



Faculty Reps' Briefing: Exam Feedback

This document aims to outline various positions relating to examination feedback with the aim of promoting thought and discussion amongst Faculty Reps leading to considering improvements in individual Faculties.

What is the University's policy?

The University is has the following policy on the feedback to students from summative examinations:

The comments of External Examiners can form useful feedback to students on the cohort's performance and provide pointers for improvement for future candidates. It is good practice to make External Examiners' reports and any response to them available to students: suggestions include posting on a notice board, incorporation into course handbooks, or archiving in the faculty or departmental library. Comments that may be attributed to individual students may need to be removed.

Similarly, internal examiners' reports can contribute to this feedback. In examinations where there are several hundreds of candidates it will not be reasonable for candidates to expect individual detailed written feedback on every part of their examination but comments from examiners about the cohort's performance as a whole can provide information to help candidates improve their performance. This can be most clearly communicated to students if reports address issues on a question-by-question basis.¹

More detailed information about the University's general policies on assessment can be found at:

➔ <http://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/offices/education/curricula/assessment.html>

What happens to exam scripts?

The ability to provide feedback on a specific candidate's performance in examination is, to a significant extent, governed by the availability of exam scripts. While examiners' comments about scripts (recorded separately from the script) could be circulated to students, a better way would be to return scripts to students so that they, in collaboration with supervisors and Directors of Studies could consider the work and identify areas for future development.

The University's policy on examinations scripts is that they need never be released to students as they are not considered 'personal data' according to the definition of the Data Protection Act. Examiners' comments, if recorded separately as per the guidance, *are* considered personal data but are destroyed shortly after the posting of the class-list. Any Faculty which chooses to deviate from this policy (e.g. Law) is obliged to notify the Education Committee of the General Board as to the reasons for their decision.

If you would like to know your Faculty's stance on the retention of scripts, you should ask to see the 'Examinations Data Retention Policy' which should be available to you from the Faculty Secretary.

The full paper outlining the University's policy on the retention of exam data and scripts can be found at:

➔ <http://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/offices/education/policies/data.pdf>

¹ <http://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/offices/education/support/to.html>

What is CUSU's policy?

As the University has committed to preventing students having access to their completed exam scripts, CUSU has a broader policy which aims to find alternative ways in which feedback can be brought into the examinations process:

CUSU Policy: Building Feedback for Students into the Exam Process

CUSU noted that there is currently no feedback available to undergraduates on their performance in non-final year exams, and that examiners' notes are destroyed once the papers have been marked, that there is no access for students, their supervisors or their directors of study to their exam papers once they have been marked. Therefore in cases where student performance is at odds with what has been predicted by supervisors there is no way for the students, the supervisors, or the directors of studies to evaluate the reason for the discrepancy and take appropriate measures, that this lack of transparency makes it difficult if not impossible for administrative errors involved in the marking process to come to light, that this lack of transparency makes it difficult, if not impossible, for the monitoring and evaluation of patterns of exam success related to: the teaching practices of individual supervisors; the differing practices for exam preparation of the various colleges; the differing practices for exam preparation of the various faculties and that the current procedure for requesting the re-marking of examination papers is designed in such a way that re-marks very rarely occur, regardless of the level of concern on the part of students, their tutors, their supervisors, or their directors of study.

CUSU believed that examinations are an important part of the learning process for students and feedback on their performance would greatly contribute to their progress through the Cambridge system, that transparency in the examination system would enable greater understanding on the part of the University and the faculties of existing and potential weaknesses and inadvertent biases inherent in the system.

CUSU resolved to support the right of students to receive feedback from their exams, to encourage transparency in the examination system, and to mandate the Academic Affairs Officer to bring this matter to the attention of the appropriate committee and subsequently to report back on his findings at the CUSU Council as soon as possible.

What has been done so far?

The following paper was introduced to the Education Committee of the General Board on 1st October 2008. The document was then circulated to Faculty Boards to encourage them to debate the possibility of improved examination feedback through the publication of 'generic' feedback relating to the specific examination questions.

Minute 449.3.4: Model Answers/Question specific feedback

Mr Bagshaw introduced a CUSU paper (E4131): *It was agreed to circulate the paper (under a cover note to be prepared by the Officers in liaison with Mr Bagshaw) to Faculty Boards, to stimulate debate and with a request that Boards consider what might be most appropriate in providing feedback on questions within their own subjects.*

Exam Feedback: the role of model answers/question-specific feedback

Basis for improved exam feedback:

- CUSU's Policy² and Learning and Teaching Strategy³ and Patrick Leonard's paper to the General Board Education Committee⁴ make clear the Union's position that feedback from the summative examinations process is of great importance to students.
- While CUSU and GB Ed disagreed on the return of examination scripts to students, the University is committed to encouraging Faculties, Departments and Colleges to improving feedback on both formative and summative assessment. This can be seen in the Learning and Teaching Strategy⁵ and the LTS 'have you tried' document on the topic.⁶
- GB Ed agreed that "model answers should be available to students where appropriate."⁷

What are the benefits of model answers?

- Not only would students be able to use model answers to help understand their results in the context of the examinations they have undertaken but also to use the information to improve exam preparation in future years.
- Supervisors could use these to aid their own preparation for teaching particular courses; this would be particularly useful for supervisors teaching a paper for the first time. This could form part of the response to the QAA's requirement that postgraduates undertaking supervision work require training.⁸

What form could model answers take?

- While marking guidelines are useful, these are most often too vague to allow students an understanding of how their work is translated into a specific mark/class.
- For Sciences, model answers could be the 'correct' answer to specific problems while for essays, they could follow a similar pattern to Arts.
- Arts answers would not need to be 'model essays' but, perhaps, a summary of what the examiner thought had been representative of the best/worst answers in terms of both structure and content.

CUSU's recommendations for model answers/question-specific feedback:

- 1. Examiners must, for each and every question set in their examinations, prepare and publish question-specific feedback. It is ALWAYS appropriate.**
- 2. Feedback must be detailed enough to allow students and supervisors a clear understanding of how each question was answered well but need not be prescriptive; it must be publicised widely to students through handbooks, lectures, websites, Directors of Studies and supervisors so that all students are aware of the resources.**
- 3. The General Board must be as firm in its resolution that Faculty Boards must require their examiners to produce question-specific feedback as it is in its opposition to the return of examination scripts to students.**

² <http://www.cusu.cam.ac.uk/union/policy/CUSUPolicyJuly2008.pdf>

³ <http://www.cusu.cam.ac.uk/academic/cusults/>

⁴ E3885 of 14 March 2007

⁵ <http://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/offices/education/strategy/strategy2006.pdf>

⁶ <http://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/offices/education/lts/examples/assessmentfeedback.pdf>

⁷ GB Ed Minute 6.4(b) of 14 March 2007

⁸ QAA Audit 2008 Report, paragraph 36

How can Faculty Reps make changes in their Faculties?

As the Education Committee's paper was circulated in Michaelmas Term 2008, your Faculty should have considered it at a meeting of its Board. To follow-up on this and initiate a discussion on the topic of examination feedback, you might like to consider:

- What was your Faculty Board's response to the CUSU paper? Asking for a summary of the discussion and access to the minutes of the relevant meeting should let you know what the current attitude of your Faculty is.
- What is the current practice in your Faculty? If you haven't yet sat examinations, you could ask older students and/or supervisors to gauge what the current level of feedback is.
- What information is currently produced but kept private? Some Faculties generate question-specific information to help with the marking of examinations – if this isn't currently public then making it so is an easy and cheap way for the Faculty to improve its service to students.
- Do you think that this is a matter which could generate interest amongst students? Conducting online polls, making posters, sending emails or using Facebook could be a way to establish the level on interest amongst students and could be used to solicit ideas for how the provision could be improved. As examinations vary between Faculties, it is important to seek a solution which fits with your local circumstances.
- Are there academics who might support improvements in the system? Speaking to supervisors and Directors of Studies about the benefits to both them and students about exam feedback is one way in which you could generate interest amongst the Faculty staff which could have an influence on the decision-makers on the Faculty Board.

If you would like support, further information or advice, on this matter or anything else relating to your work as a Faculty Rep, please get in touch.

Ant Bagshaw, Education Officer, Lent 2009
education@cusu.cam.ac.uk

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