

Paper presented at European Association for International Education (EAIE )  
Conference.  
Glasgow 15-18 September 2015

**Where do we draw the line?**

**Will my work be marked differently because I am an Exchange student?**

This is a common question.

But it raises a whole set of other questions.

## 1. STATING THE CASE

Academic assessment is built around the **learning outcomes** of the module. A student, through having attended the classes and engaged in private study, produces work which is set to test the learning outcomes. The work is marked against certain criteria, and the student gains a mark.

Whether the student writing that work is an exchange student or not, it must be marked as a stand-alone piece of work.

That's it.

- or is it ?

## 2. IN PRACTICE

### Anonymity

All exams are marked by student number. All work should be marked anonymously – even coursework – students do not have to add their name to the cover sheet. Faculty do not know the students' names until the examining board. So, it could be said that any decision is removed by the system. But in reality, students can choose whether to submit a cover sheet bearing their name, or just their student number. Is it ethical for a student to write across the cover sheet: "I am an Erasmus student"?

### "Only" Exchange students

Maybe this relates back to the time when the statement used to be: "It's okay – they are 'only' exchange students". This is precisely what we have all worked so hard to avoid in recent years. They are 'students'. They attend classes; they work alongside degree students; they submit the work. They are marked against the set of learning outcomes. They are not "only" anything. They are "students" who deserve respect and equality.

Are there other factors we could, or should, be taking into consideration?

### Making Allowances

Academic colleagues might say: "Well – they are not used to the education system here – we'll make allowances – it is not reaching the required level – but I'll be generous."

Or: "This student has only just arrived here – they're trying hard - and English is not their first language – and..., and ..."

Should there be some sort of allowance made?  
- what would the result then be?

The tendency to be generous is a perfectly human view, but it is not defensible in terms of academic integrity.

If we were to take other factors into account within the marking scheme, would this be ethical?

The question is not: "Is this student an exchange student?" The question is: "Has the student met the levels required?"

### 3. WHAT ABOUT OTHER STUDENTS?

Surely there is a whole set of other students for whom we could be making similar statements. "Well – this student has come to the UK to study for a degree – English is not their first language – we'll take that into consideration"; or "This student has entered year 1 from a school where they did not get much essay-writing practice –we'll make a special case." All this is very caring and kind – but is it anything to do with assessing learning outcomes? Moreover, what does it say for the opposite case? "This student has attended a top-ranking high school, so we'll mark more harshly". That could not be defended – yet it has to be the logic.

Then, for mature students – "This student had to adapt to university life – they entered university as a mature student – they never really had much academic training – that's okay – give it a pass".

And for students facing various difficulties in their lives: "This student is going through a tough time at the moment – okay – give it a pass."

We must return, then, to marking against learning outcomes.

### 4. LEARNING OUTCOMES

Perhaps there should be a different set of learning outcomes for exchange students. Much has indeed been written about the rewards associated with studying abroad, and all the benefits in terms of personal development which such an experience brings. Are these extra benefits part of the learning outcomes? Can we measure them, and can we allocate a grade to them? Perhaps we can, if the students write learning logs or a blog (provided they are truly reflective and not just a diary). But that would need to be stand-alone. The way in which a student has adapted to life in another country cannot possibly be considered as part of an allocated mark for a paper in microeconomics.

We want students to be part of our student body – we value their input, the dynamism and extra dimension, and the benefits for all students. We acknowledge that the exchange students come from institutions with academic standards similar to our own. If the assessment system is one to which they are not accustomed, our job is to give them as much exposure to and guidance for this as is possible. Extra support for essay writing skills? – Yes. The opportunity for extra language practice? – Yes. A clear

framework of what is expected? – Yes. A different set of marking criteria because they are exchange students? –would this be ethical?

## 5. WHAT ABOUT EXTENUATING CIRCUMSTANCES?

We have a system of 'extenuating circumstances' where students can submit evidence such as illness which may have affected their level of work. Are we then going to say that every exchange student has extenuating circumstances? Would it be ethical for the grades obtained during an exchange placement to be inflated or amended purely because they are 'exchange' students? Does this match with the ethos of exchange studies? If we were to enter this area, then the grade awarded would not be a true reflection of that university's standards. Is it not also patronising for the exchange students themselves – so many of whom are extremely able, and capable of excellent grades on their own merit, without any special treatment.

## 6. FAILURE

Should we consider what is at stake if a student fails? How many times have we had distressed students in our offices – totally distraught because they received a mark of 38%, meaning that they would have to resit the year back at home? A whole year for the sake of 2%? Not being able to graduate in the US because they did not quite answer the question? It is so kind of academic colleagues who ask: "This essay is not at the level required – I am sorry – I really need to fail it – but what will happen to the student?" These are the very values which we promote within our universities – encouraging student mobility, taking care of each other's students and so on. But it is the first part of that sentence which is important: "This essay is not at the level required".

### Credit transfer

In terms of student mobility – the aim is for students to freely transfer grades across countries. The ECTS Users Guide of 2009 states:  
"Credits awarded in one programme may be transferred into another programme."  
So – we transfer a fail – right? (European Commission, 2009)

### Other details about assessments

We must also be aware that some countries have other uses for their assessments. Not only are there learning outcomes to be met, but also factors such as a limit to the number of students who may progress to the next year. Or perhaps there is no fixed pass mark – the lecturer decides on how many students will pass, and adjusts the pass mark accordingly. An outgoing exchange student, who is not asking to be progressed to the next phase at the host university, is surely being disadvantaged at some point.

Is there an ethical dilemma? If they are treated just as 'students', they may receive a failing grade – perhaps because they knew the work, but had not adapted to the system of academic writing of the host country, or they knew the work, but failed because the system contains other factors.

## 7. TWO HURDLES – OR AN OPTION FOR FLEXIBILITY?

Let us look in more detail at the 'Learning outcomes' which we set our marking criteria against. Each academic module has learning outcomes. Students study academic modules as part of their exchange programme. But – to take Cardiff Business School as an example – the “year abroad” or “semester abroad” are, in themselves, a module. That module has a description containing phrases such as: “To gain experience of life in France, Germany...”; “to achieve XX ECTS”; “to study modules at the host university”. So now we are in a situation where outgoing students have to meet two sets of learning outcomes. Firstly – they must face the assessments at the host university, and secondly they must meet the learning outcomes for the period abroad as stated in their home university.

The excellent work being undertaken by Egracons (EC Lifelong Learning, n.d.) will, I believe, be of great benefit in transferring grades where students have met the necessary criteria and have passed.

But if a student fails? Can we ethically allow home universities to change a fail into a pass?

Our figures show that students who have spent a period of study abroad obtain consistently higher grades in their final year. How can a fail overall be reconciled with this? If a student were to fail they must be asked to prove a certain level of attainment. Do we require them to re-sit the whole year?

Well perhaps that depends on the learning outcomes of that home university. At Cardiff – if a student takes a period of study abroad, they must achieve an overall pass, taken as a weighted average of their module results. A fail in Microeconomics, for example, might not be too bad, provided a good pass in International Trade, for example, counterbalances it.

Will this be a solution to the question raised at the start of this paper? Can this be where the required flexibility lies? This is a different area of research and I would be pleased to hear from others interested in this area.

But let's leave that to one side. Let us return to the main question, and gain a student perspective. I now hand back to the chair.  
Then after Andrew's talk, I'd like to ask for another vote.

Should academic staff mark exchange students' work differently?

Note: This paper delivered interactively, with integral discussion and voting.  
RF Smith 18.8.15

## References

European Commission, 2009. *ECTS Users' Guide*. Available at: [http://ec.europa.eu/education/tools/docs/ects-guide\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/tools/docs/ects-guide_en.pdf) [Accessed 3.11.14]  
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