UNIVERSITY OF ULSTER   Paper No ASQEC/20/25c)

ACADEMIC STANDARDS AND QUALITY ENHANCEMENT COMMITTEE
22 October 2020   Agenda Item 12.3

ANNUAL REPORT ON EXTERNAL EXAMINER NOMINATIONS AND
APPOINTMENTS FOR 2019/20

COVER SHEET

Presenter: Mr A G Faulkner

Action is required of the Committee as indicated below.

The Committee is asked to endorse recommendations at 5.

UNIVERSITY OF ULSTER

ACADEMIC STANDARDS AND QUALITY ENHANCEMENT COMMITTEE
22 October 2020

ANNUAL REPORT ON EXTERNAL EXAMINER NOMINATIONS AND APPOINTMENTS FOR 2019/20

1   INTRODUCTION

This report deals with the nomination and appointment process during academic years 2018/19 and 2019/20 for appointments to take effect in 2019/20. Under Senate's Delegated Authority Framework, the Academic Standards and Quality Enhancement Committee consider external examiner nominations for recommendation for appointment by Council.   The Council's authority to approve nominations for appointment is delegated to the Interim Dean of Academic Business Development.

In November each year (with a reminder of outstanding nominations the following May), Student Administration provides each faculty with the following listings and advises them of the process for nominations for the following year:

   i)   external examiners who finished in the previous academic year;
   ii)   external examiners due to finish in the current academic year;
   iii) external examiners who have resigned; and
   iv)   programmes for which no external examiner is currently appointed.

Nominations should be submitted by faculties for consideration no later than the June meeting of the Committee preceding the year of appointment. The Academic Office reviews the relevant documentation to ensure compliance with the University's Code of Practice for External Examining. The Committee receives at each meeting a report of nominations that accord fully with the Code. In line with the decision of the Learning and Teaching Committee in December 2009 (min 09.146 refers), those that do not accord, with brief details of the departures, are forwarded upon receipt to the Interim Dean of Academic Business Development for consideration for approval or otherwise by Chair's action. Those approved are reported to the next meeting of the Committee. Nominations not received in time for consideration by the June meeting are classed as late nominations and, to facilitate attendance at induction and fulfilment of moderation duties, are considered by Chair's action and, if approved, reported to the next meeting of the Committee.

The process and practices for nomination and appointment were last considered at the October 2019 meeting of the Academic Standards and Quality Enhancement

Committee when the Committee noted the situation regarding departures, late and incomplete nominations.

The Committee agreed that faculties maintain their efforts to ensure the timely submission of external examiner nominations for 2020/21 for consideration no later than the June meeting of the Committee, that faculties ensure that staff responsible for making, processing and checking nominations are aware of the expectations of the External Examining Code of Practice and that faculties remind such staff of the importance of providing all necessary information and ensuring that all issues, in particular departures from the Code, are addressed at the time of submission.

2   SUMMARY DATA FOR THE CURRENT AND PREVIOUS TWO YEARS (2017/18 TO 2019/20)

Table 1 provides a summary by faculty of nominations to commence in academic year 2019/20.

Table 2 provides a summary of nominations over the last three years in the 'late' and 'incomplete' categories and includes the number of first-time external examiners.

Table 1 (Nominations submitted for 2019/20)

Faculties TOTALS	Nominations submitted	Accord	Departures	Late (foreseeable)	Incomplete
ADDL	2	2			
AHSS	31	25	6	12	6
CEBE	20	14	6	5	6
LHS	44	25	19	5	4
UUBS	28	19	9	4	3
TOTAL	125	85	40	26	19

Table 2

Year	Nominations submitted	Late (foreseeable)	Incomplete	No Previous Experience
2017/18	117	31 (26%)	18 (15%)	32 (27%)
2018/19	101	51 (50%)	15 (15%)	30 (30%)
2019/20	125	26 (21%)	15 (15%)	33 (26%)

3   ISSUES ARISING

a)   New External Examiners

Previously, nominations with no previous external examining experience were classed as 'departures' from the Code. At its meeting in October 2017, the Committee agreed that this should no longer be the case, but the proportion of first-time external examiners should continue to be reported (min 17.88 refers).

For academic year 2019/20, 33 nominees without previous external examining experience were submitted for consideration of approval. All were approved.

The 2019/20 total of 33 is on a par with the previous two years (30 and 32 respectively) and reflects the need to continually provide a supply of new external examiners, a situation which is to be expected across the sector. One can only speculate whether the figures detailed in Table 2 reflect those for the sector as data is not available.

Those nominating external examiners are prompted in the nomination form to indicate whether the nominee is a member of the Higher Education Academy (HEA). Membership at 'Fellow' level or above is a strong indicator of a nominee's suitability for the role. This is particularly relevant where a nominee has no previous external examining experience. Normally proof of membership is not sought where the accompanying CV includes a reference to HEA membership. On occasion however, membership is indicated in the nomination form but is not confirmed in the accompanying CV. In such cases, should confirmation be sought? Would written confirmation by the nominee suffice for example, by submission of an updated CV or would a copy of their HEA Certificate be required (and should this extend to all cases, even where a CV includes confirmation)?

b)   Departures from Code of Practice

As stated, nominations of external examiners with no previous external examining experience are no longer included in this category. The following details figures in this non-accord category for the last three years.

2017/18 – A total of 14 (12%) approved nominations did not accord fully with the Code. One non-accordance nomination was not approved.

2018/19 – A total of 15 (15%) approved nominations did not accord fully with the Code. Three non-accordance nominations were not approved.

2019/20 – A total of 40 (32%) approved nominations did not accord fully with the Code. One non-accordance nomination was not approved.

The above figures indicate that the number of non-accordance nominations has more than doubled in the 2019/20 academic year over the previous two years.

As in previous years, of the 40 non-accordance nominations submitted for 2019/20, most (25) related to applications for an extension to the tenure of the current external examiner, all of which were approved. Of these, the majority related to discontinued programmes or those about to undergo or had just undergone revalidation (7 in each case) with most of the others related to organisational change and/or development of the programme. The Code of Practice permits *exceptional* approval of nominations which do not fulfil the appointment criteria (Code Section 7) and makes specific provision for the exceptional approval for an extension to an external examiner's period of appointment "to ensure continuity, for example, where a programme is being discontinued" (Code paragraph 3 [c]).

It should be noted that in response to the current coronavirus emergency, the CVRT Academic Impact Group proposed that in respect of the 2020/21 academic year, external examiners whose term was due to come to an end could be automatically extended for a further year if the external examiner was agreeable (reported to Senate on 22 April [min 20.07 refers]). Since these extensions were not processed through the normal ASQEC approval process, they are not reflected in the figures reported here.

c) Late Nominations

Until 2018/19, the percentage of late nominations had seen a steady decrease over the three-year period from 33% in 2015/16 to 26% in 2017/18. However, a sharp reversal occurred during 2018/19 resulting in 51% of nominations being submitted late. However, a return to a lower level of late nominations occurred during 2019/20 with 21% (26) of the total having been submitted late.

While this result is to be welcomed, the figure is still too high, particularly so since faculties are reminded by the Examinations Office in November of each year of those external examiners who require to be replaced for the following year (with a further prompt issued the following May).

One, and perhaps the main reason for the annual tranche of late nominations, appears to be faculties' unwillingness to engage with the process until late in the academic year. The pattern of submission of nominations during recent years indicates that most nominations are not submitted until the June meeting of ASQEC which too often results in the submission deadline at the end of May being missed. This is despite faculties being provided in November with a list of those external examiners due to finish in the current academic year.

d) <u>Incomplete Nominations</u>

The previous three-year period between 2015 to 2018 had shown a downward trend of 23%, 21% and 15% of incomplete nomination forms. This position was maintained during 2019/20 with a figure of 15%.

Queries arising from incomplete nominations related in the main to missing CVs, failure to complete all sections of the form (particularly that relating to late submission) and submission of unsigned nomination forms.

4   SUMMARY

It was disappointing to note that departures from the Code had doubled during 2019/20. The majority again related to extensions of tenure for current external examiners. It is probable however that the abnormally high figure can be attributed to the University's response to the coronavirus emergency resulting in a substantially higher than normal number of external examiner extension requests thus creating a single year aberration.

The number of late nominations (21%) saw a welcome downturn from the 2018/19 figure of 51% reflecting a greater effort on the part of faculties to address the problem. The indications are that a significant part of the problem lies in leaving the issue of replacing external examiners to too late in the academic year thus missing the final deadline. An earlier focus on the issue would go a long way in helping to eradicate/minimise further the problem.

While the figure for incomplete nominations continues to be relatively low, it is important that attention is paid to this issue as the resulting delays, particularly those relating to late nominations, have implications for the timing of appointments and participation in induction and the moderation process. Faculties must take greater care before submission to ensure that forms are completed in their entirety with, where applicable, relevant documents attached.

5   RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee is asked to consider the following recommendations:

i)   that faculties ensure that staff responsible for making, processing and checking nominations are fully conversant with the contents of the External Examining Code of Practice;

ii)   that such staff be reminded of the importance of full completion of nomination forms ensuring that all sections are completed and all issues, particularly those regarding departures from the Code, are addressed *before* submission;

iii)   that faculties increase their efforts to ensure the timely submission of external examiner nominations for consideration no later than (and, where possible, in advance of) the June meeting of the Academic Standards and Quality Enhancement Committee. (A submission deadline to the Academic Office for consideration by the meeting is published in the Examinations and Associated Activities Calendar. For academic year 2021/22, the deadline is 28 May 2021).

BMcA/AnnualReport/08.10.20