

Summary of Undergraduate External Examiner Reports 2017-18

This report summarises the feedback from 119 external examiners relating to undergraduate BSc, MSci, BEng, MEng and MBBS programmes in the Faculties of Natural Sciences, Engineering, Medicine and the Imperial College Business School, as well as BPES modules in the Business School and Languages and Horizons modules in the Centre for Languages Culture and Communication.

The report template was updated this year, with the following changes incorporated:

- a) The sections have been reordered to provide a more logical flow throughout the template.
- b) New questions have been added with regards to course content undertaken away from the college at other HE institutions or industrial partners.
- c) An overall confidence section with three statements has been added at the end of the report to ask examiners to make a definitive judgement on the programmes they examine. The new statements are as follows and were taken from the then current Quality Code chapter on External Examiners (B7):
 - The degree awarding body is maintaining the threshold academic standards set for its awards in accordance with the FHEQ and relevant Subject Benchmarks Statements.
 - The assessment process measures student achievement rigorously and fairly against the intended learning outcomes of the programme(s) and is conducted in line with the College's policies and regulations.
 - The academic standards and the achievements of students are comparable with those in other UK degree-awarding bodies of which you have experience.

At the time of this meeting seven reports remain outstanding despite reminders from the Quality Assurance Team to submit this. Individual departments have been asked to make contact with the examiners directly and assist with chasing these outstanding responses.

Provision of Programme and Module Information

85% of examiners reported that they had received programme handbooks and/or programme specifications including programme learning outcomes relating to their programmes, although some examiners noted that these were not resent each year, so they were unsure of what updates, if any, may have been made. 87% had received syllabus or module descriptors including learning outcomes and 92% had received assessment briefs and marking criteria.

Overall over 90% believed they had been given sufficient information about the department's programmes and modules in order to fulfil their role.

Examples of useful information or documents which some examiners had not received but would have found beneficial to have, included:

- a breakdown of marks and study time between exams and coursework, rubrics and marking criteria for both examinations and coursework,
- detailed programme specifications including learning outcomes,
- copies of the external examiner reports from the previous academic cycle (especially for new examiners), and
- the rationale for viva voce examinations where used.

Examiners also asked if VLE access could be provided throughout their tenure.

Departments are reminded that a list of items which should be provided to new examiners is available on the [QA website](#). It is advised that examiners be advised if any changes were made to these items at the beginning of each academic year, and if so, that the updated documentation is sent to them.

Appointment and Induction Process

Thirty-six examiners attended induction days in 2017-18. Of these, 97% were satisfied with the arrangements for the induction day, and the case studies session by Martyn Kingsbury was particularly praised. Approximately 15 other examiners were invited but were unable to attend.

A number of examiners were not able to attend due to the timing of their appointment. The QA team asks all departments to ensure their examiners are appointed in good time so they have sufficient advance notice to attend these sessions, which are held between November and February each year.

87% agreed that the department was able to provide an effective induction to the programme and specific requirements of their role.

Feedback from the induction sessions this year indicated that some externals found the session was too late in the academic year and they had already commenced "work". In order to try to address this, the QA team had provisionally agreed a new November date to cover appointments made after (or very close to the inductions earlier in the year. Unfortunately this has had to be cancelled due to lack of attendees.

Those that are unable to attend are provided the material after the induction session, and are also invited to attend in the next round.

Programme and Curriculum Design

90% of examiners agreed that the balance and content of the degree programmes in relation to stated learning outcomes was appropriate. However several commented that they had not had access to the learning outcomes and were not able to be certain of this.

82% felt that programmes were coherent and current, and compulsory modules and units were appropriate in relation to stated learning outcomes.

There were recommendations for individual courses concerning updates to teaching material or other areas of interest that could be incorporated into the course. Examiners noted that judging the balance of programmes was harder to judge in later years of courses where more content is elective.

Almost all examiners agreed that their programmes designs were suitable in relation to the relevant subject benchmarks, and also where applicable relevant to the Professional Statutory Regulatory Body (PSRB) or Accrediting Body requirements, including those set by the GMC for the MBBS programme.

Where applicable, examiners were asked to report on the relevance and integration of placements to the overall programme and its contribution to the programme learning outcomes. Approximately a third of examiners reported that placement were available as part of their programme, and the feedback on these was overwhelmingly positive.

However, several examiners whose programmes did involve placement activity did not feel they had sufficient opportunity to judge this, for example by meeting with the students' involved or reading placement reports.

Some examiners whose programmes did not currently involve the option of placements noted that this would be beneficial for the students and encouraged their departments to consider offering this option.

For those students who had attended placements, the examiners reported that their experience was overwhelmingly beneficial, and that the relationships between departments and hosts were positive. There were a few concerns about the incorporation of placements into the degree classification, and queried if the mark conversion was appropriate or whether the marks themselves should be given a higher weighting.

Assessment Strategy

86% of examiners agreed that methods of assessment (unseen written papers, essays/dissertations, orals, clinical examinations, etc.) were suitable in relation to the level of study and the intended learning outcomes.

Several examiners raised concerns about the balance and comparability of assessment methods across modules of the same level and the suitability of the overall assessment load for the programme.

One theme amongst those who reported concerns was the issue of over assessment. Several examiners felt that students on their programmes were over-assessed in general, and also that there was an imbalance in the amount of assessment required for individual modules versus the weighting these has been assigned.

Examiners also noted variations in types of examination which could adversely affect the students, including:

- An over reliance on unseen examinations versus in course assessment.
- An imbalance in the difficulty of assessment for projects where students are undertaking different types of project to their peers.
- A variation in the type of question in unseen examinations, with some setters keeping to a consistent range of marks were question, and others varying marks available between questions.
- Concerns were raised that the style of questioning meant that additional skills were being tested, beyond that of the actual knowledge and application of the questions. For example that the student needed to be able to extract from a large text that actual task to be completed. Whilst the examiners considered that this was a valuable skills, it was questioned if this was the intension, and was not providing additional complexity, particular at early stages of the programme and therefore potentially causing additional stress for the candidates.

Another theme was unnecessary repetition of knowledge or material being assessed between examinations.

Drafting of Assessment

83% of examiners confirmed that they had received all of the necessary draft assessments for comment and or approval and that the nature and level of the questions or tasks was always appropriate.

88% felt that there were arrangements in place to consider their comments on the draft assessments and that their feedback had been taken into account, although only 70% received feedback on all of their suggestions.

There were several examples given where proofreading had not picked up errors in exam papers prior to these reaching the external examiner.

Marking and Moderation of Scripts

89% of examiners received a sufficient number of scripts and other assessed work for them to review. 79% agreed that the general standard and consistency of marking was always appropriate, and 13% that it was most mostly appropriate.

78% of examiners agreed that there was always evidence that assessed work had been moderated internally, either through check marking or second marking, but only 67% found that scripts were marked in such a way as to enable them to see the justification for marks given.

Practical Examinations

Almost all examiners on programmes with practical examinations (including PACES and OSCE assessments on the MBBS course) found satisfactory arrangements were made for the conduct of practical examinations. For the clinical exams, several examiners noted some issues with the size or layout of the venue.

86% of examiners agreed that the general standard and consistency of marking with regards to practical examinations was appropriate.

Oral Assessments (including Viva Voce Examinations)

All examiners agreed that there were satisfactory arrangements made for the conduct of oral assessments and viva voce examinations (e.g. presentations, poster presentations etc...) where these were included as part of a course. Assessment of these was generally appropriate and consistent.

However it was not always felt that the purpose for conducting a viva voce examination or the reason candidates had been selected for these was made clear. It was noted that in some cases examiners were asked to participate in viva voce examinations for borderline candidates, and examiners felt that it would be preferable for these to be a solely internal exercise.

Assessment Process, Marking and Moderation

Almost three quarters of examiners were completely happy with the suitability of marking schemes and criteria, the procedures for marking and moderation, and the consistency with which these were applied. 84% agreed that grade boundaries for the assessment are set at the appropriate level and applied consistently, and 91% agreed that the assessment processes measured student achievement rigorously and fairly against the intended outcomes of the programmes in line with College policies and regulations.

Programme Content Delivered and Assessed by External Providers

Almost all examiners felt it was clear in advance of the Board if students under consideration had undertaken content away from the College. However only three quarters of these agreed that the procedures for incorporating marks obtained externally by students were clear and consistently applied, and a similar amount did not feel that such provision was suitably discussed at the Board of Examiners in relation to progression and award decisions, overall value and consistency with regards to the programmes of study.

Exam Boards

Almost all examiners reported that the Board Meeting had been conducted to their satisfaction and they were satisfied with the recommendations of the Board of Examiners.

87% of externals agreed arrangements for degree classification are set at the appropriate level and applied consistently.

91% of examiners found College procedures governing mitigating circumstances and/or academic misconduct (e.g. plagiarism cases) were considered and applied fairly and equitably to all students.

However there were parts of the policy which examiners felt could be made more robust with regards to complex cases of mitigating circumstances.

86% agreed consideration of borderline performances was conducted fairly and equitably, and in line with College Procedures. However in some cases it was felt that the performance range for borderline consideration and the algorithms used to make decisions could be tightened up.

Academic Standards and Student Achievement

The majority of examiners found 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 (PSRB) or accrediting body requirements were suitable.

Standards of student performance across modules within the programmes, and in comparison with standards achieved by students on similar programmes in other UK higher education institutions were broadly similar. There were a few cases where marking was felt to be slightly generous, and departments advised to be mindful of grade inflation.

Overall Confidence in Imperial's Programmes

100% agreed with the statement that "The degree awarding body is maintaining the threshold academic standards set for its awards in accordance with the FHEQ and relevant Subject Benchmarks Statements."

95% agreed with the statement that "The assessment process measures student achievement rigorously and fairly against the intended learning outcomes of the programme(s) and is conducted in line with the College's policies and regulations."

100% agreed with the statement that "The academic standards and the achievements of students are comparable with those in other UK degree-awarding bodies of which you have experience."

Recommendations and Suggestions for Enhancement

Based on the feedback from all examiners, the Quality Assurance Team have identified the following recommendations for programmes across the College which we encourage departments to consider over the next year:

- Ensure new examiners receive all relevant items from QAECs [list of recommended items for new examiners](#).
- All External Examiners are clearly informed of updates to the above as and when necessary. It is recommended that this is completed yearly or articulated clearly where documentation is unchanged.
- Provide examiners with links to updated handbooks at the start of each academic year.
- Conducting a comparison of marks across modules and between academic years and making this exercise available to the examiners.
- Review the amount of assessment across the year and between individual modules.
- Ensuring examiners receive feedback on their comments throughout the year in a timely manner.
- Improving feedback to students.
- Ensuring clear evidence of second marking is present on all papers as expected as part of the College procedures on second marking.
- Review marking guidelines for project work, especially in group projects.

- Review procedures for dealing with borderline cases and ensure procedures are robust and articulated to External Examiners.
- Review procedures for incorporation of marks from Year Abroad placements into final degree classification.
- Provide examiners with the opportunity to interview students on the course.
- Ensure marking criteria are clear and robust, and are implemented fairly across modules.

Examples of good and/or innovative practice in learning, teaching and assessment

Examiners were asked to comment on examples of good practice within their departments. This could be general positives or specific examples.

The following examples of good or innovative practice were identified:

- Oral presentations
- Industry engagement
- Exam Passport
- Individual Critique
- Fieldwork
- Online assessment
- Real World Application sessions
- Decision tool for borderline candidates
- Mastery Questions across exams
- Sport Innovation challenge
- IPAD marking

Departments are encouraged to share examples of good practice which could be implemented more widely across the College via Annual Monitoring. To assist with the dissemination of these examples, a good practice section will be added to the Quality Assurance website.

Conclusion

Overall, the feedback from our examiners is positive, with almost all examiners answering positively to our Overall Confidence statements regarding academic standards and the fairness of our assessment process. However, many of the issues highlighted in last year's reports are continuing to come up in the feedback on 2017-18, including evidence of scripts where second marking was not clearly evident, a tendency towards over-assessment of students, not providing materials or feedback to externals in good time, and questions over the policies for the awarding of marks and degree classifications.

Each examiner will be sent a copy of their report with comments by the department in response to their specific feedback. Copies of this College-wide summary report, as well as the departmental annual monitoring reports, will also be provided to illustrate how their reports feed into quality assurance processes at both local and College level, and to enable a view of wider themes and issues across the College.

A subsequent report on the Postgraduate taught programmes will be submitted to QAEC in the spring.