



Senate

Paper Title	Postgraduate External Member's Report 2012/13
Outcome requested	Senate is asked to consider the report of the External Member to the Postgraduate Degree Examination Boards, and to endorse or approve any actions deemed necessary.
Points for Senate members to note and further information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • External Members are the Academic Registrars of other UK higher education institutions. • One external sits on the UG DEBs, and one on the PG DEBs, to comment on issues of parity within and between the SEBs and DEBs, and on the comparability of QM's regulations and policies to those elsewhere.
Questions for Senate to consider	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does Senate feel on the points raised by the external? • Do QM's processes and policies appear proportionate and appropriate? • Is specific action required to address any of the points raised.
Regulatory/statutory reference points	The role and duties of the External Member are described in the Academic Regulations (2012/13: 1.58).
Strategy and risk	Any issue flagged by the External Member should be taken seriously as a potential risk to academic standards of the parity of treatment for students. If the External Member sees QM as significantly out of line with UK norm on any point then this may mean that QM's processes are open to challenge and appeal. More generally, the suggestions of External Members are of great value in ensuring that QM is demonstrating good practice.
Reporting/consideration route for the paper	N/A
Author	Kate Ruffell, Assessment Governance Administrator
Sponsor	Professor Susan Dilly, Vice-Principal (Teaching and Learning)

Postgraduate External Member's Report 2012/13

Preliminary

QM appoints External Members to sit on its Degree Examination Boards (DEBs) and to review and comment upon process, the application of regulations, and the conduct of the Boards. The External Members are the Academic Registrars (or equivalent) of other UK higher education institutions, and are thus in positions from which to comment on good practice in the sector, and whether QM is in line with practices elsewhere. They also fulfil an important role in looking at comparability between the DEBs. QM's postgraduate External Member (Caroline Johnson, Surrey), sits on the PG Arts, Sciences, Medicine and Dentistry, and Laws DEBs.

This paper provides Senate with the full written report of the PG External Member for the 2012/13 academic year. A brief summary of major issues for consideration is given below, including recommendations for action (Senate may wish to add additional recommendations). Senate is asked to consider the report, and to approve any action deemed necessary to address the points raised. This may include suggestions for changes to processes or regulations, and/or the constitution of one or more task and finish groups. It should be noted that the overall tone of the report is positive, and that - while there are items requiring address - the External Member was in general complimentary of QM's processes.

Summary of major points

The report raised a number of issues, which Senate should consider for review. Suggested actions are given in each case.

Discretion

The External Member commented in her 2011/12 report that discretion in classification was not applied consistently across the SEBs or DEBs. In 2012/13 she observed a significant improvement in this area. However, she also noted a need for further harmonisation. In particular, the External Member felt that a universal policy for applying discretion should be adopted, if not across QM as a whole, at least across each DEB. She suggested that in developing such a policy, the importance of failed or condoned modules should be considered, as well as the importance of any particular modules such as the dissertation.

The External Member also suggested that QM might consider whether it wished to consider whether it used discretion at all. At the External Member's institution, Surrey, discretion is not used; the External Member noted that in most cases where discretion was used in 2012/13, rounding decimal figures to the nearest integer would have led to the same outcome.

Plans are in place to review discretion policies during the 2013/14 academic year; please refer the separate paper on discretion presented at the December 2013 meeting of Senate.

Examination Board administration

The External Member was in general complimentary about the operation of the DEBs and the documentation provided. However, she did raise some concerns, particularly in respect of the Medicine and Dentistry DEB:

- At the Medicine and Dentistry DEB, some SEBs had had problems with the late availability of SITS-generated SEB reports¹, and had therefore considered marks on locally produced Excel spreadsheets. The External Member stressed that this, “should be discouraged and every attempt should be made to ensure SITS reports are generated in a timely fashion so that there is only one definitive record.”
- Some Medicine and Dentistry SEBs had not had all of the final marks available at their meetings, and the External Member noted that this raises concerns over how they were able to make recommendations for consideration at the DEB.
- There was confusion over the registration status of some Medicine and Dentistry students, and the External Member commented on the importance of ensuring student registrations were correct in advance of the Exam Boards.
- The External Member noted that a few SEB Chairs who were new to their roles were unclear about certain procedures, or the exact circumstances relating to their students. The External Member stressed that it was important to ensure Chairs were appropriately briefed.

These concerns have been raised in previous years, and Senate is asked to consider measures which could be taken to avoid the recurrence of such issues.

The External Member also noted that it would be useful if the DEB report spreadsheet included a column for the dissertation mark. This has been raised at Exam Boards in the past, and requests have been made by ARCS for ITS to make this change. Senate may wish to request that this be prioritised and implemented for the next set of DEBs.

High levels of distinction/merit candidates in SMD programmes

The External Member noted that in some programmes in the School of Medicine and Dentistry, there were unusually high proportions of distinction and merit candidates. However, she also acknowledged that this could be explained by the fact that the students were often very experienced clinicians.

The issue was raised at the Medicine and Dentistry DEB meeting, and it was agreed that this issue would be monitored to ensure standards are appropriate. Senate may wish to consider whether any further action is required.

Harmonisation of LLM regulations

The External Member commented on the fact that the LLM regulations are somewhat different to the regulations for other awards. She suggested that QM considers harmonising the regulations, particularly with respect to the lesser weighting of the dissertation, and the fact that the LLM modules are valued at 45 credits instead of 15 or 30.

Senate may wish to suggest a review in this area. However, it should be noted that the LLM is a different award to an MA or MSc, and so certain differences in regulations and programme structure are to be expected.

Additional resits for retake students

Under QM's existing regulations, students who are granted retakes (a reattempt at the module in attendance, with full teaching) have their attempts reset, and receive a resit opportunity if they fail the retake (effectively granting three attempts). The External Member endorsed the view of the Sciences DEB that – in the very rare cases where a retake is awarded - the retake should count *in place of* a resit, for a total of two attempts, to ensure parity of treatment for all students.

¹ SITS reports are only available at certain points in the academic year; the comment refers to them being available 'late' in the year, not later than scheduled.

A recommendation will be put to the June 2014 meeting of Senate to change the Academic Regulations for 2014/15 so that this additional resit is no longer available. The change would not affect first takes (triggered by extenuating circumstances, and where the first attempt is deemed invalid).

Maximum duration of study

The External Member noted that QM may wish to consider the regulation on maximum duration of study for PG programmes. Currently, the maximum duration is twice the normal duration, which can cause problems for students on one year Masters programmes. For example, a student who failed at the first attempt and was scheduled to resit out of attendance, but who then has extenuating circumstances for the resit, would go into a third year of study and be automatically timed out, without the opportunity to take up their final attempt (for SEBs that only offer one assessment opportunity per year).

Senate may wish to consider amending the regulations. A possible solution might be to make the maximum duration for PG programmes twice the normal duration plus one additional year.

Changes to award rules

The External Member noted that QM's award rules are changing for 2013-14, and have been harmonised across many programmes. She saw this as a positive change.

Requested action

Senate is asked to consider the report, and to give thought to how the points raised might be best be addressed.

Kate Ruffell
Assessment Governance Administrator
13th November 2013

**EXTERNAL MEMBER'S ANNUAL REPORT ON DEGREE
EXAMINATION BOARDS
2012-13**

Name of external member
Caroline Johnson

Institution of external member
University of Surrey until 31 July 2013

Institution address
University of Surrey, Guildford, Surrey, GU7 2XH

Degree Examination Board(s) attended (with dates)
PG DEBS for Medicine and Dentistry (22/10/13); Law (23/10/13) and Arts (24/10/13)

Your completed report should be submitted by e-mail to the Assessment Governance Administrator (Kate Ruffell) at k.ruffell@qmul.ac.uk within 30 days of the main examination board meeting.

If you prefer, you may post your report in hard copy. If completing this by hand, you may need to enlarge the text boxes before printing. Please send any hard copy reports to:

Academic Secretariat (External Examiners)
ARCS
Queen Mary, University of London
Mile End Road, London, E1 4NS

Your report is intended for internal use only and will contribute towards aspects of QMUL's annual reporting procedures. Your report will be made available to students; **please do not include personal information (such as your home address) or identify individual students.**

If you would like to raise any issues of a sensitive nature directly with the Principal, please feel free to do so. The address is Principal, Queen Mary, University of London, Mile End Road, London E1 4NS. Please do NOT use this form for this purpose.

This template is updated annually; the most recent version is available at:
www.arcs.qmul.ac.uk/qa/external_examiners

1. The award process

1.1 In your view, are the processes for the determination of progression and awards sound and fairly conducted and in line with national standards and expectations?

YES / NO (if 'no', please state the reasons they fall short)

YES

1.2 Please also comment for QM on:

- particular strengths and weaknesses in the progression and award process;
- the scheme for progression and for the classification of the award;
- the use of discretion, within the permitted scope of QMUL policy;
- the interpretation of regulations.

I understand that the regulations for classification of degrees have been harmonised wef 2013/14 and this is pleasing. I was pleased to note that the use of discretion, on which I commented last year, appears to be much more consistent this year. I understand that this issue will be considered at College level during this current academic session and I would recommend particular consideration of the points I highlighted in last year's report ie:

- (a)The advisability of one policy across the institution and/or within each DEB
- (b)The relevance of failed (and condoned) modules to the issue of discretion
- (c)The importance/value of particular modules to the issue of discretion (i.e. the dissertation)
- (d)Whether the rounding of decimal places to integers would eliminate the requirement for discretion
- (e)The requirement for discretion within somewhat draconian regulations.

The regulations were interpreted well by all concerned and clarified when necessary by the secretary to the Boards.

2 Examination Board arrangements

2.1 Were you satisfied with the arrangements for, and conduct of, the Degree Examination Board meeting?

YES / NO (if 'no', please state the reasons they fall short)

YES

2.2 Were you satisfied with the decisions and recommendations of the Degree Examination Board meeting?

YES / NO (if 'no', please state the reasons they fall short)

YES

2.3 Please also comment for QM on:

- particular strengths and weaknesses in the examination board arrangements;
- the suitability of the examination board documentation;
- the opportunities provided to you to participate fully in the Degree Examination Board meeting.

The documentation for the DEBS was, as last year, exemplary. The requirements of HECFE and the non-completion rules require that the Boards should all meet before the end of October. The SEBS had clearly been organised in good time to be able to forward the recommendations and marks promptly for the DEBs.

There was the opportunity for me to participate in the meetings and to comment at the end.

3 Standard of student achievement

3.1 In your view, are the patterns of student achievement by degree classifications, comparable with similar programmes or subjects in other UK higher education institutions with which you are familiar.

YES / NO (if 'no', please state the reasons they fall short)

YES

3.2 Are there any other points on patterns of student achievement that you wish to direct to the attention of QMUL?

As last year, there were comments at the Medicine and Dentistry Board about the large number of students gaining their masters with distinction. However, the same response was made, namely that the candidates registered on these programmes were often very experienced clinicians within that relevant field.

4 Issues of Procedure

If applicable, how did procedures/arrangements compare this year with previous years? Were suggestions made by you last year acted upon? If not applicable, please go to question 5.

I understand that the changes to award rules for masters with merit and distinctions have been amended to bring them all into one line, following comments I made last year.

The majority of my report last year dealt with the issue of the use of discretion. In addition to the fact that this was applied far more consistently this year, I understand that this issue will be considered later this year.

The important issue about the use of discretion - if it is to continue - is that, as far as possible, it should be applied fairly and consistently across the institution so that it can be robustly defended should it ever be challenged.

It is worth considering whether or not to continue the use of discretion or whether the numerical weighted average should stand as the final mark. In the majority of cases of discretion at the three boards I attended, the rounding of the decimal places to the nearest integer would have eliminated the need for discretion. While changing SITS at this point would be very difficult and time-consuming, the rounding is something which could be done at the boards by those present within a previously agreed convention (eg 59.5 rounds to 60 with 59.4 rounding down to 59).

Academic judgement, then, would have been exercised at the point of assessment of the work.

5 General comments

5.1 Are there any other further comments you might wish to draw to the attention of QMUL? In particular we would welcome your comments on any aspects of exemplary practice.

There was some suggestion at the Medicine and Dentistry DEB that the late availability of SITS examination reports had resulted in the use of locally-generated EXCEL spreadsheets. This should be discouraged and every attempt should be made to ensure SITS reports are generated in a timely fashion so that there is only one definitive record.

At the same board there was concern expressed that the SEB had not apparently had all the final marks at the point of its meeting; if this is the case, it is difficult to see on what basis the SEB could have made its recommendations.

There were concerns expressed at this board also about the registration status of some students, and I would make the obvious point that it is important to ensure that all students are registered on the appropriate programmes and for the correct modules in advance of the examinations; that students should be advised correctly on the regulations for their specific programme; that the SEB minutes should represent a complete and accurate record of a student's performance.

On the whole, the Chairs of the SEBS or those representing them, were appropriately briefed, but one or two (mainly new to the role) were a little uncertain of their role or in one or two cases unclear about the particular circumstances of the student under discussion. It is important that those representing a SEB at the DEB are well briefed to ensure minimal later use of Chair's action.

The Law DEB should be commended on producing their results – for a significant number of students – one week earlier than the stipulated deadline.

In discussion with colleagues in the margins of the board meetings, I should also like to recommend as follows:

- (a) That consideration be given to harmonising the regulations for the LLM with other masters programmes (particularly in relation to the size of modules and the relative importance of the dissertation)
- (b) That no student be given the opportunity of a second resit (custom and practice, I understand, after a student has repeated a module with attendance and then failed the assessment again). In the interests of equity and transparency, all students should have just one resit opportunity after an initial failure (deferrals in light of extenuating circumstances notwithstanding)
- (c) That consideration be given to the maximum length of registration for the masters programmes. Again, equity and transparency are very important here as is the requirement for compelling extenuating circumstances to support any genuine request for extension
- (d) That the addition of a column to display the dissertation mark on the DEB reports be given priority – to clarify for those present the application of any programme-specific regulations.

Signed:

Date:

Thank you for completing this report and for your contribution to assuring standards and quality at Queen Mary, University of London. Please return your report to the address/e-mail address given on the front page of this pro-forma. You will receive acknowledgement of the receipt of your report from the Academic Secretariat.