

## **Professional Qualifications, Case Study No. 2: Report of the group discussions**

Some delegates felt that this case study was very technical. Understanding of statistics such as means and standard deviations and their significance was not universal. Nevertheless there was agreement that Case Study 2 raised issues common to many exam-based professional qualifications.

There was a common view that the professional awarding body's rules for awards, and its method of calculating candidates' final grades, are over-complicated. There was also a view that the current systems are difficult to justify and apply, and could become contradictory – even discriminatory - when applied to individuals. The consensus was that rubrics, plus methods of aggregating and reporting marks, should be simple and clear.

It was agreed that the key issue in this case study is the value of combining the component grades into an overall grade. The observation that too few distinctions are being awarded is valid. The figures show that in the diet investigated only 2.67% of the candidates gained a distinction, while 57.8% were awarded the middle grade of pass. Similarly, only 3.6% got the lowest grade of pass. There was a consensus that the overall grade is of limited value and selection procedures should be based on the component grades. A number of delegates recommended that a survey be organised to identify who uses the final grade and what they use it for?

Turning to the technical data provided, the following four components were considered to form the core of this examination:

- **Specialist topics 1;**
- **Specialist topics 2;**
- **Professional issues and ethics;**
- **Synoptic paper.**

All four correlate well with each other but the third and fourth are more difficult than the first two.

There were concerns that the **Case Study** component only correlated weakly with the above four and only to the level of a general ability factor. Although there may be many examination-based professional correlations that have such low inter-component correlations and differences in component difficulty, the direct aggregation of case study grades with the four components above should be questioned. Further, separate statistics should be provided for each case study to ensure equity.

The concern with the **Professional Practice Component** was that – the Case Study Component alone - its correlations with the other components are so low that it is statistically independent, which indicates that it is measuring a different dimension of professional performance.

A number of concerns were expressed about the quality of the component examinations. The results were perceived as being insufficiently discriminating. Several reasons were suggested:

- The differential difficulty of the components;
- The very low correlations between the Professional Practice component and four of the others are producing a significant bunching of the candidates' results

towards the middle of the distribution, which has lowered the discrimination of the examination;

- Technical concerns were expressed about the way that the professional body has graded each component, averaged the grades and rounded the result to produce the final award. Each of these processes was considered to have lost some of the discrimination of the component concerned. The discrimination of the overall results were considered to be weakened and of limited value.

It was agreed that options for awarding future qualifications might include:

1. Reporting each component separately and producing a profile of performance;
2. Awarding the Professional Practice component separately from the other five;
3. Aggregating the marks of selected components, rather than their grades, to produce an overall award;
4. Scaling all component marks to the same statistical parameters and proceed as in 3 above.

The review of the case study ended, for at least one group, in a general discussion about the difficulty of recruiting and retaining sufficient examiners. Examiners who are able to design syllabuses and schemes of assessment are much sought after. Further, it is only recently that the degree of professionalism that most examiners bring to their work has been recognised outside the awarding bodies. The discussion revealed considerable variations in the ways responsibilities for examination processes are divided between examiners and professional awarding body staff.

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