

UNIVERSITY OF ULSTER

LEARNING AND TEACHING COMMITTEE

8 December 2015

EXTERNAL EXAMINERS' REPORTS 2014/15: OVERVIEW REPORT

## **1 Introduction**

The University appoints at least one external examiner for each award-bearing programme or undergraduate Honours subject with specified module responsibilities. Their main duties are to ensure that academic standards are maintained and that individual students are treated fairly in the assessment process. They may also have responsibility for credit-bearing short course modules. Where applicable, external examiners are also expected to have due regard for professional practice standards as they relate to the programme. Chief external examiners are appointed on three campuses to have oversight of undergraduate combined degrees. There is a chief external examiner for the frameworks governing the Certificate of Personal and Professional Development and the Postgraduate Certificate of Professional Development.

Each external examiner is required to submit a written report electronically to the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Learning, Teaching and Student Experience) within one month of attending the last meeting of the Board of Examiners in each academic session. They are asked in particular:

- to comment on marking standards and assessment criteria, and the general quality of candidates' work (with reference to the academic infrastructure and their comparability with those in other UK higher education institutions);
- to comment on the teaching, organisation, syllabi and structure of the programme with a view to identifying good practice and further opportunities to enhance the quality of the learning opportunities provided to students;
- to comment on their participation in the moderation process and the sufficiency and timeliness of the evidence made available to them to effectively discharge their responsibilities.

The report is a key component in the University's standards and quality assurance and management processes. It is considered on behalf of the Senate in the first instance by the appropriate Course/Subject Committee(s) who report back on action that they have taken in response to the substantive matters raised. All reports are also reviewed by the PVC (Learning, Teaching and Student Experience).

The reports and their responses are considered subsequently as part of the University's Programme Management System (for internal courses) and the Annual Course Review for the University's collaborative provision. The reports (or a summary) and the responses are also discussed with student representatives and can be accessed by all students on the course through the course support area on the VLE. From 2013/14 they are one element of the

qualitative dataset which informs development of School action plans as part of the implementation framework for the Learning and Teaching Strategy.

Further confidential reports may be made directly to the PVC (Learning, Teaching and Student Experience) and/or the Vice-Chancellor. At the end of their period of appointment, external examiners are invited to draw attention to any significant developments or changes in standards relating to the programme or subject they have observed during their appointment, and to include, if appropriate, any suggestions for modification to the programme of study. A copy of the final report is made available to the successor external examiner.

External examiners' reports from the last two years are provided to revalidation panels.

## **2 Receipt and Acknowledgement**

Some external examiners have responsibility for more than one programme and, to date, the number of submitted reports for the 2014/15 academic session totals 357. Upon receipt in the office of the PVC (Learning, Teaching and Student Experience), reports are acknowledged and concurrently forwarded electronically to the Examinations Office and to Faculties and collaborative partner institutions for consideration by the relevant course/subject committees and a written response. The formal acknowledgement letter invites external examiners to advise the PVC in writing if they do not receive the written response addressing any suggestions for consideration and/or recommendations for action made. Additionally, and occasionally, where the external examiner raises matters of significant concern, or matters are explicitly identified which require a response at University level, alternative letters are sent from the office of the PVC (Learning, Teaching and Student Experience) acknowledging and addressing the concerns in liaison with the relevant Dean/Head of School, as appropriate.

## **3 General**

As in previous years, the vast majority of external examiners reported that standards are appropriate. In many cases they commended specific aspects of programmes but in a few cases critical comments were made. While these comments are, by and large, not serious, course/subject committees must take immediate action to address concerns and report these actions on a timely basis to the external examiner(s). The following paragraphs highlight specific matters, reoccurrence of which in 2014/15 reports points to more general issues that Faculties should take account of.

## **4 Participation in the Moderation Process**

The vast majority of external examiners expressed satisfaction with their involvement in the moderation process throughout the year with many describing the process and conduct of the Board of Examiners as 'efficient', 'well managed', 'professional' and 'exemplary'. Most praised course/subject directors and faculty administrative staff on the way in which they had been

supplied with relevant programme documentation, examination papers and coursework schema, assignments and examination scripts in a prompt and efficient manner. Again, a number referred to the usefulness of the external examining induction event.

It was again pleasing to note that, in line with the last two years, no concerns were raised by external examiners about late appointment resulting in their limited involvement in prior approval and moderation of material.

On only a (very) small number of occasions were issues raised around administration of the process and in some cases, external examiners made suggestions to improve the process. The external examiner for the Master of Public Administration was one of several who praised the provision of our access to materials online stating, 'I moderated the work on Blackboard and had access to all the modules online. As an examiner, this is a fantastic system which really facilitates a thorough review of all the materials used with the modules'.

Almost all issues raised by external examiners related to either a lack of timeliness in the provision of materials or incompleteness of materials received, particularly, in regard to the latter, module packs.

It was disconcerting to note the following concerns raised by several external examiners. The external examiner for the BSc Hons Sports Technology stated that despite having requested same, he had not been sent any of the second semester coursework and examination papers. The external examiner for the BSc Hons Optometry stated that he had not been asked to approve coursework. Similarly, the external examiner for the BSc Hons Social Work (Colleges) stated that she had not been required to approve examination papers and coursework assignments while the external examiner for Politics stated, 'It does strike me as odd that I am asked to review the exam questions but not the essay questions'. The University's Code of Practice for External Examining and the External Examiners' Handbook (3.3) makes clear that, in order to fulfil their duties, external examiners are required to approve all draft examination papers and coursework assessment schemes (although not necessarily every piece of coursework set in a module) with the exception of levels 3 and 4 of Honours degrees which do not contribute to the grading of an exit award.

## **5 Content and Structure**

There was almost universal confirmation that the content and structure of all programmes and subject strands were coherent and appropriate to the level of the qualification, the subject area, and the particular aims of the course/subject. For example, the breadth and diversity of programme content in the BA Hons Contemporary Applied Arts and the highly innovative nature of the PgCert/PgDip/MSc Community Planning and Governance were commended. Many external examiners identified clear evidence of research and scholarship informing the curriculum and its pedagogy across all Faculties.

It was disappointing to note once again however that both external examiners for the Master of Architecture expressed concern regarding what they described as 'a disconnection between 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> year student cohorts'. Last year they opined that Years 5 and 6 did not form a coherent programme because of the 'weak' year 5; a situation they urged should be addressed. This year the external examiners concurred that the situation had not been remedied with one stating, 'The course was again weakened by the lack of coherent thinking from 5<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> year. I cannot reiterate this enough for it has been my ongoing concern over my 4 years (as external examiner)'.

## **6 Assessment**

Once again the vast majority of external examiners were satisfied with assessment standards. In general the reports provide evidence of module teams making good use of assessment criteria and deploying a wide range of appropriate assessment methods including written examinations, class tests, essays, case studies, practical exercises, reflective logs, reports and presentations. The range and innovative nature of assessments was commended in a great many programmes across the Faculties.

In regard to feedback, across all Faculties, external examiners praised the high quality, timeliness, amount and comprehensive nature of feedback as well as an emphasis on formative feedback intended to improve future performance.

There were however a number of negative comments regarding variability in quality (or absence) of feedback, inconsistency in detail to ensure it aligned to mark, and a lack of timeliness and a 'feed-forward' approach.

In addition, illegible handwritten feedback was again highlighted by a number of external examiners who recommended that all feedback be typed. Others commented positively where this approach had been adopted or on the use of the VLE for this purpose.

Over-assessment was mentioned for a significant number of programmes across the Faculties, and the use of formative rather than summative assessment or fewer assignments with greater depth and challenge were suggested.

It was pleasing to note that the number of complaints raised by students in their meetings with external examiners in regard to assessment by group work has greatly reduced in recent years. In only three cases, BSc Hons Building Surveying, BSc Hons Property Investment, Appraisal and Development and Sociology at Magee, did students complain that 'some students were carried'. These are complaints which should have been negated by the introduction in 2010 of the University policy on assessment by group work which required an individual element to a mark for group work (TLC min 10.76).

Some external examiners encouraged the use of Turnitin and the online submission of coursework. In a number of cases the absence of anonymous marking of coursework was commented on. The University policy is that 'while

anonymous marking is not always feasible for coursework, it is encouraged where appropriate and practicable' - Assessment Handbook; section 14.5.

## **7 Marking Standards**

Marking standards were generally considered to be appropriate with a number of external examiners praising them and describing the moderation process as 'high quality' and 'exemplary'. For example, in regard to BSc Hons Psychology, the external examiner stated, 'An outstanding aspect of the programme is the internal marking procedures'.

It is however disappointing to note that some concerns recur from previous years although not necessarily in the same programmes.

Concerns about internal moderation were highlighted in terms of the absence of (or limited) evidence of internal moderation; the absence of and variation in the level of written commentary provided by markers; and a lack of transparency in reconciling differences between the marks of first and second examiners.

Inconsistency in the depth of feedback provided was also highlighted as an issue for external examiners in helping them to determine the appropriateness of marks and in providing an audit trail. In regard to several programmes, it was suggested that the language used in feedback did not align with the mark awarded. In one case feedback was described as ranging from 'extensive' to 'just a signature' (BA Hons Media Studies and Production). This was the second year the external examiner made this comment.

Inconsistent marking both within and across modules was highlighted in a small number of cases.

A tendency to generous marking was highlighted in a number of cases: FdSc Applied and Medical Sciences (Colleges); BSc Hons Occupational Therapy; BSc Hons Business Studies (QAHE); BSc Hons Transportation; MSci Planning and Property Development; MSc Human Resource Management).

A number of external examiners mentioned the reluctance of staff to use the full range of marks, particularly at the upper end.

## **8 Quality of work, Student learning and Comparability with other institutions**

The quality of students' work was generally commented on favourably with external examiners describing themselves 'impressed' and many indications of clear evidence of effective student learning. One notable example was the comment by the external examiner for the PgDip/MSc Infrastructure Engineering who urged staff to submit the 'very best journal manuscripts for possible publication'.

Once again, referencing skills, sources and academic skills generally were the most common areas for concern. A poor standard of basic English, grammar,

spelling and punctuation was cited in a number of programmes across all Faculties and in some FE Colleges.

In regard to the BEng Hons Clean Technology, the external examiner referred to 'poor performance and relatively high failure rate in the first two years giving some areas for concern' and suggested that a review of admission requirements might be beneficial in ensuring that students of an appropriate standard undertake the programme. In a similar vein, in relation to the BSc Hons Biomedical Engineering, it was suggested that the retention problem at the end of year 2 may be a reflection of the admission criteria.

Concerns around staff resources were raised in respect of a number of programmes: the BSc Hons Diagnostic Radiotherapy and Imaging, Environmental Science and the PgDip/MSc Environmental Management. In regard to the first course, while the programme was praised in terms of its 'leading-edge delivery', it was suggested that a risk exists with respect to which staffing needed to be maintained at the current levels to enable 'the good work to continue'. In regard to the latter two programmes, the lack of a replacement ecologist in the teaching team was identified as a 'serious issue'. In addition, in relation to the PGCE: Primary, the external examiner suggested that since there were no substitute tutors, delivery involving only two full-time staff constituted a potential weakness.

Poor quality work continued to be highlighted at QAHE. One of the external examiners for the BSc Hons Business Studies stated, 'The broad body of work and feedback at QAHE is not at the level observed at Jordanstown and the Colleges' while the other stated, 'Standards achieved are somewhat lower than on the main (Ulster) campus, particularly in respect of examinations where the failure rate is quite high'. In regard to the MSc International Business, the external examiner expressed concern that 'there is a large group of weaker students with multiple resits'. The external examiner for the MSc Marketing commented, 'Student performance is lower than would be expected'.

In regard to student learning and comparability with other institutions, external examiners' responses were overwhelmingly positive. The effect of a placement year in terms of instilling student confidence and improved final year performance was highlighted not only by a number of external examiners but also by students. The words of the external examiner for the BSc Hons Civil Engineering (Geoinformatics) best sum up this view: 'The placement experience clearly benefits the students and undoubtedly leads to an improved final year performance for the majority of students'. This was reinforced by the external examiner for Business Economics who stated, 'Placements are an excellent aspect of the Ulster degree; its main strength'.

This year, external examiners for eight courses suggested that level 5 should count in Honours degree classification: Property Investment, Appraisal and Development; Geography; Occupational Therapy; Optometry; Pharmacy (and level 6 for the MPharm); Sports Studies; Social Policy; Economics (and in two cases as a means to reduce the high proportion of first class degrees awarded: Optometry and Pharmacy).

Many programmes and teaching staff across all Faculties attracted high praise from external examiners. In regard to the BA Hons Architecture, it was stated that the School's greatest strength was 'the utter dedication of the staff'. Similar comments were made in respect of Spanish; BSc Hons Applied Biosciences; BSc Hons Speech and Language Therapy; BSc Hons Biomedical Science; Certificate in Teaching; the PgCert in Education (Further Education); PgDip/MSc Social Research Skills and undergraduate Law.

Many courses across the University were described as 'excellent'. The MFA Photography was described as 'really one of the best courses in the UK', the BEng Hons/MEng Hons Engineering Management as 'a high quality course', the MPharm as 'well designed and highly innovative'; Sociology (Jordanstown) as 'a stand-out course; a model of good practice' and the BSc Hons Marketing as 'one of the best I have come across in all of my time in academia'.

## **9 Administration**

The overwhelming majority of external examiners praised the administrative arrangements with many describing the process as 'excellent', 'exemplary' and 'outstanding'. The support and hospitality provided was in many cases described in similar terms.

## **10 Concluding Remarks**

The picture which emerged again this year was one in which the University's procedures were wholeheartedly endorsed. Of particular note was the way in which University staff, and in particular course/subject directors, were praised for their professionalism and dedication. The University's quality management and standards assurance processes were once again affirmed as aligning well with best practice in the sector. It was also pleasing to note effusive praise from a number of external examiners in regard to the quality of programmes.

There were, however, as indicated, a few notable exceptions, and in these instances closure on all the substantive issues raised by the external examiners must be quickly addressed by the relevant course/subject teams and/or University line management. While some issues were raised in previous years, their reappearance is often in different programmes. Faculties should therefore be mindful of the general points highlighted in the report and ensure that action is taken to prevent reoccurrence. In only a very few cases have concerns around standards been raised.

The key general lessons for Faculties are the importance of good communication with external examiners and the consistent application of the best practice.