Proposal: revised exam scrutiny process

Alan Smaill

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The following is largely based on one of the proposals brought to Teaching Commmittee some time ago by Perdita Stevens. However, I am reponsible for this version.

Summary of current process

1. Lecturer writes exam and marking scheme.

2. Lecturer uploads these to exam PC

3. Large group of people (e.g. all lecturers of courses in a given year) is invited to scrutiny meeting

4. ITO prints out papers and takes them to scrutiny meeting

5. Smaller, but still rather large, group of people turns up to scrutiny meeting

6. We aim to get two lecturers to read and comment on each paper.

7. Lecturer goes to ITO to read and act on comments.

8. Paper goes to external examiner [etc.]

Perceived advantages and disadvantages

+ In theory, the fixed scrutiny meeting acts as a deadline by which even the most dilatory lecturer will have written their paper.

− In practice, several to many papers are always missing from the scrutiny meeting.

+ In theory, all papers get thoroughly scrutinised.

− In practice, most (scrutineer, paper) pairs involve a paper being scrutinised by someone who couldn't (without some work!) get a first class mark in the paper. Contributing factors to this include:

- the wide range of papers at each meeting, across Informatics;

- the concurrent nature of the meeting: you pick as your next paper to scrutinise a paper which is free, and there usually aren't many at a given moment;

- the distribution of lecturers across years, which does not maximise, in fact almost *minimises*, the chance that the best person to scrutinise your paper is at the meeting where it is scrutinised; they're more likely to attend a different year's scrutiny meeting, where the course they're teaching, which is in a prerequisite relationship with yours, is.

The result is that the meeting ends up much better at nitpicking wording than at finding substantive errors (and no, this is not because there never are substantive errors...).

+ In theory, the job of scrutinising papers is evenly spread.

− In practice, there are people who always turn up to scrutiny meetings and people who never do.

+ For those who turn up, the scrutiny meeting provides a valuable opportunity to see the kinds of questions that are set at a given level. In theory, one could do this by looking at published papers, but that's a "pull" mechanism: one would have to get round to it, whereas a scrutiny meeting you're going to anyway gives you that overview automatically.

− The process does not (attempt to) identify a member of staff who could mark each paper in the event that the lecturer were unable to do so.

− Anecdotally, the number of bugs only spotted wher the exam is sat has been increasing.

Proposed revised process

1. Much smaller, perhaps virtual, meetings, of the lecturer and one other person, chosen to be a suitable expert to scrutinise the paper. That person signs off the paper having read it carefully, and is considered to be the go-to person to mark the paper should the lecturer be unavailable.

   It would be natural fairly often for pairs of papers to be "shared" between lecturers in this way.

2. Optionally, also have a second such meeting with a pseudo-randomly selected person, aimed at catching wording likely to confuse a non-expert, and to provide a third pair of eyes to catch typos. This could help with having some uniformity over the set of exams – what "a typical Edinburgh UG3 paper" looks like.

3. A point that would need attention: security of the papers. Currently most lecturers prepare scripts on their own machines and take them on USB sticks to the ITO, so it is not the case at present that papers are never held outside the ITO; but perhaps the smaller meetings would increase the temptation to email unsat papers around, which should not be allowed to happen.

4. The primary responsibility of organising the nominated other vetter would lie with the course lecturer, to be determined at the start of the academic year, and recorded by ITO.