

University of Glasgow

Academic Standards Committee – Friday 25 May 2018

Annual Report on External Examiners' Reports – Session 2016-17

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1. Introduction

This report summarises the External Examiners' reports received for Session 2016-17, 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), Edinburgh Theological Seminary (ETS)). These are reviewed by the relevant Joint Boards or Joint Liaison Committees.

Summary of External Examiners Reports – 2015-16		
Expected	Received	% Received
471	414	88

Category	No	%
A/Aspcl Very Satisfactory	152	37
B/Bspcl Satisfactory	82	20
C/Cspcl Satisfactory but some general comments made will prove helpful to course development	141	34
D Concerns have been raised that require attention	39	9

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 39 reports (9%) 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 three months. From the 39 requests, 37 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

In general, comments and recommendations made by External Examiners for Session 2016-17 covered the following detailed below. The statistics would suggest that many of the issues were related to the Student Experience as opposed to concerns regarding standards of learning and teaching.

4.1 Assessment and Feedback

There was an increase from 21 in 2015 to 47 comments on assessment and feedback in 2016. See **Appendix 2** for a sample of comments. The main issues identified are as follows:

- Late feedback (5)
- Inconsistent/inadequate feedback (23).
- Need for variable forms of assessment (8)
- Overlap between essay and exam (4)
- Request for viva (3)
- Over assessment (2)

4.2 Marking and Marking Scheme

There were 46 comments on marking which reflected an increase from 33 in 2015. See **Appendix 3** for a sample of comments.

- Need to utilise the full range of the marking scheme (11)
- Marking over generous (6)
- Consistency of moderation (7)
- Need for cross marking/moderation (3)
- Need for detailed marking scheme (3)

4.3 Staffing

There were 23 comments on staffing levels in 2016, an increase from 9 in 2015. External Examiners commented on inadequate academic and administrative staffing levels. A sample of comments is attached at Appendix 4.

4.4 IT/Plagiarism Software

There were 9 comments on IT processes and Urkund. Comments included:

- Difficulties in accessing Moodle;
- Moodle VLE outdated;
- It is not possible to rely on the University's plagiarism software ('Urkund') while using Moodle.

4.5 Procedural and Documentation

There was a decrease from 22 to 13 comments on procedures and documentation. Issues included:

- Need for greater attention to detail on papers sent to External Examiners;
- Poor attendance by academic staff at Board of Examiners' meetings.

4.6 Standard of Students

There were two comments on the language capabilities of international students.

5. Good Practice

External Examiners noted examples of good practice which related to:

- Wide range of assessment
- Quality feedback
- Moderation of marking

6. On-line External Examiner System

The development of the online nomination process has been ongoing with further testing being undertaken. The feedback from the latest testing was extremely positive and, subsequently, a number of additional functions are under development. It is planned for a pilot to be undertaken in early 2019.

7. Summary

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

- The summary of comments made by external examiners in their reports for session 2016-17. 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 – 2009 to present

Diet	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17
Report Prepared	7 May 2013	20 May 2014	10 April 2015	10 May 2016	25 April 2017	11 May 2018
No. of external examiner reports expected	469	465	453	455	456	471
No. received at date of report	442 (94%)	443 (95%)	424 (93%)	429 (94%)	415 (91%)	414 (88%)
% received by 31 July ¹	47%	50%	53%	48%	56%	57%
% received by 31 October ²	71%	76%	76%	78%	80%	80%
Reports with substantial comment, for reply by School/Subject	72 (16%)	65 (15%)	54 (13%)	34 (8%)	36 (8%)	39 (9%)
Replies received from School/Subject and forwarded to external examiners at report date	58 (81%)	49 (80%)	39 (72%)	21 62%	25 (69%)	37 (95%)

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

SAMPLE OF EXTERNAL EXAMINER COMMENTS SESSION 2016

ASSESSMENT

<p>I asked for more consistency in the level of feedback provided to students (with some markers providing nearly half a page, and others only a sentence or two) and I did see some improvement, but I am unsure as to whether this is after explicit actions by the school. It would be good to get some clarification on this.</p>
<p>Q 8.2 I noticed some differences in the quality and quantity of feedback given on assignments and the style of feedback forms used. In instances where the feedback is formative such differences may have an influence on the final grade achieved. Something for course coordinators to keep an eye on.</p>
<p>Feedback quality and timeliness is a continuing problem. ... it was mentioned by students on my visits both this year and the last....They (the students) felt that the assessment process was something of a lottery with some members of staff giving better quality of feedback than others. Again, this is not an unusual situation in any institution, but any measures that would encourage consistency of marking and assessment across the school would be very helpful in improving feedback.</p>
<p>Students reported that feedback could take a few months in some cases, though they appreciated that staff are not always on-site at the same time due to conferences or fieldwork. Particularly feedback on posters was reportedly a long time.</p>
<p>As I have noted before though, some of the comments that appear in the summative feedback the students receive, would arguably be better received at a draft formative stage when they would be able to address this feedback in a timely way. Feedback is only formative if students do something with it and so assessment needs to provide opportunities for this. As noted in my last report, the formative feedback did in the main appear rather brief and focussed on only one or two issues. I suggested that the team might wish to discuss whether more comprehensive formative feedback would be of value, though this suggestion appears not to have been taken on board.</p>
<p>Whilst the standard of student work (degree classification, bands etc.) was comparable with other institutions where I have examined, my impression is that it is much more difficult for your students to achieve first class marks (and esp. high first class marks) because of both the GPA system and the tendency to over-assess.</p>
<p>However, the somewhat limed evidence available points towards the need for a critical review of the marking and assessment processes in all possibly most years of the course. Perhaps paradoxically this is despite the programme's content being interesting, stimulating and very much current. There are questions over service courses... which must be addressed. The examination is multiple choice □ far from appropriate for students who need to demonstrate that mathematics is a tool rather than a learning exercise. It is a total misnomer to call the current course as □engineering mathematics□! At the higher levels in specialist subjects there is the much repeated need for more □stings in the tail□ on examination questions. ...on both projects and examinations, the assessment criteria and processes need a thorough re-examination. This year's graduating class had almost two thirds of the cohort classified as first class honours. This is ... very unlikely to be appropriate! Again an opportunity to meet with more students would have helped very significantly.</p>
<p>My first impression last year was that there is a great deal of assessment load on any individual student on this programme. ... some courses have many very small elements of assessment. ... The disadvantages are that fragmentation of learning prevents a disciplinary mastery. That students feel they can skip an assessment without undue penalty overall, and that staff workload across the course is greater than otherwise. Clearly this is a matter for the course team to consider continuously. The primary concern, perhaps, should be to check whether the same learning outcomes are being tested twice within a module or across the programme as a whole. The former is relatively easy to do from the perspective of the module tutor; the latter is more tricky and requires a curriculum map and more general discussion, but I think it is one worth having.</p>
<p>The oral presentation is excellent training and it was noticeable that marks for this assessment were generally good. However, this resulted in at least two weak students moving up a grade boundary and obtaining a pass.</p>

SAMPLE OF EXTERNAL EXAMINER COMMENTS SESSION 2016

MARKING

<p>It is natural to find some variation in practices of second marking and reconciling examination scripts. But given the pressure and growing workload in exam marking, I feel it is imperative that Glasgow markers tighten up the consistency of their practices: there ought to be more clarity and transparency in annotated reconciliation; final agreed grades ought to be listed on the examination scripts; indicative marginalia could be a useful habit to inculcate. All of these would help mitigate against the sorts of problems that cropped up in this Exam diet, and would assist with consistency across courses.</p>
<p>Some examinations are OK, but many would benefit from a critical appraisal. One consequence of this is the arguably excessive percentage of first class honours, graduates. This should be carefully and critically examined. At this level the 'high input standards' argument has well-rehearsed flaws – school cramming and the style of examinations at school level both contribute to this.</p>
<p>I notice that I have commented every year on the 17/18 borderline. Once again there seemed to be a number of scripts that had been assessed at 18 but that might be more appropriately have been given a 2.1 mark.</p>
<p>There were a couple of examples of where marks at the low end were a little generous. Might be useful ensuring all staff are familiar with the marking criteria at the lower end.</p>
<p>Cross Marker moderation again, in the interest of equity of student experience.</p>
<p>Marking of poor and weak work (D and E grades) needs some thought, partly to ensure there is a real comparison in terms of marks with the 95% of students who do well or really well, and partly to ensure the wrong message is not given to students who ...do not convince they have followed/understood the course.</p>
<p>There was a major problem in some modules with the marking of some very inexperienced Graduate Teaching Assistants.</p>
<p>I found the first marking on some courses to be very generous. In a number of cases, the % of first class and top 2.1 marks awarded was very high, with hardly any work in the 2.2 range. Indeed, I occasionally, got a sense of a significant mismatch between comments and grades (eg work described as 'rambling' and 'lacking coherence' awarded a B1).</p>
<p>There must be consistent and useful annotation of all scripts.</p>
<p>Ongoing staff development for marking consistency</p>
<p>Overgenerous marking; feedback not in line with marking.</p>

SAMPLE OF EXTERNAL EXAMINER COMMENTS 2016

STAFFING

<p>I have stated that the administration of the assessment process was effective but was significantly under resourced. I was very surprised to find that there was only one administrator for the foundation phase, which runs over two years. Therefore the process was effective only because of individuals stepping in and going above and beyond.</p>
<p>I have recently undertaken some quality audit duties for the online version of the programme that is being developed, ...I do have some reservations about an increase in student numbers without additional support being provided for the programme.... It would be extremely regrettable to see increasing student numbers, with no commensurate increase in staffing/resources, undermine successful delivery.</p>
<p>The current resourcing of the course cannot continue. This year only three full-time academic staff and a small team of TAs were assigned to the course, with nearly 450 students to deal with. The team had to rely on good will from other members of staff to deliver a coherent programme of lectures for the thousand years covered by the module.... if this success is to continue, then more full-time lecturing staff and preferably more TAs and administrative help needs to be allocated in future years, as the current situation is untenable.</p>
<p>...The only area that can be identified is concern over the potential reduction in administrative support staff for the SSC programme. It is clear that the ongoing provision of such a well run and high quality module, along with the increased burden associated with moderation implementation, the increasing plagiarism challenge, and the introduction of REVOLVE and EVASYS will impact significantly on the level of administrative support required for the team. It would be my strong suggestion that ... the necessary support is provided to allow this well run programme.</p>
<p>Administrative support for the programme has been variable over the years. Initially, the programme was supported by a dedicated administrator who was co-located with many of the staff running the course and provided excellent support, ...Unfortunately, the administrative support was subsequently centralised and provided by a number of different staff, and the support provided (to students, academic staff and myself as external examiner) suffered as a result. Consistency of support is key to ensuring that students (many of whom are from overseas and paying considerable fees) are able to perform to their full potential on the programme.</p>
<p>One outcome of Glasgow's enviable reputation appears to have been a sizeable increase in the number of applications ...It is already beginning to manifest itself in a year-on-year increase in the size of the student cohort, and ... the rate of growth is accelerating. ... senior managers must be made to realise that this success comes at a price, and that it will be necessary to increase investment in the Department if it is to maintain the present quality of its provision. ... Just as importantly, as I made clear in last year's report ... there is an even more immediate and acute pressure on the administrative resources of the Department. The problems experienced in the exam boards this year reflect the fact that far too much burden is now being placed on the shoulders of the lone administrator... there is an urgent need to recruit at least one full-time administrative assistant dedicated to the subject (i.e. not shared with other departments within Humanities) in order to ensure that the administrator's workload is practicable and humane.</p>
<p>Better staff resourcing and e-learning support are essential if this small number of staff are to continue to maintain the excellent standards of learning and to continue to develop their innovative teaching practice in the face of growing student numbers, and in the face of any unpredictable adversity... The course currently relies heavily on the goodwill of this dedicated team who worked well beyond reasonable expectations this year.</p>
<p>I feel that the assessments team, despite fantastic achievements, is relatively understaffed. As a minimum, an assessments team for a large medical school should have a data manager and a psychometrician; I would suggest these are considered as a priority. The small team at present is having to cope with the heavy workload...</p>

SAMPLE OF EXTERNAL EXAMINER COMMENTS 2016

The SSC Programme has currently only temporary administrative support, which may compromise the delivery and smooth running of the SSC Programme in the future. Considering the complex nature of the SSC Programme involving the coordination of multiple tasks relating to the management of a large number of modules with a large number of supervisors and students, it is essential to have a reliable and continuous administrative support.

The main problem for this course is an administrative one. A more robust structure is needed to help administer this part of the course.

For three or four years, the practices of academic and supplier staff have been exemplary. The four, and my final year, was disorganized and unlike any previous year. It was also clear that the administrative changes at Glasgow have had a negative impact on the work of external examiners.

increasing office/administrative capacity in this period is ... imperative. I suggest the University can avert future problems and best support the subject as a growing and successful subject area with several new teaching posts by providing for an additional administrator who can and should be taking up some of the burden that is currently falling unnecessarily (and at times, with problematic results) on academic staff.

The staffing issue for the sustainable energy programme needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency. Comments from a number of students highlighted this specific issue □ they felt that whilst the programme was unanimously viewed as a very good one, they had been disadvantaged by the lack of internal staff. There is a need for staff access to discuss module issues and, more so, a need for internal staffing to ensure appropriate project supervision.