

University of Glasgow

Academic Standards Committee – Friday 17 April 2015

Annual Report on External Examiners' Reports – Session 2013-14

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1. Introduction

This report summarises the External Examiners' reports received for Session 2013-14, paying particular attention to concerns and/or recommendations that have been raised by External Examiners.

2. Statistical Information

This report covers External Examiner reports on courses taught in the University. It does not include reports on courses validated by the University or for joint courses where Glasgow is not the administering University (e.g. Christie's Education, Glasgow School of Art, Scotland's Rural College (SRUC), and Edinburgh Theological Seminary (ETS). These are reviewed by the relevant Joint Boards or Joint Liaison Committees.

Summary of External Examiners Reports – 2013-14		
Expected	Received	% Received
453	424	93%

Category		No	%
A/Aspcl	Very Satisfactory	159	37%
B/Bspcl	Satisfactory	109	26%
C/Cspcl	Satisfactory but some general comments made will prove helpful to course development	102	24%
D	Concerns have been raised that require attention	54	13%

Spcl = a specific issue has arisen that applies at University or College level and generally lies outwith the School's responsibility.

The table at Appendix 1 shows comparative figures for the last six years.

3. Comments Requiring Reply

As indicated in the table at Appendix 1, from the 54 reports (13%) which contained comments that required a response, the Head of School was asked to arrange for the School or Subject to address the points made and to respond to the Senate Office within 3 months. From the 54 requests, 39 replies have been received so far; copies of these responses have been sent to the External Examiners. Senate Office is currently following up on outstanding responses.

4. Issues

A sample of comments from reports graded D with the School/Subject Area response is included in Appendix 2. A sample of comments from those reports graded C, pertaining to assessment and marking, is included in Appendix 3.

In general, comments and recommendations made by External Examiners for Session 2013-14 covered the following issues.

4.1 Marking and Marking Scheme

The number of comments made in relation to marking and the marking scheme was similar to last year, with 43 comments. The main concerns were:

- Inconsistent use of marking scheme between markers including too high/low marks
- Inconsistencies in the use of marking sheets
- Lack of moderation
- Translation of marks from partner institutions

4.2 Assessment and Feedback

There was a decrease in the number of comments made with 21 External Examiners commenting on Assessment and Feedback compared with 33 in session 2012-13.

- Inconsistent feedback
- Need for revised assessment

4.2 Procedural and Documentation

8 External Examiners raised issues pertaining to procedures and documentation.

- Concern over problems with administrative processes in compiling results and averages for final year students
- Need for improved examiner training and support
- Mentoring system for new members of university staff

4.3 Course Content

5 External Examiners commented on the need for modernisation and revision of curriculum.

4.4 Standard of Students

3 External Examiners raised concerns over the language capabilities of international students.

4.5 Staffing

2 External Examiners commented on the need for additional staffing.

5. On-line External Examiner System

It is expected that the external examiner system will be upgraded during summer 2015 to facilitate the submission of external examiner nominations on-line.

6. Summary

The Academic Standards Committee is asked **to note** the following:

- The summary of comments made by external examiners in their reports for session 2013-14. These comments will be addressed where necessary by schools and responses reviewed and monitored by the Senate Office.
- The external examiner on-line system update

Overview of External Examiners Reporting – 2008 to present

Diet	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14
Report Prepared	7 May 2010	13 May 2011	14 May 2012	7 May 2013	20 May 2014	10 April 2015
No. of external examiner reports expected	441	449	479	469	465	453
No. received at date of report	409 (93%)	404 (90%)	403 (84%)	442 (94%)	443 (95%)	424 (93%)
% received by 31 July ¹	50%	44%	37%	47%	50%	53%
% received by 31 October ²	78%	70%	60%	71%	76%	76%
Reports with substantial comment, for reply by School/Subject	52 (12%)	51 (13%)	38 (9%)	72 (16%)	65 (15%)	54 (13%)
Replies received from School/Subject and forwarded to external examiners at report date	38 (73%)	36 (71%)	9 (24%)	58 (81%)	49 (80%) ³	39 (72%)

¹ This is the date by which reports are requested

² This is the date by which most reports on taught post graduate courses are expected

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Sample of External Examiner comments with School/Subject responses

Examiners' Comments	School/Subject Response (One sample from each College)
<p>My only significant concern relates to feedback on the Dissertations. In a number of cases the second marker had not written anything on the mark sheet at all and, indeed, had not even signed this sheet. This was combined in some cases with only very brief comments from the first marker. In one case this resulted in my having to try to determine whether the mark awarded was appropriate with 8 words of feedback to draw upon.</p>	<p>...It is probable that the external examiner's comments relate instead to his review of undergraduate honours dissertations. The examiner was asked to review five dissertations; on three of the marking sheets, as he correctly notes, the second marker has provided no comments. Our review of these marking sheets has revealed that, in each of these cases, the same member of staff — a new member — was serving as second marker. This indeed needs remedial action, but because the report located the problem in dissertations, the matter was not considered by the Level 3/4 at the autumn meeting.</p> <p>The School Quality Officer has written to the Level 3/4 convenor and the Honours Dissertation Coordinator asking that action be taken to ensure that internal markers provide adequate feedback, not only for the student's sake, but for the guidance of external examiners. He has also asked those officers to contact the second marker in question and give guidance on what the University expects. This advice will be reinforced as and when dissertations are submitted.</p> <p>The minutes of the relevant committee meetings feed back into the School agenda, and hence will come before School later in January</p>
<p>I noted that the level 3 exam had a noticeable drop in mean score. The students' answers were often rooted in work from the 1970s and 80s, and it did not appear that recent research was being sufficiently highlighted. Consideration could be given to making the curriculum more current for this module.</p> <p>A Mini-project in Level 3 had also dropped by two grade points, apparently coinciding with a new person taking over the module. It would be useful to know how the marking standards of new lecturers are brought in line with departmental practice.</p> <p>Neither of the mini-projects at Level 3 are currently moderated, and consideration should be given to finding some way to introduce some form of moderation of the marks given.</p>	<p>The relevant teaching staff will be strongly encouraged to take this advice on board.</p> <p>In terms of general practice regarding lecturers taking on new courses, (in the case of the qualitative project, the lecturer was new to this course but has worked in the School for a considerable time) all markers are provided with a copy of the University Code of Assessment when collecting any marking. The year tutor also oversees any new delivery in terms of both new courses and new staff to ensure it fits within departmental practice and as is standard practice all grades and courses are considered at both interim and final boards and any discrepancies identified and discussed.</p> <p>Moderation processes have been introduced to the mini-projects at L3.</p>
<p>Accuracy of marking needs to be improved. In addition to</p>	<p>We agree that the timescale last semester was indeed very tight and we are looking at</p>

<p>the points raised in 8.2, I recommend that staff are given a longer time for marking to ensure fewer errors. I would also suggest double marking of scripts (2%) either side of the border-line to ensure scripts are marked accurately. This does not have to be done by a specialist, just a generalist who can check the answers against the model answers.</p>	<p>ways of giving markers longer to mark scripts. A compounding problem is that it is largely the same group of markers doing both Y1 and Y2 examinations which fall close together. The errors however were not by the markers but at data input stage of marks and again we are keen to move to an automated process where there is less opportunity for human error. If grades for each question could be read by OCR or similar, then this would remove one level where human error can influence the process. In addition we intend to use a unified scheme whereby it is possible to see where marks are awarded on scripts, making it easier for our external examiners to understand grades awarded. Double marking is not a university requirement at Level 1 but we agree that if time permitted it would be good practice. Same issues as noted above. We do “moderate” scripts by looking at those both above and below the pass mark. The issue with doing such is that marks could in theory go down as well as up so for fairness all should be done and not possible within timeframe. What is important is that the process is fair and a unified scheme used by all markers showing how marks are awarded will ensure no student is being disadvantaged by errors such as mistakes in adding scores etc. All student scripts are marked against a model answer currently, but as the name suggests it is exactly that, with other possible answers being possible. Markers are asked to amend or note where other answers</p>
<p>It became clear during and after the Board of Examiners meeting that there had been very serious problems with compiling the results and averages for the final year students. The spreadsheet we were using contained various inaccuracies because of the need to manually enter and check marks, given the lack of a fully functioning spreadsheet, and the Subject Area’s exams officer had had to check everything manually during the previous night. It is not acceptable for academic staff to have to do this (or indeed for any member of staff to have to do this in their own time), and it is not acceptable for a Board of Examiners to have anything less than complete confidence that they are awarding the appropriate degree to each candidate. I very strongly urge the College to investigate how this situation arose, and to ensure that it is rectified for next year.</p>	<p>As part of standard practice within the School, a review of exam boards was undertaken following the exam diet in May 2014. In specific reference to the Subject Area this was undertaken in July, and included a summary discussion/review meeting involving the Head of Subject Honours Convenor and Teaching and Student Support Administrator on 1st July. This discussion focussed on improvements to developing formulas for ‘a-typical’ student marks, rather than manually entering this data as previous. This discussion was also further informed by previous meeting on 10th June staff prior to the exam board in which all formulas within the students record sheet were verified for the final year/senior honours data (prior to the Exam Board). Some incomplete data in relation to junior Honours data, which was subsequently rectified. The Board was satisfied as to their own decision-making in relation to final degree classifications, as outlined in the Exam Board minute. Following this meeting, the Head of School Administration also met with staff to further review practice. In relation to future mitigation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Since 2013-14, the School has engaged in a project to increase standardisation of academic assessment records across Subjects • This project is continuing during session 14-15, with a view to further improving the functionality and presentation of Exam Board data • A series of pre-exam board checks/verification of data • Further statistical analysis of assessment data across and within sessions to further augment the quality assurance process

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Sample of External Examiner Comments on Assessment and Marking

Marking
I would encourage markers to annotate scripts and give some indication at the end why a particular mark was given - particularly important at the upper and lower ends of the marking scheme and certainly when a candidate has failed an element. This has improved over the last couple of years but is still not adopted by everyone.
Although the marking was consistent across the different courses, I found that there was a slight issue, in one course more than in others, with assessing exam (and, to a much lesser degree, essay) responses in which the marker criticized that the question had been missed, but that there was still substantial knowledge on the subject matter as a whole. In the above mentioned course, the marker occasionally awarded marks in the B range, despite these comments, whereas most other markers would not go beyond the C range after they had made such a comment. In this regard, I would urge a consistent response and I would generally side with those markers who award no more than a mark in the C range for such a response. On the essays, there were a few examples where even the examiners commented on the brevity of the bibliography or a 'very thin source base', but where they nevertheless awarded rather high marks -- in the most extreme case an A3. It might be useful to have a conversation about minimum primary and/or secondary source expectations for respective marks.
I feel that in some cases the marking and assessment regimes are too tough and students are not getting the marks that they would at comparable UK institutions. One aspect was that marks for oral assessments had been 'moderated' to get a better average because some of the examiners involved were being too tough. This should be solved by changing and simplifying the assessment procedure using proformas with prompts that elicit sensible marks for the students. There was also evidence of tough marking in some of the examinations. Overall, the School should be awarding more First Class degrees.
My main observation is that the entire marking scale ought to be used. Currently, the 'C' band is rarely used and the 'D' band almost never.
Assessment
In the feedback there is sometimes a tendency to mention only the positive aspect to the student, while minimising or the importance of negative aspect, or not mentioning them at all. As feedback is part of the learning process, the students need to know exactly what they need to improve as well as giving the credit for what they do correctly.
I feel the assessment criteria needs further developed to include both specific and general marking criteria. (at present the learning outcomes are used to assess performance). Markers should address assessment criteria in their feedback/ comments showing what the writer has achieved and what has not. It is good that you are highlighting strengths and weaknesses in the feedback. I feel more detailed feedback would be helpful for every student.
Although the mix of assessment techniques is entirely appropriate, I am not as sure about the weighting. Given the range of varied assessment, I think that (mostly) 70% for the exam work is too heavily weighted. I would urge examiners to think about weighing particularly the essays more heavily because, for the most part, students do a lot of work for these essays, which is perhaps not adequately acknowledged.