

Calibration Toolkit for Geography: Introduction and Instructions

Introduction

Welcome to the Geography Toolkit, which is designed to assist you as a geography academic in calibrating your academic standards with those of your subject community. The toolkit:

- supports you in discussing and creating a shared understanding of the criteria used to assess work, leading to greater consistency in your understanding and application of academic standards
- refers you to published national reference documents for academic standards as you make your judgements.

You can use the toolkit within and across departments, and while you are an aspiring or experienced external examiner.

The overall aim of calibration is to enable you to make consistent grading decisions that are:

- commensurate with the respective levels of academic achievement they represent
- comparable across course and institutional boundaries at any one point and over time
- consistent with disciplinary and societal expectations of higher education graduates.

Background

A recent review of external examining (HEFCE, 2015) noted there is a formal requirement and a public expectation that UK awards are comparable, at least at the level of threshold academic standards. This public expectation illustrates the increased interest in university assessment practices seen in recent years as the profile of UK awards has shown considerable upward drift, particularly in the proportion of first-class degrees that are awarded. While changes in mark profiles are likely to be the result of a complex range of factors, consistent marking that reflects national standards is vital for the reputation of UK higher education, fairness to students and the confidence of employers and professional and statutory bodies.

Internationally, there is a similar emphasis on maintaining standards. An Australian study reports that a 'Reliable, consistent assessment process that produces comparable assessment grades between assessors and institutions is a core activity and an ongoing challenge with which universities have failed to come to terms' (O'Connell et al., 2016, p. 331).

In the UK it is recognised that external examiners are part of the quality assurance measures designed to safeguard academic and quality standards. However they typically provide the only external quality assurance activity designated to consider actual student achievement. The Finch Report on external examining (2012, p. 5) considered that external examiners 'ensure that there is benchmarking against comparable programmes at the point when students are being awarded their qualifications'.

However, the recent HEFCE review (2015, p. 88) was much less confident about the contribution of the external examining system to safeguarding standards because:

'The assessment decisions of external examiners and others in the higher education setting exhibit very poor reliability in applying standards to student work, although examiners are often unaware of this; It is not possible to explicitly state most academic standards so they are interpreted similarly by all users although often examiners, other academics and those managing quality assurance may assume that explicit standards are genuinely shared;(with the proviso of b) Some examiners do not make use of published reference points for standards.'

The 2015 review drew on the research evidence regarding assessment, marking and external examining to make recommendations about how to improve the contribution of external examining to assuring academic standards. It argued that there is an urgent need to promote a shared understanding of what constitutes quality in student work, and that we cannot rely on written statements of standards (e.g. assessment criteria, qualification descriptors and benchmarking statements) to assure this consistency. We need to interpret the key terms used in these written statements consistently across markers. Dialogue provides a means through which assessors can establish a common vocabulary and set of meanings in relation to the criteria they are using to judge the academic standards of pieces of work. The intent with calibration discussions is to share the rationales for making judgements about quality, identifying meanings-in-use for the principal explanatory terms. Consequently, the 2015 review recommended regular calibration of external examiners' standards to take place in disciplinary communities across the range of institutions where programmes of a similar nature are studied. This recommendation is similar to the conclusion of a HEQC report on external examining from over 20 years ago.

Consistent assessment decisions among assessors are the product of interactions over time, the internalisation of exemplars, and of inclusive

networks. Written instructions, mark schemes and criteria, even when used with scrupulous care, cannot substitute for these (HEQC, 1997).

Purpose of the toolkit

This toolkit is designed to support the calibration process in the broad discipline of geography. It aims to:

- raise awareness among geography academics and examiners about the potential variation in academic standards across different assessors
- build greater consistency in the judgement of student work among geography lecturers and examiners both within and across programmes and institutions
- discuss and create a shared understanding of criteria for the assessment of research-based coursework essays or reports, drawing on key reference documents: the [Subject Benchmark Statement for Geography and the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications](#).

The intended outcomes for those participating in the calibration process are:

- greater awareness of differences in academic standards across assessors
- greater capability and confidence when drawing on accepted academic standards in their assessing and examining roles
- a shared interpretation of agreed key criteria for the assessment of research-based coursework essays or reports, with reference to relevant national standards statements.

Overview of the process of calibration

The approach to calibration described here takes the form of a workshop. Before the workshop, delegates are asked to independently mark and briefly comment on three final-year research-based coursework assignments then upload their marks and comments anonymously. The three assignments have been assessed by an expert panel of 14 geography external examiners in advance of the calibration workshop, but their marks are withheld from the delegates at this stage. Before the workshop the facilitator compiles an overview of the results.

At the workshop small groups attempt to arrive at a consensus grade for each assignment, noting the characteristics of the assignment that were particularly influential when it came to making decisions at the borderline.

Finally, the small-group grades are shared in the whole group and the facilitator manages a cross-group discussion aimed at achieving consensus about the grade for each piece and the influential characteristics. At this stage the facilitator can feed in the grades and comments of the expert panel as a further contribution to consensus.

The workshop concludes with a summary of its achievements, encouraging delegates to consider the implications of the day for their own standards and use the process with other assessment types in geography, and in other forums such as their own or an examining department.

What the toolkit contains

- A set of amendable PowerPoint slides for running the workshop.
- The detailed programme for running the online stage and the workshop, including use of software, timings, instructions to delegates, resources and when to use the PowerPoint slides.
- Three examples of final-year student assignments from the same module that focus on demonstrating the use of research in all fields of geography.
- An agreed mark for each example as determined by a panel of experienced examiners, and an explanation for the marks awarded. These reference the contextual information and external reference points (the latter included as annexes).
- Contextual information regarding the module, such as learning outcomes and assessment brief.
- Evaluation questionnaire

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