

THE UNIVERSITY *of York*
SCA Briefing Sheet
Fourth edition July 2008

Throughout each academic year the Standing Committee on Assessment (SCA) considers and provides guidance on a number of issues raised by staff, other University committees and external bodies. The Committee is responsible for the content of the University's *Guide to Assessment Policies and Practices* and for the *Academic Misconduct Policies, Guidelines and Procedures*. These documents are updated annually, but much of the Committee's work during the year is of immediate benefit to departments. The regular Briefing Sheets provide departments with useful clarification and guidelines for many of the issues they deal with each day.

Academic Misconduct

Awareness and detection

The University has piloted an online plagiarism awareness tutorial in a small number of departments during this academic year. Following the success of the pilot, **the module will be compulsory for all new students** from October 2008.

The Safe Assignment plagiarism detection software is now a standard part of the VLE. Contact the support team on rw23@york.ac.uk for details.

Annual Report 06/07

The analysis of misconduct statistics from 06/07 presented a mixed picture. On the one hand, it was pleasing to note an 11% fall in the number of reported undergraduate student cases of academic misconduct in 2006/7, which may indicate success in educating students in good and bad academic practice.

On the other hand, the number of postgraduate cases reported has risen by 39%, demonstrating the continued need for emphasis on plagiarism awareness especially for students on one-year programmes. It was felt that this increase was due to improved detection measures as there had not been this percentage rise in the student body.

It is hoped that incidences of academic misconduct in examinations will decline significantly now that individual dictionaries cannot be taken into examinations.

NOTE: that at July 2008, such incidents are down by more than 50%

Ownership of material submitted for assessment

Senate has approved a new regulation (to be numbered 5.5) that will clarify the ownership of material submitted for assessment. The regulation clarifies that once material has been submitted for assessment it becomes the physical property of the University, and may be passed to third parties for legitimate purposes (such as plagiarism detection services). The regulation contains safeguards in relation to intellectual property and the rights of students under data protection legislation.

Examinations for research degrees

Recording of oral examinations

Senate has decided that from 1 October 2008 all research students' oral examinations will be audio recorded. The recordings will only be used in the event of an appeal, or where the two original examiners have been unable to agree on their decision and an adjudicating examiner is appointed.

Suitable recording equipment will be held in the Audio Visual section and will be available for booking through the usual procedures upon request. The recording policy is now on the Graduate Schools Office website.
<http://www.york.ac.uk/admin/gso/>

Guidelines on the conduct of oral examinations

The SCA have approved guidelines on the conduct of oral examinations for research students and they can be found on the Graduate Schools Office website.
<http://www.york.ac.uk/admin/gso/>

Appointing retired staff as PhD examiners

Departments sometimes wish to appoint retired members of staff as internal examiners for PhD candidates. This is because they form a pool of valuable expertise and experience, and often continue to make a strong contribution to the research life of their former department. However, under previous regulations, retired staff were not eligible for appointment.

UTC has approved SCA's recommendation that retired members of academic staff could act as examiners provided:

1. they have not been re-employed at another institution
2. if 3 years have elapsed since retirement, evidence of continuing research activity or advanced scholarship must be provided as part of the nomination process.

It has also been agreed that a retired member of staff would receive a fee (at the same rate as the external examiner) if appointed as a PhD

examiner, and would be responsible for ensuring that the examination is conducted in accordance with current guidelines and regulations.

Items relating to closed examinations

The duration of examinations

It is becoming increasingly difficult to schedule additional exams for more students in a finite space envelope. This is compounded by a range of unusual examination durations. UTC has approved SCA's recommendation that from October 2008 examination lengths will be standardised to:

- One hour
- One hour and thirty minutes
- Two hours
- Two hours and thirty minutes
- Three hours

In future, departments not wishing to comply with these exam lengths will have the option to conduct their own invigilated examinations, following University guidelines. If, however, departments have already announced non-standard examination lengths for next year, they will be accommodated – please contact the Examinations Office as soon as possible.

Checking students' identities in closed University examinations

The current procedure for establishing a student's identity in examinations states that candidates are required to display their University Card on their exam desks throughout an examination; photographs on the cards are checked by invigilators in the first 30 minutes of each examination. Candidates unable to produce their University Card or any alternative form of identification acceptable to the Senior Invigilator will have this noted on their examination script before they submit it, and must provide the Senior Invigilator with a specimen signature.

A substantial number of students do not bring any ID to an examination and this is a problem we need to solve.

The SCA approved the following:

1. At each examination session a candidate **must** produce one of the following: University Card, passport, photo driving licence or EC ID card. Attendance slips will still be completed and signed by students; when these are collected the name will be checked against the name on the ID card.
2. If a student fails to provide any one of these cards they will be required to provide two forms of identification, one of which must be a photo ID, to the Student Administration Office **within one working day of the exam**. Not providing this data will be considered a failure to comply with the University's regulations on

establishing identity in an examination, and as such is an academic offence, which could result in a mark of zero for that exam.

3. Anyone found to be impersonating a University of York student in a formal University exam will always be reported to the police. If they are a member of the University they will be investigated for academic misconduct.

It is hoped that in the future it will be possible to introduce a more sophisticated system of checking students' identities in examinations.

Access to examination scripts

The department of Biology conducted a very successful pilot study in 2006/7 allowing students' supervised access to some closed examination scripts. The SCA reviewed the results of the pilot and have decided that from October 2008 all departments can offer students supervised access to examination scripts but they are not obliged to do so. Guidelines for departments will appear in the 2008/9 edition of the *Guide to Assessment*.

External examiners

External Examiners acting as 'markers'

As part of its Annual Programme Review process UTC noted that there was a lack of clarity about the use of external examiners as markers. SCA were asked to review the situation.

The *Guide to Assessment* already implicitly discourages this practice, and with UTC's approval the SCA approved the proposal that **External Examiners for taught programmes should not act as markers under any circumstances**.

This should not preclude the possibility that an external might be sent scripts where the internal markers had differed widely in their original marks, but the purpose would be for the external to verify that discrepancies are resolved in an appropriate fashion, rather than to determine the final mark. (See also the item on resolving differences between first and second markers below.)

SCA has also consulted with departments on whether external examiners should continue to have the unilateral power to alter marks, and will make detailed proposals to UTC in due course.

Attendance of externals at Boards of Examiners

As part of their duties, external examiners are required to attend all Boards of Examiners at which awards are made. If your department is notified by an external examiner that they are unable to attend such a meeting, please contact the SCA (via Student Administrative Services on ext 4040 or rag501@york.ac.uk) immediately. It is

good practice to arrange the dates of Boards well in advance to ensure the availability of Externals.

Fees for External Examiners of taught postgraduate programmes

The current fee structure was formulated some time ago and is out of line with those operated by comparator institutions. Planning Committee approved SCA's proposal that any future appointments of external examiners for taught postgraduate programmes will be on the basis of payment of a flat fee of £150 plus a capitation fee of £18. Existing contracts will be honoured, except in the case of those who would benefit financially from the change, and those external examiners will also be paid the new fee from October 2008.

Miscellaneous items

Resolving differences between first and second markers

UTC approved the following recommendation from the SCA: Departments should have written guidelines on how differences in marks between first and second markers are resolved, based on the following principles:

- (a) The margin of difference that is regarded as a significant discrepancy should be clearly stated.
- (b) Where the difference between the two markers is not regarded as significant, an agreed mark can be returned by the markers without further documentation.
- (c) In all cases where a significant discrepancy has occurred, the markers should engage in negotiation to attempt to determine an agreed mark. The rationale for any agreed mark should be documented.
- (d) If the markers are unable to reach agreement, a third internal marker should be appointed by the Board of Examiners. The third marker should have access to the reports of the first two markers as well as the script and should determine the mark, documenting their rationale.
- (e) External Examiners should not be asked to adjudicate between internal markers although the process by which the marks are resolved should be open to their scrutiny and comment.

Departments should also document their procedures for ensuring the reliability of methods for sampling, if these are employed.

Marking closed examination scripts that deviate from the rubric

Guidance has recently been requested on the procedure for marking closed examination scripts when students fail to adhere to the rubric and answer more questions than specified.

It is difficult to formulate a single policy that will meet every discipline's particular needs and workloads. Rather than be prescriptive the SCA decided that each department should have clear guidelines in their Written Statements of Assessment on how scripts where the wrong number of questions have been answered will be marked.

Penalties for failing to meet assessment deadlines

Section 8.5 of the *Guide to Assessment* has recently proved to be too succinct and departments have been seeking more advice and guidance on applying penalties to ensure equity in and between disciplines. This section of the *Guide* will be updated for 2008/9.

Assessment rules governing modules taken outside the home department

The SCA decided that students taking modules outside their home department should be assessed according to the rules and procedures of the department offering the module, in line with policy stated in the current academic framework.

It is the responsibility of the home department to ascertain, before approving an elective request, that marks will be available in good time for their own Board of Examiners meetings, or else to put suitable alternative arrangements in place.

Committee Membership for 2008/9

The current Chair of the SCA, Dr Chris Fewster, is pleased to announce that he will be succeeded on 1 August 2008 by Dr David Efird, currently Director of Graduate Studies in Philosophy.

The full committee membership for 2008/9 is:

Dr David Efird, Philosophy (Chair)
Prof Colin Runciman, Computer Science
Dr Anne Duhme-Klair, Chemistry
Dr Simon Eveson, Mathematics
Dr Amanda Rees, Sociology
Dr John Brown, Social Policy
Dr Pat Ansell, Health Sciences