

## **Review of External Examiner reports 2016/2017**

### **Introduction**

1. This report provides a top-level analysis of the External Examiners Reports received in relation to provision in 2016/2017. The analysis covers both undergraduate and postgraduate provision.
2. The intention of this report is to identify trend and themes arising from the review of the reports that indicate any areas of wider concern, or to identify areas of best practice that can be shared with the wider College community.
3. This report will not provide an in depth analysis of each report. All reports received have been reviewed by the individual programme teams and departments, contributing to the annual monitoring and standard enhancement review of the programmes. The department level analysis of the external examiners reports can be found in the department annual monitoring reports.
4. For Academic Year 2016/2017 there were 435 individual “programme” appointments. It should be noted that some External Examiners are appointed to cover one or more programmes in their entirety, also some Examiners are appointed to cover an aspect of provision in an individual programme or across a number of programmes.
5. Of the 435 appointments; 285 relate to postgraduate provision in Natural Sciences, Engineering and Business. 81 relate to undergraduate provision in Natural Sciences and Engineering, the remaining reports relate to the Medicine provision. Within Medicine, some appointments are specific to covering clinical aspects of the programmes, and the report template therefore differs to take this into account.
6. In previous years a separate review for undergraduate and postgraduate reports was provided, due to the differences between the timing of delivery of undergraduate and postgraduate provision. As this report seeks consider systemic themes this was not considered necessary.

### **Issues with reporting base**

7. The deadline for reports from the External Examiners is one month following the final Board of Examiners for the programme. In practice this means that all reports for undergraduate provision were expected to be received by 1 August 2017, and for postgraduate programmes reports would have been expected to be received at the latest of the 1st February 2018. At the time of completing this report 33 reports remain outstanding, despite chasing from both Registry and individual programme teams. This does not include the very few reports which due to individual circumstances were agreed as not required/necessary in this academic year.
8. Whilst 33 forms a small percentage of the total number of reports (less than 8%), and there should be evidence of external scrutiny for the assessments that have been reviewed, it does mean that there is no evidence of external scrutiny of the programmes overall and the quality processes of the Boards of Examiners. As usual within the sector, fees are only paid on receipt of the report however, expenses incurred in travel to Boards of Examiners are paid. The only other recourse open to the College at this stage is to terminate the appointment of the External. There is little appetite for this within the College, as the other interactions with the External are

valued, and to a limited extent the report is viewed as a tick box exercise (the “real” work is through the assessment process). It is necessary to reiterate the worth of the report, a vital component of the quality assurance mechanisms of the College.

9. In order to address the above, in this academic year a clear final date will be provided to the External Examiners for the receipt of the report. This will give clarity to the External Examiners, and provide a clear point at which the chasing of reports by Registry should begin. It should also enable a more timely intervention by Departments where needed.
10. The College should also consider approving a clear stepped action plan for outstanding reports, including the responsibility of each concerned party. At present this is not clear.
11. In reviewing the reports where possible the department response has been considered alongside. This has not always been possible as the Registry had either not received the response by the point of review, or no response has been received in Registry at all. Whilst it is likely that there has been at least informal response to the Examiner concerned, it means that there is no clear evidence of the consideration of the comments of the Examiners, nor any actions that may need to be taken in regard of this. At the current time 122 responses to reports are outstanding. This is in part due to the delays in receipt of the reports themselves as a significant number were received after the expected deadline however, this is not always the case.
12. A timeline for reports means that a deadline for departmental responses can be established. This will provide clarity of process and provide External Examiners with an indication of the period in which they should expect a formal response.
13. In the review of the reports where the comments related to a ‘central’ aspect, regulations for example, there was a specific response sent by Registry to the Examiner, with the Department copied in for reference.
14. As stated in paragraph 4, some External Examiners cover provision for more than one programme. In some cases the Examiner has provided a separate report for each, in others they have combined their comments on one form. In the later it has not always been clear that all assigned programmes are covered by the report. Therefore some gaps in coverage of programmes may in part be due to the lack of positive confirmation.
15. This, with other comments in relation to the report template itself, will be addressed in a redevelopment of the report form. Whilst the first version of the updated report will remain in Word format, the development of a web-based version is being explored.

### **Analysis of reports and arising themes**

16. In order to review the reports, and to identify emerging themes, a rag rating system has been introduced. This was a rough but useful exercise, though formalising and refinement of this procedure needs to be completed prior to the next round of reports. This system reviewed both the qualitative and quantitative aspects of the responses and assigned a colour coding of red, amber or green. Finally the report was given an overall rating based on the coding for each question.
17. Mapped on to a spreadsheet this rating system provided a quick, visual ability to consider any particular sections or specific questions within the report sections that greater consideration was needed.

18. It was through the rating part of the review that the responses of the departments were particularly valuable. A question that may have been rated amber or red could be 'commuted' where it became clear that the issue was not in the particular area, but in the joint understanding of the College or specific department's practice.
19. Finally the qualitative comments were analysed, particularly in the sections regarding potential improvements and identification of good practice, to see if there were particular themes that came to the fore.
20. The overwhelming majority of reports were complimentary with regards to the standards of the programme provision, the assessment design and the work produced by the students. In all cases the provision was considered to uphold the expectations of the Quality Code, the UK Framework of Higher Education Qualification (FHEQ), and where appropriate that of an accrediting or professional body.
21. Student work was considered to be routinely of a high standard, demonstrating high levels of knowledge, skill and originality, particularly in postgraduate provision.
22. Programmes were praised for the real-world application of assessment. This included both the type of assessment, for example the use of corporate reporting and teamwork in the Business programmes, and the scenarios/ settings for the assessment which were considered by the External Examiners to provide students with an interesting highly applicable skills set for future employment or study. An example of the latter was the 'journal club' cited in reports for Bioengineering. The Examiners also praised the industry collaborations and the impact of this on the programmes of study and the student experience.
23. Boards of Examiners were considered to have clearly and carefully considered individual results, and had fairly reviewed where there were cases of proven academic misconduct or accepted mitigating circumstances.
24. There were a number of incidences in which the External Examiner stated that they had not received a response to the previous year's report. As there is no clear pattern by type of provision, area of study or date which the report or the respective department response was made, and in nearly all cases there is a response on file, it is unclear if the formal response was not sent, that it was sent and was not received for some reason, or it was not perceived to be the formal response, rather than some kind of systemic failure. In order to address this in future the following steps have been agreed in the Quality Assurance team.
  - a. The provision of responses will be logged with the date and address to which they have been sent centrally.
  - b. The email cover message will clearly state that this is the formal response to their report.
  - c. The report template will be updated to confirm what is meant by the formal response.
  - d. On the sending of the updated report template to External Examiners, they will be reminded that if they had not received a response to their previous report, they should ask for it to be re-sent.

It should be noted that in most instances the External Examiner commented that it was apparent that action had been taken in response to their report, or that their report did not particularly require a response.

25. As can be expected in a review across all provision in the College there was not universal agreement in all aspects. External Examiners commented that there was too much assessment, or that there was sufficient assessment or in one case not sufficient individual assessment.
26. In line with the internal discussions the Examiners also had opposing views of other areas of policy. Some Examiners provided strong support for maintaining full second marking, others supporting the moderation approach. There were clear differences in their views with regards to the relative year weightings in the final classification, with support for abolishing weighting at year one, for maintain the current weightings or for reducing them. The arguments for reducing or abolishing weightings provided by the Examiners included supporting the transition to Higher Education, particularly for those from a widening participation background for whom it was considered that the transition would be more difficult, as it was recognised that the programmes at Imperial are highly demanding from the beginning. The arguments for maintaining a weighting were to encourage full participation and effort from the beginning of study.
27. External Examiners also reported concerns regarding the lack of clarity in the classification of postgraduate master programmes. This appeared to relate to the requirements into each discrete section (referred to as elements or components depending on the programme) and their overall impact on classification. The External Examiners also commented regarding the use of compensation, with some in favour, and some not, and how this impacted on students that *on paper* were in a fail position.
28. It was interesting to note that in some cases the Department response indicated there had been a misunderstanding or some confusion regarding decisions that had been made, or the impact of these decisions then on an individual student's academic profile. For example an Examiner referred to a student that following scaling of an assessment had then failed, which was stated to be inaccurate by the Department in their response. As these related to specific individual cases it is difficult to draw any further conclusion except that improvements to the clarity of our decision-making processes is required.
29. The negatives within the reports ultimately are centred on issues of consistency, clarity and communication. Many Examiners, particularly where provision was shared across departments remarked on the differences in:
  - a. Timing of draft assessment for review and the level of proof reading that had taken place;
  - b. Responses and actions taken to their comments on the draft assessments;
  - c. Quality, or lack thereof, of model answers/marketing schemes for the assessments;
30. In the setting of assessment the Examiners' recommended moving away from examinations that simply tested knowledge without critical application. Exam setters were encouraged to provide questions from threshold to higher levels within the papers, which would then differentiate the most able students.

## **Marking, Moderation and scaling**

31. The overwhelming majority agreed that the marks awarded were appropriate to the standard of the work however, there were issues with the visibility/clarity of the marks that had been awarded, and why a particular section or question had been scored in that way.
32. There was significant comment on the level of feedback provided to students. The Examiners' comments encouraged the use of 'feed forward' techniques to support subsequent submission. There were also concerns that in some cases, particularly at the higher end of the scale, there was not clear feedback as to the strengths and weaknesses of the submission. This included examples of a high mark receiving only comments for improvement, therefore not clearly justifying the high mark, or simply feedback that the work was good, without providing areas in which the submission could have been further improved. Both feedback and clarity of the marking process appeared to vary from paper to paper within the same Examiner's remit. The Examiners' comments were clear in most areas that this related to differences between markers, but occasionally seemed to imply that different levels of feedback were produced by the same marker.
33. With regards to second marking, it was clear from the comments and responses that where this was not utilised (alternative forms were used), it had not always been clearly articulated to the Examiner in question. Where second marking was routine, it was found by Examiners on occasion that the accepted normal practice (use of a different coloured pen for example) had not always been adhered to. Where there was a departmental response, it clearly identified actions to improve clarity in the marking processes.
34. Where programmes included group work, the Examiners consistently raised concerns regarding the way in which individual effort and impact within the group could or should be rewarded in the final marks allocation. A repeated suggestion was the inclusion of a peer-assessment component to the grade. This was acknowledged in the departmental responses as an area for further consideration.
35. Where there was comment within the reports there were differing views in the method and extent of scaling that was utilised. Whilst there was support to ensure that a particular assessment that had scored particularly well or poorly in comparison to other assessment within the programme did not have a disproportionate impact on the final outcomes for students, there was concern that it was being over utilised in some areas. That scaling was being repeatedly and routinely used as a tool where the assessment design had not been completed in the best way, rather than addressing the assessment task itself.

## **Additional considerations**

36. As highlighted earlier in this report, there is an issue in the timely production of reports by examiners, responses to the reports, and ultimately the production of this review. Whilst the reports on the whole are overwhelming positive, there is the potential that this would not always be the case. The College needs to ensure that there are suitable procedures and practices in place that where there is a 'red-flag' that this is swiftly investigated and necessary actions taken.
37. The Quality Assurance team will be reviewing its procedures and how it supports the departments and External Examiners.

38. As the College goes through curriculum review, it will also need to review the provision of External Examiners to ensure that:
- a. The expected workload is fair and reasonably compensated;
  - b. The type, extent and format of assessment is duly considering in relation to credit value and student numbers;
  - c. Process to enable external scrutiny of the overall quality of programmes is maintained.

## **Recommendations**

39. Within the Examiners reports, there are areas for improvement that need to be taken forward by the individual programme teams or departments. Some actions with regards to central processes and procedures are required, as identified in the body of this report, and are being taken forward by the Quality Assurance team. However, the overview analysis suggests a number of points for consideration by the wider College community.
40. Whilst respecting the autonomy and individual expertise of each departmental team, the majority of concerns raised within the reports relate to the clarity of processes, the consistent application, and how these are communicated to markers, moderators, External Examiners and students. The differences between areas are most noticeable where the provision is shared across departments, sometimes in different faculties. The College community may be able to rationalise these different approaches individually however it has the potential to damage the student experience, or cause unnecessary confusion or duplication of effort.
41. It is recommended therefore to ensure that:
- a. Within a defined area the marking and moderation processes are clearly articulated to all staff, students and External Examiners, and that adherence to the procedures is monitored internally rather than reliant on the end of year report from the External Examiner.
  - b. There is an agreed set of principles regarding scaling activity which can then be articulated to students and Examiners. It would be expected that there is also a clear record of the instances in which it is used and the impact that this has had where it results in a student(s) failing the assessment or module, and therefore potentially the year.
  - c. Reference materials for External Examiners that are common be centrally maintained on an easily accessible platform (such as re-developing the External Examiner pages owned by the Quality Assurance team).
  - d. Feedback policies are reviewed in line with the information within the reports to provide consistent and useful feedback to students, though noting that the majority of provision already meets this standard.

## **Identified good practice**

42. In the report template External Examiners are asked to comment on '*examples of good and/or innovative practice in learning, teaching and assessment*'. Given the role of the Examiners it was not surprising to note that nearly all examples given related to assessment practice.

43. In this section the Examiners particularly highlighted the assessments that had real-world application, those that developed critical and analytical skills, and those that had been designed to require interpretation and application, rather than 'regurgitation', of knowledge.
44. The External Examiners highlighted areas in which the course book/assessment packs were particularly well implemented, providing clear information to markers and students.
45. The External Examiners also commented where the process of marking and moderation were clearly articulated on the scripts and accompanying paperwork. This ensured the Externals were able to follow the reasoning of the marker, and why marks had been allocated.
46. External Examiners also commented on innovative practice utilising video-based applications for the assessment.
47. Whilst not all innovations can be applied to all programmes, programme teams should be encouraged to share identified best practice more widely within the College.

### **Maintenance of standards**

48. The analysis of the External Examiner reports supports that in 2016/2017:
  - a. The College provision was of a high standard.
  - b. Student achievements were comparable to previous cohorts and that of the sector as a whole.
  - c. The standards set for the awards in relation to the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications, national subject benchmarks and any additional Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body requirements (where relevant) were met.

Therefore confidence can be placed on the outcomes for students in academic year 2016/2017, subject to the outcome of other quality assurance mechanisms.

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