

Agenda Item:	7.
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Committee:	Academic Board
Meeting Date:	27 January 2022

Summary of External Examiner Reports 2020/21

Recommendation

Academic Board is asked to consider annual summary of External Examiners reports.

Executive Summary

The report:

- Briefly summarises the external context around the external examining system
- Gives an overview of external examiner feedback for academic year 2020/21, looking at both quantitative and qualitative data.
- Outlines the response taken to the one external examiner unable to confirm statements in the annual summary report on standards.

Overall feedback from examiners in 2020/21 has been very positive, with continued support for actions in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic.

University Strategy 2018-23

Strategic Outcomes, Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and Business Outcomes supported by the information or proposal in this item

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) - Select the KPIs this paper contributes to from the University Strategy:

- 1. Entry quality** (*Average UCAS entry points of new undergraduates*)
- 2. Home Masters Students** (*Population of postgraduate taught students (FTE)*)
- 3. International students** (*Population of FT on-campus international students and Income from TNE*)
- 4. Graduate employability** (*Percentage of graduates in professional employment and graduate further study (Graduate Outcomes)*)
- 5. Satisfaction** (*Percentage expressing satisfaction with Teaching Quality and Student Experience (NSS)*)
- 6. Continuation** (*Students still in HE the following year*)

Business Outcomes – If applicable, select the key Business Outcome(s) this paper contributes to from the University Strategy:

- BO06. Staff and students are supported to be digitally fluent**
- BO08. Student health and wellbeing is improved through transformed services responsive to demand**
- BO18. Teaching quality enhancement is supported by all academics holding a professional teaching qualification**
- BO19 The Taught portfolio has been rebalanced and refocused based on quality and demand**
- BO20. More learning takes place collaboratively and in small groups**
- BO21. Technological innovation embedded in the curriculum**
- BO22. Educational data analytics have been implemented**
- BO23. Intelligent and inclusive learning spaces created**

- BO24. A Step Change in the Student Experience**
- BO26. Holistic Support to Improve Student Employability**
- BO27. Step Change Improvements in Education and Research across all Subjects**
- BO28 A High Quality PGT Offer at Critical Mass**
- BO29. Investment in academic staff is aligned to optimising the Student-Staff Ratio (SSR)**
- BO35. A European campus opens in Amsterdam, teaching 800 students per annum by 2022/23**
- BO36. The London campus expands to 3500 students**
- BO39. Contact with students, stakeholders and customers is personalised through a single view available to staff**

Strategic Outcomes – If you were not able to identify a Business Outcome that this paper contributes to, then please select the key Strategic Outcome(s) instead:

- Exceptional people empowered to achieve shared ambitions**
- World-class research driving excellence in all of the University's activities**
- Transformed student and stakeholder outcomes**
- Strong global reputation and market position, with diversified revenue streams**
- Organisational sustainability, efficiency and effectiveness**

Strategic Risk(s) and other core implications arising from the business –

Please identify any [Strategic Risks](#) which would be mitigated, or made worse, by the key observations/recommendations in the paper:

- SRR003 - International opportunities and uncertainties**
- SRR008 - Fit-for-purpose, resilient Business processes**
- SRR001 - Brand, reputation and market position**
- SRR010 - Research culture and related outcomes**
- SRR006 - Student outcomes and experience**
- SRR005 - Strategic Partnership opportunities**
- SRR002 - Staff Engagement and Culture**
- SRR004 - Financial sustainability**
- SRR007 - Exploiting benefits from estates and technology**
- SRR009 - Managing Compliance**

Consultation with / information / data provided by:

Information provided by Quality and Teaching Excellence, SLAS, from external examiner annual reports.

Liaison with the Finance Directorate:

N/A

Reporting/consideration route:

The response included in Appendix 2 has been approved at the interim Quality Operational Group.

University Executive Sponsor(s):

Maureen McLaughlin, Academic Registrar

Author(s):

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Date of finalisation of the paper: 22 December 2021

Summary of External Examiner Reports relating to 2020/21

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 August 2021, Universities UK (UUK) announced¹ that the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) had been asked to work with them (together with GuildHE) to support universities review and improve their external examining practices. This included the addition of new principles to the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment (UKSCQA) statement of intent², and the commitment to support and strengthen the external examiners system. The Advance HE degree standards project³, managed by the Office for Students, continues to investigate ways to improve the training and professional development of external examiners and reinforce their role as guardian of national standards.

2 External Examiner Reports 2020/21

2.1 Overview

This paper presents an overview of feedback provided in 253 out of 281 expected annual reports submitted for 2020/21 (as at 2 December 2021). Outwith the 281 expected reports, 14 reports are not required. This includes examiners who were inactive, examiners who resigned or whose contracts were terminated, and examiners not appointed by Northumbria (Bar Standards Board).

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. The Faculty Directors of Quality Assurance review reports for their faculty and compile a summary report (Appendix 1). 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.

¹ <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/what-we-do/creating-voice-our-members/media-releases/universities-improve-external-examining>

² <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/what-we-do/policy-and-research/publications/degree-classification-statement-intent>

³ <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/degree-standards-project#Purpose>

One negative response was received in 2020/21, compared to one negative response in 2019/20, and three in 2018/19. Further detail can be found in the response included in Appendix 2. The negative response is for the International Foundation Programme and was received in response to Section B:

- When moderating samples this examiner was not able to clearly see the marks or evidence of how the marks were awarded or of feedback to students. They noted that the same staff member had carried out actions as module tutor and internal moderator.
- The Programme Leader confirmed in the response that the university’s moderation policy had been followed, however this was outwith the eVision system due to staffing and access changes. They confirmed that different members of staff had completed the module tutor and internal moderator tasks, however only one of them had access to eVision to record the process.
- The Programme Leader assured the examiner that moving forward the team will ensure that all relevant staff members have access to eVision to complete their relevant actions, and ensure that the audit trail is fully and correctly evidenced.
- The response was approved by Quality Operational Group Chair’s action on 7 September 2021 and made available to the examiner.

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 3:

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
78.03%	20.58%	1.12%	0.27%

This response range is similar to the report for 2019/20, and the comments reflect many of the same issues. Of note is the continued positive feedback on the University’s response to Covid and to the cyber incident which occurred early in the academic year.

There are recurring positive comments across the Faculty reports in relation to:

- The information provided, training and induction, and the high level of support provided to examiners from both academic and professional support staff.

- Generally the systems used for moderation were complimented, with the e:Vision system being regarded as a useful tool for accessing information and engaging in dialogue on assessments and marks.

Negative feedback tended to be in isolated pockets. It should be noted externals in EE were more inclined to 'mostly agree' rather than 'strongly agree' across several areas. The Faculty report provides more detail on the individual comments and responses. Common themes across the faculties included:

- Tight timescales and turnaround times, which in some cases were not notified in advance.
- In some cases approval of assessment had not taken place in advance.
- Systems and access remain an issue for some externals, particularly where a mix of e:Vision and Blackboard were used.
- There were instances of limited moderation comments, and issues with consistency of feedback to students.

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

This section covers consistency of application of the Regulations and attendance at examination boards. There were less comments compared to 2019/20 relating to confusion around examination board attendance. Those externals who attended boards commented positively on the consistent and fair application of the regulations (although one external in EE queried the potential consequences of the principle of 'material difference' as part of the emergency regulations).

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. Of note for 2020/21:

- There was widespread acknowledgement of the integration of research in the curriculum, and also professional practice. One external commented positively on the adherence to apprenticeship standards.
- Innovation in teaching and assessment, particularly in on-line learning and delivery were commended.
- No issues were raised in relation to PSRB compliance.
- In one faculty there were concerns about partner consistency (between TNE, London and Newcastle).

2.6 Issue 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 report to Education Committee. The second column is the suggested Education Committee response:

Issue	Response
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IT systems accessibility and usage, disparity between e:Vision and Blackboard	e:Vision is the platform for moderation and external examiner liaison. We need to look at where e:Vision is not being used to understand the reasons behind this, aiming to ensure that all areas use one platform. We will continue to evaluate and improve the e:Vision moderation platform, and major developments are planned in relation to the new External Examiner policy and the introduction of CPPR.
Accessibility at virtual meetings	To be agreed as an action to take forward.
Differences in performance between Newcastle and those studying at partners.	Further investigation into the specific instance, with feedback to Education Committee. In the longer term differences in performance should be surfaced and addressed through the CPPR process.
Central schedule for externals to show when their contributions are most needed.	QTE to take forward as an action, working with Academic Support and FDQAs.
Expectations for physical visits to Northumbria	This ties in with the new External Examiner policy, which specifies that visits are expected. This will need to be monitored in line with developments and guidelines in relation to the pandemic.
Clarification of question 6, and whether it relates to assessment briefs or assessment samples.	Note that a new external examiner report template has recently been agreed by Education Committee. QTE to check report questions to ensure that there is clarity in similar questions/sections.
The ability for externals to generate reports of assessment approvals and dialogue from e:Vision to inform PABs.	QTE to note in relation to system developments on the moderation/external examiner portals, and the available data in CPPR.

2.7 Future Developments

As noted above, over the course of this year the embedding of the new External Examiner policy and the CPPR process should positively impact on some of the issues raised, including on examination board attendance. The new Education Strategy may lead to a review of elements of PFNA, including the Assessment for Learning policy. Any such review will look to incorporate external examiner feedback on policy and practice.

3 Recommendations

Academic Board is asked to consider annual summary of External Examiners reports.

Appendix 3: Progression and Awards Board External Examiner Reports 2020/21 – 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.				
	Total	81.75%	17.06%	0.79%	0.40%
	ADSS	86.79%	11.32%	0.00%	1.89%
	BL	86.89%	13.11%	0.00%	0.00%
	CENTRAL	58.33%	33.33%	8.33%	0.00%
	EE	75.93%	24.07%	0.00%	0.00%
	HLS	81.94%	16.67%	1.39%	0.00%
Q02	Briefings/information on assessment procedures and regulations, and on the duties of external examiner, has helped me in my role.				
	Total	73.20%	25.20%	1.20%	0.40%
	ADSS	74.07%	22.22%	1.85%	1.85%
	BL	76.67%	23.33%	0.00%	0.00%
	CENTRAL	80.00%	20.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	EE	64.81%	33.33%	1.85%	0.00%
	HLS	75.00%	23.61%	1.39%	0.00%
Q03	The timing given for consideration of assessed work complied with the indicated schedule.				
	Total	62.80%	33.60%	3.20%	0.40%
	ADSS	70.37%	25.93%	1.85%	1.85%
	BL	60.00%	40.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	CENTRAL	63.64%	36.36%	0.00%	0.00%
	EE	55.56%	38.89%	5.56%	0.00%
	HLS	64.79%	29.58%	5.63%	0.00%
Q04	I received sufficient information on programme/module structure, content, methods of assessment and assessment criteria.				
	Total	77.38%	20.24%	2.38%	0.00%
	ADSS	85.19%	14.81%	0.00%	0.00%
	BL	75.00%	23.33%	1.67%	0.00%
	CENTRAL	66.67%	16.67%	16.67%	0.00%
	EE	72.22%	24.07%	3.70%	0.00%
	HLS	79.17%	19.44%	1.39%	0.00%
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>)				
	Total	78.09%	19.10%	2.81%	0.00%
	ADSS	85.29%	8.82%	5.88%	0.00%
	BL	73.81%	23.81%	2.38%	0.00%
	CENTRAL	66.67%	22.22%	11.11%	0.00%
	EE	65.85%	34.15%	0.00%	0.00%
	HLS	88.46%	9.62%	1.92%	0.00%
Q06	I approved all summative assessment (assignments, examinations and referral) before issue to students.				

Question	Faculty	A - strongly agree	B - mostly agree	C - mostly disagree	D - strongly disagree
	Total	82.16%	16.60%	0.41%	0.83%
	ADSS	86.00%	12.00%	0.00%	2.00%
	BL	83.61%	16.39%	0.00%	0.00%
	CENTRAL	83.33%	16.67%	0.00%	0.00%
	EE	76.92%	21.15%	1.92%	0.00%
	HLS	81.82%	16.67%	0.00%	1.52%
Q07	Assessment tasks are appropriate to the level of study. They are stimulating and challenging, and enable students to demonstrate knowledge and skills.				
	Total	86.29%	13.31%	0.00%	0.40%
	ADSS	86.79%	13.21%	0.00%	0.00%
	BL	86.89%	13.11%	0.00%	0.00%
	CENTRAL	81.82%	18.18%	0.00%	0.00%
	EE	79.63%	18.52%	0.00%	1.85%
	HLS	91.30%	8.70%	0.00%	0.00%
Q08	The process of internal moderation was clearly evidenced.				
	Total	82.19%	16.60%	0.81%	0.40%
	ADSS	94.44%	5.56%	0.00%	0.00%
	BL	78.33%	20.00%	1.67%	0.00%
	CENTRAL	83.33%	8.33%	0.00%	8.33%
	EE	75.47%	22.64%	1.89%	0.00%
	HLS	80.88%	19.12%	0.00%	0.00%
Q09	The standard and consistency of marking were appropriate.				
	Total	80.66%	18.93%	0.41%	0.00%
	ADSS	86.54%	13.46%	0.00%	0.00%
	BL	85.00%	15.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	CENTRAL	80.00%	20.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	EE	71.70%	28.30%	0.00%	0.00%
	HLS	79.41%	19.12%	1.47%	0.00%
Q10	Assessment feedback provided to students is effective in enhancing their learning and supports their development, progression and attainment.				
	Total	75.72%	24.28%	0.00%	0.00%
	ADSS	88.89%	11.11%	0.00%	0.00%
	BL	70.00%	30.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	CENTRAL	80.00%	20.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	EE	67.31%	32.69%	0.00%	0.00%
	HLS	76.12%	23.88%	0.00%	0.00%
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; d) Northumbria students at alternative campuses (eg London, Amsterdam).				
	Total	69.47%	29.47%	1.05%	0.00%
	ADSS	69.23%	30.77%	0.00%	0.00%

Question	Faculty	A - strongly agree	B - mostly agree	C - mostly disagree	D - strongly disagree
	BL	55.88%	44.12%	0.00%	0.00%
	CENTRAL	50.00%	50.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	EE	77.78%	16.67%	5.56%	0.00%
	HLS	82.14%	17.86%	0.00%	0.00%
Q12	Any specific requirements raised by professional bodies are being addressed. <i>(select n/a if not relevant)</i>				
	Total	85.71%	14.29%	0.00%	0.00%
	ADSS	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	BL	81.82%	18.18%	0.00%	0.00%
	CENTRAL	60.00%	40.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	EE	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	HLS	85.71%	14.29%	0.00%	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>				
	Total	89.80%	10.20%	0.00%	0.00%
	ADSS	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	BL	75.00%	25.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	CENTRAL	80.00%	20.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	EE	92.59%	7.41%	0.00%	0.00%
	HLS	89.80%	10.20%	0.00%	0.00%
Total		78.03%	20.58%	1.12%	0.27%

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