

## LTC16D128

Title: **Review of the Senate Marking Scales**  
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### Issue

A periodic review of the Senate Marking Scales.

### Recommendations

LTC is asked to endorse the following recommendations:

- (1) That the Senate Marking Scales be retained in their current form;
- (2) That the University's guidance document on the Senate Marking Scales be updated to provide appropriate advice on supporting student understanding of academic judgements.

### Resource Implications

Since the *status quo ante* is recommended with respect to the Senate Marking Scales, there are no resource implications. There are possible implications regarding the import of the second recommendation, regarding supporting student understanding of academic judgements, but these are likely to be minimal.

### Risk Implications

Failure to aid student understanding of academic judgements may lead to continuing poor responses to the NSS question "the criteria used in marking have been clear in advance" as well as fail to properly support student outcomes.

### Equality and Diversity

There are no equality or diversity implications associated with these recommendations

## **Timing of decisions**

Since no changes to the Senate Marking Scales are recommended, there are no timing issues. The revised University Guidance on the Marking Scales will be in place by September 2017.

## **Further Information**

Please direct any enquiries to Dr Clive Matthews (clive.matthews@uea.ac.uk, x3430).

## **Background**

Marking scales are descriptions of what a learner is expected to do in order to demonstrate that the learning outcomes of a particular assessment task have been achieved. Criterion-referenced scales consist of two elements: *criteria* – the desired characteristics or properties of performance – and *standards* – the levels of achievement by which performance is to be judged and, hence, grades appropriately assigned. Often the use of “marking criteria” in the literature and general discussion conflates these two component parts; here only “marking” or “assessment scales” will be used to avoid confusion.

LTC approved a significant revision of and improvements to the Senate Marking Scales (SMS) for UG assessments in July 2012 (LTC11D125). A similar review of the Senate Scales for PGT assessments were approved in December 2013 (LTC13D012). Both SMS cover three assessment-types: (essay-based) coursework, dissertations and presentations. The University, however, recognises that these do not cover all forms of assessment, especially those in the Natural and Health Sciences, and that these require the use of alternative marking scales (see §4.4.2 of the *Senate Guidance on Assessment and Feedback*). The expectation is that such bespoke assessment scales will, in line with the SMS, clearly outline the criteria and standards against which the particular assessment will be evaluated and be made readily available to students. The focus of the 2012/2013 LTC papers were aimed at *markers*. In particular, the revisions to the marking scales were intended to help improve consistency and transparency of marking across the Institution through more detailed and precise descriptions of qualitative criteria. The papers, however, also contained detailed discussion around the award of upper marks in the first class band in the light of the University's then anomalous performance with respect to Good Honours. Backgrounded was the pedagogic role of marking scales and how students may be expected to use and understand them. This review redresses this balance by considering how well the SMS meet student needs and what changes, if any, are required. This question is of some importance in the light of the University's relatively poor performance on the National Student Survey question: “the criteria used in marking have been clear in advance”. As a further consideration, appropriately supporting student understanding of academic judgements should lead to improved student outcomes.

This review is “desk-based” in that it uses the research literature as the main source of its discussion. Some of this literature is listed in the Appendix.

## **Discussion**

The central importance of assessment as both defining the curriculum and supporting student learning by directing their “time on task” has long been recognised. Assessment tasks are intended to allow a student to demonstrate that they have met certain learning outcomes (in alignment with the overall learning outcomes of the module). Assessment or marking scales should make explicit what those learning outcomes are and what is expected in order to pass or attain a particular grade.

Marking scales come in different varieties. In broad terms, the *criteria* may either be specific to the assessment and subject area or may apply generically to more than one discipline. Similarly, the *standards* of attainment may outline little more than a satisfactory or required level of achievement, as in pass/fail, or be more fine-grained, typically permitting marks ranging from 0-100%. The SMS are a generic (with respect to the assessment type) and fine-grained, at least between each 10% band.

From the perspective of the marker, clearly articulated assessment scales help to facilitate consistency, reliability, comparability and transparency of marking. They also provide a well-articulated framework in which to provide feedback to the student.

Pedagogically, clearly articulated marking scales are also important for students. For example, they go some way to developing a notion of trust in the quality assurance of assessment practices by demonstrating the means by which their assessments are fairly judged, marked and ranked. It is also important that, prospectively, students know how their work is to be judged so that, as part of their assessment literacy, they can shape their work intelligently and direct their efforts appropriately. Retrospectively, assessment schemes help provide an understanding of specific grading judgements. Further, and as already noted, marking scales provide a clear framework in which to understand feedback; given the well-attested importance of feedback on student learning, this is not an insignificant factor. Exposure to assessment scales also allows students to develop a greater understanding of the concerns and values of their discipline. By entering into this “community of practice”, students are able to achieve greater autonomy in their learning by acquiring the capacity to self-assess the quality of their work. The pedagogic value, therefore, of marking scales is potentially considerable. There are, however, some well-established problems which need to be addressed.

In particular, research has shown that many students find the language used in marking scales and its interpretation “obscure and non-obvious”. For an inexperienced student, for example, the meaning of “argument and understanding” and “criticality and analysis”, as found in the SMS, are unlikely to be self-interpreting. Further, these

concepts may well have different interpretations depending upon the nature of the discipline; for example, an argument in psychology may well take on a different form and function from one in philosophy. Similarly, the modifying expressions used to distinguish between different grades are typically at best; the SMS remain silent as to what distinguishes an “exemplary” from a “very high” from a “high” from a “good” or a “satisfactory” standard of performance. These levels of achievement will also change with the stage of study since a “satisfactory” performance presumably means something rather different at PGT level compared with first year UG. Finally, there is the question of weighting; the SMS do not indicate whether some criteria are more or less important than others and research has shown that there is sometimes a mismatch between students and markers on the importance of particular criteria.

For these and other reasons – for example, that criteria with respect to most assessment tasks of any degree of complexity are multidimensional or that criteria are often tacit and that judgement is often best understood as a form of “connoisseurship” – it is clear that marking scales in general and the SMS in particular do not meet *all* student pedagogic needs being too broad and vague.

The answer, however, is not to try and achieve greater clarity by increasing the written detail. This has been found to be ineffective for a variety of reasons:

- As the precision of language and terminology increases, it moves explanation away from everyday expression and, as a consequence, becomes less readily accessible to novice students. One consequence of this is that not only can it increase the level of student anxiety but, through misunderstanding, lead students to a focus on tangential issues.
- Due to the highly contextual nature of assessments, ever more comprehensive and detailed levels of description mean that generic marking scales become increasingly less fit for particular individual assessments. Pragmatically, providing highly detailed scales for every individual assessment requires high levels of resource.
- Most importantly, there is now a general recognition amongst scholars that due to the complexity of academic judgement (much of which is implicit and so not easily described), it is not possible to exhaustively document and codify academic standards. Rather, such understanding is only realised through socialisation processes such as observation, discussion, imitation and practice whose “credibility emerges from a community of practice which shares a consensus about what constitutes accepted knowledge, rules and procedures” (Bloxham, 2002).

In summary, the above has shown that:

- (a) Marking scales codify both criteria and standards;

- (b) That the descriptions of such criteria and standards are not necessarily immediately intelligible to students;
- (c) That any gaps in understanding cannot be bridged by increasing the amount of description since it is not possible to exhaustively document and codify academic standards due to the complexity of academic judgement;
- (d) That marking descriptors are, therefore, important, if only partial, descriptions of the component parts of academic judgement and must be complimented by other means for a full understanding;
- (e) That academic judgement is a social construct which is acquired through the process of becoming a member of a particular academic community of practice. This is how markers have acquired their understanding of academic judgements and students must be inducted in similar ways.

The conclusions drawn from this review are two-fold:

- (1) That the current SMS are fit for purpose and nothing is to be gained by any further amendments. It must be recognised, however, that these descriptions of criteria and standards are neither exhaustive nor self-interpreting.
- (2) That proper emphasis needs placing on students becoming familiar with how academic judgements are made in their discipline through the social behaviours associated with being a member of a community of practice. Such a supportive community allows members to develop a shared context of understanding, provides a forum for dialogue in which to ask questions and refine understanding, allows the spread of knowledge within the group, encourages collaborative processes of exchange of information and provides an environment in which appropriate activities can be practised. Examples of such activities which allow students to explore the nature of academic judgement might include, for example, peer- and self-assessment and the use of databanks of exemplars. In each of these processes, the SMS will naturally play an important role in framing a students' understanding of the nature of academic judgement.

## **Recommendations**

- (1) That the SMS be retained in their current form.
- (2) That the University's current guidance document on the SMS (<https://portal.uea.ac.uk/documents/6207125/8551351/senate-scales-guidance-on-use.pdf>) be updated to provide appropriate advice on supporting student understanding of academic judgement.

## **Attachments**

Appendix: Bibliography of Readings on Marking Scales

## **APPENDIX: Bibliography of Readings on Marking Scales**

### **(1) General Literature:**

- Bloxham, S. & Boyd, P. (2007). *Developing Effective Assessment in Higher Education: A Practical Guide*. Open University Press: Maidenhead.
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### **(2) Specific articles on assessment and marking scales:**

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