

## Overview of Reports

In May 2018 a new online portal hosted on eVision was launched, enabling examiners to submit their reports online. The portal enables academic leads to provide a response on the same online form and for this to be departmentally approved before being made available to the examiner.

This paper presents an overview of feedback provided in 259 out of 273 annual reports submitted for 2017/18. 14 annual reports are outstanding. Automatic reminders are sent via the portal, and after three months Academic Registry's Governance and Enhancement team contact the examiner if the report is still outstanding.

## Summary of Data from External Examiner Report Forms

The external examiner report form largely consists of a series of affirmative statements with which examiners are invited to agree or disagree. Section 2 covers the examiner's role and the information provided to them (questions 1 to 5), and section 3 (questions 6 to 13) covers assessment and feedback processes. As shown in Table 1, the aggregated data indicates that over 83% of external examiners strongly or mostly agree with all questions, with fewer than 2% mostly or strongly disagreeing with them. The remainder indicated the question was not applicable or gave no response. This strongly suggests that external examiner induction and support is robust and that assessment processes are effective and efficient overall.

The 'no response' rate averaged at 6% across all questions. This includes examiners whose report was not required and a number of Bar Standards Board examiners in the Faculty of Business and Law who only answer Section 1.

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

| <b>A<br/>Strongly<br/>agree</b> | <b>B – Mostly<br/>agree</b> | <b>C Mostly<br/>disagree</b> | <b>D<br/>Strongly<br/>disagree</b> | <b>E – Not<br/>Applicable</b> | <b>No<br/>response</b> |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------|
| 54.8%                           | 18.8%                       | 1.5%                         | 0.4%                               | 18.4%                         | 6%                     |

Disaggregated data by question and faculty is set out in Appendix 1 and is summarised below. Regarding section 2 on the external examiner's role:

- Over 90% of examiners strongly or mostly agreed that they had been given sufficient advice and guidance on assessment procedures and the role of the external examiner, and that this had helped them in their role. None strongly disagreed (Q.1 & 2).
- 91.8% strongly or mostly agreed that they had been given sufficient information about programmes, modules, assessments and criteria, whereas 2.2% mostly or strongly disagreed (Q.4).
- In 6.4% of cases, examiners noted that timelines for their consideration of assessed work had not been followed (Q.3).
- 3.4% of examiners disagreed that issues raised in their last report were being addressed (Q.5).

Similarly, section 3 on assessment and feedback processes shows excellent practice overall, with isolated reports indicating significant room for improvement.

- 4.8% disagreed with the statement that they had approved all assessments before issue to students, though this may be partly attributable to examiners joining mid-year (Q.6).
- 94% mostly or strongly agreed that assessment was stimulating, challenging and appropriate to level of study. 0.4% mostly disagreed (only in relation to Engineering and Environment), and none strongly disagreed (Q.7).
- About 93% strongly or mostly agreed that the process of internal moderation was clearly evidenced and that the standard and consistency of marking were appropriate. Around 1.5% disagreed (Q. 8 & 9).
- 92.2% strongly or mostly agreed that assessment feedback provided to students is effective in enhancing their learning. 0.7% mostly disagreed (only in relation to Health and Life Sciences), and none strongly disagreed (Q. 10).
- 1.5% strongly or mostly disagreed that there was parity of standards for all Northumbria students across all delivery locations. This was deemed not applicable in 55.8% of cases (Q.11).
- No examiner pointed out that specific requirements raised by professional bodies were not being addressed. This was deemed not relevant in 74% of cases (Q. 12)
- No examiner disagreed that suitable processes were in place where work-based or practice learning is assessed, for example Degree Apprenticeships. This was judged to be inapplicable in 69.5% of cases (Q. 13)

This data shows that the highest level of examiner dissatisfaction was around timelines for the consideration of assessed work (6.4% on Q.3). This issue has been addressed during the 2018-19 academic year. The online eVision assessment task portal has been further enhanced to facilitate this activity and avoid some of the issues experienced in previous years. Institutional deadlines by which assessment tasks should be uploaded online and internally moderated have been agreed, before release to external examiners when relevant. Given the multiple intakes and diverse delivery across Northumbria, it is unavoidable that some tasks will continue to be assigned and released to examiners throughout an academic year. However, a large proportion can be expected in line with the deadlines below, as agreed for both first sit and resits, respectively.

Semester One and Yearlong Semester One Assessment Tasks: Friday, 6<sup>th</sup> September 2019

Semester Two, Yearlong Semester Two and Semester Three Tasks: Friday, 6<sup>th</sup> December 2019

### **Summary Report on Standards**

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.

Four negative responses in total were received in 2017-18, from four separate external examiners, compared to seven negative responses from four examiners 2016/17, and ten in

2015-16 from nine examiners. This shows a welcome downward trend. Three of the four responses related to University-level processes beyond the control of the departments concerned. The fourth related to departmental assessment and moderation processes, which were comprehensively addressed in a four-point action plan with an update provided to Academic Registry in May 2019.

Action planning to address issues identified in external examiner reports is undertaken at the level most appropriate to their specific nature. University-level issues are also identified each year. For example, differential attainment between home and international students was highlighted in both the 2015-16 and 2016-17 summary reports. Other issues raised can be broadly classified as in the realm of 'good honours'. For example, in 2015-16, one external examiner highlighted that the University's decision to change the classification algorithm to exclude the mark for the lowest scoring 20 credits meant that students could graduate from Northumbria with a first class degree even if they had effectively failed the significant academic module in their final year. Another issue identified in 2016-17 was condoning arrangements and regulations around borderlines that were both deemed overly generous. Both these issues were raised again in 2017-18, as noted below.

- (i) *ADSS: A 'No' response was received in response to Section C relating to condoning arrangements. The examiner commented as follows:*

'As last year, I remain very concerned about the highly generous condoning arrangements – I do not accept that a student who has only achieved a mark of 30 has met the learning outcomes of the programme. Condoning arrangements are often a focus of QAA review so I urge the University to reflect on the current regulations, which run the risk of devaluing the degree and damaging institutional reputation, especially with industry.'

- (ii) *EE: A 'No' response was received in response to Section C relating to calculation of degree classifications. The examiner commented as follows:*

'I understand degree classifications are made based on marks from the best 100 credits taken by students in their final year, not the full 120 credits. This is out of line with practice at all other institutions (5 in the UK) I am familiar with and means degrees at Northumbria are likely to require lower abilities for a given class than elsewhere. Discussion at the exam board suggested this issue is being looked and may be changed. I strongly advise this.'

- (iii) *HLS: A 'No' response was received in response to Section C relating to calculation of degree classifications. The examiner noted as follows:*

'The algorithm for determining final degree classifications used at Northumbria seems to be overly generous, in comparison with all other UK higher education institutions I have encountered; I fear this will lead to 'grade inflation'. In my visit, I perceived that academic staff also lack confidence in the algorithm, feeling that some students are being awarded classifications that misrepresent their overall academic abilities.'

- (iv) *HLS: A 'No' response was received in response to Section B relating to the marking, moderation and feedback processes within the department.*

Academic Registry collates updates to action plans to be reported to the final Education Committee of the year, and these were duly received regarding all four of the examiner reports above. Under point (i), the Head of Department was reported to be in correspondence with the External Examiner. As previously noted, an action plan was completed for point (iv). In other cases, programme leaders referred to the University's involvement in a UK-wide review

of good honours across the sector and to this summary report as a conduit for highlighting the external examiner's concerns.

In 2018 the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment (UKSCQA), a co-regulatory body, launched a UK-wide project looking at the comparability of degree standards and grade inflation in collaboration with Universities UK, Guild HE and the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). Consultation on the document entitled *Degree Classification. Transparent, Consistent and Fair Academic Standards* closed on 8<sup>th</sup> February 2019. In May 2019 the project published a *Statement of Intent* requiring providers to publish a degree outcomes statement articulating the results of an internal institutional review in the course of 2019-20. This should include, among others, analysis of whether assessment criteria meet common sector reference points and are applied consistently by academic staff and external examiners, and whether the rationale for degree algorithm(s) is clear and publicly accessible.

Looking forward to external examiner reports for 2018-19 and beyond, Academic Registry is reviewing how best to highlight and disseminate good practice, address areas for improvement in an efficient and timely way, and use evidence of impact for purposes of institutional TEF.

## Appendix 1: Progression and Awards Board External Examiner Reports 2017/18 – Report Questions and Data Summary

Table Showing Data by Percentages

|     | 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  | 3.4%          | 78.0%              | 16.9%            | 0.0%                | 0.0%                  | 1.7%               |
|     | BL  | 16.9%         | 61.0%              | 22.0%            | 0.0%                | 0.0%                  | 0.0%               |
|     | CENTRAL   | 0.0%          | 75.0%              | 0.0%             | 0.0%                | 0.0%                  | 25.0%              |
|     | EE  | 0.0%          | 74.6%              | 25.4%            | 0.0%                | 0.0%                  | 0.0%               |
|     | HLS   | 3.4%          | 68.2%              | 26.1%            | 2.3%                | 0.0%                  | 0.0%               |
|     | <b>Total</b>  | <b>5.6%</b>   | <b>70.3%</b>       | <b>22.7%</b>     | <b>0.7%</b>         | <b>0.0%</b>           | <b>0.7%</b>        |
| Q02 | Briefings/information on assessment procedures and regulations, and on the duties of external examiner, has helped me in my role. |               |                    |                  |                     |                       |                    |
|     | ADSS  | 3.4%          | 64.4%              | 28.8%            | 1.7%                | 0.0%                  | 1.7%               |
|     | BL  | 16.9%         | 49.2%              | 27.1%            | 1.7%                | 0.0%                  | 5.1%               |
|     | CENTRAL   | 0.0%          | 75.0%              | 0.0%             | 0.0%                | 0.0%                  | 25.0%              |
|     | EE  | 0.0%          | 55.9%              | 39.0%            | 1.7%                | 0.0%                  | 3.4%               |
|     | HLS   | 3.4%          | 65.9%              | 27.3%            | 3.4%                | 0.0%                  | 0.0%               |
|     | <b>Total</b>  | <b>5.6%</b>   | <b>59.9%</b>       | <b>29.7%</b>     | <b>2.2%</b>         | <b>0.0%</b>           | <b>2.6%</b>        |
| Q03 | The timing given for consideration of assessed work complied with the indicated schedule.   |               |                    |                  |                     |                       |                    |
|     | ADSS  | 3.4%          | 61.0%              | 28.8%            | 5.1%                | 1.7%                  | 0.0%               |
|     | BL  | 16.9%         | 42.4%              | 32.2%            | 5.1%                | 1.7%                  | 1.7%               |
|     | CENTRAL   | 0.0%          | 100.0%             | 0.0%             | 0.0%                | 0.0%                  | 0.0%               |
|     | EE  | 0.0%          | 40.7%              | 49.2%            | 6.8%                | 3.4%                  | 0.0%               |
|     | HLS   | 3.4%          | 56.8%              | 36.4%            | 2.3%                | 1.1%                  | 0.0%               |
|     | <b>Total</b>  | <b>5.6%</b>   | <b>51.7%</b>       | <b>36.1%</b>     | <b>4.5%</b>         | <b>1.9%</b>           | <b>0.4%</b>        |
| Q04 | I received sufficient information on programme/module structure, content, methods of assessment and assessment criteria.          |               |                    |                  |                     |                       |                    |
|     | ADSS  | 3.4%          | 83.1%              | 13.6%            | 0.0%                | 0.0%                  | 0.0%               |
|     | BL  | 16.9%         | 57.6%              | 23.7%            | 1.7%                | 0.0%                  | 0.0%               |
|     | CENTRAL   | 0.0%          | 100.0%             | 0.0%             | 0.0%                | 0.0%                  | 0.0%               |
|     | EE  | 0.0%          | 59.3%              | 37.3%            | 3.4%                | 0.0%                  | 0.0%               |
|     | HLS   | 4.5%          | 71.6%              | 20.5%            | 1.1%                | 2.3%                  | 0.0%               |
|     | <b>Total</b>  | <b>5.9%</b>   | <b>68.8%</b>       | <b>23.0%</b>     | <b>1.5%</b>         | <b>0.7%</b>           | <b>0.0%</b>        |
| 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  | 3.4%          | 55.9%              | 20.3%            | 0.0%                | 0.0%                  | 20.3%              |
|     | BL  | 16.9%         | 39.0%              | 13.6%            | 1.7%                | 0.0%                  | 28.8%              |
|     | CENTRAL   | 0.0%          | 0.0%               | 25.0%            | 0.0%                | 0.0%                  | 75.0%              |
|     | EE  | 0.0%          | 50.8%              | 16.9%            | 5.1%                | 1.7%                  | 25.4%              |
|     | HLS   | 3.4%          | 45.5%              | 14.8%            | 4.5%                | 0.0%                  | 31.8%              |
|     | <b>Total</b>  | <b>5.6%</b>   | <b>46.8%</b>       | <b>16.4%</b>     | <b>3.0%</b>         | <b>0.4%</b>           | <b>27.9%</b>       |

|     | Faculty  | (no response) | A - strongly agree | B - mostly agree | C - mostly disagree | D - strongly disagree | E - not applicable |
|-----|--|---------------|--------------------|------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|
| Q06 | I approved all summative assessment (assignments, examinations and referral) before issue to students.   |               |                    |                  |                     |                       |                    |
|     | ADSS   | 3.4%          | 76.3%              | 6.8%             | 0.0%                | 1.7%                  | 11.9%              |
|     | BL   | 16.9%         | 57.6%              | 16.9%            | 3.4%                | 1.7%                  | 3.4%               |
|     | CENTRAL  | 0.0%          | 50.0%              | 25.0%            | 0.0%                | 0.0%                  | 25.0%              |
|     | EE   | 0.0%          | 59.3%              | 28.8%            | 8.5%                | 1.7%                  | 1.7%               |
|     | HLS  | 3.4%          | 67.0%              | 18.2%            | 2.3%                | 1.1%                  | 8.0%               |
|     | <b>Total</b>   | <b>5.6%</b>   | <b>65.1%</b>       | <b>17.8%</b>     | <b>3.3%</b>         | <b>1.5%</b>           | <b>6.7%</b>        |
| Q07 | Assessment tasks are appropriate to the level of study. They are stimulating and challenging, and enable students to demonstrate knowledge and skills.   |               |                    |                  |                     |                       |                    |
|     | ADSS   | 3.4%          | 78.0%              | 18.6%            | 0.0%                | 0.0%                  | 0.0%               |
|     | BL   | 16.9%         | 72.9%              | 10.2%            | 0.0%                | 0.0%                  | 0.0%               |
|     | CENTRAL  | 0.0%          | 100.0%             | 0.0%             | 0.0%                | 0.0%                  | 0.0%               |
|     | EE   | 0.0%          | 78.0%              | 20.3%            | 1.7%                | 0.0%                  | 0.0%               |
|     | HLS  | 3.4%          | 85.2%              | 11.4%            | 0.0%                | 0.0%                  | 0.0%               |
|     | <b>Total</b>   | <b>5.6%</b>   | <b>79.6%</b>       | <b>14.5%</b>     | <b>0.4%</b>         | <b>0.0%</b>           | <b>0.0%</b>        |
| Q08 | The process of internal moderation was clearly evidenced.  |               |                    |                  |                     |                       |                    |
|     | ADSS   | 3.4%          | 81.4%              | 15.3%            | 0.0%                | 0.0%                  | 0.0%               |
|     | BL   | 16.9%         | 67.8%              | 13.6%            | 1.7%                | 0.0%                  | 0.0%               |
|     | CENTRAL  | 0.0%          | 100.0%             | 0.0%             | 0.0%                | 0.0%                  | 0.0%               |
|     | EE   | 0.0%          | 64.4%              | 33.9%            | 1.7%                | 0.0%                  | 0.0%               |
|     | HLS  | 3.4%          | 76.1%              | 18.2%            | 2.3%                | 0.0%                  | 0.0%               |
|     | <b>Total</b>   | <b>5.6%</b>   | <b>73.2%</b>       | <b>19.7%</b>     | <b>1.5%</b>         | <b>0.0%</b>           | <b>0.0%</b>        |
| Q09 | The standard and consistency of marking were appropriate.  |               |                    |                  |                     |                       |                    |
|     | ADSS   | 3.4%          | 79.7%              | 16.9%            | 0.0%                | 0.0%                  | 0.0%               |
|     | BL   | 16.9%         | 64.4%              | 16.9%            | 0.0%                | 1.7%                  | 0.0%               |
|     | CENTRAL  | 0.0%          | 75.0%              | 25.0%            | 0.0%                | 0.0%                  | 0.0%               |
|     | EE   | 0.0%          | 66.1%              | 32.2%            | 1.7%                | 0.0%                  | 0.0%               |
|     | HLS  | 3.4%          | 78.4%              | 15.9%            | 1.1%                | 1.1%                  | 0.0%               |
|     | <b>Total</b>   | <b>5.6%</b>   | <b>72.9%</b>       | <b>20.1%</b>     | <b>0.7%</b>         | <b>0.7%</b>           | <b>0.0%</b>        |
| Q10 | Assessment feedback provided to students is effective in enhancing their learning and supports their development, progression and attainment.  |               |                    |                  |                     |                       |                    |
|     | ADSS   | 3.4%          | 76.3%              | 20.3%            | 0.0%                | 0.0%                  | 0.0%               |
|     | BL   | 16.9%         | 57.6%              | 23.7%            | 0.0%                | 0.0%                  | 1.7%               |
|     | CENTRAL  | 0.0%          | 50.0%              | 0.0%             | 0.0%                | 0.0%                  | 50.0%              |
|     | EE   | 0.0%          | 64.4%              | 33.9%            | 0.0%                | 0.0%                  | 1.7%               |
|     | HLS  | 3.4%          | 67.0%              | 27.3%            | 2.3%                | 0.0%                  | 0.0%               |
|     | <b>Total</b>   | <b>5.6%</b>   | <b>66.2%</b>       | <b>26.0%</b>     | <b>0.7%</b>         | <b>0.0%</b>           | <b>1.5%</b>        |
| Q11 | There was parity of standards for all Northumbria students across all delivery locations (please select the option that reflects your overall opinion, and select n/a if not relevant):<br>a) collaborative students at partner institutions;<br>b) collaborative students at UK partner institutions;<br>c) Newcastle based students;<br>d) Northumbria students at alternative campuses (eg London, Amsterdam) |               |                    |                  |                     |                       |                    |

|              | Faculty   | (no response) | A - strongly agree | B - mostly agree | C - mostly disagree | D - strongly disagree | E - not applicable |
|--------------|---|---------------|--------------------|------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|
|              | ADSS  | 5.1%          | 15.3%              | 11.9%            | 1.7%                | 1.7%                  | 64.4%              |
|              | BL  | 16.9%         | 28.8%              | 20.3%            | 1.7%                | 0.0%                  | 32.2%              |
|              | CENTRAL   | 0.0%          | 25.0%              | 0.0%             | 0.0%                | 0.0%                  | 75.0%              |
|              | EE  | 1.7%          | 16.9%              | 10.2%            | 0.0%                | 0.0%                  | 71.2%              |
|              | HLS   | 6.8%          | 29.5%              | 8.0%             | 1.1%                | 0.0%                  | 54.5%              |
|              | <b>Total</b>  | <b>7.4%</b>   | <b>23.4%</b>       | <b>11.9%</b>     | <b>1.1%</b>         | <b>0.4%</b>           | <b>55.8%</b>       |
| Q12          | Any specific requirements raised by professional bodies are being addressed. <i>(select n/a if not relevant)</i>  |               |                    |                  |                     |                       |                    |
|              | ADSS  | 6.8%          | 6.8%               | 0.0%             | 0.0%                | 0.0%                  | 86.4%              |
|              | BL  | 16.9%         | 15.3%              | 3.4%             | 0.0%                | 0.0%                  | 64.4%              |
|              | CENTRAL   | 0.0%          | 0.0%               | 0.0%             | 0.0%                | 0.0%                  | 100.0%             |
|              | EE  | 3.4%          | 13.6%              | 5.1%             | 0.0%                | 0.0%                  | 78.0%              |
|              | HLS   | 4.5%          | 25.0%              | 2.3%             | 0.0%                | 0.0%                  | 68.2%              |
|              | <b>Total</b>  | <b>7.4%</b>   | <b>16.0%</b>       | <b>2.6%</b>      | <b>0.0%</b>         | <b>0.0%</b>           | <b>74.0%</b>       |
| 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  | 5.1%          | 15.3%              | 5.1%             | 0.0%                | 0.0%                  | 74.6%              |
|              | BL  | 18.6%         | 3.4%               | 5.1%             | 0.0%                | 0.0%                  | 72.9%              |
|              | CENTRAL   | 0.0%          | 0.0%               | 0.0%             | 0.0%                | 0.0%                  | 100.0%             |
|              | EE  | 3.4%          | 3.4%               | 5.1%             | 0.0%                | 0.0%                  | 88.1%              |
|              | HLS   | 4.5%          | 42.0%              | 3.4%             | 0.0%                | 0.0%                  | 50.0%              |
|              | <b>Total</b>  | <b>7.4%</b>   | <b>18.6%</b>       | <b>4.5%</b>      | <b>0.0%</b>         | <b>0.0%</b>           | <b>69.5%</b>       |
| <b>Total</b> |   | <b>6.0%</b>   | <b>54.8%</b>       | <b>18.8%</b>     | <b>1.5%</b>         | <b>0.4%</b>           | <b>18.4%</b>       |

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