

Moderation Practice for MSc Dissertations

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In consultation with Richard Mayr and Vijay Nagarajan, MSc project organizers.

The aim of this proposal is to (a) comply with university regulations that require that we have an official, published moderation procedure (which we currently don't), and (b) agree a moderation procedure that is compatible with rising MSc student numbers.

Current Practice

All MSc student dissertations are marked independently by two markers. Once the two markers have submitted their marking forms, they are expected to agree a joint mark, and submit a third form stating (and justifying) this mark.

There are, however, cases, in which a third person is called in, typically an experienced member of staff, to check the marks returned by the three markers. This person, the moderator, takes into account all available information (the dissertation, the two marking forms, and the agreed marking form if available) and comes up with a moderated mark, which he/she returns on a standard marking form. The moderated mark is then used as the final mark for the project.

Traditionally, we have applied moderation if one of the following criteria were satisfied:

- (1) the agreed mark was a failing mark (<50)
- (2) the two markers could not agree on a mark
- (3) the discrepancy between the two marks was more than 10

Last year (2015/16) we had a substantially increased number of MSc students, with 255 of them doing projects. This made the previous moderation criteria infeasible, as they would have resulted in a large moderation workload (60 projects requiring moderation, or 24% of the total), at a time when project supervisors and markers already were highly loaded.

Bonnie Webber (project organizer at the time) and myself therefore decided to loosen the moderation criteria (this seemed possible, as there was no official statement as to what the criteria were, and no TC decision that we could fine). We did this by dropping criterion (3). Instead, we asked the external examiners to look at projects with a large mark discrepancy (more than 20). This is also a form of moderation (as per university regulations), but arguable it's less stringent, as the externals look at a project fairly briefly and do not normally change marks (unlike a moderator).

This change reduced the number of project for which required moderators to 14, with 11 project being looked at by the externals because of a large mark difference.

Proposed New Moderation Rules

For this year, we need to agree on a moderation procedure that scales, and we need to publish it to the students. (This is a university requirement, which we so far have not followed.) Note that we have an even larger MSc cohort this year, with 337 regular MSc students, about 25 CDT MSc

students, and 36 design informatics students, i.e., up to 398 students will do projects.

I therefore propose that from 2016/17 onwards, we use a new moderation procedure, where we moderate project where at least one of the following criteria is met:

- (1) the agreed mark is a failing mark (<50)
- (2) the two markers cannot agree on a mark
- (3) the discrepancy between the two marks is more than 20
- (4) the discrepancy between the two marks is more than 15 and a marking boundary has been crossed

As "marking boundary" in (4), I propose to define 50 (pass/fail boundary) and 70 (distinction/merit boundary). These are the projects where appeals tend to cluster, so it is prudent to make sure our decisions are watertight in these cases. (For example, in 2015/16 I dealt with 2 appeals and 4 cases in which project marks were queried by students; all of these cases involved the pass/fail or distinction/merit boundaries.)

If we were to apply the new criteria to the 2015/16 marks, we would get the following number of projects for each criterion:

- (1) 10 projects
- (2) 3 projects
- (3) 11 projects
- (4) 16 projects

The total number of projects to be moderated would have been 26 projects (some projects meet more than one criterion), or 10% of the total. If we extrapolate this to the cohort in 2016/17, we would expect to moderate 34 projects (assuming that around 85% of the 398 students reach the project stage).