

UNIVERSITY OF ULSTER

Paper No ASQEC/20/32

ACADEMIC STANDARDS AND QUALITY ENHANCEMENT COMMITTEE

3 December 2020

Agenda Item 9

COVER SHEET

EXTERNAL EXAMINERS' REPORTS 2019/20

Presenter: Mr A G Faulkner

To receive the annual overview report.

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EXTERNAL EXAMINERS' REPORTS 2019/20: 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 Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) (in future Pro-Vice Chancellor Academic Quality 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. 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 2019/20 academic session totals 302. Upon receipt in Student Administration, reports are acknowledged. They are forwarded electronically to the interim Dean of Learning Enhancement, Academic Office, Quality Enhancement and to Faculties and collaborative partner institutions for consideration by the relevant course/subject committees and a written response. The external examiner report form invites external examiners to inform the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (DVC) 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 interim Dean addresses the concerns in liaison with the relevant Dean/Head of School, as appropriate. The interim Dean will also acknowledge course teams and identified individuals where outstanding best practice and exemplary work have been identified by external examiners.

3 General

The annual overview report provides a summary for academic year 2019/20. It does not comment on issues specific to individual programmes nor on follow-up responses or actions taken which are monitored through the ongoing monitoring processes including the operation of the Continuous Assurance of Quality Enhancement (CAQE) process. This year, in a slight change in presentation, to provide greater clarity and focus, in Section 5 below dealing with negative comments by external examiners, rather than identifying individual programmes, the report highlights a summary only of the more generic issues raised of which all Faculties should take account.

The 2019/20 academic year was unusual due to the advent of the coronavirus pandemic during Semester 2. The University acted promptly to address its impact through the removal of staff to remote home working and the delivery of its services online. In their reports, most external examiners referred to the University's actions and all praised the timeliness and professionalism with which staff transitioned to fully online teaching and assessment without compromising quality and standards. Most referred to the appropriateness and fairness to students of the measures taken and the communication with and support provided to students throughout. Many referenced complimentary remarks from students regarding the way the process had been managed. With one exception (see below, collaborative provision in Hospitality, Travel and Tourism), all external examiners praised the professional and efficient way in which Board of Examiner meetings were conducted. While a small minority of

external examiners referred to minimal impact on their moderation duties through unavailability of documentation, in those cases, they acknowledged that the situation was beyond the control of staff and the impact was so minor that it did not inhibit their ability to fulfil their duties. Staff were commended for their imagination, commitment and dedication in their response to the emergency.

As in previous years, most external examiners reported that standards were appropriate. In many cases, they commended specific aspects of programmes but in a few cases, concerns were raised. While these comments were, largely not serious, course/subject committees must take immediate action to address the issues and respond on a timely basis to the external examiner(s).

Most external examiners expressed satisfaction with their involvement in the moderation process throughout the year acknowledging the sufficiency and usefulness of the information provided, the opportunities provided to approve examination papers and coursework assignments, the inspection (and adequacy) of examination scripts and coursework submissions and the conduct of the Board of Examiners. In most cases, the administration of the process was described as excellent.

In each category that external examiners were invited to comment on, the vast majority expressed satisfaction with what they saw and, in many cases, identified practices which drew high praise.

The structure and content of provision was in all cases found to be appropriate to the level of the qualification. On occasion, an external examiner made a recommendation(s) and/or a suggestion(s) in this regard. The underpinning of provision by current pedagogic research and scholarship was in most cases noted. Praise for the variety, level, and consistency of assessment including suggestions for improvement in performance was a constant theme. In most cases the rigour, impartiality and fairness of internal marking was acknowledged and in many cases the use of marking schemes and rubrics was praised as was the consistency of standards applied across modules.

Generally, the quality of student work was found to be satisfactory, reflecting the level of qualification and the aims and intended programme learning outcomes while the range of assessment methods and outcomes provided clear evidence of effective student learning. In all cases, programmes were found to compare favourably with similar provision provided by other higher education institutions in the UK and Ireland.

Where there was consultation with students (severely reduced due to the circumstances affecting Semester 2), generally the external examiners found support from students for programmes, the quality of the student experience and, in particular, the support provided by teaching staff.

In their general comments, external examiners were, in the main, complimentary about the provision, the commitment and dedication of staff, particularly in their approach to the coronavirus emergency, and the level of support that they provided to students.

4 Positive Comments

The following are a selection from each Faculty where programmes were highly praised by external examiners.

Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences

Access Diploma Combined Studies (NWRC) - The course is I believe a market leader in that it offers the students clear progression routes linked to a flexibility of approach to meet the needs of students returning to Higher/Further education. The University of Ulster is to be congratulated on its approach to Access courses and to Access students in general.

AdvDip Policing (PSNI) - Ulster University is a UK leader in the provision here of academic learning in a policing context. I am conversant with the ongoing processes in other HEIs and there is no doubt that this university is a leader in that field.

BSc Hons Criminology and Criminal Justice with Applied Practice - I am aware of few courses directly in line with this but am satisfied that as a leader in the field that UU are setting standards for others to follow. I am conversant with the ongoing processes in other HEIs and there is no doubt that this university is a leader in that field.

English Honours Subject - What an extraordinary year for everybody! During times of crisis it really highlights how universities function. It magnifies all processes, team working, and relationships and communities across the breadth of the university. What's emerged from the University of Ulster has been nothing short of extraordinary.

History Honours Subject - This is clearly an excellent degree programme, with committed and talented colleagues working very hard to provide excellent opportunities for learning to students.

PgDip Health and Social Care Management – I have greatly appreciated the combination of theories and practices that oftentimes it is hard to obtain in academic as well as executive teaching. The courses are nationally leading the provision and application of theoretical concepts and insights on everyday practice of managers working on health sectors. Overall, the diplomas stand out in a remarkable way with the national and international academic and professional benchmarks.

PgDip/MSc Professional Development Social Work - This is my final year as EE for this course and I continue to be impressed at the way it has developed over the years. The programme demands a lot of (the best of) the students, but also provides a highly structured schema within which they can develop evidence informed understandings of their area of practice. The course is of very high standard and, in my experience, unique within the UK.

Computing, Engineering and the Built Environment

BSc Hons Building Surveying - This is my first year as an external examiner and I have been very impressed in terms of the course structure and content and its relevance to industry and professional practice standards. The staff are very enthusiastic and experienced in their delivery of the course and have adapted well to the special arrangements put in place following the Covid 19 pandemic to replacing the examinations with online assessments.

BSc Hons Computing Science / BEng Hons Software Engineering - It is clear that high-quality learning and teaching is taken very seriously by the programme team/department, with a focus on appropriate pedagogies and authentic assessment, constructively aligned to the module and programme specifications.

Life and Health Sciences

BSc Hons Diagnostic Radiography & Imaging - The course continues to go from strength to strength. The four years as EE have flown by. It is interesting to reflect on the growth of the team in those years and the number of first-class honours now awarded. The knowledge and professionalism of the students is credit to the course team and the high standards they adhere

BSc Hons Geography - This is my first year as external examiner at the School and I am impressed by the high quality of the B.Sc. Geography course and in general of the assessment methods and process. The COVID-19 crisis may have been expected to impact on the quality of work submitted by the students, but in fact I think the opposite may be true – I reviewed some really excellent work, comparable to the best work at other UK and Irish institutions.

BSc (Hons) Healthcare Science Cardiovascular, Respiratory & Sleep; BSc (Hons) Health Physiology - The main strength of this course is its small, committed and enthusiastic course team and I have very much enjoyed working with them. They have come up with innovative and effective ways to ensure clinical competencies are appropriately and consistently assessed across different placement providers (by bringing DOPS in-house). They also successfully integrated the Healthcare Science and Health Physiology degree programmes ensuring that the needs of both sets of students continue to be met.

PgCert Quantitative Methods for the Behavioural and Social Sciences -The course ran very smoothly this year and was relatively unaffected by the shift to online teaching. This was down to a combination of factors: the small cohort, a well-prepared teaching team and teaching and assessments that lend themselves to blended and online learning. However, it is also clear that a strong teaching team who are motivated and enthusiastic about research methods and teaching research methods also played a part in the success of the course.

PgDip/MSc Geographic Information Systems - The programme is one of the best I have come across, is well-resourced and very well taught and supported, and one that involves the student in the department where it is taught in a very

engaging and positive atmosphere for which all of the staff – academic and support and the Head of School should be congratulated.

Master of Pharmacy - From my meetings with the staff it is clear that they are highly committed, and the head of school is dedicated to ensuring the students have the best possible experience at Coleraine. Despite the ongoing problems with Covid-19, the board of examiners meeting was well organized, structured and efficient. I was pleased to see the very positive comments and feedback from the undergraduate students, and these speak to the high quality of teaching and excellent professional relationships between staff and students. The MPharm course at the University of Ulster is of international standards, the staff are dedicated to their students, the management are forward thinking, and the students are clearly very motivated and engaged.

Ulster University Business School

BSc Hons Consumer Management and Food Innovation; BSc Hons Culinary Arts Management; BSc Hons International Hospitality Management; BSc Hons International Travel and Tourism Management; BSc Hons Leisure and Events Management - The tutors are to be commended on the level of support that is given to the students, particularly on these work-based modules, which can be very labour intensive for tutors and students. The practical aspects of the courses are to be highly commended. It is evident that the courses have the right mix and balance of academic theory and vocational/practical skills to ensure that the students who graduate from these programmes are highly employable and are able to meet the challenges of a career in the tourism, hospitality, events, and food industries with confidence.

BSc Hons Culinary Arts Management; BSc Hons International Hospitality Management - I would like to offer my congratulations to the team on becoming number one in the UK in the Complete University Guide, not surprising as the programmes are well designed, creative and industry led, delivered by a professional team that clearly care about their students and that is illustrated in the quality of student work.

BSc Hons Customer Contact Management/Managing the Customer Contact - This programme is innovative, work-relevant and transforms the lives of those who participate. The critical reflections from the students demonstrate the excellent levels of engagement and how the modules make a difference to their work practice and build confidence.

Master of Business Administration - The quality and standard of the applied T&L tools and the visible commitment of the academic team is to be commended.

MSc Business Improvement - Overall this is a highly engaging programme. It provides students with a broad education in the various aspects of business improvement, but the individual modules provide an opportunity to go in-depth to various aspects of theory. The focus on implementation is to be commended as this is often the most difficult aspect of any business improvement initiative.

MSc Management and Corporate Governance -This is an excellent course with high future employability features. This is a course that the University should be very proud of!

5 Negative Comments

The following sections highlight specific matters, recurrence of which in 2019/20 reports point to more general recurring issues of which Faculties should take account. As in previous years, most issues raised were in the categories of participation in the moderation process, assessment and feedback, and marking standards.

Participation in the moderation process

By far the main complaint of external examiners in this category (as in previous years) related to incompleteness and inconsistency in the provision, presentation and access to documentation. In some cases, recommendations and/or suggestions for improvement were made. The following is a summary.

Regarding access to documentation, a small number of external examiners identified difficulty around accessing and using BlackBoard Learn with one suggesting that, "In future it may be advisable to provide some training to future EEs so that they can get up to speed with the benefits of the Blackboard system quickly". A lack of opportunity to approve assessments in advance was also raised in a small number of cases. One external examiner (BSc Hons Criminology and Criminal Justice) recommended, "I think it would really benefit future examiners if a timetable was put in place for when work could be expected, and templates/responses required. This would help with time management and quality of feedback".

The following is a summary of issues identified.

- Inconsistency in the completion of module evaluation forms.
- Inconsistency in 'module box' content.
- Variation in the way BlackBoard Learn module sites were organised.
- Inconsistency in the structure and organisation of online module files (which did not contain what was normal for the paper-based folders).
- A standard checklist recommended for each module to be reviewed online.
- Design of a 'module pack' with a clear and consistent set of contents recommended.
- Recommended that course teams' use of Blackboard Learn and OneDrive be standardised.
- Recommended inclusion of a summary statistics such as the number of students assessed, the number who passed, pass percentage, the number

who failed, number who withdrew. Also, in module spreadsheets show the same statistics plus the average mark and standard deviation.

The external examiners for Architecture provision highlighted specific difficulties with the moderation process.

- *BA Hons Architecture; MArch Architecture*
External Examiner 1 - Under normal circumstances the examining process described above would be sufficient but with the benefit of hindsight I would like to point out how this process fell short in a number of ways: in the virtual world we missed the ability to cross-reference project work that we were seeing separately and we missed the informal time between meetings in the school where we might refer back to work on walls or confer with the other examiners. Whilst module descriptors and project briefs were shared virtually, we did not have access to a complete set of module information (briefs, learning outcomes etc) that I assume would be normally be physically available for us to check.

If this situation were to arise again, I would recommend that all course information, for all studios and modules would be provided digitally for the external examiners to read in advance of our visit and that more time would be allocated to reviewing the non-studio-based modules. If possible, I would also request that all final year portfolios and a sampling of other years' work were made available in advance.

(NOTE: The external examiner did qualify his remarks by stating, "Overall, I believe that the documentation we did receive was useful and sufficient as a one-time experience to fulfil our role as external examiners. Because of Covid 19 the administration of the assessment process had to be reinvented and was without precedent. The staff worked extremely hard to provide as normal an experience of examining as possible and should be congratulated for their efforts.)

- *External Examiner 2* - Given my experience, the remote examining and sampling of student work was appropriate and generally accessible. This situation did not negate an effective overview of the programme. Here, however, it is worth raising two key points. Firstly, the examining process was diminished by not being able to have immediate access to a larger, physical, body of student work. While this was perhaps inevitable, it did reduce the usefulness of comparative analysis and discussion through the EE process. In this sense, the 2019/20 EE process was unfortunately largely perfunctory. In addition, at points, information was difficult – or frustratingly time-consuming – to access. Unfortunately, this was especially frustrating given 2019/20 was the first year that two EE, including myself, examined at the school.

Secondly – and perhaps more crucially – the conversations and meetings with my fellow EEs were time-pressured and, given the remoteness, less-effective than usual. I have a tremendous respect for my fellow examiners

and strongly suggest the UU work toward considering how to best employ our expertise while we are collectively in session as a team.

The external examiner for the following college provision identified issues with the operation of the Board of Examiners.

FdSc Hospitality and Tourism Management with Specialisms; FdSc International Hospitality Management; FdSc International Travel & Tourism; Management and Consortium (Colleges) - It would have been good to have had the opportunity to find out how the Semester Two exams were adapted for the Covid-19 pandemic. Finally, I would have welcomed a more organised approach to the Award Board at UU on Wednesday 12 June. There was no agenda provided, introductions for so many colleagues present, feedback from the 18/19 minutes or last year's action plan from the EE report. The broadsheets only had module numbers attached, so it would have been useful to have been given a list of the module numbers with their names included, just like the relevant award codes sheet.

Appropriateness of the structure and content of the course or subject and modules

No concerns were raised by external examiners. On occasion, a recommendation(s) and/or suggestion(s) was made.

Assessment and feedback

The approach to assessment and feedback was praised by most external examiners. Issues raised (in only a very few cases) were in the main concerned with the inconsistency in, quality and level of feedback provided. The following are examples typical of the comments made.

- Inconsistency in the provision, level and quality of between feedback.
- Insufficient detail in feedback comments - too many 'generic comments' used in feedback, more specificity and content focus required providing pointers for future improvement.
- Avoid use of idiosyncratic abbreviations in feedback.
- Lack of consistency in the manner of feedback, some word processed, and some handwritten (the former recommended).
- Over assessment – compliance with University guidelines recommended.

Marking standards

Generally, external examiners were complimentary in this category. The following reflect those areas where, in a very few cases, issues were raised.

- Reluctance to use the full marking range (particularly in the upper range).

- Lack of anonymity in marking.
- Over generous marking particularly in work-based learning modules.
- Failure to penalise non-adherence to stipulated word count.
- Failure to indicate (or indicate sufficiently) how differences between first and second markers were reconciled.
- No evidence of secondary marking.
- Use of marking scheme intermittent.
- Not all module handbooks highlighted marking criteria.
- Marking rubrics not specific to assessments and module learning outcomes.
- Unclear whether generic marking criteria or specific assessment criteria being applied.
- Inconsistency in the use of assessment criteria across modules and tutors.
- Feedback comments inconsistent with the mark awarded.

General quality of candidates' work

Most external examiners expressed satisfaction with the quality of students' work and in many cases praised the quality of work. In a few individual cases (mainly relating to level 4/5 work), course teams were encouraged to encourage the use of appropriate academic-based referencing avoiding the use of web-based resources. On a rare occasion, a lack of academic study skills was highlighted.

Student learning

Apart from one instance, no concerns were raised in relation to the level of student learning. Several external examiners expressed how impressed they were with the quality of student learning.

In the only negative comment that related to the FdEng Civil Engineering (NWRC), which the external examiner linked to the coronavirus emergency, he commented that there "were an unusually high number of students (as a percentage of the cohort) who had failed to engage with some/many of their assessments this year, no doubt as a direct result of the covid-19 epidemic". However, he qualified his comment by stating, "The course team have put in place a comprehensive package of support for those students over the summer referral period, so they have every opportunity to succeed".

Student consultation

Issues of concern raised by students were specific to their own programme and were highlighted to the course team for consideration. No issues were identified in this category for University-wide consideration.

General comments

Negative issues raised here were normally a summary of issues already highlighted in the foregoing categories. As mentioned in last year's report, the tendency to identify by name individual staff members continues. The External Examiners' Handbook (July 2020), in Section 6, External Examiner's Report (page 35), makes clear, "External examiners are asked not to identify individual students or staff by name in the report". External examiners should be advised accordingly. This is also made clear in the front page of the external examiner's report form.

In a small number of cases, external examiners raised the issue of under-staffing: BDes Hons Animation; BSc Hons Communication and Counselling Studies (Y1); BSc Hons Therapeutic Communication and Counselling Studies (Y2/Y3); BSc Hons Professional Development in Counselling; MSc Sport and Exercise Psychology.

6 Conclusion

The overall picture which emerged again this year was one in which the University's standards and related processes were wholeheartedly endorsed. This was particularly laudable given the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the operation of the University. Of 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 as indicated above a small number of concerns raised by external examiners which 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.

On a positive note, the recurring issues raised by external examiners in the report relate to only a small minority of programmes, in numerical terms, most issues total only in single figures.

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