

Case study: Calibration of standards in music

In partnership with: Conservatoires UK and the Royal Northern College of Music

Purpose

This case study focuses on the calibration of academic standards for musical performance. The calibration activity described was undertaken as a collaboration between the Higher Education Academy (now Advance HE), Conservatoires UK and the Royal Northern College of Music.

The case study has been created as part of the [Degree Standards Project](#) and is for those in higher education interested in the process of calibration, particularly: higher education providers, academics in subject departments or who are leading programmes seeking to calibrate standards, and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs).



Introduction

As part of the Degree Standards Project, the calibration of academic standards has been explored through an approach to calibration which involves the ‘social moderation’ of student work with groups of subject external examiners. Social moderation can be effectively used as a process for obtaining consistency in understanding and applying academic standards through discussion of examples (i.e. of student work or performance) and drawing on external reference points (e.g. subject benchmark statements).

The project team has worked in partnership with exemplar disciplines to undertake calibration activity and produce resources describing processes, which other subject, discipline or professional areas can emulate. In the longer term, the anticipated impact of this approach to developing calibration is the establishment of a community of practice around degree standards, and the increased comparability of academic standards across subject communities.

The activity described here entailed the design and delivery of a one-day calibration workshop relevant to the assessment of performance using social moderation as a method. The workshop was held in February 2018 at the Royal Northern College of Music and involved 24 participants (external examiners, heads of instrumental or vocal schools at conservatoires and student representatives),

representing all UK music conservatoires and six university music departments (providers of higher education).

A key outcome of the workshop has been the development of a Calibration Toolkit for Musical Recitals (available on the [Degree Standards Project](#) website), which can be used to support a calibration process specifically in relation to final-year undergraduate musical recitals. For example, four video assets of musical recitals have been produced, providing varied examples of student performance. These can be used by other groups of external examiners, conservatoires and music departments to develop a shared understanding of standards. The Toolkit aims to:

- raise awareness among music academics and external examiners about the potential variation in academic standards across different assessors
- build greater consistency in the judgement of student work among music academics and examiners within and across programmes and in institutions
- create a shared understanding of criteria for the assessment of recitals by drawing on key reference documents, particularly the [Subject Benchmark Statement for Music](#) and the [Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications](#).

Approach and process

The workshop was designed to explore the calibration of academic standards relevant to musical performance (i.e. recitals), with the following intended outcomes for participants:

- A greater awareness of differences in academic standards across different assessors.
- A greater capability and confidence in their assessing and external examining roles.
- A shared interpretation of agreed key criteria for the assessment of recitals with reference to relevant national standards statements.

The approach adopted for the calibration process involved three stages as follows.

Stage 1

At the workshop, the participants watched four recitals – of varying standards and different instrument and ensemble types – and considered each with respect to their knowledge of final-year undergraduate standards, using a percentage scale. No specific assessment criteria were provided.

An agreed judgement of the recitals had been made by a group of music assessors from across all UK conservatoires and several university music departments. These marks were withheld from the participants at this stage. Participants submitted

their marks online using their mobile phones,¹ making a note about why they had made their judgement.

Stage 2

Participants were assigned to small groups (i.e. five panels of 4-5), mixed by institution and institution type, where they discussed their judgements to determine a shared judgement. As a panel, they submitted their mark and comments into an online document. All the groups shared this through a multimedia display.

Stage 3

This stage involved the sharing of all the marks agreed by each of the five panels and their comments through a multimedia display of the documents, as well as a display of the individual marks for the recitals. Participants then took part in a whole-group discussion with a view to achieving a consensus regarding the marks for each of the four recitals and the reasons why. They discussed and agreed a list of characteristics that influenced their decisions. This involved considering the criteria for judging, which emerged from the panels, to identify those commonly occurring qualities that assessors seek.

Finally, returning to work in small groups, participants concentrated on agreeing a set of common criteria and providing short written descriptions of why each recital was judged to be at the agreed standard.

Evaluative summary

In general, participant feedback on the workshop was extremely positive, for example:

Stimulating, relevant and timely

Thought-provoking. Useful to see the spread of marks and to 'lay bare' the process of marking performance. Clear that peer discussion ... is critical to tackle skewed or outlying results

Well structured: good mix of people. Brought out that not all marking criteria are created equal!

Throughout the workshop, there was a high level of debate related to the meaning of the different standards. As anticipated, there was variety in the marks awarded by individuals and these were moderated somewhat by the marks agreed by the panels. It was interesting to find that three of the performances generated marks at the borderlines of pass/fail and 2.1/1, which was valuable in teasing out which

¹ All recitals were filmed with the participants' permission.

factors were crucial in placing a student 'above' or 'below' such borderlines. The process enabled individuals to see whether the standards they applied were particularly different from their colleagues. For example, one participant had given the horn recital a very low mark in comparison with his colleagues. Through discussion, it became apparent that the participant was emphasising the technical aspects of the performance at the expense of other elements. This stimulated a discussion about how to consider various criteria to make a final judgement. Through the workshop process, it became apparent that there may be three overarching categories of criteria that underpin or inform the judgement of performance, namely: technical competence; communication; understanding, interpretation and expression.

The pre- and post-event questionnaires asked participants how well prepared they felt for marking musical performance, and how confident they were in their capacity to make judgements about musical performance that are consistent with their peers in their own and other institutions (using the scale of 1 for very confident, 5 for not at all confident). Findings suggest that following the workshop participants felt more prepared for marking musical performance and rated their confidence more highly.

Although the overall process was relatively time consuming because time had to be factored in for each recital, the use of real examples engaged participants, facilitated discussion and resulted in resources that can be used by other groups. The process also led participants to consider implications in relation to themselves and their institutions. In response to the question: 'How likely are you to discuss the knowledge you have gained from today with colleagues including those who work as external examiners?' participants gave an average response of 1.37 (1 for very likely, 5 for not at all likely). For example, a participant commented: 'I sit on many external panels and will share and use this experience'.

To evaluate the process, participants were asked about the extent to which they found the workshop useful for marking musical performance, with comments indicating that they found the activity valuable:

Very helpful in identifying divergence and huge disparity of specialism and view / understanding of marking

Very useful in terms of realising breadth of approaches across the sector and common ground too

Valuable to discuss issues with other examiners with range of genres

it was really interesting to hear the sort of conversation that happens on the other side of the table! (student observer)

It is not, however, possible to conclude whether the calibration process led to any reduction in the marking variation seen between the assessors involved. Follow-up

evaluation work involving the participants would need to be undertaken, and ideally, the workshop marking and moderation activity would need to be repeated to demonstrate any change in practice. A possible limitation of the approach is the lack of time in a one-day workshop to progress shared understanding of the marking criteria to be used in common to make judgements about student performance (i.e. instantiations of standards).

The lead workshop facilitator was an assessment expert,² and although this involved working with a subject specialist³, it was at times difficult as a lead to manage certain aspects of the discussion due to not being sufficiently familiar with disciplinary terminology to understand and feedback the key nuances emerging from the panel and whole-group discussions. One of the key lessons learned is that, where possible, facilitation of the process of calibration is undertaken by a subject expert in collaboration with an assessment expert.

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