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Nameless and Blameless? Anonymised Assessment, Equality and Fairness

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The practice of anonymous marking is commonplace in Scottish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Our analysis of assessment documentation produced by HEIs in Scotland indicates that a minimum of 16 out of 19 institutions require anonymous marking in at least some assessment contexts[1].

Not every HEI's guidance includes a reason for anonymous marking but of those that do give a rationale, all refer to fairness and reducing potential bias. For example, the University of Edinburgh states that: 'Marking work anonymously is an important aspect of fair marking' (2019, p. 30). Similarly, the University of the West of Scotland notes that: 'anonymous marking is carried out and designed to improve reliability and to ensure that the assessment of students' work is free from bias' (2019, p. 14). Their language chimes with the NUS's Mark my Words, not my name campaign, which argued for anonymous marking to 'ensure equality and fairness for students' (2008).

The NUS's campaign implied a link between non-anonymous marking and the assessment performance of certain groups: 'Anonymous marking for exams and coursework is crucial to ensure equality and fairness for students. Research tells us that black students receive lower marks than their white counterparts.' (NUS 2008; source not cited).

Yet research on anonymous marking in the UK has questioned its impact on performance variations between specific groups. One study found no statistically significant relationship between gender or ethnicity and performance in anonymised and non-anonymised assessment (Pitt and Winstone, 2018), and another found that anonymous marking had little effect on reducing variations (according to ethnicity, gender and socio-economic group) in assessment outcomes amongst different groups of students (Hinton and Higson, 2017).

The minimal influence of anonymous marking on the performance variation between groups of students, suggests that differences by ethnicity, gender and socio-economic group arise from factors other than marker bias.

It may be argued that, even if anonymous marking does not reduce inequality, it serves other useful functions. On an individual level, anonymity may reduce instances of the 'halo effect' whereby a marker is influenced by a student's performance in class or a previous assignment (Malouff et al, 2013). The existence of the NUS campaign in the first place suggests that students may find anonymity reassuring, a point made in Edinburgh Napier University's assessment documentation, which states that anonymous marking 'reduces candidates' cause for concern that assessment could be influenced by such factors [as bias]' (2018, p. 62). Educators may also find comfort in marking anonymously as it offers protection from accusations of bias. The University of Stirling (2014) insists on anonymous

[1] Anonymous marking was not featured in guidance from the Glasgow School of Art. Documentation from Scotland's Rural College (SRUC) and Abertay University was not publicly accessible to us online.

marking where possible, ‘To protect students from unfair or partial assessment and staff from accusations of bias’.

However, some propose that anonymous marking can have a detrimental effect on students’ learning experiences. McArthur contends that the value placed on individuality and dialogue with students in a learning context is undermined by anonymous marking in an assessment context (2016, p. 974). Whitelegg similarly identifies disadvantages with anonymous marking in terms of disrupting the feedback loop (2002). Drawing on the responses of student and staff focus groups, Whitelegg observes concerns that feedback on anonymously marked work could not be personalised or linked to previous work and ‘increases the distance between learner and teacher’ (2002, pp. 7-8).

Building on this sense that anonymous marking can have negative implications for student learning, we would add that its widespread implementation limits engagement with wider questions about inequality in our HEIs. For example, the NUS is correct when it notes that black students have lower attainment rates than other students (Woodfield, 2014). But if Higher Education lands upon anonymous marking as the solution, might it not imply that the issue lies with individuals rather than in larger, structural inequalities? And could this divert attention away from addressing issues of fairness and inequality more broadly? Questions such as these are especially pertinent in light of calls to acknowledge and address structural racism (Advance HE, 2020), as well as other inequalities in education (such as in relation to gender, socio-economic class and disability).

There is a danger that anonymous marking emphasises fairness at the point of marking, at the expense of acknowledging the unequal structures in which the assessment is situated. It allows us to say that all students are treated in the same way, without recognising the differences within and between those groups of students. Let us not mistake fairness in one very narrow context for any wider sense of fairness in our universities, education systems, or society.

This is not to say that HEIs should throw out their anonymous marking policies completely. Instead, there is value in a more nuanced approach that enables greater reflection on the purpose and use of anonymous marking. There is scope for the sector to question whether anonymous marking should be so central to the aim of fairness in assessment. As well as considering the nature of specific assessments and the context of study, these conversations should be contextualised in wider debates about equality and fairness in Higher Education.

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