

University of Glasgow

Academic Standards Committee – Friday 24 January 2020

Annual Report on Undergraduate External Examiners' Reports –
Session 2018-19

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1. Introduction

This report summarises External Examiner reports received for **undergraduate** programmes during Session 2018-19. The report highlights themes and/or recommendations, including good practice, raised by External Examiners.

2. Statistical Information

This report covers undergraduate 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 Undergraduate External Examiners Reports – 2018-19		
Expected	Received	% Received
248	244	98%

Category	No	%
A/Aspcl Very Satisfactory	94	39
B/Bspcl Satisfactory	31	12
C/Cspcl Satisfactory but some general comments made will prove helpful to course development	94	38
D Concerns have been raised that require attention	29	11

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

3. Overdue reports

As outlined in the summary of received reports, the percentage of undergraduate reports received for session 2018 was 98%. As this is the first year where there has been separate commentary on undergraduate reports, it is not possible to do a direct comparison with previous years. However, a figure of 98% is most satisfactory and an improvement on 90% from session 2017-18 for both UG and PGT reports.

4. Comments Requiring Reply

From the 29 reports (11%) 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 29 requests 25 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. Themes

The Senate Office has identified the themes most commented on in the undergraduate External Examiner reports. External Examiners are invited to comment on areas of good practice, and these are detailed at q6.

Those areas that require further action or comment by Schools and Subject areas are detailed below:

5.1 Assessment and Feedback

There were 36 comments on assessment and feedback. See Appendix 1 for a sample of comments. The main issues were:

- Inconsistent/inadequate feedback (15)
- Need for review of current assessment (17)

5.2 Marking and Marking Scheme

There were 36 comments on marking See Appendix 2 for a sample of comments. The main issues were:

- Inconsistent marking (11)
- Moderation issues (8)
- Over generous marking/too many First-Class Awards (12)

5.3 Staffing

There were 12 comments received on staffing. The focus was on inadequate academic and administrative staffing levels. A sample of comments is attached at Appendix 3.

5.4 IT

Five comments were made on the University IT Services, mainly focussing on difficulties experienced in accessing Moodle and online systems.

6. Good Practice

External Examiners noted examples of good practice including:

- Creative, low stakes assessment
- Standards of programme
- Quality of feedback
- Rigour of marking/grading criteria
- Staff engagement
- Learning & Teaching Leadership

Examples of comments:

'Excellent pastoral care, great attention to individual circumstances; well-marked work, evidently strong and positive commitment to the programme from the teaching team.'

'Improvement in the organisation and assessment of the final year projects is so dramatic over the last few years that I would now identify this as an area of good practice. There is entire transparency in the assessment, and it is as fair as possible between projects and markers.'

'Appropriate marking, good feedback for the students, clear and transparent marking schemes, clear module information, good on-line learning resources.'

'Feedback on scripts/standard of work -high/systems in place for learning jobs and criteria clear and matched assessment process/variety of approaches to assessment /links with theory and practice excellent/reflection on personal and professional development very strong.'

7. Summary

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

- The introduction of separate reports for Undergraduate and Postgraduate Taught External Examiner comments.
- The summary of comments made by external examiners in their reports for session 2018-19. These comments will be addressed, where necessary, by schools and responses reviewed and monitored by the Senate Office.

14636	<p>Q2.8 I would strongly encourage the School to be more ambitious. Learning outcomes could be expanded to include relevant employability skills. In turn, assessment methods could be more creative. There is a prevailing approach in the School based on essay/technical coursework + final exam. However, some modules could be better assessed through coursework only, including videos, presentations, poster, twitter diaries, blogs. There is a full range of assessment methods already widely adopted in the sector which appears highly underutilised. These assessment methods could also be used in junction with a final exam if need be. However, institutions are now exploring alternative way to assess students that reduce the weight of exam assessments taking place in conditions that will never be replicated in real world scenario. More emphasis on collaborative work should also be considered.</p>
14682	<p>Q8.3 Advanced 3D Design: the assignment brief was awkwardly phrased throughout. The sub-headings within the brief do not always align with the corresponding text underneath. Different terminology is used to describe the same concept or topic. Inconsistent referencing, some sources are dated and possibly irrelevant to the module content.</p>
14578	<p>2) The courses I examined offer a comparatively traditional, fragmented and restricted menu of assessments (oral presentation at 6% of the total mark, seminar participation at 4% of the total mark, essay, exam). In line with the comments offered by the other external examiners, I strongly encourage the department to continue diversifying assessment methods (as is already happening on some modules, e.g. HIST4023, and in particular on some of the global history modules) and rely less on exams. This will allow an increasingly more diverse student body to develop a wider range of skill more broadly and deeply. One suggestion would be the introduction of source commentaries, which might also help recalibrate the balance between historiography and primary source work towards the latter in student assignments and help prepare students for their dissertations.</p>
14657	<p>Q8.2 The danger, however, is that students opt for modules with standard assessment to secure 'easier' marks rather than develop and challenge their learning. In tracking students taking both kinds of hon. module this year, and noticing discrepancies in ambition between them, I recommend that question setting for all Hons. modules is checked for suitable ambition, to ensure that more testing questions/tasks are set at hon. than at year 2 level, whatever the modes of assessment students undertake.</p>
14516	<p>In terms of the Continuous Assessment Task (CAT), the course team may want to consider which two of the nine tasks are summative given that currently, that is dependent on timetabling rather than being driven by outcomes (or learning incomes). The information available to me indicated that the mean mark for the CAT is a B grade, with all students passing this. This suggests that the CAT could be made more challenging. The 10% contribution of the CAT to the overall assessment weightings maximises the impact of the Schedule A assessment tools. It may be worth considering how to identify the contribution of the CAT on the overall standard setting reports, as the information that was made available to me was a mixture of actual marks (all other assessment tools) and grade points (CAT).</p>
14879	<p>Q1.8 assessment remains v traditional and bitty. it might be time to start bringing this into line with more modern practices.</p>
14516	<p>The potential impact on student success in Yr 3 and beyond, from weighting contributions of assessment tasks which enable a student to progress from Yr 2 to Yr 3 with C-E-E-E grades.</p>

14940	Q8.2 In the Level 4 and 5 inorganic papers the style of question varies a lot: from problem solving questions that involve some quantitative analysis and marks are awarded for each step of the question, to essay style questions where a single sentence question is set for large chunk of marks. Some question are clearly asking the students to recall large amounts of lecture notes.
14692	Q8.3 Despite the implementation of our proposal from last year, a new format where the students choose any four questions from six, the very poor performance of the Special Topics paper remains an issue. For example, in the CHEM 4H cohort, twenty-two students did a question that averaged approx. 30%. While for the CHEM 4CMC cohort, eighteen students did a question averaging approx. 29%. That is a total of forty fourth year students whose marks will be affected by attempting a question whose average is a fail. Again, I would suggest that more work on question structure needs to be undertaken.

14639	Q2.8 Last year I commented on the variation in exam rubrics. This is improved but could still be further harmonised. I see a wide variation in the length of papers and number of marks awarded. While there may be some justification for different lengths due to different levels and different weights of exam, I encourage the department to try to standardise these at least within levels. If there is a standard idea of marks per minute this reinforces student understanding of marking and assessment and supports their expectations about how much work is involved for each answer.
14800	Presentations attract higher marks/grades and this style of assessment appears to suit these students well. The high presentation marks become dumbed down by other elements of assessment. The team may like to consider how weightings could be altered to allow these students to benefit from the higher marks as they currently become lost in the system.
14584	As mentioned last year, the percentage of 1st Class Honours and Upper Second-Class Honours degrees being awarded is still too high, in my opinion, and remains outside the norm of the Russell Group Universities. Specific data is as follows: 70% in [REDACTED]; 100% in [REDACTED]; 94% in [REDACTED]; 62.5% in [REDACTED] At BEng level, the percentages of 1sts and 2:1s are more reasonable, though the Singapore courses have quite high percentages: o 76.5% in BEng Mechanical Design (62/80 students) o 68% in BEng Mechatronics (59/81 students) The underlying reason is that overall exam averages are, in my opinion, excessively high. For the Mechanical Engineering courses I looked at, the averages were as follows, out of 41 courses across all years: 28 courses with averages above 15/22 (62% centre of mark band); 14 courses with averages above 16/22 (65% centre of mark band); 9 courses with averages above 17/22 (68% centre of mark band) o 4 courses with averages above 18/22 (71.5% centre of mark band); 2 courses with averages above 20/22 (78% centre of mark band) I do, however, notice a moderation of mark averages in Year 5 versus the average of the last 4 years. Of 19 courses examined, 12 had lower averages this year compared to the 4-year average, 2 were the same and 5 had higher averages than the 4-year average. This trend is to be welcomed and encouraged. In my opinion, we need to challenge our students a bit more, in particular the top 50% of the cohort. Even one more challenging obligatory question on each exam would make a big difference to these average marks.
14758	Q8.3 Some students are getting marks of 22/21 when no diagrams have been included in their answers. This should not be happening and needs be addressed. I would recommend that the 'inclusion of pertinent diagrams' be included in the marking criteria.
14529	Greater consistency in using marking criteria in examiners' comments is needed. The degree needs to more systematically articulate how students' progress through their degree. At present it appears (to an external anyway), to be a bundle of individual modules rather than a coherent educational experience with a beginning, middle and end. The new moderation system is being implemented inconsistently, with a wide variation in how moderators perceive their responsibilities; some effectively still second marking. As it is very new, I'm sure greater consistently will emerge over the coming years, but it should be a theme of departmental discussion.

14853	There were a number of scripts where I was not able to discern how the 1st and 2nd markers have arrived at their final mark. In some cases, it was not evident that the second marker had assigned a mark.
14913	Q2.8 (see also 8.3). One issue concerning the scripts examined in Level 3 and Level 4 was adherence to University rubric on marking and grades. There was patchy provision of written words/phrases (e.g. excellent, very good answer, adequate, etc.) descriptors to justify grades awarded. Although most markers provided detailed comments in the margins and in the feedback boxes, there was frequently variance between overall comments and grades awarded, and also not in line with University descriptors.
14578	3) the Department urgently needs to develop and agree on clear and transparent marking criteria and marksheet - and a set of complementary guidelines - for oral presentations in the interest of equity, transparency and consistency of assessment. This would be an opportunity for the Department to review the place of oral presentations on the assessment menu, possibly with a view to increasing its value as an assessment and reducing what one of my fellow external examiners called the "bittiness" of the assessment
14578	Q5.4 2) there is a tendency in some colleagues to second mark and change marks for individual assignments. This is practice contrary to the guidelines and does not represent best practice in terms of equitable, transparent and consistent treatment of students. The Honours Exams Officer and the externals made this point repeatedly and it has been noted by the Department.

14906	Q8.3 None within the School of Life Sciences. However, it is worth noting that staffing levels are low and that there are no obvious contingency plans in place to deal with unexpected and extended sickness leave. This has been a major problem in previous years.
14848	For the attention of Head of School: I was struck by the marked rise in the number of special circumstances cases in the cohort, at both levels 1 and 2. The course organisers and supporting staff are clearly spending a lot of time and energy providing support and direction to the students, and ensuring that proper procedures are followed and sufficient evidence is provided - it may be that additional support, perhaps in the form of additional staffing, especially in the run up to the exam boards, is needed for both academic and professional/admin staff to be able to handle this marked rise and the additional time and work that goes into providing students with the support and direction they need, as well as collecting and collating the paperwork/evidence needed for special circumstances cases.
14623	For the attention of the Head of School: However it is clear that the staffing situation in Italian means that staff are stretched and an additional lecturer would allow some more breadth in the Honours options available to students each year.
14529	The administration of the degree devolves on a very small number of individuals (both academic and professional services), with systems and processes based on existing practice and word of mouth not written procedures. Everything works as long as current staff are in post, but if they are unexpectedly unable to be, the assessment process is in serious jeopardy.
14714	For the attention of the Head of School: I would recommend that convenors continue to be given support. In the extended absence of one convenor due to illness, the return of assessments to students was delayed; I suggest that a process to manage this kind of situation is discussed and a procedure implemented. In addition, orientation of staff before the modules begin is not clear to me, and would help them to clarify assessment procedures and use of criteria,
14492	For the attention of the Head of School: With reference to the field, a strong ongoing support for recruitment in Portuguese from the university will also remain essential for the future.
14879	Q8.3 For the Attention of the Head of School: the department needs a Student support Office. [REDACTED] needs help. she does far too much