Review of External Examiners’ Annual Reports reflecting on the academic year 2018/19

Introduction

This report is a qualitative, thematic summary of External Examiners’ Annual Reports received for the academic year 2018/19. It presents an overview of the good practice, strengths and points raised within the Annual Reports submitted by City’s External Examiners for undergraduate and postgraduate taught programmes, covering programmes across all five Schools, LEaD and validation partners. It is based on a review of all the External Examiner Reports.

External Examining at City is undertaken in line with the QAA Quality Code Advice and Guidance and in accordance with City’s published criteria and processes.

Overall, the review of annual reports for 2018/19 confirms that External Examiners

• are satisfied with academic standards and programmes are comparable with equivalent programmes within the UK sector.
• have confidence in City's ability to maintain the level of teaching, to deliver the content of programmes at the correct level, to deliver the learning outcomes and to appropriately assess students’ understanding of those learning outcomes.
• are satisfied with the administrative processes that City has to support teaching and assessment.

Overview of reporting arrangements

City’s External Examiners number approximately 250, covering programmes across the five Schools including School-managed partnership provision, Learning Enhancement and Development (LEaD) and City’s validation partners.

As a condition of their appointment, External Examiners are required to submit an annual report on the programme(s) or module(s) for which they are responsible after the final assessment board of the academic year. External Examiners may highlight strengths of the programme or areas of good practice which could potentially be applied by other programmes within the respective School or across City. They are also asked to comment on areas that could be improved.

External Examiner Reports are initially received by Student and Academic Services (S&AS), where they are reviewed and strengths, good practice and points for response are identified. Attention is not drawn specifically to standard practice and general comments about the programme. The reports are then passed to Schools (or partner institutions for validated programmes) for review through the usual governance structures. Any matters of great concern would be highlighted directly to the Chair of the Board of Studies (BoS). Boards of Studies are responsible for ensuring that External Examiners receive a response to the comments they raise.¹

¹ This systematic analysis and the ability to prompt action by programme teams was described by the QAA review team at the last Institutional Audit as a “robust process” and identified as a feature of good practice (QAA 2012).
Themes and recommendations arising from 2018/19 Annual Reports

The structure of this thematic report broadly follows the sections and questions in the External Examiner’s reporting template. It is assumed that responses approved by Boards of Studies will have addressed programme-specific issues raised and recommendations therefore focus on common themes.

1. External Examiner role, administrative arrangements and communication

1.1. Comments received by External Examiners indicate that communication from City is effective and, in many cases, exemplary. The administrative arrangements enable the External Examiners to undertake and meet the expectations of the role. The External Examiners commented on being contacted about draft assessment tasks and being invited to make suggestions on amendments or corrections.

1.2. Professional service staff referred to by name were praised as highly organised, responsive and proactive.

1.3. External Examiners generally appreciated communication with respect to administrative and technical matter, including access to and navigation around Moodle. Most importantly, some External Examiners praised the use of Moodle and commented that the efficient use of the tool has made their role easier.

1.4. External Examiners welcomed being informed of assessment schedules in advanced of the assessment period in order to manage the demands of their role. Some External Examiners commended as good practice being sent calendar invites for Assessment Boards early on in the academic year, as soon as the dates are known. It was highlighted that this enabled them to attend and fully contribute to the assessment process.

1.5. Some External Examiners noted the organisation of Moodle pages could be reviewed to make the location of materials clearer. In some reports it was noted that some IT glitches delayed Moodle access, but they commended how these were promptly resolved by the IT Department.

1.6. In some reports External Examiners referred to poor administrative arrangements, for example being informed late of dates of assessment boards or receiving draft assessment tasks to review at short notice. Some External Examiners commented on not receiving a substantial response regarding their comments on examination papers.

1.7. Some External Examiners noted that they have not seen programme handbooks, which would have helped them in reviewing both draft assessment tasks and student work.

Recommendations

1.1 At the commencement of the academic year, Programme Directors and teams should agree the schedule of key dates and activities with the External Examiner. This should include the review and approval of draft assessments, dates for assessment boards and arrangements for the review of assessed work including how to access via Moodle where relevant. Course officers should ensure that calendar invites of assessment boards dates are sent to the External Examiners.

1.2 Programme Teams should inform External Examiners of how they have used and incorporated their comments on draft assessment tasks. If their suggestions cannot be accommodated the rationale for this should be provided.

1.3 Programme handbooks should be made available to External Examiners to view.
2. Curriculum content, programme design and benchmarks (where available)

2.1 The majority of External Examiners were satisfied with the curriculum content and programme design and considered that they were appropriate in enabling students to meet the learning outcomes. Where there were QAA or accreditation benchmarks available, the majority of External Examiners commented that the content aligned with the standards of these. In some cases, the content exceeded the External Examiners’ expectations, and was praised for characteristics such as innovation, currency and continuously aligning with the very latest considerations in the field.

2.2 Some programmes were praised for their evident ability to prepare students for work in the respective fields and/or further study; enabling real world experiences and enhancing employability. There was a consensus that City’s academic provision proved appropriate and was suitably challenging to students at both undergraduate and taught postgraduate level.

2.3 Amongst the notable comments from the External Examiners was praise for the dedication of Programme Directors and teams to ensure that their programme was continuously revised and updated to align with best practice.

2.4 For a small number of programmes, there was commentary on the need for more innovation in approaches.

3. Communication in response to previous reports

3.1 Generally, External Examiners considered that there was clear communication and good dialogue in response to their comments. External Examiners noted the willingness of programme teams to act on their comments in order to make appropriate changes on work reviewed, at any stage of the academic year.

3.2 Some External Examiners who have undertaken the role for more than two years commended on how their suggestions from previous reports have been incorporated over time. Critically, they reported that they could see improvements year on year based on their comments.

3.3 A minority of External Examiners commented that they had received no response or feedback to the suggestions they had made in their annual reports. Some External Examiners commented on the time gap between submitting the report and receiving a response.

**Recommendation**

3.4 External Examiners should receive a response to their report once it has been approved by the Board of Studies (BoS) or Course Board for partner institutions. They should be kept informed of the BoS approval process and when their report is due to be considered by the BoS, particularly where the date of the meeting might mean a significant delay.
4. **Assessment: Methods and Tasks**

4.1 The majority of External Examiners were satisfied with the assessment strategy applied to the modules and programmes. The commentary was highly positive around the variety of assessment methods, which fully test the students’ learning. Some assessment methods were commended as innovative.

4.2 External Examiners’ reports generally indicated that the rigour and challenge presented by the assessment tasks were appropriate. This enabled an accurate judgement of City students’ performance and achievement of the learning outcomes to be made.

4.3 Some reports highly commended the reflection in the assessment methods of the mix between theory and practice. It was highlighted that this design of assessment tasks enables long term continued development in the students’ chosen profession.

4.4 A small number of External Examiners commented on frequent use of assessment tasks, which could lead to a burdensome assessment load especially for weaker students.

5. **Assessment: Marking and Feedback**

5.1 External Examiner reports indicated that the marks given for assessed tasks were fair, appropriate and consistent. External Examiners particularly praised the use of a standardised moderation form that clearly evidence discussion between the first and second marker.

5.2 External Examiners particularly welcomed provision in many cases, of a module report from the module leader. Good practice commended by the External Examiners, included the model answers for reference and a clear rubric within the marking scheme.

5.3 A number of External Examiners highly commended the quality of thorough feedback provided; and noted the benefits to enabling all students’ progression – particularly those with low attainment.

5.4 Some External Examiners commented on inconsistency of feedback provided across the same programme. In some cases, there was no clear justification for the allocated mark. While in most cases, the feedback is considered to be excellent, some External Examiners recommended for the feedback to be clearly attached to the assessment criteria so the students understand how the mark was reached.

5.5 In a small number of cases, External Examiners have not seen any evidence of feedback provided to students.

5.6 A minority of External Examiners have raised concerns over possible grade inflation.

**Recommendations**

5.7 Programme teams should provide evidence to External Examiner of feedback provided to students on assessments. Feedback should be provided via Moodle.

5.8 Programme teams should ensure that feedback is consistent across all modules and that clear justification is given for why a mark has been awarded. Feedback should be clearly attached to the assessment criteria so students and External Examiners can understand how the mark was reached.
6. **Operation of Assessment Boards and Assessment Regulations**

6.1 Comments on the conduct of the Assessment Boards were overwhelmingly positive. External Examiners’ observations referenced the rigour of Boards and the professional and efficient manner in which they were conducted by the Chair. A briefing session prior to the board was also noted as good practice by External Examiners.

6.2 Reference was made to the thoroughness with which marks are scrutinised and the continuous endeavour to ensure that students are treated fairly and equitably, while guided by the Assessment Regulations. Some External Examiners praised the use of students’ names being made anonymous to ensure that biases are avoided.

6.3 Where this was the case, External Examiners praised the programme and administration team for accommodating their attendance at Assessment Boards via Skype or telephone call.

Recommendation

6.4 Where not already the case, programme teams should consider scheduling of briefing session prior to the Assessment Board

7. **Student performance**

7.1 Generally, External Examiners considered that the performance of students at City was at least comparable, to that of students at equivalent institutions, or at their own institution. In some cases, the performance exceeded that with which the External Examiner was familiar. There were some isolated instances where External Examiners felt that student performance was lower than expected. On these occasions, External Examiners highlighted where they perceived the poor performance was most pronounced.

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Student and Academic Services March 2020