Letters

Look to Wollongong for best-practice assessment

GAVIN Moodie (*HES*, January 17) is to be congratulated for his timely and balanced review of the difficult process of assessment, particularly of honours and other research students. He argues: "Universities might have to consider adopting new system-wide measures to maintain public confidence in their assessment procedures."

In the department of biological sciences at the University of Wollongong, where research encompasses a wide range of sub-disciplines, from molecular genetics to community ecology, we have developed what we believe to be an effective assessment process that could be generally applied and considered as best practice.

Our procedure is designed to ensure that assessment is rigorous, while removing the potential for bias (either for or against the student) by a supervisor — subconscious or deliberate. Our honours program in science is structured to prepare students either for immediate entry into the workforce or to launch them on a research career. Achieving fair and accurate assessment is important because the mark (not just the class of honours) may determine a student's rank in the competition for a job or scholarship.

All work contributing to honours has multiple markers; all academic staff members assess poster and seminar-based communication skills, and three markers (including the supervisor) assess scientific writing skills (a literature review and a scientific paper). This coursework comprises 30 per cent of the honours assessment.

Because supervisors are not markers, they are free to guide the student in preparation of the thesis; indeed, they are expected to do this, because it is a particularly important part of learning by "apprenticeship". The thesis (comprising 70 per cent of the honours assessment) is examined by two academics within the university, whose expertise is in the research area, and an external examiner, usually from another university or a research organisation. (This goes even further than the procedure, described by Moodie, of seeking external input only when there is a dispute within the department. Indeed, we understand that many departments do not have any external assessment of honours theses.)

All thesis examiners give both a score and a written assessment. The department's examination committee, comprising all academic staff, compares the comments and scores for each examiner, hears arguments from the supervisor and other staff who assessed the student, and determines the final mark.

In most cases, the final thesis mark is a straight average of the marks of the three examiners.

We offer this description of the processes we use, which we consider to be both stringent and fair, as a contribution to a national discussion on how honours assessment might be improved and become more standardised.

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