

**University of Glasgow****Academic Standards Committee – Friday 24 May 2019****PGT Dissertation Supervision and Marking Practices within ASBS****Mrs Ruth Cole, Clerk to the Committee****Note of Meeting re ASBS Supervision and Marking Practices on PGT Programmes -  
1 May 2019**

Present: Professor Neil Evans, Professor Jill Morrison, Dr Maria Jackson, Professor Marc Alexander, Professor Greg Stoner, Mrs Fiona Baxter, Mrs Ruth Cole.

Concerns had been raised to and at Academic Standards Committee regarding supervision and marking of PGT dissertations in the Adam Smith Business School, with aspects of this found to be out of line with University guidance. It had been agreed that a sub-group of ASC should meet with colleagues from ASBS to explore the various issues and then bring a proposal to ASC at the meeting in May concerning practice in the short term and practice going forward in future years.

**Background**

It was noted that the University's position on marking practice was set out in a document that had originally been developed through the Learning & Teaching Committee [[Moderation and Second Marking](#)]. This has not been incorporated into the Code of Assessment and is described as Guidance that sets out good practice, aimed at ensuring that appropriate standards in assessment are applied consistently. The document notes that the extent to which this can be achieved in practice may be limited by resource constraints.

The guidance indicates that PGT dissertations should be double marked or 'at the very least... if practicable, be second marked with a 100% sample'. In discussion, it was noted that the dissertation was a high stakes assessment, representing one third of the credits taken on a generic PGT programme and the grade achieved was one of the criteria that determined the final degree outcome.

**Marking protocol**

In ASBS, PGT dissertations were currently not all double or second marked. Information provided by ASBS had set out the various steps involved in a moderation protocol that had been adopted to ensure marking standards. This involved first marking by the supervisor, statistical analysis of variance across all markers, all assessment sheets being reviewed by PGT dissertation conveners, second marking of a stratified sample of around 22% of dissertations, and a sample of in the region of 10% being sent to external examiners. For each marker at least 2-3 dissertations were second marked. Professor Stoner's position was that confidence in the effectiveness of the protocol was high and that the various different strands of the moderation protocol in fact made for more robust moderation than blanket double marking. It was noted that the statistical analysis was a key component of the process and was reliable because of the very large PGT student cohorts in ASBS. Such analysis would have less value in the smaller cohorts that were more typical in other parts of the University. The role of the dissertation conveners, who took an overview of all assessment sheets, complemented the statistical approach.

## **Staffing constraints**

It was acknowledged that student numbers in the ASBS were high and were continuing to grow. The School was not resourced to a level where it would be possible to double mark all PGT dissertations, but even if it was, the number of individuals with the appropriate expertise and knowledge was insufficient to cover such a volume of work. The University of Glasgow was not alone in having to manage this challenge. It was in that context that the ASBS had developed the moderation protocol, which they in fact believed made for a more reliable marking process than double/second marking.

## **Involvement of adjunct staff**

ASBS relied heavily on adjunct staff for marking PGT dissertations. In Accounting & Finance all marking was done by adjunct staff and for both Economics and Management it was about 50%. It was noted that these were individuals who were experienced in the relevant fields of business, a number of whom were former UoG staff members and many were published researchers. It was common for the adjunct staff members to be involved in the marking of dissertations for between five and ten years, so they could build up considerable experience. For marking in 2019, however, there was a particularly high number of new adjunct staff, reflecting the continuing rise in student numbers.

New adjunct staff were required to attend a briefing session which covered issues such as ethics, the Code of Assessment's marking schedule, plagiarism, and information on student support. Continuing adjunct staff were invited annually but attendance was not a requirement. Adjunct staff members were encouraged to make links with each other, in order to share their experiences. As noted above, internal staff levels in the ASBS meant that the marking of dissertations depended on the input of adjunct staff.

## **Supervisors acting as markers**

The Code of Assessment required that assessment should be 'so far as practicable' anonymous. In the ASBS the supervisor of a PGT dissertation also acted as the first marker and therefore in the majority of cases was also the sole marker. However, all assessment sheets were reviewed by PGT dissertation conveners. ASC had expressed some disquiet about this situation, believing that there was considerable scope for impartiality and thus unfairness in such an arrangement. In many areas of the University it was common practice for the supervisor to be involved in marking a PGT dissertation (reflecting the importance of specialist knowledge of the field) but this would be on the basis that a second marker was also involved. Professor Stoner spoke about the distinctive context of PGT programmes in the ASBS, where supervisors each had a relatively high number of supervisees and, by necessity, there were clear protocols on the number and duration of supervisory meetings and a limit on the volume of material a supervisor would review in draft. Their experience was that close relationships between supervisor and student did not tend to form in the same way as could happen in areas of the University which had smaller student cohorts and where the supervisor-student interaction was not as clearly defined. It was suggested that asking one supervisor to mark the dissertation supervised by someone else, but in a related field, could alleviate the risk of impartiality. The view of ASBS was that the value of the supervisor's knowledge of the specific field and of the development of the particular project outweighed any risk of potential bias which was limited in this instance by the student numbers and guidelines related to project supervision and by the monitoring of supervisor grading that is facilitated by the volume of grading that each completes.

## **Alternatives to the traditional dissertation**

There was a discussion around the potential for reducing the overall marking burden by developing alternatives to the traditional dissertation including the possibility of a range of deliverables or a final dissertation of shorter length. Professor Stoner indicated that the

ASBS would be open to developing such alternatives. Accounting & Finance had in recent years been considering alternatives and in fact had proposed and got approval to use professional portfolios (though the approved programme has not been offered). All parts of the School have considered and are open to the possibility of alternative forms of assessment for the substantial independent piece of work, and will be encouraged by the positive views from this meeting. It was noted that amending the brief for the dissertation in such a way that would reduce word length was not necessarily appropriate in the disciplines covered by ASBS and it was also not clear that reducing word length would in itself significantly reduce the marking burden.

## **Conclusion**

The view of the sub-group of ASC was that ASBS had made a sufficient case for the continued use of their current supervision arrangements, and their marking protocol allied with a detailed review and moderation system that is made possible given their particular context of high student numbers and rendered necessary by limited availability of staff with the appropriate subject specific expertise for marking dissertations. At its meeting in May 2019 ASC would be asked to confirm this as the agreed position for the foreseeable future though reserving the right to revisit this pending the outcome of annual review of the moderation process.

The sub-group's view was that:

- The ASBS should report to ASC on the marking process undertaken in 2019, to include a report on the outcome from the marking/moderation protocols (e.g. number of dissertations/markers identified for review through statistical analysis and through the review carried out by dissertation conveners), the total number of dissertations subject to second marking and the proportion of dissertations where grades were amended, with an indication of the scale of adjustments, through the moderation protocol.
- The ASBS should report to ASC on their conclusions regarding how to improve the debriefing of supervisors/markers at the end of the year.
- The ASBS should continue to consider possible alternatives to the traditional dissertation.

ASBS would be asked to report to ASC in January 2020.