

Step-Marking Guidance for Faculties 2023-24

The Step-Marking Scheme

The step-marking scheme is part of the new Marking Framework developed by an Academic Standards Sub-Committee (ASSC) working group and approved by College Education Committee/Academic Board. It was successfully piloted in several faculties on several programmes in the past two years. Step-marking can be used for many types of assessment and may be applied to a single assessment or the whole programme, where appropriate. It may necessitate a new set of marking criteria (see below), but it does not require changes to mark input as the agreed band will be reported as a numerical mark to SITS.

Introducing a step-marking scheme will need marking training at departmental level. Students will have to be introduced to the new scheme as well, and the application of the steps and the corresponding marking criteria would also need to be trained. This should be done within the module so staff would be able to embed some criteria training exercises for students. Examples on how to do this can be sourced via King's Academy.

Step-marking is recommended for work based on a wholistic application of the marking criteria where assessment uses criteria or rubrics to make judgements that result in a single overall mark for the piece, for example essay-based assessments, presentations, projects, oral exams, etc. There is no requirement to use step-marking when marks are assigned automatically (e.g., by computer software), or via a structured mark scheme with clear specification of how individual marks are awarded (e.g., SAQs, technical work) for multiple components and are aggregated mathematically.

Advantages:

- As it can be difficult to mark to one percent accuracy in qualitative methods of assessment, a move to a banded grading can improve the alignment between assessment rubrics and assessment grades, resulting in a more consistent marking approach and clearer feedback for students. Student feedback suggests that students question the difference between narrow percentage marks for assessment containing an element of subjective marking, and they frequently comment on their perception of inconsistencies between markers. The second marking process, too, should benefit from a less granular scale.
- Step-marking avoids borderline marks (e.g. 49; 59; 69) as marks are clearly at the top end of one band (e.g. 68) or at the lower end of another (e.g. 72).
- The step-marking scheme does not necessitate regulatory changes nor changes to the module approval process via OPAMA but will need a careful introduction combined with training for markers. King's Academy offers workshops and guidance on marking training that can be tailored to program or module teams on a bespoke basis.
- The new set of College marking criteria already uses steps. Local marking criteria may need to be aligned to the new scheme.

Implementation

- The Assessment Sub-Board decides which assessments will be marked on the stepped marking scheme. If a module mark is made up of several assessment components, a combination of both schemes (reduced steps and 100% numerical) is possible.
- If an assessment is marked using the stepped scheme, the corresponding numerical mark will be used in calculating the final percentage mark for the module.

- The final module mark will be made up of all assessment components according to their weighting. The module mark will be the mathematical average and does not need to be one of the fixed percentage points on the step-marking scale.
- Modules which are subject to Professional Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRB) requirements should be marked in line with those requirements.

How to mark an assignment with a stepped marking scheme

- The student's work is marked against published assessment criteria by using the grade descriptors. The descriptors describe key features and general characteristics of assessed work associated with each grade.
- Markers decide first on the grade (class), for example 2.1.
- By considering the grade descriptors the assessment is then assigned to a band inside the grade, i.e. lower, middle, or higher range.
- The step maps onto a numerical mark, for example a 'high 2.1' = 68%. This mark is recorded on the system.
- If the module is assessed by one component, the fixed percentage point becomes the overall course unit mark. If the module is assessed by more than one component, the fixed percentage points for each component is averaged to produce the overall module mark.

Monitoring Step-Marking

ASSC has agreed to monitor the step-marking scheme during the academic year 2023-24 and will collect data on its use as well as on potential grade inflation for modules or programmes using stepped marks. ASSC would also like to hear back from faculties not being part of the pilot in 2022-23 how the new scheme was perceived by academic colleagues, administrative staff, and students. For this, Faculty Assessment Board Chairs together with VDEs are asked to collect the following data on which departments and/or programmes are using step-marking and for which types of assessment step-marking is used. **A detailed questionnaire will be distributed shortly.**

Is there a danger of mark inflation?

The question of a potential danger of grade inflation triggered by a step-marking scheme has been looked at several times during the pilots. So far, the data is not conclusive and may well also depend on marking habits. Once step-marking is used on a wider scale, a more thorough comparison with previous cohort marks can take place. Departments using step-marking are asked to look at the available data and report back to ASSC after Assessment Period 2 in 2024. See below for a brief suggestion of mark distribution with a step-marking scheme vs a 0-100% scheme.

King's 100 comments on step-marking

King's 100 is a diverse group of just over 100 students, reflective of the King's community, who co-create with the university on pieces of work which directly impact the student experience. In Autumn 2020, a panel session took place in which the new step-marking scheme was discussed. In addition to this, the students provided feedback and comments on the step-marking scheme via email and Padlet to the Student Success team.

Summary of key points regarding step-marking

- The panel wanted the step-marking scheme to be implemented for both UG and PGT and to see the final scheme ahead of implementation. – *This is implemented already.*

- Step-marking would be more transparent and make marking easier in essay-based type subjects where it was difficult to differentiate between marks.
- It would avoid borderline marks and where 100% was less achievable. For these subjects, students wanted the full range of marks to be used more.
- The scheme needs to be clear so that there is no negative understanding of low/ medium/ high steps and a 1st is not devalued.
- The College should implement more specific marking criteria together with the step-marking scheme, as well as guidance and training on how to use the scheme to provide clarity to students. – *A new set of College marking criteria has been published, taking step-marking into account.*
- Transcripts should show a broader marking scheme for employers.

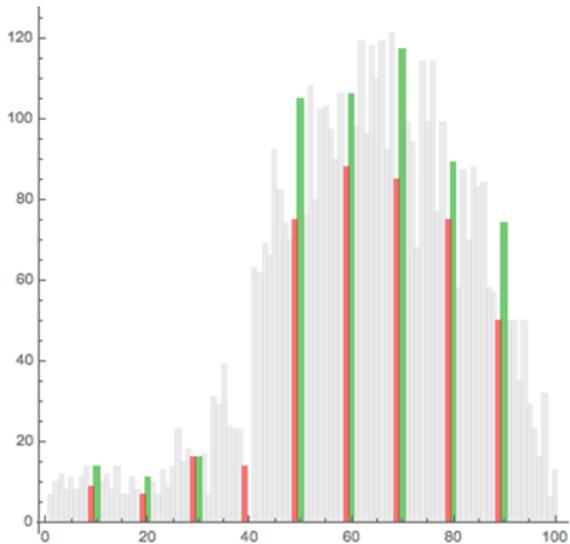
Step-Marking FAQ

You may use this table to record your own FAQ and/or send them directly to the Chair of ASSC (anette.schroeder-rossell@kcl.ac.uk) and King’s Academy (jayne.pearson@kcl.ac.uk) who will collect comments and answer questions.

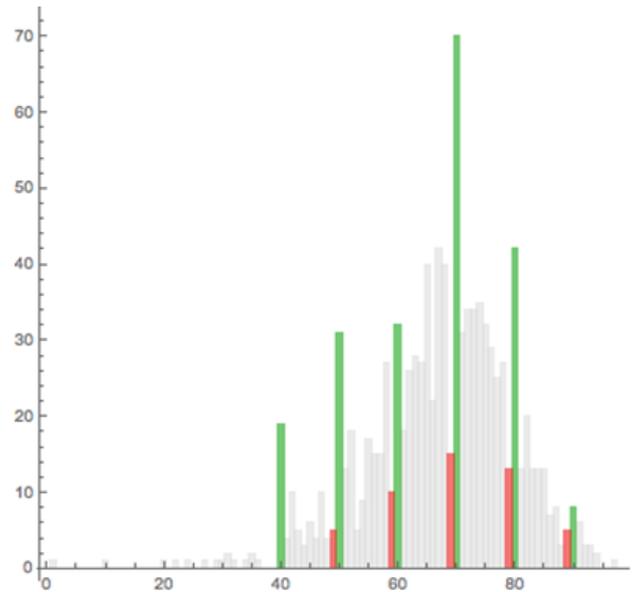
Should we only record the stepped marking on Turnitin (for the student to view)? This would be for moderated/sampled work at level 4, 5 or 6 but not for dissertations where students would see both markers’ scores and then the final agreed mark.	The agreed (stepped) mark should be recorded on SITS, but both marks from the first and second marker should be noted somewhere so that the external examiner is able to follow the moderation process.
How do we apply a word count penalty when using stepped marks?	Word count penalties can be applied as before, i.e. if there is 2% penalty reduction, the step mark would be reduced by 2%. As noted, marks can be recorded outside of the steps.

Appendix 1: How grades may change

Example 1: The first example compares module mark distribution based on several years’ data for 1st Year Mathematics modules versus Project modules across NMS. Most exams (“standard modules”) have a very detailed mark scheme and students expect to be given a numerical mark in the 0-100 range. Project modules on the other hand are marked as essays on various criteria.



Mark distribution for "standard" mark-scheme modules



Mark distribution for "project" type modules.

Marks ending 0 are shown as green, those ending 9 are shown as red (40 has to be excluded for standard modules as the data includes capped resits). As can be seen, there is a significant difference between the distribution of marks for "standard" modules and "project" modules.

For "standard" modules there is a slight preference to give marks just above the borderline (40,50,60,70) and this even extends to 80 and 90, but it is slight (20% more likely), and the marks are in line with other numbers.

For "project" modules there is a marked preference for marks ending in 0, with 20% of marks being in the set (40,50,60,70,80,90), whereas only 4.5% are in the set (39,49,59,69,79,89).

If these marks were placed onto a stepped marking scheme, it would be the principal cause of grade inflation: all marks ending in 0 would be raised by 2%; all marks ending in 9 would be lowered by 1%, giving almost all the approximately 0.5% average rise in the marks seen in modelling.

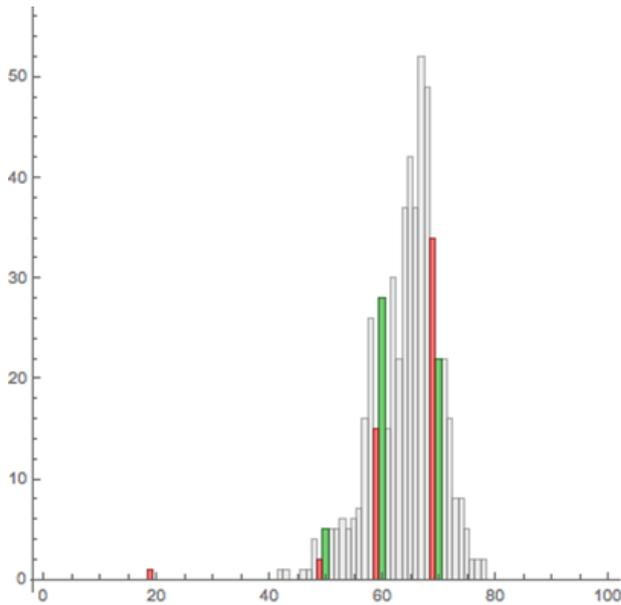
Effects on average marks

Assuming that the effect of step-marking would be to give a student the mark nearest to that they were originally given, for "standard" modules this would raise the average mark from 62.6% to 62.7%, but for "project" modules, it would raise the average mark from 66.9% to 67.4%.

Effect on degree classifications

Without access to historic data it is hard to model what would happen to degree classifications. If the 0.5% increase in the c-score occurs across modules in a discipline, then – as a guess - around 5% of students who would have been given 2:1 degrees would instead get 1st class degrees and around 5% of students who would have been given 2:2 degrees would instead get 2:1 class degrees.

Example 2: The data shows a random range of A&H module marks from one year (4ABLLIB2 Writing Liberal Arts, 4AAH1001 The Making of Britain 400-1400, 5AANA005 Ethics II: History of Ethical Philosophy, 6AAVC100 Digital Foundations III)



Selection of A&H modules

Compared to Example 1, the distribution is even narrower (standard deviation of 6%), but there seems little or no bias towards giving 60 vs 59, or 70 vs 69. Comparing the means of the historic mark distribution and the means if marks were instead assigned to the nearest step point, the following picture emerges:

	Mean (historic)	Mean (step)	Standard deviation
NMS (standard)	62.6	62.8	19.7
NMS (project)	66.9	67.4	12.6
A&H	64.2	64.5	6.2

Each 0.1% increase in the mean will mean approximately 1% of students who would have obtained a 2:i would be given a 1st instead (before the 2% rule is taken into account). A&H marks have a narrower spread, which means that within step positions marks would probably go up by around 0.3% on average, which would mean that around 3% of students who would now get a 2:i would instead get a 1st, if marking habits did not change.

Appendix 2: Step-marking schemes

PRE-UG STEP-MARKING SCHEME		
Credit Level 3		Mark Allocated
A	A+	100
		95
		92
		88
	A	85
		82
		78
	75	

		72
B	B+	68
		65
	B	62
C	C+	58
		55
	C	52
D	D	48
		45
		42
FAIL	F+	35
	F	28
		21
		14
		7
	FF	0

UG STEP-MARKING SCHEME		
Credit Level 4,5,6		Mark Allocated
First	Excellent First	100
		95
		92
	High First	88
		85
		82
	First	78
		75
		72
Second	High 2.1	68
	Mid-range 2.1	65
	Low range 2.1	62
	High 2.2	58
	Mid-range 2.2	55
	Low range 2.2	52
Third	High Third	48
	Mid-range Third	45
	Low range Third	42
Fail	Marginal Fail	35
	Mid Fail	28
	Low Fail	21

PG STEP-MARKING SCHEME	
Credit Level 7	Mark Allocated
Distinction	100
	95
	92
	88
	85
	82
	78
	75
	72
Merit	68
	65
	62
Pass	58
	55
	52
Fail	48
	45
	42
	35
	28
	21

	Fail	14
	Fail	7
	Non-submission or of no discernible merit.	0

	14
	7
	0