“Marking is subjective.” This is something I have heard students say on numerous occasions and it never
fails to make me think academics are failing to adequately explain how marking happens. I want to try to
remedy this.

First, a comment on what I think is meant by the student who thinks marking is ‘subjective’. Usually
what the speaker is trying to convey is that they believe marks simply reflect the opinion of the marker, and
not an objective fact about the quality of the work. In truth, however, marking is neither subjective nor
objective in these senses of the terms. Markers use their judgment rather than merely formulate an opinion,
and they, like the whole process of marking, approach the task objectively. That is to say, they seek to
fairly judge the work they are marking according to publicly available criteria. Far from being subjective, if
we have to use such terms, I would say marking is objective, in the sense of fair - the decisions made are
more like those of a judge or referee than someone merely identifying what they like.

If you don’t believe me, consider what happens after you submit an essay or other piece of work for
assessment.

Within 24 hours of submission the marker receives the work. Less experienced markers will be given
guidance by the module convener in order to ensure they mark to the right level and provide appropriate
feedback. More experienced markers simply get on with the task.

After the work is marked it then goes through a process called ‘moderation’. This involves a portion of
the marked work being passed to a second marker who reviews the marking. The task of selecting the work for moderation is not carried out by the original marker, and the work selected for moderation is a representative sample of the range of marks awarded - including examples of the highest and lowest marks, and the range in between.

After reviewing the work, the moderator must sign a form saying they approve or don’t approve the marking. If they approve the marks, then the marks as they appear on SDS are confirmed - though this is not the end of the process as we will see. If alternatively they do not approve the marks, or recommend that even one mark be changed, then all of the work must be remarked by someone other than the original marker. Should this happen, then moderation must take place again after the work is remarked. Although it is designed to ensure fairness and accuracy of marking, moderation is one of the sources of student doubts about its fairness. If you don’t understand the process, it is easy to see why.

You collect your work after it has been marked and feel happy, disappointed, relieved or whatever at the mark you have received. You even see the mark on SDS and feel certain that hurdle is now behind you and you have done as well as you have done. Sure, you are told the work is subject to moderation and the mark may change, but this doesn’t happen often and, after all, no one has ever explained exactly what moderation is. Then a short while later you look again on SDS and find the mark has changed, maybe upward a bit or maybe downward a bit. And likewise everyone else in your class sees that their mark has changed a bit. Since you have not had the process explained to you, at this point you might be forgiven for thinking that the whole process of marking is, well, ‘subjective’. Doesn’t it look like the mark you receive
simply depends upon the last person to look at your work?

The marking system is designed to ensure fairness and accuracy but it can sometimes give just the opposite impression. There is of course a simple solution to this problem and from this academic year the School of Arts has changed its procedures in the hope of overcoming the problem. The solution has two parts, and this article is one of them - explaining the process better than perhaps we always have in the past. The second part of the solution is to ensure that moderation is completed prior to the return of work, so that the mark a student first encounters is the final one.

Because the School has also introduced some new procedures to ensure that all marked work is returned within three weeks, this new policy on moderation will be challenging. For if is discovered through moderation that a large batch of work needs to be completely remarked, we will have to work very hard indeed to get this completed in time for the three week deadline. We are committed to doing so, but if it proves impossible we will be keeping the affected students informed and giving them a date when they can expect their work returned with a final mark.

I mentioned earlier that moderation isn’t the end of the process. After moderation another representative sample of marked work is sent to the programme’s external examiner. The external examiner is a senior academic in the relevant subject from another university who monitors standards and advises on the curriculum, programme management and teaching. Their views carry considerable weight within the Department, the Faculty and the University.

The external examiner reviews a representative sample of work, and confirms or otherwise the marks for each module. They have the authority to ask for marks to be changed and for entire batches of work to be remarked. If there is any doubt inside the Department about whether a mark is appropriate, it is standard practice to refer it to the external examiner. At the end of the academic year the external examiner visits the Department and attends the Exam Board at which Degree Classifications are determined. They have a very important role in looking at the work and marks of those students who are on the borderline between two Degree Classifications, and often will recommend marks be changed upwards in order to ensure a higher classification is achieved. At the end of this process the external examiner writes a report delivered to the University rather than the School in which they are required to comment on the accuracy and standards of the marking - among other things. The School is required to respond to these reports, indicating how they are acting upon the External Examiner’s recommendations and comments. It would be a very serious matter if an external examiner were to report unfairness in the marking, or inappropriate standards of marking.

The review of marking does not even end with the external examiner. The School’s Learning and Teaching Committee scrutinizes the spread of marks awarded on every module, considers how learning is assessed, the criteria employed in assigning marks, as well as requiring module conveners to report on how they will correct any problems that have been identified. This includes identifying modules in which students are consistently receiving higher or lower marks than they receive on other modules, and then taking action to correct these anomalies.

There are, then, multiple mechanisms in place to ensure fairness in marking. That marking involves the exercise of judgment is undoubtedly true, but in forming their judgments markers draw upon their experience and the published criteria for the award of each mark. Whether they have good judgment is then repeatedly tested. It may not be perfect, but it is as fair a system as possible.