

# IMPERIAL

## Summary of Postgraduate Taught External Examiner Reports for Academic Year 2022/2023

### Introduction

This report summarises feedback from the External Examiners in their 2022-2023 annual reports in relation to the College's postgraduate taught provision across all areas of the College (MSc, MRes and MA).

At the time of writing this report (March 2024), 168 reports had been submitted and 27 (11 FoM, 7 FoNS, 5 FoE, 3 ICBS and 1 CLCC/CHERS) remained outstanding. The respective departments have been advised and requested to send further reminders in addition to those sent from the External Examiner Team. Reports are required to be submitted within one month of the Board of Examiners. It is known that in some areas the Boards are held in the Spring term which may have delayed some, but this would not account for all.

Following feedback on the structure of the report, it has been streamlined for this reporting cycle with fewer specific questions requesting a yes/no response, and increased commentary opportunities (see Annex 1). Each section provides a free comments section for further information or justification of the response(s) given. The examiners are requested to response to three confidence statements and at the end the report examiners are asked to identify any areas of best practice or innovation, provide any recommendations for improvements to practice, and to provide an overarching summary.

### Consideration of Reports

As had been described in the previous year's summary report, the External Examiner 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 as it is received. This informs the annual monitoring and other relevant activities within the programme/department. They are requested to provide a response to the report. In addition to this response, where received, the External Examiners are provided the relevant College-level summary report following consideration 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 is not included in this summary.

### Appointment and Induction of New External Examiners

Examiners were, overall, positive about the appointment and induction process. They appreciated the time given within the central induction session to meet and discuss key points with other examiners and the interactive workshop section. Examiners commented that the opportunity to meet the programme/department team would have been a useful addition.

The examiners reported that there could be improvements to the timing and distribution of information relating to their role, including programme content, access to the Virtual Learning Environment, definitive programme documentation and expecting workload and timings.

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## Programme Information and General Administration

Whilst the majority felt that they had been provided with the relevant documentation, as with those that were new to the College the examiners reported issues with access to College systems needed for their work. Whilst reporting that overall, these issues had been addressed quickly by the department team, it had caused additional work at a time when pressures were already high.

A limited number of examiners reported that the timeliness of the receipt of materials and schedules was poor, and improvements to these processes would better enable to meet their remit.

Throughout the reports, examiners commented that they wish to be granted greater access to programme data such as classification trends and other comparative cohort data. Similar comments have been received and reported in previous reports. This included module outcomes, programme classification trend, including where appropriate data relating to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion.

## Response to Last Year's Annual Report

Where the examiners received a direct response to their report, the majority (over 90%) felt that their comments and suggestions had been fully and carefully considered. Where the examiners did not consider that their report had received an appropriate response, some had stated that this was too high-level. On review these examiners had not received a response from the programme team and had only received the summary report with a cover letter from the External Examiner team.

It is interesting to note that the number of examiners that reported that they had not received a formal response to their report is considerably lower than that recorded by the External Examiner team, which may again be due to the provision to all examiners of the summary report. This will be kept under review by the team, and reminders sent as appropriate.

2 examiners stated that their report had not been provided to the programme team. This has been investigated and action taken to ensure that the appropriate additional recipients for the reports has been added to the information held by the external examiner team so that there will be no future issues/misunderstandings in this area.

## 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 programme learning outcomes and were satisfied that core modules were appropriate. There were some recommendations to improve the balance of individual programmes and modules, which the relevant Departments can take forward. The Examiners praised the programmes for the appropriate challenge and stretch, highlighting the range of electives provided in many programmes and the development of advanced skills. The programmes were described as challenging, relevant, and cutting edge.

## Entrepreneurship and sustainability

This academic year, the examiners were asked to provide commentary in relation to the opportunities for students to develop their entrepreneurship skills and for co-creation. Most examiners that commented on these opportunities were positive of the ways in which these were incorporated into the programme. A small minority felt that this was not explicit in the material provided to them.

Examiners commented that the curriculum evidenced sustainability as a key theme. This could be explicitly within a module(s) or across the breadth of the programme and was specifically related to the subject matter in most cases.

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## Assessment strategy

Most examiners reported that they considered that the assessment strategy was suitable with regards to the load and types of assessment utilised within the programme(s). Examiners encouraged programme teams in some area to diversify the assessment types in use across the programme.

Concern was raised by examiners in some areas of the design and management of coursework. This included the clarity and visibility of the assessment criteria/marking schemes/model answers as appropriate to students, markers, and examiners, with a particular emphasis in supporting students to understand the expectations on them with regards to the development of their project work. Examiners encouraged programme teams to consider formative assessment and spreading the load across the year.

## Assessment Setting

Overall, the Examiners felt that the assessment setting process, particularly for examinations, worked well, though examples were provided where this was not the case where proofing/review could have been improved prior to external review. In the additional comments, it appears that examiners are not provided 'non-examination' briefs for consideration/comment where they might have expected to receive these.

Examiners did not always consider that their comments on briefs/exam papers had been responded to adequately, noting that this sometimes applied to an individual rather than the full programme, and programme teams are encouraged to ensure that examiners are fully responded to.

A significant number of examiners commented throughout the reports that they did not consider the marking schemes/ model answers were sufficiently detailed. The examiners indicated that had led, in places, to potentially inaccurate/discrepancies in marking between individuals and encouraged better development of marking criteria for project-based assessment.

## Marking, Moderation and Feedback

This section is one that has scored lowest overall in this and previous academic years across undergraduate and postgraduate taught provision. In the table below are the questions, and responses (as a percentage to the nearest integer) relating to marking, moderation, and student feedback. Where there is a sufficiently matched question in the previous year, this is included in brackets.

| Marking & Moderation  | Yes        | Mostly    | No       |
|---|------------|-----------|----------|
| Did you receive an appropriate sample across the grade profile for consideration?   | 92<br>(89) | 5<br>(9)  | 3<br>(0) |
| Did you see evidence of the full marking and moderation process? For example, evidence of second marking, internal moderation etc.                | 88<br>(90) | 9<br>(8)  | 4<br>(2) |
| Was the justification of marks clear, including where markers have differing initial outcomes?  | 90<br>(77) | 9<br>(21) | 1<br>(2) |
| Was the feedback to students clear and appropriate (identification of strengths and weaknesses, nomenclature in line with the marks awarded etc.) | 78         | 19        | 3        |

It can be seen that there have been significant improvements in the marking process in comparison to the previous years' reports. It is also noted that changed from the previous academic year, overall

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PGT examiners provided more favourable responses than the undergraduate provision, particularly in relation to the justification of marks and the visibility of the marking process.

The comments from examiners showed that the quality of the feedback provided to students varied. In some cases, the examiners gave significant praise for the feedback however, there were areas in which the examiners felt that feedback mechanisms needed to be improved to support student learning. Several examiners highlighted concerns that were echoed in their meetings with students that there was limited feedback provided to students in some aspects of the programmes (particularly end of programme projects and for exams) preventing the students, and the examiners, from understanding the marks that had been awarded or where improvements that could be made for future assessment.

The comments provided by examiners in this academic year reflect that which has been provided in previous academic years. The College may wish to consider what measures can be put in place to address this area, particularly considering the corroborating outcomes from student surveys (internal and external).

## Placement Learning and Collaborative Provision

In instances where the examiners were cognisant of externally provided provision, they were positive of the offer being made and the processes utilised to support students. Where projects were being offered outside of the institution, the examiners encouraged programme teams to ensure that the quality, supervisory arrangements, and access equalled that of 'home' projects.

## 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. The Boards were described as robust, thorough, open, transparent, and inclusive. The positive response rate for this section (7 questions) was the highest across the report. Except for the consideration of relevant analytics (score 94%), the mean score for this section was 98%.

Examiners commented on scaling, seeking clarification of the pedagogic reasons for changing marks, particularly where this was routine and/or utilised a simple linear process. The support for scaling varied across the reports. Some considered its use necessary and proportionate, with others expecting the programme team to reflect on, and reduce reliance upon, scaling to bring results in line with expected norms suggesting changes to the assessment setting process.

To improve the understanding of discussion at the Board, several Examiners expressed the desire to be provided with material earlier in the process or be provided with the opportunity to attend a meeting in advance.

As described earlier in the report, some examiners requested to be provided with, and have discussion of, trend data at the Boards of Examiners.

Individual suggestions for improvements in process were made which need to be reflected on by the relevant programme team.

## Overview, Recommendations and Good Practice

### Overall Confidence

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

99% 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 examiners who did not fully agree that their programmes met the above statements, they did find that these were mostly met. The responses showed a small decrease to the previous year's responses (these were 100, 99 and 99% respectively). This will be kept under review.

## Good or Innovative Practice

The Examiners provided several examples of practice that they considered to be good or innovative. The detailed responses are available from the External Examiner team. Examiners commended the varied assessment offered within the programmes, and the depth and range of project work made available to students.

They noted that the programmes were highly interdisciplinary and industry-focused, commenting on the real-world application of the content and assessment methods used, which would provide students with the skills and knowledge to move forward in their careers.

The examiners commended the opportunities offered to students for co-creation in their research projects in many areas.

## Recommendations or Suggestions for Enhancement

The Examiners made recommendations for enhancement as part of their report. Detailed responses are available from the External Examiner team. Though most recommendations were specific to the provision under consideration and should be considered by the relevant programme team, there main themes to the recommendations received are as follows:

- Resources, Organisation and Management
  - Ensure that sufficient staffing is maintained, to support the programme and maintain minimum standards (teaching and support)
  - Ensure Examiners are provided with relevant information in a timely manner in order to support the programme
  - Ensures work is managed appropriately to support the function of the programme e.g. adequate time to mark, moderate and prepare for the Board of Examiners.
- Assessment strategy
  - Ensure the assessment load is fairly balanced for students and staff and consider areas in which further adaptation may be necessary. For example, better use of formative assessment, and reducing 'pinch' points.
- Marking, moderation and feedback
  - Extend/develop marking schemes to support clarity and consistency in marking processes, ensuring marks are justified and in line with sector expectations for the marks given.
  - Consider/address default scaling practices and ensure assessment is designed to provide appropriate test for achievement of learning outcomes and for stronger candidates to demonstrate extended learning.
  - Ensure that students are provided timely and consistent feedback on their work, outlining areas for development and areas of strength, including examinations and final year projects.
- Generative AI
  - Consider impact of generative AI for students as part of their programme of study including, where relevant, within their assessment.

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- Ensure that systems are suitably robust to prevent where possible, and identify where necessary, academic misconduct.

Several examiners expressed the wish to meet with students, or where limited meetings already took place, to broaden the number of students invited to meet the examiner.

## Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion

External Examiners were requested, where possible, to specifically comment on how the programme team may have considered Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) in the programme design and delivery. Detailed responses are available from the External Examiner team. An examiner highlighted the need to ensure that students understood EDI in the context of their work, for example potential hidden bias in data sets.

Most examiners that provided comment considered that the programme teams had considered EDI in the development of the programme and in the management of their students. Examiners noted the impact of large numbers of students for whom English was not their first language and the potential impact on programme delivery and student outcomes, should a student have an insufficient level of English to successfully engage with the programme.

It was noted that further work may be needed to ensure digital accessibility, for example ensuring material can be accessed using assistive technologies. Examiners for online programmes also highlighted the need for the College to provide adequate support for students where they are not campus-based in areas such as welfare or disability support.

## Additional Comments/Exit Report Comments

Examiners provided their thanks and praise to the programme teams for work undertaken in the previous year. Several examiners also took the opportunity to highlight the positive work that they had seen in relation to mitigating the impact on students of the COVID pandemic and the recent industrial action.

Examiners recommended to the College that there is due consideration of investments needed to support provision at Silwood Park, to prevent overloading of staff, and to ensure that generative AI was managed, monitored, and utilised appropriately.

Examiners noted that the College and individual programme teams needed to consider the role and workload of the external examiners. This should ensure that this was in line with expectations of the sector and that appropriately and adequately valued.

In the exit reports, the examiners noted improvements to the programme content, management and marking processes during their tenure.

## Recommendations for action

Recommendations for action, beyond that provided by the examiners, were made in the undergraduate summary report and are provided below for reference. On review of the postgraduate reports and the recommendations made by the examiners, no further specific recommendations are made.

Recommendation made in the undergraduate summary report:

1. Review nomination, approval and 'on-board' processes and timeline.
2. Develop and ensure distribution of information pack for prospective External Examiners that explains in basic detail: role and responsibilities, expected workload, terms and conditions including issues with conflicts of interest, and government mandated requirements for appointment.

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3. Review College processes and action to be taken where Examiners do not provide their annual report, or where responses to reports are not completed by programme teams.
4. Ensure that the expectations with regards to provision of programme information is met for all examiners, in line with [Key-information-for-external-examiners.pdf \(imperial.ac.uk\)](https://www.imperial.ac.uk/key-information-for-external-examiners.pdf).
5. Staff in areas in which the examiners commended new teaching or assessment practices, or communication/management/software initiatives are encouraged to disseminate these with the wider College community.
6. Consideration of whether the development and use of more standardised documentation and systems would provide an enhanced experience for examiners, without hindering development of new initiatives or improvements in process or increasing workload for staff.

## 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 overall quality and standards of its programme.