation and moderation processes for a large team of educators can also be exacerbated by tight turnaround times (Saunders & Davis, 1998).

Therefore, standardisation procedures can be implemented in several different ways. Which one is more suitable for your department depends on **time contingencies**, and the **size** and **experience** of marking teams.

Procedure models		
Model	Pros	Cons
<p>'Ideal' model- all markers mark a small number of assignments and all get together for a face-to-face meeting.</p> <p>Can be done using assignments from the previous year or current assignments.</p>	<p>Social harmonisation and discussion of standards for all markers ensures maximum support and minimum deviation from standard.</p> <p>Newer markers can ask questions and more experienced staff can question assumptions.</p> <p><i>Using a sample of current assignments does not duplicate marking, although the meeting may take longer to define a standard.</i></p>	<p>Requires all staff to be available at the same time.</p> <p>The session itself can be time consuming because of the amount of discussion.</p> <p>Newer markers can feel dominated and afraid to ask questions in large team meetings.</p> <p><i>Using a sample of past cohorts duplicates time marking although this means the standardisation process can take place at any time during the semester.</i></p>
<p>'Asynchronous online model'- some assignments are put online (anonymization is preferable even if that is not the usual department policy) with a spreadsheet for all markers to enter grades. Preferably a setting would be used that prevents from seeing other markers' grades. Grades are compared amongst the team by senior team or module convenor.</p> <p>If anyone is far off the mark, the individual can have a one-to-one meeting with module convenor, or a whole team meeting can be organised.</p>	<p>Saves time because not all staff need to be in the same place at the same time. This is particularly useful for more experienced markers.</p> <p>Reduces social norming where less experienced markers are dominated in discussions by more experienced ones.</p>	<p>Can single out 'rogue' markers who can feel their abilities are being questioned. It is vital to establish trust.</p> <p>Less supportive for new staff and GTAs.</p>

<p>'Standardisation committee' model- a group of senior teachers mark some assignments and put them online as examples of grades at different levels. Markers follow the guidelines. It is better to do this with previous years' assignments to save time.</p>	<p>Saves time because not all staff need to be in the same place at the same time. This is particularly useful for more experienced markers.</p> <p>If using previous years' assignments as exemplars, it can take place at any point during the year and allow for questions to be asked by new staff during the semester.</p>	<p>Does not ensure that standards have been internalised or understood.</p> <p>Less supportive for new staff and GTAs.</p> <p>Denies teams the discussion around standards and social harmonisation that is necessary for maintaining consensus around criteria/rubrics and disciplinary conventions.</p>
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Any of the above models can be facilitated through an online webinar or skype conference call

A mixture of the models can be employed at various times throughout the academic year

All of the above models should incorporate a discussion of feedback practices and participants in the process must be able to justify their grades by reference to key criteria and/or learning outcomes.

FAQs

The suggested answers are guides only and all decisions should be based on consideration of your marking team.

Is it necessary to standardise for every single assignment?

The necessity of standardisation will depend on many factors. If your team is quite inexperienced, it might be necessary to perform a few times during the academic year. If a particular module has received comments from students about disparity of marking, standardisation procedures can address this for students and the external examiner in module reports.

If assignments during a module/programme are quite similar, Raikes et al (2009) found that the effect of standardisation on one usually transfers to the other. However, for very different types of assignment, and

especially when trialling new types of assessment (blogs, wikis, podcasts, research reports) standardisation is highly recommended.

How many times should standardisation take place?

If your marking team is consistent over a number of semesters or academic years, the need for standardisation reduces. In fact, increasing standardisation in a top-down manner amongst experienced teams can stymy trust.

However, if the module relies on a large number of GTAs and VLs, which may change from year to year, standardisation should be more frequent.

Standardisation procedures could occur for less experienced markers only, but it is good to have more experienced markers present. A rotation scheme could be implemented where two or three experienced markers attend one session only throughout the year.

Is it necessary to standardise formative assessments?

This will depend on the policy of your faculty (the College Marking Framework makes no reference to formative assessment) but generally is not considered necessary to standardise (or indeed moderate) anything which will not contribute marks towards a degree programme.

That said, as with students, standardisation of formative assessment can help staff to internalise standards that will transfer to the summative assessment (Raikes et al, 2009). Using an asynchronous model with previous years' assignments/exams could help less experienced staff give better advice to students throughout the year about the progress of their assignments/exam preparation.

References and Resources

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