

UNIVERSITY OF ULSTER

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ACADEMIC STANDARDS AND QUALITY ENHANCEMENT COMMITTEE

30 November 2018

Agenda Item 8.1

EXTERNAL EXAMINERS' REPORTS 2017/18: ANNUAL OVERVIEW REPORT

COVER SHEET

To receive the report. No action is required by the Committee

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EXTERNAL EXAMINERS' REPORTS 2017/18: ANNUAL 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. They may also have responsibility for credit-bearing short course modules. Their main duties are to ensure that academic standards are maintained and that individual students are treated fairly in the assessment process. 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 are chief external examiners for the frameworks governing the Certificate of Personal and Professional Development and the Postgraduate Certificate of Professional Development. (One person discharges these roles.)

Each external examiner is required to submit a written report electronically to Student Administration for onward distribution 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 on action that they have taken in response to substantive matters raised. The Academic Office also reviews all reports.

The reports and responses are considered subsequently as part of the University's ongoing monitoring processes. Reports and responses are also discussed with student representatives and are accessed by all students on the course through the course support area on the VLE. External examiners' reports from the previous two years are provided to revalidation panels.

Further confidential reports may be made directly to the PVC 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. A copy of the final report is made available to the successor external examiner.

2 Receipt and Acknowledgement

Some external examiners have responsibility for more than one programme and, to date, the number of submitted reports for the 2017/18 academic session totals 351. Upon receipt in Student Administration, reports are acknowledged. They are forwarded electronically to the Examinations Office, Academic Office, Quality Enhancement and to Faculties and collaborative partner institutions for consideration by the relevant course/subject committees and a written response. The acknowledgement letter invites external examiners to inform the PVC (Education) if they do not receive a written response addressing any suggestions for consideration and/or recommendations for action. Occasionally, where the external examiner raises matters of significant concern, or matters are explicitly identified which require a response at University level, the PVC addresses the concerns in liaison with the relevant Dean/Head of School, as appropriate. The PVC will also acknowledge course teams and identified individuals where outstanding best practice and exemplary work has been identified by external examiners.

3 General

The annual overview report provides a summary for academic year 2017/18. It does not comment on follow-up responses or actions taken which are monitored through the ongoing monitoring processes.

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, largely, not serious, course/subject committees must take immediate action to address concerns and respond on a timely basis to the external examiner(s). The following sections highlight specific matters, recurrence of which in 2017/18 reports point to more general issues of which Faculties should take account.

4 Participation in the Moderation Process

The vast majority of external examiners expressed satisfaction with their involvement in the moderation process throughout the year.

Most praised course/subject directors and faculty administrative staff on the provision of relevant programme documentation, examination papers and coursework schema, assignments and examination scripts in a prompt and efficient manner. A significant number described access to materials on Blackboard Learn variously as “expedient”, “very useful”, “highly efficient” and “and a great improvement on previous arrangements”. In a very small number of cases however, this was undermined by access difficulties (Geography Honours subject; BEng Hons/MEng Hons Safety Engineering and Disaster Management; BA Hons Textile Art, Design and Fashion). One external examiner lamented, “It would have been more

helpful to have more of the administration done via Blackboard” (LLM Gender, Conflict and Human Rights; LLM Human Rights Law and Transitional Justice) while another stated, “I would like access to Blackboard for the coming session to enable easier access to course documentation” (BSc Hons Architectural Technology and Management). It should be noted that the University’s Electronic Management of Assessment and Feedback Policy (2016) encourages faculties to support external examiners’ online access to coursework, provisional marks and feedback. A protocol is in place to facilitate access.

The usefulness of the external examining induction event was again praised and many external examiners were impressed with the overall moderation process and commended the organisation and conduct of the Board of Examiners that was described as “impressive, “efficient”, “professional” and “diligent”.

Only a small number of issues were raised around administration of the process and, on occasion, suggestions for improvement were made.

No concerns were raised by external examiners about their late appointment being a factor limiting involvement in prior approval and moderation of material but a number did express regret at not having been given the opportunity of approving assessment schema and examination scripts in advance (FdEng Civil Engineering [BMC]; BSc Hons Architectural Technology and Management; BEng Hons / MEng Hons Engineering Management; PgCert/PgDip/MSc Stratified Medicine; MSc International Business).

The following quote is worthy of mention.

“I encountered a significant number of difficulties in accessing information in relation to my role as an external examiner. Consequently, I found the process stressful, onerous and frustrating. I was not given the opportunity to approve coursework assignments, for instance, either because they were not sent to me or because I was not given timely access to the VLE. I was not able to attend performances because dates were never confirmed, although I asked for them. I was obliged to request this Report Form from your exams office because it was not sent to me via the proper channels. Most seriously, I did not receive timely access to well-ordered samples of work from each module. It was consequently very difficult for me to carry out my auditing duties in a professional manner” (Drama Honours subject).

The University’s Code of Practice for External Examining (11[a]) 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. In the latter case, they may choose to be involved.

The most common complaint concerned incompleteness in the provision of documentation and inconsistency in presentation (FdEng Civil Engineering [BMC]; FdSc Infrastructure Engineering [BMC]; BSc Hons Business Studies [QAHE]; Computer Science provision [ME]; BSc Hons Construction Engineering and Management; Food provision [CAFRE]; Geography Honours subject; BSc Hons Healthcare Science [Respiratory and Sleep Physiology]; BSc Hons Pharmaceutical Sciences; BEng Hons/MEng Hons Safety Engineering and Disaster

Management; BSc Hons Sport and Exercise Sciences; PgDip/MSc Marine Spatial Planning; MSc International Business [QAHE]; MSci Hons Pharmaceutical Bioscience; Master of Pharmacy Hons).

The following are extracts from reports suggesting improvements and consistency in presentation of information.

- Standardise the materials provided for each module (Computer Science provision [ME])
- One thing that might make externals' work easier would be the provision of module material in a common pattern (Pharmaceutical/Pharmacy provision)
- It would be helpful to receive assessment pieces as a pack, per module, and to also include the module descriptor (Food provision [CAFRE])
- I would like to access student work in just one format only – [currently] some on flash drive, some on Dropbox, some on Blackboard and some in module boxes (Geography Honours subject)
- It would be useful for external examiners to have an overview of student performance in each module in an easy to access format (a simple printout of cohort marks) (BSc Hons Property Investment, Appraisal and Development; BSc Hons Real Estate)
- I would recommend the move to online module boxes to give better and earlier access to materials (FdSc Tourism, Hospitality and Events [SERC]; FdSc International Hospitality and Tourism Management; FdSc International Travel and Tourism Management [NWRC/SRC/SWC])
- For the first time much of the student work and marking evidence was online but some information was stored on CDs or USB memory sticks. I found it difficult to work out where different materials were to be found and spent far too much time trying to gain access to the system and locating different elements of the evidence. Evidence of internal moderation was generally not available. Next year the team needs to find a way to make all the information available in a much easier way (BSc Hons Computing Science; BSc Hons Software Engineering)

A lack of timeliness in the provision of materials was also raised by a small number of external examiners (FdSc Building Services and Renewable Energy [BMC]; FdSc Sport, Exercise & Fitness [NWRC]; BSc Hons Biomedical Engineering).

The following quotes are also worthy of mention.

“I do wonder about the lack of transparency in the way the exam boards are conducted. All the discussions and decisions take place pre-board that the external examiner is not invited to. No minutes are provided to justify these changes or give insights into the discussions” (BSc Hons Computing Science; BSc Hons Software Engineering). External examiners may attend preliminary Boards of Examiners (External Examiners' Handbook, paragraph 3.7).

“I did not receive an invitation to attend the examination board this year” (PgCert Prescribing for Allied Health Professions).

5 Structure and Content

There was almost universal confirmation that the content and structure of all programmes and subject strands were coherent and appropriate to the qualification level, the subject area, and the particular aims of the course/subject. The structure and content of provision were described variously as “well-designed”, “innovative”, “impressive”, “highly commendable”, “current” and “relevant to industry”. In a majority of cases, there was acknowledgement of underpinning research and scholarship.

The following positive comments are worthy of mention.

Advanced Diploma in Policing: “The University is a national leader in successfully adapting very specific and detailed subject learning to HE standards and I am impressed with how well the subject matter, learning and assessment of that learning map to HE standards at the appropriate level. A large number of UK universities are, for the first time, mapping and developing police training into an educational framework capable of scrutiny at HE level and this course is a shining example of how that process can work.”

Graduate Diploma in Accounting: “This is an established quality programme and is well recognised in the market place.”

BSc Hons and PgDip Developing Practice in Healthcare: “[The] courses should be commended for the positive impact they have in developing critical thinking in clinical practice, practitioner confidence and innovation.”

English Honours subject: “This is a beautifully balanced programme which, on the one hand, looks outwards towards Europe and the US, retains a vibrant dialogue with UK scholarship, and still supports distinctive engagement with Irish and NI literary studies.”

BSc Hons Environmental Science: “The course structure and content is more than fit for purpose – it is an exemplar”.

Sociology Honours subject: “The Sociology programme at Ulster continues to be a pedagogical leader in the field”.

PgDip/MSc English Language and Linguistics: “The teaching academics are of international standing conducting cutting edge research of the highest quality and have structured a programme of the highest standard”.

MSc Health Psychology: “The University should be very proud of its provision in Health Psychology.”

MMus Music: “The MMus has developed an increasingly distinctive character and now stands as a very interesting programme with a unique profile. This degree could serve as a model for other Music institutions.”

In the few cases where there was adverse comment by external examiners regarding content, the comment was always in the form of a recommendation designed to support improvement and/or currency of the curriculum.

6 Assessment and Feedback

The vast majority of external examiners were satisfied with the assessment strategies employed. In general, reports provided evidence of module teams making good use of assessment criteria and many external examiners described themselves as impressed with the range, variety and appropriateness of assessment methods including essays, case studies, practical exercises, reflective logs, reports, presentations, class tests and written examinations. The range, innovative, imaginative and stimulating nature of assessments were commended in many programmes.

As in previous years, the main concern raised by external examiners was over-assessment. It was the only issue that ran across all four faculties (FdSc International Culinary Arts [SRC]; BSc Hons Biomedical Science; BSc Hons Building Surveying; BSc Hons Culinary Arts; BSc Hons Engineering Science; English Honours subject; Consumer, Culinary, Food Innovation, Hospitality, Leisure and Events and Travel and Tourism Management provision; BSc Hons Occupational Therapy; BSc Hons Optometry; Politics Honours subject; MA TESOL). However, it is pleasing to note that the instances of over-assessment reported has declined overall. The new Curriculum Design Principles encourage a norm of two items of assessment per module and as the Principles continue to become embedded, it is expected that a reduction in this area will continue.

Although occurring in only a very few cases, it was disappointing to note that external examiners reported that concerns were still being expressed by students around assessment by group work. Students again referred to the “unfairness” of a system whereby all group members received the same group mark regardless of the level of contribution by each group member (Undergraduate Accounting provision; Culinary, Consumer, Food Innovation, Hospitality, Leisure and Events and Travel and Tourism Management provision; Undergraduate Pharmaceutical Sciences and Biosciences provision; Master of Pharmacy Hons). The University policy on assessment by group work, which has been in place since 2010, is clear on this point: where group work contributes to an award classification, an individual element shall be included in each group member’s mark for group work (TLC min 10.76).

Regarding feedback, across all faculties there were many cases of external examiners praising the high quality, timeliness, amount and comprehensive and personalised nature of feedback as well as the emphasis on formative feedback to improve future performance. External examiners were effusive in their praise of staff recognising the demands in terms of time and effort involved in providing high quality, consistent feedback for a large student cohort.

There were however a number of reports regarding inadequacy in the quality and/or consistency of feedback (FdSc Building Technology and Management [NRC]; FdSc International Culinary Arts [SRC]; FEng Software Engineering [BMC]; AdvDip Intelligence Management; AdvDip Intelligence Policing; BSc Hons Accounting and Law; BSc Hons Biomedical Engineering; BSc Hons Business Administration; BSc Hons Business Studies with options; BSc Hons Community Youth Work; BSc Hons Culinary Arts; BEng Hons / MEng Hons Engineering Management; English Honours subject; BDes Hons Interaction Design; BSc Hons International Hospitality Management; Law Honours subject; BSc Hons Quantity Surveying

and Commercial Management; BSc Hons Social Work; PgDip Housing Studies; MSc Sport and Exercise Psychology).

In addition, more in the way of 'feed-forward' was recommended by a number of external examiners (FdSc Architectural Technology [Colleges]; FdSc Construction Engineering with Surveying [Colleges]; FdSc International Culinary Arts [SRC]; BSc Hons Business Administration; BSc Hons Business Studies with options; BSc Hons Community Youth Work; BSc Hons Culinary Arts; BDes Hons Interaction Design; BSc Hons International Culinary Management).

Illegible handwriting was again highlighted although only in a small number of cases (FdSc International Culinary Arts [SRC]; BSc Hons Culinary Arts; English Honours subject; BSc Hons International Hospitality Management; BSc Hons Psychology; BSc Hons Social Work; PgCert/PgDip/MSc Communication and Public Relations [one module]; PgDip Communication Management [one module]). The University policy is that where feedback is not typed, comments should be printed to ensure legibility. The Policy for the Electronic Management of Assessment and Feedback expects that all feedback be provided online from academic year 2018/19.

On occasion, external examiners suggested that feedback did not always match the mark given (FdSc Sport, Exercise and Fitness [SRC]; English Honours subject; BSc Hons Football Coaching and Business Management; PgDip/MSc Advancing Practice; MSc International Hospitality Management; MSc International Tourism Management).

It should be emphasised that the above comments were exceptions rather than the rule and related to only a very small number of programmes.

7 Marking Standards

Marking standards were generally considered appropriate with many external examiners praising the high standard and transparency of marking and describing the moderation process variously as "impressive", "robust", "rigorous", and "exemplary". Many reports highlighted clear evidence of moderation and dialogue between first and second markers. The external examiner for the BSc Hons Biomedical Science reported, "Double marking and robust processes for moderation provide confidence that assessment methods and marking standards meet or exceed sector standards and demonstrate best practice". The MA English Literature external examiner stated, "There was evidence of detailed consultation between the first and second marker. I was particularly impressed by the decisions made regarding failing work, as well as borderline grades in the upper degree classification", and the external examiner for the MSc Human Resource Management stated, "I have found Ulster to be exemplary in regard to marking standards compared to other UK and Irish universities.

There were however some concerns expressed, some recurring from previous years although not necessarily in the same programmes.

A lack of use of the full range of marks, particularly at the upper end of the scale was by far the most common issue raised (BSc Hons Accounting and Law; BSc Hons Community Youth Work; English Honours subject; Law Honours subject; BSc Hons Human Nutrition; BSc Hons Sport and Exercise Sciences; PgDip/MSc Library and Information Management; PgDip Professional Development in Social Work; MSc Applied Peace and Conflict Studies; Master of

Architecture; MSc Business Development and Innovation; MFA Fine Art; MA TESOL; MSc Sport and Exercise Psychology).

Over generous marking remains a complaint (BSc Hons Nursing [SAAD]; BA Hons Photography with Video; BSc Hons Sports Technology; PgCert Prescribing for AHPs; MMus Music; MSc Marine Spatial Planning).

Of particular concern regarding over generous marking is the comment provided by the external examiner for the BSc Hons Quantity Surveying and Commercial Management, “There has been a veritable explosion in the number of First Class Honours degrees awarded. It has more than doubled since last year, which I considered to be high in any case. This is truly extraordinary. Of the eight Part-Time students, six were awarded a First, up from one last year. It may have been an extraordinary cohort of students, but there is a very real danger of devaluing the degree. According to reports, this appears to be a national trend. The national average is 26% Firsts, whilst Oxbridge awards 33%. I would urge all assessors to stand back and reflect, ‘Is this truly a first class piece of work?’”

In addition, the external examiner for the Geography Honours subject stated, “On occasion, grades appeared to be awarded on the generous side. Since 2012, the percentage of 2.2 degrees has dramatically reduced while 1st have dramatically increased. This rate of change is remarkable and the School should ensure to watch for any evidence of grade inflation going forward”.

The external examiner for the BSc Hons Sports Studies remarked, “I continue to be surprised that it is not a University requirement to use anonymous marking”. The same external examiner made the same comment in his report for the previous year. Other external examiners also referred to this issue: BSc Hons Human Resource Management (also referred to in the previous report); Consumer and Culinary Arts Management, Food Innovation, Leisure and Events and International Travel and Tourism Management provision). The (longstanding) University policy is clear that written examinations are subject to anonymous marking (anonymity only being lifted after the marking process is completed) and that “while anonymous marking is not always feasible for coursework, it is encouraged where appropriate and practicable” - Assessment Handbook; section 14.5.

The following concerns were raised in relation to the moderation process.

FdSc Tourism, Hospitality and Events [SERC]: “The main issue this year was the moderating process which was scant to say the least. The moderating comments were only a passing comment on the marks awarded. There needs to be more due process given to the moderating process in the future”.

Drama Honours subject: “Going forward, I would like to see more evidence of discussion between moderators.”

BEng Hons / MEng Hons Engineering Management: “Some scripts were only provided after I requested to see them (MEC103). The scripts did not appear to have been checked or tallied correctly and at least one script contained an arithmetical error in adding up the marks. Furthermore, the mark scheme used to mark Q1 for this paper appears to differ from the mark

scheme provided with the paper. Specifically, Q1A has 9 rather than 8 marks for part c, with 2 rather than 3 marks for part d. Marking of this question does not appear to follow the University's guidelines, and some numbers are very difficult to interpret. Last year I raised concerns about the marking process for the final year dissertation module. The situation has improved a little this year, but the paperwork is in my view still confusing and inadequate. Supervisors mark out of 75 and second marker mark out of 65, the difference being ten marks for "professional approach" awarded only by the supervisor. Subsequently, first and second markers appear to agree on a mark in different ways, some taking the "professional approach" mark into consideration when coming up with an agreed mark, with others agreeing a mark for the thesis out of 65 and then adding on the professional approach mark from the supervisor. This is poor practice, open to interpretation and confusion and must change before the next session."

BSc Hons Human Resource Management: "A little more clarity [required] on how internal moderation works, specifically how agreed marks are arrived at."

BSc Hons International Hospitality Management (HTMi, Switzerland): "I would urge colleagues at Ulster to be more rigorous when moderating work and that it is consistent across all modules".

MSc Management / MSc Sports Management: "Regarding marking criteria, there is not always clear transparency between the material presented and how/why certain marks were awarded".

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

The quality of students' work and student learning generally attracted favourable comment with standards described variously as "excellent", "impressive", "outstanding", "high quality" and "exemplary". Notable cases where the level of work produced was described as at or near publishable quality included, BSc Hons Architectural Technology and Management, BSc Hons Environmental Science, BSc Hons / PgDip Specialist Nursing and MSc Geographic Information Systems.

The following comments by external examiners are worthy of note.

FdSc Applied and Medical Sciences (Colleges): "There are many examples of work that exceed my expectation for a level 5 award."

FdSc Computing (SERC): "Some of the best work is equal to or better than L4/L5 UG work."

BSc Hons Building Surveying: "The quality of project and practical work is above what I have seen in other universities".

BSc Hons Environmental Science: "I saw some of the best pieces of student undergraduate work I have ever seen; a number of the dissertations I examined were of publishable quality and well above the standard usually seen, demonstrating, clear criticality and advanced knowledge and insight."

BMus Hons Music: “Work was of a very high quality indeed, equivalent to, and in some cases surpassing the quality of work in other universities across the UK and Ireland.”

MA English Literature: “The higher end work is consummate with the best work I have read at Irish/UK universities.”

Academic skills

Although only relating to a very small number of programmes, once again, over-reliance on websites and poor referencing skills were highlighted as common areas for concern (FdSc Building Technology and Management [NRC]; FdSc Sport, Exercise and Fitness [NRC]; BSc Hons Biomedical Science; Consumer, Culinary Arts, Leisure and Events, Travel and Tourism Management and Food Innovation provision; BA Hons Textile Art, Design and Fashion; MSc Advancing Practice).

The external examiner for the MSc International Business at QAHE stated, “The quality of written work varies considerably especially on the London campus. Some students appear to have language issues and are unable to express themselves when writing their essays”. In respect of the MBA programme at the same location, the external examiner stated, “The overall quality of work is well below that at Jordanstown”.

Comparability with other institutions

Regarding comparability with other institutions, it is pleasing to note that once again, all external examiners were positive in their comments with many stating that the standard of Ulster programmes exceed that of similar programmes in other UK institutions. In addition to those mentioned above, noteworthy examples are as follows.

Advanced Diploma in Policing: “These students compare favourably with their peer group. The University is a UK leader in the provision of academic learning in a policing context. There is no doubt that this University is a leader in the field.”

BSc Hons Communication Management and Public Relations: “I am familiar with several UG PR courses in the UK and Europe and am happy to say that the programmes are one of the strongest I have seen.”

BSc Hons Dietetics: “The quality of the students’ work is excellent. The students who graduate from this course are amongst the best in the UK.”

Education Honours subject: “Overall the subject content compares positively with other institutions and is perhaps even more comprehensive in the suite of modules than those I have seen in comparable institutions.”

BSc Hons Environmental Science: “The programme is comfortably comparable with other equivalent undergraduate courses and in several respects better including the range of teaching methods, student evaluations, graduate employment levels, staff commitment, pastoral support and the quality of the dissertations.”

Postgraduate Certificate of Education Primary: “Ulster produces outstanding teachers every year. The quality of teaching I have seen over a 4-year period has been consistently, exceptionally high. I have no hesitation in stating that the quality of the teachers produced at Ulster is superior to that which I have seen in any of the other eleven institutions where I have examined and worked.”

PgC/Dip/MSc Food and Nutrition: “The course has great strengths in content and structure and in its methods of delivery and forms of assessment that make it highly competitive with other MSc courses in the same and related fields.”

MSc Advanced Accounting: “Standards are better than top ranking UK institutions.”

MSc Dietetics: “This is an excellent course which compares very favourably with similar courses throughout the UK. Ulster graduates are amongst the most able dietitians.”

Many course teams across all faculties attracted high praise for their professionalism, knowledge, motivation, expertise, commitment, enthusiasm and support for students. In a number of cases, the course team was described as the strongest feature of the programme. Many programmes attracted fulsome praise for their high standards, content, innovation, relevance to industry, underpinning research and scholarship and the quality of the student experience. Students’ comments reflected those of external examiners. They were overwhelmingly positive about the quality of their programme, appreciative of the commitment and dedication of teaching teams and the level of support provided by them, and the overall quality of their learning experience.

Staffing levels

A number of external examiners expressed concern over staffing levels (Certificate in Teaching; BDes Hons Animation; BA Hons Architecture; BSc Hons Cinematic Arts; BSc Hons Environmental Health; BSc Hons Environmental Science; BDes Hons Graphic Design and Illustration (technician); BSc Hons Healthcare Science (Cardiovascular, Respiratory and Sleep Sciences); BDes Hons Photography with Video; Sociology Honours subject; PgCert in Education (Further Education); Master of Architecture; MSc Sport and Exercise Psychology). Each of the external examiners for the Architecture provision expressed grave concern over inadequate staffing levels, a situation also raised by students. It should be noted however that steps have already been taken by the School to remedy the situation. One of the external examiners for the BSc Hons Environmental Health stated, “This is an area that needs to be urgently addressed by the University management. I am in full agreement with the other EE that the staff team needs to be reviewed as a priority”. The external examiner for BSc Hons Healthcare Science stated, “It is clear that the staffing difficulties I witnessed last year have been exasperated this year – this has had an impact on the team’s ability to sustainably deliver a high quality experience – I strongly recommend that contingency plans are made to ensure that staffing levels are made / increased”.

University and College Union (UCU) strike

Several external examiners commented on the perceived impact of staff absences during the UCU strike during semester 2 and the action taken by the University to mitigate its affect on student performance and attainment.

BEng Hons Computer Science / BSc Hons Computing Science / BSc Hons Computing Technologies / BEng Hons Software Engineering: “[Regarding ‘Marking Standards’] I find this question very difficult to answer. Although I think the marking within the school by module teams is fair and in accordance with the criteria for marking and classification, I cannot confirm that the final assessment and presentation of marks was fair and in accordance with the criteria for marking and classification. This is because prior to the award board I was provided with a letter from Professor Paul Bartholomew, Pro Vice Chancellor (Education) outlining an approach the university has adopted in relation to the strike action. As a result of this, marks for students in two modules were altered sometimes with no additional marks, other students receiving up to 15 marks extra. I do not see how this can be seen as ‘fair’ to the students, without input from the local module/programme teams on whether individual students were being affected more than the wider cohort. The methodology outlined in the paper from Professor Bartholomew is not specific so as an external examiner I am unable to confirm in the final assessment of these students is now fair and in accordance with the criteria for marking and classification”.

BSc Hons Computing Science / BEng Hons Software Engineering: “My concern was the decision taken by the PVC (Education) to use an ‘algorithm’ to centrally adjust (‘uplift’) marks for students who may possibly have been affected by the lecturers’ strike (about USS). Although I was advised that none of the students on SE and CS were directly affected by this decision, it does concern me that decisions on student marks were taken out of the hands of examiners and very little information was provided to explain how the algorithm adjusted the marks”.

BSc Hons Health and Social Care Policy / Social Policy Honours subject: “To finish, unusually this year, I was unsettled to receive, just before the board, communication from the university that unilateral action had been taken to adjust the marks on some courses to mitigate for industrial action taken earlier in the year. It was noted that marks had been adjusted by a University imposed algorithm. First, I did not find the information clear and accessible. Second, I did not feel there was any academic rationale for this action and I had concerns that the initiative compromised issues of fairness and equity. Third, I became aware, after seeking further information, that there had been no discussion regarding the implementation of this action with affected staff. I am not aware of any other university taking such action and would be critical of any such approach being implemented again in similar circumstances”.

BDes Hons Interior Design: “Over the previous two years there has been concerns raised that marking was over-generous. I am pleased to say that ... the marking and internal moderation process was rigorous and sound, and in line with UK standards. The original marks were reviewed against the work submitted and were deemed appropriate. However, an ‘uplift’ to the final module marks was given as approved by the Senate and Students’ Union in respect of strike action and severe weather at the exam board. I have raised this as a separate issue with the Pro Vice Chancellor for Education. The final classifications confirmed at the exam

board were deemed appropriate since the uplift did not significantly change the final classification.”

BDes Hons Product and Furniture Design: “As external examiners we were briefed on this University wide decision to mitigate and compensate for students effected by the industrial action to ensure fairness in assessment. While this action did not directly impact on the assessment of the final awards that I was reviewing, the mitigating action and algorithm applied did increase attainment across modules in other years. In discussing this action following the EE briefing from the Head of School, there was a feeling among the team and I as an external that this might have a potential impact on parity given that some teaching on modules that went through the mitigating inflation was not affected by the strike action.”

BA Hons Textile Art, Design and Fashion: “Students stated that the strike action had affected the cohort’s morale particularly in relation to obtaining reassurance from academic staff about how their practical work was progressing.”

Two external examiners provided a different perspective.

BSc Hons Criminology and Criminal Justice: “I see no evidence of quality being affected by the UCU strike action”.

BDes Hons Graphic Design and Illustration: “Students I spoke to were full of praise for the team and very understanding of the strike action and said staff worked hard to keep the momentum strong.”

Honours degree algorithm

In recent years, a small number of external examiners urged the University to adopt an Honours degree classification algorithm that included contribution of results from level 5. This year, a number welcomed the move to the new classification algorithm. However, one external examiner expressed disapproval. The external examiner for the BA Hons Ceramics, Jewellery and Silversmithing commented, “It has come to my attention that students have been asked to opt for either a 30% or a 40% contribution from 2nd year to their overall classification. In discussion with the staff, they feel that whilst this may be appropriate for more academic paper based learning, they feel strongly against this for the CJS subject area – and I fully support their concerns with this regard. It will erode experimentation and risk taking during the 2nd year experience, two things that truly underpin the development of artistic and creative practice. The course will end up with safe and pedestrian practice in 3rd year. I feel that the grade of 30% or 40% will have an adverse impact on the quality of the work and is detrimental to art practice, which is more organic in its development and implementation”. This was the only external examiner voicing opposition to the move.

Placement

Both external examiners and students welcomed the benefits of the placement year in terms of performance in final year (BSc Hons Building Surveying; Consumer, Culinary Arts, Leisure and Events, Travel and Tourism Management and Food Innovation provision; BSc Hons

Environmental Science; BSc Hons Quantity Surveying and Commercial Management; BSc Hons Technology and Design).

9 General Administration

The overwhelming majority of external examiners praised administrative arrangements around the assessment process with many describing the process as “exemplary”, “outstanding”, “rigorous” and “thorough”. The support and hospitality provided was in many cases described in similar terms.

10 Concluding Remarks

The overall picture which emerged again this year was one in which the University’s standards and related processes were wholeheartedly endorsed. Of particular note was the frequency with which University staff were praised for their professionalism and dedication. The University’s quality management and standards assurance processes were again affirmed as aligning well with best practice in the sector. It was again pleasing to note effusive praise from so many external examiners regarding 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 recurrence. In only a very few cases have concerns around standards been raised.

It should be highlighted that the recurring issues raised by external examiners and highlighted in this report relate to only a small minority of programmes. The highest number relating to a single issue, namely, inadequacy in the quality and/or consistency of feedback, was twenty. This equates to only 6% of the total programmes submitted for 2017/18 and puts in context the level of ‘concerns’ raised.

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

16 November 2018