

# 'This answer is excellent: shall we give it 100%?'

John Hegarty & James Hartley

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*To obtain their degree, final year students of psychology in the UK normally complete a set of examination papers and a dissertation, and the marks obtained for these pieces of work are usually combined with marks obtained for coursework completed in the second year. With joint-honours degrees the marks obtained for psychology are combined with those obtained for the other subject. Here we comment on some of the difficulties inherent in these procedures and focus, in particular, on how student excellence/exceptionality may be inadvertently suppressed.*

**Keywords:** *assessment, grading, combining examination marks.*

## Introduction

**E**XAMINATION answers (and theses and dissertations) in psychology are typically marked using the following scale:

70–100	first
60–69	upper second
50–59	lower second
40–49	third
35–39	pass
0–34	fail

In our experience many markers have difficulty in using the full range of marks available, especially for first-class answers (and for those deemed to have failed, for that matter). Accordingly, in October, 2017, we posed on the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) and the (ALT) mailing lists the question:

*Anybody have any thoughts on why we find it difficult to give marks of 70–100 per cent compared with 7–10 out of 10?*

We received over 30 replies and this article summarises them. We have categorised the replies into six groups according to the complexity of the answers provided.

## The responses

Members of Group 1 replied as follows, suggesting that a limited marking range was

an unquestioned practice:

It's traditional.

It's what we have always done, it is hard to grade from 70–100 etc.

Most people grade in range of 20–80.

Members of Group 2 queried the issue of perfection:

100 per cent implies perfection and how can an answer be perfect?

If it is really wonderful, give it 105!

Members of Group 3 made statistical/technical comments:

Why are the marks in the top band spread over 30 per cent when most of the marks in the other bands cover only 10 per cent?

The mean score assumes a ratio scale, which means that the difference between 69 and 70 is the same as the difference between 65 and 66, but this is unlikely to be the case as markers are more protective of the A threshold than the middle of a B grade. This suggests that grades we give are on an ordinal scale and that we should be using the median rather than the mean.

We could replace the notion of percentages with that of marks: e.g. (courtesy Alison Stewart):

Exceptional first	96
High first	89
Mid first	81
Low first	74
High upper second	68
Mid upper second	65
Low upper second	62
High lower second	58
Mid lower second	55
Low lower second	52
High third	48
Mid third	45
Low third	42
Marginal fail	38
Mid fail	32
Low fail	18
Outright fail	0

At the OU our top band is 85–100. Our online marking system only allows for two digits so it is difficult to give 100...

Members of Group 4 asked: How do other institutions do it? In the US...? In Canada...? In Argentina...?

In Denmark, for example, they used a 6-point scale:

- 12 – excellent
- 10 – good – with minor weaknesses
- 7 – good – but with some weaknesses
- 4 – fair performance but some major weaknesses
- 2 – performance meeting only minimum requirements
- 0 – performance that does not meet minimum requirements

Members of Group 5 examined how we might reduce the problems outlined above:

- Clarify the meanings of the marks more clearly to enable staff to use them.
- Provide examples of a range of answers with marks attached.
- Ensure that inexperienced staff co-mark with experienced staff.

Finally, members of Group 6 commented on the fact that that disciplinary differences in

the allocation of marks made pooling the marks across disciplines difficult:

The median marks and ranges for subjects in the arts, sciences and social sciences differ (see Yorke et al. 2000). This means that these marks cannot simply be combined when many students combine studies from different disciplines (as is the current practice in many institutions).

Presumably marks from the different disciplines could be re-scaled to meet a common measure, but it is unlikely that this would meet with universal agreement?

## Conclusions

There are many reasons why academics find it difficult to work with marks that technically range from 0–100 but more often in practice from 35–75, thus restricting the range of marks awarded. The replies to our survey suggest that tradition, and different disciplinary practices, play a part in this – as does the definition of top of the range performance. There are also statistical abnormalities that arise when using the 30-mark range between 70–100. Some solutions have been proposed, of which those in Group 5 have especial practical merit, unless the conventional 0 per cent–100 per cent scale is changed.

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## Useful reference

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