



Senate

Paper Title	Undergraduate External Member's Report 2012/13
Outcome requested	Senate is asked to consider the report of the External Member to the Undergraduate 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. • The report raises a serious issue in respect of credit requirements for award.
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, notably: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Credit requirements for award;
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
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Sponsor	Professor Susan Dilly, Vice-Principal (Teaching and Learning)

Undergraduate 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 undergraduate External Member (Beatrice Ollerenshaw, Nottingham), sits on the UG Arts, Sciences, and Engineering DEBs, and is also an audit secretary for the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA).

This paper provides Senate with the full written report of the UG External Member for the 2012-13 academic year. A brief summary of major issues for consideration is given below, followed by 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, including one serious point - 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.

Credit requirements for award

The standard question '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?' was answered with 'not entirely' (in respect of the national standards and expectations). This represents a serious issue, on which investigation and action are required. The report indicates that QM is out of line with the sector in requiring that students pass only 270 credits (of the 360 taken) for a standard BA/BSc/BEng award, noting that elsewhere students are generally expected to achieve the full 360 credits.

ARCS has undertaken benchmarking work, and QM does appear out of line. The requirement to pass 360 credits is not universal (and often factors in a number of 'condoned fail' modules), but 270 does appear low. Within the Russell Group, an ordinary degree, issued without honours, generally requires that students pass 300 credits including at least 60 at academic level six. QM's honours degrees require that students pass at least 270 credits, and only that they 'take' 90 credits at level six.

The full results of the benchmarking work will be presented to the December 2013 meeting of Senate, and will be reviewed by the Award Rules Task and Finish Group (which worked on year weightings and progression regulations during 2012/13) in the meantime. However, Senate should note that this appears to be a serious issue where QM is out of line with expectations in the sector, and that major reform of the academic credit framework and the award regulations may be a necessary consequence.

The External Member also raised concerns over QM's policy of allowing students to choose whether they take up resits or not, noting that this can be seen to place academic standards in the hands of students, rather than those of the institution. This issue will be investigated as part of the benchmarking work, though early figures indicate that students are generally required to take up resits before modules can be condoned (and, given that only a small number of credits can be condoned, this effectively means that resits are mandatory).

Making changes in this area would be a considerable undertaking, and would involve detailed consultation with schools before action was taken. There would be a considerable number of side effects to changing the regulations. The overall number of students receiving awards would drop, though the proportion receiving 'good honours' degrees (First/2:1) would rise. Examination numbers would also increase significantly if resits became mandatory, which could cause issues with venue capacity, which is already stretched. The report notes that QM is unusual in not offering a non-honours degree – in the past, this has been a peculiarity of the University of London regulations, but now that QM exercises its own degree awarding powers this is a possibility; this should not be considered unless the requirements for honours degrees are first increased, however. The entire area requires careful thought, but it does seem apparent that change on some scale is needed.

Discretion

The report noted that discretion was applied fairly and consistently, but that it can be closer to an automatic 'borderline regulation' in some cases. This was noted as perfectly normal, but it was suggested that QM might want to be more explicit in its description of the process. The External Member also stressed the need for harmonised processes – the UG Arts DEB now follows a single process, but the SEBs at the other boards have individual schemes (within common general parameters). Senate may wish to consider the further harmonisation of discretion procedures (this issue is raised regularly, at both UG and PG level).

Variation in mark capping: LLB

The External Member raised her concerns that QM does not have a universal policy in respect of capping/not capping resit marks. This refers specifically to the LLB programme, under the UG Law DEB, where students have uncapped resits and one extra attempt compared to other schools; they are also required to pass all modules at one sitting, or else resit all modules, including those that were passed. The LLB operates on significantly different regulations from all other UG programmes in a number of areas. Other examples include classification, in which the College Mark plays no significant part, and students are classified based on profile rather than aggregate. With the change to independent degree awarding powers, Senate may feel that this is an opportune time to begin harmonising certain of these regulations, which are derived from the old University of London regulations.

Late summer resits for finalists

The External Member noted concerns on the grounds of parity in respect of final year students not being offered late summer resits/first sits, meaning that their awards are always delayed by twelve months. Senate may also wish to note that an increasing number of suspensions of regulations are being requested to grant reassessment in the late summer for these students, especially in cases of first sits (where a student missed the original assessment due to valid extenuating circumstances). Late summer resits for postgraduate students (who are effectively finalists) are already permitted where schools choose to operate them.

Offering late summer resits for finalists would necessitate some form of additional Degree Examination Board in early September, and would require a number of additional administrative processes in ARCS, but would not require additional meetings for SEBs, who already have late summer meetings in most cases to consider progression. It would require

additional examination papers and marking, and would also increase capacity requirements for examination venues (though it would slightly reduce those for the more pressured May/June examination period). Senate is asked to consider whether it would be appropriate to consult on the possible introduction of a summer reassessments for students with first sits and/or students with resits.

Students with insufficient credits at the level of award

A considerable number of suspensions of regulations proved necessary in 2012/13 to make awards to students who had taken insufficient credits at the academic level of the award. The External Member noted that the DEBs dealt appropriately with these cases, but did observe that this was a standards issue, particularly given the comments on the credits requirements for award more generally. This is not a case of the regulations being at fault, but of students being incorrectly registered for modules. Further details are given in the Suspension of Regulations Summary Report under consideration at this same meeting of Senate.

Students studying abroad

The External Member noted that it was encouraging to see so many QM students choosing to study overseas as part of their degrees, but – in common with staff in schools and in ARCS – raised a number of concerns in respect of the administrative handling of these exchanges, especially in respect of the return of marks to QM by the host institutions. The External Member noted that these issues are problematic across the sector, but singled out a number of key points for QM to consider:

- What to do when marks are not provided on time by the host institution (this delays the awards for final year students);
- How to handle cases where the host institution will not release results due to a debt on a student's part (it is accepted that this will normally delay awards, but there have been issues in communication, and a lack of clarity over the details, or even existence, of debts in certain cases);
- How to handle extenuating circumstances incurred when abroad (we would expect the host institution to have its own processes, but this seems not always to be the case, meaning that students can be disadvantaged on their return);
- How to handle failed modules where the host institution does not offer resits (this is surprisingly common, and students are effectively disadvantaged);
- How to register the students in SITS for the overseas modules (which are often not finalised until late in the year, meaning that it is often unclear whether or not students have taken the correct number of credits).

Senate is asked to give thought to how these issues might be handled.

Simon Hayter
Assistant Academic Registrar (Assessment Governance)
25 September 2013

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

Name of external member
J Beatrice Ollerenshaw

Institution of external member
Sunderland University

Institution address
Edinburgh Building City Campus Chester Road Sunderland SR1 3SD

Degree Examination Board(s) attended (with dates)
Arts 28 June 2013 Science 2 July 2013 Engineering 4 July 2013

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?

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

To be more precise the answer is 'not entirely'. The regulations are clear and the boards are conducted in line with them. To that extent the processes are sound and fair. However there are a number of aspects of the regulations which give me cause for concern about alignment with national standards and expectations.

1. Honours degrees are being awarded with as few as 270 credits passed. The national norm is 360 credits with the award of credit dependent not only on studying but on passing the relevant modules which signals that students have achieved the learning outcomes associated with that credit. Within those parameters institutions can and do permit compensation and/or condonation of marks; the former usually results in the award of credit, the latter not. The amount of compensation or condonation is a matter for each HEI but to condone 30 credits per year of study and to award credit for that (and not to compensate) seems to me to be out of line with sector norms.
2. I also have concerns about the process by which condonation is applied. Allowing students to decide whether to take a resit or not seems to me to have the effect of allowing the student, not the Board, to determine whether a module is to be resat or condoned. I think that a more managed process, particularly a compensation rule, supported by a rationale, would still avoid unnecessary resits but better secure standards. The revised draft QAA Quality Code on assessment (currently under consultation) might provide a good opportunity for Queen Mary to review its practices.
3. It is usual within the sector to award a non-honours degree based on fewer credits (typically 300) and it is good to see that Queen Mary no longer signals this by a lower mark. With as few as 270 credits leading to the award of an Honours degree it would currently be problematic to establish an Ordinary degree on this basis but I would suggest that this option be considered if the credit framework is reviewed.

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.

Discretion was well used for students with extenuating circumstances and the regulations were consistently applied for borderlines. In some subject areas this may be closer to a borderline regulation than to discretion though in others discretion was clearly being applied taking a range of parameters into account in each case. Either approach is entirely defensible – a regulation secures consistency across subject areas and is easy for students to understand, discretion allows for 'hard cases' to be given an appropriate outcome on the basis of academic judgement. This is a perennial issue in the sector to which there is no easy answer, and I will be interested to hear next year how the planned task and finish group on discretion is progressing.

There is variation between subject areas in provisions such as the capping of marks and summer resits. This seems to me to result in a lack of equity between students as well as creating some ambiguity about college expectations. Practices such as the capping of resit marks say something about what the HEI 'means by' its graduate standards while late summer resits strengthen progression by ensuring that students do not progress without the skills or knowledge to succeed at the next academic level and I would suggest that Queen Mary considers this further.

I am particularly concerned about whether it is fair to make final-year students wait for another 12 months to resit their final assessments and with high fees I would not be surprised to find it raised by the student body. This situation raises two further issues:

- it seems harsh to require students with extenuating circumstances who are now 'fit to sit' to wait a year to resit
- it makes it impracticable to create an additional penalty of a year's deferral for students with

infringements and it appears that some of these students resubmit coursework quickly and have it marked sooner than students without an infringement. I understand that this issue has been discussed previously and suggest that it be revisited.

2 Examination Board arrangements

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

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

The Boards were very professionally serviced and well chaired. Where necessary Chairs sent appropriately robust messages to SEBs and programme teams. Simon Hayter was extremely well prepared in relation both to the regulations and to individual student cases and advised the Boards in an exemplary manner. He was also very helpful in making the arrangements for my visits. We are discussing having the Boards on consecutive days (unless broken by a weekend of course!) to reduce travelling time and cost to the college.

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

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

Yes, the Boards applied the regulations appropriately and used discretion in a professional manner to address a range of situations.

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 Boards were very well managed. The documentation provided by the registry team was very clear and they were well aware of particular issues which were raised in specific cases. I felt fully able to participate in the discussions at the Boards.

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

I note that colleagues are keeping under review the proportion of firsts and 2:1s awarded in comparison with benchmark institutions and in the light of students' entry qualifications. There were some subject areas which identified particularly strong, and/or improving, profiles of firsts and 2:1s.

It is possible that even some of the better students are carrying very low marks where they have chosen

not to take resits and might be interesting to model classifications with all failed marks raised to a capped resit mark of 40%.

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

There were instances of students being registered for too few credits at the final year (level 6 or 7) for a range of reasons including poor advice given by academic staff and the consequences of changes to programmes where transitional arrangements had not been fully thought through. The Boards dealt with this appropriately, ensuring that the students were not disadvantaged but it needs to be addressed as it does constitute a standards issue if students are not taking the appropriate number of credits at the level of the award. A SITS solution which would flag registration for unapproved diets is being explored but subject teams need to ensure that all colleagues understand and adhere to the regulations when advising students and consider what steps they could take to review registrations at an early stage when errors or misunderstandings can still be rectified.

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.

n/a as this is my first year

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.

1. There were several instances in Science of marks being moderated due to issues in the teaching and/or errors in the assessment. I was satisfied that all these situations were handled appropriately by the Board so that students were not disadvantaged but it is important that they are addressed at source including the support for and oversight of new or inexperienced academic staff and checking of exam papers.
2. 'Fit to sit' seems to be working effectively and chairs of boards were very clear about the kind of ECs which would justify waiving that requirement.
3. DEBs rightly accept the judgements of extenuating circumstances panels which have considered the evidence in detail. However there were occasions on which more information about ECs was provided to the DEB than was necessary. Members of Boards need to be aware of this especially as students' names are on the mark-sheets.
4. It is very encouraging to see so many students taking a year or semester abroad and the approach taken to return marks which can be used under the QM regulations looks very

thorough. Managing the marks returned from host institutions is always challenging and the Boards identified a number of issues including

- marks not provided on time by the host institution
- marks not released at all due to debt owed by the student to the host institution
- how to handle extenuating circumstances incurred while abroad
- how to handle failed modules where resits are not offered by the host institution
- how to register students in SITS pending confirmation of students' module choices abroad.

These are all important issues, which we are also discussing at Sunderland, and I look forward to seeing how the debate develops in the next year.

Signed: *Beatrice O'Mearns*

Date: *5. July 2013.*

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.