

Overview of Assessment Boards 2015/16

Summary

Senate is responsible for the maintenance of the academic standards of City'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 2015/16.

This report summarises the outcome of the sampling of Assessment Board operation and highlights elements of good practice and some areas for improvement that were identified. This year's report also includes a summary of feedback on the conduct of Assessment Boards from External Examiner Annual Reports.

The report includes a set of recommendations for consideration by Education and Student Committee prior to being taken forward to Senate.

The new HEFCE operating model for quality assessment requires HE providers' governing bodies to provide annual assurances relating to their oversight of academic governance arrangements including the setting and maintaining of standards of awards. In particular these will include assurances on the reliability of degree standards.

Recommended Action

Education and Student Committee is asked to:

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

OVERVIEW OF ASSESSMENT BOARDS 2015/16

1. INTRODUCTION

Senate is responsible for the maintenance of the academic standards of City's educational provision. Assessment Boards are sub-committees of Senate with delegated authority to approve Awards and degree classifications. The primary purpose of an Assessment Board is to ensure the standards of City's academic Awards and consistency and fairness in the application of the Assessment Regulations.

Following a Senate review of Assessment Boards in 2011, an annual report on Assessment Board operation is received by Senate based on a sample of Boards held in the previous academic year. Current Senate policy requires that a member of Student and Academic Services attends the sampled Boards, together with any Board which has an element of collaborative provision, as standard practice.

2015/16 Progression and Awards Boards

During 2015/16, 19%¹ of undergraduate and taught postgraduate Progression and/or Awards Boards were attended by or on behalf of Student and Academic Services. A collaborative approach is taken to attendance and a number of School-based senior Professional Services staff form part of the pool of staff undertaking this role². The majority of Boards attended involve an element of partnership activity, for instance an articulation arrangement or joint delivery. A member of the Student and Academic Services also attended Assessment Boards at all validated institutions.

Assessment Board Briefing Sessions and Guidance Notes

In 2014/15, Briefing Sessions were introduced for Chairs, Secretaries and School Professional Services staff who support the Boards. The annual sessions are designed to brief new and existing staff in an Assessment Board role, to share good practice and to provide updates on regulations and other key information in preparation for the Boards.

The *Guidance Notes for Assessment Boards* are published in City's Quality Manual and are updated annually to reflect regulatory and procedural changes.

HEFCE Annual Provider Review

The new HEFCE operating model for quality assessment requires HE providers' governing bodies to provide annual assurances relating to their oversight of academic governance arrangements including the setting and maintaining of standards of awards.

From 2015/16, Council will have to provide annual assurances to HEFCE relating to:

- the continuous improvement of the student academic experience and of student outcomes
- the reliability of degree standards

As part of this assurance, Council will be required to submit a declaration to HEFCE on behalf of City stating that:

'the standards of the awards for which we are responsible set and maintained'

Senate's oversight of Assessment Board operation will continue to form part of the annual assurance reports to Council.

¹ 28/148 Progression and Awards Board held between September 2015-October 2016. The 24 Interim Assessment Panels were not attended.

² Attendance is in addition to the support provided by Professional Services staff within the Schools or partner institution

2. OPERATION OF THE ASSESSMENT BOARDS

2.1. Assessment Board Chairs

In accordance with Senate Regulations (Regulation 19), each year Senate approves the Chairs of Assessment Boards on recommendation from the Boards of Studies (or VIP Committee for validated provision).

All the sampled Boards were chaired by a senior member of staff from the Senate approved Register of Chairs.

2.2. Quoracy

The updated Assessment Regulations for 2016/17 confirm that Assessment Boards are sub-committees of Senate with delegated authority to approve Awards and degree classifications. As such, the Regulations state that an appropriate representation of members must be in attendance at the Assessment Board for it to conduct its business and the Board must be quorate in order for it to have the power to make decisions affecting progression or final Award.

All of the sampled Boards in 2015/16 were quorate (i.e one third of the non *ex officio* members were present). Most Boards had good levels of attendance from internal panel members (programme staff) however this is not always the case and some Boards are only just quorate.

Internal Board Members

The standard Board of Studies Agenda includes provision for the list of Internal Assessment Board members for each programme to be approved by Boards of Studies and the expectations regarding attendance to be confirmed at the start of the academic year. This is to support forward planning and ensure that Assessment Boards confirming Progression or Award will be quorate and that there will be appropriate representation of the programme and relevant modules at the Boards.

2.3. Agenda

The current standard agenda is designed to highlight key areas for discussion and consideration as well as a set of standard preliminary items (such as confirmation of the last minutes, commitment of equal opportunities, declarations regarding conflicts of interest and identification of risk).

All the sampled Assessment Boards had used the standard agenda and in most cases the agenda was followed systematically at the Board. In some cases however items such as the Risk Management section (which highlights any significant risks or issues to be reported to the Board of Studies or Senate) were omitted (see 2.8 below).

2.4. Supporting documentation

The *Guidance Notes for Assessment Boards* set out the standard documentation to be provided to the Board.

Most of the sampled Boards provided copies of some or all of the key documents for the Boards' information including the last minutes. Some Boards also provided programme specific regulations and the minutes of Preliminary Assessment Panels.

2.5. Roles

Some Chairs took the opportunity to conduct introductions for the benefit of the External Examiner and staff new to the Board, and ensure that members understood the scope of their roles at the Board. At other Boards, members' roles were not discussed explicitly with the assumption that individuals understood their role.

Many internal Board members were familiar with the Assessment Regulations and any approved variations for the programme. There were a small number of instances when members attempted to act outside of their remit or override the Regulations but in these cases guidance was provided by the Chair or a member of Professional Services staff.

2.6. Marks Data and Statistics

Anonymity

From 2015/16 the Senate Assessment Regulations state that Assessment Boards must consider marks anonymously. During 2014/15, 60% of sampled Boards considered marks anonymously. In 2015/16, with the exception of two Boards which erroneously provided names for some students, all considered marks anonymously.

Some Boards provided Chairs and Secretaries with full student names and there was some debate about whether this should be extended to Programme Directors. It is not recommended that this is permitted as marks data should have been verified and any initial queries resolved in advance, for instance by a Preliminary Assessment Panel. Preliminary Assessment Panels are not required to be anonymous as they do not make decisions on progression or award.³

Marks Data

Student results were generally well-presented in the agreed format, with those that were not at the required standard marked clearly. The results sheets were considered systematically by the sampled Boards.

In general, clear and robust decisions were made in line with the Assessment Regulations. At some Boards, queries that should be resolved prior to the meeting were raised by some members. For instance, some decisions on progression or award were debated at length by Board members prior to agreement being reached, for instance where a student had marks which were near, but not within 0.5%, of a borderline⁴. Following discussion it was confirmed that marks could not be rounded except as permitted by the Regulations. The use of Preliminary Assessment Panels would reduce the need for debate on regulatory matters at the Boards and enable members to focus on those areas that need to be discussed.

Where Programmes share modules with other Schools, it was not always apparent how differing rules relating to calculations of marks apply. It should be made clear within the specific Programme Regulations and Specifications where any variations have been approved.

Extenuating Circumstances and Academic Misconduct Information

Assessment Boards should be provided with the outcomes and recommendations from any Extenuating Circumstances (ECs) (for approved EC claims only) and Academic Misconduct (AM) Panels.

The results data presented to the Board normally highlight which students have had ECs or AMs during the relevant period, but there is differential practice in the recording of the EC or AM Panel recommendations against individual results. It is not always clear what the recommendations of the Panels were which can mean that records of decision making processes may be unclear, or have to be deferred until the matter can be investigated requiring a Chair's action to be taken at a later date outside the Board.

Statistical Analysis

The Assessment Boards are an opportunity to examine the performance of students against each module with the External Examiner and assess the overall health of a programme. The standard Agenda and *Assessment Board Guidance Notes* prompt the inclusion and discussion of relevant statistics for each module. All Boards are expected to consider statistical analysis of the distributions of marks both within and between modules.

³ Preliminary Assessment Panels may recommend that marks should be scaled, but must not change individual marks (unless this is to correct an error; with a written rationale minuted)

⁴ The 2015/16 Regulations enable a Board to round up marks that are no more than 0.5% below the pass mark or classification boundary subject to criteria stated within the Regulations.

The presence and presentation of statistical data varied across the Boards and there was variation in the type and nature of statistics used and level of discussion. The majority provided some statistical data but in many cases this was not discussed during the Board.

Some Boards took the opportunity to consider the statistical data and discuss the distribution of marks within and between modules with relevant internal and external Board members. This was generally prompted by the Chair and sometimes by the External Examiner. There was a request by an External Examiner for the statistical analysis to be circulated prior to the Board, rather than on the day, to enable greater time for consideration.

A number of Internal and External Examiners requested that previous years' statistics are made available so that trends could be identified.

Two of the Boards reported issues with the accuracy of the statistics extracted from SITS. Further work is required to identify where errors in the SITS extracts occur and to provide more detailed guidance on the production of statistics or pre-define the statistics that should be presented to the Boards. This will support consistency of operation and enable wider analysis to take place and a common baseline would be useful to Schools and Senate.

2.7. 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 of the relevant External Examiners were present.

If External Examiners are unable to attend the Boards, they should be asked to provide written summaries for discussion at the Board and these had generally been provided where relevant.

The External Examiners present at the Boards were given an opportunity to provide a verbal report in accordance with the standard agenda. Several External Examiners provided comments on performance on specific modules. Overall, feedback from External Examiners was positive and their observations and suggestions were accepted by the Boards.

2.8. 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 includes a specific item as an opportunity to record any such matters. Some Chairs used this opportunity to generate discussion and/or raise a concerns for further investigation or action, but in some cases Chairs omitted to acknowledge this agenda item.

Where issues were highlighted, it was not always clear how the matter would be progressed or escalated. Chairs should identify how actions would be progressed by Schools and whether they would be reported to Boards of Studies or Senate where appropriate.

2.9. External Examiner Annual Reports

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

This year, a review was undertaken of the comments relating to Assessment Board operation as submitted by External Examiners following the Boards in their 2015/16 Annual Reports. These comments are routinely considered and managed by Boards of Studies but are not reported to Senate separately.

A sample of 100 reports were reviewed for External Examiners' comments relating to '***the processes for assessment and determination of awards, including the soundness and fairness of the conduct of the Assessment Board.***'

Where External Examiners had commented on Assessment Board conduct, all but two of the sample confirmed that the Boards attended had operated according to the expected standards. Some noted that scrupulous internal processes had been followed in order for the awards to be determined.

The External Examiners that were unsatisfied with the Assessment Board operation noted that this was due to excessive discussion about application of regulations that should have been resolved prior to the Board, for instance details regarding ECs and AMs.

A number of the External Examiners expressed a desire to see the statistical analysis provided in more digestible formats and alongside previous years' statistics to aid discussion and analysis.

2.10. Operational Overview

The 2014/15 Assessment Board Operation report had noted a number of inconsistencies in the way the Assessment Regulations had been interpreted by Assessment Boards. The overview informed work undertaken to revise the Assessment Regulations in 2015/16.

During 2015/16 the majority of Boards ran smoothly and in accordance with the Assessment Regulations and the Assessment Board Guidance. Discussions were generally robust with clear decisions being made to enable accurate minutes to be taken. Some points of good practice and areas for improvement were noted as detailed below.

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 and Programme Regulations for the benefit of internal and external members of the Board
- 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.
- Where complex or non-standard issues are discussed, the outcome of the discussion are 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).

4. AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT AND RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

As noted above, the Boards generally operated well, however there were some areas of practice that would benefit from further consideration. 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 2017 alongside other work that has been designated priority.

The recommendations support the continuous review and enhancement of City's quality frameworks noting the forthcoming assurances required by HEFCE.

i. Assessment Board Composition and Quoracy

The revised HEFCE operating model for quality assessment will require Council to provide annual assurances relating to oversight of City's academic governance arrangements including the setting and maintaining of standards of awards, and in particular the reliability of degree standards.

The 2016/17 Assessment Regulations confirm the quoracy requirements for Assessment Boards to have the power to make decisions affecting progression or final Award.

It is recommended that Deans ensure via Boards of Studies that Assessment Boards have appropriate representation of members to conduct their business, and that the Boards of Studies monitor quoracy during 2016/17 on behalf of Senate.

ii. **Briefing Sessions and Guidance**

The Assessment Regulations for 2016/17 have been updated and it is recommended that further briefings sessions will be held for existing and new Chairs, Secretaries and Professional Staff supporting Assessment Boards. The sessions will provide updates on the revised Assessment Regulations, promote a consistent approach to the operation of Assessment Boards and share good practice. Sessions will be facilitated by academic and professional services staff.

Feedback would also be sought on the *Guidance Notes for Assessment Boards* to identify the scope of additional information that would be useful for Boards, and in particular additional guidance will be developed to support the role of Internal Panel members.

iii. **Agenda and key information**

The standard agenda should be used by all Boards to support consistency of practice. 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.

Chairs should ensure that the standard agenda is followed and attention drawn to all items so that a consistent approach is adopted across all Boards. When considering the Risk Management section of the agenda, clear actions should be defined for dealing with any issues considered as a risk and where these will be noted (e.g. Boards of Studies or Senate).

iv. **Preliminary Assessment Panels**

It is recommended that Preliminary Assessment Panels are used where appropriate to resolve queries, confirm marks for modules prior to submission to the Assessment Boards and to provide evidence of discussion to support any non-standard recommendations being made to the Board.

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

It has previously been reported that there is a desire to improve the formats of the marks reports for use at Assessment Boards to support decision making. It is proposed that this work will be considered as part of the *Transformation Programme* and work would be undertaken to identify and resolve issues encountered by Professional Services staff in collating and producing accurate marks and statistical data for Assessment Boards.

The Progression and Final Assessment Boards should provide statistical information and are an opportunity to discuss student performance and the overall health of the programme with the External Examiner present.

It is recommended that work be undertaken to provide additional guidance on the use of statistics, for instance the minimum statistical analysis to be provided for all modules to enable City to monitor performance and trends for both existing and new modules. This would be informed by existing good practice utilised by a number of Assessment Boards.

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Student and Academic Services

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