



## Anonymous Marking of Final Examinations at UCT Senate Executive Committee

10 November 2003

### Executive Summary

The Senate Executive Committee (SEC) recommends to the Senate that UCT adopts a policy of anonymous marking of final written examinations. In support of this recommendation, this report briefly traces the history of the issue of anonymous marking of examinations at UCT. Secondly, it revisits the educational principles which underlie the need for anonymous marking, namely, that anonymous marking will strengthen the validity of our assessment judgments by minimizing the possibility that irrelevant inferences be subconsciously used to discriminate for or against students, in particular, inferences based on race and gender. The SEC requests Senate to approve anonymous marking as a matter of principle, and that the system for the implementation of this policy should be developed by the Office of the Registrar in consultation with Faculty administrations.

### I. Background

Debate around the anonymous marking of examinations – that is, the practice of concealing the identity of the student from the examination marker – has a long history at UCT<sup>1</sup>. The first formal record of this issue is the General Purposes Committee (GPC) minutes of 10 September 1990 where GPC recommended that “student numbers rather than names be written on examinations scripts in the future”. The issue was discussed extensively by faculties and by the Student Representative Council (SRC) during the period of 1990-1991. The SRC argued that anonymous marking would address the possibility of “passive discrimination” or “unconscious (gender and racial) bias” in the final written examinations<sup>2</sup>. The responses from the faculties and departments varied from general support for the proposal (but with a concern that student numbers would not ensure anonymity and thus another system should be explored) to strong opposition of the proposal. The Science Faculty noted that, “No other proposal has generated as much verbal and written comment”. The reasons that are recorded for the opposition largely center around administrative concerns.

The issue was taken to Senate 20 April 1993 where Prof. Gevers, on behalf of the GPC moved that:

- Scripts in formal written examinations in future (from Nov. 1993) carry the student number, and not the candidates’ name.

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<sup>1</sup> This history is compiled from GPC and Senate minute archives. The author acknowledges that there may be gaps.

<sup>2</sup> SRC letter entitled Anonymity of Evaluation Scripts dated 28 February 1991.



- Departments would have the discretion to adopt the same method in other forms of examination.
- The system of anonymity in examinations be reviewed after 3 years.

The motion was put and defeated by 32 votes in favour, 36 against and 6 abstentions. The main concerns that were recorded were that anonymous marking would increase the margin of error, add an extra administrative burden, and obstruct the feedback process between students and teachers. However in 1994 Senate approved an examination system for the Law Faculty which ensured anonymity in the marking of examinations. The Law Faculty does not use student numbers, but a Heritage-generated random number. This practice continues to this day.

In 1996, the Committee of Undergraduate Education (CUE) conducted a fairly extensive investigation into the issue. This investigation included a report from the Law Faculty on the success of their implementation. The investigation also included a report on the administrative implications of extending the Law system to all of UCT (then an issue of the capacity of PRISM). The conclusion was that although the system had been successfully implemented in the Law Faculty, “the administrative and budgetary implications of implementing the system of anonymous marking university-wide in 1996 could not be discounted”. “Given the current load on student administrative computing”, it was felt that it was therefore “prudent to postpone” implementation until 1997<sup>3</sup>.

In 1997 GPC appointed a subcommittee to consider the CUE recommendations and review the experiences of other universities in effectively managing an anonymous marking system. This sub-committee canvassed internationally to find that anonymous examination was fairly standard practice in the UK. The sub-committee also consulted with 10 large departments at UCT. The majority of these departments rejected the proposal on the grounds that:

- Student registration numbers did not guarantee anonymity.
- The margin for student and administrative error would be increased.
- The system would be time-consuming in terms of marks processing.

Nonetheless their final set of recommendations from the sub-committee were that<sup>4</sup>:

- The examination system at UCT must be perceived to be fair. Anonymous marking is an attempt to reduce unconscious bias in favour of or against individual students or groups of students and, therefore, if anonymous marking is regarded by students as a means of ensuring fairness UCT must work towards introducing anonymous marking university-wide.

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<sup>3</sup> CUE Report on Anonymous Marking System for Examinations dated 3 May 1996.

<sup>4</sup> GPC Agenda dated 15 September 1997.



- It is neither desirable nor educationally sound to implement anonymous marking for all forms of assessment. It is desirable that crucial parts of the testing process be anonymous (e.g. formal written examinations and possibly tests).
- The alphanumeric student registration number not be used for the purposes of anonymous marking given that it does not guarantee anonymity.
- An investigation be conducted to ascertain whether the unique SAP number generated within the HR application of SAPR/3 for every student could be used for purposes of anonymous marking of formal written examinations (and an additional number of “safeguards and practical recommendations” were noted if this proposal was approved).
- The proposed system be introduced as a pilot study, as soon as possible, in order to test the system. The subcommittee recognizes the possibility that there could be different approaches to anonymous marking in different faculties.

GPC considered this report, as well as a minority report which had also been submitted, at its meeting of 16 March 1998. After a consideration of the report and the minority report, Professor Gevers recommended that the issue be taken up as part of the internally directed Audit to be conducted in 1998. This is the final formal record of discussion on this issue.

The issue was tabled by the SRC at the Examinations and Assessment Committee’s (EAC) February 2003 meeting. The SRC proposal was that students be allowed to write their student numbers rather than names in order to address the possibility of “racial discrimination and subjectivity due to personal relationships between lecturers and students”<sup>5</sup>. The EAC drew up a proposal in support of anonymous marking which was taken to the SEC November meeting. The SEC approved the recommendation in principle, and agreed that it should be taken to Senate.

## II. Anonymous Marking: Re-visiting the principle

The educational principle that underlies the practice of anonymous marking is that it strengthens the validity of our assessment judgments in two ways. Firstly, there is evidence to suggest that assessors’ judgments of student performance are influenced by a variety of factors, in addition to the actual performance product. This is inevitable and it can be argued that some of these factors are directly or indirectly relevant to the overall assessment judgment (e.g. an assessor may want to reward progress or diligence). At the same time there may be irrelevant factors that influence judgment, subconsciously or consciously<sup>6</sup>. The intention of a policy on anonymous marking of

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<sup>5</sup> EAC minutes 13 February 2003.

<sup>6</sup> There has been some research which argues for the effect of bias in the marking of students’ written work (see Fleming 1999 for an overview). There have been, however, very few studies which can argue conclusively that the introduction of anonymous examinations reduces racial or gender discrimination for or against students. Support for the policy tends to be supported principally on the basis of the effect of the policy on students’ perceptions of discrimination.



written examinations is to minimize the possibility that irrelevant inferences be subconsciously used to discriminate for or against students, in particular inferences based on gender, race and any other kind of information which can be made on the basis of a student's name. The intention of the policy is to address subconscious discrimination. It is acknowledged that there is no system that can fully eliminate deliberate discrimination. The second way in which anonymous marking will strengthen UCT's assessment system is by addressing students' perceptions that the marking is biased<sup>7</sup>. Scholars in educational assessment argue that, even where discrimination cannot be conclusively confirmed, the very perception of biased marking can serve to weaken the validity of the assessment outcomes.

For the purpose of UCT's policy, the principle of anonymity is qualified in four ways. First, the policy on anonymity pertains to the marking only, not the recording of the mark. It is felt that for ease of administration, the mark should be recorded, as is current practice, against Heritage-generated class lists that include both the student's name and number. Second, the policy of anonymity pertains only to final written examinations. The focus on final examination is in recognition that while a case can be made for anonymous marking of course work (e.g. tests, essays), final examinations are generally higher stakes and thus warrant special attention. It should be up to the discretion of departments to introduce anonymity more widely. Third, the policy of anonymity pertains only to written examinations. It is acknowledged that there are other forms of final examination (e.g. oral, drama, musical and clinical performances) in which the identity of the student cannot be and should not be separated from the performance, e.g. examination of dance, drama and oral examinations cannot be, and examiners of music and fine art might argue should not be. In these examples (and others) it could be argued that anonymous examination would weaken validity, rather than strengthen it. And finally, the policy of anonymity pertains only to internal examiners, not external examiners.

While objections to anonymous marking have been noted in the debate, anonymity also has certain advantages some of which are endorsed by staff in UCT's Law faculty. First, assessors are free to mark a script without fear of being accused of unfair marking or bias. Such a policy therefore reduces potential conflict between students and staff. Second, anonymous marking helps to ensure that students are marked solely on the basis of their performance on the exam. Third, it protects the University from risk of litigation from an individual who feels that he/she has been discriminated against in the examination marking.

### III. Proposal

The SEC recommends therefore that UCT adopt a policy of anonymous marking of final (June/October) written examinations.

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<sup>7</sup> The SRC representative on the Examinations and Assessment Committee (EAC) noted that student opinion on this issue had been widely canvassed and that these perceptions are widely held by students.



In its discussion of the implementation of this policy, the SEC felt that the system will need to be one which: ensures total anonymity (rather than the partial anonymity of the student number), is not susceptible to administrative error, is relatively time and cost-effective, is accommodating of individual Faculty needs.

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*10 November 2003*

Reference

Fleming, N. (1999) "Biases in Marking Students' Written work: Quality?" In Brown, S & Glasner, A. *Assessment Matters in Higher Education: Choosing and Using Diverse Approaches*. SRHE & Open University Press.

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