

## Overview of Assessment Boards 2014/15

### Summary

Senate is responsible for the maintenance of the academic standards of the University's educational provision. In accordance with Senate policy, a sample range of Progression and/or Award Boards for Undergraduate and taught Postgraduate programmes were attended during 2014/15. In addition, an Internal Audit focussing on Assessment Boards was carried out on behalf of Senate during 2014/15.

This report summarises the outcome of the sampling of Assessment Board operation and highlights elements of good practice, the areas for improvement that were identified, and recommendations for consideration by Education and Student Committee prior to being taken forward to Senate.

### Recommended Action

Education and Student Committee is asked to:

- **note** the report in relation to maintenance of academic standards
- **approve** the recommendations to be taken forward to Senate

# OVERVIEW OF ASSESSMENT BOARDS 2014/15

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Senate is responsible for the maintenance of the academic standards of the University's educational provision. A primary mechanism by which this duty is discharged is through the operation of Assessment Boards. Following a review of the operation of Assessment Boards across the University in 2011 overseen by Senate, it was agreed to report periodically on their operation. The current Senate policy is that a sample of Boards will be attended by a member of Student and Academic Services each year, and any Board which has an element of collaborative provision will be attended as standard practice.

### ***2014/15 Progression and Awards Boards***

During 2014/15 18%<sup>1</sup> of Progression and/or Awards Boards were attended by or on behalf of Student and Academic Services. This year, a collaborative approach was taken to attendance with a number of School-based senior Professional Services staff undertaking this role. This attendance was in addition to support provided within the Schools or at partner institutions. The majority of Boards attended involve an element of partnership activity, for instance an articulation arrangement or joint delivery. The sample covered Boards for Undergraduate and Postgraduate Taught provision. In addition, a member of the Student and Academic Services attended Assessment Boards at all validated provision.

### ***Internal Audit Report: Assessment Board Controls***

In July 2015, Senate received the University's Internal Audit Report based on the 2013/14 Assessment Boards. Whilst Senate noted that a substantial level of assurance was given to the adequacy and effectiveness of the system of internal control there were 6 *Priority 2* and 4 *Priority 3* recommendations. These centred around Assessment Board composition and voting, anonymous consideration of marks by Boards, format and provision of key documentation for Boards and the clarity of reporting from Extenuating Circumstances Panels and Assessment Boards.

Senate has approved updates to the Regulations requiring Boards to consider marks anonymously from 2015/16 and Guidance for Extenuating Circumstances Panels is currently under development. The outcomes of the Internal Audit were used to inform both the 2014/15 Briefing Sessions for Assessment Boards and the updates to the standard agenda and guidance notes for Boards.

### ***Assessment Board Briefing Sessions***

Following recommendations made in the 2013/14 Assessment Board Operation report, a series of Briefing Sessions were held in May/June 2015 for new and existing Chairs, Secretaries and Professional Services staff supporting the Boards. A total of 105 staff attended the sessions which were delivered jointly by academic and professional services staff. The sessions were designed to provide updates on key information in preparation for the Boards and to share good practice.

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<sup>1</sup> 33/138 Progression and Awards Board held between September 2014-August 2015. The 33 Interim Assessment Panels were not attended.

## **2. OPERATION OF THE ASSESSMENT BOARDS**

In accordance with Senate Regulations (Regulation 19), each year Senate approves Chairs of Assessment Boards on recommendation from the Board of Studies (or VIP Committee for validated provision). All but one of the sampled Boards were chaired by a senior member of staff from the Senate approved Register of Chairs.

All Boards sampled were quorate (i.e one third of ex-officio members were present). Most Boards had good levels of attendance from internal panel members (programme staff) however some only just achieved quoracy.

In opening the meeting, some Chairs took the opportunity to ensure that members understood the scope of their roles at the Board. Members' roles were not discussed explicitly at other Boards with the assumption being that individuals understood their role. There were a small number of instances when members attempted to act outside of their remit but in these cases guidance was provided by the Chair or a member of Professional Services staff.

The majority of Boards ran smoothly and in accordance with Section 2 of the Assessment Regulations and the Assessment Board Guidance. Discussions were generally robust and clear decisions were made to enable accurate minutes to be taken. Some points of good practice and areas for improvement were identified, which are discussed in more detail later in this report.

### ***Agenda and supporting documentation***

Most Boards used the current standard agenda, which is designed to highlight key areas for discussion and consideration as well as a set of standard preliminary items (confirmation of last minutes, equal opportunities, conflicts of interest etc). The agenda is supplemented by the *Guidance Notes for Assessment Boards* published in the University's Quality Manual and updated annually to reflect regulatory and procedural changes.

The *Guidance Notes for Assessment Boards* set out the standard documentation to be provided to the Board. Most Boards provided copies of these key documents which include the last minutes and University Assessment Regulations. Some Boards also provided programme specific regulations.

Assessment Boards should be provided with the outcomes and recommendations from any Extenuating Circumstances and Academic Misconduct Panels. In most cases these were available however some Boards were awaiting pending decisions so it would be necessary for Chair's action to be taken after the meeting.

### ***Marks Data and Statistics***

The results were generally well-presented in the agreed format with attention drawn to those that were not at the required standard. The results sheets were considered systematically and clear and robust decisions were made in line with the University regulations. Some decisions were debated at length prior to agreement being reached, particularly those regarding non-standard results and profiles.

It is noted that there is a desire to improve the formats of the marks reports for use at Assessment Boards and there were instances where errors were identified with marks calculations on Board reports. It has been proposed that work to identify and resolve issues encountered by Professional Services staff in collating and producing marks data for Assessment Boards will be progressed as part of the University's developing *Transformation Programme* to improve systems and processes.

Both the Senate Assessment and Feedback Policy and the Assessment Regulation for Assessment Boards provide the option to consider marks anonymously. During 2014/15 60% of sampled Boards considered marks anonymously however it was noted that all Boards would be required to do so in future following an update to the Regulations for 2015/16.

The presence and presentation of statistical data varied across the Boards with discussion taking place at some Boards relating to distribution of marks.

### ***Internal Board Members***

Many internal Board members were familiar with the Assessment Regulations and any approved variations for the programme. Some members would have benefited from a more thorough working knowledge of the Regulations to support them in discussing more complex cases and reduce instances of confusion and debate, however Chairs and/or colleagues conversant with the Regulations generally provided clear guidance in these cases.

### ***External Examiners***

External Examiners were present at most of the sampled Assessment Boards and carried out their duties in accordance with published guidance. For Boards considering multiple programmes, most relevant External Examiners were present.

The External Examiners were given an opportunity to provide a verbal report in accordance with the standard agenda. The verbal reports were constructive and highlighted key observations, good practice and some suggestions for enhancements. Overall, feedback from External Examiners was very positive in terms of their relationship with the University and many aspects of the programmes they are assigned to.

### ***Student Engagement***

The Regulations state that Boards have discretion whether to offer a resit opportunity if a student has not attended an assessment or submitted work. The threshold for non-participation in assessments can vary across Boards and on occasion can be the subject of debate, particularly for those Boards which did not operate anonymously.

### ***Risk Management***

Following discussion by Senate in March 2015, Assessment Board Chairs are required to highlight any significant risks identified by Boards to be reported to Boards of Studies and Senate. The standard agenda now includes an opportunity to record any such matters and Chairs used this opportunity to raise a number of concerns for further investigation or action. Matters noted during the Boards included:

- matters to be clarified within programme documentation such as resolving inconsistencies relating to assessment/component weighting and assessment questions
- discrepancies in the marks recorded in the Board reports which had occurred during manual transfer from other sources
- timing of availability and/or confirmation of marks for the Boards including those for shared modules
- discussion about individual students' extenuating circumstances at a Board
- oversight of academic misconduct within all modules in a programme to ensure Academic Misconduct Panels have sufficient information to recommend appropriate sanctions for students

Chair's identified where actions would be progressed by Schools and reported to Boards of Studies where appropriate. As noted above a proposal to incorporate work to support

production of Assessment Board data within the *Transformation Project* has been made. The current review of Assessment Regulations review and associated work will incorporate consideration of extenuating circumstances and academic misconduct.

### 3. GOOD PRACTICE

A number of points of good practice were observed, for instance where Chairs ensured that:

- Board members were clear about their roles
- Attention was drawn to relevant aspects of the Assessment Regulations, particularly where PSRB requirements applied
- Marks were verified and any queries resolved ahead of the Assessment Board, for instance through use of a Preliminary Assessment Panel.
- Members were asked to consider and comment on statistical analysis of distribution of marks, modules with a high proportion of low marks, and trends (e.g. comparisons with prior years, across modules, including shared modules, and programmes). Some Chairs encouraged Boards to identify solutions and assigned actions to programme teams to provide further analysis on issues, for instance retention or failure rates on certain modules.
- Where complex or non-standard issues had been discussed, the outcome of the discussion was summarised for the Board to ensure that the Officer could clearly minute the outcome.
- Marks would not be released to students until final verification processes had been completed (for instance, by producing a pass list to support administrative checking).

The attendance of the External Examiner(s) at Boards provided valuable externality in the assurance of quality and standards and some constructive feedback.

### 4. AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

As noted above, the Boards generally operated well, however there were some inconsistencies in practice that would benefit from further consideration. Some of these issues may be addressed by clarification of current regulation, policy or procedures whilst others would be through guidance and training.

- **Assessment Board composition and quoracy**  
One Chair had not been approved by Senate and some Boards were only just quorate.
- **Agenda and key information**  
Standard agenda had not been used at all the sampled Boards so key areas such as ensuring no conflicts of interest and identifying risks were not covered. All Progression, Assessment and Resit Boards should ensure that members have access to the Assessment Regulations, Programme Specification/Programme Handbook and any PSRB requirements which apply over and above the University Regulations (either in hard copy or on an iPad).
- **Marks data**  
Some Boards were unable to make a decision due to missing data (for instance where there were errors or uncertainties relating to marks on the results grids, pending Academic Misconduct information or a lack of clarity relating to EC Panel decisions). The use of Chair's action at a later date takes matters outside the power of the Board.

Queries relating to marks should be resolved prior to the Assessment Boards. The use of Preliminary Assessment Panels would reduce the need for debate at the Boards to enable clear decisions to be made, particularly where programmes have numerous modules and components.

- **Use and Interpretation of Regulations**

Inconsistencies in the application of the Regulations were noted at a number of Boards. Senate has approved further work to be undertaken to update the Assessment Regulations to support consistency of practice.

- **Extenuating Circumstances**

There is differential practice in the recording of extenuating circumstances against individual results. Boards should receive and consider the Extenuating Circumstance (EC) Panel recommendations but there is some variation in how this is interpreted; some Boards presenting the full EC panel report and decision, whilst others just add a notation in the comments column of the results report indicating ECs had been considered (but not the outcome). The full Assessment Board is only required to accept the recommendations of the EC Panel for approved claims. When information was not clear, decisions were deferred until the matter could be investigated and Chair's action would be taken at a later date. There was one instance where Board members were provided with particular students' ECs and considered them during the meeting which contravenes University policy and practice.

- **Statistical Analysis of Data**

All Boards are expected to consider statistical analysis of the distributions of marks both within and between modules. Whilst most of the Boards attended had statistical information available, there was variation in the type and nature of statistics used and level of discussion. Further work is required to provide more detailed guidance on the production of statistics, or to pre-define the statistics that should be presented to the Boards, to ensure consistency across the University and enable wider analysis to take place and a common baseline would be useful to Schools and the University.

## 5. RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

The following recommendations arise from the sampling review process. If approved by Senate, the specific timing for implementation would be considered by Education and Student Committee in early 2016 alongside other work that has been designated priority.

- i. **Assessment Board composition and quoracy**

It is proposed that the composition of Assessment Board membership is reviewed as part of the wider review of the Assessment Regulations, and that additional guidance is developed to support the role of Internal Panel members. In order to support Boards to achieve quoracy it is recommended that the list of Internal Panel members for each programme is approved by each Board of Studies at the start of the academic year to ensure all relevant modules will be represented at the Board.

- ii. **Briefing Sessions and Guidance**

Further briefings sessions will be held for existing and new Chairs and Secretaries to offer an opportunity to prepare for the 2015/16 Boards, promote a consistent approach across the University and share good practice. Sessions will be facilitated by academic and professional services staff and feedback from this year's sessions will be used to tailor

content. Feedback will also be sought on the *Guidance Notes for Assessment Boards* to identify the scope of additional information that would be useful for Boards.

iii. **Assessment Regulations**

Work to update the Regulations to improve consistency of practice and equitable treatment of students will continue as approved by Senate, informed by consultation with Boards of Studies on key areas. The sub-group of Education and Student Committee will continue to oversee the work and an updated set of Regulations will be brought forward for consideration and approval for 2016/17.

iv. **Agenda and key information**

The standard agenda should be used by all Boards to support consistency across the University. Key information such as confirmed marks and recommendations from Extenuating Circumstances Panels and Academic Misconduct Panels must be available prior to or at the Board to enable clear decisions to be made by the Board so matters are not deferred for later Chair's action.

It is recommended that Preliminary Assessment Panels are used to resolve queries and confirm marks for modules. A set of *Panel Guidance Notes* are being developed to support Extenuating Circumstances Panels and the current Assessment Regulations review will include consideration of academic misconduct guidance.

v. **Assessment Board data and statistical analysis**

Additional guidance on the use of statistics would be useful for Boards, for instance the minimum statistical analysis to be provided for all modules to enable the University to monitor performance and trends. This would be informed by existing good practice utilised by a number of Boards and a number of attendees of this years' Briefing Sessions expressed an interest in assisting with development of a set of guidelines.

vi. **Student Engagement**

It is recommended that further guidance is developed to support Boards in making decisions relating to students who do not participate in assessment. It is proposed that this will be taken forward as part of the broader current work on student engagement and retention.

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