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Pre-marking standardisation as an approach to moderation: exploring academics' perceptions and experiences of policy change

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the findings of a small-scale study exploring academics' experience and perceptions of the implementation and enactment of an institutional assessment policy change. The policy change that the study focuses on is the introduction of pre-marking standardisation as an approach to moderation for when there are multiple markers, adopting the theoretical framework of the implementation staircase. Semi-structured interviews were used as a data collection method to explore academics' perception of the policy change implementation process and policy enactment. Thirteen academics participated in the study, ten of whom were from the same department. Findings from the study demonstrated that when pre-marking standardisation is introduced through institutional assessment policy, it is interpreted and enacted in different ways despite support for its notion. The paper argues that HEIs must consider more holistic and inclusive policy implementation to ensure more consistent enactment. Furthermore, the paper argues that pre-marking standardisation can be a beneficial practice however anxieties exist around quality assurance post-marking that may lead to academics applying their own practices of post-marking moderation.

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Introduction

Higher education policy can be fraught with ambiguity; HEIs are continuously navigating a process of reacting to external regulation and political and socioeconomic drivers that require internal strategy, policy implementation and policy enactment. The shifting landscape of higher education means that institutional policy is under continuous review. Institutional policies and regulations will often overlap and academics on the ground must enter a process of sensemaking through decoding policy discourse which will often be reconstructed based on academic cultures (Hay, 2025). Teaching and learning practices are heavily influenced by socio-cultural factors within disciplines therefore policy enactment may differ across an institution creating a discourse and practice dissociation (Lisewski, 2021). Moreover, creating assessment policy that is relevant and applicable for a diverse group of subject disciplines and assessment methods poses a huge challenge (Williams et al. 2022) and could potentially lead to further variation in assessment practices. Policy enactment variation could pose risks for HEIs including sanctions from student appeals and complaints, poor student evaluation and sanctions from external regulators (Rust et al., 2024).

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have a responsibility to ensure that the marking and moderation of student assessments is carried out in a way that is fair, against a set of agreed criteria and transparent to external examiners and students (Quality Assurance Agency, 2024). External regulation by the Office for Students (OfS) (OfS, 2022) and benchmarks for quality assurance provided by the QAA (QAA, 2024) have led to institutions developing assessment and feedback policy which sets out the ways in which internal moderation ought to be carried out (Simper et al. 2021). Assessment policy and academic regulations in higher education can be ambiguous and lack application consistency leading to variation in practices

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(Price et al., 2024). Internal moderation processes can vary significantly from institution to institution and evidence suggests it can also vary within a single institution, between departments and even between teams (Bloxham, den-Outer, et al., 2016; Poole, 2022; Prichard et al., 2025; Sadler, 2012). To further compound these challenges, academic cultures that may exist across an organisation will often influence enactment of policy which may not reflect the intentions of policymakers (Williams et al. 202022).

This study aimed to explore how academics perceived, experienced and responded to a change to an institutional assessment and feedback policy where a new approach to moderation, 'pre-marking standardisation' had been introduced and the paper focuses on how policy implementation and enactment. The HEI in this study had updated their institutional assessment and feedback policy in the summer of 2024, introducing the pre-marking standardisation approach to moderation for when there is more than one marker. The pre-marking standardisation approach requires the assessor team to meet, collectively mark a minimum of three assessments and agree the marks and academic standards as a group. Once agreed, the assessors proceed to mark the assessments, removing the need for a post-marking moderation activity. The 'implementation staircase'; a metaphorical illustrative model of the trajectories of policy communication up and down a ladder of higher education systems and levels has been used as a theoretical framework to inform and contextualise the study's design.

Research questions

The study was designed to answer the following research questions:

1. How do academics perceive and experience institutional assessment policy change?
2. How do academics implement and enact pre-marking standardisation as an approach to assessment moderation?

Moderation practices in higher education

Moderation of assessment is an important quality assurance process in higher education to ensure work has been fairly and accurately graded based on an agreed set of standards that allows students to meet the assigned learning outcomes (Beutel et al., 2017, p. 20). However, there is variation in how moderation is implemented in higher education (Poole, 2022). Grading objectivity of some assessment types can be almost impossible to achieve (Bloxham, den-Outer, et al., 2015) and this can be all the more problematic when there are multiple markers grading large cohorts of students (Broadbent, 2018; Vergés Bausili, 2017). Moderation has often been referred to as a 'post-marking' activity however more recently, moderation is considered to be more of an ongoing process throughout the marking episode (Beutel et al., 2017; Bloxham, Hughes, et al., 2015; Prichard et al., 2025; Sadler, 2012). In studies by Adie et al. (2013), moderation was understood to be a 'shared understanding of assessment requirements', ensuring learning outcomes are assessed against a set criteria, that assessment processes are fair, and judgements are consistent and reliable (Adie et al., 2013). These definitions of moderation are suggestive of a social, collective process which would therefore lend itself to an opportunity for professional development (Crimmins et al., 2015).

Within the literature, social moderation, also referred to as consensus moderation, conference moderation or calibration moderation, is an approach that brings academics together to discuss and agree assessment standards (Beutel et al., 2017; Bird & Yucel, 2013; Crimmins et al., 2015; Mason et al., 2023; Reimann et al., 2024; Vergés Bausili, 2017). In most instances in assessment research, social moderation involves a pre and post marking discussion. Where there are examples of pre-marking moderation without a post marking moderation activity, there is a dearth of evidence on whether this impacts variability and trustworthiness of assessment judgements. However, even when there are rigorous multi-step processes in social moderation including pre, midway and post marking moderation discussions, evidence of grading judgment variation exists (Hunter & Docherty, 2011) which could suggest that a pre-marking moderation activity is sufficient (Sadler 2012).

Research into social moderation more generally has found that markers benefit from the active learning that takes place when assessment is discussed in a collegial way (O'Connell et al., 2016; Watty et al., 2013), with the process developing the tacit knowledge of the academics involved. Some studies have

shown that a pre-marking consensus moderation improves grading consistency (Bird & Yucel, 2013; Grainger et al., 2015) but does not necessarily improve marker variation (Bird & Yucel, 2013; Czaplinski et al., 2014). Social moderation is not without its challenges; this is an approach that requires academics to find a mutually agreeable time to meet which can be a challenge for larger marking teams (Mason & Roberts, 2023). Novice markers or those who may lack confidence could be less vocal in social moderation discussions (Mason et al., 2023; Reimann et al., 2024) and feel reluctant to challenge judgements in a large group (Grainger et al., 2015). Navigating group dynamics can be a challenge and requires careful management (Reimann et al., 2024). Academics' workload, time constraints of marking and balancing the increasing financial pressures of ensuring appropriate staff to student ratios are all challenges HEIs must navigate when ensuring and evidencing quality assurance measures around assessments (Bloxham, 2009; Bloxham et al., 2016; Mason & Roberts, 2023; O'Donovan et al., 2024; Sadler, 2013). Whilst pre-marking standardisation as a social moderation activity could be seen as an addition to workload activity upfront, it could potentially allow for more time to provide effective feedback. What is clear from the literature on social moderation is that there is a lack of consensus on how this moderation approach should be facilitated and, suggests pre-marking standardisation is only one stage of the moderation process. Furthermore, where pre-marking standardisation is introduced as an approach to moderation, academics require training and support for this method to be successful (O'Connell et al., 2016; Mason et al., 2023).

Theoretical frameworks for policy implementation

- The implementation staircase is a metaphorical, theoretical framework that illustrates higher education hierarchies and suggests that at all levels, people are acting as both message receivers and message agents (Reynolds & Saunders, 1987; Saunders, 2006; Saunders & Sin, 2014). It acknowledges that policy communication moves up and down through senior and middle managers who play a significant part in mediation between the policy creators at the top and academics at the micro-level (Saunders & Sin, 2014). In Saunders and Sin (2014) study exploring middle managers' experience of policy implementation, managers felt that they played an integral role in policy translation as sense makers for academic colleagues and were tasked with steering opinion and feedback from academics on the ground towards the top of the HEI hierarchy. Despite this, participants in their study spoke of frustration and barriers in the bottom-up feedback communication chain, suggesting that feedback was not considered or acted upon by those at the top of the hierarchy. Whilst there are studies looking at middle managers in the implementation staircase and studies looking at policy enactment more generally, a research gap has been identified in looking at the micro-level experience of the implementation staircase. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of how the implementation staircase framework has been applied to the organisational structure of the institution within this study. Although the study aimed to explore the perceptions and experiences of the micro level of the staircase, the interview questions were framed to explore perceptions of this organisational structure in terms of policy trajectory.

Academic cultures in higher education

Assessment within a poststructuralist view involves co-created practices within disciplines and 'socially constructed standards which are relevant and contested' (Orr, 2007; Price et al., 2024). Despite the efforts of HEIs to improve marking variability and validity through the use of marking criteria and grade descriptors, such efforts can be a challenge when academic cultures within subject disciplines exist (Orr, 2007; Simper et al., 2021). It has been suggested that assessors do not always adopt institutional standards (Simper et al., 2021; Smith & Coombe, 2006) and academics may not trust the robustness of their organisational standards and assessment policy (Price, 2005; Simper et al., 2021). Despite experienced academics often considering themselves to be marking experts, research does not always reflect this, and studies have suggested there to be no difference in the marking of novice academics and experienced academics (Price, 2005). Furthermore, academics' tacit knowledge of assessment practice may not

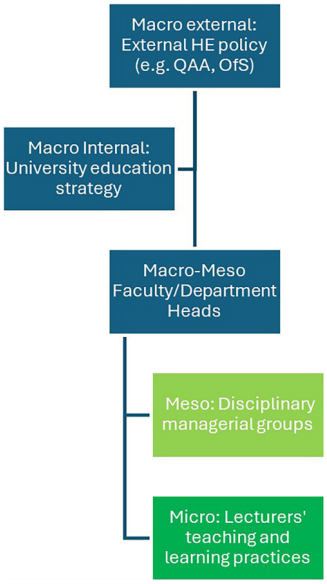

Figure 1. Implementation staircase adapted from Saunders and Sin (2014) representing the institutional organisational levels at University X.

be from assessment scholarship, but from prior experience of certain assessment practices (Grainger et al., 2016; Sadler, 2011).

Social groups and associated characteristics and practices that may be found within subject disciplines or departmental teams can result in either contestation or agreement that will inevitably play a role in policy implementation (Lisewski, 2021; Trowler, 2009, p. 186). With this in mind, HEIs must acknowledge the existence of such academic cultures when considering policy change (Trowler, 2020, p. 154).

Methodology

This small-scale qualitative study was conducted within a large city-based university in the United Kingdom. The aims of the study were to explore academics' perceptions and experience of the implementation of a change to their institution's assessment and feedback policy which introduced pre-marking standardisation as an approach to moderation when there are multiple markers. The participants in the study reflected the micro-level of the implementation staircase and therefore the positioning of this study is not only interested in the experiences and perceptions of the individual participants but also an exploration of academic cultures within the teaching and learning practices of higher education around assessment marking and moderation.

The study was designed to answer the following research questions:

1. What similarities or differences exist in academics' experience and perceptions of the change to an institutional assessment and feedback policy to include pre-marking standardisation moderation?
2. How have these perceptions influenced implementation of the policy change and teaching and learning practices around assessment moderation?

To explore experiences, perceptions and academic cultures, semi-structured interviews were adopted as a data collection method. Participant interviews were conducted amidst the institution's assessment weeks when participants would be at their peak of assessment activity and engaging with assessment policy. Furthermore, the principal researcher conducting the interviews was also embedded within the setting of the participants, allowing for a deeper understanding of the culture of the participants in the study (De Fina, 2019; Rinaldo & Guhin, 2022; Spradley, 1979, p. 46).

Questions were created to broadly reflect the research questions and to provide a loose structure to the interview and were further tweaked following two pilot interviews to ensure that interview

conversations were centred around the research questions. The data from the pilot interviews was included in the analysis as there were significant statements made by the two participants that were reflected by others later on.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval was sought from the researcher's institution of doctoral study, Lancaster University's Research Ethics Committee, and permission was then sought from the researcher's employing institution where the study took place. With any qualitative research, the researcher must consider ethical principles to minimise risks of harm to participants, ensuring participants give their informed consent and that participants' anonymity be protected (Wiles, 2013; British Educational Research Association [BERA], 2024). Although it was not anticipated that the study would provoke any issues that may cause participants harm, it is important that all researchers are mindful of the risk of harm (Cohen et al., 2018; Daniel & Harland, 2018). Informed consent was obtained from all participants and participants were advised that they could take a break at any time during the interview and could withdraw from the study at any point up until data analysis.

Sample

Academics working at the researcher's employing institution were invited via email to participate in the study. Sampling was purposive in nature to ensure that participants were best placed to provide their experiences and perceptions of assessment policy implementation and enactment. Thirteen participants were recruited to the study. Ten of the thirteen participants were from the same department and will be the focus of the study. Sixty-four academics from the School of Nursing were eligible to participate, with a response rate 15%. The other three participants were each from a different department and although response rates were low here, participants from other departments provided an insight into how different departments had enacted and implemented the policy change. A breakdown of the participants' departments and subject disciplines is demonstrated in Figure 2. The length of academics' higher education experience ranged from 1.5 years to 20 years with an average of 7.5 and a median of 5 years. Of the 10 participants from Nursing, 3 had experience of working as an academic in another HEI. All other participants, including from other departments had only worked within the one HEI. Participants were all in academic roles such as lecturers, senior lecturers and were actively involved in marking and moderation and were therefore engaging with the institutional assessment and feedback policy. As some of the participants had specific role titles that may identify them, role titles will not be specified.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were adopted for this study as it was felt that this method was most appropriate to answer the research questions. A series of pilot interviews were initiated which enabled the researcher to review and adapt the interview questions and the ordering of questions for subsequent

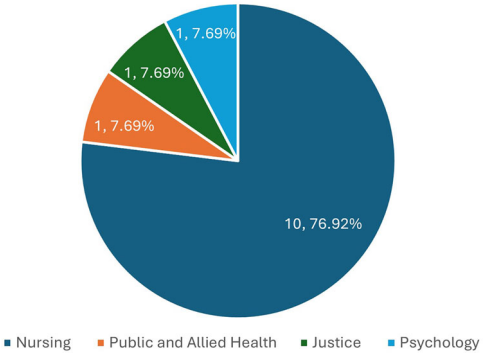

Figure 2. Participants' department.

interviews (Olson, 2016, p. 39). Saturation was considered achieved when additional data collection no longer yielded new themes or insights relevant to the research questions (Saunders et al., 2018). Interviews took between 30 and 50 minutes and were facilitated via Microsoft Teams video call to aid automatic transcription. It was felt that video calling would ensure a better rapport with the participant and the researcher would be able to pick up on non-verbal communication that could have been missed over the telephone. Virtual interviews were selected over in-person interviews as it was a particularly busy time of year falling within assessment weeks and it was thought that this approach would be more convenient for participants, especially due to the geographical spread of department buildings across a large city, and remote working during the assessment period. Interviews were recorded for ease of transcription, transcriptions were then automatically generated by Microsoft Teams, checked for accuracy and corrected where necessary. The transcripts were then anonymised and names of academics that may have been mentioned in interviews, or any other identifiable data were redacted to protect anonymity. Once the transcripts had been reviewed and reflected a verbatim account of what participants had said, the transcripts were anonymised and saved within a secure OneDrive folder at the researcher's institution of study. The transcripts were checked and reviewed by the researcher.

It was important to consider the potential power dynamic and the effect this may have on trust and willingness to be open with regards to responses to interview questions (Olson, 2016). The researcher had line management responsibility for a team of academics at the institution therefore a gatekeeper was used to disseminate information advertising the study and it was stressed that interviews would be confidential, data would be anonymised, and participation was entirely voluntary. With awareness of the potential for power imbalance, the researcher made significant efforts to ensure participants felt at ease to provide insights into their experiences however it could be argued that in any study adopting interviews, what is said might not reflect how something is (Rowlands, 2021). The researcher made significant efforts to create a safe space for discussion and was able to clarify points with participants to ensure understanding.

Data analysis

Data was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's six phases of analysis which has been summarised in the Table 1. This data analysis approach encouraged active reflection and allowed the researcher to consider potential biases, ensuring findings were reliable and robust (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). Analysis for this study was a combination of deductive and inductive reasoning due to there being certain expectations of data aligning with a theoretical framework but also adopting an openness that there may be unexpected or new insights (Braun & Clarke, 2022; De Fina, 2019). Once transcripts had been checked and anonymised, the transcripts were read again several times by the researcher to ensure the immersion in the data in a process of familiarisation. This was an important step in the thematic data analysis as without such familiarisation, it would have been easy to leap into codes and themes and potentially miss less obvious meaning from the interview transcriptions (Terry, 2021, p. 150). No software was used in the coding process.

Table 1. The six steps to reflexive thematic data analysis based on Braun and Clarke (2021).

Step 1: Familiarising with the data set	All transcripts were read repeatedly to become immersed within the data.
Step 2: Coding	Interview transcripts were labelled or 'coded'. This involved labelling words, sentences or sections of text to capture the features within the text loosely based on the research questions. This stage was repeated several times to ensure no labels were succinct. Codes and the labelled quotes were then reviewed across the corpus of transcripts and were inputted into a table to begin organising the data for the following stages.
Step 3: Generating initial themes	Codes and labelled text were reviewed to identify patterns of meaning or potential themes.
Step 4: Developing and reviewing themes	Returned to the corpus of the transcripts and reviewing the initial themes against the coded data. Themes were reviewed and developed.
Step 5: Refining, defining and naming themes	A detailed analysis was developed for each theme.
Step 6: Writing up	Findings from the data analysis was narrated and contextualised in relation to existing literature

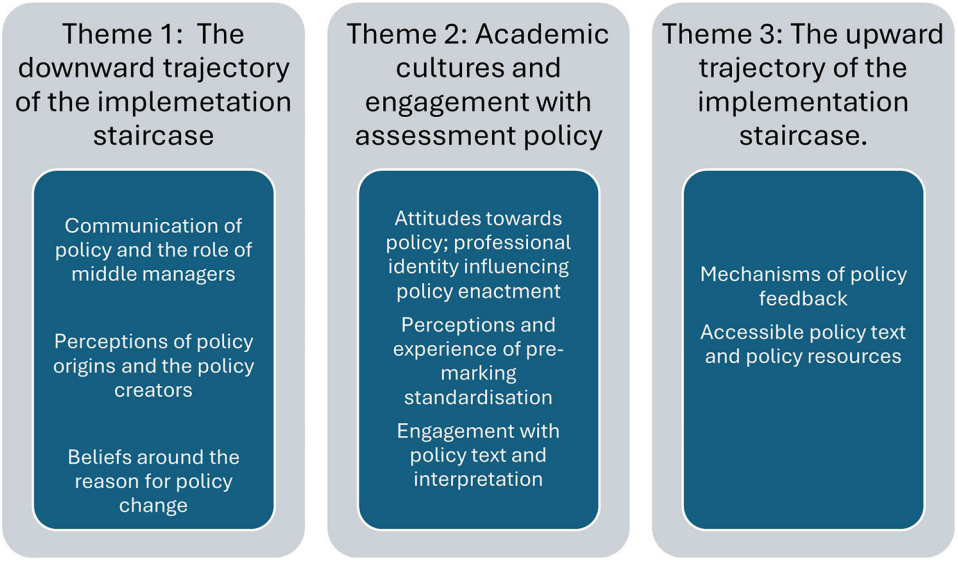

Figure 3. Themes and subthemes generated from the data.

Once interview transcripts had been coded and initial themes had been generated, the researcher returned to the transcript corpus to review and develop the main themes and subthemes. Figure 3 shows the main themes and subthemes that were developed.

To present the findings from the participant interviews, direct quotes that provided key themes and insights that were relevant to the research questions were selected. Statements made by participants that may have inadvertently revealed their identity were redacted to protect the anonymity of the participant.

Findings

Theme 1: the downward trajectory of policy change

Communication of the policy change and the role of middle managers

Eight of the participants spoke of departmental meetings with their Heads of department, reflecting middle manager, meso-level directing of policy in a downward trajectory. Participants outside of the school of Nursing perceived communication from senior managers as more of a 'discussion':

> '*… the senior management team were really keen to highlight the key differences and to arrange a meeting to discuss them' (PSY1),*

and

> '*… we have a monthly teaching and learning committee that meets so that is where it was discussed, what the changes look like, what they mean for our subject … ' (J1).*

Participants in the School of Nursing perceived middle manager communication to be more of a direct instruction to enact policy rather than a discussion and could potentially suggest that the professional identities appear across all levels:

> *'I think there was very much a drive for the pre-marking calibration from the [Head of Department], very much like, this is what you should be doing … '(N4),*

and

> '*… we had a meeting about internal moderation with our Heads and then we were asked to do it' (N8),*

and

> '*… this did come as, 'oh, by the way, we're doing this now'. There wasn't particularly any discussion with us on the ground floor so to speak … if I'm honest it wasn't discussed it was, this is what you are doing' (N1).*

Perceptions of policy origins and the policy creators

None of the participants were aware of who was involved in the policy writing and review. However, there were perceptions of policy creators at the top of the institutional hierarchy and there was a palpable tension between the top-down cascade of policy implementation and the enactment on the ground.

> '*… it tends to be what I would call the great and the good… we've got a lot of expertise and I don't know whether those people are involved or whether it is a group of people sat in a room just churning something out and saying this is what we're now going to do because we feel it's important*' (N3),

and

> '*is there a quality committee that's looking at policies and procedure? Is there a mechanism that allows board of studies to report into those? How do those programme reports and those factors that actually become raised and actually therefore become informed into policy? I don't know where that that happens at the moment*' (N10).

and

> '*I could sit down in my office and write a policy and all of a sudden because I'm in a senior position, everybody now has to work with that policy, but who's to say I'm right?… I have real concerns that in numerous organisations there's somebody in a high position and an assumption that they know what should be done… but it should come back to why are we doing it and what does the evidence-base say*?' (N3)

There were also uncertainties about whether the micro-level of the implementation staircase', i.e. academics and students, were involved in the policy review and there were concerns for the way it may have been communicated to the external examiners (EEs) and students:

> '*I would like to think this policy was informed by the Teaching and Learning Academy but I'm not really sure. I would hope there has been input from all of the Schools and a panel of students*' (N1).

and

> '*One of the things I want to know is who has been involved in this policy? Has there been an analysis of the people involved in this policy… did they involve students and staff from different schools or external experts?*' (N3),

and

> '*… when I asked my EE if they had been informed of the policy change around moderation, they hadn't so I had to send them the policy and provide an overview.*' (N10)

and

> '*I worry about how students have been informed of this new process. One thing they can appeal on is due process so they would need to understand due process to know if it has been followed*' (N10).

Beliefs around the reason for policy change

None of the participants were aware of the reasons for the introduction of pre-marking standardisation as an approach to moderation but some offered their beliefs and perceptions of why the assessment and feedback policy had been changed. Three participants felt it was specifically around reducing academics' workload:

> '*It wasn't made clear to us why but I don't know if it was to do with not requiring an internal moderator anymore, you know to free staff up*' (N10)

and

> '*I don't feel this was overly to do with improving quality, it was sold to us from a workload perspective. The workload benefit with a nod to quality*' (N4).

Five participants thought it was to improve quality and fairness of marking:

> '*I would guess it was, you know, to make people mark more fairly. Maybe they found a lot of discrepancies*' (N9)

and

'*I'd guess it was to streamline the process to make it more efficient. Either that or there has been an incident and they want to improve quality*' (N10)

and

'*Nothing has been communicated about why but my best guess would be it was to reduce the number of academic appeals … '* (J1).

There were beliefs that policy enactment would be more successful if people understood the reason for the policy change and were involved in policy review:

' *… from a change management point of view, if people don't understand where it has come from, they will rail against it. In policy change, you need to bring people onboard, get them involved in the process*' (N3).

Theme 2: academic cultures and assessment policy

Attitudes towards policy: professional identity influencing policy enactment

Participants from the School of Nursing had strong professional identity which influenced their teaching and assessment practices:

'*We would have gone through what it meant, what that looked like, because we're nurses, we're practical … '* (N5).

There was evidence of professional identity influencing perceptions of policy. Participants from the School of Nursing perceived policy as a set of rules to be followed and found comfort in the practice of 'abiding by' policy. These findings are interconnected with earlier findings where middle managers in the School of Nursing were perceived as giving direct instruction to implement and enact policy. This could suggest that the assessment cultures that exist in subject disciplines are also present in the practices of middle managers.

' … from a nursing perspective, that is what we do. We follow policy because it is what we are trained to do' (N10),

and

'*I look at our policies and guidance for our students in the same way that I would in clinical practice … I take them seriously … so it makes me feel reassured that we're doing the right thing for the students … the same way in clinical practice. We've, got a responsibility, and a duty of care to our students*' (N4),

and

'*You just follow policy; I am a policy follower. I'm a black and white thinker so if that's what the policy says then that is what I will do*' (N8),

and

' *… if the policy isn't being abided by then the policy is just a fancy thing that sits on your website, and everyone thinks you're doing this amazing work but if people aren't doing what you think they're doing then you might as well not bother having one*' (N3).

Conversely, participants in Justice and Psychology saw policy as more of a loose guide and perceived enactment of pre-marking standardisation to be optional. There were also beliefs that if there were no perceived benefits, then policy would not be enacted. Again, this directly mirrors the stance of the middle managers within the subject disciplines.

'*I spoke to the team about whether the new calibration approach would enhance our marking but because we have marked those assignments for a number of years now, the team felt they knew how to assess the learning outcomes and the external examiner had never raised any issues so for now, it was decided not do it … it isn't necessarily going to benefit us*' (PSY1)

'*I honestly don't think it would be possible to implement so what is more realistic and what I would prefer is a [post marking moderation] sample*' (J1).

These findings suggest there are significant inconsistencies in policy interpretation and enactment across the institution based on attitudes to policy, professional identity, prior experience or perceived benefits of

adopting policy. It could also be argued that the role of the middle managers, presented in theme 1, directly influenced academics' enactment of pre-marking standardisation. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that there are beliefs that pre-marking standardisation as an assessment practice only benefits inexperienced academics and that it is an approach that may be perceived as difficult to implement.

Perceptions and experiences of pre-marking standardisation

All participants commented on their worries about marking and moderation robustness and there was a strong desire to ensure fairness, equity and transparency for students and EEs. When participants were asked about their experience of enacting pre-marking standardisation it was suggested that this approach eased some of the anxiety and concerns around grading:

'*Marking is the one thing I worry about the most … it was actually quite nice to have that sort of group support*' (N1).

and

'*I found [pre-marking standardisation] really beneficial because, I just think it is about fairness and parity, you know across the board, it's about transparency*' (N4)

Whilst participants could see the benefit of pre-marking standardisation, there were also concerns about the robustness of only having a pre-marking moderation activity. All but one of the participants in the study who had experienced pre-marking standardisation had reconstructed the policy to add an additional layer of moderation for 'greater robustness'. Whilst participants could see the value in pre-marking standardisation as a quality process to ensure markers are aligned, there was a strong sense that there also needed to be an additional post marking moderation of a sample. This was not a resistance to the policy change as the participants were enacting, but they felt strongly that there was a risk that they needed to mitigate for.

'*[Pre-marking standardisation moderation] was all on the module lead and I lost sleep thinking that I was moderating my own work … I think there needs to be something after to check*' (N8)

and

'*A lot of us felt that [pre-marking standardisation of three assessments] wasn't enough and that we needed a post-marking moderation. We wouldn't have been happy unless we had done that*' (N5)

and

'*People might come to the pre-marking meeting, do the moderation and then go off and do their own thing. So there needs to be moderation afterwards to ensure people haven't gone rogue*' (N9)

and

'*We felt more comfortable doing moderation at the end point as well*' (N10).

Engagement with policy text and interpretation

Interpretation of the policy text was a significant topic that participants mentioned. Some participants' perception was that academic colleagues had misinterpreted the policy text and blamed ambiguous language and a lack of practical examples as potential explanations.

'*Even though it is in the policy, do people actually understand what that means for their module? Everyone interprets policy differently*.' (N8)

and

'*The policy is really ambiguous, it is open to interpretation and difficult to understand*' (N4)

and

'*I've just come out of a marking period and people weren't overly clear on the policy*' (N9)

Institutional training on the policy change and pre-marking standardisation was mentioned by several academics and academics spoke of their experience of attending it and its usefulness. However, there were also participants who believed that no such training existed. This demonstrates that communication of the training sessions was not received by all. Moreover, participants who were aware of training spoke of challenges in finding the time to attend.

Theme 3: the upwards trajectory of policy; perceptions and recommendations

Mechanisms for policy feedback

Despite the findings of the study demonstrating the institution's top-down trajectory of the implementation staircase presented in theme 1, there is also evidence that the bottom-up trajectory is somewhat of a challenge. None of the participants in the School of Nursing were aware of precise mechanisms to feedback on institutional policy although there was some evidence of participants feeding back to their middle managers. However, there were perceived uncertainties on whether feedback would either stop at the middle managers and not go any higher or feedback would not be listened to:

'*I'm not really aware of a mechanism to feedback on policy, I had provided some feedback to my manager but I don't think they would do anything with that*' (N1)

and

'*I always hear about SMT [senior management team] and FMT [faculty management team] and I suppose it might be discussed there as they are representing the staff voice, you know, for us people who aren't at that level to attend*' (N4)

and

'*My issue is that I feel like you have to get an external examiner to bring something up before anything is done*' (N1)

and

'*I provided extensive feedback on [another] policy and I have not seen any evidence that my feedback has been taken forward*' (PAH1)

and

'*I had a conversation with [registry about elements of the policy change that I was unhappy with, but it sort of fell on deaf ears and I wasn't really listened to, to be honest*' (N2).

Accessible policy text and policy resources

Participants shared valuable insights on how they felt policy text and policy training resources could be made more accessible and therefore ensure policy enactment is more successful and links to earlier findings of policy text ambiguity. This finding has a direct relationship with earlier findings on how training opportunities were communicated and how accessible they were to academics. Participants also spoke of policy text ambiguity and would often refer to meso-level managers as policy translators who would provide context of how the policy was relevant to the subject discipline.

'*We don't take on board that some of our staff are neurodiverse … we are good at making sure resources are accessible for students but not for staff*' (N4).

and

'*I think some of the terminology is ambiguous … It is difficult to understand … I have to ask the Subject Head what does this actually mean? I think user-friendly terms or … a video that you could refer to*' (N4)

and

'*Workshops are helpful if you're going to use it the following day but if you're not going to use it for say six months, then you can't remember. I think the use of videos that will keep people up to date would be really useful*' (N3).

Discussion

Pre-marking standardisation is considered to be an effective assessment moderation practice (Beutel et al., 2017; Bloxham, 2009; Crimmins et al., 2016; Mason & Roberts, 2023; O'Donovan et al., 2024) however the findings of this study demonstrate that when introduced in institutional assessment policy, there were differences in interpretation amongst departments despite there being

considerable support for pre-marking standardisation as a notion. Some of the challenges around pre-marking standardisation that were identified were largely based on academic cultures and workload management which aligns with similar research on consensus moderation practices (Mason & Roberts, 2023).

As highlighted by Saunders and Sin (2015), policy implementation trajectory through the implementation staircase is evident in higher education and middle managers play an integral role in influencing enactment, as found in this study. Policy translation by middle managers attempted to bridge the gap between the institutional policy and the assessment microcultures within subject disciplines, something which is echoed within the literature (Blakçori & Psychogios, 2021; Saunders & Sin, 2015). However, the notion of policy trajectory moving up and down the illustrative staircase was hampered by unclear mechanisms for academics to provide feedback or influence policy review. Furthermore, academics suggested that if there were mechanisms to provide feedback through middle managers, their comments would be overlooked or ignored, something which was reflected in the findings of educational research into middle managers' experience of implementing policy (Saunders & Sin, 2015). HEIs would benefit from opening policy creation and review processes to all levels of the implementation staircase to ensure different perspectives and subject disciplines are considered.

Engagement with policy text was shaped by several factors. Professional identity influenced attitudes towards policy, with some viewing policy as a set of rules to abide by and others viewing it as more of an optional guide. These academic cultures in subject disciplines ultimately influenced policy enactment of pre-marking standardisation and were further compounded by the middle managers' messaging around policy implementation; with some giving direct instructions to enact and others having more open discussions on whether to enact. Microcultures in assessment practices and within subject disciplines generally are formed from prior experiences and underpinning knowledge (Grainger et al., 2016; Sadler, 2011) however despite their known existence, HEIs continue to follow hierarchical policy implementation methods that then result in variations in policy enactment.

Whilst academics were largely in support of pre-marking standardisation as an approach to moderation, there were significant variations in its enactment, even within the same department. Pre-marking standardisation was found to provide a collegial and social opportunity for academics to engage in discussion around grading criteria and alleviated anxieties around fairness of grading judgements, aligning with assessment literature on moderation (Crimmins et al., 2015; Mason & Roberts, 2023). This approach is known to enhance professional development and can be a support for new academics (O'Connell et al., 2016) which was also a finding in this study. However, this belief also contributed to decisions by some subject disciplines not to adopt pre-marking standardisation as they perceived themselves to be 'experienced markers' and therefore did not perceive a benefit of adopting this moderation approach. This paper argues that academics may be more reluctant to enact policy if they fail to see the benefits of it and therefore communication of policy implementation would be more successful if the benefits and links to evidence were made clearer.

Despite the benefits of pre-marking standardisation, there were a number of challenges that emerged in the findings of this study. There were suggestions that inexperienced or less confident academics were hesitant to contribute to the grading discussions during pre-marking standardisation, consistent with the findings of other studies into social moderation (Grainger et al., 2015; Mason & Roberts, 2023). However, evidence also exists that suggests experienced academics can also be hesitant in presenting their decision making around assessment through fear of judgement (Garrow & Tawse, 2009). Bloxham and Boyd (2012) highlighted egalitarianism as an important aspect of calibration activities; academic teams must ensure that team members feel comfortable and empowered to share their insights on their marking judgements. This paper contends that for pre-marking standardisation meetings to be successful, the academic culture must be one of inclusivity and openness to allow for collegial discussion on assessment grading that improves marker variability. This could be achieved through assessment workshops and processes to support anonymised grading decisions during the pre-marking standardisation activity (O'Connell et al., 2016). Furthermore as highlighted by Reimann et al. (2024, p. 102), group dynamics and collegial relationships need to be actively managed in a positive way for social moderation to be successful.

Although academics saw value in pre-marking standardisation, there were reservations on its robustness in the absence of a post-marking activity and there was an overarching desire to ensure rigor, accuracy and transparency. This mirrors the findings of Mårtensson et al. (2012) where micro-cultures were centred around a strong desire for excellence and quality, and academic cultures were developed from traditions of practice from within the subject discipline. Although pre-marking standardisation was perceived to ease marking anxiety to a point, there were concerns about marker drift from the decisions made in the pre-marking standardisation meetings and concerns about 'rogue' markers. This led to reconstruction of the policy by academics who reintroduced a post-marking moderation as a perceived safety net. There are inconsistencies in the literature on whether pre-marking calibration alone is sufficient in the moderation of grading judgements (Prichard et al., 2025) and it could therefore be argued that such inconsistency leads to academics relying on tacit knowledge from personal experience rather than the evidence-base. This paper calls for further research into whether a pre-marking moderation activity is sufficient to ensure trustworthiness and consistency in assessment grading decisions.

Participants provided some valuable insights and perspectives on policy communication more generally, that would be beneficial for HEIs to consider for successful policy implementation. Accessibility of new policy and policy change is something HEIs must consider. Whilst there was evidence of communication of the policy change through notification emails and departmental meetings, there was a call for more inclusive and accessible policy resources to support neurodiverse staff, an area where no current literature exists. Furthermore, policy workshops although welcomed, were only perceived as useful if they were timed alongside assessment periods. As mentioned above, pre-marking standardisation workshops that take place to actively support academics during assessment periods are shown to improve confidence and grading variability (O'Connell et al., 2016) and considering the aforementioned challenges of new and less confident academics' hesitance in contributing to calibration discussions, the implementation of such workshops could be beneficial. This paper also advocates for accessible and inclusive assessment policy resources such as video-based policy training or more visual resources that could be accessible to all staff as required. Many staff reported barriers of workload clashes preventing them from accessing live training therefore a range of resources would address this.

Limitations

This is a small-scale study in a single institution and as with many educational research studies, generalisability is a potential limitation. However, there is a dearth of recent literature on pre-marking standardisation as an approach to moderation and there are further gaps in the research on the perceptions and experience of academics in implementing and in enacting pre-marking standardisation. It is therefore hoped that this study can inform assessment practice and policy communication in higher education.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study has explored the experiences and perceptions of policy change enactment from the micro level of academics using the implementation staircase as a theoretical framework. It is evident that HEIs operate policy implementation through the hierarchical structures illustrated in the implementation staircase however policy enactment is significantly influenced by the academic cultures that exist. Pre-marking standardisation as a moderation practice is endorsed by academics as it is viewed as a collegiate and supportive approach to justifying grading decisions however despite the support for its notion, there were variations in implementation and enactment based on beliefs on its benefit or beliefs in its robustness as a sole moderation activity. This led to variation in moderation practices across different subject disciplines and even within the same departments. Such variations in moderation practices could pose significant challenges for external examiners and students, risking complaints and appeals if processes are inconsistent or unclear. Furthermore, professional identities and academic cultures played a significant role in implementation and enactment of policy due to perceptions of policy as rule or policy

as guidance. Pre-marking standardisation is an approach to assessment moderation that promotes parity, consistency and trustworthiness in assessment grading however assessment policy and literature must provide more sophisticated ways to ensure its enactment when introduced in institutional assessment policy. Further research into the robustness of pre-marking standardisation and how best to facilitate it would be beneficial to support the change in academics' assessment practices.

Whilst there was evidence of middle managers acting as translators and policy messengers in the implementation staircase of policy communication, it was heavily weighted towards the downwards trajectory. Mechanisms and opportunities for academics to feedback on policy or to be involved in policy creation or review were not clear. Furthermore, if the evidence-base behind policy was effectively communicated and the benefits of new approaches were presented more clearly, policy implementation would be more successful. To avoid misunderstanding or misinterpretation, policy discourse must clearly define where practice is mandatory or optional. Policy text should avoid ambiguous language and policy training resources should be accessible, inclusive and representative, adopting a variety of visual methods and practical examples. Successful social moderation requires a culture of collegiality and trust and HEIs must positively promotes such cultures. Furthermore, HEIs must adopt clear and transparent policy review processes that are inclusive of the diverse subject disciplines and reflective of all levels of the implementation staircase if successful policy implementation and consistent enactment is to be achieved and where such practices exist, they should be widely advertised to ensure academics are aware of them.

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Data availability statement

The data supporting this study's findings are available on request from the corresponding author, JF. However, the data are not publicly available due to the personal information of participants.

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