



Queen Margaret University

EDINBURGH

STUDENT EXPERIENCE COMMITTEE

REVIEW OF EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORTS 2015-16 CONSIDERED BY SEC ON 12 APRIL 2017

1 Introduction

Each year, the Division of Governance and Quality Enhancement carries out a review of all External Examiner reports received in the previous academic session¹. The aim of the review is to draw out common themes or recurring issues to highlight in summary form at an institutional level. This allows for identification of issues that are common across programmes and might need to be addressed, for example through policy development. It also facilitates dissemination of good practice, where this was commented upon by the Examiner.

The production of an annual report is in line with the Indicators of best practice contained in Chapter B7 of the QAA Quality Code for Higher Education². The supporting text under Indicator 15 of that Chapter reads as follows:

At senior management level, it is established practice for institutions to provide a summary of external examiners' responses annually. This enables them to draw out any themes or recurring recommendations, and ensure that these are fully addressed at appropriate levels. A first step in this process may be to produce an overview report for consideration by the relevant quality assurance committee(s). Decisions can then be made about consequent actions to enhance provision.

This report was compiled on the basis of External Examiners' annual reports for the Session 2015-16. It includes all programmes delivered by QMU staff in Edinburgh, as well as programmes delivered by collaborative partners in the UK. A separate more detailed summary of themes emerging through overseas collaborative reports will be considered at the May meeting of the Collaborations Operations Group (COG).

2 Submission and response rates

At the time of completion of this review, all but one of the expected reports (including reports for overseas collaborations) had been submitted. There were just five outstanding responses, one

¹ The annual summaries are available on the University's Quality website at:
<http://www.qmu.ac.uk/quality/qm/qmu.htm>

² For further information, please see:

<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Documents/Quality%20Code%20-%20Chapter%20B7.pdf>

of which was not yet due to be submitted and two of which had been submitted but were subject to revision before going out to the Examiner.

Number of reports

Number of Reports Expected							
Total	90	ASSaM	33	Health Sciences	56	IGHD	1
Number of Reports Submitted							
Total	89	ASSaM	33	Health Sciences	55	IGHD	1
All figures correct as at 3 April 2017							

Comparison with previous years

Year	Received (%)	Responded to (%)	Date of review
2009-10	95	58	3 February 2011
2010-11	99	92	14 March 2012
2011-12	97	86	28 January 2013
2012-13	97	95	27 February 2014
2013-14	99	99	31 March 2015
2014-15	98	83	04 April 2016
2015-16	99	94	03 April 2017

The usual timescale for Programme Teams to respond to the Division of Governance and Quality Enhancement is within eight weeks, after which responses are reviewed by the Dean before being sent to the Examiner. Sometimes, it can take longer than eight weeks to provide a response, for example if the Programme Leader is absent due to sick leave or other extenuating circumstances, or if there are particularly complex issues to be addressed. Where this happens, the Division of Governance and Quality Enhancement seeks to keep the Examiner updated on the reasons for any delay. If an Examiner raises serious concerns, a more immediate response is provided with a detailed follow-up after the Programme Team has considered the detail of the report. Such reports are infrequent, usually no more than one or two per year.

Each year, in addition to Programme Team consideration, some reports require an institutional response, for example where the Examiner comments on University regulations. The locus of responsibility for replying to this type of feedback is agreed on a case by case basis, but typically the Assistant Secretary, Governance Quality Enhancement, will write to the Examiner taking advice as appropriate from the Assistant Secretary, Registry and Academic Administration and Exam Board Conveners and Secretaries.

There continues to be divergence of practice regarding the time for reports to be submitted. The report form requests submission no later than 30 September each year, but preferably within three weeks of the summer Board of Examiners. However, some programmes operate outside the usual dates, especially collaborative provision for CPD, and Examiners with responsibility for these programmes are not restricted by the usual reporting timeframe. Actual submission dates are provided below for information. As can be seen, the majority of reports were submitted within the expected timeframe, with a peak in September. Where reports were delayed, the Examiner typically provided an explanation to staff of the Division of Governance and Quality Enhancement.

Timescale for submission of 2015-16 reports (figures in brackets are for 2014-15)

Month	Submissions	Month	Submissions
<May 2016	0 (0)	November 2016	2 (1)
June 2016	15 (18)	December 2016	4 (1)
July 2016	11 (6)	January 2017	1 (3)
August 2016	17 (13)	February 2017	0 (1)
September 2016	27 (27)	Later	2 (1)
October 2016	10 (10)	Outstanding	1 (2)

3 Good practice

3.1 Curriculum/employability

As in previous years, Examiners commented very positively on the development of professionally and academically relevant degrees with an appropriate balance of theory and practice. The preparedness of QMU graduates for employability was cited in a good number of reports. This was particularly notable for Nursing and the Allied Health Professions, but also explicit within the reports for some other programmes.

The Public Sociology programme is distinctive and, I believe, one of only a very small number of similar degrees in the UK. It should be encouraged and developed BSc (Hons) Public Sociology

The course is well structured with a newly validated document beginning to show results. It offers the students the opportunity to create work that addresses industry from a context of personal engagement. Students are able to participate in a number of external projects which provides them with a sense of the professional opportunities available to them BA (Hons) Costume Design and Construction

The Programme is based on a strong foundation of the integration of theory and practice, where Practice Placement is integral to learning throughout the Programme. The Programme provides students with an excellent beginning for their professional journeys and on-going development as occupational therapists, and is to be commended. MSc Occupational Therapy (pre-registration)

As with last year, I am impressed with the mix of theoretical and practice-led modules available to students on this programme. I am pleased to see evidence in assessments of attempts to bring theory and practice together – for example in creative work on predominantly theory-led modules, or in the theoretical essays used to assess practical modules. I would like to see further demonstrations of how the two sides of the course work together, but the evidence suggests that there is a healthy relationship between theory and practice here BA (Hons) Media; BA (Hons) Film and Media

The current programme remains an innovative & industry responsive programme, offered both on site & online. The curriculum is well planned to meet the needs of the specific group of learners, who are also working. The programme has been planned in consultation with employers, which is not just good practice and an area of strength, but is essential for a programme of this type. PgCert Collaborative Working

Some reports made direct reference to the impact on the wider community (employers and service users)

The course meets the needs of the local NHS service provision, and as district nursing continues to be a valuable part of NHS provision, the course is well placed to respond to the recent need for ensuring safe staffing levels. Community Health Nursing (undergraduate and postgraduate)

The three modules (Anticipating and Responding to Pain and Symptoms in Palliative Care, Care for the Patient and Family in Palliative Care and Using Person-Centred Communication Skills towards the end of life) are delivered by a team who are very well grounded in the various practice areas. This is demonstrated in the strong practical focus of the learning & teaching and assessment strategies employed. I have no doubt that the learning acquired by participating students will be readily translated into their practice, delivering tangible benefits for people with palliative care needs in their care. Palliative Care (undergraduate and postgraduate)

Examiners confirmed alignment with relevant Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body (PSRB) requirements through the tick box section of the report form. Some qualitative feedback was also provided in this regard:

The content of the programme meets HCPC requirements and national subject benchmarks and is increasingly meeting international high level research standards in addition MSc Music Therapy

3.3 Assessment and feedback

Examiners commented on the overall mix of assessments, highlighting flexibility and recognition of different learning preferences as positive features.

All assessments I viewed were appropriate to the units examined. They gave the students the ability to focus on their interests whilst maintaining standards across the board. As I have only come on board this semester I have not reviewed all the units' assessments and therefore cannot comment in detail but there appears to be a balanced diet of assessment – with live events, presentations, web-based activities, exams, reports and essays. This is in line with other institutions. Students are offered choice of exam and essay questions to answer. It is often difficult to develop an assessment diet which is varied for the student's needs and meets the needs of the learning outcomes. This has been achieved. BA (Hons) Events Management

The range of assessment approaches used across the programme is varied and, as previously stated, I think this is commendable. The option for a written answer or mind-map for C3137 written exam demonstrates a considered approach to supporting students and managing different learning styles. BSc (Hons) Podiatry

A wide range of sufficiently challenging assessments is utilised. These will appeal to all types of learners and many inherently develop transferable skills e.g. poster presentations, E-portfolio, reflective assignments, learning contracts, along with more traditional modes of assessment. Some modules explicitly offer formative opportunities to augment learning. MSc Nursing

Unsurprisingly, Examiners considered feedback to be worthy of commendation where there was appropriate and specific guidance to inform and enhance student performance in subsequent modules. As can be seen below, some Examiners commended the level of detail within student

feedback. However, there was also a recommendation in at least one report for a reduction in volume of feedback to improve efficiency (paragraph 4.2 refers). The importance of consistency across and within modules was highlighted in relation to marking and feedback. Examiners also welcomed transparent presentation of marks, allowing them to see how these had been derived.

There was good evidence of robust internal processes for second marking/ moderation. Feedback to students was usually very detailed, lengthy and constructive in its criticism; the quality of feedback really was exemplary and deserves special commendation. BSc (Hons) Public Sociology

The consistency of marking within and between modules is very good, as is the level of feedback given to students by a variety of means. The use of audio recorded feedback in particular is very good – and the level of feedback given to all candidates, whether from the low or high end of the marking scale was excellent. BSc (Hons) Physiotherapy

Marking is noted to be fair, consistent and transparent and rigorous in ensuring double marking and agreement between markers. The team provide comprehensive feedback and comment for feed forward which clearly guides students to how they could improve their performance for subsequent assessments. Assessments continue to challenge students and support development of skills for clinical practice through application of their learning with OSCEs. MSc Radiotherapy and Oncology

A particular example of good practice in relation to consistency is provided below:

The team have embraced the concept of a ‘calibration club’ showing a commitment to adopt processes that enhance consideration of reliability and validity in their marking. It continues to be good practice that the team offer feedback both via a grid showing how specific criteria are achieved, alongside qualitative feedback that is assignment specific in its approach. A robust number of submissions are double marked. This is good practice. Being aware of a commonality in approach amongst markers including consistent use of the word descriptors from the university ‘postgraduate performance attributes’ within the qualitative feedback adds context to the mark and consistency in approach to the student experience – and this has been more consistent this year. Where evident, inclusion of specific ‘feed forward action points’ / pointers ‘to improve’ the work as part of the qualitative feedback to students is both clear and is considered very good practice. This was especially valued by the student that I met during my visit. MSc Occupational Therapy (post registration)

As reported in previous years, some Examiners were pleased to note the use of the full range of marks, but comments were also made in relation to further enhancement of this (paragraph 4.1 refers).

3.4 Student support and performance

The overwhelming majority of Examiners confirmed that: a) the quality of student work was as they would have expected and comparable with work of students at other institutions; and b) the distribution and classification of awards was appropriate and consistent with other institutions.

Several Examiners commented very favourably on staff efforts to support student achievement. There was recognition of staff responsiveness to individual circumstances. Feedback was also provided more generally on efforts to support particular cohorts/groups, for example online learners and students returning to formal postgraduate education after an extended gap.

Commendations under this heading related not only to academic development but also pastoral matters and central University support services.

Staff continue to be alert and sensitive to students' needs and circumstances and at all times acted in a fair and equitable manner. As necessary, students were signposted to other resources e.g. academic writing or referencing etc. BSc (Hons) Occupational Therapy

Last year, I highlighted the time and attention given to students by way of counselling and support. I commented that this is an aspect I have not seen at other Universities I have attended. This provides an excellent support mechanism to students which I would recommend to other institutions as an example of good practice. MBA and MSc International Management and Leadership

Student performance on the programme is very good, the small number of students that have failed modules and need retrieval generally face personal pressures in dealing with postgraduate study whilst juggling family life and full-time work. There is evidence of excellent work produced by students who clearly enjoy the programme and showed evidence of personal development whilst on the programme. Tutors are to be congratulated in the performance of their students and the support and guidance they give to them. This is an innovative programme well delivered and in good academic standing. MSc Gastronomy

Examiners who had met with students found this to be extremely beneficial in terms of their overall understanding of the student experience.

I was able to talk to students in the spring term via conference call and they were able to discuss openly the attributes of the course and support from staff. They were also able to share some of the other pressures of being a student on a professional course where placement and theory are equally important and how difficult it can be to balance at times. BSc (Hons) Nursing

I had the chance to meet with a group of approximately 8 third year students and we discussed their experiences on the programme. We discussed progression throughout the programme, assessment load, clinical experiences, support from staff, and career opportunities and progression. There was a resounding positive response from the students. They were enjoying the programme and felt the appropriate support was available to them. Staff (university and clinical) were highly praised by the students for their support, knowledge and encouragement. BSc (Hons) Podiatry

3.5 Administration

Feedback on the conduct of the Board of Examiners was largely positive. Examiners appreciated the way in which the Board was convened and also the high quality support from the School Office Team.

The assessment board was conducted and chaired very smoothly and according to the regulations. The administrative support for the boards was also of the highest standard and it is clear that all members of the board are very familiar with the assessment regulations. BSc (Hons) Psychology

I have taken part in the Board of Examiners via 'tele con' and the Board demonstrated strict adherence to academic regulations, institutional policies and equity of treatment of the students.

The meeting was both efficient and friendly and discussion of any issues was appropriate.
Mammography (undergraduate and postgraduate)

A few Examiners welcomed the use of Google Drive to access materials, as well as the provision of guidance notes and support for using this technology. This feedback needs to be seen in the context of frustrations reported later in this report (paragraph 4.2 refers). However, encouragingly, it appears that many of the issues identified were addressed promptly and to the satisfaction of the Examiner.

I really appreciate receiving the work through the year and I think Google Drive works well (though a longer period before a password resets would be nice). BSc (Hons) Psychology

The inauguration of Google Drive as a means of transmission of materials for moderation has been extremely useful in terms of both access to the materials and small amounts of extra time in which to moderate. MSc Speech and Language Therapy

The support given to access of work via google drive and e-portfolio is to be commended. BSc (Hons) Physiotherapy

Some Examiners noted that they had benefited from access to recordings of clinical exams.

Although I was not present at student (Public Health) vivas it was very useful to be able to listen to the assessment through audio recording via the google share repository. I was assured of the rigour within this assessment. MSc Public Health Practice

Related to the above, one Examiner requested video rather than audio recordings, with another Examiner expressing a preference to attend a clinical examination in person.

The vast majority of Examiners indicated that they had received a satisfactory response to their report of the previous year, expressing confidence that their recommendations had been considered and acted upon. Where Examiners noted that they had not received a response, or their recommendations had not been fully addressed, this was highlighted to the Programme Leader for action.

3.6 End of tenure summaries

End of tenure summaries were introduced in 2013 to improve alignment with the Indicators of best practice in Chapter B7 of the QAA Quality Code for Higher Education (paragraph 1 refers). Examiners completing their tenure in 2016 generally used this section of the form to provide feedback about their overall impressions of the Programme and University. Several indicated enhancements to the curriculum and assessment since they first took up post. Others reiterated recommendations made elsewhere in the report, or in previous years, and provided suggestions for the future development of the programme(s) for which they had been responsible.

Ten end of tenure summaries were provided in total, all of which were positive. Two examples are given below:

Example one

Since my initial appointment to the post of external examiner, I have been delighted by the continuing support from the programme team. Communication between myself and the team remains robust and from the onset of the role, I have always been included in discussions and

decision making when considering minor amendments to the programme to develop the curriculum further to meet service provision, all of which have been implemented successfully. I congratulate the team for the detailed feedback and feed forward offered to students and this remains a very positive aspect of the programme. Student performance remains variable, as within other universities and would be expected allowing for a wide range of academic and clinical skills between a cohort of students. The marks awarded to students both rank and discriminate them appropriately and I believe that the programme meets the need of educating professional colleagues to work within the service.

Example two

I have enjoyed and valued my five years as External Examiner to this course. The on line delivery has been a unique feature of this course and has enabled student to access the materials from overseas. All the staff have been very welcoming, friendly and have provided me with course materials to look through on time. As I have mentioned before I have particularly valued access to the VLE and other evidence of the students' work that has been referred to me electronically prior to the exam boards. This has enabled me to peruse the material at my leisure and arrive at exam boards with a better representation of the student's work and to have first-hand experience of some of the modules they are studying.

4 Possible areas for development

As in previous years, Examiners offered a range of constructive comments on areas for future development. It is to be noted that the points identified below were not generally presented as significant concerns, and many related to individual modules rather than the programme as a whole.

4.1 Assessment and feedback

Whilst the majority of comments on assessment strategy were positive, one Examiner identified inconsistency in expectations for elective modules, whilst another highlighted the challenges of marking different assessment options against the same criteria. Two Examiners identified possible over-assessment, in one case citing four components within a single module.

Variation in quantity and quality of feedback was identified as an area for development in a small number of reports:

The level of feedback varies considerably between modules. On some modules, comments on individual parts of the rubric are well-thought out and constructive. On others, a single word is issued. While one would expect some variation in feedback style, I believe it is better practice to offer detailed constructive feedback.

The feedback offered is excellent, however some tutors annotate scripts on turn it in and others do not – not a huge issue but maybe something to consider for consistency.

The following comments illustrate the importance of transparency in the materials provided to Examiners.

On review of the feedback, and reflection from previous years, it can be difficult to clearly see how marks were awarded. For example, how do examiners differentiate within bands (e.g. 62% vs. 68%)? Is this consistent across examiners? I had a look at the assessment proforma but

wonder if the team have considered a continuous marking criteria which could more clearly demonstrate how marks are awarded (within and between bands).

The feedback provided on the marking sheets was useful in determining why marks were given, but I would be interested to know if students receive more feedback than this. Although it is useful for me, there is not that much of it and I can imagine that students would prefer an increase in the amount.

One Examiner recommended introducing some form of exam feedback, either to provide markers with a rationale for the mark, or to provide written comments to students

Whilst some Examiners commented positively on the use of the full range of marks, others indicated that this was an area for development:

There is a dearth of marks above the early 70s range, which has the general effect of limiting the number of first class students. In my view, there is no reason not to award higher marks to deserving work, and so I would recommend venturing further up the 'A' band of marks

4.2 Administration

Whilst some very positive feedback was provided on Google Drive (paragraph 3.5 refers), Examiners also highlighted technical difficulties, for example:

Google Drive was problematic in that the format of documents was often inaccessible- if measures could be effected to resolve this efficiency would increase and frustration would decrease.

The only real problem I encountered (and this might not be the place to record it) was with the use of Google Drive for affording me access to student work. Initially it was incredibly time consuming, challenging and frustrating, but I would like to record my thanks to the patience of QMU administrative, IT and academic staff in helping me with the process.

Some Examiners commented more generally on the timing of receipt of student work, for example:

It would be useful to have a timetable of when students submit work, when it is marked and internally moderated and when externals can expect to receive/access the work for external moderation.

I ask that documents are sent for examination a minimum of one week before the board is due to take place.

One Examiner highlighted the need for awareness of RUK bank holidays.

Some Examiners made specific requests for additional information they would wish to receive, including:

- A summary of student achievement each year to provide an overview of course results (number of students and overall marks).
- Data available that allows comparison of average marks between modules so as to be able to discuss implications (should there be any)

- Data available to show degree classifications of graduating students – and trend data on this, so as to be able to compare performance and standards over time.
- Full information about module cohorts, including all marks awarded with an indication of which scripts have been marked and internally moderated and the marks awarded by each.

One Examiner commented on the management of Extenuating Circumstances and relationship between the Exam Board and Extenuating Circumstances Panel. One Examiner perceived that there was some initial confusion around regulations (albeit resolved), whilst another requested clarification of the application of regulations (written response provided and follow-up meeting planned to coincide with the next Exam Board).

The majority of Examiners indicated that they had received sufficient information on the role and programme for which they had been appointed. However, some indicated that they would have welcomed more information. A few Examiners commented that they had not been given the opportunity to comment on draft examinations and other assessment instruments, and that they would have welcomed this opportunity.

Two Examiners suggested that the University might consider a move to paperless Boards to further improve efficiency. Other comments on efficiency included the following:

Whilst some modules are delivered to inter-professional groups and hence to larger module cohorts, the potential to develop this further could be a consideration for this programme in order to allow students the experience of a bigger peer group and help make effective use of resources.

One area for consideration is that some staff provide over long feedback which is very time consuming and also perhaps not on a par with other staff feedback, which was clear and succinct. This could be looked at in staff training.

5 Feedback on institutional regulations, policies and procedures

Examiners recommended that consideration be given to the points detailed below. It is helpful to receive feedback on these matters, which typically stems from good practice experienced by the Examiner at their home HEI, or another HEI with which they are familiar. Typically, changes to QMU's regulations, policies and procedures are considered through the next review of the relevant section of the Quality Framework, usually once every five years. However, exceptionally changes may be implemented between formal reviews, subject to SEC agreement. For those recommendations arising in 2015-16 notes and suggestions are provided in brackets for information, or SEC consideration, as appropriate.

- Greater consistency/standardisation of approaches to feedback across the University [to be discussed through the 2017-18 review of the Assessment Regulations]
- Introduction of a regulation to explicitly prohibit the use of ghost writing services/essay mills [a proposed regulation is due to come to SEC on 25 May 2017. This takes account of the recent QAA report on Essay Writing Services³ and related sector discussions]
- Increased use of student prizes to reward outstanding performance and contribution [Deans to consider, as appropriate]
- Enhanced efficiency of the module change process to minimise barriers to programme development [No action required, as current processes are proportionate to the level of risk]

³ <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=3107#.WOOGCjiQxoA>

- Development of mechanisms to monitor and review the progress and attainment of students carrying modules [No action required, as appropriate mechanisms are in place]
- Personalisation of the External Examiner's Report Form to include pre-populated information, e.g. module titles. [To be discussed through the next scheduled review of External Examiner paperwork, taking account of resource implications]

One Examiner who had previously made a recommendation for enhanced use of plagiarism detection software was pleased to note developments, commenting as follows:

It is excellent to note that all student dissertations are submitted through Turnitin to ensure validity, credibility and reliability

6 Conclusion and recommendations

Overall, the reports received for 2015-16 confirm that the University can have continued confidence in the quality and standards of its awards. Examiners' feedback is used effectively by individual Programme Teams, as evidenced through confirmation from almost all Examiners that their previous year's recommendations had been fully implemented. Feedback from Examiners can also be used to: a) share practice beyond the immediate Programme Team and b) inform institutional developments.

As in previous years, this summary paper will be disseminated via the usual channels, to academic and professional services staff with responsibility for administration of the assessment process. It will also be circulated to all Examiners together with the annual reminder of the submission process and deadline. Staff will be asked to consider, in particular, recommendations for development, but also good practice, where it may be possible to learn from other programmes.

SEC is asked to CONSIDER the possible development of a key themes paper, drawing on good practice and recommendations emerging from the reports. An example of the format for this is provided as Appendix one. Subject to SEC agreement in principle, further work can be undertaken to populate this resource.

SEC approved the key themes paper at the meeting on 12 April 2017

Dawn Martin, Assistant Secretary
Governance and Quality Enhancement
3 April 2017

Key themes emerging from the review of External Examiner reports for 2015-16

Examiners consider the following to be good practice:

Assessment and Feedback

- A broad assessment range that accommodates learner styles/preferences
- Consistency of assessment load across modules
- Consistency of feedback within and across modules – both in terms of quantity and quality
- Evidence of marking against the assessment criteria
- Feedback that is specific and provides pointers to help students improve (even for those students at the very top end of the marking scale)
- Use of the full range of marks, including marks above 80% where appropriate
- Feedback on examinations or an explanation of the rationale for not providing this

Administration

- Early notification of Exam Board dates and dates on which they can expect to receive student work
- Consideration of RUK bank holidays which tend to happen around semester two Exam Board time
- Sufficient time to review student work
- Paperwork that clearly shows how marks have been derived
- Where there is additional feedback to students that is not provided to the Examiner an explanation of why that is the case
- Opportunity to attend practical examinations or to consider video or audio recordings of these – preference/format to be agreed with the Examiner
- Technical support for Google Drive and rapid response to emerging issues

Other

- Opportunities to meet students, where appropriate and possible
- Provision of an enhanced information set before Exam Boards
- Responsiveness to recommendations highlighted previously