

Specialisation or Total Excellence: A Mini Study of the UK and Continental Europe Marking Scales

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If you are a student or a lecturer coming from Continental Europe to the UK it is difficult not to notice that the marking scales are different. Even the lecturers, who never had any contact with continental Europe marking system but teach Erasmus students are bombarded with questions as to why such a good work was marked at only 75%. This is a rational behaviour as in Europe the distinction starts from 90% and the pass mark is equal to 60%. The model presented below attempts to analyse how the systems deal with partial internalisation of knowledge not sufficient for a pass in some areas of assessment while in others the pass is achieved.

Let us assume an undergraduate module with two exclusive learning outcomes, LO1 and LO2, representing two areas of knowledge, which are to be internalised. The assessment of the module uses one component with two elements representing the two learning outcomes. As an example an exam with two questions each worth 50% of the final mark.

In both systems a full assimilation of knowledge is represented by 100% while no assimilation by 0%. However, in the European system the pass mark is set at 60% while in the UK one, it is only 40%. At this stage we do not define the amount of knowledge, which must be obtained to pass in both systems. By the definition of components and elements the mark (M) being a function of amount of knowledge assimilated (LO1) or (LO2) to pass the assessment must be over the pass-mark. However, the individual marks $M(LO1)$ and $M(LO2)$ for elements does not.

Let us identify then a situation, in which the whole assessment is passed but the mark of one learning outcome is a fail. We can represent such situation by a set of conditions:

- A. a maximum mark is 100 (I)
- B. the mark for an element must be higher than pass mark (II)

- C. one of the marks of the learning outcomes is below pass mark (III)

Therefore equations representing the UK would be:

- A. $M(LO1) \leq 100$ (1a) and $M(LO2) \leq 100$ (2a) and
- B. $\frac{M(LO1)+M(LO2)}{2} \geq 40$ (3a) and either
- C. $M(LO1) < 40$ (4a) or $M(LO2) < 40$ (5a).

While for Continental Europe:

- A. $M(LO1) \leq 100$ (1b) and $M(LO2) \leq 100$ (2b) and
- B. $\frac{M(LO1)+M(LO2)}{2} \geq 60$ (3b) and either
- C. $M(LO1) < 60$ (4b) or $M(LO2) < 60$ (5b).

The graphical representation is depicted on the Figure 1.

On the graphs a sum of areas A and B represents the situation defined above. We can easily see that while in the UK this sum constitutes 32% of all possible results, in Continental Europe it is only 16%! This clearly suggests that a possibility of compensation lack of knowledge in one learning outcome by other learning outcome is higher in the UK than in Continental Europe and as a result the UK system promotes specialisation. In an extreme case in the UK system a merit is possible even if one of elements is not passed.²

The above mentioned conclusion is valid only if the amount of knowledge required to pass both learning outcomes (LO2) and (LO1) is the same in both systems no matter what the exact pass mark is. This requires further primary research, which according to Prof. Tomasz Mickiewicz of Aston Business School is of critical importance for us to understand how the systems differ, including assessment methods since UK academia heavily relies on students from Europe. ●

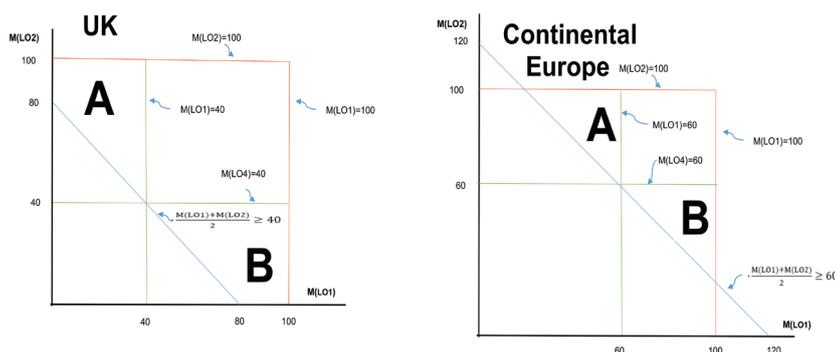


Figure 1

UK and Continental Europe Marking Scales distribution

- 1 The areas A and B in the European case are equal to $2 \cdot (40 \cdot 40) / 2 = 1600$ while the area of the trapezoids A and B in the UK case is equal to $2 \cdot 40 \cdot (60 + 20) / 2 = 3200$. By relating these to total area of 100 by 100 we get the percentages above.
- 2 If one element is marked 100 and the other 30 then the final is 65.