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**Institutional overview of External Examiner reports - 2009/10**

1. **Introduction**

This report provides an overview of external examiner reports for the 2009/10 session, identifying themes and recurring recommendations that are worthy of further consideration. The criterion for the selection of these themes is that they occur in more than one report and across more than one Department. In most cases the themes have only been identified in a handful of reports and so should not be interpreted as evidence of systemic weaknesses. It should be noted that the overall message within the external examiner reports is very positive, with considerable praise for high standards and excellent quality of provision.

The report also highlights areas of good practice for wider dissemination, before concluding with recommendations for action. In total 142 reports were received and reviewed by 8 February 2011, comprising 76 undergraduate and 66 postgraduate reports.

1. **Themes identified in the external examiner reports**
2. **Volume of assessment**

There are some concerns that students are being over-assessed in comparison to their peers at other institutions. This includes concerns about the length of exam papers, with some papers expecting a lot of work in a short time, and that there are a large number of discrete summative assessments within some modules at the expense of formative feedback.

The most common concern is that there is a high assessment load for some 10 credit modules, and that the cumulative effect on students needs to be considered. This can be linked to a concern from some externals that programmes can be fragmentary, and that Departments should consider merging some modules to produce fewer, larger modules, which examine the learning outcomes in more depth.

The following comment highlights the issue, and reflects how some Departments are seeking to address it:

*Students appear to complete a lot of assessment for a lot of 10 credit modules. It was good to discuss the Department’s blue sky planning to increase the credit size of modules and rationalise the amount of assessment.* (Information Science, UG external)

There are several comments about the tight-turnaround of exam scripts, and while one external acknowledges this is not uncommon across the sector, it is suggested that the volume of assessment is a contributing factor.

1. **Generic feedback to students**

The externals are content with the overall provision of feedback to students, but there is some concern that the provision of generic feedback is not providing sufficient level of detail to help students learn and improve. Externals have encouraged Departments to adapt generic feedback sheets to reflect the learning outcomes of each individual assignment.

1. **Moderation**

There are two concerns with the moderation process. Firstly, with the transparency of marking scripts. Externals have requested greater annotation of scripts as sometimes it is not apparent to moderators and externals how assessment criteria have been applied. While acknowledging that time is scarce, one external comments that extra time spent on annotating scripts will have long-term benefits for staff in managing and maintaining consistency of assessment across a number of different markers.

The second concern is about the practice of moderation. Some externals are concerned that the process for dealing with any discrepancy between markers is not necessarily clear.

1. **Practice of moving degree class borderlines**

There are some concerns with the practice of lowering degree class borderlines to accommodate individual students with impaired performance, in which case the revised threshold is applicable to all students under consideration by that Programme Board. There is concern that this is not objectively rigorous enough or fair to students. For example:

*The practice to move degree classification borderlines rather than considering upgrading individual students who are just below a degree classification boundary appears to be improper. The percentages for degree classifications are generally and uniformly accepted, whereas a strong case may be made for an individual student who is just below a boundary. The current practice also can lead to a situation that one student deservedly is moved up but another undeservedly benefits from the moved degree classification.*

(Electrical and Electronic Engineering, UG external)

1. **Impaired performance**

There is concern that awarding marks to those with impaired performance claims is arbitrary, as events will affect people in different ways. One external suggests it is fairer to allow mitigation in the form of extended coursework deadlines or first sits for exams and coursework.

1. **Use of the full range of marks**

While acknowledging that this is a national issue, several externals encourage Departments to use the full range of marks, especially at the top end. One external recommends that developmental work is undertaken to produce more detailed marking criteria for marks above the mid-70s, the existence of which may prompt greater consideration of the full range of marks available.

1. **Postgraduate classifications**

There are several calls for the University to consider the award of merits for postgraduate awards, a practice which is common across the sector. For example:

# *Many taught master’s programmes offer this now (for overall means between 60-69%) and it seems a shame if Loughborough students are disadvantaged in an increasingly competitive job market by not gaining an award with a merit when others with the same % mark do. Also, it will differentiate them from those students obtaining a pass degree.*

# (Sport, Exercise and Health Sciences, PG external)

1. **Format of the external examiner report form**

There are favourable comments about the ‘yes/no’ approach to questions at the start of the form as this allows the externals to concentrate on substantial comments. However, one external suggests that this is not helpful as it makes minor issues look like big ones.

Another external recommends that the report should ask for examples of ‘best practice’.

A recurring comment on the report format is that externals do not feel in a position to make a judgement on diversity issues, or would appreciate further guidance on what we would like them to consider in regard to diversity.

1. **Induction of external examiners**

Some externals report that in their first year of appointment they have not received the reports of previous examiners, or the Departmental response, so they cannot assure themselves that issues have been addressed.

1. **Meeting with staff and students**

It is clear that many externals have a good interaction with staff and students. However, there are some comments from externals who feel they would benefit from meeting with a broader range of staff and students to discuss the provision. A few externals even suggest it would be beneficial to observe teaching sessions at some point in their tenure to develop a clearer understanding of the relationship between the paperwork and the experiences of the students.

1. **Good Practice**

Several of the externals were not able to attend exam boards in winter 2009/10 due to adverse weather conditions. Departments were praised for their efforts to mitigate this by the use of electronic communication.

There are several other areas of good practice identified by externals, including:

**Mentoring for externals:**

*I am ... impressed by the policy of using an existing examiner to mentor an incoming examiner and I am happy to accept this role for the coming year. This demonstrates the rigour and importance the University applies to the examination process, which is admirable*. (School of the Arts, UG external)

**Encouraging students to summarise work in succinct form:**

*this year I was sent some 25 ‘Fact Sheets’ which were prepared by the taught programme students based on their respective dissertations. This is a new approach and is a challenge for the students to summarise their findings in a succinct way while also attempting to prepare statements in a professional (publishable) form. I believe that the production of the Fact Sheets is a great idea in principle and a selection should be prepared for publication or placed on the WEDC web site.*

*The ‘Fact Sheets’ reflect the difficulty that some students have in the task of succinct condensation of a large volume of work.* (Water, Engineering and Development Centre, PG external)

**Recording vivas:**

*I was not present at Viva Voce examinations but was able to view a recording of them on video prior to the board* (Aeronautical and Automotive Engineering, UG external)

1. **Recommendations**

The themes indentified in this report cover both guidance / practice of external examining, and broader regulatory issues for the University to consider. There is currently a national review underway of external examining arrangements in the UK, which is due to report within the coming months. This review is looking to make recommendations on the selection, role, induction, training, recognition, reporting, and the raising of concerns by external examiners. It is therefore recommended that any significant work on the guidance / practice themes identified in this report should be deferred until the outcomes of the national review are known.

Notwithstanding the national review, it is recommended that Programme Quality Team should be asked to consider the broader regulatory issues identified in this report and to disseminate good practice.

RP

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