

Data Act blows open exam marks secrecy

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Cambridge is in a quandary as dons campaign to stop the university disclosing students' examination marks — some of which are held on computer. But Data Protection Act, which comes into force in November, will mean that marks held in a computer for more than 40 days must be revealed.

Other universities could face a similar problem. The Committee of Vice-Chancellors is to warn them later this month that, under the terms of the new Act, they will run into legal problems if they refuse to disclose students' marks.

Cambridge is a focal point in the controversy because just as the university planned to change its rules forbidding the disclosure of marks, dons forced a ballot on the issue.

A Cambridge spokesman said: 'We are now in the curious position that we may be prevented from complying with the law by a vote from members of the university. In any case, there are good educational reasons why students should know their marks.'

Present rules prevent dons from giving details of exam marks except in the case of outright failure — when 'they shall, on request, intimate to a candidate the extent of this failure.' In practice, some dons already give students an indication of their marks.

But other dons fear that the automatic disclosure of marks would lead to less fair and flexible marking. Dr Mark Kaplanoff said the marking process in history, for exam-

ple, is so complex that releasing the marks would be misleading.

Another historian, Dr Maurice Cowling, said marks are often only a preliminary guide to assessors. 'We award degree classes as a result of discussions. Of course these discussions cannot be revealed,' he added. 'We work very hard to make the result fair.'

Lawyers and mathematicians are also protesting. Dr J. A. Hudson, chairman of the faculty board of mathematics, pointed out in a Senate debate that the examination system was not very precise. 'Publication of marks will imply, notwithstanding any words of interpretation the examiners may add, that the procedure is much more accurate than it really is.'

Dr Kaplanoff believes that the ballot, to be held this week, will come out against the university's proposals to disclose marks. All university's teaching and administrative staff are entitled to vote, but only about 700 are expected to do so.

London University has already decided to release exam marks to students, but deputy registrar Dr David Eames, accepted that there were problems. Two students with almost identical marks might receive different degree classifications because the examiners took special circumstances into account.

'The view the university took was that it was absolutely fair that examiners should have to explain why such things had happened,' he said.