Background

1. This report provides an overview of all the key issues identified in the undergraduate external examiner reports for 2017-18.

Overview of reports

2. All Undergraduate External Examiner Reports have been received for 2017-18.
3. LTDS have been responding directly to external examiners who have raised matters to the University. Individual Boards of Studies will respond to all other recommendations and suggestions.

Quality and standards

4. This year three external examiners were not able to confirm that the standards and learning outcomes of the programmes were appropriate. In all cases the matters were referred to the Pro-Vice-Chancellor Education and the subject areas provided a full written response to the external examiners comments. The external examiners and programmes were:

   Professor Alison Hulme       F100 - BSc Chemistry, F103 - MChem Chemistry, F151 - BSc Chemistry with Medicinal Chemistry, F123 - MChem Chemistry with Medicinal Chemistry, F102 - BSc Chemistry (Industrial Training), F106 - MChem Chemistry (Industrial Training), F122 - BSc Chemistry with Medicinal Chemistry (Industrial Training), F124 - MChem Chemistry with Medicinal Chemistry (Industrial Training), F107 - MChem Chemistry with Study Abroad

   Professor Dominic Hudson   1414U - BEng Marine Engineering (JT SIT), 1415U - BEng Offshore Engineering (JT SIT), 1413U - BEng Naval Architecture (JT SIT)

   Dr John Tan               1413U - BEng Naval Architecture (JT SIT), 1414U - BEng Marine Engineering (JT SIT), 1415U - BEng Offshore Engineering (JT SIT)

5. All other externals, confirmed that the intended learning outcomes of the programmes were appropriate and were appropriate to the level of award as set out in the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ).

Procedures

6. Over 60 external examiners provided comments on procedural and administrative matters, these mostly consisted of individual areas for consideration by the specific Academic Unit. There
were, however, a number common issues which a number of externals across the faculties raised including:

a. The time allowed to review materials was too short for many external examiners and the sample size of materials being reviewed, most felt this was too large.

b. Changes this year to the way in which materials had been supplied to external examiners. Some had been sent materials digitally and others had been given access to materials via Blackboard. One external examiner noted difficulty navigating Turnitin to view student work.

c. The low attendance levels at Board of Examiners was also noted by some external examiners.

d. The presentation, format and lack of consistency of the exam grids at Board of Examiners.

7. Where the industrial action was mentioned it was noted that the mitigation process had been comprehensive and had showed care and consideration by the Board of Examiners.

Feedback

8. 23 externals made specific comments about feedback provided to students. As in previous years the comments mainly related to inconsistencies in the length and type of feedback provided.

9. Other common comments were that feedback provided to the student did not match with the mark awarded and that often handwritten feedback itself was difficult to read and should be typewritten.

Regulation and Policy matters

10. There were few external examiner comments relating specifically to University policies and regulations and LTDS will respond to these externals clarifying University policy.

11. Three externals felt that the lack of student feedback on modules was an area which was missing and that the lack of the ‘student voice’ within the external examiner process was a concern.

12. Two externals made reference to the University rules regarding re-sitting modules.

Marking and Moderation and the use of the full range of marks

13. 46 externals made specific comments on marking and moderation processes. While some relate to particular assessment types in subject areas there were a few recurring themes including:

   a. The transparency of mark allocation and the level of detail contained in marking criteria.

   b. The clarity of the moderation process, whereby scripts and feedback sheets provided to the externals do not clearly show how work was moderated and marks arrived at.
14. 18 external examiners provided comments on the use of the full range of marks noting a reluctance to award marks at the top of the marking range and suggesting that further detail should be included in marking criteria for work above 80%.

Personal Extenuating Circumstances

15. Only 3 external examiners provided direct comments about the PEC process. Two externals noted that the system was effective and that great care had been taken during the Board of Examiners. The other comment related to the complex grading system. LTDS has contacted this external to advise of the changes to the PEC process.

Degree classifications, including borderline cases and use of discretion.

16. 13 external examiners provided specific comments on degree classifications and in particular in relation to class boundaries. Comments included:

   a. The system for dealing with borderline to be subjective and qualitative which allowed for the possibility of inconsistencies within the decision making. The same was said of the use of discretion whereby there is inconsistencies in how discretion is applied each year.

   b. That this year a large number of students were in the borderline and that the resultant Board of Examiners discussion could allow for possible inconsistent decision making.

Student support

17. 7 external examiners made recommendations in relation to student support including the following:

   a. Early intervention for students who are struggling with the course.

   b. The external for Chemistry noted the need to ensure students on placements are appropriately supported.

   c. The external for Biomedical Sciences NUMed noted the need for more opportunities for work experience and that the services of the Careers Service could be utilised more for students in Malaysia.

Educational Partnerships

18. One of the external examiners for INTO Newcastle University raised again a matter surrounding academic governance for pathway provision delivered at both INTO Newcastle University and Newcastle University London. This matter is currently being considered by University Executive Board.

19. Two of the external examiners for the NU-SIT joint programmes commented that they had received little information regarding the joint programmes and there had been a lack of
communication throughout the year with colleagues in Singapore. Due to the timing of the Board of Examiners one external had not been able to attend the meeting via teleconference.

Reports

20. Five external examiners noted difficulty using the online report system finding the report constraining and repetitive in places. LTDS have made changes to the online form and these will be introduced during to 2018-19.

21. One external examiner noted that the form did not allow staff to be congratulated on their efforts.

Summary

22. External examiner comments on the whole were positive about Newcastle University degree programmes and in the main recommendations and suggestions were provided to enhance already good practice.

23. Last year there was a general feeling throughout the reports of disconnect between Academic Units and External Examiners, this was not evident in the reports this year.

Recommendations to TPSC:

24. Last year a number of recommendations were made to TPSC and LTDS have taken forward these actions.

25. To consider whether further guidance should be provided on types and methods of feedback assessed work should be developed.

26. To consider whether to ask NUIIT for guidance on a consistent and reliable approach to providing access for external examiners to materials required to carry out their duties.

Laura Johnstone, Janice Trewick, Jolein De Ridder and Gilly Box, LTDS
30 January 2019