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Committee:	Education Committee
Date:	16 March 2023

Summary of External Examiner Reports 2021/22

Recommendation

The Committee is asked:

- i. To endorse the Summary of External Examiner Reports 2021/22 and recommend to Academic Board for approval;
- ii. To approve Faculty actions in response to two external examiners being unable to fully confirm statements in the annual summary report on standards.
- iii. Approve the responses and actions detailed in Section 2.8

Executive Summary

The report:

- Briefly summarises the external context around the external examining system
- Gives an overview of external examiner feedback for academic year 2021/22, 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 2021/22.
- 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)
Date of finalisation of the paper: 24 February 2023	
Prior and Onward Consideration/Reporting The paper will be presented for consideration to Academic Board on 6 April 2023.	

Summary of External Examiner Reports relating to 2021/22

1 External Context

Whilst not formally mandated 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 2021/22

2.1 Overview

This paper presents an overview of feedback provided in 269 out of 298 expected annual reports submitted for 2021/22 (as at 16 January 2023). Of the 298 expected reports, 13 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 nominee) taking an overview of all responses. The Faculty Directors of Quality Assurance review the 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-Committee¹ (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.

¹ This is a change to the published policy which is to be agreed.

- 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 2021/22, compared to one negative response in 2020/21, and one in 2019/20. A summary is below and further detail can be found in Appendix 2:

- Engineering and Environment, Mathematics, Physics and Electrical Engineering Department: the examiner responded 'no' to statements B and C:
 - For statement B they raised concerns about the subjectivity of marking schemes and fairness of marking. The Academic Lead noted the modules with the biggest concern and advised that pre- and post- assessment meetings would be arranged with the marking teams.
 - For statement C they noted that some level 6 modules were marked generously but they had not yet seen final outcomes to ascertain whether degree outcomes had been inflated. The Academic Lead advised that the level averages had been reviewed and found that they had not been inflated.
- Health and Life Sciences, Nursing Midwifery and Health Department: the examiner responded 'no' to statements A and B and 'not applicable to statement C. For all statements they noted that they had not received any work to moderate. The Academic Lead added a note to explain that the Level 4 programme had not run in 2021/22.
- Central Departments, International Development Department: the examiner responded 'no' to statement B. They advised that whilst they felt that the assessment process is rigorous and fair, they had not seen any feedback provided to students. The Academic Lead's response outlines that staffing issues had been experienced which impacted on the turnaround time for marking. Feedback has been issued to students but it was not available for the examiner.

2.3 The Module Assessment and Feedback Processes (Section 2)

As in previous years the tone of the reports is overwhelmingly positive. Many examples of good practice are commended throughout the Faculty reports, including innovative and relevant assessment briefs, fair and consistent marking practice, evidence of internal moderation, and excellent feedback to students. There is evidence of assessment that aligns well to module learning outcomes, and academic staff have responded to comments and issues.

Concerns were raised about marking standards and the provision of constructive feedback to students at some of our overseas partners. It was suggested that consideration could be given to ensuring that feedback could be more tailored and detailed for students who were performing less-well. There were also some concerns about inconsistency of moderation, which have been picked up and addressed in departments. It should be noted that some comments reflect individual preferences.

In terms of the faculty reports, it was noted that whilst the new requirement to comment on individual modules was useful at module and programme level it made the task of summarising more difficult. Consideration will be given to how this more detailed information is used in future years.

2.4 Programme Overview (Section 3)

Broadly the overall structure and content of programmes was considered to be cohesive, rigorous and comprehensive, offering a range of options. There was praise for the mix of teaching methods, with a clear route to progressing knowledge and skills. Programmes are contemporary, providing real-world experience.

In some cases there were issues where examiners felt unable to comment on cohort performance (e.g. attainment gaps) due to a lack of access to overall marks for students. There were also some comments on tight turnaround times, and on a lack of appropriate referencing in some areas.

2.5 External Regulatory Standards and Other Comments (Section 4)

National benchmarks and standards, including apprenticeship standards, are being met. There was a discrepancy between those who had met students and those who had not in terms of knowledge of the student experience. There was strong PSRB alignment (where relevant).

2.6 Programme examination board (Section 5)

There were mostly positive comments about the conduct of the examination board including consistency of decision-making, adherence to the regulations, and the quality of the information. There was a suggestion that more support could be provided to examiners in advance of the board, for instance providing a list of terminology and acronyms. As in previous years there remains some confusion about the requirements for exam board attendance. There were several comments from examiners wanting to be there but not invited, and others who commented positively on having received sufficient information about the Board even though they did not attend. Some felt that attendance would strengthen links to the programme (although boards normally consider multiple programmes which perhaps is not well-understood). The number of academic misconducts was flagged in Engineering and Environment, and poor referencing was highlighted elsewhere.

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).

A – Strongly agree	B – Mostly agree	C – Mostly disagree	D – Strongly disagree
64.11%	31.56%	3.42%	0.91%

Themes included the need for better communication, specifically around onboarding and providing context at department level suggesting that internal training and guidance for staff should be reviewed. Consideration could be given to a different approach for professional externals who may be less familiar with higher education practice and terminology. There were examples where mentoring of new examiners had been agreed but had not been carried out. Lack of clarity about the differences between the role of lead and non-lead examiner were noted. There was mixed experience of meetings with staff and students, both in terms of the expectation under the policy and facilitation of the meetings themselves. Satisfaction with the e-Vision platform was mixed (as in previous years).

The amount and level of commentary in the report was variable. The process would be improved by having a mechanism for module feedback to be considered throughout the year as part of CPPR and linked directly to the annual report. Further work is required to ensure access to module and programme performance data.

In some areas tight timescales for the turnaround of work were commented on, with a request for advance notice of deadlines particularly for non-standard programmes (e.g. London Campus).

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 are flagged for further action. It is proposed that these actions are monitored through the Quality and Standards Sub-Committee.

Issue	Response
More guidance on the e-Vision platform	<p>Action: Investigate options for delivering this, including help guides and videos.</p> <p>Led by: QTE (G&E)</p>
Report structure and real-time capture and integration of module feedback	<p>Action: Review of report structure and interfaces between systems, including alignment with CPPR.</p> <p>Led by: QTE (G&E, PSRB/Review)</p>
Lack of a consistent approach to meetings with staff and students, and other examiners. Ensure policy regarding expectations of meeting students is implemented.	<p>Action: Consider approaches to monitoring external examiner visits and meetings. Evaluate the process of CPPR module panels and opportunities for external examiner engagement.</p> <p>Led by: QTE (G&E, PSRB/Review)</p>
Examination board attendance	<p>Action: Revisit guidance (again) 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.</p> <p>Led by: QTE (G&E) with input from Academic Support.</p>
Communication with and onboarding of external examiners	<p>Action: 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.</p> <p>Led by: QTE (G&E) with Faculty Directors of QA.</p>
Closer monitoring of mentoring arrangements.	<p>Action: Devise a monitoring process to ensure that agreed mentoring arrangements are in place.</p> <p>Led by: QTE (G&E) with Faculty Directors of QA.</p>
Summary report content and structure	<p>Action: Consider the structure of this annual report (in light of more detailed module information and embedding of CPPR)</p> <p>Led by: Assistant Director (QTE) and Faculty Directors of Quality Assurance</p>
Support and feedback for weaker students	<p>Action: Consider training and guidance, and assimilation of best practice in terms of providing assessment feedback to students performing less-well.</p> <p>Led by: Teaching Excellence Team</p>

2.9 Future Developments

It is proposed to review the External Examiner policy in June/July 2023 in the light of two years operation, and the publication of new principles referred to in Section 1.

3 Recommendations

Education Committee is asked to:

- i. Endorse the Summary of External Examiner Reports 2021/22 and recommend to Academic Board for approval;
- ii. Approve Faculty actions in response to three external examiners being unable to fully confirm statements in the annual summary report on standards.
- iii. Approve the responses and actions detailed in Section 2.8.

Appendix 3: Progression and Awards Board External Examiner Reports 2021/22 – 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	73.86%	24.62%	1.52%	0.00%
	ADSS	67.92%	32.08%	0.00%	0.00%
	BL	72.31%	24.62%	3.08%	0.00%
	CENTRAL	63.64%	27.27%	9.09%	0.00%
	EE	66.67%	33.33%	0.00%	0.00%
	HLS	85.90%	12.82%	1.28%	0.00%
Q02	Briefings/information on assessment procedures and regulations, and on the duties of external examiner, has helped me in my role.				
	Total	64.89%	32.06%	2.67%	0.38%
	ADSS	55.77%	42.31%	1.92%	0.00%
	BL	73.85%	24.62%	1.54%	0.00%
	CENTRAL	63.64%	36.36%	0.00%	0.00%
	EE	58.93%	33.93%	5.36%	1.79%
	HLS	67.95%	29.49%	2.56%	0.00%
Q03	The timing given for consideration of assessed work complied with the indicated schedule.				
	Total	54.05%	40.15%	4.25%	1.54%
	ADSS	59.62%	36.54%	1.92%	1.92%
	BL	53.97%	39.68%	4.76%	1.59%
	CENTRAL	45.45%	45.45%	0.00%	9.09%
	EE	44.44%	48.15%	7.41%	0.00%
	HLS	58.23%	36.71%	3.80%	1.27%
Q04	I received sufficient information on programme/module structure, content, methods of assessment and assessment criteria.				
	Total	66.42%	30.19%	3.40%	0.00%
	ADSS	67.92%	32.08%	0.00%	0.00%
	BL	63.08%	30.77%	6.15%	0.00%
	CENTRAL	63.64%	36.36%	0.00%	0.00%
	EE	64.91%	33.33%	1.75%	0.00%
	HLS	69.62%	25.32%	5.06%	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	69.94%	26.38%	3.07%	0.61%
	ADSS	75.00%	22.22%	2.78%	0.00%
	BL	67.65%	32.35%	0.00%	0.00%
	CENTRAL	83.33%	0.00%	16.67%	0.00%
	EE	59.46%	32.43%	8.11%	0.00%
	HLS	74.00%	24.00%	0.00%	2.00%
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	44.93%	43.48%	8.70%	2.90%
	ADSS	42.86%	50.00%	7.14%	0.00%
	BL	46.67%	46.67%	0.00%	6.67%
	CENTRAL	25.00%	50.00%	25.00%	0.00%
	EE	47.06%	29.41%	17.65%	5.88%
	HLS	47.37%	47.37%	5.26%	0.00%
Q07	Assessment tasks are appropriate to the level of study. They are stimulating and challenging, and enable students to demonstrate knowledge and skills.				
	Total	51.52%	27.27%	9.09%	12.12%
	ADSS	66.67%	33.33%	0.00%	0.00%
	BL	25.00%	50.00%	0.00%	25.00%
	CENTRAL	33.33%	66.67%	0.00%	0.00%
	EE	66.67%	11.11%	11.11%	11.11%
	HLS	57.14%	0.00%	28.57%	14.29%
Total		64.11%	31.56%	3.42%	0.91%

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