

Moderation, second-marking and external examiners

Moderation

Moderation is the mechanism most commonly utilised to ensure that student work is handled in an academically rigorous manner. Moderation is undertaken on a sample basis, the aim being that the second tutor to mark work makes a judgement on the accuracy of the first markers assessment of the piece. This sample should comprise a representative 20% of all assessed work, provided that at least 8 pieces of assessment are available. If 7 or less pieces are available, all should be moderated (or second-marked, see below).

Because moderating tutors are seeing only a sample, it would be unfair on the individual students selected for the sample to have their marks amended (or, conversely, it might be unfair on those not selected). The moderating tutor should aim to come to a conclusion about whether the marking of the sample as a whole appears to be accurate. They are **not** entitled to amend individual marks. However, if they have specific concerns, they are free to raise these with the first marker, but have no right to overrule. Should such a dispute occur, with no resolution, a third marker should be invited to adjudicate. This marker can not be the external examiner.

The moderating tutor might decide that all the marks in the sample are inaccurate, perhaps to the same extent. In much the same way as external examiners, they may then request that all the marks are adjusted accordingly. As above though, this should be through a process of academic discussion, and if disputes occur a third individual should be invited to adjudicate. Again, this should not be the external examiner.

Second-marking

Student work can only be second-marked where all work is available to the second marking tutor. In this case, the tutor should ideally be marking blind – that is, without knowledge of the original markers grade. Once the exercise is complete the two markers should discuss each piece and explain how they arrived at the grade awarded. In cases of unresolved dispute, a third marker can adjudicate. Once again, this should not be the external examiner.

The role of external examiners

External examiners are asked to examine the course/subject as approved, within the regulations made by the Academic Board. Their function is different in kind from internal examiners. The role is not “second marker” or “third marker”, or adjudicator between conflicting judgements of internal markers. Their role is primarily to ensure that the marks of internal examiners are consistent with marks awarded for similar subjects in relation to similar awards elsewhere in the UK HE sector. External examiners’ reference points will be their experience in other HEIs, and such expressions of national consensus as the QAA “benchmark” statements. On the basis of samples the external examiner moderates or confirms the marks of cohorts, or runs of marks, but not individual marks or assessment items.

Final judgements on, or approval of marks and classes of awards must be academic peer group processes. As with any such process, it is possible that members of the group will disagree. Where the dispute is between an internal marker and the others, the means of resolution is straightforward: discussion and vote. Where the dispute is between an external examiner and the internal examiners, or between external examiners, it is more problematic, since the mark sheet that forms part of the record of an assessment board’s decisions is not valid unless it is signed by the appointed external examiner(s).

The Academic Board is the final authority for any award of Bath Spa University, or for any marks assigned in connection with a BSU award. Therefore any dispute that cannot be resolved at the level of an assessment board (i.e. where an external examiner has not signed an assessment board mark sheet) may come to Academic Board for resolution. Clearly this is cumbersome and a means of last resort.

However, when an external examiner proposes to moderate a whole run of marks upwards or downwards in the interests of preserving the standard of the BSU award, then he or she is performing precisely the function for which he or she was appointed. In such a case an assessment board should consider rejecting the view of the external examiner(s) only after considerable deliberation, and in the recognition that a rejection implies that the external examiner is unable to perform his or her proper function. Where the external examiner differs from the assessment board even after discussion, he or she must exercise the right not to sign the mark sheet, and the Academic Board will adjudicate.

Inevitably, and despite the comments above, external examiners will encounter individual marks with which they disagree, even where they believe a general run of marks to be accurate. In such cases, it is

open to an external examiner to suggest to the responsible internal marker that an individual mark is anomalous. The difference of opinion may still not have been settled at the assessment board stage. Even here, the external examiner has the right not to sign the mark sheet. However, the external examiner should exercise this right in these circumstances only when he or she considers the error to be so serious as to compromise the award as a whole.