



Senate

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| Paper title | External Examiners' Summary Report 2013/14 |
| Outcome requested | Senate is asked to consider and comment upon the paper. |
| Points to note and further information | The paper summarises key themes raised by external examiners across QMUL. |
| Questions to consider | What are Senate's views on the issues raised? Should further action be taken to address any of the points |
| Regulatory/statutory reference points | External examining is required and regulated by Chapter B7 of the Quality Assurance Agency's UK Quality Code. |
| Strategy and risk | Failure to address significant issues raised by external examiners may pose a risk to academic standards, and consequently cause reputational damage. |
| Reporting/consideration route for the paper | The report was considered by Education Quality Board in January 2015. The statistical section has been updated to reflect current numbers. |
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| Sponsor | Jonathan Morgan, Academic Registrar & Council Secretary |

External Examiners' Summary Report 2013-14

Background

External examiners are employed by QMUL 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 QMUL 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 2012-13*: Progress on institution-level issues raised in 2012-13.
- *Statistical data*: a summary of statistical data relating to external examiners in 2013-14.

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 QMUL was comparable to that elsewhere.

- A number of undergraduate external examiners commented on the fact that fewer first and upper second class degrees are being awarded than would be expected, given QMUL's entry criteria.

It is hoped that the new regulations coming into force in 2015/16 will address this issue. 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.

- As in 2012/13, there were some comments from some Schools' external examiners regarding lack of student attendance and engagement.

As noted last year, in 2012/13 it became a requirement for Schools to implement an engagement policy. These policies may still be bedding in. However, Schools should review them if they feel it is necessary.

- Some external examiners commented on the 'tail' of failing students who remain resitting out of attendance.

The introduction of late summer resits for all students in 2015/16 will ensure that there are far fewer students resitting out of attendance each year.

3. Assessment

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

- Many external examiners commented on the use of double marking and moderation, following the implementation of the Code of Practice on Double Marking and Moderation in 2012/13. The external examiners' views on the Code of Practice were mixed. Many comments were positive, but a few externals felt that moderation was being used where double marking would be more appropriate. There were also some externals who were uncomfortable with the idea that moderators are unable to make changes to individual marks. As last year, a number of external examiners commented that evidence for double marking or moderation was not always clear on the scripts that they were sent.

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. It is hoped that as the Code of Practice beds in, Schools will adhere more closely to this requirement. Schools should monitor the issue to ensure that it improves in future years. Schools also have the option to choose whether double marking or moderation is most appropriate, and should consider the views of their externals when making this decision.

- 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 noted as an issue across several Schools in 2013/14.

Reluctance to use the full range of marks is a known issue at many institutions, and

has been considered by QMUL on several occasions. Most Schools are taking steps to address the issue, but a culture change will be necessary before a consistent improvement is seen. This is likely to take more time to occur. SEBs at QMUL should continue to remind graders of the importance of using the full range of marks and Schools should continue to monitor the issue.

- 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. *External examiners made similar comments in 2012/13. It is a requirement of QMUL 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.*
- Several external examiners felt that there should be more detailed and more consistent feedback on assessment, including exams. *This is a known issue, and one that has been raised previously. A proposal to introduce formative mock exams is currently being considered as part of the Assessment Governance Consultation 2014/15. Should this proposal be adopted, it will provide students with experience of examination techniques, familiarity with marking criteria and useful feedback.*
- Several external examiners commented on the current discretion conventions, which allow for SEB-specific criteria within a common overarching framework. External examiners' opinions on discretion varied widely on whether discretion is currently used too much or too little. However, there was general agreement that clearer guidance was needed for SEBs on when discretion should or should not be applied. *Discretion was considered as part of the Assessment Governance Review 2013/14, and a harmonised borderline policy has been introduced in 2014/15. While those external examiners who favoured more SEB discretion may not be happy with the new borderline policy, it will ensure clarity and consistency across all SEBs.*

4. Other issues of quality

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

- A number of external examiners felt that there is no clear link between the volume of assessment on a module and the amount of credit awarded. *Some individual Schools have looked at this issue, but there has been no QMUL-wide approach taken. Senate may wish to consider this.*
- Some external examiners commented on the inconsistent use of word limits and word limit penalties. In particular, the external examiners felt that if a word limit exists, it must be made clear what penalties will be applied if the word limit is not adhered to. *A proposal to introduce a harmonised policy on word limit penalties is currently being considered as part of the Assessment Governance Consultation 2014/15.*

5. Procedure

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

- A number of external examiners noted that they had had issues accessing QMPlus. *Schools should ensure that any issues with QMPlus are raised with the E-learning Unit.*

- 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. A number of externals also commented that they were not given feedback on their comments on exam questions. *It is important that SEBs work closely with external examiners to ensure communication is timely. QMUL 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, and the UG external member noted that she was particularly impressed with the response to her 2012/13 report, through regulatory changes made as part of the Assessment Governance Review 2013/14.

A few areas were identified as needing further attention:

Award standards

The UG external member raised ongoing concerns over the regulations for award, which were identified in her 2012/13 report as being rather lenient in comparison with those of the sector more generally. It was noted that the new regulations resulting from the Assessment Governance Review 2013/14 will address this issue. However, the regulations will come into force from 2015/16 and are cohort-dependent, so it will be a matter that takes some years to fully resolve. The external member also stressed the importance of making sure the new regulations are communicated effectively to staff and students to manage the transition, which QMUL has taken into account.

Mark scaling

The UG external member noted that a number of issues around the appropriate use of scaling arose at the Sciences Degree Exam Board. These issues were also noted by the external examiners from the relevant Subject Exam Boards. A QMUL policy on scaling and standard setting has since been proposed, and is being considered as part of the Assessment Governance Consultation 2014/15.

New borderline policy and projects

The UG external member identified a trend for some Engineering students to focus on their 30 credit projects to the detriment of their taught modules in their final years of study. With the new borderline policy coming into effect from 2014/15, these students risk missing out on a higher classification by focusing all of their efforts into one module that would not in itself allow them to meet the criterion of having 60 credits at or above the level of the higher classification. The Subject Examination Boards in question took note of this at the Board, and a reminder message has been sent to the Chairs to ensure that the message is communicated to students.

Non-standard cases

The UG external member also commented upon a number of unfortunate cases in which QMUL was forced to suspend regulations so as not to disadvantage students who had, for example, taken too few credits overall or taken the incorrect amount at the specified academic levels. QMUL monitors such cases, and while the numbers were slightly down on the previous year this does remain a problem area. Suspensions are now reviewed as part of QMUL's Annual Programme Review process so that areas with multiple instances of the same issue can be

addressed. It is anticipated that the changes made as part of the Assessment Governance review 2013/14 will eliminate or at least very significantly reduce these problems by use of a more prescriptive module selection system.

Structure and membership of Degree Exam Boards

The PG external member noted that it may be beneficial for QMUL to reconsider the structure and membership of its Degree Exam Boards, as the harmonisation of regulations and changes regarding use of discretion reduced the need to discuss many cases and meant that meetings were very short. Proposals to change the structure of the Degree Exam Boards so that they are faculty based, and to change the quorum for Subject Exam Boards, are being considered as part of the Assessment Governance Consultation 2014/15.

Issues raised in 2012/13

This section describes action taken on some notable institution-level issues since 2012/13.

External Examiners' Comments

Prevalence of plagiarism cases and use of Turnitin

External examiners in 2012/13 commented on an increase in plagiarism, and felt that more widespread use of Turnitin to detect plagiarism would be beneficial. New guidance and a policy on using Turnitin at QMUL was recently approved by VPTLAG (now EQB), which should enable skills to make more use of the software. There has also been a reduction in the number of plagiarism cases referred to the ACCCE Unit in 2013/14 (121 cases, compared to 143 in 2012/13).

Student engagement and attendance

As mentioned above, all Schools should now have an engagement policy. The Engagement, Retention and Success Project Group is also continuing to monitor engagement issues.

Use of the full range of marks above 70

Exam Boards continue to remind markers to use the full range of marks, and many Schools have introduced marking criteria for marks above 75 and 80. As noted above, improvement in this area will require a culture change, which may be gradual.

More consistent feedback on exams

As noted above, a proposal to introduce mock exams is currently being considered as part of the Assessment Governance Consultation 2014/15.

Issues with SITS

In 2012/13, several external examiners noted that they had encountered problems with SITS at the SEB meetings. There was a significant reduction in comments of this nature this year.

External Members' Comments

Credit requirements for award on undergraduate programmes

The UG external member noted in 2012/13 that students on bachelors degrees at QMUL are required to take 360 credits, but are only required to pass 270 of those for award, which is significantly below sector norms. This has been addressed by the Assessment Governance Review 2013/14, and from 2015/16 students will be required to pass 315 credits for award.

Discretion

Both the PG and UG external members commented on discretion practices in 2012/13, and the PG external member in particular felt that it would be advisable to harmonise discretion criteria

across the institution and/or within each DEB. A harmonised borderline policy has now been introduced as part of the Assessment Governance Review 2013/14.

Resit arrangements/condoned failure

In 2012/13, the UG external member expressed concern that students were 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. Following the Assessment Governance Review 2013/14, late summer resits will be offered to all students from 2015/16. Students are also now automatically opted in to their resits (although they are still able to opt out).

Low levels of firsts/2:1s

As noted above, it is hoped that the new regulations coming into force in 2015/16 will address this issue. 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.

Statistical data (as of 02/03/2015)

A total of 42 external examiners (17% of the total) have failed to submit reports this year, which is substantially higher than last year (9% had not submitted when this report was written in 2012/13). The majority of missing reports are from PG external examiners, who are still submitting reports and the figure may still improve. However, 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.

| Undergraduate statistics 2012-13 | |
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| Total examiners/reports expected: | 141 |
| Reports received (to date): | 128 (91%) |
| SEB responses to reports expected: | 94 |
| SEB responses received (to date): | 55 (59%) |

| Postgraduate statistics 2012-13 | |
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| Total examiners/reports expected: | 109 |
| Reports received (to date): | 80 (73%) |
| SEB responses to reports expected: | 52 |
| SEB responses received (to date): | 24 (46%) |

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