What does "fair marking" look like in the LSE Media and Communications Department?

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Introduction

Fair marking is a hallmark of a university's credibility and a critical aspect of students' learning experience. This report investigates the perceptions and experience of fairness by postgraduate students in the Department of Media and Communications. Through surveys and interviews, we identified key areas where fair marking could be challenging and offer some practical suggestions.

Literature Review

This report is influenced by existing research into fairness in assessments. We took inspiration from the following studies:

Bell, A., Mladenovic, R., & Price, M. (2013). Students' perceptions of the usefulness of marking guides, grade descriptors and annotated exemplars. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, *38*(7), 769–788. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2012.714738

Bloxham, S., Boyd, P., & Orr, S. (2011). Mark my words: The role of assessment criteria in UK higher education grading practices. *Studies in Higher Education*, *36*(6), 655–670. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075071003777716

Elliott, C. (2025). Against anonymity: relational marking and awarding gaps. Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education, (35).

Existing modes of marking may be seen to considered fair, but still introduce biases, hidden or otherwise. It also centers the importance of managing expectations and forging a good working relationship between students and teachers, as it influences perceptions towards fairness.

<u>Challenges of Fair Marking</u>
At the master's level, the complexity of assignments and diversity of submissions generates barriers to rigid evaluation and requires professors to use academic judgement (Bloxham et al., 2011 and Elliot, 2025). Despite the well-informed nature of this subjective judgement, evidence suggests there is still "inconsistency in marking" (Bloxham et al., 2011, p. 657).

Many universities utilise marking rubrics intended to improve fairness. Lecturers have also found, when discussing with students, rubrics improved the overall quality of work produced (Bell et al., 2013). However, the often-broad nature of these rubrics can reduce understanding, unintentionally exacerbate student anxiety and mis-direct their attention to trivial marking criteria (Bell et al., 2013). Additionally, Bloxham et al. find that within higher education institutions there is a discrepancy between "stated policies and actual practices" (2011, p. 667).

Students are also regularly provided with exemplary work to guide their approach and increase their understanding of assessment criteria. Whilst many students find this helpful, students have also suggested examples of poor assignments could further improve their understanding (Bell et al., 2013).

Methods

Surveys: We sent out an online questionnaire via the administrative team of the department and gathered 16 responses. There were responses from every course except MSc/MA Global Media and Communications (LSE and UCT). This survey was open for 60 days and comprehensively covers different aspects of fair marking, such as identifying key characteristics of fairness, how well students understand the LSE Marking Guidelines and their personal experience of fair marking in the department. An interview invitation was also included at the end of the survey. [Appendix A is the survey]

Semi-Structured Interviews: Based on the survey responses, we selected from a pool of respondents from the who agreed to participate in the interviews. We interviewed four respondents, who have a mix of perceptions and experiences of fair marking at the LSE. These interviews were conducted via Zoom and lasted no more than 30 minutes. They were later then transcribed and coded into themes of (1) perception, (2) practical concerns and (3) suggestions/recommendations. [Appendix B is the interview guide]

Our research is subject to several methodological limitations. Our small sample size makes our research not representative of the whole department. It may also have introduced a self-selection bias, in which students who feel more unfairly treated would choose to participate. The short timeline of this project also meant that we had to focus only on the experience of fair marking from a retrospective angle, instead of doing a comparative study, which a larger project timeline would afford.

Findings

I. – Perception
Anonymity and Trust
Candidate anonymity was ranked the second most important quality for fair marking in the survey with one interviewee highlighting its importance in combating racism. However, whilst anonymity is a pre-requisite of most assessment formats in the Department, 56% of survey respondents felt that it was not realistic due to class sizes and the often-unique topics students explored. Students noted that in-class discussions and office hours compromised their anonymity and factored this into their decisions to participate.

Trust and good rapport with academic staff played a big role in students' perception of fair marking. Students who did not get along well with their lecturers tend to be more skeptical of the marking process for that particular module.

Variation in Marking
10 out of 16 survey respondents scored "fairness" in LSE with a 2 and 3 out of a total score of 4. In a follow-up question in the survey, many respondents cited "difference in harshness" and "different markers" as a key reason for their scoring. In the interviews, when asked what the conversation around fair marking is in the department is, respondents also cited how perceptions of harshness of teachers can affect the way students select their modules.

II. – Practical Concerns
Clarity of Marking Criteria and Policy
Whilst the department displays general marking rubrics through tools such as Moodle, students found the documents' efficacy was limited by a lack of precision and requirement of proactive searching. Students also noted that these should be better integrated with courses with one interviewee stating, "we do know them theoretically, but honestly, practically I'm not sure"

(interview). Certain criteria such as 'writing style' were criticised as enabling subjectivity which negatively impacted fairness (survey). One student noted that without sessions discussing the content of marking criteria, they were left with "more questions than answers" (interview).

Students also cited the importance of exemplar assignments in helping them to understand marking criteria; however, 63% of survey respondents stated that they were not supplied with sufficient examples to enable full understanding. In the interviews, multiple students advocated for extending example work to include a range of grades as an essential facilitator to better understand the expected standards in the marking criteria.

Only 4 of 16 respondents indicated that they knew LSE's Marking Policies very well (giving a 4 out of 4 rating). Interview respondents also hoped that the department would provide more clarity in aiding understanding of the LSE's marking guidelines and how it can apply to the department.

Formatives

Formative assessments were viewed favourably by respondents as a way of understanding how grading is undertaken (interview). However, students noted that different seminar groups often received notably different feedback in terms of content and framework. Several students raised that for the same course, one seminar group received only written feedback whilst the other also received a grade. Respondents emphasised that receiving grades for formative assignments was important in enabling them to understand the marking process and adjust their approach and wider expectations.

Feedback

Comprehensive feedback (which showed examiner evaluation against each marking criteria) was viewed as crucial to fair marking by 81% of survey respondents. Whilst feedback was returned in accordance with LSE guidelines, some students criticised it as "limited" and lacking specificity and clearly identified improvements, instead containing "overall comments" (survey). Additionally, respondents cited that group feedback was unhelpful as it can be too general in some courses and did not add value to their summative assessment.

The different modes of feedback can also affect fairness. One respondent recounted how their seminar group was only given written feedback and not an actual grade, while other students from another seminar group were given grades. They then had to ask for a grade during office hours. They then felt that the onus was on the students to pursue fair treatment in the feedback process, which negatively impacted their learning experience.

Double-blind Marking

Double marking was viewed as essential by 56% of surveyed students, though they did not exhibit a preference as to whether markers were independent of one another. Given the extended timeline required for double-blind marking, students did not feel they received sufficient feedback to justify this. Students also noted that feedback attached originated from one marker and opposed the restrictions upon discussing feedback with examiners (survey). This restriction on examiner contact also caused students to question fairness due to a lack of accountability as they felt they could not raise questions of fairness. One survey respondent noted that they sought advice from their academic mentor in light of perceived unfairness who offered little assistance, stating that they "did not have control over it" (survey). Additionally, two interviewed students worried that informal discussions and agreements between lecturers and students were not visible to the second marker which could result in penalisation for previously agreed matters (interview). Overall, despite expressed concerns students did view double-blind marking as generally fair.

III. – Student Suggestions

The survey and interviews highlighted several recurrent student suggestions and recommendations for improving the perceived fairness of marking in the department:

1. **Widening work samples** to include received grades ranging from Pass to Distinction
2. Returning examiner **feedback against the marking criteria**
3. Enabling students to **discuss feedback with examiners** to enhance understanding
4. Providing **explanation sessions/videos** to improve understanding of LSE marking policies

Limitations and Reflexivity
While our research has a small sample size, it still has value in centering the lived experiences of students in the department, which can provide some insight into some areas where fair marking can be further studied.

While we the researchers are not from the same department as our research participants, we are also fellow masters' students who can empathise with their views. This helped our respondents open up to us more easily and also trusted us with answers that can be deeply personal and sensitive. Although having researchers from the department has its benefits, we did not conclude that our "outsider" status negatively influenced our interactions with our participants and by extension, the openness in their sharing.

Conclusion
Students generally have a favourable view of the fairness of marking within the department, but this research has identified clear areas for improvement specifically in relation to students' understanding of marking criteria. We found that students would benefit from a clear dissemination of LSE's marking policies, sample writings of varying grade ranges, individualised over general feedback, and a more transparent marking process with the returning of the examiner's used marking rubric. This is essential for improving students' perception and ability to assess the fairness of marking.

While beyond the remit of this research, several students raised the impact of AI tools on perceptions of fairness. AI usage is often viewed as an essential tool however academic policies currently fail to communicate distinct approaches between its use for research and grammar corrections and directly writing essays. Considering the increasing adoption of AI, we suggest this could be a pertinent avenue for future analysis.

Questionnaire
(interactivity removed for Word edition)

Dear LSE Media and Communications student, this questionnaire will provide insight for a report for the LSE Department of Media and Communications. The aim of the report is to help improve the 'fairness' of assessment feedback in the department. This survey is anonymous unless you indicate your interest for a short interview at the end of the questionnaire.

PART 1 – Academic information (1 minute)

1.1. Which LSE programme are you currently in?
- MSc Media and Communications
- MSc Media and Communications (Research)
- MSc Media and Communications (Data & Society)
- MSc Media and Communications (Governance)
- MSc Media, Communication and Development
- MSc Politics and Communication
- MSc Strategic Communications and Society
- MSc/MA Global Media and Communications (LSE and USC)
- MSc/MA Global Media and Communications (LSE and Fudan)
- MSc/MA Global Media and Communications (LSE and UCT)

1.2. Which higher education institution did you previously attend? (most recent)
[short answer text]

1.3. What was your previous field of study?
[short answer text]

PART 2 – What is fair marking to you? (1 minute)

2.2. Please **tick** the **qualities** that you think are **necessary** for fair marking.

- Candidate anonymity
- Candidate and marker sharing the exact same rubric / feedback sheet before assessment
- Marker Pre-Meeting (markers meet prior to discuss 2-3 pieces of work to bring them closer to agreement on attainment levels)
- Feedback Sheets (markers assess work using a defined rubric, ticking scores for each objective and providing a brief justification for each. This is then supplied with final grade)
- Having 2 or more markers marking independently of one another's comments
- Having 2 or more markers marking with reference to one another's comments
- Viewing comments of marker(s) after grades are released
- Viewing comments of marker(s) after grades are released and having the chance to appeal.
- Others:

2.3: Please specify if you ticked "Others" for Question 2.2

PART 3: Your personal experience of marking at the LSE (3 minutes)

Please provide short answers to the following questions based on your personal opinions and experiences with marking both at the LSE.

3.1. **'Fairness' at LSE** - How would you currently rate the 'fairness' of marking you have received at LSE?
[tick box selection 1-4]

3.1.1 If you selected 1,2 or 3 for Question 4.1, please briefly explain your rating of marking at the LSE, and areas for improvement.

3.2. **'Fairness' at LSE** - Are you aware of LSE's current marking policies and processes?
[tick box selection 1-4]

3.3.1. Have you appealed a grade at the LSE/your previous academic institution/both?
[yes/no]

3.3.3. If you answered 'Yes' for Question 4.3.1, how did you find the appeals process? How could it be improved?
[short text answer]

3.4.1. Have you sought advice from an academic staff member following feedback you felt was 'unfair'?
[yes/no]

3.4.2. How did they respond? Were you happy with this outcome?
[short text answer]

3.5.1. Do you speak about marking and feedback with your peers on your course?
[yes/no]

3.5.2. From your perspective, what is the general dialogue around 'fairness'?
[short text answer]

3.6.1. Are you provided with sufficient examples to fully understand the marking criteria for your assessments?
[yes/no]

3.6.2. If you answered 'No' for the previous question, how has this been insufficient? How could this have been improved?
[short text answer]

APPENDIX B

Interview Guide

General questions:
1. How familiar are you with the LSE's marking policies?
2. Can you share more about the different assessment types in your program and your experience of fair marking?
   a. Are there specific assessments you feel are more unfairly graded than others?
3. How do you think marking can be made fairer in the department?
4. What makes you trust the marking process?
5. How important is candidate anonymity to you?
   a. To what extent does this affect marking and feedback?
   b. What safeguards could be put into place where anonymity is not ensured?
6. How does feedback affect your perception of fairness?
7. Have you ever appealed a grade at LSE?
   a. How did you find the process?
   b. How could the process be improved?
8. Are you provided with suitable examples for each assessment format?
   a. Are mark schemes / rubriks clearly communicated?
   b. How helpful do you find these?
   c. Do you feel feedback fairly aligns with these?
9. Do you speak to others on your course about marking fairness?
   a. What is the dialogue around this?
   b. Are there specific points that seem particularly prominent amongst your peers?
10. How does the LSE '5 week' timeline for feedback impact fairness?
11. Is there are large discrepancy in fairness across your modules?

Questions specific to survey (some examples depending on respondent):
1. Tell us more about your experience appealing a grade at the LSE and why you felt ignored by the department?
2. You mentioned there are biases in the way marking is conducted, can you elaborate more on your response and suggest some ways you would like to see this improved?