

ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK TOOLKIT

ANONYMOUS MARKING

IS ANONYMOUS MARKING THE ANSWER TO PREVENT BIAS IN MARKING?

This guidance links to the CU Assessment Policy requirement of anonymous marking where possible.

“Approaches to anonymity should be decided in partnership between staff and students, with the assumption that, unless decided otherwise, all summative assessments should be anonymous (as far as is possible). Appropriate external input is sought during assessment to ensure fairness and comparability.”

NUS – *Comprehensive Guide to Learning & Teaching: A resource for Students’ Unions. (n/d)*

INTRODUCTION

The current **CU Assessment Policy**, makes brief, but clear, reference to the implementation of anonymous marking:

“Anonymous marking is to be used for all assessments where practically possible. If peer assessment is included as a portion of any mark awarded, clear guidance should be provided to students. The University requires all formal written examinations to be marked and moderated anonymously to protect students against bias – whether consciously or unconsciously – on the part of examiners. This is an important element of the University’s quality assurance process with regard to these assessments.” (March, 2017)

SO WHAT IS ANONYMOUS MARKING?

The term ‘anonymity’ refers to the use of an identifier when assessing students’ work that cannot be linked to a specific student’s name. It therefore implies a psychological distancing during the marking period and at least until the marking process is complete.

The key reason for implementing anonymous marking is to give assurance to students that the process of assessment is fair and impartial. For staff, anonymous marking can help eliminate conscious and unconscious bias. This is also seen as a clear step towards ensuring the elimination of discrimination and a step further on the CU path towards ensuring equality in attainment.

HOW DO WE PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE?

When assessing **exam papers**, the exam script normally contains a fold-over section where students write their

personal details (e.g. name and student number). This section is then folded and sealed until marking and moderation have been completed. Only then should the personal details be revealed.

When assessing **coursework assignments** submitted via the VLE, Moodle and Turnitin, submission points have to be created and set up as anonymous. As above, the personal details should only be revealed as soon as marking and moderation have been completed.

Guidance on setting up Turnitin2 for anonymous marking can be accessed here:

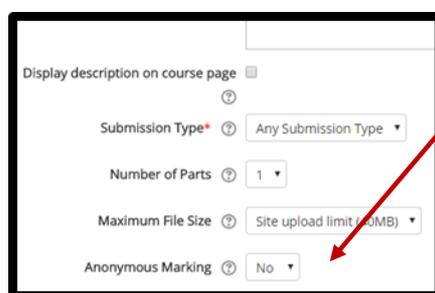
https://guides.turnitin.com/03_Integrations/Turnitin_Partner_Integrations/Moodle/03_Moodle_Direct_V2/03_Instructors/Anonymous_marking

Brief demonstration – setting up anonymous marking

When setting up your Turnitin assignment, you can choose to set it up to be marked without identifying the students.

PLEASE NOTE, that an existing assignment can **NOT BE CHANGED**, to be set up as anonymous.

The Turnitin activity setting will prompt you to choose Anonymous Marking (No / Yes)



You will notice that in the assignment inbox, all student names are filled with a link titled **ANONYMOUS MARKING ENABLED**.

Once a student has submitted to an assignment, you may reveal their name, providing you have reason to do so. Revealing a student's name is **irreversible** and you will be prompted to give a reason for revealing the student's name. This could be to follow up on suspected plagiarism identified by a high Turnitin Index.

ASSESSMENT EXEMPTED FROM ANONYMOUS MARKING

In some circumstances, coursework assignments will be **exempted from anonymous marking** due to the nature of the assessment task. Typical examples include:

- Observed assessments where students can be identified, such as presentations, skill demonstrations, role play, etc.
- Assessment where students have been closely supervised by the marker, such as dissertations, fine art projects, etc.
- Reports or projects associated with presentations.
- Laboratory work, practicals, fieldwork, placement reports, etc.
- Portfolio assessment that has been developed over time with formative feedback from the marker.
- Oral assessment, such as in language learning.
- Courses with professional accreditation that require identifying the student as part of their code of practice.

In the circumstances noted above, the moderation approaches and techniques should make accommodation for at least the use of internal moderation, double marking or multiple markers.

ADVANTAGES OF ANONYMOUS MARKING

The key reason for implementing anonymous marking is that it has clear benefit (or re-assurance) for students and Higher Education Institutions, as it is said to have more likely potential of removing bias (or even perceptions of bias) based on:

- Age, disability, sex, sexual orientation and gender reassignment, marriage or civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race; religion or belief or nationality.
- Judgements on previous student performance and expected performance.
- Possible favouritism.

Giving anonymous feedback is expected to “*encourage as much student dialogue with the lecturer as possible*” to get personalised feedback (Whitelegg, 2002; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick 2006).

DISADVANTAGES OF ANONYMOUS MARKING

Although anonymous marking is widely supported by Student Unions, the NUS and the QAA, we need to be aware of the shortcomings of such approaches.

Key reasons for **not** implementing anonymous marking (Whitelegg, 2002) include the following:

- **Disruption of the ‘feedback loop’**
Whitelegg’s research finds that tutors (markers) commented that they feel they do a disservice to the students unless they write comments for individual students (thus personalised). His research also found that students prefer comments directed at them personally, as it leads to better reflection on their assessment feedback.
- **Distancing between tutor and student**
If feedback is anonymous and not directed to an individual student, they may feel isolated/alienated (*just-a-number*) from the feedback, thus not helping to create a nurturing learning environment. The student is also less likely to feel comfortable in seeking further feedback from the marker (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick (2006).

We need to be aware of the fact that anonymous marking can depersonalise assessment and potentially undermines the developmental use of feedback. A toolkit developed by the UK QAA noted that evidence has been found that students are more likely to respond to tailored feedback steered by “the marker’s knowledge of that student’s progress” (QAA, 2012:16).

Whitelegg (2002), reporting from a pilot study undertaken, notes that anonymous marking was unpopular with both staff and students. This begs the question as to whether anonymous marking is really the best way to minimize bias, conscious or unconscious.

HOW THEN CAN WE REALLY ADDRESS THE ISSUE OF BIAS IN MARKING ASSESMENT?

Anonymous marking is **not always practically possible** and, as reflected in the discussion above, **not always feasible**. When exploring the notion of anonymous marking, a large section of the literature questions the ability of such approaches to overcome bias, and asks the question *‘is it worth having anonymous marking?’*

Hinton and Higson (2017) suggest that, as anonymous marking can be a costly practice, consideration should rather be given to provide training for markers to raise personal awareness “*of their own potential unconscious biases (that) might prove to be a more cost-effective option for ameliorating performance differences.*”

So what is ‘unconscious bias’?

According to the ECU (2013) unconscious bias refers to bias “*that we are unaware of, and which happens outside of our control. It is a bias that happens automatically and is triggered by our brain making quick judgments and assessments of people and situations, influenced by our background, cultural environment and personal experiences.*”

A good starting point is to consider your own tendency to be biased and or to stereotype, as having this self-awareness is a step forward in rethinking your practice, in both teaching and assessment.

If you want to know more, then explore the guide to mitigating unconscious bias in teaching and learning, developed at Plymouth University.

Available:

<https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/uploads/production/document/path/3/3273/7 Steps to Mitigating Unconscious Bias in Teaching and Learning.pdf>

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<https://acdev.coventry.domains/teaching-learning-assessment/assessment>