

Recommendation on the anonymisation of written performance assessments

Background and Explanation:

In 2012, the university Senate discussed the topic of anonymized performance assessments at the request of students. Anonymizing¹ the respective documents in the exam process makes it possible to exclude irrelevant information related to students' names. This enables examiners to evaluate students' work without being influenced by this information. For this reason, the Senate made the following recommendation:

"The Senate recommends teaching staff require students to provide only their student ID number on written exams, and not their names. If, in certain individual cases and for particular reasons it is not possible to do so, the Vice Rector for Teaching must be informed accordingly by the middle of the summer semester 2013."

In the meantime, research on this topic has progressed, as included here in a non-systematic overview. A lack of anonymization has been identified as a distorting factor in other exam formats as well.

Consideration of the scientific state of the art

In a study, Malouff, Stein, Bothma, Coulter and Emmerton (2014) showed that lecturers who had previously seen an excellent presentation by students, tended to give these students a better grade on written work completed at a later date, when compared with experimental conditions in which the initial presentation had been significantly worse.² In other words: As per the "halo effect", previous excellent performances influence later evaluations positively, while previous poor performances influence later evaluations negatively. Different performance assessments that should formally be evaluated independently of each other, were thus perceived as connected. Similarly, in a Swedish study by Bygren (2020) on a sample of 17,235 students, there was a slight positive bias in favour of students with an international background, which corresponds to positive discrimination.³

These individual findings aside, a summary of 20 studies in meta-analysis by Malouff and Thorsteinsson (2016) revealed that the presence of irrelevant information about students can skew evaluations of their work.⁴ In the meta-analysis, this especially impacted students from marginalized ethnic groups, those from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds, those who were considered less attractive, and those who had previously performed more poorly. Another important finding was that these distortions were even observed in experienced lecturers as well as those who had been trained in evaluating exams, although it was to a lesser extent than in new or untrained examiners. Thus, experience and practice alone are not enough to counteract this effect.

¹ Technically, this is a pseudonymization process, since the respective persons can easily be identified and indeed must be identified by their student ID numbers in order to correlate the results of their performance assessments. In this document, the term "anonymization" is used in the general sense of the word and in order to emphasize that the name is omitted, instead of the more complex process of replacing it with a pseudonym.

² Malouff, J. M., Stein, S. J., Bothma, L. N., Coulter, K. & Emmerton, A. J. (2014). Preventing halo bias in grading the work of university students. *Cogent Psychology*, 1(1), 988937. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311908.2014.988937>

³ Bygren, M. (2020). Biased grades? Changes in grading after a blinding of examinations reform. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 45(2), 292–303. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2019.1638885>

⁴ Malouff, J. M. & Thorsteinsson, E. B. (2016). Bias in grading: A meta-analysis of experimental research findings. *Australian Journal of Education*, 60(3), 245–256. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0004944116664618>

Further development of the recommendation

At a time when universities and institutions of higher education are striving to promote equal opportunity and objectivity, the anonymization of performance assessments is an important step in reducing disadvantage and prejudice in the assessment of students. Removing personal identifiers such as names can help to minimise unconscious bias and unequal treatment in the performance assessment. In this context, the 2012 recommendation has now been expanded to include all written course-related performance assessments (not just written exams). The changes are in italics. The proposed text thus reads:

The Senate recommends teaching staff require students to give only their student ID numbers, and not their names on all exam documents for written or electronically transmitted course-related performance assessments.

Support for implementation

As explained below, it is easy to implement the anonymization of performance assessments. The intent is not to patronize lecturers or to create central points of control. Instead, the lecturers themselves implement all the steps for anonymization. The goal is to avoid unintended influences due to normal human tendencies when processing information. The advantages are twofold: lecturers can complete a more objective evaluation of performance assessments and they can be more certain of their own evaluations in disputed cases. This is especially important for performance assessments in which evaluations are more subjective, e.g. in written seminar papers as opposed to multiple-choice exams with a set grading scale.

Anonymization steps can easily be taken for different exam formats:

In-person written exams (exams taken on campus in written or electronic form, text-based or multiple choice, and for which only permitted aids (if any) are allowed):

- Students provide only their student ID numbers. Exam participants identify themselves using their student IDs (UniCard) and place them on the table in front of them during the exam so that the exam supervisors can check them.
- If there are enough supervisors, then students can show their student IDs before entering the exam room.
- Alternatively, if there are not enough staff to check students' IDs, then a cover sheet can be used for students to write their respective name and student ID number. The pages with students' answers, however, are only labelled with the student ID number. Before they are evaluated, these pages are stapled together and separated from the cover sheet. The cover sheet is not used during the evaluation process, but afterwards it is archived together with the other pages.

Written assignments and other written work:

For assignments submitted in paper form:

- Students only use their student ID number in the document (e.g. on the title page or in the header). The texts do not list the respective students' name.

For assignments submitted electronically (e.g. via email or by uploading them into the applicable ILIAS system (for coursework or exams)):

- Students use their student ID number as the corresponding file name.

- On the title page and in the header, they only use their student ID number.
- Teaching staff save the assignments submitted electronically (e.g. via email or ILIAS) to a folder or drive, so that the documents are no longer linked to the students' email or ILIAS accounts. Neither the file names nor the content of the written works should give a direct indication of their authors.
- Likewise, only the student ID numbers are necessary for the lists of grades that teaching staff are required to sign since the corresponding grades can also be recorded using student ID numbers.

If, at a later date, it is necessary to attribute the performance assessment to a student by name, then this can be done using the list of participants for the respective course.