

Summary of External Examiner Reports relating to 2019/20

1 External Context

External examiners assure the University that the quality and standards of its awards are secure and robust in terms of internal standards and external benchmarks, by ensuring that awards at the same level and in similar subjects are comparable with those in different higher education providers in the UK. They also ensure that the system of assessment is fair and is objectively operated in the determination of awards.

In December 2020 the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment (UKSCQA) published 'Protecting the value of UK degrees: Reviewing Progress one year on from the statement of intent'¹. This document outlines ongoing work including enhancing the comparability of qualifications by developing the external examiner system's training and calibration activity. As part of this work institutions are steered towards reflecting more on classification trends with the support of external examiners. This is reinforced by Advance HE's degree standards project², managed by the Office for Students, designed to improve the training and professional development of external examiners and reinforce their role as guardian of national standards. The future intention is to build on this work, establishing sector-wide standards of practice and further professionalise the external examiner system.

2 External Examiner Reports 2019/20

2.1 Overview

This paper presents an overview of feedback provided in 265 out of 270 expected annual reports submitted for 2019/20.

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

This report should be read in conjunction with the Faculty summary reports (Appendix 1).

2.2 Summary Report on Standards (Section 1)

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

¹ <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2020/protecting-the-value-degrees-progress-review.pdf#search=external%20examiners>

² <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/degree-standards-project#Purpose>

- 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.

One negative response was received in 2019/20, compared to three negative responses in 2018/19, and four in 2017/18. Further detail on the response can be found in Appendix 3 but in summary the negative response is in the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences and was received in response to Section C:

- This examiner had previously raised concerns relating to the algorithm for determining final degree classifications.
- They welcomed the proposed changes to the Assessment Regulations for Taught Awards, which all external examiners were invited to comment on in February 2020. They noted that if the proposals were adopted, this would address the concern fully.
- At the time they submitted the 2019/20 report, the outcome of the consultation and proposals was not yet known. The examiner therefore responded ‘No’ in order to query whether the proposals were adopted.

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 2.

Table 1: Summary responses to Sections 2 and 3 of External Examiner report forms (excluding not applicable or no response).

A – Strongly agree	B – Mostly agree	C – Mostly disagree	D – Strongly disagree
77.41%	20.86%	1.20%	0.53%

For Section 2 responses indicate a high level of satisfaction with training, guidance and administrative aspects of the role. Several comments were positive about the induction and initial training, particularly that it was made available throughout the year for those unable to attend synchronously, or as a refresher. System alerts to indicate when action was required by the external appeared to be working well, but several examiners mentioned that they had not seen an overall schedule of assessment.

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic was widely acknowledged in the responses across this section, with positive responses overall in terms of alternative measures and emergency regulations, and keeping external examiners informed. Outcomes for students were judged to be well-considered, fair and in line with the emergency regulations. Several examiners commented on the range of assessment tasks despite the challenging circumstances.

Three question areas scored less than 80% on 'strongly agree': internal moderation; assessment feedback to students; and parity between delivery to different partners and campuses.

On internal moderation, the comments reflect that this was carried out but to a varying standard, for example, comments made by the internal moderator were generic and not analytical.

On assessment feedback the variation in the amount of feedback given was noted several times. One specific suggestion was to undertake more work with students to understand how feedback was accessed and used.

In relation to partners/campuses the process was followed, although one comment made reference to inconsistency in the application of the marking rubric. Several comments noted disparity between the performance of Newcastle-based students and those at overseas partner institutions. One comment related to the issue of judging parity on a programme taught in Hong Kong, given that special measures had already been made because of the rioting there, and because of the different timing of Covid-19 lockdown. Several examiners commented that they were unsure where the students were studying from the samples they moderated. There was no concern raised about standards between Newcastle and the London Campus.

2.4 Programme award board (PAB) attendance (Section 4)

This section covers consistency of application of the Regulations and attendance at examination boards. Comments are very similar to last year in that there continues to be confusion for some examiners about examination board attendance. It is clear from the comments that practice varies. One external comments on the usefulness of attending a pre-board, another states that they have not been invited to an examination board. Where externals attend boards it's not clear that they always understand their role to be regulatory rather than subject focused. There was one comment expressing concern over the 'by exception' approach taken by the Board. For examiners who did attend the PAB the regulations were found to have been applied fairly and consistently, despite the challenges of Covid-19, with appropriate use of discretion.

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 overall picture is primarily one of strong support. Academic and professional support staff were commended by many examiners for the management of modules and programmes, support to students and responses to comments or queries. The comments often reference innovative changes and good practice, particularly in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. On the negative side there were comments about difficulties with the e-Vision system for accessing information (although these are counter-balanced by others who found the system fit for purpose). In line with feedback in previous sections there were some concerns about not being able to see an overview of individual modules and their context within programmes, and one noted that access to historical data on module performance would be useful.

2.6 Future Developments

Some of the comments and concerns raised will be addressed by the revised Academic Regulations for Northumbria Awards (ARTA) approved in September 2020, and the new External Examiner policy will commence next academic year. The latter policy should particularly address issues around examination boards and visibility of programme and module data. A new annual report form will also be introduced which requires responses to be more narrative and analytical.

3 Recommendations

Education Committee is asked to:

- i) Endorse this report, and recommend its approval to Academic Board.
- ii) Approve Faculty actions in response to one external examiner being unable to fully confirm statements in the annual summary report on standards.

Appendix 2: Progression and Awards Board External Examiner Reports 2019/20 – Report Questions and Data Summary (Percentages, excluding not applicable or no response)

Question	Faculty	A - strongly agree	B - mostly agree	C - mostly disagree	D - strongly disagree
Q01	I was advised about assessment procedures and regulations, and on the role of external examiner.				
	ADSS	86.00%	14.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	BL	80.33%	19.67%	0.00%	0.00%
	CENTRAL	70.00%	30.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	EE	75.00%	21.67%	1.67%	1.67%
	HLS	87.18%	10.26%	1.28%	1.28%
	Total	81.85%	16.60%	0.77%	0.77%
Q02	Briefings/information on assessment procedures and regulations, and on the duties of external examiner, has helped me in my role.				
	ADSS	76.00%	22.00%	2.00%	0.00%
	BL	68.85%	26.23%	4.92%	0.00%
	CENTRAL	55.56%	33.33%	11.11%	0.00%
	EE	62.71%	32.20%	3.39%	1.69%
	HLS	76.92%	17.95%	2.56%	2.56%
	Total	70.82%	24.51%	3.50%	1.17%
Q03	The timing given for consideration of assessed work complied with the indicated schedule.				
	ADSS	64.00%	36.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	BL	67.80%	30.51%	1.69%	0.00%
	CENTRAL	70.00%	30.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	EE	54.24%	44.07%	0.00%	1.69%
	HLS	65.38%	28.21%	3.85%	2.56%
	Total	63.28%	33.98%	1.56%	1.17%
Q04	I received sufficient information on programme/module structure, content, methods of assessment and assessment criteria.				
	ADSS	83.67%	14.29%	2.04%	0.00%
	BL	72.13%	24.59%	1.64%	1.64%
	CENTRAL	60.00%	40.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	EE	73.33%	26.67%	0.00%	0.00%
	HLS	82.05%	15.38%	1.28%	1.28%
	Total	77.13%	20.93%	1.16%	0.78%
Q05	I am satisfied that any issues raised in my last report are being addressed. <i>(select n/a if this is your first report)</i>				
	ADSS	87.88%	12.12%	0.00%	0.00%
	BL	76.32%	23.68%	0.00%	0.00%
	CENTRAL	60.00%	40.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	EE	59.46%	40.54%	0.00%	0.00%
	HLS	86.54%	9.62%	1.92%	1.92%
	Total	77.58%	21.21%	0.61%	0.61%

Question	Faculty	A - strongly agree	B - mostly agree	C - mostly disagree	D - strongly disagree
Q06	I approved all summative assessment (assignments, examinations and referral) before issue to students.				
	ADSS	85.71%	12.24%	0.00%	2.04%
	BL	81.67%	15.00%	3.33%	0.00%
	CENTRAL	66.67%	33.33%	0.00%	0.00%
	EE	86.79%	13.21%	0.00%	0.00%
	HLS	78.38%	17.57%	4.05%	0.00%
	Total	82.04%	15.51%	2.04%	0.41%
Q07	Assessment tasks are appropriate to the level of study. They are stimulating and challenging, and enable students to demonstrate knowledge and skills.				
	ADSS	90.00%	10.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	BL	86.89%	13.11%	0.00%	0.00%
	CENTRAL	90.00%	10.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	EE	83.33%	16.67%	0.00%	0.00%
	HLS	87.34%	12.66%	0.00%	0.00%
	Total	86.92%	13.08%	0.00%	0.00%
Q08	The process of internal moderation was clearly evidenced.				
	ADSS	91.84%	8.16%	0.00%	0.00%
	BL	70.49%	27.87%	0.00%	1.64%
	CENTRAL	88.89%	11.11%	0.00%	0.00%
	EE	65.00%	33.33%	1.67%	0.00%
	HLS	82.28%	15.19%	2.53%	0.00%
	Total	77.52%	20.93%	1.16%	0.39%
Q09	The standard and consistency of marking were appropriate.				
	ADSS	84.00%	16.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	BL	80.00%	20.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	CENTRAL	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	EE	80.00%	20.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	HLS	82.28%	16.46%	1.27%	0.00%
	Total	82.17%	17.44%	0.39%	0.00%
Q10	Assessment feedback provided to students is effective in enhancing their learning and supports their development, progression and attainment.				
	ADSS	88.00%	12.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	BL	68.85%	29.51%	0.00%	1.64%
	CENTRAL	66.67%	33.33%	0.00%	0.00%
	EE	63.33%	36.67%	0.00%	0.00%
	HLS	76.62%	22.08%	1.30%	0.00%
	Total	73.54%	25.68%	0.39%	0.39%
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>): a) collaborative students at partner institutions; b) collaborative students at UK partner institutions; c) Newcastle based students;				

Question	Faculty	A - strongly agree	B - mostly agree	C - mostly disagree	D - strongly disagree
	d) Northumbria students at alternative campuses (eg London, Amsterdam).				
	ADSS	42.86%	57.14%	0.00%	0.00%
	BL	67.65%	29.41%	2.94%	0.00%
	CENTRAL	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	EE	70.59%	23.53%	5.88%	0.00%
	HLS	85.19%	14.81%	0.00%	0.00%
	Total	70.21%	27.66%	2.13%	0.00%
Q12	Any specific requirements raised by professional bodies are being addressed. <i>(select n/a if not relevant)</i>				
	ADSS	50.00%	50.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	BL	90.00%	10.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	CENTRAL	77.78%	22.22%	0.00%	0.00%
	EE	92.31%	3.85%	3.85%	0.00%
	HLS	50.00%	50.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	Total	87.23%	10.64%	2.13%	0.00%
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	77.78%	22.22%	0.00%	0.00%
	BL	80.00%	20.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	CENTRAL	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	EE	92.00%	8.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	HLS	77.78%	22.22%	0.00%	0.00%
	Total	89.13%	10.87%	0.00%	0.00%
Total		77.41%	20.86%	1.20%	0.53%

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