I once heard a children’s support charity use the phrase ‘one child at a time’. This caused me to reflect on my ongoing attempts to meaningfully reach my class of 400 students as just one individual. I have published a blog on ‘teaching at scale’ (1), and my screencast video providing generic feedback for the course problem was certainly well-liked by students (A3) (CPD 8). However, there are many situations where one size does not fit all, and it is necessary to take one person at a time. My experiences as Personal Tutor, as a member of our special circumstance (SC) committee, as a member and chair of various exam boards, as CAMO and as a member of the University-wide Undergraduate Appeal Committee (K6), often underscore cases where students suffer from the prescriptive and inflexible nature of university regulations, where individual difference is not considered. One example I wish to highlight and reflect upon is my personal tutee, R.

R has obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). R gained entry to the university through a widening participation (WP) programme. I am keen on WP (it would have been my own route of entry, had I got to university at all with today’s associated expenses). I have contributed sessions to WP summer schemes such as LEAPS and LIFTOFF for the last ten years (V2) as well as running a number of my own events such as a pupil conference for Scottish school pupils here at King’s buildings in 20112, and near-peer events where visiting pupils could meet first year students during Innovative Learning week (V2). I am also one of a few personal tutors, within my School, selected to look after students joining the University through access schemes such as SWAPS. Sadly some of these students are ill-suited to higher education study and I observe a high drop-out rate despite intensive mentoring (V1), normally because the student has not been adequately prepared for the academic rigor required and there is often the confounding danger of social isolation (3). Watching these raised expectations crumble is very upsetting, and begs the question of whether we should be actively gathering and supporting these students better or whether this would lead to stigmatisation and further social isolation.

R found the social mix difficult but was prepared to do whatever it took to get his degree (target 2.2). He was a frequent volunteer at my widening participation and orientation events (A4) (experience and success 4), providing valuable encouragement to others in his position. R was a golden boy.

The problems started in second year when R’s grandfather died, and he failed an open book exam. SCs were submitted but, having been a long-standing member of SC committees, I was nervous about his plight gaining sympathy. Will it be accepted that the death of a grandparent can have ‘significant adverse impact’? I note that the death of a pet categorically will not (4), yet I would be devastated to lose my dogs. The problem then went from bad to worse as regulations prohibited me from breaking with anonymity (K6), and I watched as colleagues passed judgement on his case. ‘How did he fail the open book exam? Why does he not have the notes? He should just get them from a friend?’

R has OCD. During one of his rituals R threw the notes in the bin. R does not have friends. R is very embarrassed.

Then things really got bad. R took ill. He stopped attending lectures because his rituals were too ‘odd’ to carry out in public and so he could not catch buses any more. R felt that he had already
claimed ‘too many’ special circumstances. He also found his GP very unwilling to write letters in a
timely manner (despite charging for them) and started missing SC deadlines too. As a member of the
University Appeals committee I am all too aware of the rules prohibiting late SCs or appeals where
no good reason for lateness of information is given. But R has OCD.

Clearly we need to be consistent in dealing with difficult cases and it is imperative that those with
the power do not make up their own rules, but I often wonder whether our QA procedures result in
a little too much tautness, and whether a little slack to allow individual judgement might actually
result in fairer outcomes in some cases such as this (K6).

After many SCs, many long conversations about whether he ‘belonged’ here, and six months of
interrupted study, R graduated... with a 2.1! I have been directing students for 15 years and this was
easily my proudest graduation as I beamed at him from the procession and eagerly met his mother
over bubbly. Then just before I set him sailing off to his future I added one final injustice. To his
horror, I gave him a hug. R has OCD!

1) web link <anonymised> for ‘Teaching at Scale’ blog
2) <anonymised> self-reference of publication in Genetics Society News
3) Friend, KL (2016). Widening participation initiatives and the experience of underrepresented

Word count: 861 words
Areas covered: A3, A4, V1, V2, K6.
External examining and norm-based marking. More the norm than you think?

In 2016 I took the fairly standard step at my career stage of becoming external examiner at another institution. The induction consisted of an online tour of the assessment regulations and various other densely-worded documents. I did feel slightly out of my depth at first, but accepted this as normal since a ‘sink or swim’ approach to training and support was normal in my experience of academia and teaching (V4). Initially I found the role challenging but hugely advantageous to my own teaching (and self-confidence) since the courses I was examining were first year courses covering my discipline in a broad manner, making me purposefully relearn what I had not considered since my own first year at University many years ago (K1).

After much hard work I found that I was engaging with the content of the assessment materials more than the process of assessment. In meetings with staff I found myself engaging well as a critical friend reviewing teaching innovations but not reflecting on standards, which I did not consider myself qualified to comment upon. I then volunteered for a pilot HEA external examiners’ workshop (A5) which opened my eyes to the huge responsibility that the external examiner carries as the only person who is charged to review process and standards between institutions (V4, K6). One particular learning point was the desirability, from a student perspective, of criterion versus norm-referenced marking whereby students are assessed on fixed criteria rather than in comparison to their peer group (1) (K6). This struck a chord since at my first external exam board I had been bewildered by the correction algorithm that was applied to all marks, leading to inflated outcomes. Bolstered by the support from the literature, I addressed this issue at the exam board leading to extensive discussion and further reference to the regulations and literature (2). Although this justified the practice in some items, a rescaling of some marks was deemed necessary and was duly applied (A3). Bouyant with moral rectitude and armed with solid reference material (3), I returned to my own course markers meeting. Here I found myself defending the much hated marking scheme that I had personally put in place a few years ago to convert Peerwise scores into course marks. Why much hated? The students dislike that their own mark depends upon how much other students do. To my horror I now realise that this method is unequivocally a norm-referenced marking scheme. Lower weapons.

References:
• Janke Cohen-Schotanus & Cees P. M. van der Vleuten (2010) A standard setting method with the best performing students as point of reference: Practical and affordable, Medical Teacher, 32:2, 154-160, DOI: 10.3109/01421590903196979

Word count: 499 words
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