

Review of External Examiners' Annual Reports reflecting on the academic year 2019/20

Introduction

This report is a qualitative, thematic summary of External Examiners' Annual Reports received for the academic year 2019/20. 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. Examples of illustrative comments are provided in Appendix 1 for information.

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 2019/20 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.
- are satisfied with the contingency measures put in place by City to respond to the impact on the educational provision by the Covid-19 pandemic.

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) by School Quality & Standards Officers in liaison with S&AS where matters have been identified through the report annotation process. Boards of Studies are responsible for ensuring that External Examiners receive a response to the comments they raise.¹

Introduction from the Academic Lead for External Examining, Professor Rachael-Anne Knight

The thematic report has highlighted the high quality of many aspects of City's provision.

In particular, it is noteworthy that externals are satisfied with the comparability of our academic standards, our ability to teach and assess learning outcomes, with our administrative approaches, and with our Covid contingency measures. This feedback reflects the continuing efforts of all staff to maintain and enhance the quality of teaching learning and assessment.

Of the recommendations raised, Schools and programmes may wish to put in place processes to ensure a reasonable timeframe for externals to review assessed work, and to consider implementing pre-board briefing sessions, where these do not already take place. Sharing of good practice could be enabled by School approaches, such as learning and teaching events, by submitting to the Learning@City conference, and writing for the Learning@City blog. LEaD would also be happy to facilitate workshops on obtaining feedback consistency, and methods by which feedback can be delivered, if colleagues would find this helpful.

Themes and recommendations arising from 2019/20 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 and programme directors 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

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.

and commented that the efficient use of the tool has made their role easier.

- 1.4. External Examiners noted the way programme teams and professional services handled administrative arrangements and communication in spite of the challenges posed by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. Most External Examiners commented on being consulted on changes to assessment arrangements as a result of the pandemic and appreciated their involvement in adapting the educational provisions.
- 1.5. External Examiners who joined City for the first time in 2019/20, felt welcome to the role and included in the programme despite not being able to physically attend meetings. Good support for starters is noted several times and some External Examiners praised the institutional External Examiners Induction.
- 1.6. Overall External Examiners commended the institutional response to the pandemic and appreciated that they were centrally informed of the contingency regulations and other changes implemented by the University.
- 1.7. In last year's report some External Examiners commented on IT difficulties and Moodle access. This year, a few External Examiners have commented on how the Moodle access has been much improved in comparison to last year. However, in some reports IT glitches were noted to have delayed Moodle access. Overall, it was commended how these were promptly resolved by programme administrators alongside the IT Department.
- 1.8. Some External Examiners commented on the tight turnaround times for review. Where this was the case, it was noted that this was a challenging year, and the tight turnaround was a direct result of the difficulties posed by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Recommendations

- 1.9. Programme Teams should ensure that External Examiners are given a reasonable timeframe for review of students' work in line with the timing of assessment boards. Where this is impacted due to unforeseen circumstances, it is recommended that programme team discuss a mutually convenient timeframe with their External Examiners.

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.

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 to make appropriate changes on work reviewed, at any stage of the academic year.
- 3.2 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 Some External Examiners in their final year of appointments commended the programme teams on their dedication in improving their programmes and ensuring that these remain relevant over the Externals' tenure.

4. Assessment: Methods and Tasks

- 4.1 Most 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 Generally External Examiners recognised that assessment has been one of the main challenges during the 2019-20 academic year. External Examiners commended the way programmes teams responded to the challenge and adapted assessment without compromising learning outcomes.
- 4.3 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.
- 4.4 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.
- 4.5 Some External Examiners shared the way their own institutions adapted assessment as a result of the challenges brought by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Where good practice was shared, External Examiners recommended for programme teams to explore new options for adapting assessment in the new academic year.

Recommendations

- 4.6. Where External Examiners shared good practice in relation to adapting assessment, programme teams are recommended to highlight these for discussion and dissemination at School and University Learning and Teaching Committees and where applicable consider the outcomes at Board of Studies.

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 Several 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 have commented on the fact that assessment feedback tends to be brief for students at the higher end of marks. In those cases, External Examiners recommended more meaningful feedback to ensure that those students can improve and obtain an even better grade.
- 5.5 In some cases, External Examiners noted lack of consistency in the quality of feedback between markers on the same module. Where this was the case, it was suggested that staff need to take a consistent approach in terms of the platform they use and the quality of feedback.

Recommendations

- 5.6 Programme teams should ensure that feedback is consistent across all modules and between markers in as far as possible. Staff should also ensure that they take a consistent feedback approach across modules and cohorts in terms of the platform they use. As noted in the introduction from the Academic Lead for External Examining LEaD could facilitate workshops on obtaining feedback consistency, and methods by which feedback can be delivered. It is recommended that programme teams contact LEaD to discuss feedback workshops.

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 it they were conducted by the Chair. A briefing session prior to the board was also noted as good practice by External Examiners.

- 6.2 Generally External Examiners praised the move to virtual Assessment Boards and congratulated the programme and administrative teams for their smooth running of these. In some cases, External Examiners recommended for the Assessment Boards to be run remotely permanently.
- 6.3 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 identified the use of students' names being made anonymous to ensure that biases are avoided as good practice.
- 6.4 For 2019-20 External Examiners were asked to comment on how the Assessment Boards mitigated and/ or noted the impact of Covid-19 on assessment. The comments received were very positive with External Examiners noting as good practice the way Chairs summarised the contingency changes put in place. It was also noted that External Examiners appreciated receiving the contingency regulations ahead of the Assessment Board.
- 6.5 In some cases, External Examiners felt that the comparison and evaluation of module marks was not as useful this year as in previous years.

Recommendation

- 6.6 Where not already the case, programme teams should consider scheduling a briefing session for External Examiners prior to the Assessment Board. This was noted as an example of good practice in some programmes by External Examiners .

7. Student performance

- 7.1 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 their conversations with the programme teams regarding these observations and recommendations for improvement.

8. Summary of Recommendations

The recommendations from this report are noted below:

- 8.1 Programme Teams should ensure that External Examiners are given a reasonable timeframe for review of students' work in line with the timing of assessment boards. Where this is impacted due to unforeseen circumstances, it is recommended that programme team discuss a mutually convenient timeframe with their External Examiners.

- 8.2 Where External Examiners shared good practice in relation to adapting assessment, programme teams are recommended to highlight these for discussion and dissemination at School and University Learning and Teaching Committees and where applicable consider the outcomes at Board of Studies.
- 8.3 Programme teams should ensure that feedback is consistent across all modules and between markers in as far as possible. Staff should also ensure that they take a consistent feedback approach across modules and cohorts in terms of the platform they use. As noted in the introduction from the Academic Lead for External Examining, LEaD could facilitate workshops on obtaining feedback consistency and methods by which feedback can be delivered. It is recommended that programme teams contact LEaD to discuss feedback workshops.
- 8.4 Where not already the case, programme teams should consider scheduling a briefing session for External Examiners prior to the Assessment Board. This was noted as an example of good practice in some programmes by External Examiners .

Madalina Glavan
Quality and Standards Officer

Student and Academic Services June 2021