

UNIVERSITY OF ULSTER

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ACADEMIC STANDARDS AND QUALITY ENHANCEMENT COMMITTEE

22 October 2020

Agenda Item 12.1

MEETINGS OF BOARDS OF EXAMINERS

COVER SHEET

Presenter: Dr A Moore

To consider a report from Student Administration.

MEETINGS OF BOARDS OF EXAMINERS 2019/20

Background

The provision of online Boards of Examiners meetings has been mooted for several years. The advent of Covid-19 inadvertently brought this forward and a system for managing that process was created at a pace with input from right across the University. Following the June Boards of Examiners meetings, Student Administration and the Faculties reviewed the process. All agreed that the process had worked well and been well received by academic colleagues and External Examiners.

Some issues were raised and addressed in order to improve the process for the remaining Boards of Examiners scheduled during the year. The following were raised at the meeting on 9 July of the 2019/2020 subgroup of Workstream 4.

Paperless Boards

All those involved in the process agreed that the paperless aspect of the process should remain in place going forward. There was a strong view that this achieved a saving in time and paper. Another benefit is that course results sheets can be viewed by Course Directors on SharePoint as and when required. With the move to GBD, this was also timely.

Sharing the Course Results Sheets for the Online Boards

There had been some issues with colleagues sharing the course results sheets at the Board of Examiners meeting from their own file source rather than from files loaded into the Examinations Office SharePoint site. This has been addressed and all colleagues are now sharing directly from the Examinations Office SharePoint site as directed.

Synchronisation

Issues with synchronisation have been addressed and both guidance notes and a short video are available for staff to view in the Course Results Sheets SharePoint area.

It has to be recognised that for most staff involved in the process, this was new and a steep learning curve, working in a new remote and online environment, with the need to acquire many new software skills, with everyone rising to the challenge.

External Examiner Attendance at Boards of Examiners Meetings

It is University policy that External Examiners must attend meetings of Boards in person, on at least one occasion in the academic year, where results that contribute to final awards are being considered. If an External cannot meet this requirement, the Faculty have had to seek approval from the Senior Officer responsible for overseeing this with proposals on how the work will be moderated and results confirmed.

It has also been the case that, in normal circumstances, Boards of Examiners must be held on campus and that online boards should only be by exception and by approval of the relevant Senior Officer.

As neither of the above has been possible this year it seemed timely to review this practice and to that end the Associate Deans (Education) were asked for the views of their Faculty. These are summarised in the Appendix.

Conclusion

All Faculties agree that the online process worked well and that would also appear to be the consensus of their External Examiners. From the Examinations Office perspective, it appeared that more Externals were able to attend the Board remotely than is often the case with on campus Boards. However, as the faculties have pointed out, they would not wish for the option for Externals to be present at on campus boards to be removed, but that this would be a local agreement between the course team and the External as to what point in the year is the most beneficial to travel to Ulster. Post Covid, it may be more difficult/challenging for Externals to travel to Ulster as the whole travel infrastructure may look quite different. There are also the cost savings to be made if Externals can effectively undertake the role remotely.

Recommendations

1. Consideration be given to removing the clause that Boards of Examiners should not take place online as experience this year has shown that this is a viable alternative.
2. That consideration be given to the proposal that Faculty/course teams agree with Externals when it would be most beneficial for them to attend the campus, allowing for more flexibility than is currently the case.
3. That Externals are encouraged to attend a Board on campus in their first year of appointment, if possible.
4. It remains the case that External Examiners are expected to attend a Board either on campus or remotely (if recommendation 1 above is agreed).

Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences

- In terms of Externals attending Boards in person, teams noted that face to face engagement with Externals can really benefit programmes, but that this can take place at a less frantic time of the year rather than around the exam board period. Within creative arts it is important that Externals get to view student work in person, so the option for them to come over just before exam boards at the point of the student work being on display needs to be retained. However, the flexibility of then permitting Externals to attend remotely after they have viewed student work is very welcome given the pressures within their own institutions around the exam board period.
- This year we had a much greater proportion of EEs attending via Skype rather than having to process non-attendance forms due to clashes. Externals are also busy at this time of year within their own institutions so permitting remote access has increased their ability to attend in person. Flexibility is important rather than taking a one-size approach, with teams encouraged to work with their Externals during the whole of the academic year to ensure engagement with material and assessments on BBL.
- Externals were impressed with the professionalism of the boards, and this is echoed by the Faculty who owe a great deal to the professionalism and support of the examinations team at Ulster.
- Externals can be given the option whether to attend boards in person or not, or attend the campus in person at another point during the year, but we welcome remote engagement due to the reduced cost of travel and claims, the time spent by Externals travelling for a one day event, and the resulting fall in our collective carbon footprint.

Faculty of Computing, Engineering and the Built Environment

- We are very keen to retain the facility to use remote examination boards, these have proven really useful and very effective. Indeed, post boards more Externals from collaborative provision were commenting on how helpful they have been and how well they have worked in practice. We would particularly draw attention to the very significant benefits remote Boards of Examiners have for postgraduate and often part-time provision, any programme with multiple intakes where the demands on External Examiners are very significant and as we introduce more January intakes the demands can grow during the period of appointment.
- The move to reducing the number of colleagues attending BoE's was a matter for some discussion before the boards (I say some because it was not a significant number). But interestingly, post boards colleagues who were sceptical have reported back in schools to say that the change has been positive and that not everyone actually needs to be at the formal BoE. That's because the move placed a renewed emphasis on attendance at and diligence at the preliminary boards. These were detailed and often repeated to make sure that all decisions were made and discussed by teams – this in itself is a really significant quality assurance focus. Those debates at BoEs that could arise in the past, didn't.
- Resoundingly, we don't want to lose that face to face contact with our Externals and this could be at the June board or at another time of the year where the External could perhaps also tap into programme delivery providing lectures or workshops to students and spend more time discussing programme enhancement and perhaps review semester 1 materials early in semester 2.
- Essentially this move has been really positive both administratively and also in the opinions of both staff and our Externals. But this would not have worked without the internal pull together to make it work, that effort across exams office colleagues and school office staff made sure that this worked so efficiently.

Faculty of Life and Health Sciences

- All Schools in the Faculty of Life and Health Sciences would prefer a flexible approach and the opportunity to meet with External Examiners face-to-face on-campus. All schools would not like the removal of the option to meet with their External Examiner. There are a number of benefits to interacting face-to-face with the External, particularly the ability to have discussions based on issues arising on the day which can be sadly missed when online and then not fully explained to the External. Meeting on-campus also is important for networking; meeting with the EE is often a great source of intelligence on the subject nationally. Externals have also said they missed the opportunity to meet us face-to-face.
- It would seem prudent that the External Examiner could attend if they and the course teams feel it is beneficial (this may or may not require a face-face visit every year). Affording the EE/course team the ability to do it remotely as a flexible arrangement would be the general consensus.

Ulster University Business School

- We would be in favour of retaining electronic Exam Boards and the Sharepoint process with minimal paper (and would agree with the sharing of best practice, particularly around 'live' annotation, etc). In our experience, the process seemed to effect a closer review of the results (and live annotation works well) and a large number of externals commented on the robustness and professionalism of the process. All staff engaged with the preliminary boards and discussions which enabled the final boards to be more efficient in terms of staff time with the A/HoDs and CDs mainly and particularly so for the large and complex courses.
- In talking to Externals this year and in reading their reports, the majority have been comfortable with remote Boards (and many other institutions do this), although some do like to visit campus to meet with the course team and also, to meet with students. In particular, it might be beneficial to attend in person in their first year of appointment to meet the team in person and build the relationship. The latter can be very beneficial in terms of programme enhancements and sharing of practice, and not just the moderation process.
- Suggest that:
 - Attendance is not mandatory every year as long as Externals are content to engage remotely with materials/moderation and with the staff involved (and that staff are able to provide these materials remotely).
 - An External can however attend in person (if they wish) once per academic year and should perhaps be encouraged particularly to attend in their first year of appointment.