

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

Introduction

This report summarises feedback from the External Examiners in their 2021-2022 annual reports in relation to the College's undergraduate provision. This includes BSc, MSci, BEng, MEng, iBSc, and MBBS programmes in the Faculties of Engineering, Natural Sciences, and Medicine, Horizons/i-explore modules offered by the Centre for Languages, Culture and Communication and BPES/i-explore modules in the Imperial College Business School. Postgraduate taught provision will be reported on later in the academic year.

At the time of writing this report, 99 reports had been submitted and 1 was outstanding. This outstanding report has been referred to the respective Department, who have been requested to send further reminders. For reference, reports are due within one month of the Board of Examiners, and so would normally be expected by the end of August for undergraduate programmes.

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.

Consideration of Reports

As had been described in the previous year's summary report, 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

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to be addressed in the individual responses from the department and as part of the annual monitoring process, and so is not 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.

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.

Provision of Programme and Module Information

Whilst the majority felt that they had been provided with the relevant documentation, examiners reported issues with access to different platforms used across the College for maintaining and disseminating programme documentation such as programme handbooks, module descriptors and assessments briefs, exam papers, assessed work, mark sheets and feedback. Whilst reporting that on the whole, that these issues had been addressed quickly by the department team, it had caused additional work at a time when pressures were already high.

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 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, which Departments can take forward and many commented that the curriculum review had produced improved programmes. External Examiners believed the programmes met PSRB and accreditation standards where relevant, noting the need to ensure that recent changes to requirements, such as limits to the amount of academic credit that may be compensated in accredited engineering programmes, were adhered to.

Examiners noted in their reports the world-leading research of the relevant department embedded in the curriculum and the inclusion of non-discipline study available to students through initiatives such as i-explore, however, they encouraged greater use multi-disciplinary study where appropriate, such as machine learning or the impact of climate change.

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. Examiners were divided about the return to in person, closed book exams and reflected on the difficulties that

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students had reported, or appeared to have experienced, when utilising an open book format. Of note throughout the reports were concerns about the assessment load on students across the programme as well as the expectations of individual assessments in some areas. The increase in continuous assessment and participation elements, though considered an improvement in practice to end of year exams only, were noted to corresponding increased the workload for staff and students. It was reported that there had been an increase in claims for mitigation attributed in part to this change.

The concern regarding the workload of students was also expressed in comments relating the relative workloads between modules and levels, with only 74% of examiners responding positively that this was fair and equitable. Where examiners where unable to respond positively they commented that in some cases there were issues with the relative load with either too many assessments in some modules in comparison to others, or assessments were too challenging with regards to the time allocated for completion.

Drafting of Assessments

Most examiners (approximately 95%) had received examination papers for scrutiny and considered that these were set at an appropriate level. However, only 78% of examiners stated that they had received responses to any comments that they had made, with 10% stating that they had received no response at all. There was no discernible pattern to negative responses for this section of the report and it did not reflect the experience of other examiners for the department.

Of concern is that 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.

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 (%)
Did you receive a sufficient number of scripts and other assessed work across the full grade profile?	94	6	0
Was the general standard and consistency of marking appropriate?	94	6	0
Was there evidence that assessed work had been moderated internally, either through second marking or check marking?	92	5	2
Was the justification of marks clear on the scripts that you reviewed?	84	15	2

In many instances when commenting on moderation, the examiners used the opportunity to provide their views specifically in relation to scaling activities. Whilst in favour of supporting

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academic decision-making, there was concern expressed in some areas of the extent and/or repeated need to scale the student outcomes or the methods that were utilised.

Examiners noted through the reports that project marking in particular could be considered generous and highlighted that supervisors may potentially be displaying unconscious bias in their marking. It was felt that this could contribute to grade inflation, especially given the weight that project marks were given in the consideration of student classifications, particularly for borderline candidates.

Practical Examinations

Examiners were positive about the range, real life application and attention to detail in the design, implementation, and review of practical examination where this took place.

Oral Assessments Including Viva Voce Examinations

Where Examiners had been able to attend or review oral assessments, they were positive about the handling of the assessment itself, and the marking and feedback provided.

Assessment Process Marking and Moderation

87% of Examiners reported that marking schemes/model answers were suitable, and applied consistently, with the remainder responding that this was 'mostly/usually'. Negative comments related to one off incidents with specific papers/modules and complained that the lack of suitable rubrics made it difficult to assess rigour of the marking and moderation processes.

However, 96% of examiners felt that marking had been completed suitably, in line with College policies and procedures. Negative responses related to areas in which model answers had not been provided this or concerns were raised by overmarking by supervisors. When questioned about appropriate grade boundaries, concern was raised about potential grade inflation, citing the increase in top grades awarded and that lack of availability within the scale to differentiate by classification beyond the 70% band.

Programme Content Delivered by External Providers

In instances where the examiners were cognisant of externally provided provision, they were universally positive of the offer being made and the processes utilised to support students, noting the work to support conversion of these marks back into the programme. It was noted that some placement institutions timelines had delayed results.

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 provided and the smooth running of the Boards.

A number of Examiners commented that changes to the consideration of borderlines to utilise an algorithm was positive, as was the reduction in the regulations of the borderline to 2 percentage points below the threshold. Where viva voce examinations were held for borderline candidates, most Examiners were positive about the process, but this was not universal as this was not felt to be appropriate by all.

A number of Examiners commented, as through the earlier stages of their report, their concerns about possible grade inflation, and urged programme teams to be clear about their

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processes and the thresholds. It was noted that this was a matter for the sector and that the calibre of candidates was high.

Following from this, examiners comments on scaling, seeking clarification of the pedagogic reasons for changing marks, particularly where this was routine and/or utilised a simple linear process.

The Examiners felt that mitigating circumstances were dealt with consistently and fairly, with due care being taken however, they noted that the increase in claims was having significant impact on these processes and indicated that the College may wish to investigate how technology and streamlining process could support this area.

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, some Examiners expressed the desire to be provided with material earlier in the process.

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.

Recommendations

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

1. The return to business as usual should be careful monitored, retaining the use of hybrid/online in person for teaching and assessment activities, highlighting requests from students for recordings of lectures.
2. 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.
3. Appropriately encourage, and provided credit for, teamwork within degree programmes.
4. Monitor impact of increased claims for Mitigating Circumstances.
5. Consider how attainment data can be presented and considered by the Board of Examiners in relation to specific equality & diversity and widening participation markers.

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.”

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98% 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.

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