

POSTGRADUATE EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORT 2020-21

Introduction

This report summarises feedback from reports relating to postgraduate taught provision in academic year 2020/2021 by External Examiners appointed to relevant programmes (MSc, MRes, MBA, GMPH and associated PgCert and PgDip programmes) 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.

This report is based on the 185 reports which had been received. In some cases, an External Examiner who is appointed to more than one programme has provided separate reports for each programme. Outstanding reports (18 individual examiners) have been referred to the respective Departments, who have been asked to send further reminders. For reference, reports are due within one month of the Board of Examiners, and so would normally be expected to have been received for the majority of appointments by the end of January 2022.

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

- Yes/always
- Most/usually
- No/never

Except where a simple yes/no/not applicable is required. In addition to the confidence statements at the end of the report an additional option of 'somewhat/in part' is provided. Each section then provides a free comments section for further information or justification of the response given.

2020-21

The academic year to which this report relates saw the second year of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is reassuring to note that the vast majority of externals, where they made specific reference to the College's response to the pandemic continued to be supportive of the measures that had been put in place to ensure the academic standards of the College were maintained.

Programme and Module information

The majority of externals reported that they had received all the programme and module information they needed to carry out their role. However, there were several comments that it would have been helpful to have had earlier access to material to support the assessment process, such as module descriptors, information on previous years exams and access to the papers. Several examiners commented that they would have liked longer to check draft exam papers.

Where material was being provided through a central site, such as through Teams, External Examiners were mainly positive however, it was noted that some areas provided a greater depth of material to others, within the same programme. Examiners also requested access to the student VLE.

In reviewing the comments from the External Examiners, it was clear that there were significant differences between them in the level of documentation or access which they desired. In all cases it was noted that programme teams were responsive to requests for additional information.

In terms of the content and structure of the degree programmes, all externals considered that the core/compulsory modules in the programmes delivered the stated learning outcomes and that the programme design was aligned with relevant subject benchmark statements and or expectations of Professional, Statutory Regulatory Bodies. Many very positive comments were received in response to the question on the programme being coherent and up-to-date, with evidence of links to cutting-edge research through the programmes.

Assessment

External Examiners continued to be supportive of the changes that were made to the normal assessment processes in the light of the Covid-19 pandemic. Comments include being impressed with the trialling of the timed remote assessments, that alternative assessments had been suitable replacements and that outcomes had not been negatively affected which mirrors the comments received in undergraduate reports. In addition, the examiners were positive about change that had to be made to programme fieldwork components and research projects, where necessary.

However, there also continues to be some negative comments from externals over the transparency of marking practices, a lack of clarity over the arrangements for second marking and moderation of marks, particularly where the first and second markers differ in the grade awarded by a significant amount

Several examiners also commented on the assessment load they saw within individual modules and across some programmes and the burden that this places on staff and students alike. They reported concerns from students in some cases of the timelessness of feedback, and were encouraging to programme teams to consider particularly how feedback from exams can be provided to students.

Exam Boards

All examiners reported that the Exam Boards were conducted appropriately and many complemented the smooth running of the Boards. 95% of examiners considered that the College procedures governing mitigating circumstances and academic misconduct had been appropriately applied.

Comments were received about high scores achieved by students. On the whole the examiners agreed that they were warranted but it was noted that there could be improvements to marking rubrics and assessment design to differentiate “excellent” students from “very good” students.

External Examiners commented on the classification and consideration of borderline candidates, noting the current differences in practice between regulations and from accepted variations of these in schemes of award. Whilst the comments were mainly positive, supporting the decisions made, there were some concerns raised which will need to be addressed at individual levels.

Other comments relating to the exam boards and recommendations made by external examiners in terms of overall recommendations will be taken forward by the Regulations and Policy Review Group as part of their continuing work and as part of the response to the NSS comments.

Overall Confidence Statements

External Examiners were asked whether they agreed with three overall confidence statements based on the requirements of the QAA’s Quality Code.

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 limited number of reports in which the External Examiner did not fully agree that their programmes met the above statements, they did find that these were mostly/usually met. There was one exemption of ‘somewhat’ in relation to enforced programme structure changes, which the students and examiner were aware of prior to commencement.