External Examiners’ Reports for Postgraduate Taught Programmes 2015/16

University Overview

The Taught Programmes Sub-Committee (TPSC) considered the Faculty summary reports of External Examiners’ Reports for the 2015/16 academic year at its meetings held on 4 April and 9 May 2017. University Learning, Teaching and Student Experience Committee endorsed the proposed actions at its meeting on 7 June 2017.

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| 1. | • External examiners confirmed the standards of Newcastle University awards as well as the standards of the achievements of the University’s students, and found that both of these were comparable with standards at other institutions in the UK.  
• No major concerns were identified, although a number of external examiners raised issues for the attention of the University. These issues are being followed up by LTDS on behalf of the University, and external examiners will receive a response from the institution.  
• In the majority of cases, FLTSECs were satisfied that all boards of studies had been meeting their responsibilities for considering and addressing external examiners’ reports. Any responses deemed unsatisfactory by FLTSEC were returned to the relevant school for revision.  
• One external examiner had not submitted their report despite repeated chasing in accordance with University policy. |
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| Issues of strategy, policy and process identified by external examiners that raise issues relating to University strategy, policy or process |
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| 2. | • Procedures  
• A small number of external examiners’ reports for programmes within HaSS had not been submitted as a result of the external examiners resigning their appointments, citing the Universities and Colleges Union pay dispute as grounds. The University’s emergency regulations were invoked to ensure that Boards of Examiners took place as planned, and that standards could be confirmed.  
• That one external examiner within the Faculty of Science, Agriculture and Engineering had raised a number of concerns regarding the functionality of the online external examiner system, and in particular the size of the text boxes provided for their comments. |
| | • To mitigate the risk of further disruption as a result of industrial action, ULTSEC agreed at its meeting on 3 May 2017 that a formal notice period of three months should be introduced for all new external examiner appointments. This has now been incorporated into the Policy for External Examiners of Taught Programmes.  
• TPSC suggested that comments about the online external examiner system should be considered as |
3. **Quality Management**

1. That a small number of external examiners had recommended fuller use of the marking range especially but not exclusively at the upper end, and had also requested clearer audit trails for moderation and mark reconciliation. FLTSEC members had been asked to report the need for moderation and mark reconciliation to be auditable back to their boards of studies and to check that appropriate procedures were in place.

2. That one external examiner had queried a lack of consultation by the programme-owning School regarding major programme changes.

3. That attendance at Boards of Examiners by externals was a problem in some areas and many were unable to attend because of other commitments.

4. That the Faculty of Medical Sciences had asked the University to consider providing guidance to external examiners covering multiple programmes to ensure that comments specific to all programmes were included in their report, and that it was clear to which programme individual comments related.

5. That one external examiner within the Faculty of Science, Agriculture and Engineering, appointed from the EU, had been unfamiliar with the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications.

6. That one external examiner within the Faculty of Science, Agriculture and Engineering had queried why there was no policy on the re-use of examination questions, and was concerned about the potential repeated use of questions from one year to the next as this could undermine the security of assessment.

7. That a number of external examiners had requested access to Blackboard to help them fulfil their duties.

8. That the requirement for external examiners to review draft assessments did not seem to work well at taught postgraduate level, in part because assessments were often negotiated between staff and students.

9. That one external examiner had raised issues about progression at the end of the taught stage. TPSC noted that a minor change to the Postgraduate Taught Examination Conventions had been agreed by ULTSEC for 2017-18, clarifying that students were normally expected to proceed to the dissertation even if they were taking resits, but that programme regulations could seek an exemption from the normal rule.

1. FLTSEC members had been asked to report the need for moderation and mark reconciliation to be auditable back to their boards of studies and to check that appropriate procedures were in place.

2. FLTSEC had recommended to boards of studies that all externals should be briefed on changes to programmes in cases where they had not been formally consulted.

3. TPSC suggested that the University could consider running a pilot of external examiner attendance by skype or video conference at Boards of Examiners for taught postgraduate programmes. Action: LTDS to manage a small pilot of virtual external examiner attendance at Boards of Examiners for PGT programmes during 2017-18.

4. TPSC suggested that it was most appropriate for individual Schools to negotiate with their external examiners about how they could be encouraged to provide more specific information within their reports.

5. TPSC suggested that Schools should be reminded of the need to ensure that all nominees for external examiner appointments were familiar with the external reference points with which the standards of the University’s awards were required to be in alignment.

6. TPSC suggested that, whilst there was not institutional policy on the re-use of questions, the normal expectation would be that questions should not be repeated in successive years (with the exception of multiple choice questions). Re-sit
papers would also be exempt from the normal expectation as these papers were not published and therefore not freely available.

7. TPSC noted that it was possible for Schools to arrange access to Blackboard.

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<td>Some external examiners with responsibility for programmes that were the subject of an educational partnership had been unsure what sort of information about the partnership they should expect to see. There were also some issues about assessment, which arose in the case of the MA International Multimedia Journalism, which related to the modules delivered by the partner.</td>
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<td>TPSC suggested that the guidance provided to external examiners responsible for programmes that were the subject of an educational partnership be enhanced, as some of these external examiners did not fully understand what information relating to the partnership they were expected to consider. The issues with the MA International Multimedia Journalism would be followed up with the school by the Chair of FLTSEC.</td>
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**Examples of effective practice identified in external examiners’ reports**

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<th>Exemplary Practice</th>
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<td>A small number of specific areas of exemplary or effective practice were identified within Faculty summary reports, but TPSC did not deem that any of these were genuinely transferable on a University-wide basis.</td>
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