

## Preliminary marks ahead of January exam boards

*Iain Murray, March 2019*

This year the MSc cohort didn't get their exam marks until week 3. Some students are surprised by low marks in technical courses. A mechanism to release results earlier would help students make better course choices.

It is unfortunate that some students are surprised by results, and we should separately reflect on feedback mechanisms. But realistically, this problem isn't going to go away next year.

**This proposal suggests that in January 2020 we try to release some preliminary exam marks when they are available.**

The taught assessment regulations dictate what procedures we can follow: <https://www.ed.ac.uk/academic-services/policies-regulations/regulations/assessment>

*46.4 Throughout the year, before consideration by a Board of Examiners, marks for examinations and assessed coursework are provisional and have no status until they are approved or modified by the Board. If such marks are released before confirmation by the Board of Examiners, students must be advised that the marks are provisional and may be modified when considered at the Board of Examiners meeting.*

*47.5 Students' results (including assessment component and course marks, programme and progression outcomes) may not be released over the telephone or informally via email. Students only receive their results via formal communication channels.*

*47.11 Once a final award, final degree programme or final course result and progression decision has been agreed by the Board of Examiners and other relevant bodies, then Schools may contact students who have failed before the decision is published in EUCLID Student View. Schools should not give informal indications about the final award, final degree programme or final course result or progression decision in advance of the decision of the Board of Examiners and/or other relevant bodies. See regulation 46.4 for the release of provisional marks.*

So, we could release some exam results (viewable in the Assessment tab in Euclid) before the board. As long as we don't release them informally, and make it clear the final course mark and outcome has not been decided.

If it's clear a course's results won't be available until after the board, we should tell students that too.

This year the MLPR exam was marked before Christmas. I think it would have been possible to get the marks checked and entered in the two weeks of January before week 1 (and maybe they were).

## Comments after posting the initial proposal above

I am including the shorter comments that were sent to me. The two final comments were much longer, so I have summarized them as indicated. I have omitted a comment theorizing about why marks are low, and told that staff member to present their own item if they want to discuss it.

1. I second your suggestion. As someone whose course inflated yet again post-grade release, and who deals with around 40 Personal Tutees, I'd really like to have pertinent information for course choices earlier rather than later. The later students can access results, the later into the Semester we need to deal with putting out fires and consoling disappointed students.
2. I strongly support this proposal, can't make Teaching Committee. I had between 10 and 15 MSc tutees repeatedly enquiring during weeks 1 and 2 about postponing course choices until after semester 1 results were known for courses whose coursework and exams I know had all been marked and returned to the ITO in December. I made changes to course enrollments after the official deadline for 9 MSc tutees as a result (so they said) of exam results.
3. In principle, I am in support of your proposal. There may be a few things to consider, though.
  - a) Not all lecturers have their marks ready before Christmas. In fact, many/most marks only arrive at the ITO shortly before the BoE meeting.
  - b) Some amount of sanity checking may still be desirable before we release even provisional marks to students.
  - c) Some few students may experience a situation where their final mark may be lower than their provisional mark. It's almost guaranteed that we'd get complaints/appeals if that happened.
4. I strongly support this proposal for the reasons you give. I am MSc PT and apart from the unnecessary worrying the delay causes, several students needed to make late changes to their course choices for second semester after learning their exam marks.
5. I support this, preferably with a single 'early release' date that can be publicised to students (ideally, just before week 1), and any marks ready by that date get released together. This will reduce student anxiety and endless queries. If doing this, we should ask that ITO prioritize handling the largest courses first.
6. I'm certainly in favor of publishing exam results as soon as possible, so that students can react accordingly. However, as an MSc personal tutor, I didn't quite have as bad an experience as [one of the PTs above]. The reason was the particular way that I advised my MSc PTs... [To reflect if they have the right skills and interests, rather than precise marks.]

7. I'll comment, because it so happened that this year the exam marks on my course were accidentally made available to students as soon as I'd marked the paper, and so formed a relevant natural experiment! What happened, of course, was that a few students immediately popped up being upset about their low marks... [a) and b) below are a brutal summary of multiple points in a long email]
- a) If there are queries from excellent students that can't be resolved, it will cause worry for students and markers. (And what is the process?)
  - b) Breaks anonymity of BoE if do look at scripts early. (And availability of marks in Euclid enables us to key who students are more generally.)
  - c) We have very stringent requirements for speed of marking exams, anyway. What is the limiting factor that makes the BoEs come so late, and can we address it?

## Updated comments from proposer

This proposal was motivated by the feeling of some MSc PTs noted above.

Regarding 3a), not all marks come in before Christmas or on time, and I doubt that *all* marks will be ready much earlier (query 7c), unless anyone can propose a mechanism that changes things (more staff?!). However, ANLP and MLPR were both marked before Christmas this year, and would have covered a large fraction of the problematic cases. The proposal is to release what marks we can. As suggested by 5), prioritizing larger more core classes.

To address 3b–c). I propose that exam marks are only released to APT/Euclid with the agreement of *both* the lecturer *and* the relevant Convenor.

Regarding 7a) I would rather have queries sooner rather than later. My feeling is that large shifts in mark are rare (for 300 MLPR scripts, one part worth one mark was omitted from marking on one of them) and concern about gross anomalies shouldn't block this proposal. I *am* concerned that ITO might struggle to deal with queries while checking and entering marks for remaining exams.

Regarding 7b) I don't think anonymity should veto this proposal. The principle is that we check things when it's in the interest of students. It's already possible to look at coursework marks in Euclid and correlate with students. We already have to assume the BoE operates in good faith.

## Updated statement of proposal

- When we can enter MSc marks into APT much earlier than the January BoE, release them if *both* the course lecturer *and* relevant convenor agree.
- Do a single release before the BoE, and announce it to the students. Tell students that marks, the overall mark, and the course decision are not

final and decided until the BoE. Also tell them that no further marks will be released until a specified date after the BoE.

- ITO should also announce a date from which exam scrutiny requests will be processed. This date will be as early as possible, but processing all exams before the BoE must take priority.