

Summary of External Examiner Reports relating to 2018/19

1 External Context

External examiners continue to play a key role in quality assurance. In the post-HERA environment their role has recently been specifically highlighted in terms of ensuring standards and the value of a degree over time. This includes reference in 'Degree Classification... Statement of Intent'¹ to the need for institutions to consider whether assessment criteria meet common sector reference points and are applied consistently by academic staff and external examiners. The Statement also poses the question of whether an institution is making use of Advance HE's external examiner professional development programme and subject-specific calibration activity, or providing alternative arrangements. Going forward the University may want to review its current practices, which could tie into the discussions around a new programme monitoring approach.

2. External Examiner Reports 2018/19

2.1 Overview

This paper presents a high-level overview of feedback provided in 269 (of 269 expected) annual reports submitted for 2018/19. It is positive to note that all expected reports for 2018/19 were submitted (compared to 259 out of 273 in 2017/18).

External examiner reports are responded to in detail by the relevant Academic Lead, with the Head of Department (or nominated Director of Education) taking an overview of all responses. Where an external examiner provides a negative response in one of the key areas the University response is overseen by Education Committee (see section 2.2 below)

The External Examiner report covers the following:

Section 1	Summary report on standards
Section 2	Role and quality of information provided
Section 3	Assessment and feedback process
Section 4	Progression and award board attendance
Section 5	Overview and Summary

2.2 Summary Report on Standards (Section 1)

Northumbria asks external examiners if in their view, the following statements can be confirmed:

- Section A: The threshold academic standards set for the awards are in accordance with the Frameworks for Higher Education qualifications and applicable benchmark standards.
- Section B: The assessment process measures student achievement rigorously and fairly against intended learning outcomes, and is conducted in line with the University's policies and regulations.
- Section C: The academic standards and the achievement of students are comparable with those in other UK education institutions of which you have experience.

Three negative responses in total were received in 2018/19, from three external examiners, compared to four negative responses from four examiners in 2017/18, and seven in 2016/17 from four examiners. Further detail can be found below in the Faculty responses included in Appendix 2:

¹ <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2019/degree-classification-soi.pdf>

- (i) ADSS: A 'No' response was received in response to Section B relating to the compensation of modules.

Response summary: In the consultation on proposed changes to ARTA, compensation is being considered for removal. All external examiners were sent the consultation proposals and invited to provide feedback.

- (ii) HLS: A 'No' response was received in response to Section C relating to low student achievement (at a partner).

Response summary: The programme (both home and partner occurrences) has now closed. The examiner did also note that staff had made great efforts in terms of 'care, patience and meticulous attention to feedback and encouragement' to address the issue.

- (iii) HLS: A 'No' response was received in response to Section C relating to the algorithm for determining final degree classifications, which the examiner felt was 'overly generous'.

Response summary: It was noted that the examiner raised the same issue in 2017/18. Since the report the University has consulted on a number of issues relating to the Assessment Regulations for Taught Awards (ARTA), including the algorithm. All examiners have been sent the consultation proposals and invited to provide feedback.

2.3 Summary Report for on Role, Quality of information and processes, assessment and feedback (Sections 2 and 3)

- Section 2 Examiner role and quality of information provided
Questions 1-5 cover induction and administrative aspects, and examiners are asked to select a response (A-E) based on the extent to which they agree or disagree with the question.
- Section 3 Assessment and feedback process
Questions 6-13 cover include feedback on moderation and marking standards. Examiners are asked to select a response (A-E) based on the extent to which they agree or disagree with the question.

Aggregated data from Sections 2 and 3 (questions 1 to 13) is provided below, with further detail provided in Appendix 1:

Table 1: Summary responses to Sections 2 and 3 of External Examiner report forms

A – Strongly agree	B – Mostly agree	C – Mostly disagree	D – Strongly disagree	E – Not Applicable	No response *
53.3%	17.7%	1.1%	0.3%	19.2%	8.3%

* "No response" includes: reports that were not required; and Bar Standards Board examiners in the Faculty of Business and Law who only answer Section 1.

The data relating to **section 2** confirms that the majority of external examiners feel they have been well-briefed and prepared for their role, and that they are receiving the required information in a useful and timely way. The most significant 'negative' responses relate to compliance with published timescales, which links to the comments for section 3 below.

There were several comments relating to induction, in particular the use of the webinar. Generally the webinar was received positively, but there were a number of comments relating to the

impersonal nature of this method. In the context of sector interest in the training of external examiners it is recommended that the University review its induction, although there is no suggestion that there is a compliance issue. Where a mentor had been assigned to new external examiners this was positively received.

Overall, the data in **section 3** is broadly in-line with 2017/18 and indicates that Northumbria continues to deliver assessment that is appropriate to level of study, that standards of marking are consistent and that feedback to students is effective. The area where there is least endorsement is around timing given for consideration of assessed work, and this is borne out by comments from externals relating to tight deadlines.

2.4 Progression and award board (PAB) attendance (Section 4)

This section covers consistency of application of the Regulations and attendance at examination boards. As only a small percentage of external examiners attend the PAB this section is not relevant for most, but the comments indicate that there is still a degree of uncertainty about what the requirement is here. Where externals had attended examination boards they confirmed that the regulations were applied consistently.

2.5 Overview and Summary (Section 5)

This section invites comments on a variety of issues, including research-rich and practice-based teaching, the development of employability attributes, innovation and good practice, quality of learning opportunities, performance at partner institutions and general comments/observations.

The comments indicate evidence of all the above. Comments relating to local issues are addressed by the relevant Academic Lead but overall, there was widespread praise for academic and professional support staff, for the guidance and assistance given for the role, and for the systems and provision of information. The majority found the moderation process straightforward, but the comments regarding timescales referred to above were reiterated in this section. There are also several references to the low level of student feedback (through module survey), which made it difficult for externals to comment. The University is aware of this issue and has introduced measures through the Survey Policy to improve response rates.

3. Recommendations

In view of developments in the current external environment and in the light of the data/comments in the reports the following is recommended:

- 3a** Review the external examiner process in the context of the current external environment, including induction, reporting and degree outcomes.
- 3b** Review the issues around external examiner involvement in examination boards, including the notion of a 'chief or lead' external, potentially focused on degree classification.

Appendix 1: Progression and Awards Board External Examiner Reports 2018/19 – Report Questions and Data Summary (Percentages)

* “No response” includes: reports that were not required; and Bar Standards Board examiners in the Faculty of Business and Law who only answer Section 1.

Question	Faculty	No response *	A - strongly agree	B - mostly agree	C - mostly disagree	D - strongly disagree	E - not applicable
Q01	I was advised about assessment procedures and regulations, and on the role of external examiner.						
	ADSS	0.0%	83.3%	16.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
	BL	21.1%	56.3%	21.1%	0.0%	0.0%	1.4%
	CENTRAL	0.0%	62.5%	25.0%	0.0%	0.0%	12.5%
	EE	3.3%	73.8%	19.7%	1.6%	0.0%	1.6%
	HLS	4.6%	66.7%	26.4%	1.1%	1.1%	0.0%
	Total	7.8%	68.4%	21.6%	0.7%	0.4%	1.1%
Q02	Briefings/information on assessment procedures and regulations, and on the duties of external examiner, has helped me in my role.						
	ADSS	0.0%	74.1%	20.4%	0.0%	0.0%	5.6%
	BL	21.1%	45.1%	28.2%	2.8%	0.0%	2.8%
	CENTRAL	0.0%	50.0%	37.5%	0.0%	0.0%	12.5%
	EE	3.3%	59.0%	32.8%	3.3%	0.0%	1.6%
	HLS	4.6%	58.6%	32.2%	1.1%	0.0%	3.4%
	Total	7.8%	57.8%	29.1%	1.8%	0.0%	3.5%
Q03	The timing given for consideration of assessed work complied with the indicated schedule.						
	ADSS	1.9%	64.8%	25.9%	3.7%	3.7%	0.0%
	BL	21.1%	43.7%	33.8%	1.4%	0.0%	0.0%
	CENTRAL	0.0%	62.5%	25.0%	0.0%	0.0%	12.5%
	EE	4.8%	46.8%	40.3%	3.2%	3.2%	1.6%
	HLS	4.6%	50.6%	39.1%	3.4%	2.3%	0.0%
	Total	8.2%	51.1%	35.1%	2.8%	2.1%	0.7%
Q04	I received sufficient information on programme/module structure, content, methods of assessment and assessment criteria.						
	ADSS	1.9%	87.0%	9.3%	1.9%	0.0%	0.0%
	BL	21.1%	56.3%	22.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
	CENTRAL	0.0%	62.5%	12.5%	12.5%	0.0%	12.5%
	EE	4.8%	66.1%	25.8%	1.6%	0.0%	1.6%
	HLS	4.6%	78.2%	14.9%	2.3%	0.0%	0.0%
	Total	8.2%	71.3%	18.1%	1.8%	0.0%	0.7%
Q05	I am satisfied that any issues raised in my last report are being addressed. (select n/a if this is your first report)						
	ADSS	1.9%	48.1%	20.4%	1.9%	0.0%	27.8%
	BL	21.1%	32.4%	9.9%	0.0%	0.0%	36.6%
	CENTRAL	0.0%	25.0%	50.0%	0.0%	0.0%	25.0%

Question	Faculty	No response *	A - strongly agree	B - mostly agree	C - mostly disagree	D - strongly disagree	E - not applicable
	EE	4.8%	43.5%	24.2%	3.2%	0.0%	24.2%
	HLS	4.6%	42.5%	13.8%	4.6%	0.0%	34.5%
	Total	8.2%	40.8%	17.4%	2.5%	0.0%	31.2%
Q06	I approved all summative assessment (assignments, examinations and referral) before issue to students.						
	ADSS	0.0%	81.5%	9.3%	1.9%	0.0%	7.4%
	BL	21.1%	56.3%	14.1%	0.0%	0.0%	8.5%
	CENTRAL	0.0%	75.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	25.0%
	EE	6.5%	58.1%	22.6%	6.5%	1.6%	4.8%
	HLS	4.6%	67.8%	11.5%	3.4%	1.1%	11.5%
	Total	8.2%	65.6%	13.8%	2.8%	0.7%	8.9%
Q07	Assessment tasks are appropriate to the level of study. They are stimulating and challenging, and enable students to demonstrate knowledge and skills.						
	ADSS	1.9%	83.3%	13.0%	1.9%	0.0%	0.0%
	BL	21.1%	69.0%	9.9%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
	CENTRAL	0.0%	62.5%	37.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
	EE	6.5%	66.1%	25.8%	0.0%	0.0%	1.6%
	HLS	4.6%	87.4%	8.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
	Total	8.5%	76.6%	14.2%	0.4%	0.0%	0.4%
Q08	The process of internal moderation was clearly evidenced.						
	ADSS	0.0%	83.3%	16.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
	BL	22.5%	56.3%	19.7%	1.4%	0.0%	0.0%
	CENTRAL	0.0%	62.5%	12.5%	12.5%	0.0%	12.5%
	EE	6.5%	61.3%	27.4%	1.6%	0.0%	3.2%
	HLS	4.6%	83.9%	10.3%	0.0%	1.1%	0.0%
	Total	8.5%	71.3%	17.7%	1.1%	0.4%	1.1%
Q09	The standard and consistency of marking were appropriate.						
	ADSS	0.0%	77.8%	22.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
	BL	21.1%	70.4%	8.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
	CENTRAL	0.0%	75.0%	12.5%	0.0%	0.0%	12.5%
	EE	6.5%	67.7%	24.2%	0.0%	0.0%	1.6%
	HLS	5.7%	71.3%	21.8%	0.0%	1.1%	0.0%
	Total	8.5%	71.6%	18.8%	0.0%	0.4%	0.7%
Q10	Assessment feedback provided to students is effective in enhancing their learning and supports their development, progression and attainment.						
	ADSS	0.0%	75.9%	24.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
	BL	21.1%	59.2%	18.3%	0.0%	0.0%	1.4%
	CENTRAL	0.0%	37.5%	37.5%	12.5%	0.0%	12.5%
	EE	6.5%	64.5%	27.4%	0.0%	0.0%	1.6%
	HLS	5.7%	69.0%	23.0%	1.1%	1.1%	0.0%
	Total	8.5%	66.0%	23.4%	0.7%	0.4%	1.1%
Q11	There was parity of standards for all Northumbria students across all delivery locations (<i>please select the option that reflects your overall opinion, and select n/a if not relevant</i>):						

Question	Faculty	No response *	A - strongly agree	B - mostly agree	C - mostly disagree	D - strongly disagree	E - not applicable
	a) collaborative students at partner institutions; b) collaborative students at UK partner institutions; c) Newcastle based students; d) Northumbria students at alternative campuses (eg London, Amsterdam).						
	ADSS	0.0%	14.8%	20.4%	0.0%	0.0%	64.8%
	BL	21.1%	32.4%	14.1%	0.0%	0.0%	32.4%
	CENTRAL	0.0%	0.0%	12.5%	0.0%	0.0%	87.5%
	EE	6.5%	24.2%	11.3%	0.0%	0.0%	58.1%
	HLS	4.6%	23.0%	10.3%	0.0%	0.0%	62.1%
	Total	8.2%	23.4%	13.5%	0.0%	0.0%	55.0%
Q12	Any specific requirements raised by professional bodies are being addressed. <i>(select n/a if not relevant)</i>						
	ADSS	1.9%	1.9%	3.7%	0.0%	0.0%	92.6%
	BL	23.9%	16.9%	1.4%	0.0%	0.0%	57.7%
	CENTRAL	0.0%	12.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	87.5%
	EE	6.5%	11.3%	3.2%	0.0%	0.0%	79.0%
	HLS	4.6%	25.3%	2.3%	0.0%	0.0%	67.8%
	Total	9.2%	15.2%	2.5%	0.0%	0.0%	73.0%
Q13	Where work based or practice learning is assessed, for example Degree Apprenticeships, there are suitable processes in place. <i>(select n/a if not relevant)</i>						
	ADSS	1.9%	7.4%	5.6%	0.0%	0.0%	85.2%
	BL	21.1%	7.0%	2.8%	0.0%	0.0%	69.0%
	CENTRAL	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
	EE	6.5%	4.8%	3.2%	0.0%	0.0%	85.5%
	HLS	4.6%	31.0%	9.2%	0.0%	0.0%	55.2%
	Total	8.5%	13.8%	5.3%	0.0%	0.0%	72.3%
Total		8.3%	53.3%	17.7%	1.1%	0.3%	19.2%

Key:

AD&SS Faculty of Arts, Design and Social Sciences
 B&L Faculty of Business and Law
 CENTRAL International Development/Northumbria Language Centre
 E&E Faculty of Engineering and Environment
 H&LS Faculty of Health and Life Sciences