



Senate

Paper Title	Undergraduate External Member's Report 2013/14
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 is generally positive, and the majority of action points relate to the implementation of the agreed outcomes of the Assessment Governance Review. • The comments on scaling will be reviewed by a Task and Finish Group during 2014/15.
Questions for Senate to consider	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is Senate's view on the points raised by the external? Are there any particular comments for inclusion in the formal response? • Do QMUL'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 (2013/14: 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 QMUL as significantly out of line with UK norm on any point then this may mean that QMUL's processes are open to challenge and appeal. More generally, the suggestions of External Members are of great value in ensuring that QMUL is demonstrating good practice.
Reporting/consideration route for the paper	N/A
Author	Simon Hayter, Assistant Academic Registrar (Assessment Governance)
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

2013-14

Name of external member
Beatrice Ollerenshaw

Institution of external member
Sunderland University

Institution address
Academic Services Edinburgh Building 2 nd floor City Campus Chester Road Sunderland SR1 3SD

Degree Examination Board(s) attended (with dates)
Arts DEB 27 June 2014 Sciences DEB 3 July 2014 Engineering DEB 4 July 2014

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 (processes) / NO (national standards)
(if 'no', please state the reasons they fall short)

Inevitably the situation which I described last year still pertains: the processes were conducted very well and were entirely fair to students especially those with difficult circumstances, but the issues around the standards of the awards remain. However I am very impressed by the way in which colleagues at Queen Mary have tackled the concerns which I raised and the proposed changes to the regulations will address them. This represents a considerable amount of work in a short time as well as something of a culture change.

We discussed a few things which I know colleagues are aware of but they may be worth noting here. Information to students about the changes to the regulations will be crucial, and when I have made similar changes in other universities I have found it helpful to make sure that material is provided centrally with a record kept, as well as at departmental or programme level. Plain English guides and flow charts often help staff as well as the students for whom they are written!

You may wish to check that your new regulations use the term 'compensation' where this is appropriate (as opposed to 'condone'). I think that this comment applies particularly to your new postgraduate regulations. This is not just a piece of nit-picking! Where compensation is applied, traditionally credit is awarded (the module is 'passed by compensation' as opposed to 'failed but condoned') and hence supports standards within the credit framework.

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.

The boards were soundly managed and very professionally supported and advised. Issues with the standards of the awards will be addressed by the proposed regulatory changes.

Discretion was exercised appropriately in all three boards. The SEBs in arts and sciences tended to have agreed rules which they followed, while engineering tended to consider a wider profile of issues. The balance between genuine discretion and a borderline regulation (which will come into play next year) is a difficult one but I am quite happy with both approaches. Students with extenuating circumstances were treated with appropriate sensitivity and consideration.

The Sciences board raised some concerns which I know will be followed up with the subject areas concerned. There was evidence of some inappropriate uses of scaling which seemed to reflect a form of norm referencing rather than criterion referencing. This has the potential to compromise standards. It appeared that students in mathematics may not be in receipt of assessment criteria and this needs to be addressed. Queen Mary may wish to consider whether generic assessment criteria at college and/or subject level would be helpful, to provide a benchmark for assessment aligned with the FHEQ, above and beyond the specific requirements of a module or piece of assessment.

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)

Once again I was very impressed with the way in which the boards were supported and managed. The Sciences board, which raised some particular concerns, was extremely well chaired. The mark books are of a very high standard and Simon Hayter's grasp of the issues around 'hard cases' is exemplary. I understand that he has also done much of the work to support the review of the regulations and that is highly commendable. Having two of the boards on consecutive days made the travelling much easier and I appreciated that change.

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)

Decisions were consistent and students with difficult circumstances were given fair and full consideration. I was pleased that this year none of this discussion risked breaking the appropriate bounds of confidentiality in respect of the detail of individual circumstances.

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.

See 2.1 above. The board arrangements and documentation are excellent and I was able to participate fully.

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)

We noted a point in the Engineering board which may also be relevant to other subjects. Some students appear to be focusing very heavily on their projects so that the project mark is higher - in a few cases much higher - than the mark for the rest of their final-year modules and hence their 'college mark'. Where this also resulted in a borderline mark, discretion was used quite properly to raise the classification. Students need to be aware that this will not be possible under the new regulations where the project is worth fewer than 60 credits (and I understand that many projects are worth 30 credits). While it is entirely laudable that students should be particularly committed to their

projects they do need to be able to manage their time appropriately across all their modules, and the ability to do that, even in modules which they may find less compelling, is an important employability skill. The change of regulations may provide an opportunity to help students reflect on this.

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

In all three boards there were again a few cases of students with too many or too few credits or the wrong number of credits at one or another level. Most seemed to be students taking modules from more than one department which admittedly can be tricky to manage. However it is not impossible to ensure that students are properly advised or to cross-check their module registrations so that problems can be addressed before it is too late and the subject areas where this was an issue, particularly Languages, Linguistics and Film, need to review their tutorial / advisory processes. There is the potential for this to become a particular problem when the regulations change, modules are 'locked' to levels and some programmes review their module structures in the light of this. Staff and students must be clear about the new rules and students must be given the right advice. This may be especially complex where students take an extra year as a result of academic failure or illness.

There were also a few examples of modules where changes in teaching staff had resulted in a poor student experience. This was rightly compensated by the SEBs and DEBs concerned so that students were not disadvantaged but it is a concern that the issue had not been picked up quickly at subject / programme level and addressed during the teaching period. Responsibility for this needs to be clear and a proactive approach taken where staff changes have occurred at short notice.

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 am very impressed with the thoroughness and speed with which my comments last year have been acted upon and believe that this will support academic standards as Queen Mary exercises its own degree awarding powers.

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.

I think that the mark books are exemplary. I understand that they represent marks taken from SITS and processed through a locally developed IT system supported by considerable manual intervention by Simon Hayter and his team. I am very impressed with the result which is a significant support to the boards and would I believe also be a valuable part of the audit trail in the event of an appeal.

Thankyou for your warm welcome and hospitality.

Signed:

Beatrice Olsen-Shaw

Date: 5. JULY 2014.

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.