Introduction

In the 2009 National Student Survey, only 65 per cent of respondents expressed satisfaction with feedback and assessment indicating that issues of effective and valuable feedback and satisfaction with assessment are still a priority for students nationally.

Since it began, NUS’ campaign for anonymous marking across all UK institutions has gone from strength to strength. Originally started in response to students’ complaints about under-marking in the late nineties, the campaign continues to be highly relevant today.

Over a number of years, NUS’ national anonymous marking campaigns have won notable victories: endorsements from the Quality Assurance Agency, teaching unions and the Equal Opportunities Commission, increasing take-up by UK Higher Education institutions and a general recognition across the HE sector that anonymous marking constitutes best practice.

Our campaign arises from our central belief that all students deserve to be treated fairly and without discrimination and prejudice. Our original survey of students in 1999 found that 44 per cent of students’ unions believed that discrimination and bias played a part in the way that students’ work was assessed and addressed. Based on these findings, coupled with indicators and research elsewhere that suggest that anonymous marking reduces both the fear and likelihood of discrimination, we continue to work alongside students’ unions to campaign for the introduction of universal anonymous marking across all institutions.

Although anonymous marking is not a panacea for tackling discrimination, it does go a long way towards safeguarding students and improving confidence in marking, assessment and feedback. It offers some protection to students from discrimination and bias and reduces any potential conflict with their assessors.

What is anonymous marking?

Anonymous marking is a system of assessment where the student’s name is unknown to the marker. It is sometimes referred to as ‘blind marking’. It can be used for written examinations and for other forms of assessment. There are various ways of implementing anonymous marking. Some of the common ones are:

- Marking by numbers
- Bar codes
- Double marking
- External or visitor marking

Marking by numbers

This is by far the most common form of anonymous marking. The system of ‘marking by numbers’ can be applied in several ways. Marking by numbers is simply a system where numbers replace students’
names. Most institutions have had one form or another in place for examination papers sat under supervision for a number of years and is the system most (if not all) students will be familiar with from their public examinations in secondary school (or equivalent). It can be introduced in a number of ways, the most common of which are:

- **Tear off**: Before marking begins, names and ID numbers of candidates are removed using ‘tear off’ slips at the top of the examination script.
- **Identification number**: The examination paper has a number, but no name on it.

**Bar codes**

Under such systems, bar codes are generated centrally and applied by students to examination scripts and coursework. There can be a greater cost implication for institutions that choose to use this method, however.

**Double marking**

Quite often, where students submit complaints about their awarded marks, scripts are re-marked by a second examiner. Sometimes, this person may be drawn from the same institution, but a different department. Although not necessarily ‘anonymous’, it can be a way of ensuring fair treatment on behalf of the candidate. Non-written assessment, such as lab work, oral examinations or performance pieces cannot be marked anonymously. In these cases, double marking or the use of external assessors becomes essential to ensure fairness.

**External marking**

This is essentially a system whereby examination scripts are marked by people who are not in any way directly associated with the particular institution or by exam boards. However, for such a system to be successful the script must not include students’ names to remove the possibility of gender bias, or discrimination on the basis of faith, race or ethnicity.

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**Why do we need anonymous marking?**

NUS has long supported the introduction of anonymous marking as a means of ensuring fairness and equality for all students throughout their studies. There are a number of important reasons why we continue to campaign for the introduction of anonymous marking.

**Freedom from discrimination and prejudice**

Equality and fairness must lie at the heart of every aspect of the student experience, from admissions right through to assessment. NUS believes that where anonymous marking has not been introduced, institutions are leaving themselves susceptible to prejudice and perception of prejudice.

NUS’ campaign for anonymous marking began following a major survey conducted in 1999, arising out of students’ reported concern about under-marking. In the survey, conducted in August of that year, 44 per cent of students’ unions believed that there was discrimination and bias in their institutions. Interestingly, two-thirds of those with institutions who had implemented full anonymous marking believed that there was little or no discrimination in assessment, which suggested a link between perception of discrimination and the student experience of marking and assessment.

This came just over a decade after research commissioned by the Association of University Teachers (AUT) reported changes in mark distribution following the introduction of anonymous marking, which was shown to benefit women and was identified as a result of gender bias in assessment. At the University of Wales, for example, the research showed that 42 per cent of men in the Arts Faculty achieved either a first or a 2:1 compared with 34 per cent of women. However, within a year of anonymous marking being introduced, the figures were 42 per cent for men and 47
per cent for women. There are a range of papers and research articles which examine gender bias in assessment (see further reading).

In the early nineties, racial bias in assessment was also raised as a concern at the University of East London (UEL) and the University of Glasgow’s Dental School. At UEL, black undergraduates were awarded marks that were, on average, 4.2 per cent lower than their white counterparts. Even more worrying statistics emerged from the University of Glasgow’s Dental School where Asian students accounted for 20 per cent of students on the course, yet made up 8 per cent of those who failed. Although racial discrimination was not conclusively proven in either case, both institutions introduced anonymous marking as a safeguard.

“...The evidence is clear, a lack of anonymous marking creates inequality of attainment for those with typically African and Asian sounding names. Institutions are aware of this and in the interest of promoting best practice in equality and diversity and meeting their basic duties under the race relations amendment act 2001, anonymous marking should be implemented across the board.”

Kanja Sesay,
NUS Black Students Officer

Dennis and Newstead (1994) also highlight the potential for discrimination on grounds of race, age and other personal characteristics. All these are difficult to prove and are under-investigated in any case.

Brennan (2008) highlighted the dramatic difference anonymous marking can have by discussing experiences at the University of Wales. After introducing anonymous marking for written assessments the number of women awarded firsts increased by 13 per cent, demonstrating that complete anonymity helps to ensure an even playing field.

Brennan (2008) concludes that the basic premise of a need for anonymous marking is because “knowledge of the identity of the student who authorised the piece of written assessment has the potential to create bias in the mind of the examiner”.

NUS acknowledges that there is little recent literature addressing the effectiveness of anonymous assessment and a lack of conclusive evidence. However, we strongly encourage institutions to undertake their own reviews and comparative studies across the institution and between similar institutions, examining the impact of anonymous marking on under-represented groups and on students’ perceptions of fairness in relation to assessment methods. We would also encourage such studies to include an examination of the pedagogical implications of anonymous assessment.

Quality of work, not lifestyles

Anonymous marking is an important factor in boosting students’ confidence in the fairness of their assessment. How many times have we said, or heard someone else say, “I would have got a higher mark, but he’s never liked me”. Often, students are afraid to complain or feedback on the quality of their course for fear that it will have a detrimental impact on their assessment. Anonymous marking would go a long way to dealing with such a complaint and make it easier for students to voice legitimate concerns about their course without the fear of incurring penalties in marking.

Lifting suspicion from examiners

Occasionally, lecturers express concern that NUS’ anonymous marking campaign accuses them of bigotry. We consistently stress that our campaign is not directed against lecturers and one of the main benefits of anonymous marking is that it reduces suspicion towards examiners and minimises potential conflict, safeguarding both staff and students.
Exposing the root causes of discrimination and prejudice

Anonymous marking is not a panacea for eliminating discrimination and prejudice on campuses. However, even where anonymous marking is unsuccessful in removing apparent bias towards particular groups on campus, the removal of the possibility of bias at the assessment stage can provoke a more thorough investigation as to why students from certain backgrounds are experiencing relative under-achievement in comparison with others.

Measuring confidence in the structure

NUS was successful in persuading the Quality Assurance Agency to include anonymous assessment in the ‘Assessment of Students’ section of the Code of Practice for the Assurance of Academic Quality and Standards in Higher Education. The relevant section from the Code1 reads:

Some of the factors institutions may wish to take into account in developing policies and procedures on marking and moderation include:

- The circumstances in which anonymous marking is appropriate and when it is either not practical or inappropriate (for example in work-based assessment, or in the performing arts). Advice about where in the process anonymity ends is normally included in institutional guidance on this topic.

- When double or second marking should be used and what approach should be taken, for example, whether or not the second marker normally has access to the first marker’s comments and/or marks and highlighting the importance of demonstrating that double or second marking has taken place the methods to be used when assessments from larger groups are sampled by internal or external examiners.

- The processes governing and recording any internal moderation and verification of marks and the procedure to be followed when an internal or external moderator disagrees with the original marks.

- The usefulness of undertaking an analysis of marking and marking trends to facilitate comparisons and provide evidence on standards. Some institutions may find it appropriate to incorporate such analysis in annual monitoring processes.

While NUS continues to push for the inclusion of anonymous marking as an integral part of the criteria list used by QAA inspection teams during the Institutional Audit, this section of the Code of Practice makes it clear that institutions should be carefully considering the need for anonymous marking and should be evaluating all aspects of the assessment process to ensure fairness. You should make the case to your institution that, in this context, the introduction of anonymous assessment would reflect well during the quality assurance process.

“Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans people are significantly more likely to leave university before completing. It’s vital we create an environment where everyone has the opportunity to achieve their potential and not be disadvantaged by circumstance. Ensuring LGBT students feel their work is being marked fairly without bias or discrimination is one of many ways we can ensure they are more likely to complete their course successfully.”

Vicki Baars,
NUS LGBT Officer (Women’s Place)
and Alan Bailey NUS LGBT Officer (open place)

Common complaints and criticisms of anonymous marking

Despite support for anonymous marking from many of the education trade unions, the Equal Opportunities Commission and the Commission for Racial Equality, many institutions continue to oppose anonymous assessment. Here are some of the arguments you may come across and some advice on how to rebut them effectively.

“Examiners currently allow leeway for disabled students, which only they know about”

It is absolutely right that the individual needs and circumstances of individuals are taken into account. Under the Disability Discrimination Act, institutions have an obligation to ensure that reasonable adjustments are made to ensure a fair and equal student experience for disabled students. Where appropriate, it is absolutely right that examination boards should take any mitigating factors into account before, during or after assessment. For example, it may be appropriate to offer additional time to dyslexic students in an examination. Many institutions have already been able to introduce anonymous assessment without discriminating against disabled students and anonymous marking enjoys the full support of the NUS Disabled Students’ Campaign.

“Anonymous marking hampers the ability to give effective feedback to students”

Every piece of work should be returned to students with feedback and many institutions actually have a standard form that the examiner is required to fill in.

“A marker can recognise students’ handwriting”

Of course this may be true in some cases, though does not apply to coursework typed and or submitted electronically.

“Anonymous marking won’t remove gender bias, because women write differently to men”

In a study of writing styles, Francis et al. (2001) were unable to support the commonly cited view that there are gender differences in writing style that could lead to a subconscious bias by examiners, whether or not anonymous marking is in place. Therefore this argument is a bit of a non-starter.

“Anonymous assessment is impossible for lab-based, performing arts and oral examinations”

The first point to highlight is that anonymous assessment will not necessarily be practical for all types of assessment and alternative means can be applied for each form of assessment. Double marking or external marking could easily be adopted to assess performance pieces, exhibition work, lab work or oral examinations.

“ Anonymous marking is burdensome and expensive”

While cost is an important consideration, it is secondary to eradicating discrimination and boosting students’ confidence in assessment practices. Ensuring that our institutions have impartial and unbiased systems for grading and awarding qualifications is an important consideration. These issues have to be dealt with over and above the initial administrative costs. Students’ confidence in the marking system will be well-received by quality assurance inspectors, thus reflecting well on institutions. There are now countless examples of anonymous marking in place and your institution would do well to consult with those who have introduced anonymous marking successfully without a great administrative or financial burden.

“There isn’t enough research to support anonymous marking”

Discrimination and bias is always hard to identify. We acknowledge that there is the need for more conclusive research and encourage institutions to undertake their own studies.
Key issues to note

- **Partial systems**: Where institutions have anonymous marking in some, but not all, departments, parity across all departments is a great argument to use - if it is good enough for one department, why not all? (Highlight the anomaly for joint honours awards).

- **Optional systems**: In some cases, institutions have attempted to introduce an optional scheme, but this reduces effectiveness, especially for small groups.

- **Model system**: There is no ‘holy grail’ in assessment. There is no one perfect system for anonymous assessment and you should not argue that one size fits all. Different courses will need different methods of anonymous assessment and the onus is on the institution to work with you to develop a flexible system.

- **Monitoring**: To ensure the effectiveness of anonymous marking, it must be reviewed on a regular basis and used as a performance indicator for each department.

- **Stability and consistency**: A major concern for students’ unions is that some institutions implement anonymous marking, only to revoke it soon after on the whim of departmental staff. It is important that the system is maintained and used consistently and that any adjustments to the methodology are in line with the overall principal of anonymity.

- **Practicality**: Institutions are notoriously good at agreeing in principle only to then find ‘practical’ barriers to change. It is important that you are ready to win both the moral and practical arguments. Contact other students’ unions and use their case studies as examples.

For more information about how to run a successful assessment campaign, please go to the Assessment campaign tool section where you will also find a model petition for anonymous marking.

Getting involved nationally

In addition to providing you with the tools to campaign for anonymous marking within your institution, NUS continues to work on this issue nationally by lobbying Universities UK, Guild HE, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and the Quality Assurance Agency. As within any NUS campaign, we rely on your feedback and your input to help us build a clear national picture about what is happening at an institutional level.

There are 4 easy things you can do to help...

1. Showcase your campaign by sending us photos, materials, press releases and press coverage for us to put online on the Education Campaign website so that other unions can see what you’re doing and share best practice.

2. Contact us if you need any quotes for your press releases.

3. Invite NEC members to come and take part in events and campaigns on campus.

4. Provide research findings from any surveys or research you or your institution conducts on campus.

Simply e-mail Usman Ali, VP Higher Education, on usman.ali@nus.org.uk

Key contacts at NUS

You will find the following contacts useful for your campaign:

Usman Ali - Vice President (Higher Education) education@nus.org.uk

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