Aims and objectives

The department wanted to improve its performance in the NSS, particularly with regards to the speed with which it returned feedback to students (51% - 2011). Focus groups revealed that students would require feedback on summative work within four weeks or less to make a significant improvement on results in this area.

It was also hoped that replacing paper based submission with online approaches through the VLE would also be more secure (helping to avoid papers getting lost or stolen) and more convenient for students, particularly those based overseas.

Outline

Staff were informed ahead of time of their marking / 2\textsuperscript{nd} marking responsibilities through a centrally shared spreadsheet.

All 1\textsuperscript{st}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} and 3\textsuperscript{rd} year modules were due to submit summative assignments on the same day (Monday week 1, Spring term). Paper based submission was replaced with online submission through 17 separate VLE module sites, allowing quicker distribution of the 2100 scripts collected to markers, and speedier reallocation of scripts in case of marker illness etc. Immediately following the midnight submission deadline, scripts were harvested from the VLE sites and arranged in a centrally accessible shared drive. Markers were able to access their scripts and feedback forms from the drive and start marking within 24 hours of submission.

After the main batch of scripts were collected and distributed to markers, all VLE sites were checked daily for late submissions which were then passed to markers as they came in.

On completion of first marking, scripts and feedback forms were made available to 2\textsuperscript{nd} markers for moderation via the shared drive. Once moderation and QA processes to identify discrepancies in marks were complete for a module, the feedback sheets and marks were administered centrally and students contacted to collect their feedback forms from the dept office. Marks were released via e-vision a few days later.

Feedback and marks were returned within 11 days of the submission deadline for all 3\textsuperscript{rd} year assignments and within 15 days for all 1\textsuperscript{st} and 2\textsuperscript{nd} year assignments.

Methodology

There were a number of factors that combined to significantly improve the time take to collect, mark and provide feedback on student work:

- **Workload model:** Care was taken to evenly distribute marking workload throughout staff within the department with 30-40 scripts per staff member. In many cases this required multiple markers for large modules. Staff were all made aware well in advance of the papers that they would be expected to mark and where to go to collect the scripts.

- **Ringfenced assessment period:** Week 1 of Spring term (week of submission) was cleared of teaching
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and supervision responsibilities to allow staff to dedicate their attention to marking and providing feedback. To allow markers to make best use of this clear time, it was essential that submitted work could be collected and distributed to markers as quickly as possible.

- **Anonymous assignment through the VLE:** The Anonymous Assignment Submission tool within the VLE ensured that work could be collected and marked anonymously and efficiently. Assignment submission points were located within separate module sites, giving students a familiar location to submit to.

- **Central shared drive:** Simple but effective use of a shared drive allowed work to be efficiently distributed to and collected from markers. All staff were given access rights to this area which was secure from students.

- **Role of admin team:** Central to the success of this initiative is the active role of the departmental admin team who took responsibility for liaising with the Exams Officer re comms to staff & students, prepping prior to submission, collection of submissions, chasing late submissions, distributing work to markers, handing off feedback and marks to students and entering marks into e-vision.

### Reflections

- **Process very effective at improving return speeds.** Combined with the new workload model we were able to turn around the vast majority of the marking within three weeks, thus avoiding too much overlap between teaching and marking.

- **Positive student responses.** Initial evaluation shows that students were very positive about the changes; we’re hoping that this will be reflected in this year’s NSS scores.

- **Staff Printing.** E-submission placed the printing burden on the department, but this was not a problem in the end. Staff either printed from their printers or marked on-screen (something that PGW Ts seemed prepared to do). In future students will be required to include exam numbers and page numbers on each page to avoid any potential for mix ups using shared printers.

- **Module convenor as moderator if not first marker** to address student concerns. Assigning multiple markers to modules required a little more care in terms of QA issues. We ensured that module convenors acted as moderators where there were multiple markers.

- **Address wrong paper submissions.** We did find that a small number of students sent essays to the wrong VLE site and also failed to format their essays in accordance with departmental conventions so we have developed a cover sheet and a style FAQ to reinforce proper formatting and an explicit instruction to check which essay they are submitting to which site.

### Transferable lessons learned

- **Invest time in Dept & admin process implementation and communications** to both staff and students in areas such as marking allocation and deadlines, admin processing deadlines, the folder structure in the shared drive, how markers pick up their marking, who and how to handover to 2nd markers/moderators and return completed feedback and marks to admin and contingency if staff cannot access shared drive via VPN off campus (email zip files).

- **Create space for markers to mark.** For the process to work it was vital to create a block of time in week 1 to allow the markers to devote themselves to marking. We did this by relocating the termly supervision to the end of term, and avoiding other obligations in this week.

- **Even distribution of marking.** Key to the improvement in turnaround was the reduction of individual marking loads; 30-40 scripts per staff member was a more manageable burden if one has a dedicated (but fairly short) time set aside to mark the work. Staff were more likely to get the marking done swiftly under these circumstances, Better for staff in that one no longer faced weeks of trying to fit marking around other activities.

- **Digital submissions using the anonymous assignment tool in VLE** allowed scripts to be collected and passed on to markers quickly within the crucial assessment week window.