



**STUDENT EXPERIENCE COMMITTEE**

**REVIEW OF EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORTS 2017-18**

**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<sup>1</sup>. 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 advice and guidance contained in the External Expertise Theme of the QAA Quality Code for Higher Education<sup>2</sup>. The supporting text under the Delivery and Monitoring section of that Chapter reads as follows:

*At a senior committee level, it is established practice for degree-awarding bodies to consider a summary of external examiners' responses annually, and this is reported to the appropriate academic authority. This enables them to draw out any themes or recurring recommendations, and ensure that these are fully addressed.*

This report was compiled on the basis of External Examiners' annual reports for the Session 2017-18. 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 by 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 six outstanding responses.

**Number of reports**

<b>Number of Reports Expected</b>							
<b>Total</b>	100	ASSaM	30	Health Sciences	69	IGHD	1
<b>Number of Reports Submitted</b>							
<b>Total</b>	99	ASSaM	29	Health Sciences	69	IGHD	1
All figures correct as at 02 May 2019							

<sup>1</sup> The annual summaries are available on the University's Quality website at <https://www.qmu.ac.uk/about-the-university/quality/>

<sup>2</sup> For further information, please see. [https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/quality-code/advice-and-guidance-external-expertise.pdf?sfvrsn=6f2ac181\\_2](https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/quality-code/advice-and-guidance-external-expertise.pdf?sfvrsn=6f2ac181_2)

## Comparison with previous years

Year	Received (%)	Responded to (%)	Date of review
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
2017-18	99	94	02 May 2019

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.

As in previous years, 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 2017-18 reports (figures in brackets are for 2016-17)

Month	Submissions	Month	Submissions
<May 2018	1 (2)	November 2018	8 (7)
June 2018	15 (14)	December 2018	1 (0)
July 2018	11 (7)	January 2019	1 (0)
August 2018	28 (17)	February 2019	0 (0)
September 2018	27 (22)	Later	0 (0)
October 2018	15 (17)	Outstanding	1 (1)

### **3 Good practice**

#### **3.1 Learning and teaching**

Examiners were very positive regarding staff commitment, expertise and the resulting quality of provision. Teams within both Schools were commended on their supportive and enthusiastic approaches to teaching.

*The Programme is extremely well managed and offers a quality and coherent learning experience for the students. MA Arts, Festival and Cultural Management*

*I continue to be impressed by the standard of teaching on the course and the commitment to excellence shown. BSc (Hons) Dietetics*

*The Team has been fantastic and creative in the delivery of this Programme. MSc Advancing Physiotherapy Practice*

*Staff are clearly committed to offering the students the best learning possible. BA (Hons) Event Management*

*Staff go out of their way to be helpful, placements seemed as if they were planned according to student learning needs, and students thought staff listened and acted upon suggestions and needs. Staff are available for tutorials when needed and always respond quickly in a crisis if a student needs special advice. MSc Music Therapy*

#### **3.2 Assessment and feedback**

##### **3.2.1 Assessment types and mix**

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

*The Programme has recently been updated to include e-assessment and includes a wide variety of assessment tools enabling students to demonstrate their strengths through a number of assessment strategies, both academic and clinical. MSc Mammography*

*The course shows an impressive commitment to utilising the most appropriate forms of assessment for each module and the adjustments made to assessment have always been appropriate and in the best interests of the student. BSc (Hons) Dietetics*

*All assessments I viewed were appropriate to the units examined and to the levels. They gave the students the ability to focus in their interests whilst maintaining standards across the board. The diet is well balanced with live events, presentations, web-based activities, exams reports and essays. The blog assessments are particularly worth noting as good practice. They develop real world writing skills and technology skills. BA (Hons) Events Management*

*Methods of assessment are excellent and use an interesting range of assessment types. These all have good clinical relevance for students. MSc Speech & Language Therapy (Pre-Registration)*

*The approach to and contents of teaching and assessment are excellent and commensurate to the specific topics taught within each module. IGHD*

### **3.2 Guidance on assessment**

Positive feedback was also provided on the approach to preparing students for assessment through the provision of clear guidance.

*The support for assessments is tremendous – the briefing and detailed guidance given is (and always has been) a real strength of the Programme across all modules. This consistency in support across a range of assessment points is key to student success. MSc Public Services Leadership*

*The assignment briefs are excellent and in particular the Honours Dissertation Guide deserves particular praise. It covers all aspects of the dissertation process and the Learning Agreement between student and supervisors that is required to be signed by both commits both parties to the relationship and the process. BA (Hons) Business Management*

### **3.3 Feedback**

Examiners' reports identified good practice in relation to the level of detail, format and consistency of feedback students received.

*The level of feedback provided to students is impressive and above and beyond what I would expect to see. BSc (Hons) Dietetics*

*In all modules, there is very constructive written feedback that includes comments on how the work can be further improved, as well as commends students for their efforts.....Assessment criteria for each assignment are very clearly laid out and are in line with module's learning outcomes. There is good practice in that an assessment grid/table is used in all module assessment that outlines each assessment criterion. This helps students see how their final mark was achieved as well as how their work has been marked against each assessment criterion.*

BA (Hons) Media Production, AKMI

*The feedback offered is excellent and students can see where their mark comes from. The model answers for the exams are a great idea for internal purposes. BA (Hons) Events Management*

*The use of audio feedback in particular is very good – I perceive it gives an additional, more personal, dimension to the student, and its use could be extended. BSc (Hons) Physiotherapy*

Overall 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 and/or employer expectations.

*This is a well-run and unique offering, providing students with a rigorous, well-taught education. Students develop a wide range of skills, as well as subject knowledge, through a range of different and innovative assessments. MA Gastronomy*

*The inclusion of oral presentations and the creation of production artefacts (e.g. prompt book) were welcome amendments and replicated more closely the communication tools of the industry for which these students are preparing to join. MA Stage Management*

Some Health Sciences Examiners commended the Programmes on their alignment with the requirements of the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) and professional body expectations.

*Mapping of the course content to the Association for Nutrition core competencies really highlights the ability of this course to 'meet the needs' of the students. The Team are congratulated for the number of employability-relevant examples in the assessments used. This will be of considerable benefit to graduates. MSc Public Health Nutrition*

*The aims and modular content have been very well designed and developed, preparing graduates with the knowledge and skills required to be fit to practice within the environment in which they intend to be working in the future. The assignments were also topical to their future practice setting. MSc Advanced Dietetics Practice (Greece)*

*The modules link theory to students' practice and enable them to develop their knowledge and skills to lead and develop person centered holistic care, in line with national objectives. BSc (Hons) 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. Sample comments are provided below:

*Quality of students' work is generally of a very good standard and is comparable with other similar Programmes. There is an appropriate spread of marks across the different assessment categories, which in my experience is comparable with other UK institutions. IGHD*

*There continues to be a full spread of marks across the cohort which gives confidence to the robustness of the Programme. At the top end there is some exceptional work with detailed and useful feedback from staff. MA Arts, Festival and Cultural Management.*

Examiners also commended the high standard of student work at QMU.

*The knowledge of individual students and their circumstances by the academics is incredible and demonstrates how involved and supportive as a team they must be. This is reflected in some excellent performances from students and a very healthy ratio of firsts and 2.1s. BSc (Hons) Psychology*

*I'm impressed with some of the group or individual assignments. There is some high quality student work. Some students managed to present work almost to professional level. I want to congratulate all the team members for supporting the students to discover their strengths, improve their skills and experience real life cases before their professional journey begins. BA (Hons) Public Relations*

*Some of the dissertation work I moderated this year were of a publishable standard. This reflects the maturity and ability of students as well and the high quality of teaching and supervision provided by the team. MSc Speech & Language Therapy (pre-registration)*

*Students on this Programme demonstrate some very sophisticated thinking. Some of the Dissertations are worthy of submission for conferences and publication. MSc Occupational Therapy (pre-registration)*

### **3.5 Administration**

Feedback on the conduct of the Board of Examiners and External moderation process was largely positive.

*I was given full opportunity to participate in the Exam Board Meetings and found these to be rigorous. BSc (Hons) Speech & Language Therapy*

*I was most impressed with the efficiency of the Exam Board and the presentation and consideration of marks. MA Stage Management*

*The co-ordination between QMU and AKMI and the quality control systems in place make my work as external examiner a lot easier. QMU's administrative processes for external examiners including boards are commendable. BA (Hons) IHTM (Greece)*

Some Examiners commented on the increased availability of materials that could be accessed electronically and the improvements to the process in comparison to previous years that they had experienced as a result

*All documentation (PowerPoint presentations, poster samples, presentation and viva videos) were provided online via GoogleDrive and was easily accessible, following clear instructions from the School Office and the IT team. This made the review process much easier particularly for cross referencing against Module Descriptors and Module Handbooks. International Hospitality & Management*

*There has certainly been an improvement in terms of the availability of relevant documentation, sample work etc on the HUB and Google Drive. Of particular note here was my ability to review student presentations, the PowerPoint slides and marking proforma in the one place on Google Drive. MBA Hospitality Management*

Examiners praised the support they received from the School Office through the year, particularly in the preparations and arrangements of Exam Boards.

*The administration process for External Examining has been highly supportive, as always. The team at QMU has provided me with all the details and access required to provide comments on work, assessment feedback mechanisms and student performance.*

*I would like to acknowledge the excellent support and coordination provided by the academic and support staff from within these three programmes. This included timely provision of all appropriate materials and information as needed, and made my role as external examiner much easier.*

### **3.6 End of tenure summaries**

Examiners submitting their final report to QMU are invited to provide an overview of their experience. 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.

Twenty-five end of tenure summaries were provided in total, all of which were positive. Two examples are given below.

*In these four years, I have been impressed with the staff's commitment to professional and curriculum development and their receptiveness to my comments, which has led to improvement of academic practices across the board. On the practical side, the communication and access to material has improved significantly over the years, especially after the introduction of the online system (Google Drive). What could improve and this is something to continue to work on in the future, is the time given to the External Examiners to review the material. It usually tends to be very close to the deadline, which tends to coincide with other demanding obligations at the Examiner's home institution. BSc (Hons) Speech and Language Therapy, Greece*

*It has been a pleasure to have been involved in the Programme, and in particular to have assessed some excellent work completed by the students. The move to refocus the Programme to a fully online environment has, I think, been very positive and is clearly advantageous for supporting flexible and accessible learning for busy professionals. The student support and particularly the excellent assessment feedback processes has been consistent across years and modules. This year in particular I was impressed with the online portfolio and was able to navigate through students' work with ease. It has been a pleasure to work with the academic staff who have always been very responsive when I needed guidance and also the PGAdmin staff. MSc Professional and Higher Education*

#### **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 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.

*I have noted frequently comments such as 'we could not have asked for much more', but with a grade in the mid-70s. If it is the case that a student could not have done much better than the grade should reflect this. Please award your outstanding students grades commensurate with their performance.*

One Examiner noted, as a point for discussion, that there had been a move away from too much variety of assessment at their institution.

*The range of assessments offers variety which speaks to students' different learning styles and prepares them for a variety of future directions. However, I would encourage some discussion*

*about the risks of too much variety in assessment and whether this does at times, for the weaker students, limit their ability to practice one well e.g. essay writing leading towards final project.*

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

*Feedback on assessment continues to vary from module to module, as does evidence of moderation.*

Some Examiners commended the structure, content and processes for providing feedback within specific modules and recommended that this be extended across the Programme to further enhance the student experience and provide consistency.

*Some modules provided excellent detailed feedback to the students and addressed both the better aspects of the assignment, as well as areas of improvement to inform justification for marks. It would be helpful to use this detailed feedback process more consistently across all modules ensuring comments clearly articulate the criteria within the grade awarded. This could enable continued enhancement to the quality assessment process and enable students to further develop their knowledge and academic writing skills.*

Some Examiners noted the challenges with assessing group work and recommended that individualised feedback be provided.

*Where there is an individual component within group projects, students need to see individualised feedback and grades. This is particularly problematic where the feedback is the same, but the grade is different.*

In addition, individual marks for group presentations were suggested by one Examiner.

*For module XXXX marks for group presentation were equally awarded to all group member. It would be helpful to consider if these could be individualized to take into account individual contributions and presentation skills, which did vary between group members.*

One Examiner recommended that consideration be given to providing more extensive written feedback to students that were undertaking a re-sit.

*Do consider writing more detailed feedback to students who are resitting assessment, as these students are the students that need more support to develop their writing skills.*

## **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.

As in the previous year, a few Examiners recommended that a pre-board meeting be conducted to address withdrawals, deferrals and extenuating circumstances, rather than including this discussion in the Exam Board meeting.

*I believe it would be a step forward to remove discussions of extenuating circumstances from the assessment boards to maintain fairness for all students. My concern here is that the*

*circumstances of some students may only be known by a member of staff who is not present. If there is a clear deadline and an independent panel prior to the assessment board this removes the issue.*

*This would give teaching Teams an opportunity to consider their marking and if there are borderline cases, or questions over a student's performance, this might be dealt with in advance and therefore ensure the smooth running of the official board meeting. An example of this would be a student missing out on a classification because of a borderline grade. In these cases, a preliminary board meeting could ensure the matter is dealt with, to the students' advantage by the teaching team, to avoid the decision going to the official board for consideration.*

A few Examiners noted tight turnaround times for moderation and requested longer timeframes to review samples and assessment drafts. One requested earlier notification of the dates for receipt and review of work to help balance other work commitments.

#### **4.3 Student and staff experience**

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

*The issue of including, or not including appendices in the assignment should be addressed. I would suggest that all required information be included in the report, and a longer, and clearer word limit is given.*

As in the previous year, 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.

### **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.

Three Examiners suggested that QMU consider the use of a stepped approach to grades (e.g. 52, 54, 56, 58) to reduce the number of students receiving borderline grades.

*The issue of awarding marks with 9s caused problems with the board and could have been avoided if the course team had a meeting prior to the board to address the issue of 'step change' 9s. I would recommend that 9s are not used. ...The impact on student self-esteem and sense of achievement of gaining 60 versus 59 is significant. In one case, a higher classification would have been missed because of 1% of one module in the Programme.*

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

One Examiner suggested that the electronic moderation process be moved to Blackboard to improve efficiency as they already had access to modules via this platform and could therefore access the scripts there.

## **6 Conclusion and recommendations**

Overall, the reports received for 2017-18 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.

Lucy Hinds  
Quality Enhancement Officer  
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