

**STUDENT EXPERIENCE COMMITTEE**

**REVIEW OF EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORTS 2016-17 – considered by the Student Experience Committee on 13 February 2018**

**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 session[[1]](#footnote-1). 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 Education[[2]](#footnote-2). 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 2016-17. It includes all programmes delivered by QMU staff in Edinburgh, as well as programmes delivered by collaborative partners in the UK and overseas. 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 was just one outstanding response.

**Number of reports**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Number of Reports Expected** | | | | | | | |
| **Total** | 100 | ASSaM | 37 | Health Sciences | 62 | IGHD | 1 |
| **Number of Reports Submitted** | | | | | | | |
| **Total** | 99 | ASSaM | 37 | Health Sciences | 61 | IGHD | 1 |
| All figures correct as at 01 February 2018 | | | | | | | |

**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 |
| 2016-17 | 99 | 98 | 17 January 2018 |

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 (or Head of Division, where responsibility is delegated) 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 August and September.

**Timescale for submission of 2016-17 reports (figures in brackets are for 2015-16)**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Month** | **Submissions** | **Month** | **Submissions** |
| <May 2017 | 2 (0) | November 2017 | 7 (2) |
| June 2017 | 14 (15) | December 2017 | 0 (4) |
| July 2017 | 7 (11) | January 2018 | 0 (1) |
| August 2017 | 23 (17) | February 2018 | 0 (0) |
| September 2017 | 22 (27) | Later | 0 (2) |
| October 2017 | 17 (10) | Outstanding | 1 (1) |

**3 Good practice**

**3.1 Learning and teaching**

Examiners were very positive regarding the quality and commitment of Programme Teams. Programmes within both Schools were commended for their supportive and enthusiastic approaches to teaching. Examiners highlighted the positive impact on the student experience.

*The staff are clearly committed to offering the students the best learning possible and should be commended on this.* BA (Hons) Events Management

*I am happy to report (as previously) that the course team have done an excellent job with teaching, management and assessment. The students have clearly had excellent opportunities for learning.* MSc Public Health Nutrition

*Across the Programme the team is obviously committed to the students and this was good to see. I visited earlier in the year to view practical work and was impressed by the quality of student engagement and the atmosphere in the department itself. It seemed like a very happy and creative place.* BA (Hons) Drama and Performance

*The Programme Team is small but is made up of a group of enthusiastic and dedicated lecturers who aim to provide a high quality educational experience for their students, an aim which they achieve.* MSc Occupational Therapy

**3.2 Assessment and feedback**

As in the previous year, Examiners commented on the overall mix of assessments, highlighting some innovative approaches.

*The range of assessments was good, developing transferable as well as subject related skills. Some were very innovative, which is welcomed and makes for a more interesting learning experience.* MSc Gastronomy

*I particularly like the way this curriculum requires presentation based assessments, as these challenge the candidates to synthesis and contextualise their in depth thinking verbally and these assignments sit well alongside more traditional written assignments*. MSc Occupational Therapy (post-registration).

*There is a really interesting variety of assessments on offer. In addition, the content of these assessments is highly topical to the field. As a result, the work that is produced by the students is very interesting to read and allows them to demonstrate a range of useful skills.* BSc (Hons) Psychology

*The assessment tasks that I’ve seen are appropriate to the level of assessment. Not only are they consistently of a very high quality, they are also excellent examples of assessment strategies that authentically reflected the requirements of graduate physiotherapists and, as such, are preparing the students well. The team should be commended on such innovative assessments.* MSc Physiotherapy (pre-registration)

Examiners commended feedback which was fair, constructive and transparent. They welcomed feedback which was helpful for students to improve future work. They highlighted good practice where feedback comments were closely aligned to the learning outcomes of the modules and the assessment criteria.

*A particular strength of the programme is the quality of feedback provided and it is good to see that the feedback described not only where marks were lost, but also where more marks could have been gained. This is very helpful for students’ future work.* BA (Hons) Business Management Fast Track

*Continuing from last year, across the majority of modules the feedback is very detailed and very much aligned to the learning outcomes and assessment criteria. This provides a good level of transparency and clarity for students wishing to develop and improve their performance.* MBA Suite and MSc International Management Programmes

*I commented at the Board on the quality of feedback to students. This was exemplary and worthy of special commendation. Feedback to students was usually very detailed, lengthy and constructive in its criticism.* BA (Hons) Public Sociology & Psychology and Sociology

*The quality of feedback and support given to students on this programme is excellent. It is often very challenging and one of the key things I have noted is the way in which feedback is incorporated into subsequent submissions. This is an indicator both of the resilience and quality of the student body and the high quality of the supervision support provided.* Professional Doctorate in Health and Social Sciences

*The standard of feedback which is provided for students is of an exceptionally high quality and I hope that students appreciate and value the attention that the team obviously give to this. Feedback includes detailed information about positive aspects of performance as well as very detailed suggestions about how work could be improved. My only comment here would be to ask the team to consider how sustainable this is with the additional pressures of the academic year.* MSc Speech and Language Therapy

Examiners commended fair marking and good internal processes for resolving disagreements between first and second markers.

*I was able to listen to audio-recorded student presentations and the discussions of tutors agreeing marks for these, which revealed considered processes and good use of marking criteria.* MSc Speech and Language Therapy

Most comments surrounding assessment and feedback were positive. However, some Examiners also highlighted areas for improvement (paragraph 4.1 refers).

**3.3 Curriculum and employability**

Examiners commended the content of programmes and the skills they help develop in students. Some Examiners specifically commended programmes as being up-to-date with current practices or demands from employers. Suggestions for additional were put forward in some cases (paragraph 4.4 refers).

*The Programme continues to offer students an excellent grounding in the discipline of event management and related subjects. It provides students with logistical and practical skills and knowledge whilst also demanding an excellent level of critically at level 3 and 4, with a strong development through to the honours year.* BA (Hons) Event Management

*This course provides an excellent basis for students to build a career in Dietetics on. I have been impressed with the way the course maintains its relevance incorporating the current hot topics in clinical Dietetics into its teaching and training. I have no doubt that students are given every opportunity to excel and are well supported on their learning journey.* BSc (Hons) Dietetics

*The key texts for each module are kept up to date, which is an excellent indication that the current developments in each field are regularly incorporated into teaching.* IGHD

Health Sciences Examiners commended the programmes on their alignment with the requirements of the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) and professional body expectations. A few also noted that the programmes provided students with the skills required by the NHS.

*Students demonstrated a good understanding of key aspects re research, critical thinking, synthesis of occupational therapy process. There was evidence of engagement with national policies and current health and social issues impacting on health and well- being.* BSc (Hons) Occupational Therapy

*I am very happy with the way that the programme has developed over time, in accordance with professional standards for health visiting practice.* MSc Person Centered Practice

*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.* BSc (Hons) Community Health Nursing

**3.4 Student support and performance**

The 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.

Examiners commended the high standard of student work.

*The students’ work is of a consistently high standard, reflecting the richness of professional doctorates.* Professional Doctorate in Health and Social Science

*The previously noted improvement in M level writing skills of students is noted to have been maintained this year. The extra work staff have undertaken in order to provide support for students with this aspect of their academic development is evident in the performance of students.* PgDip Radiotherapy and Oncology

*There is some superb practical work from students in the samples I have been sent: mature, thoughtful and distinctive work, particularly at dissertation level. There is also some exceptional theoretical understanding demonstrated at the top end of the conceptual modules. Even at the lower end, I am impressed by the standard of presentation and rigour. I saw very little work anywhere that I thought was not of a passing standard. As previously indicated, it is apparent to me that students on this programme are being appropriately challenged in their work, taught excellent content, and achieving standards well in line with other institutions, and in some cases producing work approaching professional standards.* BA (Hons) Film and Media

*There was a range of student performance across the work reviewed. There were some excellent pieces of work, with the clinical assessments reflecting a very holistic and client-centred approach.* BSc (Hons) Speech and Language Therapy

**3.5 Administration**

Feedback on the conduct of the Board of Examiners and External moderation process was largely positive. A small number Examiners commented positively on receiving work for moderation by various electronic means, although others experienced some technical problems with accessing work (paragraph 4.2 refers).

*The information being supplied electronically was very helpful and much more environmentally friendly. As a champion of the Grademark tool within Turnitin, I found reviewing the students work and feedback to be much more conducive than hard copy samples.* BA (Hons) International Hospitality and Tourism Management

*The main improvements related to external examining is the use of Google Drive – this has made the process of examining much easier and allowed me to receive the content in a more timely fashion. There has been a genuine improvement over the last few years and this is to be commended.* Master of Research

*The access to a comprehensive range of material (examples of student work; assessment guidelines; marking and moderation records etc) via ‘google Drive’ is excellent.* BSc (Hons) Physiotherapy

Examiners praised the work of the School Office in the preparations and arrangements of Exam Boards.

*[The School Office Team] not only support the external examiners but it is clear that they support the academic staff in ensuring processes are smooth and exam boards are efficient.* BA (Hons) Events Management

*In terms of the administration process and the procedures followed by the Board of Examiners, I would commend all involved for making it such a seamless exercise. For the event to run so smoothly is a testament to the hard work done in advance by the whole team.* BA (Hons) International Hospitality and Business Management

*The organisation around the Board of Examiners was excellent. Access to material for moderation was well organised.* BSc (Hons) Psychology

The majority of Examiners (95% of those in post for a second or subsequent year) indicated that they had received a satisfactory response to their previous report, expressing confidence that their recommendations had been considered and acted upon to their satisfaction. 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 2017 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.

Thirteen end of tenure summaries were provided in total, all of which were positive. One example is given below:

*This period has been characterised by a real sense of commitment on the part of academic staff to maintain very high standards of teaching, assessment and student support. While student work varies and is often very good, grades obtained are certainly obtained by merit with high grades not being easily achieved. In general feedback is very supportive to facilitate future academic improvements on the part of students and this is usually extensive and accurate, providing a clear justification of grades awarded. While there are some inconsistencies around the amount of feedback provided- i.e. annotations, the vast majority well exceeded a reasonable minimal standard. Academic staff know their students well- this is very clear at exam boards. There has been effective moderation system in place. Over time there have been some useful curriculum developments and I have had the privilege of being consulted on proposals. The School is to be commended for a curriculum which is theoretically based but explicitly linked to practice improvement, much of this being evident in the focus of assessments and extensive well-supported student efforts having great potential to not only enhance the academic and professional development of individual students but also to stimulate genuine practice improvements in clinical and other work place environments.* MSc Person-Centred Practice Framework

**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 (paragraph 3.2 refers), some Examiners highlighted areas where improvements could be made.

Examiners made recommendations around the marking criteria used for assessments and the consistency of marking as well as giving encouragement to use the full range of marks in the highest and fail grades.

*My recommendation to the team is they continue to look at criteria for marking within 70-100 range in order to encourage marking at the full range of marks.*

Three Examiners highlighted the challenges of assessing group work.

*An area of interest was the distribution of marks for group work. This is a problem for all institutions, but I would encourage staff to consider ways of recognising individual effort.*

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

*Consider aligning the current approaches to presentation of feedback on assignments across the modules (for example, agreeing a common format for general feedback, while keeping an option of detailed in-text comments).*

*Assessment criteria in the Clinical Practice Examinations are detailed – the feedback form might be developed to include these to assist examiners in preparing the feedback and assigning the grade, along with signposting to students any future learning needs.*

One Examiner recommended introducing audio feedback, to provide additional help for students to improve their future work.

A small number of Examiners recommended more standardised or transparent practices in relation to internal moderation and second marking.

*The assessment concerns, which arose in my last report, are being tackled particularly in the final year as an extra internal assessor, from another course within the college, has been engaged in double-marking / internal verification. I would encourage this in all larger projects, so that the students can be offered feedback from more than one source. I suggest also that this approach (which could be reciprocal as in the case of the fourth year) may be beneficial to all staff, as it will expose different approaches to assessment and open up a useful discussion with which all academics in all institutions should engage, regarding best practice in relation to written feedback and of achievement levels as tools to best support students’ learning.*

*My suggestion would be for the process of moderation to be slightly more clearly articulated – clearly expressing each marker’s suggested grade (where I would expect some discord) and how the final grade was achieved. I do not dispute the final awarded grade but think clarity on the process would be useful.*

**4.2 Administration**

While most Examiners commended the administration surrounding Boards of Examiners and external moderation (paragraph 3.5 refers), others made recommendations for improvements to practices. Some Examiners reported difficulties with accessing work or requested to receive marks and samples presented in alternative formats.

*I would like to see the marks set out on spreadsheets as I indicated earlier so that I can better analyse the statistical breakdown of marks within and between modules – in particular the means of coursework components and examinations and module total marks.*

*For the second year work was uploaded to google drive for me to view. While I applaud this for saving the paper and postage sending work to me would involve I do continue to have frustrations accessing it, particularly in relation to constant need to change passwords.*

Other Examiners, who had not been given access to materials via the Hub, requested to move to this process for next year.

A few Examiners noted tight turnaround times for moderation and requested longer timeframes to review samples and assessment drafts. One suggested that a flow chart be provided with dates of when work would be sent to help balance other work commitments.

*I think there are two ways of mitigating the problem of timing. Firstly, in my view there is no reason at all that semester one materials cannot be sent as soon as the internal moderation has taken place. This year, I requested that these materials be sent to me in March. I didn’t receive them until May. Secondly, I believe it would be good practice to provide the external with assessments that have been moderated as and when they come in rather than wait until close to the exam board to send them. This will allow your external to manage her/his time more effectively, and will avoid a pile-up of external examination to occur at precisely the same moment as marking pressures occur at their own institutions.*

**4.3 Student and staff experience**

A number of Examiners suggested that student workloads could benefit from review in terms of assessment load and word counts. For example:

*I wonder if more assessments should have electronic submission to [potentially] offer more immediate engagement with feedback and delivery at a time that suits the student*

*There did appear to be some lack of parity in terms of what a 30-credit assessment load might consist of, with differing word lengths for assignments. This was discussed with the team, who will review assessment parity in due course.*

The above comment is timely given the on-going work of the University and Student Experience Committee to establish a standard framework through the Portfolio Sustainability Review and Assessment Regulations review.

One Examiner cautioned against increasing cohort sizes at the risk of reducing the student experience. Another recommended the allocation of placements should take into account the geographical location of students.

A small number of Examiners made observations about staffing levels. These comments were generally positive with the Examiners noting the high standard of delivery and support. However, Examiners also made comments around sustainability to ensure continued delivery of a high quality student experience and to ensure sufficient time for the full range of learning and teaching and research activity.

**4.4 Curriculum**

Examiners made suggestions for including additional resources, modules, topics or practical experiences specific to the Programmes they were reviewing.

*As some of the literature referred to by some students is rather dated, it would be useful for the course team to review and update the reading list bibliographies in all module materials. Likewise, subject resources in the QMU library could usefully be reviewed to ensure the ongoing inclusion of contemporary publications.*

A small number of Examiners recommended additional use of formative assessments to track student progress throughout the year.

*I did ask that, if possible, consideration be given to giving students some early formative work to help them better understand the nature and quality of work which they should be producing for assessment.*

*For modules containing only one summative assignment, I recommend checking for (and adding as appropriate) adequate monitoring and support to the students throughout the module (either a formative assignment or other measures such as informal feedback during in-class groupwork or exercises). This should help ensure the timely identification and addressing of any issues which can affect the final students’ performance.*

**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 2016-17 notes and suggestions are provided in brackets for information, or SEC consideration, as appropriate.

* Introduction of a regulation to explicitly prohibit the use of ghost writing services/essay mills [a new regulation was added in 2016-17; to be discussed further through the 2017-18 review of the Assessment Regulations]
* Greater consistency/standardisation of approaches to feedback across the University [to be discussed through the 2017-18 review of the Assessment Regulations]
* The number of attempts permitted, with particular reference to placement or clinical practice modules. [to be discussed through the 2017-18 review of the Assessment Regulations]
* Employing a dedicated IPE External Examiner to review all of the IPE modules.

One External noted that a module leader had provided a ‘module overview and briefing note’ which they found very useful. They suggested rolling this out over other modules as standard practice.

One Examiner requested an annual review of assessments to help demonstrate where changes were made to assessments in response to different factors, including Examiner comments.

One Examiner made the following suggestion regarding the reporting of extenuating circumstances at Exam Boards:

*I was happy with the processes at the board. It may be worth removing the process of considering extenuating circumstances from the assessment board to ensure fairness. At the moment staff often present extenuating circumstances at the assessment board and, whilst the knowledge of the students individually is clearly excellent and to be commended, it does mean that whether a student’s extenuating circumstances are considered could be reliant on a staff member attending the assessment board (which is not always the case, particularly at the resit board). It also relies on students telling staff members. In my view a more consistent and equitable approach can be achieved if extenuating circumstances are handled in a board.*

Four Examiners suggested that the University might consider a move to paperless Boards to further improve efficiency and for environmental reasons.

**6 Conclusion and recommendations**

Overall, the reports received for 2016-17 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.

Alison Thomson

Project and Policy Officer

January 2018

1. The annual summaries are available on the University’s Quality website at:

   https://www.qmu.ac.uk/about-the-university/quality/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For further information, please see: http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Documents/Quality%20Code%20-%20Chapter%20B7.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-2)