



<b>Agenda Item:</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Document Code:</b>	<b>AB23/043</b>
<b>Categorisation:</b>	<b>OPEN</b>
<b>Committee:</b>	<b>Academic Board</b>
<b>Date</b>	<b>30 May 2024</b>

<b>Agenda Item:</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Document Code:</b>	<b>EC23/053</b>
<b>Categorisation:</b>	<b>OPEN</b>
<b>Committee:</b>	<b>Education Committee</b>
<b>Date</b>	<b>1 February 2024</b>

### Summary of External Examiner Reports 2022/23

#### **Recommendation**

Academic Board is asked to approve the Summary of External Examiner Reports 2022/23

#### **Executive Summary**

The report:

- Briefly summarises the external context around the external examining system.
- Gives an overview of external examiner feedback for academic year 2022/23, looking at both quantitative and qualitative data based on the faculty summary reports.
- Outlines the response taken to three external examiners unable to confirm statements in the annual summary report on standards.
- Proposes a series of actions to be taken as a response to concerns and issues raised in the reports.

#### **University Strategy 2018-24 Strategic Outcomes, Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and Business Outcomes supported by the information or proposal in this item**

- Transformed student and stakeholder outcomes.

#### **Consultation with/information/data provided by:**

- Information provided by Quality and Teaching Excellence, SLAS, from external examiner annual reports 2022/23.
- Faculty Directors of Quality Assurance (initial Faculty-level analysis).

#### **Implications of the paper:**

- Legal and regulatory

Whilst external examiners are not a requirement of the Office for Students they are an integral part of Northumbria's compliance with the Quality and Standards (B) Conditions of Registration, ensuring parity with sector and subject practice and standards, and supporting the University in continuous improvement of the curriculum and student experience.

#### **Strategic Risk(s) and other core implications arising**

Broadly our external examining system contributes towards mitigating the following risks:

- SR5 Teaching and learning does not allow students to reach their full potential
- SR6 The broader student experience does not match expectations
- SR9 Serious compliance failure

#### **University Sponsor**

Pro Vice-Chancellor (Education),  
Professor Graham Wynn

#### **Author[s]**

Ruth Hattam, Deputy Academic Registrar (Quality and Teaching Excellence)  
Faculty Directors of Quality Assurance

**Date of finalisation of the paper:** 31 January 2024

**Prior and Onward Consideration/Reporting**

- Faculty Education Committees – 1 February 2024 (Faculty Director summaries)
- Quality and Standards Sub-Committee – 29 February 2024
- Academic Board – 4 April 2024

## Summary of External Examiner Reports relating to 2022/23

### 1 External Context

External examiners play a key role in assuring the University that the quality and standards of its awards are secure and robust in terms of internal standards and external benchmarks. They ensure that awards at the same level and in similar subjects are comparable with those in different higher education providers in the UK, and (where relevant) with professional standards. They also ensure that the system of assessment is fair and is objectively operated in the determination of awards.

In August 2022, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in conjunction with the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment (UKSCQA) published a document on [External Examining Principles](#). These principles (developed by QAA, Universities UK (UUK) and GuildHE) are an important addition to the [Statement of Intent on Degree Classifications](#). The Principles cover expectations of both institutions and external examiners.

### 2 External Examiner Reports 2022/23

#### 2.1 Overview

This paper presents an overview of feedback provided in 271 out of 323 expected annual reports submitted for 2022/23 (as at 21 December 2023). Of the 323 expected reports, 22 reports are not required or incomplete by examiners. This includes examiners who were inactive, examiners who resigned or whose contracts were terminated, and examiners not appointed by Northumbria (Bar Standards Board).

In line with previous years the tone of the reports overall is very positive and supportive. It is clear that there is constructive dialogue between programme teams and external examiners and evidence that they are acting as critical friends.

External examiner reports are responded to in detail by the relevant Academic Lead, with the Head of Department (or nominee) taking an overview of all responses. The Faculty Directors of Quality Assurance review reports for their Faculty and compile an annual summary report (Appendix 1). Where an external examiner provides a negative response in one of the key areas the University response is overseen via Quality and Standards Sub-Committee (see section 2.2 below).

The External Examiner report template was revised for 2021/22 (following the approval of the new External Examiner policy). The intention of the revisions was to illicit responses on each module examined and (for lead examiners) a programme overview, with greater emphasis on narrative and less on tick boxes. The report covers the following:

Section 1: Summary report on standards

Section 2: The Module Assessment and Feedback Processes

Section 3: Programme Overview

Section 4: External Regulatory Standards and Other Comments

Section 5: Programme Examination Board

Section 6: The External Examiner Role and Information Provided

## 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 were received in 2022/23, compared to three in 2021/22 and one in 2020/21. A summary is below and further detail can be found in the responses included in Appendix 2:

- Arts Design and Social Sciences, Humanities Department: the examiner responded 'no' to statement B. They noted the impact of the marking and assessment boycott and raised concerns around marking and moderation processes, including for the dissertation. They also noted concerns about the programme assessment board operation given the circumstances, including the lack of report on decisions.
- Arts Design and Social Sciences, Social Sciences Department: the examiner responded 'no' to statement B. They commented that semester 2 assessment processes did not appear to have been conducted in line with policy and regulations and that there was a lack of transparency about markers.
- Health and Life Sciences, Social Work, Education and Community Wellbeing Department: the examiner responded 'no' to statement C. They noted concern that the marking on the programme is too generous compared to other Undergraduate programmes.

## 2.3 The Module Assessment and Feedback Processes (Section 2)

The overall feedback from external examiners is very positive, with many examples of transparent and fair assessments that test learning outcomes in innovative ways. Meetings with staff and students are seen as informative and helpful (where they occur), and there is evidence of ongoing improvement and constructive discussion. There are positive comments on the maturing systems supporting apprenticeships in one area.

There is mention in most of the faculty reports of particular issues relating to the Marking and Assessment boycott (MAB). These comments are wide-ranging and have been addressed (where necessary) through specific responses to the report.

There continue to be pockets of concern about variability in the quality and consistency of feedback to students, in some areas specifically to students who are struggling, and in others in relation to partner delivery. Some variations in the expectations for some work worth the same credit was flagged (e.g. consistency of assignment word limit), and specifically in one area a recycling of past assessments was commented on. The practice of rotating the internal moderator each year was suggested. Moderation samples do not always include an appropriate spread of marks, and several examiners requested access to marks distributions. Although far from widespread a couple of references to Artificial Intelligence (AI) and to support for referencing more generally are worth noting.

## 2.4 Programme Overview (Section 3)

The general picture is of well-structured and robust programmes with clearly defined learning outcomes. Various externals flagged the research richness of the curriculum, progress made against previous recommendations, and areas of good practice.

Areas of more concern on individual programmes related to student attendance and engagement, the preparation of students for exams, and the provision of additional support for struggling students. In one faculty the lead examiners have raised concerns about the operation of programmes, highlighting the need for more engagement between programme teams and externals. More access to student performance data and opportunities to meet with students would be helpful to externals. The operational model in one faculty caused challenges with programme overview, which it was thought could be addressed by closer working relationships. Concerns were also raised in some areas about the demands of the workload and issues around timing and timescales.

## 2.5 External Regulatory Standards and Other Comments (Section 4)

No significant concerns were flagged in this section. Specifically apprenticeship programmes were flagged in three faculties as meeting the standards and requirements associated with that provision.

Changes made by one professional body in relation to AI were noted. In one faculty the changes to the subject benchmark was referenced, in particular the need going forward to incorporate sustainability. As all benchmarks will change all programmes will ultimately need to address this<sup>1</sup>.

## 2.6 Programme examination board (Section 5)

Those externals who attended an examination board were complimentary about their fair, efficient and effective operation. Although less prevalent than previous years there is still some confusion among externals over our expectations of examination board attendance. There were some comments in relation to the marking process and the MAB.

## 2.7 The External Examiner Role and Information Provided (Section 6)

This section covers questions on induction, administrative aspects, and the assessment and feedback processes. There are 2 additional questions relating to newly appointed examiners. Examiners are asked to select a response (A-E) based on the extent to which they agree or disagree with the question and can provide qualitative comments. Aggregated data from Section 6 (questions 1 to 7) is provided below, with further detail provided in Appendix 3:

Table 1: Summary responses to Section 6 of External Examiner report forms (excluding not applicable or no response).

<b>A – Strongly agree</b>	<b>B – Mostly agree</b>	<b>C – Mostly disagree</b>	<b>D – Strongly disagree</b>
<b>63.23%</b>	<b>31.95%</b>	<b>3.34%</b>	<b>1.48%</b>

<sup>1</sup> This will be picked up as part of the QED project

Overall, as the data confirms, externals are complimentary about their role and the support provided to them. In relation to induction and support there is widespread appreciation of the annual training session (which is recorded and available to view at any time).

A few comments related to ongoing support and the role of the academic lead in providing that. Whilst the majority are satisfied or very satisfied with the support and guidance provided, there is a minority who find it unclear and confusing. It should be noted however that some of these views may have been exacerbated by the MAB and the changes to standard process in some areas. There was a varied experience of mentoring, which was valued where it had been provided but some externals new to role commented that they were either unaware that they should have been allocated a mentor or found the arrangement unsatisfactory.

It is positive to note that there are fewer comments in relation to the e-Vision system and that issues that did occur were dealt with swiftly in the majority of cases. Also positive is that issues raised in previous reports or through dialogue with the programme team have been discussed and addressed.

Detailed feedback at module level is beneficial in terms of being able to see clear and specific feedback at that level. However, whilst helpful for programme teams it does make overall analysis and identification of common themes more difficult. Also in one area the tendency of externals to cut and paste comments in each module section makes that feedback less valuable.

Time pressures and work allocation has been a recurring theme. Whilst noting the high workload in some areas the new fee structure introduced this academic year should more fairly remunerate the work undertaken. Business and Law have established a working group to look at issues raised in reports in relation to external workload allocation and alignment to programmes.

## 2.8 Issues flagged for report at University level

As per the process, most issues or queries are resolved at department/programme level. The following issues were flagged for further action. In many cases these issues are similar to those highlighted previously. The action list from the report last year is therefore included here with at status update. New issues have been added as appropriate. It is proposed that this composite list and actions are monitored through the Quality and Standards Sub-Committee. It is noted that there were comments in the reports in relation to the MAB. These have been dealt with at programme level (with the exception of the responses noted under section 2.2). This issue is specific to 2022/23 and the University response to the MAB and the application of the Emergency Regulations guidance is well documented. Therefore no further action in relation to this issue is proposed.

Ref	Issue	Year Raised	Response	Update January 2024	Status (Jan 2024)
22/01	More guidance on the e-Vision platform	2021/22	<b>Action:</b> Investigate options for delivering this, including help guides and videos. <b>Led by:</b> QTE (G&E)	Updates provided as part of annual webinar to new and existing external examiners.  Fewer comments related to platform issues in 2022/23	Resolved
22/02	Report structure and real-time capture and integration of module feedback	2021/22	<b>Action:</b> Review of report structure and interfaces between systems, including alignment with CPPR. <b>Led by:</b> QTE (G&E, PSRB/Review)	CPPR process redesign undertaken with departmental (no longer modular) report being data led against external matrices. Combined with sector consideration in relation external examining.	Ongoing in line with evolution of CPPR and external examiner policy.
22/03	Lack of a consistent approach to meetings with staff and students, and other examiners. Ensure policy regarding expectations of meeting	2021/22 2022/23	<b>Action:</b> Consider approaches to monitoring external examiner visits and meetings. Evaluate the process of CPPR module panels and opportunities for external examiner engagement. <b>Led by:</b> QTE (G&E, PSRB/Review)	CPPR process redesign complete. Further action required to ensure consistent approach to visits and meetings with students.	Ongoing

Ref	Issue	Year Raised	Response	Update January 2024	Status (Jan 2024)
	students is implemented.				
22/04	Examination board attendance	2021/22 2022/23	<b>Action:</b> Revisit guidance on expectations around exam board attendance. Feed into discussions around the Education Strategy and any new approaches as a result of consideration of the academic calendar. <b>Led by:</b> QTE (G&E) with input from Academic Support.	Policy regarding attendance of Lead external examiner now more widely understood. Approach to exam boards currently being considered as part of the assessment regulations review (strand of QED).	Ongoing
22/05	Communication with and onboarding of external examiners	2021/22 2022/23	<b>Action:</b> Develop clear guidance and expectations for academic/examiner liaison and onboarding. Develop specific guidance for examiners appointed for their professional expertise. Develop further guidance and training for academic staff. <b>Led by:</b> QTE (G&E) with Faculty Directors of QA.	Significant progress in relation to apprenticeship delivery focusing on the External Quality Assurance of end point assessment. Induction and guidance reviewed annually. Further guidance and training for academic staff to be taken forward.	Ongoing
22/06	Closer monitoring of mentoring arrangements.	2021/22 2022/23	<b>Action:</b> Devise a monitoring process to ensure that agreed mentoring arrangements are in place. <b>Led by:</b> QTE (G&E) with Faculty Directors of QA.	Not progressed.	Ongoing
22/07	Summary report content and structure	2021/22	<b>Action:</b> Consider the structure of this annual report (in light of more detailed module information and embedding of CPPR) <b>Led by:</b> Assistant Director (QTE) and Faculty Directors of Quality Assurance	Not progressed.	Ongoing



Ref	Issue	Year Raised	Response	Update January 2024	Status (Jan 2024)
22/08	Support and feedback for weaker students	2021/22 2022/23	<b>Action:</b> Consider training and guidance, and assimilation of best practice in terms of providing assessment feedback to students performing less-well. <b>Led by:</b> Teaching Excellence Team	Teaching Excellence sit developed with range of case studies and best practice guides. More targeted work in this area could be considered.	Ongoing
23/01	Provision of module and programme statistical trend data to externals	2022/23	<b>Action:</b> Consider how and when externals get access to trend data. <b>Link to Ref 22/02</b>		
23/02	Use of 'cut and paste' for module section of report	2022/23	<b>Action:</b> Review guidance to externals. <b>Led by:</b> QTE (G&E)		
23/03	Issues with external programme alignment (B&L)	2022/23	<b>Action:</b> To consider how programme overview can be managed within a matrix structure <b>Led by:</b> B&L Faculty Working Group		

## **2.9 Future Developments**

It is proposed that the impact of the QED framework on external examiner policy is monitored closely over the course of next year.

## **3 Recommendations**

Academic Board is asked to approve the Summary of External Examiner Reports 2022/23.

Appendix 3: Progression and Awards Board External Examiner Reports 2022/23 – 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.				
	<b>Total</b>	<b>69.78%</b>	<b>27.61%</b>	<b>1.87%</b>	<b>0.75%</b>
	ADSS	69.09%	25.45%	1.82%	3.64%
	BL	72.58%	25.81%	1.61%	0.00%
	CENTRAL	72.73%	18.18%	9.09%	0.00%
	EE	63.79%	34.48%	1.72%	0.00%
	HLS	71.95%	26.83%	1.22%	0.00%
Q02	Briefings/information on assessment procedures and regulations, and on the duties of external examiner, has helped me in my role.				
	<b>Total</b>	<b>64.02%</b>	<b>33.71%</b>	<b>1.52%</b>	<b>0.76%</b>
	ADSS	61.11%	37.04%	1.85%	0.00%
	BL	67.74%	29.03%	3.23%	0.00%
	CENTRAL	54.55%	36.36%	9.09%	0.00%
	EE	58.62%	37.93%	0.00%	3.45%
	HLS	68.35%	31.65%	0.00%	0.00%
Q03	The timing given for consideration of assessed work complied with the indicated schedule.				
	<b>Total</b>	<b>55.97%</b>	<b>36.57%</b>	<b>5.60%</b>	<b>1.87%</b>
	ADSS	43.64%	38.18%	12.73%	5.45%
	BL	63.49%	33.33%	3.17%	0.00%
	CENTRAL	72.73%	9.09%	0.00%	18.18%
	EE	43.86%	50.88%	5.26%	0.00%
	HLS	64.63%	31.71%	3.66%	0.00%
Q04	I received sufficient information on programme/module structure, content, methods of assessment and assessment criteria.				
	<b>Total</b>	<b>66.79%</b>	<b>29.85%</b>	<b>2.24%</b>	<b>1.12%</b>
	ADSS	72.73%	25.45%	0.00%	1.82%
	BL	69.84%	25.40%	4.76%	0.00%
	CENTRAL	72.73%	27.27%	0.00%	0.00%
	EE	53.45%	41.38%	3.45%	1.72%
	HLS	69.14%	28.40%	1.23%	1.23%
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>				
	<b>Total</b>	<b>61.75%</b>	<b>33.33%</b>	<b>4.92%</b>	<b>0.00%</b>
	ADSS	69.77%	23.26%	6.98%	0.00%
	BL	56.76%	40.54%	2.70%	0.00%
	CENTRAL	60.00%	30.00%	10.00%	0.00%
	EE	58.54%	34.15%	7.32%	0.00%

Question	Faculty	A - strongly agree	B - mostly agree	C - mostly disagree	D - strongly disagree
	HLS	61.54%	36.54%	1.92%	0.00%
Q06	I approved all summative assessment (assignments, examinations and referral) before issue to students.				
	<b>Total</b>	<b>55.00%</b>	<b>35.00%</b>	<b>6.67%</b>	<b>3.33%</b>
	ADSS	71.43%	14.29%	14.29%	0.00%
	BL	47.06%	35.29%	17.65%	0.00%
	CENTRAL	50.00%	0.00%	0.00%	50.00%
	EE	40.00%	60.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	HLS	62.50%	33.33%	0.00%	4.17%
Q07	Assessment tasks are appropriate to the level of study. They are stimulating and challenging, and enable students to demonstrate knowledge and skills.				
	<b>Total</b>	<b>57.89%</b>	<b>21.05%</b>	<b>5.26%</b>	<b>15.79%</b>
	ADSS	60.00%	0.00%	20.00%	20.00%
	BL	60.00%	30.00%	0.00%	10.00%
	CENTRAL	50.00%	50.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	EE	33.33%	66.67%	0.00%	0.00%
	HLS	61.11%	11.11%	5.56%	22.22%
<b>Total</b>		<b>63.23%</b>	<b>31.95%</b>	<b>3.34%</b>	<b>1.48%</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