Summary of External Examiner Reports for Undergraduate Programmes in 2012-13

A report by the Assistant Registrar (Senate & Academic Review)

This report provides a general overview, highlighting good practice, common themes and key areas of concern identified in the 127 external examiner reports received for the 2012-13 undergraduate examinations in Science, Engineering, Medicine and Business. Programme specific issues highlighted in Appendix A have already been considered by the relevant Departments and appropriate Studies Committees.

General Overview

As was the case last year, external examiners reported that the quality and standards of undergraduate degree programmes at Imperial College compared favourably to other institutions within the UK and in some cases the standards were noted as being above those of students studying at other institutions of which external examiners had experience. It was largely felt that programmes continue to be coherently structured and appropriately taught for the level and subject area. The previous summary report, focussing on external examiner reports on the 2011-12 academic year, identified 3 themes highlighted by external examiners for Science, Engineering and Business which required consideration by the College. Analysis of reports on the 2012-13 academic year has identified 7 and 1 over-arching theme. The previous summary report identified 1 theme highlighted by external examiners for Medicine. Analysis of reports on the 2012-13 academic year has identified 2.

Good Practice

Of the 127 external examiner reports received, nearly all highlighted aspects of good practice. Many of the examples are programme specific but are outlined in Appendix A. In order to promote the dissemination of good practice throughout the College two of the more common items of good practice are highlighted here:

1. 8 external examiners praised the excellent, detailed and constructive feedback provided to students on assessed work
2. 4 external examiners commented on the benefits of the direct link between the programmes and current research in Departments

Items for further consideration by the College

Over-arching theme

- Reflecting the individual themes outlined below, there appears to be one over-arching theme. A significant number of External Examiners across a range of Departments raised issues relating to consistency of practice. Such comments apply to a number of different aspects of the assessment process and these are summarised in the list below [the number of external examiners who identified a particular issue can be seen in the individual themes below]:
  - Variations in the quality, accuracy and consistency of examination papers and model answers;
Variations in the volume of assessment across modules and content [amount of work expected] of examination papers;

Marking schemes and schemes for the award of honours could be better defined to ensure consistency of application;

Variations in student achievement across modules, particularly in elective subjects, and modules with consistently low marks;

Lack of consistency in the annotation of scripts and provision of comments to justify the award of marks and comments that were inconsistent with the marks awarded;

Evidence of second/double marking variable and not always apparent;

Variation in marking practice between staff and inconsistencies in the marks awarded by different members of staff. Marking schemes not always applied consistently [relates also to bullet point 3 above].

Individual themes – Undergraduate Science, Engineering & Business

12 External Examiners across 8 Departments raised the concern that, in a number of cases, markers had not provided comments to justify the award of marks, or those comments were too brief. External examiners were therefore not always able to fully understand the rationale for the award of marks. In general, the External Examiners concerned pointed to a lack of consistency in the annotation of scripts and the explanatory comments for the award of marks. In three instances External Examiners commented that the marks awarded were not consistent with the comments. Related to these issues, three external examiners also commented that evidence of second/double marking was variable and not always apparent. Similar issues were raised by external examiners for 7 Departments in 2010-11 and 4 Departments in 2011-12. Similar issues were also raised by 10 external examiners across 7 Master's programmes in 2012-13.

External Examiners in 3 Departments commented on the year weightings of the programmes. These comments included: that it was unusual in weighting the Year 1 mark into the final degree mark; that the weighting between years was uniform, which was considered unusual; and that the weighting was too heavy on certain years.

External Examiners in 6 Departments reported issues relating to grade boundaries and how degree classifications were calculated, including the arrangements for borderline decisions. These included: that the overall distribution of marks should be taken into account in the assessment of the final grade; the need to revise the honours scheme, with a view to creating a broader classification profile or using a simple GPA; that current borderlines between grades were “too narrow”; a lack of transparency related to the decision of where the mark boundaries should lie; that instead of Viva Voce the Department should profile the module marks and have an algorithm to decide borderline cases.

External Examiners in 5 Departments reported issues relating to a variation in student achievement across modules in certain programmes. One examiner commented that the difference between the lowest and highest average mark across modules was 32%. Both external examiners for one Department commented on the variation in student achievement across modules. Another examiner commented on a final year module that ‘consistently had a low average mark’.

13 External Examiners across 8 Departments raised issues relating to marking schemes and marking criteria and the consistency with which they were applied. These included: that marking guidelines were too vague and required greater clarity;
that more detailed marking schemes were needed; simplification of marking schemes to obtain overall marks of 100; to consider sharing marking practice between examiners in different modules to ensure the mark scheme is applied consistently; to consider improving project assessment guidance to aid in calibrating marking across a large number of staff involved in project assessment.

- 9 External Examiners across 6 Departments reported issues relating to the quality, accuracy and consistency of examination papers and model answers. A number of the external examiners concerned commented on a lack of consistency in the formatting of examination papers and errors and omissions in the model answers. Three external examiners also commented that they had not received all of the draft examination papers or model answers. Five external examiners had received either limited or no feedback to their comments on the draft examination papers and model answers. The clarity of model answers provided to external examiners and the provision of exam papers and model answers to externals were both issues raised by external examiners in 7 Departments in 2010-11 and 3 Departments in 2011-12. Similar issues were also raised by external examiners across 16 Master’s programmes in 2012-13.

- External examiners in 3 Departments commented on the volume of assessment and, in particular, consistency in the amount of work expected of students across modules. Comments included: that the volume of work expected in exams in some cases was too high; that the Department should consider harmonising exam papers such that the time allowed and number of substantive answers was similar; and that some harmonisation of what is an appropriate amount of assessment is needed [with specific reference to two examination papers of the same duration but with considerable differences in the amount of work required].

Individual Themes – Undergraduate Medicine

- 9 External Examiners across a range of different years (GEP, Year 1, Year 2, Year 3, Year 4 [BSc], Year 5) and for the BSc Biomedical Sciences programme raised issues relating to marking schemes and marking criteria. These included: the need for a more rigorous marking scheme to better differentiate student achievement; greater flexibility in the marking scheme; marking scheme considered too complex; the need for exam paper setters to produce an accompanying marking scheme for consistency; that the marking scheme lacked clarity; and model answers occasionally lacking detail of the mark breakdown.

- 4 External Examiners (GEP, Year 1, Year 2 and Year 6) commented that the quality of examination papers could be improved. Specific comments included: that additional questions requiring students to apply knowledge and reasoning should be included; time should be spent on the exam item banks, looking at the quality of the SBAs in particular; that the SBA was of poor quality stylistically, with a number of errors and omissions.
<table>
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<th>Department</th>
<th>Issues for concern/ consideration</th>
<th>Good practice</th>
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| The Business School         | • Marks inflated due to use of short answer/multiple choice questions  
• Issue of standards and over-generous marking is a recurring theme in a number of modules  
• All marks had already been agreed internally and there did not appear to be any scope to change marks  
• No indication of how overall marks were awarded nor any feedback or comments to external examiners  
• Model answers and examination papers were variable in quality and format  
• Inconsistency in assessment across modules – needs to be some harmonisation of what is an appropriate amount of assessment  
• Lack of individually assessed coursework / heavy reliance on group coursework  
• Lack of individually assessed pieces of writing. Current group coursework in [Economics] needs to be replaced with an individual piece of coursework.  
• Need for greater diversity of assessment methods  
• Group coursework and projects – group sizes should be reduced  
• Negative marking for MCQs should be discontinued  
• Long numerical exercises should not be used as MCQs | • Suggestions, criticisms, or queries are always followed up and addressed  
• Group coursework and projects are examples of good practice, enabling students to learn through real life problems and to apply their skills in a collaborative way |
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| **Centre for Co-Curricular Studies** | - Presentation and layout of student submissions could be improved.  
- Further thought might be given to improving skills in the variation and development of materials  
- At the summative stage it is wise to avoid modifiers such as ‘maybe’, etc. when pointing to deficiencies in submitted coursework  
- When it comes to marking compositions (i.e. short essays), either as part of exam papers or coursework assignments, the current practice needs to be harmonised  
- Another potential problem is that some students will be allowed to do the course for credit and others not  
- I raise again the issue of the balance between two essays and an exam (30:40:30). One longer essay would allow students to demonstrate a deeper understanding of topics.  
- I had also suggested that separate mark sheets are used by first and second markers, with a requirement that their names are printed                                                                 | - Tailoring the content of the language development modules to the scientific outlook of their student body  
- The generally insightful, helpful and supportive feedback to students, justifying the marks awarded in line with published grading standards.  
- A clear and succinct marking scheme, strong for being so transparent and accessible.  
- Applying innovative teaching methodology and establishing strong class dynamics  
- Regular and detailed feedback in the form of marked coursework allows students to evaluate their progress on a weekly basis  
- Model answers were provided for all modules, even for the combined degrees. They were very detailed and really helpful both for the internal markers and the external  
- Double-marking everything, and giving the students substantial written feedback on their first essays, are both striking examples of good practice.                                                                                                                                                                          |
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| Aeronautics      | - Number of first class degrees has risen from 25% to 66% since 2008. Review marking criteria for projects and weighting of project in final year  
- Units with low averages moderated up but units with high averages not moderated down. Moderation process should be reviewed for consistency  
- Helicopter Dynamics continues to be of concern (as last year) with module marks that are consistently below other modules  
- Structure and content of exam papers inconsistent  
- Department should use the same format (font, size, spacing) for all exam papers  
- Errors and omissions in model answers  
- Consider provision of historical data for exam boards | - The robustness of the moderation procedure used in the student projects  
- Both the design project and research project activities are of high quality  
- Wide range of specialised units available to the students |
| Bioengineering   | - Look at depth and breadth of Medsci courses and consider whether standards in ‘Medsci’ mastery I and II could be raised  
- Concern regarding supervisor marking of lab skills component or project and effect on overall mark. Review of weighting of this would be appropriate and adoption of a more objective marking scheme considered.  
- On-going issues regarding HCARD marking model yet to be resolved.  
- Model answers would be improved by use of a suitable template.  
- Improve timeliness of feedback and provision of feedback to external examiners on examination papers and model answers  
- Possibility of improving project assessment guidance to align student performance expectations to the honours classification – to aid in calibrating marking across the large number of staff engaged in project assessment. | - Excellent opportunities for students to engage with staff, external examiners and industry during poster presentation sessions. The appointment of an Industrial Liaison Officer has greatly enhanced this  
- The support both academic and pastoral afforded students by members of the department |
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| Chemical Engineering     | • Course is still too grounded in traditional Chemical Engineering particularly in years 1-3. Valuable for the students if the core courses applied principles to problems in the newer areas of Chemical Engineering  
                          | • More consistency in the elective marks between options  
                          | • Design Project marking dominated by group marks and does not always distinguish between major and minor contributors to the group effort  
                          | • As mentioned last year consider revisiting the honours scheme, with a view to creating a broader classification profile or using a simple GPA  
                          | • Detailed marking schemes would be useful and would represent good practice  
                          | • Considerable variation in student achievement across modules. This is of particular concern for elective subjects, where the choice of elective could influence degree classification  
                          | • Criterion for ‘Fail, withdraw’ could be properly defined so as to ensure future consistency.  
                          | • Students would like to see a greater link between the Department’s research and the content of the UG programme.                                                                                                                                 | • World class and challenging course with excellent students achieving very high standards  
                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Civil and Environmental Engineering | • The quality of several 4th year research projects deserved higher marks than those obtained by the students - the marking seems too “severe”  
                          | • The current borderlines are a bit “too narrow”  
                          | • The weighting between years is uniform. This is unusual presumably implying that all aspects of programme have the same status  
                          | • In some cases the volume of work expected in an exam seems at the expense of exploring depth of understanding or innovation  
                          | • The concept of a truly excellent project achieving close to 100% could be considered.                                                                                                                                 | • The quality of the supervision of the 3rd year group projects and 4th year research projects, which is amply reflected in excellent output  
                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                 | • The quality of the exam papers and the fact that they sent to the Examiners so much ahead of the exam date  
                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                 | • The organisation of the Student Conference, where the 4th year individual research projects are presented  
                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                 | • The constructionarium in 2nd year where students learn about real problems of a construction project  
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<td>Computing</td>
<td>• The sole practice at Imperial College that I have found to be significantly different from that at my own institution is that decisions are made by the Examiners Board at a time when the identities of the candidates are known. In my own institution (and others where I have been an external examiner), such decisions are all made anonymously.</td>
<td>• I have found the visit to Imperial College in February to check the examination papers to be a good practice. It is helpful to have access to examiners face-to-face in the event there is a problem.</td>
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| Earth Science and Engineering          | • Written comments on scripts to justify marks were variable and evidence of second marking was not always apparent. Where the final mark differs significantly from the first marker some explanation would be appropriate.  
  • Consider whether to make advanced exploration geophysics courses compulsory for BSc students  
  • Minor discrepancies (a few % and definitely <10%) in some of the marking of independent research projects  
  • In a few cases [marked] papers only had numbers, and a lack of comments to explain how the numbers related to the marking scheme  
  • For a small number of high-level modules the marking of the examination was too-much based on literal statement of facts rather than showing individual thought, integration, or discussion  
  • Consider whether it is possible for BSc students to do a substantial independent research project in addition to the work-up of the field course data | • The quality of feedback in the department is outstanding (and scores notably high in NSS) and is widely appreciated by students, who feel an identity in shaping courses. The Academic Tutor is widely praised and respected by students  
  • Students particularly appreciated the breadth and optionality of third and fourth year module diets  
  • Encouraging to see a range of styles of examination question apart from the traditional essays  
  • Independent research projects were excellent and many of the students were producing work that is of publishable quality  
  • Guidelines on assessment of the projects were excellent  
  • Many of the higher level courses have direct links to current research in the department  
  • Regular meetings between students and the Senior Tutor were extremely well-received |
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| Electrical and Electronic Engineering | - In a few instances, the marks awarded for (e.g. report writing) were not consistent with the actual comments and the markers should make sure this is addressed  
  - It would be helpful if comments are made regarding the resolution of large differences between the sub-marks from different markers  
  - In a number of [model answers], a clearer breakdown of the marking scheme would be beneficial  
  - Project marking has improved, and could be improved further, e.g. to give explicit textual backup for each category of the marking scheme | - There is a good process behind the assessment of projects, where the Supervisor and a Second Marker need to provide written comments and marks over a range of assessment criteria  
  - Industrial placement is an innovation in the course. Such placements are of real value to the students, and offer meaningful experience during their studies  
  - Final meeting of the Board of Examiners was conducted with anonymous marks.  
  - The Department is appropriately attentive to the comments and suggestions made by External Examiners, resulting in significant developments of procedure |
| Electrical and Electronic Engineering [Information Systems Engineering] | - It would have been useful to see overall statisticsDescriptors for entire modules | - I have been consistently impressed by the achievement of students. Mixing aspects of electronics and computer science is not easy and I believe the students emerge with highly marketable skills (including to academia)  
  - The Department has established practices for managing undue fluctuations in module results and invariably seeks to handle with fairness.  
  - The “fact finders” that were used to collate information on borderline students.  
  - Adoption of project marking guidelines that result in a transparent view of why marks have been awarded  
  - Introduction of anonymous marks for the final Board of Examiners |
### Appendix A

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| Materials                   | • A few model answers contained minor errors. One paper was missing  
• In some cases, there appears to be a lack of choice in the subject area of the Design Project  
• Discuss the feasibility of introducing a comprehensive paper for the third year exams  
• Students requested that more tutorial support be offered in the third year  
• Differentiating the students in the marking of the group project – there was no standard format for presenting this information  
• Consider simplifying the marking schemes to obtain overall marks of 100, rather than say 120  
• As commented last year – “the averages varied quite widely between examination papers, particularly in years 3 and 4”. This still needs to be looked at because in the 4th year the difference between the lowest and highest averages is 32%. | • The “Comprehensive Paper” (set in the M.Eng. year) appears to be a particularly good discriminator of student ability.  
• Students considered the tutorial support received in the first and second years to be excellent  
• The choice of staff with research interests directly relevant to the lecture courses presented, appears to be appreciated by the students, particularly in the later years of study  
• The summer placement activity is very well organised and extremely valuable  
• The wide range of integrated activities in the group project is excellent  
• This year we had a meeting with the Examination Team and DUGS to discuss and give feedback on our comments last year and how they have been addressed. This was a very useful meeting. In addition, we were also given feedback on our comments on the draft examination paper. |
| Mathematics for Engineers    | • None reported.                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | • The general level of organisation and efficiency of the exam team, and the professionalism of the exam setters and markers, were exemplary  
• I was impressed by the dedicated academic staff, high standards of teaching, and high quality of examination papers.                                                                                                                                                      |
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| Mechanical Engineering    | • There was no indication that scripts had been double marked/checked  
  • Look at consistency of paper standard across the year. Some courses seem to be harder and score lower marks ‘by tradition’ than others  
  • It would be helpful if all assessors used a similar notation in their marking  
  • Identify with a flag/asterisk which students have had mitigating circumstances on the order of merit  
  • Some high marks awarded for final year projects. There should be a note of meaningful justification/explanation on the mark sheet as to the reasons. Would equally apply to very low marks  
  • Consideration should perhaps be given to harmonising examination papers such that the time allowed and number of substantive questions on each paper, and the number to be answered correctly to achieve full marks, is similar and consistent from one year to the next | • Challenging exam papers – with questions that elicit answers at a variety of ability levels  
  • A very high quality and well managed 3rd year design project DMT  
  • Independently solved exam papers – makes for less errors  
  • The encouragement of the use of logbooks and their assessment |

Appendix A
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| Life Sciences [Biochemistry / Biotechnology] | - Slight concern with the current structure of the degree programme. Students are taught core biochemical principles and techniques in years 1 and 2 with little or no reinforcement in the final year – the final year being devoted to three options courses (selected from a diverse range of options) and a practical or literary project  
- The course is unusual in that there is/are no core course(s) in year 3 and thus everything is optional. There is a case for considering some kind of core course in the final year, perhaps based on data handling and/or methods  
- Some students can avoid answering any data analysis question under exam conditions in their final year. This is perhaps something that could be addressed.  
- Keep under review the issue as to whether it is wise to do the research project at the very end of the course  
- Some Universities take into account the overall distribution of individual marks in assessment of the final grade, rather than relying solely on the final percentage. This could be something that might be considered for borderline students  
- Marking guidelines a little vague  
- Entirely appropriate that the second year counts in some proportion, but 35% is a very large proportion  
- Double blind marking is only applied in some instances and could be applied throughout  
- Guidance that students receive on preparing their project write-ups seemed to be variable and it would help if the examiners were able to get a written statement of the extent of help the students received  
- It is better that the project thesis is not marked at all by the supervisor, who can either know too much about the topic or be overly influenced by the success/failure of the experiments. | - Evidence of very thorough marking by both the first and second markers  
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| Life Sciences [Biology] | • There were significant discrepancies in practice between markers and this needs attention. In particular annotation of scripts in some specific instances appeared discrepant with respect to the mark assigned and demonstrated an inadequate appreciation by the marker of the scheme  
• Further attention to a uniformity of approach, expectations and assessment amongst the staff could improve both the experience and achievement of students on the final year Medical Microbiology course  
• One of the final year courses with Medical Microbiology. This consistently has a low average mark and needs to be carefully considered in the years to come so that students taking this course are not disadvantaged  
• Timeliness of feedback to students on coursework was identified by some students as an issue and there was a consistent view that students would welcome additional feedback on exam performance preferably with an opportunity to view their scripts and learn from their exam performance  
• Process for selection and allocation of projects – concern was expressed over the variable level and quality of information provided to students when choosing project preferences  
• Department may wish to continue to develop its marks scheme, but it may also be useful to consider mechanisms to share marking practice between examiners in different modules to ensure the mark scheme is applied consistently  
• The marking scheme needs more guidance at the top end, and staff are strongly advised to make sure their comments match with their marks  
• It is still often difficult to understand why a particular mark was awarded given the comments  
• Some students complained about feedback, one had “good essay 62%” and couldn’t find out what they had done wrong despite asking explicitly | • Approach to the analysis of the assessment is excellent. Thoughtful statistical presentations allowed interrogation of patterns in the results against impressions formed during inspection of the provided materials  
• The quality of annotation and examiners’ comments on most scripts was excellent  
• The developing role of the Senior Tutor was praised by the students as important in underpinning and supporting the students learning and helping to overcome some of the problems of variable access to personal tutor support  
• The students were very happy with the ecology courses (TBFC, PCE, BCD). The “How to” lecture on exam questions was particularly appreciated. |
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| Chemistry  | • From my experience, Imperial is unusual in weighting the Year 1 mark into the final degree mark. Most other institutions consider the first year as a foundation course reflecting the need to bring all students up to the same level in recognition of the diversity of material that is covered at A-level  
• On a few questions, the average mark was close to 40% which means that a large proportion of the students were getting a fail mark. In these instances, the staff involved should be concerned and take a close look at the question, the expectation for the students’ responses or the delivery of the course in terms of the lectures and support (workshops, tutorials) and take steps to remedy this unsatisfactory situation  
• Some questions are answered by a very small number of students (0-5) and it might be worth considering discontinuing/replacing these optional courses or revising the standard of the question asked  
• The completion of the assessment forms for project by staff should be scrutinised and inadequately filled-in forms (e.g. those containing three word justifications for the marks awarded) should be rejected and returned to the staff involved for them to complete appropriately  
• There were several times when a whole page of script had no annotation from the examiner. In some cases, the number of ticks on a page didn’t correspond to the number in the margin. In a few cases, anomalies were seen – e.g. 3 ticks led to 5 marks and 5 ticks led to 3 marks.  
• It was disappointing that some students had to wait a year in order to take resit papers in order to allow them to graduate. This was often for students who had a reasonably high overall mean, but lacked the credits because of a failure in a module. This was even worse for some candidates who had been deemed to have committed academic misconduct. Such cases need to be dealt with very quickly so that the student can graduate with the rest of their cohort. | • I was particularly impressed by how the research projects are assessed and consider the procedures used at Imperial for this to be exemplary  
• The research proposal that the students have to write is an excellent way to test the students’ creativity and literature searching skills |
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| Mathematics  | • The Imperial way seems simple, but is unlike systems I have seen elsewhere. There are several issues with this system. To me 2 hours [for each exam] seems very short and hardly gives time for students to answer all the questions in the time. It also does not give candidates the chance to redeem themselves if they accidentally go off on a tangent. I would recommend that, if the format remains the same, to consider 2.5 hour exams. Personally I also prefer choice on a paper. I would also suggest a more prescriptive rubric.  
  • I note that one of the [project] markers is the supervisor. for a master's level projects (which count ¼ of the final year for the MSci students) it might be better practice to have two independent markers. I would also recommend that a meeting is held to moderate the marks, with someone specifically in charge of the project course chairing the meeting.  
  • The marking scheme and the scheme for the award of honours was unclear. The main problem was there was little or no understanding of what constituted a borderline  
  • Strongly recommend that the Department establish a new mark scale for each of the papers were 70% is a first class mark on a paper, not 75%.  
  • Strongly recommend that a written set of guidelines be issued to all staff, students (and external examiners) that are approximately along these lines: >70% = first; >60% = 2i; >50% = 2ii. etc. & a borderline represents a candidate who is up to 2% below each of these boundaries. Then a set of criteria are established by which borderline candidates are favourably assessed.  
  • One piece of evidence used to assess borderlines was a written statement from the personal tutor. I am not sure this explicit advocacy sits well against the notion of anonymising the assessment process  
  • Model answers often somewhat brief with only a vague indication of how many partial marks might be available for an incorrectly answered part to a question                                                                 | • Each examination has a "green folder" in which all previous versions of the paper, all correspondence with the external examiner, response to those comments, and all the marks both prior to and post scaling were recorded  
  • The introduction of the projects at levels 1 and 2. Mathematics students generally do not get much exposure to writing detailed reports and projects provide an excellent way to do this                                                                 |
| • As external examiner, prior to my visit I was sent an informal document summarising the exam and marking procedures. In particular, it would have been good to have regulations written down about how final degree classifications are determined.  
• Where possible exam papers should be sent to the external in one batch, and a clear deadline given by which the external must respond.  
• The marks for the mastery paper were disappointing. The timing of this exam created some problems as it was sat before all the others. Also, the style and difficulty of the questions was highly variable.  
• Another longer term approach to mastery would be to decide for definite if a particular course is level 3 [FHEQ level 6] or level 4 [FHEQ level 7].  
• The final degree classification is based on weighted averages from all years including the first year. In my institution, as well as at many others, the first year is for progression only and later years are used for classifying degrees.  
• There were some students whose scores from the year abroad were disregarded in the final classification. A more uniform and consistent policy on this would be desirable to ensure that students going abroad do not get unfairly penalised or advantaged.  
• Whilst the current process for checking examination papers is satisfactory, a more formal process with a form ticked and signed by all examiners, that they have acted (or not giving reasons) on the comments by Externals, would be desirable.  
• There was lack of clarity regarding where the borderlines should be. I would much rather prefer a more robust and transparent algorithmic process to be used for classification and discussion of borderline candidates, and the marks that the Externals are asked to look at are very close to those that would appear on the students' transcripts.  
• The way that the final year performance was used to argue for moving certain candidates up and not others, was double counting. It does raise the question of transparency and robustness of the whole process. |
• Scripts are checked by a second person to see that all the marking has been done. I did not see evidence that they are double marked except for projects.
• Concern that one unit had two versions of the paper which was sat by the same category of students
• It is not appropriate to bring plagiarism cases for open discussion and judgement at the Board of Examiners meeting, especially when the proper paperwork has not been gone through for such cases. Students are not there to defend themselves and the Exam Board meetings are not anonymous. It is very clear that the Department is treating plagiarism cases out of line with College procedures which should be investigated by the College.
• Marks lists should be made available in time for Externals to see when they come
• Grammar and English should be checked before examination papers are sent to externals
• Mastery examination for MSci students - firstly, it should be a requirement that the students pass this examination. Secondly, the department should ensure that the questions on the mastery paper test a deeper knowledge and understanding of each topic.
• The Examiners Comments Form should be uniformly completed for all exams undertaken within the department.
• Some more individual guidance [on module choices in years 3 and 4] may help the students
• The methods for converting numerical marks on individual papers into an overall mark, and deciding class boundaries, are opaque. Not enough information was provided. Marking scheme for the degree overall was not explained, and was thoroughly opaque.
• I was disappointed to see so few students doing M3S1 (Statistical Theory). If low numbers is an ongoing problem, it may be worth considering adjusting the content of this unit.
• I was struck by the fact that the Department uses two mark scales, the maths scale and the college scale. It would be helpful to hear what the rationale is for retaining two mark scales, rather than just moving to the College scale and
setting exam papers with this scale in mind.

- Mastery questions for the MSci students – Level of difficulty was highly variable across units and that, if this is to work smoothly, a concerted effort will be needed each year to check comparability across units

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<tr>
<th>Department</th>
<th>Issues for concern /consideration</th>
<th>Good practice</th>
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| Physics    | • I do have one concern and that is with the proposed introduction of anonymous examiner’s boards  
• As mentioned last year some universities no longer have *Viva Voce* examinations to decide the classification of students at borderlines. Instead we profile the module marks and have an algorithm to decide borderline cases. This method is clearer, more objective and more defensible than a viva exam. In my experience as an External the correlation between performance in a viva and other assessments is not very strong  
• Some model answers were not up to standard. The Department should do more to ensure that all draft examination papers and all sets of model answers have been well vetted before they are sent to external examiners.  
• The Department should put procedures in place to make sure that external examiners receive replies to all significant comments on all papers.  
• The model answers and examination papers that were provided were of variable quality. Far too many papers were supplied in draft form, often with model answers that were lacking in at least one significant aspect. I would ask that someone in the Department of Physics takes on the responsibility of checking all the exam papers and model answers before they are supplied to the External Examiners  
• External Examiners should receive confirmation that requested changes have been made – or justification provided as to why the original exam paper format/content was correct  
• My impression is that it is more usual for the students to perform less well in their final year than they did abroad and | • The Comprehensive Physics papers are impressive and add significant value to the Physics degrees  
• The range of MPhys projects on offer to the students reflects the diversity and high quality of the Department’s research portfolio.  
• One of the distinctive features of the Imperial College degree programme is the ‘Comprehensive’ examination. I would strongly recommend that this feature is retained in the degree programme as it provides a strong education in problem solving and enables the students to synthesize ideas from earlier modules. |
similar to earlier years at Imperial. I therefore wonder whether students are being sufficiently challenged during this year abroad and whether there are ways of enhancing the educational quality of this year abroad.

- When the External Examiners are 'on-site' for two days in June, practically all the time is spent preparing for and carrying out viva voce examinations. There was therefore no time to look at marking standards in examinations and coursework assessment in any meaningful way.
- Third year BSc students do not have to undertake project work. It seems anomalous that a student of Imperial College does not have to carry out a scientific investigation of their own devising in order to graduate.
- It might be worth checking the module prerequisites, both formal and informal, to ensure that if modules are being offered as standalone options that they can be taken on their own.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Programme (year)</th>
<th>Issues for concern /consideration</th>
<th>Good practice</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Undergraduate Medicine</strong></td>
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| **GEP** | • Is SBA really that useful as a discriminator tool? I would suggest more SAQs or even an essay to replace SBA.  
• I have discussed with those responsible the need for a more rigorous marking schedule for some elements in order to discriminate between good and adequate students.  
• The modes of assessment are not aligned to the teaching so this could be creating a false reflection of standards  
• A current weakness of the examination rubric is the absence of a ‘practical/applied’ assessment for anatomy. This could be in the form of a spotter example, steeplechase, OSPE or a hybrid  
• The quality of the papers could be improved if questions placed a greater emphasis on the application of knowledge (rather than simply of knowledge recall). The draft papers (main exam and resit) required substantial emendation on my part suggesting that a greater level of rigour in question setting and more scrutiny, by internal reviewers, would be beneficial | • The question writing and peer review process has improved and is now good.  
• I have been delighted to see the move from written essay exam questions to examine the doctor-patient communication to a system of in-course assessments. It is a very positive change in the examination of communication skills at such an early stage of the course.  
• I have been very impressed by the material provided for students on the intranet. The range and breath of the questions tested the breadth of the curriculum and did not just focus on core topics |
| **MBBS – Year 1** | • One potential cause for concern is that weak students would appear to “question spot” and it is not unusual to find large gaps of knowledge in borderline pass/fail students.  
• In an integrated assessment such as that in LSS papers 1 and 2, one concern is that a student may progress to year 2, not only with a serious deficiency in one or more “systems”, but also in one whole subject area. A minimum threshold for disciplines in year 1 or assessing subjects independently (not a preferred option in my view), is something that the academic staff should consider into the future.  
• I should like to see additional questions that require students to apply knowledge and reasoning. Assertion reasoning questions were recently introduced in MCD and might be considered too for LSS. | • Integrated questions that challenge students to think, as opposed to merely recall information, appear in the assessments. These are often difficult to set and I applaud academic staff for continuing to develop this area  
• Blended style of the teaching and assessment. There is a genuine attempt to provide applied teaching that is relevant for Medical students. Whilst the fundamentals are taught, the relevance to clinical medicine is emphasised.  
• I had not come across ARQs before, and after I had become familiar with them, I
### Appendix A

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<tr>
<th>MBBS – Year 2</th>
<th>MBBS – Year 3</th>
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| **• I should like to see some aspects of the SAQ to be a short answer with opportunity to get the marks without hitting the buzzwords. This is important in differentiating the passing and failing student.**<br>**• I should like to see a workshop for students taking them through a paper of a failing student and solid pass student to highlight the need to cover the fundamentals of the disciplines.**<br>**• The borderline students were noticeably weaker in the area of critical appraisal, which is not unusual for students at level one**<br>**• The marking scheme for one aspect of the assessment could benefit from having flexibility for the markers (currently the scheme is rigid and this accounted for the very few large discrepancies seen)** | **• The use of Turnitin software to provide student feedback. Where this was embedded into the text (rather than as comments in the side bar), highlighting examples of good analysis or areas for improvement in the submitted work is an excellent way to give specific rather than generic feedback.**

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<th>MBBS – Year 2</th>
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| **• The blueprinting of the taught material to assessment question coverage was sometimes less than obvious with a limited focus on certain material**<br>**• Some time should be spent on the exam item banks looking at the quality of the SBAs in particular. There are examples of less than perfect SBAs there that should be altered to come up to best practice formats or removed from the bank. The choice of drugs used in the SBAs should reflect what is current medical usage and what is in the BNF. Obsolete drugs of historical interest should not be included in the SBA banks. Some examiner training on assessment time writing would be a profitable use of staff development time.** | **• I found it valuable to go to the meeting prior to the exam board to look through the papers that were considered ‘fails’ and to look at borderline scripts and a script at the top end. I am impressed by process for standard setting, marking and checking/discussing students’ answers when clarifications are needed.**

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<th>MBBS – Year 3</th>
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| **• I would have liked to have been provided with a hard copy of the current year module documentation which would have stated learning outcomes.**<br>**• At my suggestion 2 years ago marking boxes were included on the front page of the examination papers to show marks awarded for each question. Unfortunately this was dropped this year, and I would suggest it is reinstated to provide clarity.**<br>**• It is not particularly clear how individual marks are awarded. Red ticks did not necessarily equate to marks awarded. I came to the conclusion that they provided an excellent method of probing reasoning skills, as well as factual knowledge.**<br>**• No specific examples highlighted.** | **• I think the pre-released scenario with**
wonder whether it is possible to incorporate a method of marking whereby it is clear to someone reviewing the examination scripts the detail of the marks awarded.

- For some questions marks are available to be awarded for range of arguments - this could be clarified - specify the number of arguments or be clear about balance of the number of arguments and depth in which each analysed/discussed.
- I did see the marking criteria but I would have liked to see the updated one produced as a result of the marking process.
- Having reviewed the 3 papers [of students who had failed the resit] I am concerned about the clarity and robustness of the marking protocol. It is difficult to see how marks are awarded. Ticks on the script do not correlate with marks awarded. The marking scheme for the ethics questions is too complex. I think it would be helpful if candidates knew what they were asked to do in more detail i.e. greater correlation between the exam question and the marking scheme.
- Given that this assessment has to be delivered across several locations, it might strengthen the confidence of examiners and candidates that the process is working fairly if information was available on the reliability of the OSCE overall and across the different sites/rotations.
- Station 5 and 11 may need some improvement. The former being overloaded with information and acted inconsistently by actresses on different venues. The latter was too short and many candidates finished 3-4 minutes before the end of the station.

Reading in preparation for the written examination is a very good method of assessment

- For the students who fail the OSCE the process of one to one feedback will be extremely valuable in allowing them to achieve the learning outcomes.
- The opportunity for examiners to complete a comment sheet for candidates is also helpful in providing feedback to individual students to enhance their learning.
- The information provided on the mark sheet for examiners to enable them to complete the scoring reliably is helpful.
- The OSCE review meeting held at the end of the day for all external examiners and those leading on the examination internally to come together and discuss the experience is valuable as it allows identification of any issues across the range of sites or at individual sites to be identified and a plan of action to be determined prior to the analysis of the data.
- Excellent organisation and good consistency between the OSCE sites.

BSc Medical Science with [optional pathway]

- It would be helpful to have seen a sample of papers and their marks, as well as projects and their marks in good time before the sub board meeting in order to give time to offer any comments re modifications if appropriate [Gastroenterology]
- It would be helpful for the question writers to write an accompanying marking scheme for consistency (these were variably present) and also for there to be a consistent and independent system for internal double marking (again, [Gastroenterology]

- I was particularly impressed by the data interpretation elements of the final examinations [Endocrinology]
- Extremely good feedback [Reproductive & Developmental Sciences]
- The intermedial materials, the broad range of assessment modes and the formative and summative feedback used are all very impressive [Medical Humanities]
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable currently</th>
<th>Pharmacology</th>
<th>The programme is wonderfully creative in terms of teaching methods deployed and the high level of its innovation is evidenced by the fluent, sophisticated, thoughtful work produced by its students.</th>
<th>Medical Humanities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The time frame between marking and vivas remains tight.</td>
<td>The excessively complicated marking scheme is still in use. The mark sheet pro forma should be amended to make it clearer whether it is being used by a first or second marker. Markers need to print as well as sign each sheet to avoid confusion on authorship of comments.</td>
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<td>Neuroscience &amp; Mental Health</td>
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<td>The issue of ‘spoon-feeding’ through providing students with paper copies of required seminar readings. This still seems to be happening, and it would be worthwhile trialling Blackboard-based materials again.</td>
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<tr>
<td>History of Medicine</td>
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<tr>
<td>One slight concern was that one exam essay was awarded 100%. While the essay mapped very closely to the model answer, and indeed included evidence of extra reading, it did lack quality in terms of presentation/structure. My recommendation would be to add suitable wording to the marking criteria documents to reflect that outlined above. This would ensure that the best exam answers are awarded appropriately.</td>
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<tr>
<td>History of Medicine</td>
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<tr>
<td>With regard to model answers, less prescriptive examples that do not specify so rigidly exactly how many marks should be awarded for each fact or facts presented. Leeway for presentation/structure (as outlined above) should be maintained.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pharmacology</td>
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<td>This course seems to be very poorly supported or appreciated by the College centrally. All the administration is done by busy clinicians, the supervisors work for free, there is no funding for external visits, and so on.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Death, Autopsy &amp; the Law</td>
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<td>Some of the projects (those on autopsy/ethics) did not appear to be global health projects to me – they should at least include some cross-cultural or international comparisons if projects on these topics are going to be considered.</td>
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<td>Global Health</td>
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<td>In the projects I saw it was not clear how the marks were allocated. I found it a little difficult to score projects because of the differing contributions of student and tutor to the</td>
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<tr>
<td>Medical Humanities</td>
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processes. I wonder if the details of the student’s contribution could be clearer, perhaps with a paragraph of explanation as well as the %? \textit{[Global Health]}

| MBBS - Year 5 |  
|---------------|---|
| **Where does the 50\% pass mark come from in each domain?** Elsewhere where I examine it is 60\% throughout. |
| **The marking scheme is still a bit opaque** |
| **I feel that the OSCE stations should have common problems and not esoteric ones.** The HIV pregnant station was totally unrealistic for an undergraduate and even a junior trainee. |
| **Some of the cases were complex for an undergraduate and seemed more difficult in the morning than the afternoon** |
| **I received no feedback from the Gynaecologists.** It would have been helpful to know whether my comments on Gynaecology questions had been addressed |
| **Feedback from Simulated Patients was not used consistently by all examiners and does raise issues of calibration and consistency** |
| **The complexity of this examination, with a number of integrated stages in each station, often made the stations feel rather rushed.** |
| **Students reported to me that they felt rushed and that they didn’t feel they were able to conduct consultations ‘properly’ or in the way that they would normally do.** I am concerned that this leads to students performing for the exam rather than being assessed on their clinical skills |
| **Students reported that they would have welcomed a chance to practice this sort of complex examination station beforehand as a mock exam or at least mock station** |
| **I remain concerned by the rationale behind the post examination review of borderline students marks and in particular with the manner in which it was conducted this year** |
| **It would have been nice to have been able to review the stations that I was going to observe in advance of the examination** |
| **It would be helpful to meet up with other examiners before a session to discuss logistics and avoid clashing with other** |
| **Actor training appeared to be very good, actors were well briefed and appropriate in their presentations** |
| **The organisation of the examination was excellent – allowing students to move through a fairly complex examination with minimal fuss** |
| **The station specific briefing at the start of each session seemed a very effective way of ironing out potential problems and inconsistencies between examiners** |
| **I am aware that examiners have all had at least a half day training and I have watched the standard setting video available to all examiners – both are undoubtedly helpful in ensuring examiner consistency** |
| **Very well run exam in excellent facilities with good numbers of helpers.** Well organised, well labelled, good exam. |
| **The PACES mark sheets were a very good way of providing marks for these students.** |
| **High levels of reliability. Use of actors provided very consistent level of difficulty.** |
| **I particularly enjoyed the respiratory scenario written this year (new diagnosis of asthma), this is a common problem and important to be able to do well.** |
externals on a particular circuit

- Age is relevant in children but much less so in parents and is **not ever** the opening question to achieve rapport. Whoever is teaching this to first year clinical students at ICL **must** stop **now**. I find it an improved situation from when I last examined but not fully resolved (50% vs 95% is an improvement.)
- It would have been nice for there to be clearer instructions as to **which** external in **which** room with a circuit map.
- The combination of child health with psychiatry and obstetrics and gynaecology would tend to reward a good “all-rounder” rather than stimulating or rewarding those with a particular interest in one area. Is this truly going to encourage students to take up a career in Paediatrics (or psychiatry or obstetrics and gynaecology)
- The lack of anchor statements to allow judgements to be made at pass/good/excellent boundaries is disappointing
- There is no attempt to re-create actual interaction with children. Dealing with adults (parents) and children are separate skills.
- Suggestion last year for a video of candidates to be sent to examiners to reduce variability has not been taken up.
- More time between candidates/stations would assist feedback/documentation.
- I still think that it is difficult to justify marks at times as boundaries between pass, good and excellent remain subjective to a degree.
- Wednesday morning had 2 alcohol related questions with some similarities – perhaps a different topic could have been used
- There was a discussion at the Exam Board about whether the four domains should be equally weighted. Some examiners felt that it might be possible for the ‘professionalism’ score to boost the candidates average score, compensating perhaps for some inadequate performance in the other domains. Further exploration is required to establish whether or not there is indeed such an effect.
My recommendation would be that the Chelsea & Westminster Hospital site should be used routinely, as it is far superior to the St Mary’s Hospital facilities.

The Board should consider whether stations need to be broadly badged eg hypertension in primary care, acute confusional state on the ward, impact of HIV on antenatal care etc.

Some students were surprised/dissatisfied about the number of stations devoted to the four specialties being examined. They had the perception that if something had been covered in one station, then it would not come up again in another.

Using simulated patients has well-recognised limitations, one of which is credibility.

On the first day (a Monday) the rooms were extremely cold owing to the central heating being off for the weekend; I recommend that this must be pre-empted in future as it was uncomfortable for both the patient volunteers and the candidates.

On the first day the internal examiners were given a formal briefing; although I am familiar with this exam, I do not remember this being extended to the externals and I would recommend that it is in future.

On a few occasions examiners persisted with questions beyond the allotted time. I recommend that the importance of stopping the exam when the indicator bell sounds is emphasised in future.

In the examiners briefing the importance of optimising the position in which the interaction between the candidate and the patient could also be emphasised as on occasions the examiner was clearly unsighted.

Some examiners gave immediate feedback which should be discouraged.

I wonder if there is scope for an additional mark (3) for “narrow/low pass”?

St Mary’s: The venue for clinical examinations needs review, so that examinations and clinical areas are more segregated. And patients for clinics are not mingling with students and examiners. A stair case in a public area is not a suitable

| MBBS – Year 6 | • On the first day (a Monday) the rooms were extremely cold owing to the central heating being off for the weekend; I recommend that this must be pre-empted in future as it was uncomfortable for both the patient volunteers and the candidates. | • The case selection was excellent and appropriate for year 6 |
|               | • On the first day the internal examiners were given a formal briefing; although I am familiar with this exam, I do not remember this being extended to the externals and I would recommend that it is in future. | • Excellent case mix of patients |
|               | • On a few occasions examiners persisted with questions beyond the allotted time. I recommend that the importance of stopping the exam when the indicator bell sounds is emphasised in future. | • Overall I felt the examination was well organised I would like to congratulate the team at St Mary’s. The case mix was appropriate for this examination and the patient volunteers had been appropriately briefed on how to behave. |
|               | • In the examiners briefing the importance of optimising the position in which the interaction between the candidate and the patient could also be emphasised as on occasions the examiner was clearly unsighted. | • I was particularly impressed by how the individual examiners were allowed to take control of the examination period (for example with stopwatches – so students could be kept on track). This allowed examiners to make sure that where doubts in performance existed they had time to probe a little deeper to assess competence in this area – before failing students. |
|               | • Some examiners gave immediate feedback which should be discouraged. | • I was also impressed how the exam was set up so the external examiner sat in with every student as they were assessed and their opinion was sought in candidates who demonstrated borderline clinical skills. This added a degree of impartiality |
|               | • I wonder if there is scope for an additional mark (3) for “narrow/low pass”? | |
student briefing venue.
• Separation of medicine and surgery examinations remains unnecessary.
• Helpers in exam venue did not always suitably quarantine students
• The written SBA and EMQ papers did not arrive in good time for review. The SBA was of poor quality stylistically, with a number of errors and omissions. This combined with the late arrival of papers for review, had meant that I had not seen the final version of the paper for sign off, this needs to be reviewed.
• I observed one whole circuit outside of the stations: The layout of the clinic meant that the circuit I observed (circuit B) was relatively unsupervised at St Mary’s. The supervising practices of the circuits needs to be reviewed immediately. Indeed I discussed this with the faculty on the day.
• There was considerable noise pollution from another station in 2 rooms.

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<tr>
<th>BSc Biomedical Sciences and BSc Pharmacology and Translational Medical Science</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Model answers occasionally lacking detail of mark breakdown [Biomedical Sciences]</td>
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<tr>
<td>• One slight concern was that one exam essay was awarded 100%. While the essay mapped very closely to the model answer, and indeed included evidence of extra reading, it did lack quality in terms of presentation/structure. My recommendation would be to add suitable wording to the marking criteria documents to reflect that outlined above. This would ensure that the best exam answers are awarded appropriately [Pharmacology]</td>
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<td>• It was commented that subject areas are now being randomly allocated to the exam paper to ensure that the same subject is not always the last question on the paper. This was a response to a particular subject regularly suffering poor marks from students not completing this answer at the end of the exam. It was noted this year that the marks in this subject had significantly improved. Other comments have also been acted on including provision of more informative comments for feedback on exam scripts and clarifying double marking annotations.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• I am very impressed by the variety and the quality of projects available to students on this programme. This reflects the high standard of research carried out within the division [both Biomedical Sciences]</td>
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• & rigour to the assessment of these students.
• End of day examiner discussion is robust and evidence based and allows for sound decisions.