



# Case study: Calibration of standards in veterinary education

In partnership with: Veterinary Schools Council Education Committee

# Purpose

This case study focuses on the calibration of academic standards for reflective writing in veterinary education. The calibration activity described was undertaken as a collaboration between the Higher Education Academy (now Advance HE) and the Veterinary Schools Council Education Committee.

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) 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 that was held in July 2017, which piloted a social moderation approach to calibrating standards with 13 external examiners and senior academics representing seven of the eight veterinary schools within the UK and University College Dublin. The focus of the event was on calibrating standards in reflective writing, as being a reflective practitioner is a key capability for graduating vets. However, this area had been identified as an area of difficulty in terms of comparable and consistent standards in veterinary education.

## Approach and process

The calibration workshop was designed to explore calibrating academic standards relevant to reflective writing in UK veterinary schools, with the following aims for the workshop:

- To identify the characteristics of effective reflective writing for veterinary graduates.
- To agree minimum standards of reflective writing.
- To identify exemplar assignments of threshold and better standards of reflective writing.
- To begin developing an assessment tool for reflective writing for use across veterinary schools.

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

## Stage A: assessing student work

A collection of final year and penultimate year examples of reflective writing by students was sourced, and participants had the opportunity to review, judge and comment on these assignments anonymously in advance of the workshop. An online environment was provided for participants with guidance about the pre-workshop activity and the student assignments to be reviewed. Contextual information for the assignments in the form of intended learning outcomes and student instructions were also provided (see Appendix). Specifically, through using online survey questions for each piece of student work, <sup>1</sup> participants were asked:

- Does this demonstrate an acceptable level of reflection for an undergraduate student in the penultimate year of their course?
- What mark or grade would you allocate to this piece of work?

The marking decision was used to help rank the student work in terms of what is considered to be the most reflective example to the least reflective.

## Stage B: workshop

At the workshop, the results of the survey completed by participants through reviewing and assessing the two sets of student assignments were presented in data summary tables in PowerPoint, <sup>2</sup> along with a sample of the participants comments made about each assignment, such as:

‘This is of a just acceptable standard i.e. it is very close to the borderline’

‘Yes. It was very reflective but if the task was about evaluating ethical

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<sup>1</sup> Four pieces of anonymised work from fourth year Scottish students and three pieces of work from final year students from a provider in England were provided. As these assessments were from students at different stages of their course, they were considered separately (i.e. each as a set in relation to the relevant learning outcomes and student instructions).

<sup>2</sup> The following were displayed for each assignment: the different grades allocated by (anonymised) markers (participants) and whether an assignment met the threshold standard or not, or was deemed as borderline.

problems I felt too much emphasis was on the clinical issues surrounding the case'

'Yes - Lots of interesting elements drawn out and into reflection, with areas of critical reflection (although could be more)'

Through this activity, the workshop involved a series of group discussions which enabled the participants to arrive at an approximate consensus about the standard for the assignments including threshold, pass and exemplar standards. They also used the calibration activity to inductively create a list of qualities of effective reflective writing and this list was used at various times as a reference point to resolve differences in judgements of standards:

#### Qualities of effective reflective writing in veterinary education <sup>3</sup>

1. Applying reflection to a specific example
2. Setting the scene about themselves, their prior learning and experiences
3. Structure to the writing: where they were, how they were influenced by what happened or what they did, and the implications for future practice, their thinking and their future learning needs
4. Recognising the influence of an event on multiple stakeholders (i.e. empathy or comparison)
5. Reflecting on feelings (before, during, after the event), through a dialogue with oneself, displaying self-awareness, considering alternative actions or choices
6. Styling as first person (personalised)
7. Drawing on evidence to make decisions, substantiate opinions
8. Evaluating what went well and what went badly
9. Insight into the important issues

In the afternoon of the workshop, small groups of participants collaborated to draw together the work of the morning into resources for further calibration between and within external examiners, and veterinary schools more generally. In particular, a tool for assessing reflective writing was devised by drawing on the list of qualities and existing theoretical models in the area of reflective practice. Exemplars were also developed by annotating the pieces of student work used in the calibration activity, with the aim of providing examples of fail, pass and exemplary standards.

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<sup>3</sup> Created by representatives from UK veterinary schools and University College Dublin.

Tool for assessing reflective writing in veterinary education	
Core criteria	All students, all years
Context	Description of event (plus role in the team) Relates to a specific example or sets the scene about a personalised experience
Interpretation	Analysis, feelings, evaluation; what went well, what went badly; insight into the important issues
Outcome	Conclusions, action plan; implications for future practice; identifying future learning needs; alternative actions and choices
Style	First person singular, optimal length, concise
Based on Gibbs (1988)	
Levels of reflection	(description only = not acceptable)
Years 1 and 2	Descriptive reflection, 'self'; displaying self-awareness
Year 3 and 4	Dialogic reflection Beyond description plus 'self only'; aware of others' perspectives / factors; link with prior and future learning
Year 5	Critical reflection Includes effects on wider stakeholders, profession in society, longitudinally relevant examples, shows progression
Based on Hatton and Smith (1995)	

## Evaluative summary

Generally, the workshop process was seen as productive, with a positive view about the outcomes of the day and the potential for future calibration workshops on other 'difficult' areas for agreeing standards, such as final year dissertations. Individuals talked about changing their practice as a result of the workshop, and there was an interest in holding similar workshops on calibrating standards in reflective writing in individual veterinary schools. It was clear that the social moderation activity facilitated reflection, discussion and an exploration of standards relevant to assessment in veterinary education.

It is important to note that while the focus was related to external examiner practice, the process was strongly valued for its general contribution to professional development in relation to marking and standards.

A potential strength of this form of collaborative working is the credence that such artefacts are likely to have from being created by academics within a subject community. The activity also indicated the potential of calibration to be delivered to all providers across the UK in small and specialist disciplines. The workshop enabled academics to devise a tool for assessing reflective writing, drawing on the attributes identified for effective reflective writing in veterinary education. Ideally, follow-up work is needed to complete and test this tool more widely.

## References

Gibbs, G. (1988) *Learning by Doing: A guide to teaching and learning methods*. Further Education Unit. Oxford Polytechnic: Oxford.

Hatton, N. and Smith, D. (1995) *Reflection in teacher Education. Teaching and Teacher Education*, 11, 33-49.

## Appendix: Example contextual information for the student assignment

### Intended learning outcomes for the activity (general)

- Apply knowledge of effective communication to an authentic situation
- Explore the approach to more difficult situations that may be encountered in and authentic practice situation
- Using feedback provided reflect on own communication

### Intended learning outcome being assessed in relation to reflection

CP 3.23 Reflect on a variety of experiences of professional practice and evaluate their own learning and professional development.

### Student instructions for this task

Write a reflection (500-800 words) on your PACE (professional and clinical experience) communication skills session. This is where you should submit your communication skills reflection. Later in the year you will also have the opportunity to provide some feedback on the reflection of one of your peers.



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