

LTC14D186

Title: Individualised Feedback and Return of Student Exam Scripts
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Issue

The Executive Team is supportive of individualised exam feedback as a direction of travel for the University. A paper looking at individualised Exam feedback and the return of student exam scripts was drafted by Dr Clive Matthews and considered at TPPG on 30 April 2015. This set out a rationale and justification for the return of student exam scripts in future and highlights issues that the University will need to consider in relation to implementing such a system. The paper attached includes a summary of the discussion relating to the paper at TPPG. TPPG was supportive of the overall thrust of the paper. A request based system was preferred, and it was felt that no fee should be charged to students for returning their scripts.

Recommendation

LTC members are asked to consider the paper and take a view on the key questions set out in the final section.

Resource Implications

The return of scripts will have resource implications in terms of staff time – these are explained in the paper, and will need to be taken into account by LTC.

Risk Implications

A large number of HEIs, including some of UEA's close competitors, now provide individualised feedback on exams and/or return copies/originals of exam scripts to students. There is a risk that by not taking deliberate steps to implement a system of individualised feedback UEA will fall behind in this area.

Equality and Diversity

It is not envisaged that any of the recommendations contained in the report will impact on groups with protected characteristics. On the contrary, the provision of individual exam feedback should be of considerable value to all students.

Timing of decisions

If LTC supports the principles set out in the paper, and of TPPG's view on how the process should operate, further discussion about resource implications will be necessary prior to implementation.

Further Information

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Background

LTC approved the provision of generic feedback on Exams in 2012/13. The provision of individualised exam feedback is the next logical step in enhancing the quality of feedback, and the functionality of feedback in supporting the student experience and student learning at UEA. There is a clear direction of travel within the HE sector in this area, but implementation will require the provision of dedicated staff resource to facilitate the return of exam scripts.

Discussion

The paper is intended to promote discussion of the key issues pertaining to individualised exam feedback, and LTC is also asked to take a view on the questions posed in Dr Matthews' paper.

Feedback and Student Access to Examination Scripts

1. Introduction

With regards to (summative) coursework the University commits itself to the return of both the coursework itself (where possible) and feedback on the assessment.¹ This conforms to the self-evident assumption that to be optimally relevant feedback needs to be read in conjunction with the submitted assessment. The feedback itself is typically attached to the assessment in the form of a cover sheet but also by means of annotations written on the script itself. The University, however, does not commit to the same principle with respect to examinations where feedback – either generic or individual – is provided but the scripts are not made readily available, if at all, to students. It is unclear why this difference is maintained given that it cannot be motivated on pedagogical grounds. Indeed, since it is (anecdotally) reported that due to the nature of the examination process many students are unable to recall the details of their answers (or, indeed, even which questions they attempted) soon after leaving the examination hall, it can be argued that access to their scripts is even more important for students than for non-examined assessments.²

The University is within its legal rights not to return examination scripts as stated in the Data Protection Act (DPA) of 1998 where Schedule 7(9) declares that “Personal data consisting of information recorded by candidates during an academic, professional or other examination are exempt from section 7” [i.e. the section on the right of access to personal data].³ UEA students are informed of this exemption on the University's DPA webpages.⁴

There is a nice legalistic twist to the DPA in that although the exemption covers the student's own answers, it does not apply to any comments, annotations or marks added by a marker; to these the student has right of access.⁵ For this reason some universities – Cambridge being an example – require that, wherever possible, such comments be recorded separately from the examination script so they can be handed to the student if so requested without the return of the script itself.⁶ In the event of a Subject Access

¹ <http://www.uea.ac.uk/learningandteaching/staff/assessment/coursework/submission>

² Given that students possess electronic copies of their coursework but not of examination scripts, it is doubly puzzling that the former are returned but not the latter.

³ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/29/schedule/7>

⁴ <https://portal.uea.ac.uk/information-services/strategy-planning-and-compliance/regulations-and-policies/information-regulations-and-policies/data-protection/dpa-faqs-for-students#Q.10>. It appears that the exemptions of the DPA hold precedence over any Freedom of Information requests.

⁵ See page 7 of the University's Data Protection Policy:

<https://portal.uea.ac.uk/documents/6207125/7068603/Data-Protection-Policy.pdf/e3a2d458-27dd-43cc-8e67-d9ba69fbae1b>

⁶ See §3.5 of the University of Cambridge guidance document on examinations data and scripts: <https://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/offices/education/local/data.pdf>

Request (SAR)⁷ the University must provide access to all examination comments within either 5 months of the request or 40 days after the official release of results (whichever is sooner).

Although under no obligation, the DPA does allow universities discretion to provide student access to examination scripts if so desired.⁸ UEA's position on this, however, is unclear with no formal statement on what is or is not permitted by the Institution. Informal advice from the University's Learning and Teaching Manager - Assessments and Quality suggests that there may be mixed custom and practice across Schools with some permitting access to scripts under supervision (but not the right to retain the script or a copy of it). If this is the case, the nature of the process involved and how it is advertised to students is unrecorded and, presumably, handled on an ad hoc basis. The University does not record student requests to see examination scripts nor does it have a centralised system to facilitate this. Given the lack of available information within the Institution, it is assumed that student requests, even if permitted in their School, are minimal. *Irrespective of the outcome of the specific considerations of this paper, it is recommended that the University both clarifies and makes more visible its position on student access to examination scripts.*

2. Some arguments in favour of providing student access to examination scripts:

- Examination feedback – generic or individualised – can only be of limited use to students without access to their script. This is especially true if, as previously mentioned, many students are unable to recall the details of their answers (or, indeed, even which questions they attempted) as a result of the particular stresses and strains of the examination process. Allowing access to scripts would, therefore, provide for an improved understanding of feedback and permit for more beneficial student-teacher dialogue. The return of scripts (as opposed to just making them available for scrutiny) would also allow the possibility of more peer-assessment. Such improvements may be reflected in better student questionnaire scores on Assessment and Feedback;
- The definition of “examination” within the DPA – “any process for determining the knowledge, intelligence, skill or ability of a candidate by reference to his performance in any test, work or other activity” – covers not only examinations but *all forms of summative coursework*. That the University does not uphold its right to withhold submitted coursework from students for obvious pedagogic reasons, it is unclear why it does so for examination scripts;
- Confusingly UEA treats course tests in the same way as coursework by routinely returning the scripts to students even though there is little to distinguish course tests from examinations and even though most students conflate the two;
- Students have the right to access A-level scripts (on payment). Universities, therefore, represent a retrograde position;
- It has been a long-term policy of the Student Union. For example, a paper by the previous UUEAS Academic Officer, David Shepherd, entitled *Examination Feedback for Undergraduates* recommended considering “the possibility of a

⁷ <https://portal.uea.ac.uk/documents/6207125/6881749/UEA+FOI+request+form.pdf/50ce5cab-e88a-4a6e-95fb-528abcdbd6bf>

⁸ This as reported by the University Data Protection Officer of Heriot Watt University. See <http://www1.hw.ac.uk/register/resources/examperformancefeedback.pdf>

system where students could view or be returned their own exam scripts” as long ago as 2009;⁹

- As the University considers the possibility of providing individualised examination feedback¹⁰ the return of examination scripts provides the most efficient and simple mechanism for delivering such feedback;
- Access to their examination scripts may be especially valuable for those sent to reassessment.

3. Examination access provision in other HEIs

Although most HEIs make reference to Schedule 7(9) of the DPA, a growing number explicitly allow student access to their scripts in some way. In most instances the student is allowed to view their script although usually only under supervision and with the script having to be returned to the university. Institutions where this is the case include: University of Birmingham, Herriot-Watt University, University of Hull, Keele University, University of Leeds, University of Lincoln, University of Liverpool, University of Nottingham, University of Reading, Royal Holloway and University of Wolverhampton. Other institutions allow copies of the scripts to be returned to the student at the discretion of the department; Newcastle University is one such case. Northumbria University appears to have the most radical policy which not only expects all scripts to be returned to students but apparently the scripts themselves rather than copies.¹¹

4. Some options for UEA

Given the arguments in §2 and the way the sector as a whole is moving as briefly reported in §3, it is timely that UEA review its current position on student access to examination scripts – or, at the very least, clarify the details of its current position: can any student request to view their script or is this determined by the individual School/module organiser; how and by whom are such requests made; does the University allow copies of scripts to be given to students if so requested; should the University keep a record of such requests, etc.

Although the argument for greater access rights is likely to be granted in principle, it may be that the significant increase in administrative resource that such a change would entail makes immediate implementation difficult. Here the judgement must be in terms of whether the likely improvements in the student experience and, hence, student satisfaction, outweigh the costs. It should also be borne in mind that other institutions are currently managing to provide improved access and that UEA runs the risk of being left behind the rest of the sector.

Changes in the policy may have other effects. For example, increased access to scripts might increase the number of appeals. Colleagues may also be required to change their

⁹ http://ueastudent.hcoms.co.uk/image_uploads/examination-feedback.pdf

¹⁰ See <https://portal.uea.ac.uk/documents/6207125/8412392/lcmmins280115.pdf/90fde9ee-a2a3-4483-8e99-f038ad5ba161> (paragraph 74); <https://portal.uea.ac.uk/documents/6207125/8187896/sec14d008documenta.pdf/60940f64-8a06-423b-8cf0-ddc1f4d24858> and http://issuu.com/ueasu/docs/student_experience_report_digital.

¹¹ <https://www.northumbria.ac.uk/static/worddocuments/ardocs/890859.doc>. There is some confusion over the policy since on the University’s Freedom of Information (FOI) webpage - <https://www.northumbria.ac.uk/about-us/leadership-governance/vice-chancellors-office/legal-services-team/freedom-of-information/foi-frequently-asked-questions/> - mention is made of the DPA and how this entails that examination scripts are exempt from disclosure under the FOI so that “the university is not obliged to provide copies to student if asked for them”. No reference is made to the previous document (which, conceivably, has been superseded).

commenting practices in the knowledge that they may be read by students and as such should be useful to them.

A wide range of alternative access policies are possible depending upon choices made with respect to a variety of parameters. These include:

- Automatic access to all examinations across the institution vs. by request of School/subject area/module organiser.

A number of HEIs allow individual units to decide whether to allow access to scripts or not (Newcastle being an example). The rationale for this is unclear since if it is thought beneficial for one type of examination, it should apply for all others. Further, should it not be for the individual student to decide what would or would not be beneficial for themselves?

- Available to all students vs. available only to a subset.

If increased access is argued for on pedagogic terms, then access to scripts may not be a priority for Final Year students. Should all students sent to examined reassessment be allowed access to their scripts irrespective of year? Does the observation of the previous bullet point apply: that choice should be left with the student?

- Access to scripts for viewing only vs. copies of scripts supplied;

The disadvantage of allowing students only to view the script under supervision (apart from the increased administrative resource) is that it precludes more considered reflection including peer-assessment.

The University, however, requires a “locked down” version of all examination scripts in the case of appeal. The simplest solution is that the University retain the original and the student be given a (scanned) copy.

- Copies of scripts automatically returned to all students vs. returned only on individual request.

Although precise figures are not available, it is claimed that only a minority of students (10-20%) in those HEIs which allow access avail themselves of this opportunity. Given the resource implications of copying scripts, it would be most efficient to provide scripts only on request.

- Copies provided free of charge vs. administrative cost applied.

It is difficult to estimate the amount of resource likely to be required if copies were to be provided. At the very least, the request would need to be processed, the script located, the script copied and e-mailed to the student and the script returned to the store. Conservatively assuming that the number of requests might amount to 10% of the current 60,000 individual examination scripts or so produced in the year and 10 minutes processing for each request, this would require a minimum of 26.7 person-weeks to handle. Given current LTS commitments this could only be handled by employing temporary staff. It may be that this additional resource can only be financed by requesting a fee (as is the case when applying for A-level scripts where a fee of around £12 is charged).¹² If this is the case, the University should be committed to providing sufficient feedback so that no student was discriminated against who could not afford the fee. That said, if the focus of the argument is on providing optimal feedback, it would be difficult to argue that feedback should be paid for.

¹² It is worth noting that A-level Boards also charge a substantial fee (around £40) for remarking. This is unlikely to be a policy that the University would want to adopt.

- Scripts made available as soon as returned to Hub vs. only after the relevant Examination Board.

It might be more efficient to return scripts as soon as possible after their return to the Hub. However, examination marks are not currently released until after the Examination Board has formally confirmed marks.

- What should the time limit of request be?

The earliest cut off point for a request to access an examination script should be, say, two weeks after the release of the marks. How far this should be extended is debatable. Since students may wish to discuss their scripts with their tutors in the first couple of weeks of the Autumn semester, a later date may be more appropriate.

The argument of this paper is that in terms of providing the best student experience in line with a growing trend in the rest of the sector, UEA needs to improve the right of student access to their examination scripts. The “gold standard” would be to provide copies of scripts to all students on request which would allow students the best means of engaging with their feedback and the simplest solution to the delivery of individualised feedback. Whether this is immediately achievable is a matter of judgement and various intermediate positions may be initially explored. Whichever policy is chosen will need to be trialled and properly assessed before committing the University to a full-scale implementation.

CAM
April 21st 2015

INDIVIDUAL EXAMINATION FEEDBACK

Received

Feedback and Student Access to Examination Scripts

(A copy is filed in the Minute Book and is available on the Policy Group's Blackboard site for the meeting as Document B.)

Reported

- By Clive Matthews (CM) that feedback to students on their assessments needs to be timely in order to support students' subsequent submissions. For coursework submissions, students typically receive their work back (with annotations) with a cover sheet of feedback on their work. This does not happen for examination scripts.
- CM reported that the University uses the Data Protection Act to prevent examinations being given back to students. However, although the Act also covers other types of assessment, the University does not seek to prevent students from receiving other types of coursework back.
- CM argues that in principle, students should have access to their exam scripts. Although a discussion would need to be had as to how this is managed and the likely resource implications. Practice in this regard varied in the sector, with some institutions returning all scripts to all students, whilst other institutions return scripts by request.
- CM asked the Group to consider his paper within which he outlined his arguments along with various options.

Reported in discussion

- By Connor Rand (CR) that some institutions had systems in place which automatically emailed marked scripts to student (Nottingham Trent).
- Sandra Gibson (SG) and Rosie Doy (RD) raised the issue of examinations within health schools, where there may be a limited pool of questions available. Within these scenarios a release of the paper could limit the future robustness of future examinations. It was also observed that practice at other institutions is considered, the operational detail is not known. Are the same scripts rotated? Or are papers revised every year? RD also observed that thought needs to be given as to the definition of 'script', for example, does this apply to multi choice papers?
- Neil Cooper (NC) noted that within the University there was a wide range of diversity and that the opportunities for feedback within multi choice examinations, or those which employed question banks, was more limited.

- CM noted that at Newcastle University each individual department decided on their own policy in respect of examination feedback.
- CR argued that this approach would result in a lottery for students in terms of where they could expect feedback. This may particularly affect students undertaking modules in different schools.
- The ADTP noted that there is a distinction between feedback to the student and giving the examination script back. Any system put in place could be costly, if done wholesale, though would need to be balanced against the positive benefits to the Student experience.
- One option outlined in the paper was that students be charged an administration fee for copying and distribution of any papers. It was noted that in the case of A-Levels a fee of £12 is charged.
- Helen Gillespie (HG) stated that she could not envisage a reason for coursework and examinations to be treated differently, except where there are professional body concerns. HS cautioned against charging students for access to feedback.
- Both Josh Clare (JC) and CR stated that they did not feel that an additional charge would be appropriate and argues that this was included within the tuition fee. Further they remarked that the Student Union were extremely supportive of the proposal to provide feedback on examinations to students.
- Ros Boar (RB) reported that a pilot had been previously been launched in ENV where students had been given a time and location where their examination scripts would be available for review, along with the marker. RB reported that take up of this was very low for this pilot. However, it did work well for those who did attend.
- Alicia McConnell (AMc) stated that the digitisation of examinations had the potential to lead to cost savings when returning feedback to students.
- JC felt that a request system for feedback would be a good way forward. Emily Kitchen (EK) noted that even if turnout was low, it was still valuable for those students who did attend and engage with any feedback sessions.

Agreed

- The Group felt that it was not appropriate to charge students for feedback.
- The Group were in favour of examination feedback on a request basis. However, there may be a need for Course Directors to decide in advance which assessments feedback would be available for. Additionally, it

should be made clear to students the reasons why feedback is not available.

- The Group felt that at first a pilot would be appropriate, to be run for those UG students at the end of year 2, before they embark upon year 3 of their course. However, thought would need to be given as to the timing and form of this feedback, along with how it would be supported.
- Faculty LTQC's will discuss this issue and the paper presented by CM at the earliest opportunity.

ACTION

ADTP to take this issue forward to LTC