

## Association of Business Schools

### Learning, Teaching and Student Experience Committee

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### **Perspectives On: Anonymous Marking: For or Against?**

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#### **Introduction**

This is the first of a series of brief 'perspectives' on challenging learning and teaching issues authored by members of the Association of Business Schools. Whilst evidence-based, they do take up a position on topical, often controversial, issues considered from a business school vantage point. As such we hope you find them both useful and thought provoking. This perspective considers anonymous marking, debating its advantages and disadvantages and drawing some considerations for business school practice.

#### **Background**

Assessment matters, and whilst many of us may debate desirability, few would argue that assessment is a key driver of student learning behaviours and secondly that business schools are, and should be, accountable for the validity of the qualifications they confer. However, valid assessment procedures demand reliability, fairness, consistency and transparency, and to this end any potential for bias requires recognition, and where identified systems and processes to minimise opportunities for bias adopted. Indeed, the QAA suggests that institutions should consider "the circumstances in which anonymous marking is appropriate ..." (QAA, 2006, p17); and the NUS campaign 'Mark my words, not my name', calls on all universities to introduce systems of anonymous marking (NUS, 2013). It is therefore unsurprising that many business schools have adopted anonymous marking processes for assessment in at least some (rarely all) circumstances along with second marking and/or moderation practices, and yet, the case for anonymous marking is not as clear cut as one might initially suppose.

#### **The literature**

Anonymous marking is a hot topic, both in terms of the currency of the debate and the amount of heat it can generate from both advocates and opponents, a debate fuelled by a rather confusing picture presented by the literature. On the face of it anonymous marking seems an obvious choice, arising from the assumption that knowing the identity of students may cause examiners to be biased in the assessment of their work. However, critics point to the

limitations of empirical evidence in this area, particularly inconsistency of findings, a disregard for confounding factors (causality), and a narrow focus on marking bias and not on the wider implications for student learning. Essentially, there are contradictory tensions and knowing one side of the argument in this controversial area is insufficient to underpin good policy-making decisions. Anonymous marking may reduce bias in the measurement of student achievement, but may also reduce the effectiveness of feedback focused on developing student learning. Some academic staff may support anonymous marking in terms of its transparent fairness and their consequent protection from allegations of discrimination and favouritism; others regret the lack of sectorial trust in their inherent professionalism and the on-going diminishment of the tutor/student relational dimension. Even students seemingly have different views, with some students wanting their markers to know who they are, particularly if they have attended and contributed well in class.

This is not a comprehensive literature review on marking bias, but a summary of key studies and references. Indeed, the literature is limited in this area with a principal focus on the possibility of gender bias. However, even here findings are contradictory with some early investigations confirming a gender bias in marking (Belsey, 1988; Bradley, 1984), with others unable to replicate their findings (Dennis and Newstead, 1990). More recently, studies based on degree outcomes at the University of Sussex indicated that female students achieved a greater proportion of 'good' degrees than their male counterparts, but importantly this advantage disappeared when controlling for differences in terms of attendance at seminars and completion of formative learning activities and assignments (Farsides and Woodfield, 2007) and other factors, particularly pre-entry qualifications (Barrow *et al.*, 2009). One study that compared the marking of examination scripts with names exposed and names withheld (Owen *et al.*, 2010) found no evidence that foreknowledge led to marking bias.

While the literature focuses principally on gender bias, and here, judged rather inconclusive, the data that has grabbed the attention of the QAA and NUS is that which discloses large differences in degree outcomes when comparing white students with other ethnic groups. A comprehensive synthesis of research on black and minority ethnic (BME) UK domiciled students' participation in higher education, commissioned by the HEA, quotes one study that concludes that:

*"Relative to White students, those from every non-White ethnic group are less likely to obtain good degrees and less likely to obtain first class degrees... The odds of an Asian student being awarded a good degree were half of those of a White student being awarded a good degree, whereas the odds of a Black student being awarded a good degree were a third of those of a White student being awarded a good degree."*  
(Richardson, 2007, p10, quoted in Singh, 2011, p6).

However, Singh (2011) reminds us to go beyond the headlines, acknowledging causality of such difference is multifaceted, and factors including gender, social deprivation and previous family educational experiences of HE are significant in explaining individual degree outcomes. Nevertheless there is emerging evidence that

*“being from a minority ethnic community ... is still statistically significant in explaining final attainment”* (Broecke and Nichols, 2007, p3, quoted in Singh, 2011, p6).

However, again explanations for these differences are complex and not yet fully understood. Osler (1999, cited in Singh 2011) suggests that minority groups would appear to be subject to some form of discriminatory practice in relation to teaching, student support and assessment, but further research is needed for confirmation of direct attribution.

However, whilst evidence of discrimination and bias in relation to marking is limited and confused, student *perception* that it is inherent in assessment seems undisputed. A NUS survey in 1999, which prompted the NUS ‘Mark my words ...’ campaign, found that 44% of students’ unions had concerns about discrimination and bias in relation to assessment. More recently, responses to statements on assessment and feedback in the National Student Survey indicate that students have concerns about assessment fairness, even if causality is again unclear (e.g. marking bias vs. lack of clarity in assignment briefs, criteria, feedback etc.)

So, whilst anonymous marking is not a blanket solution for addressing bias in marking, it can promote students’ confidence in the fairness of the assessment process. In their campaign for universities to introduce anonymous marking, the NUS suggest that it *“reduces both the fear and likelihood of discrimination”* (NUS, 2013, p3). It also protects staff from potential accusations of partiality, since it removes the opportunity to prejudge student work (that comes from a knowledge of a student’s past performance), which may cloud judgement (Fleming, 1999).

Professor Sue Bloxham in an unpublished internal report leaning on Crooke et al.’s research (2006) states:

*“anonymous marking is part of a raft of tightly managed institutional processes introduced by universities in recent years which have focused on equitable and consistent assessment procedures at the expense of enhancing assessment practice”*. Bloxham (n.d.)

Here, Bloxham joins most critics of anonymous marking recognising that anonymous marking erodes trust in the assessment process and, in particular, depersonalises teaching and undermines the development aspect of feedback (other critics include: Baty, 2007; Southee, 2009; Price et al, 2010; Beals, 2012; MacDonald Ross, 2012). David Nicol (2010) also laments the lack of dialogue between author and assessor with students finding one-way written feedback irrelevant and opaque. Writers such as Ivanic et al. (2000) and Northedge (2003a) similarly stress the importance of feedback which seeks to engage the student in some form of dialogue. Price et al. (2010) concur identifying not only students thirst for dialogue but also a ‘relational context’ to feedback; their research indicating that students are more likely to engage

with feedback from markers that they know and respect (2010) whether dialogic or one-way. Handley et al. (2008) capture well the principal concern:

*“A policy of anonymous marking creates a break in relationships which means that staff cannot write tailored feedback to suit the developmental needs of the student.” (Handley et al., 2008, p28)*

Finally, many unpublished institutional or faculty policies are influenced by practicalities. Anonymous marking can be impractical for many business assessments (e.g., oral presentations, organization-specific tasks, reflective assignments etc.). Depending on class size, assessment mode and task, even within anonymous marking processes a tutor may know or be able to work out authors. (Although here, we note that this is less likely to be the case in the large class business school environment. However, should we applaud ourselves for *not* knowing our students and their previous work?)

### **Concluding perspective**

So where does this leave us? Anonymous marking is not a panacea in terms of reducing the potential of marking bias. There are tensions between anonymous marking and good assessment practices that involve personalized developmental feedback that supports student learning.

In light of this tension, one common suggestion is to anonymise the marking of summative assessments but not formative. This would be an effective solution in some traditional institutions (such as Oxford and Cambridge) where there is a clear distinction between summative and formative assessment. Within such a context, summative assessments (exams) can be marked anonymously, whilst formative assessment (tutorial papers) can be discussed within a relational environment between tutors and students known to each other - all the better for not being anonymous and connected to previous work.

However, there is a problem for most taught UG and PG classes (particularly in the large class environment of b-schools) where formative and summative assessment is often not so clearly differentiated. In this context, summative assessment can be 'formative in intent' in that whilst such assessment confers summative marks (albeit often a relatively small percentage of the total) the purpose of the assessment feedback is often developmental and not solely focused on the justification of the mark. The mark itself is also often utilised as both feedback on the relative strength of the piece of work (although this can overpower other qualitative feedback) and to 'engage' students with the work.

In this latter, more muddled, context there is no one, clear, blanket solution. (And if there was, wouldn't we all be doing it and anonymous marking not be not such a controversial challenge?) But here we make some tentative suggestions for consideration:

- In part this issue is about communication with students. Clearly communicate to students the purpose of individual assessments and feedback (mark justification, correction, learning development etc.) and where work will be marked anonymously (or not) with a clear pedagogic rationale for so doing.
- Where possible, separate formative (developmental) and summative (measurement) assessment points, focusing developmental feedback on formative assessment. (Here, we note that necessitating student engagement with formative assessment will take some inventive assessment strategies!)
- Where the purpose of the assessment and feedback is essentially summative measurement and justification of the mark (this would include most, if not all, exams) then mark anonymously.
- Where assessments are 'formative in intent' but carry summative marks consider marking anonymously, and after the mark is given, subsequently identify the student and personalize feedback (a practice undertaken in some schools). If this is not practical and there is a clear pedagogic rationale for so doing, allow *programme teams* to exempt particular assessment points, so that there is a collective understanding of exemptions across a programme.
- Ensure robust *anonymous* moderation / second marking practices and communicate these to students. The Sector's focus has been on anonymous marking, but arguably it is at moderation that anonymity is most important.

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Berry O'Donovan is a Principal Lecturer for the Student Experience at the Faculty of Business, Oxford Brookes. She currently facilitates the ABS Development Programme for Directors of Learning and Teaching. From 2005-2010 she was Deputy Director of ASKe (Assessment Standards Knowledge exchange) a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning focused on assessment and feedback. Berry is a National Teaching Fellow and a Principal Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. Berry describes herself as a 'bundled' academic in that she is involved in teaching, research along with leadership and management responsibilities.

*R. Atfield*

From the early 1970's Richard worked in the NHS in various roles including porter, sterile services manager, critical care general manager and head of workforce development. He was involved in local, county and regional strategy and change initiatives. In 2004 Richard joined Oxford Brookes University (OBU) full-time as senior lecturer in healthcare management teaching in Oxford and Hong Kong. Following redeployment Richard was appointed Assistant Director of the Business, Management, Accountancy and Finance (BMAF) Subject Centre, based at OBU but working across the UK. He led on internationalisation and employability, established several special interest groups, organised events and conferences and led projects about the development needs of early career business academics including open access resources released through 'Open for Business'.

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