

Summary of Undergraduate External Examiner Reports for Academic Year 2018-19

Introduction

This report summarises feedback from reports relating to undergraduate provision in academic year 2018/2019 by External Examiners appointed to BSc, MSci, BEng, MEng, and MBBS programmes in the Faculties of Engineering, Natural Sciences, and Medicine, Horizons modules offered by the Centre for Languages, Culture and Communication, BPES modules in the Imperial College Business School, as well as any relevant undergraduate Intercolated degrees. Postgraduate taught provision will be reported on later in the academic year, due to the timing of Board of Examiners for these programmes.

At the time of writing this report, 104 reports had been submitted and 13 were outstanding. Outstanding reports have been referred to the respective Departments, who have been asked to send further reminders. For reference, reports are due within one month of the Board of Examiners, and so would normally be expected by the end of August for undergraduate programmes.

The report template asks a series of questions with the available responses of:

- Yes/always
- Most/usually
- No/never

Except where a simple yes/no/not applicable is required. In addition for the confidence statements at the end of the report an additional option of 'somewhat/in part' is provided. Each section then provides a free comments section for further information or justification of the response given.

Changes to reporting process

A new online portal has been implemented for External Examiner annual reports as of 2018-19. This portal is accessible via all major web browsers (IE, Chrome, Firefox) and mobile enabled. This version of the report is compatible with both Microsoft and Apple Devices, which had been an issue with the previous MS Word template.

The new portal will allow for more in-depth analysis of data arising from the reports than in previous years. Following the first round of reporting, External Examiners have fed back some recommendations on improving the user interface, including:

- 1) Having the ability to view all questions in the report before starting to input answers.
- 2) Improving the ease of moving between sections in the report.
- 3) Being able to download a copy of the answers at the point of submission.

The Quality Assurance team will take forward these recommendations for the next round of reporting in summer 2020.

Regulatory change in 2018/2019

New *Mitigating Circumstances* and *Academic Misconduct* policies and procedures were introduced for the 2018-19 academic year. This was part of a wider review of the student casework procedures that had been completed for 2018/2019, which included *Academic Appeals* and *Student Complaints*.

The changes to Academic Misconduct were to update procedures in line with sector changes. This included strengthening definitions around self-plagiarism and contract cheating, to provide greater clarity in the consideration of allegation, and to provide a greater range of potential sanctions for proven cases.

The changes to the Mitigating Circumstances policy and procedure changed the way in which information was presented to the Board of Examiners, which has meant that there was historical information for claims considered under the previous policy as well as those submitted under the new procedures. In reflection as to how Boards have been supported in dealing with these changes, further support and guidance is being put in place.

Consideration of reports

As had been described in the previous year's summary report, the Quality Assurance Team RAG rates all responses received, with attention to any qualifying comments that are provided in that section of the report. This is used to support the thematic analysis of the reports in this summary report. A College-level action plan arising from both undergraduate and postgraduate reports will be circulated and monitored by the Quality Assurance team during the next academic year.

Following the RAG rating, the departments are sent the report in order that there is individual consideration, and a response from the department/programme team is completed.

Feedback from individual External Examiner reports are then considered by Departments and Faculties as part of the College's Annual Monitoring process, which runs between September and January for undergraduate programmes. From this year, student representatives will be asked to comment on the resulting action plans.

The External Examiners will be provided with the response to their individual report and the relevant College-level summary report.

Analysis of External Examiner reports

The following subsections of this summary provide detail of the responses in each area of the report. Where there is a specific concern raised by an External Examiner this will be addressed in the individual responses from the department, and as part of the annual monitoring process, and not included in this summary.

Appointment and Induction of New External Examiners

100% of new External Examiners reported that the appointment process was fit for purpose. However, one External Examiner advised that the appointment could have been made in a timelier manner, as they were not in post in time to attend the induction sessions. It is good practice to ensure that External Examiners have been appointed prior to the beginning of the academic year.

A list of appointments due for reappointment was circulated to FECs last spring, and again at the beginning of the autumn term, and Departments have been urged to ensure any outstanding appointments are resolved as a matter of urgency and to being consideration for replacements needed for academic year 2020/2021.

Two induction sessions have been organised for 2020 and will take place on 22 January and 24 February 2020. An example programme can be found on the [External Examiner webpages](#). Based on feedback from our new External Examiners for 2018-19, the QA team have amended the morning session to include more guidance on areas such as External Examiner reporting, and a list of activities recommended for the departmental induction

sessions has been included in the programme as some of those attending felt more could have been made of the opportunity to meet with the Department later in the day.

Departments should be reminded that all new External Examiners should receive the documents outlined in the guidance produced by QAEC, details of which are available on the [External Examiner webpages](#).

Provision of Programme and Module Information

Over 10% of External Examiners advised that they had not received copies of some or all of the programme handbooks, programme specifications and syllabus or module descriptors relevant to their role. Over 90% did receive sufficient details of the assessments.

Despite this 97% stated they had received sufficient information in order to fulfil their roles as External Examiners.

External Examiners highlighted the need to receive up to date programme handbooks and learning outcomes in each year of their tenure. In view of the changes being made as part of curriculum review, External Examiners also felt that briefings on the changes being made would be useful. The Quality Assurance team will be providing guidance with regards to the Single Set of Academic Regulations and its implementation.

Programme and Curriculum Design

The majority of External Examiners were satisfied with the balance and content of the degree programmes in relation to the stated learning outcomes and were satisfied that compulsory modules were appropriate. There were some recommendations to improve the balance of individual programmes and modules, which Departments can take forward and may have already been addressed as part of the curriculum review process. External Examiners believed their programmes met PSRB Accreditation standards where relevant.

With regards to the integration of placements to degree programmes (i.e. as part of Year Abroad schemes), External Examiners strongly endorsed the positive benefits these offered to students in terms of experience and commented on how well planned and managed these were by the departments. However, a few concerns were raised in relation to the assessment of these placements. It was noted that practice can vary considerably. Of particular concern were areas in which the placements are not assessed at all, though a considerable amount of work is required on the part of the students. Where placement activity did contribute to the overall degree, some programmes had made this a pass/fail assessment, and some required a graded mark contributing to the final award. In addition, some placement providers focussed on quantitative feedback (marks) without providing qualitative evaluation of performance, which External Examiners felt would be more useful for the students to receive.

Assessment Strategy

The majority of External Examiners were satisfied with the rigour, appropriateness and overall quality of the methods of assessment used on their programmes and felt these related well to the learning outcomes. Many External Examiners highlighted the diverse range of assessment methods employed across the modules or programmes on which they examined, (including varied exam question styles, essays and other coursework, poster and oral presentations, quizzes and other in-class assessments, peer review, and opportunities for practical and group work). A few respondents did flag assessments which might need to be made more challenging, or where they considered that marking may have been generous. There were also a few concerns raised about the use of mastery exams and the

level of moderation employed. Several External Examiners highlighted the use of in-class quizzes and project work to be examples of good practice on their programmes.

Most External Examiners felt that the assessment load was suitable, albeit challenging for the students. A few were concerned about the amount of time students were spending on some coursework assignments which did not contribute a proportional amount to the final grade. There were also some concerns regarding how concentrated the examination periods have been and the pressure students were under as a result. It is noted that this should have been addressed during the curriculum review process, but that consideration should be made for continuing students following the existing programmes as they roll out.

Drafting of Assessments

Between 90% and 95% of External Examiners found the nature and level of the assessment tasks they reviewed to be appropriate and that suitable arrangements were in place to consider any comments on these. However, nearly 15% did not receive all the necessary draft assessments for their programmes and nearly 20% did not receive feedback on comments they had submitted. This issue was raised in last year's report, and whilst there has been an improvement from the previous report summary, it remains necessary to improve in this area.

In addition, a few External Examiners again raised concerns that draft papers were sent to them quite late for checking, and with insufficient proof reading beforehand which meant that they felt that the process was rushed and the necessary dialogue regarding the content was impacted.

An example of good practice was highlighted in Mechanical Engineering of the "exam passport". It is recommended that this practice is shared through the annual monitoring process for dissemination, as appropriate, through the College.

Marking and Moderation of Scripts

External Examiners were asked if they received a sufficient number of scripts and other samples of work for scrutiny, if the general standard and consistency of the marking was appropriate, and if there was evidence of second marking or moderation to ensure marking was fair and equitable across programmes. Over 10% of External Examiners felt there was room for improvement in these areas, although the majority of that group found processes to be mostly or usually satisfactory. Over 20% advised that work was not always marked in such a way as to enable the reader to see why marks had been awarded. There was a reduction in External Examiners raising this as a concern in this year's report but must still be improved going forwards.

Concerns expressed by External Examiners included a tendency toward an increasingly high average mark, a lack of comments and feedback provided by markers, especially when second marking, and some inconsistency in marking practices. External Examiners noted that in some cases, a better explanation of the marking process and the role of second markers would be useful, and also that they need to see a range of scripts rather than just those graded at the borderline. Whilst these comments were not made by all External Examiners appointed to any particular subject area, concerns of this nature will need to be addressed by each department as appropriate and responded to in feedback to the individual External Examiner's reports.

Practical Examinations

The majority of the External Examiners (approx. 50) who indicated that they oversaw practical examinations reported that suitable arrangements were made, and that the general

standard and consistency of the marking was appropriate. Where this was not the case, the External Examiners said that these were Mostly/Usually the case.

With regards to the clinical examinations (OSCE and PACES) run by the School of Medicine a separate report form was provided to analyse the conduct of these examinations in more detail. All respondents to this report agreed that satisfactory arrangements were made to conduct the clinical examinations and almost all that marking arrangements were suitable. The External Examiners praised the overall organisation of the examinations, and the management of these exams on the day. In particular, External Examiners highlighted the use of real rather than simulated patients for final year examinations, and the decision to use actual hospital facilities (i.e. outpatients) to improve the authenticity of the examinations. They also praised the introduction of electronic marking via the use of IPADS and Practique.

A few recommendations for improvement were made, including further guidance on the roles and behaviours of patients and examiners to ensure standardised behaviour across all stations. Some examiners were considered to have strayed into “teaching” during an examination, whereas others remained “aloof”. Some provided little or no guidance on the format of the exam and what was expected, others gave more explanation. Patients also seemed to react differently, with some responding as if the consultations were real, whereas others acknowledged they were in an exam scenario.

It was recommended that the set-up of stations be revised to prevent patients being asked to share examination rooms and to ensure patient confidentiality is maintained. It was also advised that examiners and students should be kept separate throughout the day, so that students cannot overhear any discussion about the examination process.

Oral Assessments including viva voce examinations

Of those External Examiners who reviewed oral examinations (e.g. vivas or poster presentations) 100% reported that suitable arrangements were made for these and 96% believed they were assessed appropriately.

Several External Examiners felt it would be useful to record presentations and oral exams, both to enable External Examiners to review these as part of their remit, and to assist in evidencing moderation decisions and handling appeals.

It was noted that use of vivas for borderline candidates should be consistent within departments, especially if students can take modules across programmes and therefore may experience differences in assessment practices.

Assessment Process Marking and Moderation

Most marking schemes were reported to be sound, but several External Examiners felt more depth or clarity for individual marking schemes was needed. Some also felt it would be beneficial for coursework marking schemes to be made available to students. It was not made clear if this with the assessment brief, to support student’s understanding of their marks with the feedback.

Several External Examiners flagged up increasingly high median marks for certain modules which could be an indication of grade inflation. Project work was felt to be particularly susceptible to this. There was also perceived to be an overuse of moderation (scaling) in some subjects.

With regards to exam papers External Examiners recommended that there should be uniformity in total marks available. They also noted that non MCQ papers provided students

with the opportunity to gain marks for understanding of subject even if they hadn't reached the correct conclusion, and MCQ focused exams would miss this.

In general it was felt that more detailed feedback should be provided by markers, especially second markers, when reviewing scripts. In some cases it was not clear whether the second marking was blind, or checking the first markers conclusions, and External Examiners advised that the roles be made clearer. There should also be better explanation of how decisions were made if there was a significant discrepancy between first and second markers. This again relates to areas in which there is specific College policy which needs to be reminded to staff.

Programme Content Delivered by External Providers

With regards to collaborative provision delivered by partner institutions, 100% of External Examiners stated that they were made aware in advance of the Exam Board that students had undertaken content away from the College. However only 75% found that the procedures for incorporating marks obtained by students at another institution were clearly and consistently applied, or that such provision was discussed at the Board of Examiners, particularly in relation to progression/award decisions, overall value, and consistency with regards to the programme of study.

With regards to placement activity, such as time spent away from the College on a Year Abroad scheme, 92% of External Examiners were made aware in advance of the Exam Board that students had undertaken content away from the College. However only 79% found that the procedures for incorporating marks obtained by students at another institution were clearly and consistently applied, and just 64% reported that such provision was discussed at the Board of Examiners, particularly in relation to progression/award decisions, overall value, and consistency with regards to the programme of study.

QAEC has previously identified this an area in which there needed to be further development. A working party to consider placement and study abroad is to meet over the coming academic year and report back recommendations to QAEC.

Exam Boards

100% of External Examiners were invited to attend their Exam Boards and 83% were able to attend these. 98% reported that the meeting was conducted to their satisfaction, and 97% that they were satisfied with the recommendations made.

External Examiners felt that the arrangements for degree classification were consistently applied but a few commented that the proportion of first class degrees awarded on their programmes was unusually high and should be reviewed.

Where Boards had cause to consider cases of mitigating circumstances or academic misconduct, most External Examiners agreed policies and procedures were applied fairly and equitably. A limited number of External Examiners commented that the removal of the severity judgement as part of the new mitigating circumstances policy did not provide Boards with sufficient information to make a decision for each student. It was suggested Mitigating Circumstances panels could make suggestions the Board of Examiners as to the suitable outcome for each student.

Generally External Examiners were satisfied with the way in which borderline cases were handled at their programme boards. In a couple of cases, it was recommended that the Departments review the impact of mastery exams or project marks when considering borderline cases. It was also recommended that borderline cases should be dealt with via an

algorithm, and EEs should not be involved with making decisions, only in ratifying them. It was also recommended that Departments ensure the procedures for considering borderline cases are the same across the Department's provision, especially where students are able to mix and match modules from different programmes.

Academic Standards

The vast majority of External Examiners concurred that the programmes on which they examined were in line with standards set by FHEQs, subject bench marks and PSRBs, and that student performance was comparable with or exceeded that of other higher education institutions with which they had experience. However, a few did reiterate the possibility of grade inflation on their courses. Generally academic standards and student performance was comparable across the modules within a programme, again with some exceptions. Most External Examiners agreed that standards were broadly comparable to previous years, with only slight variations in performance.

Overall Confidence

External Examiners were asked whether they agreed with three overall confidence statements based on the requirements of the QAA's Quality Code.



99% agreed 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."

98% agreed that "The assessment process measures student achievement rigorously and fairly against the intended learning outcomes of the programme and is conducted in line with the College's policies and regulations."

98% agreed that "The academic standards and the achievements of students are comparable with those in other degree awarding bodies of which you have experience."

For the one or two examiners who did not fully agree that their programmes met the above statements, they did find that these were mostly/usually met.

Recommendations

Based on the feedback summarised in this report, the key areas for development and improvement are listed below. Some areas highlighted by the External Examiners in their comments may not be relevant for programmes that have completed curriculum review, it may need to be considered for those programmes that are currently rolling out.

Programme information

- Ensuring External Examiners receive all relevant material on appointment and for each new academic year

Assessment setting

- Ensuring papers are provided in good order and in a timely manner
- Model answers/marking schemes provided to externals (and markers)
- Feedback to Externals Examiners with regards to assessment setting comments
- Consider the intensity during and between assessments for students
- Review the use of mastery exams and MCQ papers, and their contribution to degree outcomes
- Strengthen literature reviews to make these more challenging and hypothesis driven

Marking, moderation and feedback

- Second marking/moderation procedures
- Use of recordings in presentations/viva/practical examination
- Ensure annotation of feedback on all scripts and other assessed work.
- Review marks awarded for projects and their contribution to degree outcomes

Year abroad/distant study

- Marks awarded and contribution to degree outcomes
- Providing relevant information to External Examiners to complete their review.

Board of Examiners

- Consideration of students with mitigating circumstances
 - Action to be taken where pass is achieved
 - Supporting the Board to make decisions
- Monitor the median marks and number of first class degrees awarded, to avoid grade inflation

Conclusion

As referred to within this summary report, 2019-20 academic year will see the implementation of the first year of the newly approved undergraduate programmes following curriculum review and the updated Single Set of Academic Regulations to be used alongside. The Quality Assurance team will be working with our Departments and Faculties to assist with the implementation of these initiatives and will evaluate progress in advance of the next academic year. The comments received from External Examiners formally through their reports, and informally in discussion with programme teams, was a key driver in the curriculum review process. Feedback from our External Examiners will continue to be sought as to whether the changes are proving effective and any recommendation to improve on these for future years.

As can be seen from the summary detail in this report, whilst further action is required to further improve provision, over all the College can be assured of the quality and standards of its programmes.