Imperial College London

Summary of Postgraduate Taught External Examiner Reports for Academic Year 2018-19

Introduction

This report summarises the feedback submitted by External Examiners for postgraduate taught programmes in the Faculties of Engineering, Natural Sciences and Medicine, as well as the Centre for Languages, Culture and Communication, the Centre for Higher Education, Research and Scholarship, and the Imperial College Business School.

The programmes lead to a range of qualification types including Master of Research (MRes), Master of Science (MSc), Master of Arts (MA), Postgraduate Diploma (PGDip), Postgraduate Certificate (PGCert), Master of Business Administration (MBA), Master of Public Health (MPH) and Master of Education (MEd).

At the time of writing this summary, a number of reports are outstanding. The Quality Assurance team have sent reminders for these and ask that individual Departments also chase any that are outstanding.

The report template asks a series of questions with either free text responses or a drop down with pre-set responses. Usually the options are *Yes/Always*, *Most/Usually*, *No/Never*, and *N/A*, although a few sections will have slightly different options.

Changes to Reporting Process

A new online portal has been implemented for External Examiner Reports as of the academic year 2018-19. The portal is accessible via all major web browsers (such as IE, Chrome and Firefox) and is also mobile enabled. The software is compatible with both Microsoft and Apple Devices, which had been identified as an issue with the previous MS Word template.

The new portal will allow for more in-depth analysis of the data arising from the reports than in previous years, and eventually enable the data to be viewed and analysed via data visualisation software such as Power BI.

Following the first round of reporting External Examiners have fed back some recommendations to improve the user interface, including:

1) Allowing respondents to view all questions within the report as an overview before starting to input their answers.
2) Improving ease of moving between sections in the report.
3) Providing a PDF copy of the completed report at the point of submission.
4) Allowing respondents to switch between devices when viewing and completing the report.

The Quality Assurance team will take forward these recommendations for the next round of reporting in summer and autumn 2020.

Regulatory Change in 2018-19

New *Mitigating Circumstances* and *Academic Misconduct* policies and procedures were introduced for the 2018-19 academic year. This was part of a wider review of the student casework procedures that had been completed for 2018-19, which included *Academic Appeals* and *Student Complaints*.

The changes to *Academic Misconduct* were to update procedures in line with sector changes. This included strengthening definitions around self-plagiarism and contract cheating, to provide greater clarity in the consideration of allegation, and to provide a greater range of potential sanctions for proven cases.

The amendments to the *Mitigating Circumstances* policy and procedure changed the way in which information was presented to the Board of Examiners, which has meant that there was historical information for claims considered under the previous policy as well as those submitted under the new procedures. In reflection as to how Boards have been supported in dealing with these changes, further support and guidance is being put in place.

Consideration of Reports

The Quality Assurance team rag-rates all areas of the External Examiner reports, including both qualitative and quantitative responses. This is used to formulate the thematic analysis of the reports presented in this summary. A College-level action plan arising from both undergraduate and postgraduate reports will be circulated and monitored by the Quality Assurance team during the next academic year.

Departments are sent each report relating to their programmes to ensure that there has been local consideration of the External Examiner's feedback, and the programme teams are asked to provide a response to any areas of concern identified.

Feedback from the individual reports will also be considered at Departmental and Faculty level as part of the College's Annual Monitoring Process, which usually runs over the spring and summer terms for postgraduate programmes. From this academic year student representatives will be asked to comment on the resulting actions plans.[1]

The External Examiners will be provided with the Departmental response to their individual report and the relevant College-level summary report (depending on whether they examine undergraduate or postgraduate programmes).

Analysis of External Examiner Reports

The following subsections will summarise the overarching themes and trends arising across the reports submitted by the External Examiners. Where individual concerns have been raised in relation to specific programmes, these will not be identified here but will be dealt with via the Departmental Annual Monitoring process and by the individual responses provided by the programme teams.

Appointment and Induction of New External Examiners

97% found the appointment process to be fit for purpose and 92% felt that the appointment was made in a timely manner. 83% were satisfied with the arrangements for the induction day and 86% were satisfied with the local inductions provided by their respective departments.

A few External Examiners noted that their appointment was made later in the academic year, and therefore they were not able to accommodate the induction session in their diaries. It is advised that all new External Examiners should be in post at the beginning of the academic year, in order that they are able to attend the inductions as well as to be included in the programme handbook and to review all assessment before this is released to the students.

[1] In view of the impact caused by COVID 19, the postgraduate annual monitoring process for 2019-20 will be subject to some amendment in terms of procedure and timescale, with details TBC.

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Provision of Programme and Module Information

87% of External Examiners received programme handbooks and specifications and 85% received syllabus or module descriptors including learning outcomes. 93% received details of the assessments. Overall 97% felt they had received sufficient information about the programmes and modules on order to fulfil their role.

Whilst External Examiners were supplied with a copy of the student handbook in their first year, this was not always resent in subsequent years. A few commented that this would have been useful to receive each year in order to identify any changes or confirm that everything remained the same.

Some External Examiners found that the way in which documents were provided was not user-friendly. Examples of this included files sent via new IT systems which the External Examiners were not able to access, and which required the admin teams to send by email instead, and large numbers of documents placed together into the same folder, which meant External Examiners had to sift through a lot of files to identify those which were relevant to their role.

It was advised that External Examiners receive some information about the other summative assessment contributing to modules on which they are attached, even if they are not responsible for those elements, in order that they can draw a complete picture of the module assessment.

Several External Examiners reported that some information was only made available to them at the exam boards, but which should have been provided earlier. This included the criteria for awarding Prizes, the criteria for degree classifications, copies of exam papers, or copies of the questions to be used for viva examinations.

It was also noted that a short overall summary of the programme be useful for the first year.

Programme and Curriculum Design

The majority of External Examiners concurred that the content of their programmes and modules corresponded well with the learning outcomes and covered a wide range of topics. Several respondents did note particular topics that could be considered for more coverage within the programme, or certain areas of the course that should be updated to reflect new developments in the sector, which the respective Departments will be asked to consider for the future.

Where applicable all External Examiners confirmed that the programmes to which they were appointed met the relevant subject benchmarks and was either already accredited or would be eligible for accreditation with the appropriate PSRBs. A few suggested aspects of the programme that could be enhanced to increase compliance with these standards.

Assessment Strategy

Most External Examiners reported that they were satisfied with the assessment used within their programmes, and in general the type and amount of assessment was found to be balanced across modules, although there were a few modules or programmes highlighted as having an excessive workload, either for the students undertaking the assessment and/or for the programme team in marking this, particularly on programmes where numbers are likely to increase in the coming years.

External Examiners praised courses where a range of assessment types were used, including written and MCQ examinations, oral and poster presentations, essays and dissertations, project work, vivas, grant writing exercises, TBL scratch cards, literature review and journal clubs. They also praised the policy of including second markers/examiners for written and oral examinations.

There were a few concerns about the ability of group work projects to fairly award marks to each member according to their own contribution, especially where this mark may be a significant part of the overall grade for a module. Suggestions to combat this included an individual mark for each member, based upon peer to peer reporting or an individual report or a viva at the end.

Some External Examiners reported an over-reliance on MCQs and recommended that these not be the primary mode of assessment or contribute to a substantial proportion of the final grade.

Finally, there were several reports of discrepancies between modules, for example, where students selecting different modules could be assessed very differently, with some having a range of assessment throughout and others relying on their performance in one exam.

Drafting of Assessments

93% of External Examiners believed the nature and level of the tasks they had reviewed as part of last year of assessments was appropriate. However, only 86% confirmed that they received all the necessary draft assessment to review, and/or that suitable arrangements were in place to consider their comments on these, and only 73% received sufficient feedback on the comments they had submitted (with about 12% receiving no feedback at all).

Some External Examiners reported that a proportion of the assessment was not presented to them prior to being undertaken by the students. In some cases, this was because they were appointed part way through the academic year and reiterates the need to have all in post at the start. Several advised that requests for review of assessments were sent very late with short turn-around times. This impacted both the External Examiner's own workload within their home institution and their ability to adequately review what they had been sent. They also queried if there was sufficient time for the Departments to act on any concerns raised.

Following on from this, a few External Examiners noted that issues they had raised with draft assessments had not been rectified before the assessment was undertaken, indicating that this was not always taken on board. As noted above, over 25% of External Examiners did not receive feedback confirming that their points had been actioned. In many of these cases the comments were minor, and the External Examiners felt that further discussion may not have been necessary, however it is good practice to ensure this is always provided and would help to ensure that areas of concern are not missed.

Marking and Moderation of Scripts

92% of External Examiners received a sufficient number and range of scripts for scrutiny. 85% found the general standard and consistency of the marking was appropriate, and 87% found evidence that assessment had been internally moderated. However nearly 30% reported that scripts were not always marked in a way that enabled reviewers to justify how the marks had been awarded.

External Examiners praised the widespread practice of second marking, although there were a number of cases where they were not able to find evidence that second marking had taken place by the annotation on the scripts. A substantial number also found that there was insufficient evidence of justification of marks awarded on scripts, in particular in cases where there had been a substantial divergence in the marks awarded by the first and second marker, and it was not clear that investigation and discussion had taken place to agree an appropriate mark, rather than simply averaging the two.

There were cases where marking and feedback was not provided with copies of marked assessments, or where completed assessments were not available at all. Some External Examiners

advised there was not sufficient time allocated to review completed scripts before the Exam Boards. Finally, it was also advised that there were a number of assessments where better breakdown of the differences in marking between grade boundaries would be beneficial in aiding all markers to complete their duties and ensure parity between markers.

Practical Examinations

100% of External Examiners felt that satisfactory arrangements had been made for practical exams where applicable, and 96% believed the general standard and consistency in marking of these was appropriate.

Oral Assessments Including Viva Voce Examinations

96% of External Examiners felt that satisfactory arrangements had been made for oral examinations where applicable, and 95% believe that the assessment of these was appropriate and consistent. Some were aware oral assessment had taken place but had not been given the opportunity to attend or review these.

With regards to viva voce examinations of borderline candidates, where these were used 95% believed that suitable arrangements were in place to conduct these, and 90% believed that the purpose of conducting these examinations and criteria for selecting candidates was made clear. There were some concerns that staff or students had not been properly briefed on the purpose of the vivas.

Assessment Process Marking and Moderation

The majority of External Examiners were satisfied with the marking criteria and model answers used on their programmes. It was noted that the quality of model answers could be varied, with some being very detailed and others less so.

Several External Examiners requested that marking schemes included greater guidance on the breakdown between marks (i.e. from 65% to 70% to 75%) and around grade boundaries. A few also advised that marks for examinations should be standardised to 100 marks / 100% overall, to aid students in approaching the assessments to know how much each section is worth when allocating their time.

External Examiners praised the prevalence of second marking across the assessments, although a few emphasised that this should be carried out without the second marker knowing the marks awarded by the first. Where marking involved moderation, several External Examiners were unclear as to how this had been handled.

Most External Examiners found that grade boundaries were set appropriately and applied consistently. A few did highlight that grades on their programmes tended to be high with larger numbers of distinctions, and Departments were advised to be wary of possible grade inflation. It was also recommended that grades should be rounded up to the nearest whole number, i.e. 65% rather than 64.55%.

Overall the vast majority of External Examiners concurred that the assessment processes measured students rigorously and fairly against the learning outcomes of the programme and in line with the policies and regulations set out by the College.

Programme Content Delivered by External Providers

With regards to placement activity delivered and or assessed by external institutions, 79% felt it was made clear in advance of the Exam Board that students had undertaken such content away from the

College. 88% believed the procedures for incorporating marks obtained by students at another institution were clear and applied consistently, but only 68% reported that this content was discussed at the Exam Boards with regards to progression/award decisions, overall value and consistency with regards to the programme(s) of study.

With regards to collaborative provision delivered and/or assessed by external institutions, 94% felt it was made clear in advance of the Exam Board that students had undertaken such content away from the College and 92% believed the procedures for incorporating marks obtained by students at another institution were clear and applied consistently. However only 75% reported that this content was discussed at the Exam Boards with regards to progression/award decisions, overall value and consistency with regards to the programme(s) of study.

The majority of External Examiners whose programmes included placement activity or collaborative provision connected to external institutions reported that students enjoyed undertaking this provision and felt it would be beneficial for their education and future careers. A couple of External Examiners where such activity was not already incorporated suggested that it might be something for the programme teams to consider. A few External Examiners raised concerns with specific placement providers which the respective Departments will be asked to investigate.

Exam Boards

99% of External Examiners were invited to attend the Exam Board meetings and 94% were able to do so. Of these, 94% felt the meeting was conducted satisfactorily, and 99% were satisfied with the recommendations made by the Board.

The majority of External Examiners concluded that arrangements for the classification of degrees were set at the appropriate level and applied consistently. There were several instances where a high proportion of students were achieving distinction level, and although in these cases it was not necessarily due to grade inflation, programme teams were advised to monitor the trend carefully. There were also a few concerns raised about the restrictions on awarding higher classifications where this might be warranted by the student's overall grade, but where this standard had not been achieved in every module, particularly in compulsory modules.

Where cases of mitigating circumstances or academic misconduct were involved, External Examiners generally believed that they had been considered in line with College procedures. However, a few did note that as mitigating circumstances had been handled by a separate committee, they were not always able to judge the individual outcomes, and this could pose a problem if the Board was asked to decide an outcome for a student's whole programme without knowing to which aspects a student's mitigating circumstances applied, or how severe they were.

Finally, a couple of External Examiners noted that attendance from the internal examiner pool was rather low, and that efforts should be made to ensure greater attendance in future. There were also a few reports of excessive time pressure either during the Exam Board meetings or in completing necessary work prior to these taking place, and those departments are advised to adjust the schedules slightly to account for this.

Academic Standards

External Examiners concurred that appropriate standards were set in relation to the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (specifically that programmes met the requirements for FHEQ level 7), and where relevant that national subject benchmarks and PSRB accrediting body requirements were also met.

All External Examiners agreed that, in their experience, the standards of student performance were comparable with and sometimes exceeded those of students on similar programmes or modules around the UK.

Most External Examiners found that academic standards and standards of student performance across modules and streams was comparable. There were a number of individual exceptions noted which the programme teams are asked to review. In many of these cases it was noted that this could be due to small cohorts on those particular modules or streams, which meant that the performance of individual students was more likely to affect the balance of results compared to larger cohorts and made it more difficult to compare these fairly.

Most External Examiners not in their first year of appointment reported that standards of student performance were comparable to this achieved by previous cohorts, and that where there were variations, these were almost always minor fluctuations which should be noted but were not particularly concerning at this time.

Overall Confidence

With regards to the statement: "*The degree awarding body is maintaining the threshold academic standards set for its awards in accordance with the FHEQ and relevant Subject Benchmarks Statements*" 98% of External Examiners replied "**Yes**" and 2% replied "**Mostly**".

With regards to the statement: "*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*" 97% of External Examiners replied "**Yes**" and 3% replied "**Mostly**".

With regards to the statement: "*The academic standards and the achievements of students are comparable with those in other degree awarding bodies of which you have experience*" 99% of External Examiners replied "**Yes**" and 1% replied "**Mostly**".

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this report, the following recommendations are advised for Departments to consider with regards to their postgraduate taught provision:

Appointment Process

- Ensure new External Examiners are appointed by the start of the academic year.

Programme Information

- Send programme handbooks to External Examiners for each year of their tenure so they can track any changes to the programme.
- Provide External Examiners with more statistics to help them evaluate changes in performance, i.e., between cohorts.

Assessment Setting

- Ensure that assessment is undertaken by a range of methods where possible. Where students may choose between different modules or streams, care should be taken to ensure that the amount and type of assessment is comparable between all options.

Marking and Moderation

- Ensure copies of both draft assessments and completed assessments are sent to External Examiners in good time so that these can be adequately reviewed.
- Ensure all model answers are in-depth and provide suitable guidance about the differences between marks, particularly at the grade boundaries.
- Consider ways to ensure a fair mark for each member of a group project based on their individual contribution.
- Monitor programmes with high numbers of distinctions carefully to ensure grade inflation does not occur.
- Ensure that all markers (first and second) provide sufficient justification on scripts to ensure any reviewers can see why marks were awarded. Where there is a substantial divergence between first and second marker, ensure that discussion takes place to arrive at a final mark, as opposed to an average of the two.

Feedback

- Provide more feedback to students about their individual exam performance.
- Ensure all External Examiners receive confirmation that their feedback has been taken in to account and confirm what changes have been made in relation to any concerns raised.

Placement Activity and Collaborative Provision

- Ensure all External Examiners are aware if any of the programmes or modules for which they are responsible is delivered at or in conjunction with external providers.

Resources and Support

- Ensure that students based away from the main campus (both permanently or on placement) have sufficient access to resources and feel part of the College community.
- Monitor staff-student numbers to ensure that students can access good levels of support and staff are not placed under significant pressure when marking assessments, particularly on programmes where cohort numbers are expected to increase in the coming years.

Conclusion

The College's programmes are currently undergoing significant curriculum review. All undergraduate and some postgraduate programmes have already completed curriculum review and the updated programmes have been implemented for new cohorts as of 2019-20. The reminder of our postgraduate taught provision is expected to completed curriculum review during this academic year and for the revised programmes to operate from 2020-21 onwards. As each new curriculum reviewed programme comes online, those cohorts will also be operating under our new *Single Set of Academic Regulations*, which replaces the separate Academic and Examination Regulations.

The Quality Assurance team will be working with our Departments and Faculties to assist with the implementation of these initiatives and will evaluate progress over the next academic year. The comments received from our External Examiners both formally through their reports and informally in discussion with programme teams was a key driver in the curriculum review process. Feedback from our External Examiners will continue to be sought as to whether the changes are proving effective and any recommendations to improve on these for future years.

As can be seen from the summaries provided within this report, there are a number of areas where the College will need to take further action to improve its postgraduate taught provision, but overall the College can be assured of the quality and standards of its programmes.