

Teaching and Assessment Processes

Final Year and MSc Project Marking Panels

Date: Sept 2009

1. Aims and Motivation

The marking panel process for final year and MSc projects aims to:

1. Produce a robust ranking of projects with a clear indication of classification boundaries
2. Ensure a level of consistency of marks across a cohort
3. Minimise bias caused by over or under enthusiastic supervisors and/or markers

The prime motivation is the need for clarity on the project mark given its significance in determining the final degree classification.

2. The Process

Project panel marking has similarities with EPSRC assessment of research proposals in that projects are first assessed by two or more markers and then considered together for ranking by a panel. The main difference is that the panel is made up of the markers. The process is as follows:

1. Prior to the marking process, the panel chair ensures that all markers are familiar with the project guidelines available to students and with the project marking criteria, i.e. what constitutes a good/bad project, etc. It is good practice for the panel to meet briefly prior to marking to ensure that there is broad agreement and understanding regarding the criteria and the marking process.
2. Each project is assessed by a minimum of two panel members, neither of which should be the supervisor. Assignment of markers should aim to give a good mix, e.g. avoiding the same two markers always being paired together.
3. Markers typically see a demonstration and/or a presentation and then read the Thesis. They should then assign the project a guideline mark, a ranking within the set of projects they have seen and a confidence weight. Markers should form a view of where they think the project sits in terms of degree classifications. Borderline cases will need to be particularly carefully explained at the panel meeting.
4. The panel, made up of all the markers, meets together in one single session to consider all the individual marks and rankings with a view to producing final

marks and an overall ranking. All the Theses are available to the panel and every project should be discussed. If the supervisor for a project is a panel member, then they should not usually take part in the discussion about that project although some limited input on purely technical questions may be appropriate. It is useful to start by considering projects in which the guideline marks from the two markers is significantly different, since these are usually the 'problem cases'.

5. The way in which the panel runs is important and it needs to be steered by a strong chair. A common difficulty is that guideline marks are simply averaged and accepted without discussion. This leads to inconsistency and defeats the object of the panel. For each project, both markers need to explain the guideline mark, indicating positives and negatives of the project. This will allow the panel to differentiate it from the other projects. It should be normal practice for panel members to look at Theses they did not mark during the meeting in order to compare projects. A preliminary mark for each project is then agreed.
6. The above discussions should lead to an initial ranking of the projects. The overall ranking then needs to be considered, paying particular attention to make sure the ranking is consistent with individual rankings as far as possible. The panel should look carefully at significant decisions on borderlines such as 1st class and fail.
7. Once a final ranking has been agreed, then marks can be confirmed. Most should follow from the preliminary mark agreed, but there may need to be some adjustments once the overall ranking is considered.
8. For each project, the panel should record the agreed mark and a brief justification for the mark, e.g. indicating positives and negatives.

2. Notes

1. All markers should allocate sufficient time to read and understand projects assigned to them, including attending presentations and demonstrations. They should make sure that they are familiar with the project guidelines and the marking criteria. The latter should be available as a separate process document.
2. The number of projects and the panel size is important. Very small or very large panels do not work. Ideally, there should be between 20 and 30 projects with around 6-8 markers. For large cohorts, sub-panels should be used, with careful calibration carried out at a separate meeting.
3. Supervisors can be asked to provide any relevant additional information about a project prior to the panel meeting including technical questions relating to the research area of the project and also such as whether there were difficulties in getting equipment, large changes in project focus, etc (but excluding mitigating circumstances that may have affected the student's performance – those are dealt

with by a separate process). This can then be taken into account by the panel. However, care must be taken that the supervisor's opinion of the overall work does not overly influence the marker who should form their own independent view of the merits of the work.

4. If the panel decide that they have insufficient information to assess a project, then the decision on that project can be postponed. Once the required information is obtained a decision on the project will be made either by the whole panel or by a sub-panel nominated by the panel chair.
5. The marks and ranking agreed by the panel should be final and should not be questioned by individual members following the panel meeting.
6. Panel membership should contain a suitable mix of experienced and new members of staff in order to maintain a level of consistency in the decision making process.
7. Panel marking is neither quicker nor easier, but it does in our experience produce outcomes that are both fairer and more robust.