

## Summary of Postgraduate Taught External Examiner Reports for Academic Year 2021/2022

### Introduction

This report summarises feedback from External Examiners in their annual reports for postgraduate taught provision (MSc, MRes, MBA, GMPH and associated PgCert and PgDip programmes) in academic year 2021/2022 in the Faculties of Engineering, Natural Sciences, and Medicine, the Imperial College Business School, and the Centre for Higher Education Research and Scholarship. A report of undergraduate provision was provided to QAEC earlier this year. Where relevant, similarities or difference in outcomes between the undergraduate and postgraduate taught provision will be included in this report.

At the time of writing, 168 reports had been submitted and 27 were outstanding. Reminders have been sent to the examiners for which reports are outstanding, and will be further referred to the respective Department, to request that they send further reminders as necessary. For reference, reports are due within one month of the Board of Examiners, and so would normally be expected to have been received by Easter for Boards held in the Spring term, and by Christmas for Boards in the Autumn term.

The report template asks a series of questions with the available responses of:

- Yes/always or Yes/all
- Most/usually
- No/never or No/none

The three confidence statements at the end the report have available responses of: Yes, Mostly, or No.

Each section then provides a free comments section for further information or justification of the response given. Finally, Examiners are asked to provide any recommendations for improvements to practice, identify any areas of particular best practice or innovation, and to provide an overall summary comment. For Examiners completing their final report of their tenure, an overview comment is requested regarding their period of appointment.

### Consideration of Reports

As had been described previously, the Quality Assurance Team RAG rates all responses received, with attention to any qualifying comments that are provided in that section of the report. This is used to support the thematic analysis of the reports in this summary report.

Departments are provided a copy of the report to reflect on the information provided, provide a response to the examiner from the department/programme team, and to inform annual monitoring and other relevant activities within the programme/department.

The External Examiners will be provided with the response to their individual report and the relevant College-level summary report following consideration of this summary by QAEC.

## Analysis of External Examiner Reports

The following subsections of this summary provide detail of the responses in each area of the report. Where there is a specific concern raised by an External Examiner this is expected to be addressed in the individual responses from the department and as part of the annual monitoring process, and so would not normally be included in this summary.

### Appointment and Induction of New External Examiners

New External Examiners were content with the induction that was provided, which was conducted online through a Teams session. As regularly occurs, at least one examiner was appointed subsequent to the arranged sessions (February 2022) and whilst a recording of the majority of the session was provided, it was reported that it would have been more beneficial to ensure that all appointments are in place before the beginning of the academic year. In the case of PGT appointments, it was noted that these are more likely to be later in the academic year, and comments were raised that the examiners in question would have considered it more beneficial to have been in place at the start of the year and so be able to see the full student cycle prior completing moderation activity and the annual report.

Examiners reported that they should have been provided with more detailed information with regards to the programme schedule, such as when meetings would occur and when work would be due to be completed, with particular reference to the arrangement of Board of Examiners in a more timely manner.

### Provision of Programme and Module Information

Whilst the majority felt that they had been provided with the relevant documentation, examiners reported issues within some areas with regards to the information that they had received, stating that they needed more detailed information about the programme content, learning outcomes, as well as access to handbooks and relevant marking platform and/or Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) in use for the particular programme. A number of examiners stated that they would like to be provided with previous student performance for the module/programme, this was reiterated within the section regarding Board of Examiners. Provision of module level information was one of the three lowest scoring questions within the report. The other lowest scoring questions related to marking and moderation (see section below).

Some examiners expressed that they had not received sufficient information of their remit within the programme of study to which they had been appointed, such as particular modules or assessments for which they would be expected to review.

### Programme and Curriculum Design

The majority of External Examiners were highly satisfied with the balance and content of the degree programmes in relation to the coverage within the curriculum, the stated learning outcomes and were satisfied that core modules were appropriate. There were some recommendations to improve the balance of individual programmes and modules. Many commented that the curriculum review had produced improved programmes, or was anticipated to do so in cases in which the review had been recently conducted. External Examiners believed the programmes met PSRB and accreditation standards where relevant. In many cases, the examiners noted the development and inclusion within programmes of content in respect of climate change and artificial intelligence/machine learning.

## Assessment Strategy

Overall, the Examiners considered that the assessment strategies were fit for purpose and encouraged the continued use of a range of assessment methods, particularly where this reflected 'real-world' or skills development for future study/research. A number of examiners commented on the use of multiple-choice questions (MCQs), considering that at the level of these programmes these were of limited value.

The concern regarding the workload of students was also expressed in comments relating to the relative workloads between modules and levels, with 84% of examiners responding positively that this was fair and equitable. Examiners comments, even when responding positively, was that the assessment load was high (some of which may be hidden within the structure of the assessments), assessments were challenging (on the whole), and that the timing of assessment could be improved (for example providing more time between examinations at the end of the taught part of the programme prior to commencement of the project). It was acknowledged that within 1-year full time masters programmes there were limits to how much 'bunching' of deadlines could be avoided.

## Drafting of Assessments

Most examiners (approximately 85%) had received examination papers for scrutiny and considered that these were set at an appropriate level. However, only 76% of examiners stated that they had received responses to any comments that they had made, with 8% stating that they had received no response at all. On review by faculty, Engineering was considerably lower at 58% responding positively (18% stating no response at all), than other areas. Whilst some of the qualifying comments provided indicated that they either did not feel that their comments required an immediate response, or that they could ascertain that their comments had been taken on board when they reviewed the completed work, this did not account for all negative responses. Of particular concern was an examiner that reported that they had identified an error on the paper which was not corrected prior to sitting the exam, and therefore required additional action by the Board of Examiners when considering the student marks.

In line with the findings from the Undergraduate report, examiners reported that they did not receive assessment briefs for all modules under consideration and reported that in these areas there was a correlation with issues during the assessment, marking and moderation. QAEC may wish to consider practice in this area and make appropriate recommendations. This was particularly noticeable where assessment regimes included a higher proportion of coursework elements. As the College regulations mean that nearly all assessment that is taken by students is weighted within the module and programmes and therefore contributes to the final outcomes for students, it is expected by the examiners that they are able to review and comment on these areas in addition to the formal examinations.

## Assessment process: Marking and Moderation of Scripts

Examiners are asked the following questions in relation to marking and moderation, and the responses are included.

Marking & Moderation	Yes (%)	Mostly (%)	No (%)

	(UG)		
Did you receive a sufficient number of scripts and other assessed work across the full grade profile?	89 (94)	9	2
Was the general standard and consistency of marking appropriate?	84 (94)	16	0
Was there evidence that assessed work had been moderated internally, either through second marking or check marking?	90 (92)	8	2
Was the justification of marks clear on the scripts that you reviewed?	77 (84)	21	2

It is noticeable that the satisfaction of the PGT examiners was lower than that of the undergraduate examiners, particularly in relation to consistency of marking and justification of marks.

A number of examiners noted that there were issues with the visibility of marking procedures, for example second marking or in instances in which there was a discrepancy in marks between markers how the final mark was achieved. In this instance, examiners expressed concerns of potential undue influence of a senior marker with a more junior member of staff. In line with the undergraduate reports, Examiners commented that they found supervisor marks were more likely to be higher than the other marker.

In order to improve consistency of the marking process, the Examiners advised that in some areas the marking schemes needed to be improved with greater granularity which would support all markers and enable clearer justification of marks awarded. Though Examiners reported that they considered the final outcomes for students were appropriate, a number commented that they could not from the sample work and documentation provided be able to vouch for the College procedures being followed in full.

Of relevance for programmes undertaken by healthcare professionals, an examiner commented on the discussion held with one programme team of how to manage assessment within which poor/unsafe clinical practice was demonstrated. The College may wish to consider whether this should be left to the discretion of individual programmes or whether there should be further discussion and policy in relation to this.

## Programme Content Delivered by External Providers

In instances where the Examiners were cognisant of externally provided provision, they were positive of the offer being made, its value to students within the programme and the processes utilised to support students in their studies. The only exemption was in relation to a specific programme which has been addressed directly with the programme.

## Boards of Examiners

The External Examiners were positive about the processes in place at the Boards of Examiners, with many taking the opportunity to thank programme teams for the information

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provided and the smooth running of the Boards. However, a few commented that it did not appear that the Chair and Secretary to the Boards were fully conversant with College academic regulations.

Several Examiners commented that changes to the consideration of borderlines to utilise an algorithm was a positive step. Where viva voce examinations were held for borderline candidates, most Examiners were positive about the process involved and the opportunity to discuss work with the students.

Some Examiners raised their concerns about possible grade inflation, and urged programme teams to be clear about their processes and the thresholds. It was noted that this was a matter for the sector and that the calibre of candidates was high. It was noted that changes in the College regulations had impacted on the outcomes and recommended that this is kept under review. A number noted that marking tended to be within a narrow band and encouraged further work on the assessments themselves and rubrics to differentiate between candidates.

The Examiners felt that mitigating circumstances and academic misconduct were dealt with consistently however, they noted the increase academic misconduct cases. The College was encouraged to provide early training and support for students to understand the expectations regarding academic writing and what materials/resources would or would not be permitted within other assessments.

Examiners expressed a desire to retain as an option, where appropriate, of hybrid and online Boards but noted that advantages of being able to meet directly with colleagues. To improve the understanding of members of the Board Examiners expressed the desire to be provided with material earlier in the process including previous years data.

## Academic Standards

External Examiners concurred that the programmes were in line with expectations and standards set by as part of the FHEQ, subject benchmarks and PSRBs. They considered that student performance was comparable with and often exceeded that of other higher education institutions with which they had experience. However, a few did reiterate concerns with potential grade inflation. Generally academic standards and student performance was comparable across the modules within a programme. Most External Examiners agreed that standards were broadly comparable to previous years.

## Comments from outgoing examiners

The Examiners completing in 2021/2022 provided positive comments regarding their tenure. Highlighted particularly by the examiners was the management of programmes during the COVID pandemic, the response to their suggestions and recommendations for improvement and the high calibre of the students.

## Recommendations

The Examiners made recommendations on the following areas that have not been raised elsewhere in this summary:

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1. Enable meetings to be held between the Examiners and students prior to exam board, to better inform the comments to be provided to the Board by the Examiner.
2. Hold pre-board meetings with the Examiners to aid their understanding of outcomes.
3. Review grading structures within groupwork to differentiate between students as needed, for example with differing levels of participation.

## Overall Confidence

Examiners are asked to respond to three confidence statements at the end of their report.

100% agreed that “The degree awarding body is maintaining the threshold academic standards set for its awards in accordance with the FHEQ and relevant Subject Benchmarks Statements.”

99% agreed that “The assessment process measures student achievement rigorously and fairly against the intended learning outcomes of the programme and is conducted in line with the College's policies and regulations.”

99% agreed that “The academic standards and the achievements of students are comparable with those in other degree awarding bodies of which you have experience.”

For the one or two examiners who did not fully agree that their programmes met the above statements, they did find that these were mostly met.

## Conclusion

Whilst this summary report has highlighted those areas in which the External Examiners feel that improvement could be made, the reports were positive and overall, the College can be assured of the quality and standards of its programmes.