Project marking procedures

There have been persistent complaints over years from our external examiners concerning project marking inconsistencies. This is the main area of complaint in the UG4 external examiners' reports and it was for instance also raised by the MSc external examiners this October.

The current procedure is that project dissertations are marked independently, according to specified marking criteria and guidance on the correspondence between these individual criteria and the final mark, by the supervisor and a second marker, who then attempt to agree a mark. If they cannot agree on a mark, or if the discrepancy between their marks is wide enough, a moderator takes the two markers' reports into account in arriving at a final mark.

The external examiners' complaints concern at least the following issues:

1. There are too often wide discrepancies between marks given by the two independent markers. There are cases where these marks differ by more than one degree class.
2. There are sometimes dramatic discrepancies between the mark given and the content of the dissertation, the marks on the individual marking criteria, and/or the textual comments.
3. In some cases only very brief textual comments are given, making it hard to pinpoint the basis for marking discrepancies when they arise.
4. Under these circumstances, it is difficult to have confidence that project marks are not significantly influenced by factors other than objective ones, such as choice of supervisor and second marker.

So far the external examiners have been prepared to accept that our existing moderation procedures work well enough. But the issue keeps arising, and there is persistent pressure to change to a scheme like that used at other universities: typically each project is marked by the supervisor, and that mark is taken as input by a project marking panel that is responsible for achieving consistency of marking. Given the number of projects, membership of such a marking panel would be enough work to constitute a significant teaching duty, which would reduce the resource available for other teaching duties. On that basis, this suggestion has been rejected by the School in the past.

In my view and the view of last year's UG4 external examiners, the main problem is that our existing project marking scheme is not being followed by a minority of staff. Their suggestion is that our existing procedures would be significantly improved by changing the project marking form to require more justification of the mark given and to remind markers of the expected correspondence between the individual marking criteria and the final numerical mark.

I propose that we implement this suggestion, by making the following changes to the marking form:

1. The current box for textual comments would be for comments on the marks given for the individual marking criteria, with the sentence "You should write at least a couple of sentences here to justify your mark" replaced by a prompt requiring more information, such
as: "Justify your ratings on the criteria here. Include comments on research and background, planning and design, realisation and implementation, and evaluation."

2. The marks on the individual criteria would be used to compute a range of marks according to the algorithm in the current guidance notes, and this range would be displayed on the form next to the box where the marker records the numerical project mark.

3. A new text box would be added for comments on the project mark, which would require explicit justification of a mark that falls outside of the range corresponding to the marks on the individual criteria.

The UG4 external examiners have agreed that this proposal would address their main concerns with project marking consistency.

None of the other marking arrangements would change.

I am proposing this for UG4 and MInf project marking, since that is my responsibility, but the MSc project coordinators – both last year’s coordinator and this year’s incoming coordinator – have agreed that these changes would also be beneficial for MSc project marking.

Don Sannella, honours project coordinator

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