

University of Glasgow

Academic Standards Committee – Friday 4 October 2019

Annual Report on External Examiners' Reports – Session 2017-18

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1. Introduction

This report summarises the External Examiners' reports received for Session 2017-18, 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 – 2017-18		
Expected	Received	% Received
458	411	90%

Category		No	%
A/Aspcl	Very Satisfactory	171	42
B/Bspcl	Satisfactory	43	10
C/Cspcl	Satisfactory but some general comments made will prove helpful to course development	137	33
D	Concerns have been raised that require attention	60	15

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. Overdue Reports

As outlined in **Appendix 1**, the percentage of reports received for session 2017 was 90%; the average for the past six sessions was 91%. Ideally, this percentage would be higher to ensure that all courses are in receipt of formal External Examiner feedback. On average, a higher number of UG reports are received in comparison to PGT. The timing of UG reports, due by 31 July, permits follow up emails to be issued promptly in comparison to PGT reports which have a submission period of October to January. While reviewing its current practice, the Senate Office proposes to undertake a comparison exercise with other HEIs to identify whether these figures are comparable and to determine if there are other practices which could be implemented in our own system.

4. Comments Requiring Reply

As indicated in the table at **Appendix 1**, from the 60 reports (15%) 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 60 requests, 49 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.

5. Issues

In general, comments and recommendations made by External Examiners for Session 2017-18 covered the following detailed below.

5.1 Assessment and Feedback

There was an increase from 47 in 2016 to 73 comments on assessment and feedback in 2017. See **Appendix 2** for a sample of comments

- Inconsistent/inadequate feedback (45)
- Need for review of current assessment (21)

5.2 Marking and Marking Scheme

There were 76 comments on marking which reflected an increase from 46 in 2016. See **Appendix 3** for a sample of comments. The main issues were:

- Consistency/improved criteria/transparency of moderation (36)
- Inconsistent/transparency of Marking (23)
- Over generous marking/too many First Class Awards (13)

5.3 Staffing

There were 16 comments received on staffing. The focus was on inadequate academic and administrative staffing levels. A sample of comments is attached at **Appendix 4**.

5.4 Course Content and Procedural

There were 17 comments made on Course Content and Procedural issues. Issues included:

- Review of course content (6)
- No invitation to attend BoE (4)
- Anonymous Marking (2)

5.5 Standard of Students

There were three comments on the academic/language capabilities of students.

6. Good Practice

External Examiners noted examples of good practice which related to:

- Wide range of assessment
- Quality feedback

7. On-line External Examiner System

Further to the appointment of an Information Services Project officer, a number of changes were made to the On-line nomination facility. Two Schools participated in the pilot and will provide feedback/comments on the system.

8. Summary

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

- The review of the current report submission levels and the planned action;
- The summary of comments made by external examiners in their reports for session 2017-18. 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 – 2010 to present

Appendix 1

Diet	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
Report Prepared	20 May 2014	10 April 2015	10 May 2016	25 April 2017	11 May 2018	31 July 2019
No. of external examiner reports expected	465	453	455	456	471	458
No. received at date of report	443 (95%)	424 (93%)	429 (94%)	415 (91%)	414 (88%)	411 (90%)
% received by 31 July ¹	50%	53%	48%	56%	57%	(50%)
% received by 31 October ²	76%	76%	78%	80%	80%	76%
Reports with substantial comment, for reply by School/Subject	65 (15%)	54 (13%)	34 (8%)	36 (8%)	39 (9%)	60 (15%)
Replies received from School/Subject and forwarded to external examiners at report date	49 (80%)	39 (72%)	21 62%	25 (69%)	37 (95%)	49 (82%)

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

**EXTERNAL EXAMINER COMMENTS 2017-18
ASSESSMENT**

13823	<p>There were instances of excellent feedback [REDACTED]. However, there were other cases where feedback was perfunctory / non-constructive. I would expect such variation in feedback quality could have the potential to create student dissatisfaction. Consideration could be given to ensuring a baseline level of feedback quality. Assessment was in general consistent and very carefully done. The use of A1 grade is more frequent than I am used to (see e.g., in coursework for [REDACTED] or in the exam of [REDACTED]). This is sometimes the product of assessment that does not discriminate, sometimes grading that appears generous. More problematic, these were issues that were anticipated in concerns raised when the assessments were reviewed (see further discussion on administration). To quote from an email from February I sent to [REDACTED]: "...The answers are very short, and I don't see how one would distinguish between good students." and [REDACTED]: "There is limited scope for discussion in question 1, which may affect the ability to differentiate top marks." I don't know what happened with these concerns since were not addressed at the time, partly because of short time, but they did indeed lead to irregular distributions of grades.</p>
14135	<p>I think there are many programmes that have issues related to the quality and quantity of feedback given to students so I would not wish to appear to be alarmist about this. However there does appear to be a variability in both the quality and quantity of feedback provided. There therefore does appear to be an issue in that there is variability in the expertise of those providing feedback and the quality of their feedback. This would appear to be a resource issues, a quality issue and a general commitment to students issue which I believe would be worthy of some attention.</p>
14061	<p>As already indicated in last year's report, I do think students, especially at level 3, could benefit from a bit more specific feedback. For example, successful completion of the 3rd year level miniprojects is an important stepping stone towards the 4th year Maxi project, so it would probably be of immense benefit to the students to see specific feedback in the text for their mini-projects rather than just seeing an attached feedback sheet with mostly generic comments</p>
14117	<p>I commented in March 2018 about the length of time that I spent reviewing both the exam papers and solutions for the [REDACTED] Paper 2. I commented that the internal process for reviewing exams and solutions did not seem to be working for this course. At the exam board in June 2018, I commented on the number of elements of assessments for [REDACTED]: 5 assignment and 2 exams = SEVEN in total. It seems to me that this course is over-assessed and may deter students from gaining a deeper understanding of the topic. It is certainly out-of-line with other courses. In contrast, the [REDACTED] was assessed by a 100% assignment that was limited to only two pages of A4 plus a bibliography. Furthermore, it only addressed one of 5 course ILOS.</p>
14226	<p>The number of separate individual assignments, however, is still greater than almost any other comparable course nationally, in my experience. This leaves me still concerned that there is some redundancy in the system, with different assignments repeating a test of the same learning outcomes. An exercise in sketching out a curriculum map of course learning outcomes against assignments would highlight whether my impression is valid. There were several cases this</p>

	<p>year of students not submitting one of the minor pieces of assessment, and then being able to achieve a reasonable passing grade on the strength of their other assignments. In these cases, it is worth asking whether such students have not been tested on certain specific learning outcomes at all, or whether the team are happy for a selection of outcomes to be assessed rather than all of them.</p>
14211	<p>Assignment 1 is essentially identical to that in quantitative methods, so if a student takes both classes (which I understand is possible), they will be asked to do the same type of assignment twice. Yes, one is critical appraisal of an article using quantitative and other other critical appraisal of an article that uses qualitative methods. But what is the added value of having them do the same. Some variety in assessments across methods courses would be advisable.</p>
14120	<p>Attention needs to be given to achieving consistency between teaching teams in how feedback and grade consistency is achieved.</p>
14041	<p>As noted in my previous report, there is a need for ensure alignment of qualitative and quantitative feedback. There were examples across most modules where work awarded in the 70s was described as 'very good' and work in the 50s described similarly. This is a main concern given the lack of clarity and consistency in feedback provided to students and I strongly suggest this is discussed by all staff ahead of marking next session.</p>
14153	<p>I have expressed concern about assessment components being worth 70% (in one case 80%). I do not feel that this will encourage students, I feel it will put too much pressure on them. An essay, for example, should be weighted at 60%.</p>
14120	<p>Q8.2 Attention needs to be given to achieving consistency between teaching teams in how feedback and grade consistency is achieved.</p>
14202	<p>A careful watch should be kept on ensuring that the tone of feedback remains constructive, even for less satisfactory work.</p>
13839	<p>A few feedback statements were limited to presenting the mark distribution and, of course, this is insufficient practice, in line with the guidelines provided. I would urge the School to remind the members of staff responsible for these modules to comply with what requested of them. I am sharing a detailed report with the School to track these cases. Some feedback were mainly focussed on giving the right answer, rather than explaining students how they can improve. The pedagogical literature demonstrates that students need more guidance on how they can improve their performance. I would suggest reflecting on this issue. I noticed that some comments referred to poor English. The definition of what constitutes good or bad English is open to interpretation. Markers should either be very clear with themselves and with the students about what standard is expected or limit themselves to expect clarity. Acknowledging that international students will not speak and writing in English like a native, we also have to acknowledge that if a student is deemed to fit to be enrolled in an English-taught degree programme, their English is sufficiently good to do so. I would suggest that framing assessment and feedback in terms of clarity of exposition is a much more clean-cut indicator of quality of work. I would recommend to think, frame, and use this criterion when thinking about English quality.</p>

EXTERNAL EXAMINER COMMENTS 2017-18

MARKING

14000	The marking process and mark sheet/guidance to staff needs to be closely looked at/ revised to try and ensure more consistency between markers and to produce a less-skewed distribution of marks. Part of the problem is that many staff are not using the grade descriptors on the mark scheme and the marking criteria in some cases are not being as closely followed as they should be.
14028	<p>Justification of marks awarded by examiners continues to be a mild concern. Some scripts were not annotated at all and no comments made by either examiner, however examiners did tend to agree on the grade to be awarded. More transparency in this process would constitute Good Practice.</p> <p>Projects - some supervisors were unfamiliar with the project procedures □ didn't seem to know what they were doing, or what was expected of them.</p> <p>██████████. Students thought there may have been different versions of criteria of assessment? There was a clear sense of dissatisfaction here, when students compared marks awarded and comments made by examiners. Looks like this needs looking into.</p>
14092	One slight concern was that there appeared to be disparity in the marks awarded between the modules in the Biological and Biomedical areas and those from Economics/Politics, with the Economics and Politics modules getting a much lower range of marks. This may be due to differences in the level of marking, expectations, or the information/guidance given to the students, Nevertheless one would not expect students with exceptional marks in other areas to all do badly in these modules, this should therefore be reviewed to determine the cause for this difference and steps be put in place to ensure equality between the subject areas.
14103	One of the borderline students that I was asked to examine raised an important issue that will need to be dealt with going forward. The student was taking the MSci degree, and one of the marks that contributed to the student's overall degree classification was from their work placement assessment. The mark awarded was a C2, which was unusually low given the student's other marks. The work placement reports were not initially made available to me, but the Year 4 Coordinator was able to find the report so that I could try and assess the reason for the low mark. My assessment of the report was that it was clearly a first class piece of work, so I would have awarded it at least an A5. The work I assessed was an electronic copy and was not accompanied by any assessment documentation. I was not, therefore, able to determine the basis for the original grade. This leads me to make two recommendations: that ALL work contributing to a student's final degree classification is made available to the external examiner; and, more importantly, that the annotations made by both the examiner and the moderator are attached to the work. This issue highlights the need for oversight of all marks by the Year 4 Coordinator, which is apparently not currently the case. I would urge that mechanisms are put in place to rectify this, and to ensure that the external examiner can adequately gauge the full assessment process for a given student.
14030	In team-taught courses it is important that marking criteria are applied consistently as much as this is possible. In ██████████, there were some major discrepancies between different markers.

14029	<p>However, I did note a particular case where a final year project received scores that were significantly different (primary marker gave the project an E whereas the second marker gave it a C). Proper procedure was followed and this piece of work was then assessed by a third marker - who gave it a B. Finally, a fourth marker was brought in, who also gave this piece of work a B grade. Whilst I have no concerns about the overall procedures employed by the programme team, it does concern me that such differences in appreciation of the quality of the piece of work were evident. I was also unhappy with the tone of some of the comments from the primary marker concerning the piece of work. I am aware that these were not shown to the student, however, whilst staff should be critical, one would hope that this could be formulated in a more constructive manner.</p>
14157	<p>I have noticed this year that some essays in the option courses on ██████ and on ██████ were generously marked. I have suggested to the examiners to lower marks by 3 points across the board. The essays were mainly very good or excellent and this is reflected in the B and A grades awarded. The top marks (A1-3) at my institution and in other UK institutions with which I am familiar are reserved for absolutely outstanding work and thus rarely used. The reason for bringing marks down across the board in these Options was an overall grade inflation which made these marks the norm rather than the exception. The final marks awarded reflect the standard at Honours level, where students would be expected to go beyond what is discussed in class and undertake independent research, locating and engaging with secondary sources.</p>
13880	<p>This is my main area of concern, which is consistent with previous examiners' reports. The graduation profile ends up with far too many firsts and upper-seconds. I am aware that the intake standards are high, but other institutions with similar or better input standards, do not exhibit such a marked effect. It is too early for me to have arrived at a definite conclusion as to the cause but it may be related to the (relatively) traditional nature of the examinations, with many modules not having enough assessment artefacts which stretch the more able.</p>
13919	<p>I feel that the percentage of first class honours awarded in the MEng degree (c. 49%) was excessive, and combined with the percentage of 2:1 awards (c. 46%) does not stand up when compared to other programmes nationally. To my knowledge, it is certainly higher than the averages of the other Russell Group universities.</p>

**EXTERNAL EXAMINER COMMENTS 2017-18
STAFFING**

For the attention of the Head of School: The College proposal to move local administrative support to a centrally-managed location would present a serious risk of damage to the high standards of the programme. I speak out of bitter experience: at Nottingham we have undergone a similar process of centralisation of admin staff. The process has been widely regarded by academic staff as catastrophic; several senior managers have left or have quietly moved on; and many aspects of the reform are in the process of being reversed. The main disaster has been the physical removal of experienced admin staff with local knowledge and connections to both staff and students. I would strongly urge the university not to mirror these mistakes, and potentially damage an excellent operation of this degree programme.

For the attention of the Head of School: q9 my tenure as external examiner draws to a close with this report I would like to take this opportunity to reiterate an issue that I have drawn attention to previously. It pertains to the success and growth of the programme. Student numbers on the main campus-based programme have grown significantly. You have an excellent programme and your staff work diligently and tirelessly towards its successful execution. It would be regrettable to see increasing student numbers undermine successful delivery. I would simply ask that the university pay due attention to resources and staffing of this excellent programme. This is particularly pertinent to the dissertation module where students wish to engage with experimental research. Finally, I would like to thank the programme staff for their assistance and enthusiasm during the course of my tenure. It has been a privilege to serve as external examiner and I wish the programme well

For the Attention of Head of School: I am concerned that there seems to be a drive to substantially increase the number of students enrolling in this module without the offer of additional support in terms of staff time, equipment and laboratory space. The drive for increased student numbers is common across the HE sector, but I feel there is a risk that the student experience will suffer if this is not matched with an increase in support.

For the attention of the Head of School: Over the 4 years I have examined the programme there have been a number of staff changes and the workloads on staff have been too high particularly at certain points in the year. Ensuring that there are sufficient staff with sufficient time to undertake their teaching and assessment tasks is extremely important if the programme is to continue to develop.