Informatics Policy on Setting and Marking UG3, UG4 and MSc Exams

This document is intended to set policies on setting and marking UG3, UG4 and MSc exams in Informatics. Further policies concerning exam formats, alternative markers, and so on can be found at the web page entitled “Informatics Teaching Policies,” which records policies decided at the Informatics Teaching Committee.

1 Exam Format

UG3, UG4 and MSc exams normally have three questions with one of two standard remits:

– Answer any TWO questions.
– Answer QUESTION 1 and ONE other question.

In either case all questions carry equal weight and are marked out of 25. For each question the marks for at least the major sub-parts should be indicated, using the supplied macro. Consider also whether giving marks for sub-sub-parts is appropriate.

Exams last for two hours. One might imagine a student taking 3/4 an hour for each, preceded by 15 minutes choosing their questions and 15 minutes at the end looking over their answers.

The ITO maintains templates and macros for question setting. Instructions on where to find them are sent to all relevant lecturers at the time of the call for exam setting.

2 Exam Content

The aim is to get a good spread of marks, with most marks in the range 50–70, but with a significant number above and below. A question should be a mixture of bookwork, application/appreciation of knowledge and, perhaps, a more creative/demanding part. No more than 40% of the marks should go to bookwork.

Bookwork is simply rote learning. Application/appreciation of knowledge can be quite varied, and will depend on the area of examination; it might consist of problem solving, applying techniques or results learnt to new scenarios, or of critical analysis, discussing the key features of methods and contrasting them with alternatives. The creative part might, for example, involve exploring novel situations or proving small variants of known theorems. Where possible, an exam should have a range of types of question.
Care must be taken to ensure that the exam does not focus on one narrow area of the course. One should also avoid tricky questions that test, e.g., obscure programming language features, rather than basic principles. It is very important to ensure that failure in one part of a question does not imply failure of the rest. If a part depends on a preceding one it should be possible for candidates to obtain at least some credit for the latter part, even if the preceding one was answered incorrectly: i.e., they should not face a double penalty.

The tone of the questions should be straightforward, allowing candidates to see the point without unnecessary verbiage. Humour should be avoided: it can lead to misunderstandings by candidates, who are working under very stressful conditions.

3 Sample Answers

Sample answers must be provided for each question, following the format of the question. If a part is bookwork, then start by stating this and then provide a sample answer. For the other parts, it would be helpful if the challenges involved were briefly indicated. After the answer to each part, you should indicate briefly how the relevant marks would be allocated.

In the case of essay questions, or others where various answers are possible, you could instead simply indicate the sorts of topics you expect to see discussed and the level of information you expect, again giving a guide as to how marks will be allocated. External examiners must be able to judge if the expectations are appropriate by looking at the question and the sample answer.

Sample answers have several other functions: They help you gauge the difficulty of your question when setting the exam, especially taking into account the time available to them to answer the questions. They also help you ensure consistency when marking it. Lastly, in case, for whatever reason, you are unavailable to mark the exam, the sample answers should be written so as to provide a good guide to any other qualified person marking the exam.

Sample answers can either be typeset using the template provided by the ITO or handwritten. They are made available to students unless you wish them not to be: in which case, please inform the ITO of your preference.

4 Marking Scripts

Every page that a student writes on should be marked in some way, if only by a tick. Whenever marks are deducted, some indication should be made, whether verbal, or by a mark, such as a cross, exclamation mark or an underline; pejorative remarks should not be made. While not required, detailed comments can be helpful to the externals: such comments might point out an error or indicate missing content.

The ITO, who check all script marking, would greatly appreciate it if marks awarded were displayed in the following standard way:
– Write the marks awarded for each part of a question in the margin and write the total for the whole question at the end of the question, ideally inside a circle.
– Write the totals for each question on the front of the script book and write the final percentage mark for the paper in the box headed “For Examiner’s Use” at the top of the front page.

It is most important to mark scripts within the deadlines requested: otherwise quite unnecessary last minute pressure is put on the process of preparation by the ITO for the Board of Examiners. The ITO checks each marker’s additions within the script book, sorts the scripts, and then enters the marks in the database and double checks the data entry. This procedure is robust and means that you can be confident in the marks presented to the BoE.

5 Data Protection Act

Following university guidance, students can see their marked exam scripts, on request, after the relevant Board of Examiners has met. They do so by appointment with the ITO. Then, if they still have queries, they may request an appointment with an appropriate course organiser or lecturer. They may not make a copy of their script, or take it away. No changes of marks may be agreed.