Assessment and Moderation of Student Work
**What is the purpose of this guide?**

This guide is intended to inform institutions about the ways in which the Assessment and Moderation of Student Work could be developed in the Dubai context. The guide does not expand the scope of the UQAIB requirements and addresses an issue already contained in the *UQAIB Quality Assurance Manual*. It is not prescriptive and provides exemplar options to suit different circumstances that can be adapted by each institution to meet their individual requirements.

**What is moderation?**

**The UQAIB Quality Assurance Manual defines moderation as:**

a quality assurance process by which a suitably qualified person (or group) not involved in setting or marking an assessment task confirms that the assessment is accurately, consistently and fairly conducted.

Moderation of student work is thus the process of ensuring the grading of students’ assessed work is accurate, consistent and equitable and by implication comparable between the home higher education provider (HEP Home) and the Dubai Branch.

Moderation has also been described as the process of teachers sharing their expectations and understanding of standards with each other in order to improve the consistency of their decision about student learning.

This Guide focuses on the procedures for moderating assessed work so that the assessment process and grading standards are the same in both the HEP Home and the Dubai Branch.

Normally, all forms of assessed work that contribute to the final award would be graded (marked) to the same academic standard irrespective of where the programme is delivered and thus all such grades would be moderated.

The process of moderation described in this Guide is internal moderation and is distinct from the process of external moderation, described in External Evaluation of Standards of Student Achievement, which, in the Dubai context, compares the grading of work on similar programmes at other institutions of higher education within the same jurisdiction (country, state, territory) as the Home HEP.

Note: Moderation can also be applied to learning outcomes, syllabus coverage, level of challenge and alignment of objectives and assessment. This involves looking at the specified learning objectives to see if they reflect expected outcomes; published syllabi to see whether they cover the subject area appropriately; and the assessment instruments to see that they align with and appropriately assess the learning outcomes. These are also valuable forms of
moderation. However, this Guide focuses on the moderation of assessed student work, albeit that many of the processes can also be undertaken in conjunction with moderation of learning outcomes, syllabi and assessment instruments. (Learning Outcomes are the subject of a separate Guide.)

How to moderate student grades (HEP Home and Branch)?

1. Centrally set and graded examinations
Where assessment is purely by examination and based entirely on centrally set and marked examinations then no issues of moderation occur. In such cases internal moderation is completely under the control of the home HEP. However, research into learning and teaching suggests that assessment purely by examination is not the most effective way of stimulating student learning.

2. Double marking (grading) of all student work (that contributes to the final grade)
Where student achievement is based on both examination and coursework (including projects, dissertations, practical demonstrations or exhibitions) graded at the Dubai Branch then some form of moderation between Home HEP and Dubai Branch is expected.

The most common form of internal moderation is to have more than one assessor (member of academic teaching staff) independently grade student work. Usually this takes the form of ‘double-marking’, with two members marking (grading) the work separately. Where the two markers disagree on the grade they would normally discuss the student work and come to a final assessment (not simply average the two grades; although this may be the most likely outcome where the two grades are very similar).

Where the differences are irreconcilable, a third marker would normally be asked to grade the work and then act as an arbitrator in the final grading discussion.

Some double-marking scenarios

A. Double marking takes place at the Dubai Branch only, by academic staff based solely at the Branch.
This ensures consistency at the Dubai Branch but would not, of itself, provide comparability between the Branch and the HEP Home. In such circumstances this comparability might be achieved by one of the following.

• Sending a sample of student work across the grade spectrum from the Dubai Branch to the HEP Home to be graded and subsequently comparing the grades and then discussing how the grades would be adjusted for all students at the Branch (not just the sample).
This is a two-stage process and students would only have indicative marks at the initial feedback stage.

- Having any disputed grades ‘third marked’ by someone from the Home HEP; while not as comprehensive as sampling across the board it would provide indicative comparability.
- Having all failed work and all excellent (first-class) work graded at the Home HEP, will give clear indications of the top and bottom of the grading scales.

B. Double marking is undertaken by one member of staff in Dubai and the other at the Home HEP

This ensures consistency between the Dubai Branch and the HEP Home. However, there may be logistic issues that increase the time lag between submission of work by the student and feedback on performance. There may also be issues of Branch autonomy if academics at the Branch view this form of moderation as a check on them by the Home HEP.

C. All academic staff on a programme are based at the Home HEP and visit Dubai

Where staff are ‘fly in’ then double marking (where one or both teach in Dubai) would be based on the extant standards at the HEP Home and there would be no need to sample papers for consistency and comparability.

The logistics of comparing work between the Home HEP and Dubai Branch is facilitated by electronic communication of material especially where student work is submitted in electronic format. Where non-multiple-choice examination papers involve hand-written answers, these can easily be scanned and dispatched electronically.

3. Double marking (grading) of a sample of student work (that contributes to the final grade)

In some instances, where resources are limited, internal moderation is done on a sampling basis. This usually works as follows. Assessed work from a sample of students is passed to another assessor who grades the work and compares it to the grades given by the original marker. To ensure comparability across campuses the sample from the Dubai Branch would normally be sent to the Home HEP.

Where possible the second marker would be unaware of the grade of the first marker (so-called blind double marking) but that is only possible, for example, if the grade and comments or rationale for the grade from the original marker are on a separate grade/mark sheet rather than on the script itself.

After comparing the sample grades of the second marker with those of the first, the following actions could take place.
• If the grades from first and second assessors do not vary much in either direction, then the decision may be to do nothing and accept the first assessor’s grades throughout.

• If there is a consistent bias in one direction then the two assessors would normally discuss this to see if one is grading ‘harder’ than the other. If there is agreement that this is the case, then, for example, the mean differential in marks would be applied to all the corresponding assessed work (not just the sample). In other words, all the work on that assignment at the Branch would be adjusted up or down by the appropriate amount.

• If the variation in grades is substantive but with no consistent bias then it may be necessary to discuss each piece of work separately and have all the other corresponding work that was not in the sample double-marked.

4. Second marking based on student appeals

In some cases, a pragmatic process involves a single marker (grader) providing feedback to students. If the student is dissatisfied with the grade and the rationale for the awarded grade then the student may ask to have it ‘second marked’ by another marker. This process aims to reduce the resource expended on grading. However, such a process raises equitability concerns and if the appeals procedure is formalised can lead to more work and longer time lags.

• Second marking based on student appeals tends not to be equitable because a requested second mark is almost invariably not worse than the first as it is usually difficult to award a student a lower grade than has already been achieved. Thus there is a ratcheting-up effect. This means that students who know the system and always request a second mark are likely to be advantaged over students who accept the first appraisal.

• Furthermore, depending on how the process is formalised, a second marking request can lead to more paperwork and use of resources. If the second marking request can be activated by a simple verbal request from the student then it is likely to lead to very many such requests (especially if the ratcheting-up effect is assumed to be in operation). If the request has to be formalised via a written request with grounds for making the request, then this may spiral into a series of formal and time-consuming communications.

Overall

UQAb procedures expect to see a well-defined internal moderation process, as stated in the Manual. Regardless of the method of moderation used, it is important to ensure the following principles with respect to internal moderation.

• It is necessary to adopt an appropriate and fair strategy for all assessed work that contributes to the final award.

• The moderation process needs to ensure comparability between the HEP Home and the Dubai Branch.
• Where sampling procedures are used, any adjustment for an assignment is for the whole cohort not just the sampled items.

The process for providing moderated marks varies:

• Some institutions moderate coursework on a continuous basis through a ‘double marking’ process and student grades are confirmed once the two assessors have agreed the grade.
• Other institutions finalise student grades on assessed work only after an end-of-semester moderation process has been completed; prior to that, students have a preliminary indicative grade for their work, which may subsequently change.

Example resources
The Sheffield Hallam University, Secretary and Registrar's Directorate, Registry Services—Assessment, Awards and Regulations document on Moderation Policy and Operating Guidelines is easy to read, and concise. The document is available online and Section 3 specifies the alternatives for moderation of student work: