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Summary of Undergraduate 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 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. Examiners for clinical modules in the MBBS programme were requested to complete a streamlined report relating specifically to this provision. Where the questions are comparable, the data is provided in the relevant section of this summary report. Postgraduate taught provision will be reported on later in the academic year.

At the time of writing this report (January 2023), 91 reports had been submitted and 15 (8 FoM, 1 FoE, 4 FoNS, and 1 CLCC) remained outstanding. The respective departments have been advised and requested to send further reminders in addition to those sent from the External Examiner Team. 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.

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.

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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.

Several examiners noted that the process to nominate, appoint and 'onboard' for their role took a considerably period. It is difficult from the reports, or from the information available to the External Examiner team, to identify the specific parts of this process where the delay or delays occurred as these processes are managed by different areas of the College. It is also unclear if the timeline referred to commenced from the initial approach or the completion of the nomination form. Undergraduate examiners are required to follow the casual worker process including the Right to Work checks before they can commence work with the College. The External Examiner team are aware that the government mandated requirements of this process can take time to complete and can seem overly bureaucratic.

It has been noted by the External Examiners team that some nominees have been unclear of the exact nature of the role, or the requirements placed on the College as an employer. This has led to issues for examiners and delays with appointments.

Though those that attended the induction were mainly positive there were suggestions for improvement. This was mostly with regards the timing of the induction session, normally held in the Spring term, which they felt should have been early in the academic year. Noting this suggestion, the examiners were still being appointed after the inductions had been held and had to be provided a recording of the session. Examiners appointed late (after the commencement of the academic year) are unable to fulfil their full duties, as was stressed in their reports. All nominations should be made in good time, so that appointments and approval processes can take place before or soon after the beginning of the academic year.

Programme Information and General Administration

Whist 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, assessments briefs, exam papers, assessed work, mark sheets and feedback. Whilst reporting that overall, these issues had been addressed quickly by the department team, it had caused additional work at a time when pressures where already high.

Several examiners commented that they had not seen, nor knew how to access the definitive module documentation (module descriptors) to be able to make a judgement regarding the suitability of assessment in relation to the learning outcomes.

Some examiners expressed that they had not received sufficient information of their exact remit, such as particular modules or assessments they were expected to review. Several examiners also requested greater access to programme data such as classification trends and other comparative cohort data. Similar comments have been received and reported in previous reports.

Response to Last Year's Annual Report

Where the examiners received a direct response to their report, the majority (over 85%) 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, there was concern about potential grade inflation (see section regarding Board of Examiners) which had not appeared to have

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been fully addressed. Some examiners that reported receiving a formal response, 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. The examiners were mainly positive about the contents of the summary but felt that the timing of the correspondence should have been earlier in the academic year.

A significant proportion of the examiners reported that they had not received a response to their report for 2021/2022. Where the examiner team had received and provided this previously, it was resent. However, it should be noted the examiner team did not receive a formal response for almost a quarter of the reports received for the relevant reporting period (2021/2022). In the current year over half of the reports received to date and provided to programme teams are yet to be formally responded to. In a small number of cases, examiners reported receiving feedback during the next academic year directly from the programme team or noting actions that had been taken that reflected comments that they had made. All programme teams are requested to provide a formal response, as clearly shown in the template, and are reminded throughout the year where they remain outstanding. Part of the delay in providing the College summary report to the examiners was to increase the number of examiners that would receive department-level feedback.

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, and many continued to comment on the improvements following curriculum review. External Examiners agreed the programmes met Professional, Statutory, Regulatory Body (PSRB) and/or accreditation standards where relevant.

The examiners stated that there were transparency issues in some areas with regards to the learning outcomes that were being assessed within the programme and how the requirements of the programme are articulated to students. For example, they reported that they had not had the opportunity to view the module descriptors or coursework briefs.

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. The examiners noted that most programmes clearly developed skills needed without explicit reference within the documentation. For example, the skills were developed and tested in specific module(s) but not embedded across the programme.

The Examiners working on programmes within the Faculty of Engineering were most likely to comment positively with regards to embedding the understanding and management of sustainability within the curriculum. In other areas of College, the examiners did not consider that this was as clearly articulated within the programmes or that they did not consider that it was as relevant in certain disciplines.

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). It was interesting to note that in some areas the examiners considered that the programmes should reduce the

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proportion of formal examinations, whilst in others they considered that the use of formal examinations should be maintained or increased. The differences did not appear to be based on general fields of study, it seems that these are the individual views and experiences of the examiners. Where examiners were critical of examinations, they felt that these were testing rote learning without sufficient application, and in some cases the time granted to complete the paper was insufficient for the paper set. Some examiners felt that the use of formal examinations was important to demonstrate student learning, and to ensure that the work was solely that of the student, citing concerns about generative AI.

Where examiners were concerned about assessment load, this was often where modules contained multiple assessments and they made suggestions to reduce/change the assessments within modules to ensure that the workload for students, and staff, was appropriate and testing the relevant learning outcomes. Examiners encouraged programme teams in some areas to review the assessment strategy across the full programme (rather than modules in isolation) to improve the balance and variety of assessment, and to ensure that modules were of similar rigour. It was reported that students had reported to them that some electives were considered easier than others due to the type/amount of assessment included in comparison to others.

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. In the additional comments, it appears that examiners are not provided 'non-examination' briefs for consideration/comment.

It was concerning that a number of examiners responded "No" (9%) or "Mostly" (13%) with regards to receiving a response to their feedback on assessments. Whilst some qualified that their response related to single or a minor number of assessments that fell under their remit, or that they felt in the final version that their comments had been addressed, overall, the examiners considered the lack of response inappropriate.

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 prevented the examiner from being able to make a judgment regarding the accuracy/fairness of the marking process.

Marking, Moderation and Feedback

The section is one that has scored lowest overall in this and previous academic years. 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?	93 (94)	2 (6)	4 (0)
Did you see evidence of the full marking and moderation process? For example, evidence of second marking, internal moderation etc.	83 (92)	11 (5)	6 (2)

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Was the justification of marks clear, including where markers have differing initial outcomes?	81 (84)	13 (15)	6 (2)
Was the feedback to students clear and appropriate (identification of strengths and weaknesses, nomenclature in line with the marks awarded etc.)	74	21	4

The comments showed that there are issues in consistency and transparency with respect to marking, moderation, and student feedback. Though most provision was considered to meet the examiners' expectations, the negative comments highlighted that the examiners were not always clear whether 'moderation' had taken place, or the role held by those that had completed this. They felt that for some areas, project marking particularly, there was a lack of transparency in the marks allocation and referred to the lack of granularity in the marking schemes/rubrics to support markers and moderators in assessing the work fairly and ensuring consistency across work assessed by multiple markers. Examiners commented that in some cases they were unable to ascertain how the final mark had been agreed upon or the mechanisms that had/ would be utilised where there was a significant discrepancy between markers.

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. For example, where feedback related to work of a good academic standard, markers should still be encouraged to identify areas in which there could be further improvements in future, and where a piece of work was below standard, that these students are encouraged by highlighting where relevant, the better areas of their work and a platform to develop from.

The comments provided by examiners in this academic year reflect that which has been provided in previous academic years.

Clinical examination provision
The examiners provided positive feedback on the quality and management of the clinical examinations. It was noted that care needs to be taken to ensure that the space used for the examinations was fit for purpose, for example sufficient space for all participants but also to consider unexpected environmental factors (heat wave, flooding of examination space). They encouraged the team to ensure that contingencies and support was in place for the examination days but noted the calm and efficient ways these difficulties were overcome when they occurred.

Placement Learning and Collaborative Provision
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. It was noted that some placement institutions timelines had delayed results which impacted on student progression/awards.

Examiners commented that the documentation provided to them with regards to placement/study aboard could be improved with regards to clarity, and it was indicated that examiners were unclear if there was the opportunity for placement learning or if the Board of Examiners were considering collaborative provision.

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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 positive response rate for this section (7 questions) was the highest across the report, with all areas above 92%, with most over 95%.

Where the examiners were least satisfied, responding 'mostly', was as to whether the grade profiles were representative and in line with other institutions. 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 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 also noted that the change to the level 7 pass mark in some areas, to bring in this in line with other level 7 College provision, had impacted on the overall weighted average for these integrated master's programmes and that this should be kept under review.

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, some 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. Examiners requested additional data to be able to make fair comparisons/judgment on the provision at the College. Examples of their requests included year-on-year trend data or comparative data sets with other HEIs.

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."

97% 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."

98% 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 1 percentage point drop to the previous year's responses. This may be due to fewer reports being received in this period but will be kept under review.

Good or Innovative Practice

The Examiners provided a number of examples of practice that they considered to be good or innovative. The detailed responses are available from the External Examiner team. Examiners commended the project work across the College, and highlighted how this gave the students the

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opportunity to develop their individual interests and demonstrate their learning in a consolidated piece of work. The Examiners also commented positively on the provision of field work, placement or 'real world' links in the assessment practice and encouraged programme teams to retain/further develop these within the programmes.

The Examiners highlighted areas of teaching practice where multi-mode methods were utilised to deepen the experience of student of the material they were studying and ensuring that assessment methods were also suitably varied and designed to provide suitable academic challenge.

Examiners highlighted instances of good practice in providing academic feedback to students, ensuring that it was sufficiently detailed and provided clear justification for the marks awarded. Beyond the traditional methods, they reported that markers were annotating coursework and providing video recordings of feedback.

Recommendations or Suggestions for Enhancement

The Examiners made recommendations for enhancement as part of their report. The 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 were three main themes to the recommendations received:

- Marking, moderation and feedback
    - Extend/develop marking schemes to support clarity and consistency in marking processes
    - Reduce the marking burden by limiting the number of markers per script – for example using single marking and internal moderation for assessment (except final year projects)
    - Ensuring moderation is undertaken by suitably qualified and supported staff.
    - 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.
    - Ensure that the training for clinical examinations including calibration of marking/student outcomes across multiple assessment stations, where differences in approach could lead to inconsistent results.
- Resources
    - Ensure that sufficient staffing is maintained, particularly in areas which there is limited cover in the event of losing a particular member of staff for any length of time.
    - Ensure adequate provision of teaching spaces equipped with the relevant learning technologies are available for all learning and teaching activities.
    - Consider the use of, and implementation of one/fewer Learning Support Management system(s) for the management of assessment setting, completion and marking, and for supporting learning such as VLEs.[1]

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[1] NB notification on 30/01/2024 in the Learning and Teaching Newsletter of the Learning Management System Project, led by the Digital Education Platform Project group.

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- Generative AI
  - Consider the use of, and development of skills in, generative AI for students as part of their programme of study including, where relevant, within their assessment.
  - Ensure that systems are suitably robust to prevent where possible, and identify where necessary, academic misconduct.

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.

Most examiners did not express concerns with regards to the design and delivery of programmes, with a small number of examiners highlighting particularly good practice. Several examiners noted that they, and by extension the Board of Examiners, were not provided with comparative data to be able make any judgements whether a particular group(s) appeared to be disadvantaged or advantaged. It was noted that there are areas that are beyond the direct control of the programme teams which should be addressed at College level. This included access to assessment and support for those with disabilities or Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLDs) and consideration of specific financial constraints which may be exacerbated by the College's location.

Within the clinical examiner responses, it was particularly noted that those examining students needed to understand and take positive action to reduce the impact of any unconscious bias. It was noted the scenarios and actors hired to act as patients were diverse and that inclusivity had been built into the assessment.

Additional Comments/Exit Report Comments

Consistency was a key theme across several aspects of the examiners' reports. This related to the programme/module documentation provided to the examiners and students, details of marking and moderation, development of examination papers, feedback provided to students on their assessments, use of VLE in different modules. They explained that in most cases they had variable experiences across the provision that they were responsible for, and that differences in processes or software utilised provided a barrier to completing their role.

In their comments, examiners noted concerns with potential grade inflation, and its impact on their judgement of the maintenance of standards. It was interesting to note that whilst examiners were concerned with regards to grade inflation and encouraged programme teams to take positive action to suppress the classification outcomes to be in line with the expected norms across the sector, examiners also noted the predominately high calibre and resulting expected outstanding academic achievements of students on the programme. It is recommended that the College clearly outlines its expectations in the area to ensure that its position is understood by all relevant stakeholders, College staff, students, External Examiners and interested third parties such as accrediting or legislative bodies.

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.

In the exit report comments, examiners highlighted the changing needs and expectations of students. They noted the increasing pastoral and well-being support associated with cohorts that are

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more likely to be impacted by stress and anxiety. The examiners noted that this increased pressure on staff, at a time when they may also be experiencing similar personal difficulties. The outgoing examiners commended the dedication and enthusiasm of staff to deliver high quality teaching and learning opportunities to students and maintaining high standards through a sustained difficult period.

Recommendations for action

The following recommendations are made following the analysis of the reports, beyond those made by the External Examiners as reported in the sections above.

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.
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).
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.