

## 7 Case studies



## Case study one

After reviewing a selection of exam scripts from a couple of compulsory modules taken in semester one, you feel that the marking has not been rigorous and is overgenerous. This is compounded by question-setters providing vague and poorly structured model answers.

There is no full exam board after semester one so you send a detailed analysis and argument and request the Head of department consider re-marking or at least a review of the marking on these two compulsory modules.

At the final exam board after semester two you find that nothing has been done and your views appear to have been put aside. The module leaders maintain they have spoken to colleagues and see nothing out of order with the marking. You feel marginalised and ask why there was no earlier response to you. The module leaders reply that as far as they were aware this exam board was the appropriate point to respond. You maintain that the marking of the modules does not meet the standards you have experienced in other institutions. The chair of the exam board cuts short any debate stating that there is no time now for review or re-marking as results and classifications have to be with the exams office by the end of the day. Reluctantly, and for the sake of graduating students, you agree to sign off the award lists but refuse to sign off the module mark sheets. The chair of the exam board signs these off.

### Key issues in this scenario

- 1 Poor quality of model answers.
- 2 Marginalisation of the external examiner.
- 3 No clear procedures for the timely addressing of the external examiner's comments on semester one modules.
- 4 Process (results must be with exams office) taking precedence over integrity and fairness.

### Possible line of action

- 1 Inform staff at the exam board that you will be taking the issue up in your report. Put a strongly worded paragraph in the report about the lack of response to your recommendations and request feedback on this aspect of your report.
- 2 If there is still no satisfactory response write a confidential letter to the Head of the institution outlining the case and ask that the institution clarify the powers of the external examiner.
- 3 Depending on the response from the Head decide whether or not you need to resign – an inadequate response from the Head probably means you are in a difficult position with lack of trust and mutual respect shown by departmental staff.

## Case study two

On a validated programme at a collaborative partner to the awarding HE institution you see that there is a large failure rate (55%) on a compulsory core module in year 2. A selection of scripts is available to you on the afternoon before the exam board. There is no model answer or marking guide for the exam paper and you see that the exam has been marked by a team of staff. Your analysis shows that the problem appears to arise from students getting very poor marks on two questions and in your opinion some pretty harsh marking of their answers. Both questions appear to have been marked by the same member of staff. There is no evidence of double marking on any of the scripts. From informal conversations you gather that staff are not too worried by the high failure rate; it is a level 2 module and in aggregate level 2 modules only account for 20% of the marks going towards degree classification.

### Key issues in this scenario

- 1 Has the partner institution followed the awarding institution's policy on assessment and examination? For example, does the awarding institution's assessment policy require double marking and/or provision of marking guides?
- 2 Does the partner institution have a policy on internal moderation of team marking?
- 3 Had the team actually carried out double marking or discussed the aggregate marks?
- 4 Did the two questions with poor performance have sufficient clarity and content to allow students to produce answers with the rigour expected?
- 5 Does the casual attitude of staff toward year 2 performance permeate all modules at that level?

### Possible line of action

- 1 Request a short meeting with the marking team prior to the main exam board to discuss your concerns informally.
- 2 If there is no satisfactory outcome to the above, at the exam board ask the secretary to clarify the 'official' institutional position with regard to double marking and provision of marking guides.
- 3 Request the chair of the exam board/head of department to explain how question papers are constructed and agreed.
- 4 Having gained a clear understanding of the procedures in the presence of departmental staff discuss whether or not they have been following the awarding institution's assessment guidelines.
- 5 If there appears to be deviation from the examination policy of the awarding institution then the matter needs to be brought to the attention of the awarding institution.
- 6 Point out that poor performance in year 2 can have a real impact on those students around classification borderlines.
- 7 Indicate to staff that you will include in your report the need for a more professional approach to the setting and marking of year 2 modules.
- 8 Await a satisfactory response from the awarding institution on the issue raised in your report and expect that in the coming year there will be a much more professional approach to year 2 modules at the collaborative partner institution.

### Case study three

At the final exam board just under two-thirds of the finalists for a programme are around the upper second/lower second borderline. The board has discretionary powers to allow students within 1% of the borderline (60%) to be considered for the higher award, but apart from that there is no further guidance or policy on considering borderline cases.

Ten students fall within the 58.8-59.3 range. Six of these students have a mark greater than 59.0 but only two have a dissertation/major project mark of over 60%. Four students have marks of 58.8-58.9, but three of these have dissertation/project marks well over 60% including one with a borderline first class dissertation/project.

A long debate ensues covering such things as:

- simply sticking by the rules so all over 59% get put up;
- suggestions that only those with >59% overall and >60% on dissertation/project be put up; less than 60%;
- suggestion of 'finding' additional marks for the three students with <58% overall and >60% dissertation/project so that they can be put up;
- the need to agree to consider all borderline students on an individual basis.

#### Key issues in this scenario

- 1 Does the HEI need to write tighter or clearer criteria for discretionary powers of exam boards considering borderline cases?
- 2 How rigorous is the marking of dissertations/major projects? Is there blind double marking with arbitration from a third marker if agreement cannot be reached?
- 3 Is the assessment strategy exacerbating the tendency for bunching at borderlines (e.g. too many pieces of assessment having an equalising effect on candidate performance)?
- 4 Is poor student performance at level 2 endemic and leading to bunching around the borderline?

#### Possible line of action

- 1 Support the proposal that you consider best maintains integrity and fairness to all students. A majority of the board should support the proposal. The simplest option would be to apply the institutional guideline and have all those above 59% awarded an upper second. In practice boards often consider each borderline student individually rather than as a collective cohort of borderlines.
- 2 In your report request the institution to review its policy on the discretionary powers of exam boards in borderline cases and ask for a response.
- 3 Ask the department to review its assessment strategy to see if it can identify reasons for the severe bunching of candidates around the lower second/upper second boundary.



## Case study four

In your first annual report on a foundation degree run by a partner college you point out a serious weakness in the assessment of a particular module. Exam results are poor and assignment briefs are poorly structured and vague.

You recommend urgent action and review of the module. At the next end-of-year examination board you see the same problems with the module and that no action has been taken. You raise this at the board and the module leader says that this is the first he has heard of your comments. In a rambling discussion that follows it seems that your first annual report, sent to the awarding institution, took a long time to reach the partner institution and missed the annual programme review meeting. The module leader also maintains he did not attend a subsequent committee meeting when the report was discussed and no one informed him that there was a problem.

### Key issues in this scenario

- 1 Poor communication between awarding institution and partner institution and no mechanism in place to check timely arrival of external examiner's annual report.
- 2 The value of the partner institution conducting an annual review meeting without the external examiner's annual report.
- 3 Poor communication within the partner institution with the chance that some academic staff may not see the external examiner's report.
- 4 Potential for a very damaging QAA audit report for both the partner institution and the awarding institution.

### Possible line of action

- 1 Ask the exam board to review all the marks there and then for students on the current run of the module making comparisons with mark patterns on similar modules and making adjustments to the marks of all students if appropriate.
- 2 Request that a review of the module be carried out with a report to you before you write your annual report.
- 3 Refer to the lack of action in your report and write to the Head of the awarding institution pointing out the risk to standards raised by poor communication with the partner institution.
- 4 Be firm with the board pointing out that it is in the best interest of all (awarding institution, staff at the partner institution, students) to have a rapid resolution to the issue.