

mark my words  
not my name

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the campaign for  
anonymous marking



national union of students

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# Introduction

Since it began, NUS' campaign for anonymous marking across all UK institutions has gone from strength to strength. Originally started in response to students' complaints about under-marking in the late nineties, the campaign for anonymous marking is especially relevant today in light of successive National Student Survey results, which show that despite generally high levels of overall satisfaction, a significant minority of students are unhappy with assessment and feedback. In the 2007 National Student Survey, for example, 40% of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with feedback and assessment.

Over a number of years, NUS national anonymous marking campaigns have won notable victories: endorsements from the Quality Assurance Agency, teaching unions and the Equal Opportunities Commission, increasing take-up by UK Higher Education institutions and a general recognition that anonymous marking is increasingly the 'done thing' across the HE sector.

Our campaign arises from our central belief that all students deserve to be treated fairly and without discrimination and prejudice. Our original survey of students in 1999 found that 44% of students' unions believed that discrimination and bias played a part in the way that students' work was assessed and addressed. Based on these findings, coupled with indicators and research elsewhere that suggests that anonymous marking reduces both the fear and likelihood of discrimination, we continue to work alongside students' unions to campaign for the introduction of universal anonymous marking across all institutions.

Although anonymous marking is not a panacea for tackling discrimination, it does go a long way towards safeguarding students and improving confidence in marking, assessment and feedback. It offers some protection to students from discrimination and bias and reduces any potential conflict with their assessors.

In this campaign pack, revised to take into account feedback received from student officers, you will find a useful toolkit explaining what anonymous marking means, why it is needed, the myths and misconceptions that exist as well as a guide to running a successful campaign on campus.

In unity,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'W. Streeting', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

**Wes Streeting**

**Vice President (Education)**

# Anonymous Marking - what is it?

Anonymous marking is a system of assessment where the student's name is unknown to the marker. It is sometimes referred to as 'blind marking'. It can be used for written examinations and for other forms of assessment. There are various ways of implementing anonymous marking. Some of the common ones are:

- Marking by numbers
- Bar codes
- Double marking
- External or visitor marking

## Marking by numbers

This is by far the most common form of anonymous marking. The system of 'marking by numbers' can be applied in several ways. Marking by numbers is simply a system where numbers replace students' names. Most institutions have had one form or another in place for examination papers sat under supervision for a number of years and is the system most (if not all) students will be familiar with from their public examinations in secondary school (or equivalent). It can be introduced in a number of ways, the most common of which are:

- Tear off: Before marking begins, names and ID numbers of candidates are removed using 'tear off' slips at the top of the examination script.
- Identification number: The examination paper has a number, but no name on it.

## Bar codes

Under such systems, bar codes are generated centrally and applied by students to examination scripts and coursework. There can be a greater cost implication for institutions who choose to use this method, however.

## Double marking

Quite often, where students submit complaints about their awarded marks, scripts are re-marked by a second examiner. Sometimes, this person may be drawn from the same institution, but a different department. Although not necessarily 'anonymous', it can be a way of ensuring fair treatment on behalf of the candidate. Non-written assessment, such as lab work, oral examinations or performance pieces cannot be marked anonymously. In these cases, double marking or the use of external assessors becomes essential to ensure fairness.

## External marking

This is essentially a system whereby examination scripts are marked by people who are not in any way directly associated with the particular institution or by exam boards. However, for such a system to be successful the script must not include students' names to remove the possibility of gender bias, or discrimination on the basis of faith, race or ethnicity.

# Anonymous Marking - why?

NUS has long supported the introduction of anonymous marking as a means of ensuring fairness and equality for all students throughout their studies. There are a number of important reasons why we continue to campaign for the introduction of anonymous marking.

## Freedom from discrimination and prejudice

Equality and fairness must lie at the heart of every aspect of the student experience, from admissions right through to assessment. NUS believes that where anonymous marking has not been introduced, institutions are leaving themselves susceptible to prejudice and perception of prejudice.

NUS' campaign for anonymous marking began following a major survey conducted in 1999, arising out of students' reported concern about under marking. In the survey, conducted in August of that year, 44% of students' unions believed that there was discrimination and bias in their institutions. Interestingly, two-thirds of those with institutions who had implemented full anonymous marking believed that there was little or no discrimination in assessment, which suggested a link between perception of discrimination and the student experience of marking and assessment.

This came just over a decade after research commissioned by the Association of University Teachers (AUT) reported changes in mark distribution following the introduction of anonymous marking, which was shown to benefit women and was identified as a result of gender bias in assessment. At the University of Wales, for example, the research showed that 42% of men in the Arts Faculty achieved either a first or a 2.1 compared with 34% of women. However, within a year of anonymous marking being introduced, the figures were 42% for men and 47% for women. There are a range of papers and research articles which examine gender bias in assessment (see further reading).

In the early nineties, racial bias in assessment was also raised as a concern at the University of East London (UEL) and the University of Glasgow's Dental School. At UEL, black undergraduates were awarded marks that were, on average, 4.2% lower than their white counterparts. Even more worrying statistics emerged from the University of Glasgow's Dental School where Asian students accounted for 20% of students on the course, yet made up 80% of those who failed. Although racial discrimination was not conclusively proven in either case, both institutions introduced anonymous marking as a safeguard.

Dennis and Newstead (1994) also highlight the potential for discrimination on grounds of race, age and other personal characteristics. All these are difficult to investigate and are under investigated. NUS acknowledges that there is little recent literature addressing the effectiveness of anonymous assessment and a lack of conclusive evidence. We strongly encourage institutions to undertake their own reviews and comparative studies across the institution and between similar institutions, examining the impact of anonymous marking on under-represented groups and on students' perceptions of fairness in relation to assessment methods. We would also encourage such studies to include an examination of pedagogical implications of anonymous assessment.

## **Quality of work, not lifestyles**

Anonymous marking is an important factor in boosting students' confidence in the fairness of their assessment. How many times have we said, or heard someone else say, "I would have got a higher mark, but he's never liked me". Often, students are afraid to complain or feed back on the quality of their course for fear that it will have a detrimental impact on their assessment.

Anonymous marking would go a long way to dealing with such a complaint and make it easier for students to voice legitimate concerns about their course without the fear of incurring penalties in marking.

## **Lifting suspicion from examiners**

Occasionally, lecturers express concern that NUS' anonymous marking campaign accuses them of bigotry. We consistently stress that our campaign is not directed against lecturers and one of the main benefits of anonymous marking is that it reduces suspicion towards examiners and minimises potential conflict, safeguarding both staff and students.

## **Exposing the root causes of discrimination and prejudice**

Anonymous marking is not a panacea for eliminating discrimination and prejudice on campuses. However, even where anonymous marking is unsuccessful in removing apparent bias towards particular groups on campus, the removal of the possibility of bias at the assessment stage can provoke a more thorough investigation as to why students from certain backgrounds are experiencing relative under-achievement in comparison with others.

## **Measuring confidence in the structure**

NUS was successful in persuading the Quality Assurance Agency to include anonymous assessment in the 'Assessment of Students' section of the Code of Practice for the Assurance of Academic Quality and Standards in Higher Education. The relevant section from the Code reads:

Some of the factors institutions may wish to take into account in developing policies and procedures on marking and moderation include:

- the circumstances in which anonymous marking is appropriate and when it is either not practical or inappropriate (for example in work-based assessment, or in the performing arts). Advice about where in the process anonymity ends is normally included in institutional guidance on this topic
- when double or second marking should be used and what approach should be taken, for example, whether or not the second marker normally has access to the first marker's comments and/or marks and highlighting the importance of demonstrating that double or second marking has taken place the methods to be used when assessments from larger groups are sampled by internal or external examiners
- the processes governing and recording any internal moderation and verification of marks and the procedure to be followed when an internal or external moderator disagrees with the original marks
- the usefulness of undertaking an analysis of marking and marking trends to facilitate comparisons and provide evidence on standards. Some institutions may find it appropriate to incorporate such analysis in annual monitoring processes.

**Source:**

**Section 6: Assessment of Students. QAA Code of Practice, Revised September 2006**

While NUS continues to push for the inclusion of anonymous marking as an integral part of the criteria list used by QAA inspection teams during the Institutional Audit, this section of the Code of Practice makes it clear that institutions should be carefully considering the need for anonymous marking and should be evaluating all aspects of the assessment process to ensure fairness. You should make the case to your institution that, in this context, the introduction of anonymous assessment would reflect well during the quality assurance process.

# Anonymous Marking – rebutting the opponents

Despite support for anonymous marking from many of the education trade unions, the Equal Opportunities Commission and the Commission for Racial Equality, many institutions continue to oppose anonymous assessment. Here are some of the arguments you may come across and some advice on how to rebut them effectively.

## **“Examiners currently allow leeway for disabled students, which only they know about.”**

- It is absolutely right that the individual needs and circumstances of individuals are taken into account. Under the Disability Discrimination Act, institutions have an obligation to ensure that reasonable adjustments are made to ensure a fair and equal student experience for disabled students. Where appropriate, it is absolutely right that examination boards should take any mitigating factors into account before, during or after assessment. For example, it may be appropriate to offer additional time to dyslexic students in an examination. Many institutions have already been able to introduce anonymous assessment without discriminating against disabled students and anonymous marking enjoys the full support of the NUS Disabled Students’ Campaign.

## **“Anonymous marking hampers the ability to give effective feedback to students”**

- Every piece of work should be returned to students with feedback and many institutions actually have a standard form that the examiner is required to fill in.

## **“A marker can recognise students’ handwriting”**

- Of course this may be true in some cases, though does not apply to course work submitted electronically.

## **“Anonymous marking won’t remove gender bias, because women write differently to men”**

- In a study of writing styles, Francis et al. (2001) were unable to support the commonly cited view that there are gender differences in writing style that could lead to a subconscious bias by examiners, whether or not anonymous marking is in place. Therefore this argument is a bit of a non-starter.

## **“Anonymous assessment is impossible for lab-based, performing arts and oral examinations”**

- The first point to highlight is that anonymous assessment will not necessarily be practical for all types of assessment and alternative means can be applied for each form of assessment. Double marking or external marking could easily be adopted to assess performance pieces, exhibition work, lab work or oral examinations.

### **“Anonymous marking is burdensome and expensive”**

- While cost is an important consideration, it is secondary to eradicating discrimination and boosting students’ confidence in assessment practices. Ensuring that our institutions have impartial and unbiased systems for grading and awarding qualifications is an important consideration. These issues have to be dealt with over and above the initial administrative costs. Students’ confidence in the marking system will be well received by quality assurance inspectors, thus reflecting well on the institutions. There are now countless examples of anonymous marking in place and your institution would do well to consult with those who have introduced anonymous marking successfully without a great administrative or financial burden.

### **“There isn’t enough research to support anonymous marking”**

- Discrimination and bias is always hard to identify. We acknowledge that there is the need for more conclusive research and encourage institutions to undertake their own studies.

## Key issues to note

- Partial systems: Where institutions have anonymous marking in some, but not all, departments, parity across all departments is a great argument to use - if it is good enough for one department, why not all? (Highlight the anomaly for joint honours awards)
- Optional systems: In some cases, institutions have attempted to introduced an optional scheme, but this reduces effectiveness, especially for small groups.
- Model system: There is no 'holy grail' in assessment. There is no one perfect system for anonymous assessment and you should not argue that one size fits all. Different courses will need different methods of anonymous assessment and the onus is on the institution to work with you to develop a flexible system.
- Monitor: To ensure the effectiveness of anonymous marking, it must be reviewed on a regular basis and used as a performance indicator for each department.
- Stability and consistency: A major concern for students' unions is that some institutions implement anonymous marking, only to revoke it soon after on the whim of departmental staff. It is important that the system is maintained and used consistently and that any adjustments to the methodology are in line with the overall anonymous principal.
- Practicality: Institutions are notoriously good at agreeing in principle only to then find 'practical' barriers to change. It is important that you are ready to win both the moral and practical arguments. Contact other students' unions are use their case studies as examples.

# Anonymous Marking – running a successful campaign

Once you've decided to run an anonymous marking campaign on campus there are a number of steps you can take to boost your chances of success.

## Before you get started...

Preparation is key to achieving success!

### 1. Do your research

- **Current systems:** Find out what systems are already in place. Identify which schools, departments and faculties already have anonymous marking in place. Also, if anonymous marking is in place in some departments, find out whether it covers all forms of assessment undertaken.
- **Structural decisions:** Find out who makes the decisions and how the decisions are made. There is nothing worse than seeing your hard work buried in bureaucracy and red tape. Also, when it comes to campaigning, you'll need to know who to target to maximise the impact of your activism.
- **Complaints:** It is useful to check if students have been logging complaints around under-marking and, if so, in what areas. If such complaints were made through the students' union, there may be a summary of complaints for you to review.
- **Existing work:** There is no point reinventing the wheel or going over old ground. Check to see if your union has campaigned on this issue before. This could be especially useful if your union has run any surveys or questionnaires in the past.
- **Conducting your own questionnaire:** You may find it useful to conduct a survey or questionnaire of current students. This can be conducted over a relatively short period of time. You could run comparative analyses of results between departments with and without anonymous marking. You could also survey lectures - UCU, the University and College Union, are fully supportive of this campaign and you should approach the local branch for help.
- **Use your National Student Survey data:** Students' unions, like the Union of UEA Students, have been increasingly successful by using data gathered through the National Student Survey to underline the case. Assessment and feedback have been consistently raised at a national level as a cause for concern. You can access your data through the NSS Dissemination Site and cross reference satisfaction data by gender, ethnicity and other factors. If you're not sure how to do this, simply e-mail the NUS Student Feedback Coordinator at NUS who will be happy to help on [nss@nus.org.uk](mailto:nss@nus.org.uk).

## 2. Build support

- Get a mandate: If your executive committee doesn't have a policy mandate from students, you might want to think about submitting a motion through your union's democratic processes. This will also help you raise awareness, especially amongst activists. You can amend it where necessary and submit it to your council or general meeting. You can use the facts and arguments in this pack to back up your call for anonymous marking. You can invite a member of the NUS NEC to speak at your general meeting or council and explain why NUS is running an anonymous marking campaign.
- Conducting your own questionnaire: You may find it useful to conduct a survey or questionnaire of current students. This can be conducted over a relatively short period of time. You could run comparative analyses of results between departments with and without anonymous marking. You could also survey lecturers - UCU, the University and College Union, are fully supportive of this campaign and you should approach the local branch for help.
- Get reps on board: Inform all Course Reps about the campaign. They are an already active group of volunteers who should care about the kind of issues you're raising. You may want to write to them formally. You should involve them as much as possible - provide them with a campaign pack, which includes information about the campaign, petitions, postcards and other publicity materials.
- Involve liberation campaigns: Liberation officers and their structures are vital resources as they can play an active and central role in building the campaign. It's important that they are included in the campaign to ensure the participation of women, black, LGBT, disabled students and other sections of the community who are at the forefront of discrimination and bias.
- Get Trade Unions on board: Talk to your local trade union branches on campus. There should certainly be a UCU branch on campus. Trade unions can be great sources of support for equality campaigning and may even be able to provide some funding. At the very least, they can utilise their membership list to build support amongst lecturers for your campaign.

## 3. Plan your campaign effectively

- Sit down with your most keen volunteers and exec members and start planning the campaign in advance.
- You can find a range of guides and resources to help you plan your campaign online at <http://www.officeronline.co.uk/activism/articles/>
- Talk to other students' unions to find out how they ran their campaigns.
- Let NUS know what you're doing so we can help. The VP Education is the main contact for anonymous marking campaigns and you should also find the Liberation officers at NUS a good source of support.

## Ideas and action points

### Creating a buzz on campus

If you're going to get mass participation in your campaign, you'll need to create a buzz around it. Posters, e-mails and plain notices do not capture many students' attention when they're competing against so many others. Here are some ideas and actions you could take on board.

- Petitions: Always a good starting point with any campaign. They're a great way of having a conversation with individual students, raising awareness and demonstrating support and feeling among students. A model petition is enclosed in this pack.
- Postcards: Postcards are another way of highlighting the level of student support for your campaign. NUS has produced postcards for you to use. You can also contact our Design Unit if you wish to adapt our design and produce your own. Think about targeting students at a time when it is convenient for them. You might also think about how you could use your commercial services or advice centre (if you have one) to promote the campaign. Ensure that there are easily accessible boxes where students can return the postcards to you directly or to the vice-chancellor. Remember, it is much more effective if hundreds of postcards arrive on the VC's desk - you might want to ask students to return the postcards to you, then forward them onto the VC.
- Personalised letters: Another great way of demonstrating the strength of student feeling around the issue is to get them to write personalised letters. You should provide a way for students to send them via the students' union to avoid postage costs.
- Communicating the campaign: Utilise as many different ways of getting your message out as possible. Set up an anonymous marking campaign page on your website, write articles for the student newspaper and your regular publications, try lecture shout outs, halls knocks and why not enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century and set up an anonymous marking campaign group on Facebook or Myspace? Rather than expecting students to come to you, why not try flyer places where you know students will be?
- Events: You could organise an event to publicise your campaign. A debate with people from the college or university would be a great way to getting your arguments across. You could include a social component to the event. Why not have a campaign launch to enthuse your volunteers? Remember, publicity is the key to successful events. You might also want to invite speakers from the local UCU branch or from the NUS NEC.
- Media stunts and actions: Getting coverage in local and student media is not only a great way of get your campaign messages across; the media is an important opinion former and could prove very useful for your campaign. Put together a proactive media strategy for local and student media. Think about press stunts - you are more likely to get press coverage - and are more likely to have an impact - if your story comes with a photo. Think of ways you can get your message across visually.
- Stalls: Get volunteers to staff stalls in prominent places around campus and possibly get them to dress up or do something different or eye catching to attract attention. The stall should have campaign information explaining the ideas behind anonymous marking as well as postcodes and petitions to sign.

## Putting the case across to decision makers

With student support behind you, you will still need to apply pressure at the right points within your institution to make the desired impact.

- Top-down approach: Put pressure on your institution at the highest level. Don't be afraid to approach the vice-chancellor directly about this and utilise the committees you are already represented on. You should identify the key people you need to convince in advance, like the Pro vice-chancellor for teaching and learning, academic registrar etc.
- Bottom-up approach: In addition to high level lobbying, you will need to make the case lower down the institution to the very people who will be administering the system at a departmental level. By outlining your arguments to them from the outset, you are less likely to face resistance further down the line. You will probably find that certain departments, faculties or schools will be more sympathetic than others and these can be useful allies in your campaign. Encourage your course reps to place anonymous marking on the agenda and use them to gather intelligence about what each department, faculty or school is saying.
- Lobbying outside committees: Remember, committees are not the only ways to get decisions made. In fact, in reality decisions are often taken outside the meeting in advance. You will therefore need to think carefully about which committee members you could lobby in advance. Maybe arrange to meet with them for an informal chat/coffee/lunch.
- Paper trail: Think about submitting a paper to relevant committees outlining the key reasons for anonymous marking, using the information contained in this pack alongside any research you've done yourself at an institutional level.
- Compromise: If you are meeting significant resistance, you could offer a compromise. If the institution is unwilling to accept full anonymous marking, why not suggest a pilot study or further research. Make sure you are able to play a heavy part in the steering group for any pilot to ensure it is conducted fairly and impartially.

## Sources of information

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## Getting involved nationally

In addition to providing you with the tools to campaign for anonymous marking within your institution, NUS continues to work on this issue nationally by lobbying Universities UK, Guild HE, the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills and the Quality Assurance Agency. As within any NUS campaign, we rely on your feedback and your input to help us build a clear national picture about what is happening at an institutional level.

## There are 4 easy things you can do to help...

1. Showcase your campaign by sending us photos, materials, press releases and press coverage for us to put online on the Education Campaign website so that other unions can see what you're doing and share best practice.
2. Contact us if you need any quotes for your press releases.
3. Invite NEC members to come and take part in events and campaigns on campus.
4. Provide research findings from any surveys or research you or your institution conducts on campus.

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