



Senate

<b>Paper Title</b>	External Examiners' Summary Report 2012-13
<b>Outcome requested</b>	Senate is asked to <b>consider</b> the report.
<b>Points for Senate members to note and further information</b>	External examiners are employed by QML to comment on academic content, standards and process. They submit an annual report of their experiences, and this report summarises key issues raised by the externals which require consideration at institution level. Programme level concerns are dealt with during the Annual Programme Reviews.
<b>Questions for Senate to consider</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Do any of the issues raised cause the members particular concern?</li><li>• What measures can be taken to address the issues raised in the report?</li><li>• Are members happy with the measures that have been taken so far to address issues raised previously?</li></ul>
<b>Regulatory/statutory reference points</b>	No one specific strategy/policy, but the comments link in to many areas of practice.
<b>Strategy and risk</b>	External examiners' annual reports are an important quality assurance tool. In particular, they offer a view of how standards compare to other higher education institutions, highlighting areas which require improvement.
<b>Reporting/consideration route for the paper</b>	n/a
<b>Authors</b>	Kate Ruffell, Assessment Governance Administrator
<b>Sponsor</b>	Professor Susan Dilly, Vice-Principal (Teaching & Learning)

## External Examiners' Summary Report 2012-13

### Background

External examiners are employed by QML to comment on issues of academic content, standards, and process. They attend Subject Examination Boards, and are involved in the assessment process throughout the year. At the end of the academic cycle, externals submit reports on their experiences that year.

This report summarises the reports of the external examiners. Reports are initially sent to the Academic Secretariat, and formally acknowledged. The Secretariat then highlights key issues requiring a response, and forwards the report to the associated Subject Examination Board (SEB); where there are issues highlighted, the SEB must respond in writing to the examiner to explain the practice and/or detail how the concerns will be addressed.

The consideration route for external examiner reports is as follows:

1. Individual reports are sent to SEBs for consideration and action within the associated school or institute.
2. Consideration of all reports by School/Institute through Annual Programme Review.
3. Review of institution-level issues and recurring themes in the Summary Report (this present report)

Please note that issues related to individual programmes are considered at School/Institute level, and a formal response is required. This present report considers only issues that could have a clear impact at institution level.

The report takes note of issues that QML may wish to address, or specifically needs to respond to. It should be noted that the majority of comments expressed satisfaction with the procedures, and that high praise was given to many programmes and processes.

This report comprises four parts, as follows:

- *External examiner comments*: structured in the same manner as the external examiner reports themselves – each section heading reflects a question posed to the externals, and details of key and recurring issues are outlined.
- *External member comments*: the External Members sit on the Degree Examination Boards and consider issues of process.
- *Issues raised in 2011-12*: Progress on institution-level issues raised in 2011-12.
- *Statistical data*: a summary of statistical data relating to external examiners in 2012-13.

## External examiner comments

### 1. Programme structure

Examiners were asked to comment upon strengths and weakness of programmes, focusing upon the balance and content, programme coherence, and teaching methods as reflected by the standards achieved by students.

- No institution-level concerns (programme specific comments are addressed at School/Institute level).

### 2. Student performance

Examiners were asked to give a view on whether the standard of performance at QML was comparable to that elsewhere.

- A number of external examiners expressed a desire for more opportunities to meet with students; some mentioned that this used to happen more in previous years but has tailed off this year. The externals felt this would help them to gain a more rounded view of student performance as well as student satisfaction.

*Whether opportunities for externals to meet students are provided is at the discretion of individual SEBs. If externals feel that this would be useful, SEBs may wish to consult with their externals on arranging student meetings.*

- Some externals commented on the prevalence of (alleged) plagiarism cases. Several of them felt that more widespread use of Turnitin would be helpful, and a few also commented that students would benefit from further guidance on appropriate referencing. *Externals from a number of Schools commented on this issue, and it is something that has been raised in previous years. Schools may wish to review the guidance that they give to students on plagiarism and referencing. The Assessment Offences Task and Finish Group has also considered this issue and ARCS is planning to improve information on the QML website advising students about how to avoid plagiarism. In addition members of the Appeals, Complaints and Conduct Office have met with colleagues in schools forwarding high numbers of cases to discuss the issue and to try to improve the situation in 2013-14.*
- There were some comments regarding lack of student attendance and engagement. *In 2012-13 it became a requirement for Schools to implement an engagement policy, which should partially address these issues. As this is the first year that the policies have been a requirement, it may take time for them to have an effect. Schools should review them if they feel it is necessary.*
- Some externals did comment that student performance this year was worse than it had been in previous years, and comments of this kind were more prevalent than they have been in the past. However, this was balanced by a number of comments that student performance was high, or indeed better than in previous years. Most externals who commented on weak performance also noted that this was most likely due to natural variation. *Schools may wish to monitor this to ensure that there is not a trend of weakening student performance. However, currently this is not a cause for concern.*

### 3. Assessment

Examiners were asked to comment on processes around assessment and classification.

- Several external examiners commented on the new Code of Practice on Double Marking and Moderation, which was implemented in 2012-13. In general the Code of Practice was well received by the externals. However, there were a number of comments regarding

issues with its implementation. In particular, several external examiners felt that, although double marking and moderation had taken place, the evidence for it was not clear. A number of external examiners also felt that the procedures for resolving discrepancies between first and second markers needed to be clarified.

*The Code of Practice on Double Marking and Moderation requires that both first and second markers leave clear marking trails that can be followed by externals. As the Code of Practice beds in, it is hoped that Schools will adhere more closely to this requirement. Schools may wish to monitor the issue to ensure that it improves in future years. Similarly, the Code of Practice contains clear guidance on how to handle discrepancies in marks between first and second markers. It states that markers should resolve the difference through discussion in the first instance, and that arithmetical averages should only be used when the markers cannot agree. Where the difference is greater than 10%, a third marker should be used. Schools should ensure that this procedure is followed, and that the process by which marks are arrived at is clear to external examiners.*

- In previous years, external examiners have commented on the reluctance of markers to use the full range of marks, particularly above 70.0. This was again an issue across several Schools in 2012-13. A number of external examiners did note that they had witnessed an improvement in this area. However, some of them also noted that in some cases, this improvement was only visible in certain modules, resulting in an inconsistent approach.

*Reluctance to use the full range of marks is a recurring issue at many institutions, and this was considered by QMSE earlier in the year. SEBs at QML continue to remind graders of the importance of using the full range. It is positive that this message appears to be having an effect, even if it is not yet universal, and it is hoped that continued improvement will result in more consistency. Schools should continue to monitor this.*

- A number of external examiners commented that there was a lack of annotation on scripts, which made it difficult for the externals to understand how marks had been awarded. This issue was compounded by the fact that mark schemes sometimes lacked detail, and it was not always obvious how marks awarded related to the mark schemes. In some cases, external examiners noted that they had not been sent mark schemes with the exam papers.

*It is a requirement of QML that mark schemes are sent to external examiners, and SEBs should ensure that this is happening. Mark schemes should also be considered by exam scrutiny committees to ensure that they are appropriate and sufficiently detailed. Senate may wish to consider further measures to address this issue.*

- There was concern in some Schools that exam question types tended to be too descriptive rather than requiring evaluation or critical analysis.

*This was raised by some externals last year, notably in the Schools of Business and Management and Biological and Chemical Sciences, and on the MBBS programme, and was also mentioned this year by externals from the Schools of History and Economics and Finance. Exam questions are considered by exam scrutiny committees, and SEBs may wish to remind them of the need to ensure questions are appropriate and linked to learning outcomes. Senate also may wish to consider further measures to address this issue.*

- Requirement for more detailed and more consistent feedback on assessment, including exams.

*This is a known issue, and one that has been raised previously. An exam feedback pilot took place in the School of Geography last year, where second and third year students were offered one on one meetings in the autumn term with markers to discuss their exams from the previous summer. This was very well received by students, but it may not be feasible to roll this out into larger Schools. In June 2013, Senate agreed – following the successful pilot scheme in Geography – that each school should consider and implement a*

*scheme appropriate to its student body. Senate may also wish to consider further measures to address this issue.*

- Several external examiners commented on the current discretion conventions, which allow for SEB-specific criteria within a common overarching framework. There was general agreement that clearer guidance was needed for SEBs on when discretion should or should not be applied. Opinion varied on whether discretion is currently used too much or too little.

*This point was also raised in the reports of the External Members (see next section of this document), and QML has been aware that review is required. Discretion has been considered in 2013/14as part of the Assessment Governance Review, which is presented as a separate paper at this meeting of Senate, with a view to introducing a harmonised policy across all programmes at both undergraduate and postgraduate level.*

#### **4. Other issues of quality**

Examiners were asked a series of questions on issues of process.

- There were no institution level concerns raised.

#### **5. Procedure**

Examiners were asked to comment generally on process issues and arrangements made with the SEBs.

- A number of issues with the Student Information System (SIS), particularly in regard to the late availability/slow generation of reports. Some externals commented that reports were not available at the time of the SEB meetings.

*This has been raised previously, and is a known issue. The SEB reports are being revised as part of the Business Intelligence Project, which may result in improved reporting. Mark entry is also currently being considered as part of the HSS Process Improvement Project for Exams Marks Processing. Rationalisation and harmonisation of mark entry processes should result in improved reporting for Exam Boards.*

- Lack of anonymity in SEB reports  
*This has been raised in previous years by a small number of external examiners. QML's current policy is that anonymity at the SEB is at the discretion of the individual board. The SIS allows boards to generate reports either by name or by student number, accommodating both approaches. SEBs should take the views of their externals into account when considering which approach to adopt.*
- A number of externals noted that communication from the SEB could be improved. Some felt that they were not given enough time to review exam papers or scripts, or that they were given insufficient warning of when they could expect to receive work.  
*It is important that SEBs work closely with external examiners to ensure communication is timely. QML requires that material is sent to externals 'in good time'.*

#### **6. General comments**

Externals were asked to confirm that the standards set for the awards were appropriate, to highlight areas of good practice, and make any other comments that did not fit elsewhere.

- Generally programme specific, and addressed as part of Annual Programme Review.

External Members' comments

The External Members' reports were in general positive, however, the UG External Member in particular raised a number of issues which require action (these reports were considered separately in [SE2013.13a](#) and [SE2013.29d](#)). These issues are addressed in more detail in the Assessment Governance Review, presented as a separate paper at this meeting of Senate. Key issues include the following:

### **Credit requirements for award on undergraduate programmes**

Currently, students on bachelors degrees at QML are required to take 360 credits, but are only required to pass 270 of those for award. The UG external member expressed concern in her report that this was significantly below sector norms, and subsequent benchmarking against other UK institutions has shown that this is indeed the case. The Assessment Governance Review includes a proposal to increase QML's credit requirements to bring them into line with the sector. The UG external member also commented on the fact that QML does not currently offer an Ordinary degree (typically offered to students achieving 300 credits at other UK institutions), and a proposal to introduce one is also included in the Assessment Governance Review.

### **Discretion**

Both the PG and UG external members commented on discretion practices, echoing the comments made by external examiners. The PG external member in particular felt that it would be advisable to harmonise discretion criteria across the institution and/or within each DEB, although she did note that use of discretion was more consistent in 2012-13 than it had been in 2011-12. The UG external member's comments focused on the distinction between true discretion and a borderline regulation, and the need to decide which approach QML wished to operate. This issue is also dealt with in more detail in the Assessment Governance Review.

### **Resit arrangements/condoned failure**

The UG external member expressed concern that students are currently able to opt not to take their resits, thereby taking the decision to condone failure away from the DEB. She also commented on the variance between Schools in late summer resit provision, and the capping of resits. Historically, external examiners have also expressed a desire to see more late summer resits provided. These issues are dealt with in greater detail in the Assessment Governance Review.

### **Low levels of firsts/2:1s**

The UG external member noted that QML awards fewer firsts and 2:1s than would be expected considering entry requirements. This is a known issue ([SE2012.57](#)), and it is hoped that this will be addressed by the proposals in the Assessment Governance Review. More stringent progression and award requirements will ensure that students do not reach the point of award with a number of failed module marks that lower their College Mark and classification.

### **Registration on modules at the wrong level**

The UG external member noted that there are a number of instances of students reaching the point of award with too few module registrations at level 6 or 7, or too many at level 4. In recent years, this has resulted in a number of suspensions of regulations. A proposal in the Assessment Governance Review to lock academic levels to developmental years should avoid further similar cases.

### **Student Information System**

The PG external member commented that there had been some issues with the generation of SEB reports, which was an issue that she also raised in 2011-12. As mentioned above, the Business Intelligence Project and the Process Improvement Project for Exams Marks Processing both include measures which should result in improvements in this area.

## Issues raised in 2011-12

This section describes action taken on some notable institution-level issues since 2011-12.

### ***External Examiners' Comments***

#### **Concerns regarding the standard of English among some groups of students, particularly in dissertations**

This issue was raised in 2011-12, and has historically been an issue. It should be noted that far fewer external examiners commented on this in 2012-13, which is positive. This issue should nonetheless continue to be monitored.

#### **Concerns regarding double marking and moderation**

As mentioned above, the new Code of Practice has been implemented and has in general been well received, although there are some issues which require further monitoring.

#### **Requirement for more detailed and more consistent feedback on assessment, including exams.**

As mentioned above, the feedback pilot in the School of Geography has been successful. However, further measures that can be used in larger Schools are still required, and this should continue to be reviewed.

#### **Recommendation that the merit band be expanded at postgraduate level (from 65-69.9 to 60-69.9)**

QML has now amended the regulations and expanded the merit band at PG level to 60-69.9, as well as harmonising classification and weighting schemes more generally, and reducing programme specific special regulations.

### ***External Members' Comments***

#### **Inconsistency in the application of discretion between Boards**

As above, this is being addressed as part of the Assessment Governance Review.

#### **Special Regulations**

In 2011-12, the PG external examiner commented on the large number of special regulations. This has been greatly reduced as a result of the harmonisation of classification regulations.

#### **Assessment Offences**

The UG external examiner in 2011-12 expressed concern that the penalties for assessment offences seemed to be very lenient. The Assessment Offences Task and Finish Group has reviewed the penalties available and changes have been introduced to the regulations in 2013-14. The list of available penalties has been reduced and uncapped resits/resubmission is no longer permitted.

#### **Using the Full Range of Marks**

This issue was raised by the UG external member in 2011-12. This was not raised this year by the external members, although several external examiners did comment on it. As mentioned above, there has been an improvement in this area, although it requires further monitoring.

## Statistical data (as of 28/02/2014)



A total of 22 external examiners (9% of the total) failed to submit reports this year, which is broadly comparable to last year (8% had not submitted at this point in the year in 2011-12). Although it should be noted that reports from PG external examiners are still being received late and this figure may still improve, it is nonetheless a high rate of non-submission. Submission of a report is a key part of the contract that externals sign upon appointment. SEBs should consider the dismissal of externals who fail to submit a report, and Senate may wish to consider further measures for the monitoring of non-compliance.

<b>Undergraduate statistics 2012-13</b>	
Total examiners/reports expected:	143
Number of intercollegiate examiners	24 (17%)
Reports received (to date):	133 (93%)
SEB responses to reports expected:	98
SEB responses received (to date):	50 (51%)

<b>Postgraduate statistics 2012-13</b>	
Total examiners/reports expected:	100
Number of intercollegiate examiners	11 (11%)
Reports received (to date):	88 (88%)
SEB responses to reports expected:	41
SEB responses received (to date):	18 (44%)

Kate Ruffell  
Assessment Governance Administrator  
February 2014