External Examiners’ Summary Report 2017-18

**Background**

1. External examiners are employed by Queen Mary to comment on issues of academic content, standards, and process. They review examination question papers, attend Subject Examination Boards, and are involved in the assessment process throughout the year. At the end of the academic cycle, externals submit reports on their experiences that year. This report summarises the reports of the external examiners.

2. Reports are received and formally acknowledged by the Academic Secretariat. The Secretariat reads and highlights key issues requiring a response before forwarding reports to the associated Subject Examination Board (SEB). Where a formal response is required, SEBs are asked to respond in writing within 30 days and a copy is sent to ARCS. All reports and SEB responses are presented as part of the Annual Programme Review process.

3. The consideration route for external examiner reports is as follows:
   
   i. Individual reports are sent to SEBs for consideration and action within the school/institute.
   ii. Consideration of all reports by School/Institute through Annual Programme Review.
   iii. Review of institution-level issues and recurring themes in the Summary Report (this present report)

4. External examiners have the right to raise any matter of serious concern with the Principal via a confidential report.

5. There were no institutional concerns raised in the 2017-18 reports. Therefore, this report details some issues of note as well as examples of good practice highlighted by the external examiners.

6. This report comprises three parts, as follows:
   
   i. Statistical data: a summary of reports and responses received in 2017-18.
   ii. External examiner comments: each section heading reflects the question posed to the external and key/recurring comments are outlined.
   iii. Summary of External Member comments: the External Member sits on the UG Degree Examination Boards and considers issues of process.

**Part 1 - Statistical data (as of 12/03/2018)**

7. 16 external examiners (6% of the total) failed to submit a report, a slight decrease on last year, when 18 (7%) failed to submit. Reminders are sent to external examiners two months after the relevant SEB, and again at the start of the following calendar year. SEBs are contacted prior to these reminders to ensure that no reports have been sent directly to the SEB rather than ARCS.

8. There has, however, been a decrease in the percentage of SEB responses received external examiners; 67% compared to 71% in 2016/17. This reflects a continued amount of non-engagement from SEBs with their external examiners.

9. In line with recommendations made by EQSB in May 2016, ARCS has once again provided more detailed information on missing reports and SEB responses to DEAGs, increasing this report to once a
month from October to March. Once again, fewer than 50% of required SMD UG SEB responses were received.

**Total expected reports ad SEB responses:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>UG (16/17)</th>
<th>PG (16/17)</th>
<th>UG (16/17)</th>
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<th>UG (16/17)</th>
<th>PG (16/17)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expected Reports</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>109</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual received</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>101</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Total of missing reports</td>
<td>3 (3%)</td>
<td>10 (7%)</td>
<td>12 (11%)</td>
<td>8 (7%)</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>UG (16/17)</th>
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<th>UG (16/17)</th>
<th>PG (16/17)</th>
<th>UG (16/17)</th>
<th>PG (16/17)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expected SEB responses</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>49</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual responses received</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>32</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Total of missing SEB responses</td>
<td>28 (28%)</td>
<td>25 (27%)</td>
<td>14 (28%)</td>
<td>17 (35%)</td>
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**Actual expected reports and SEB responses by Faculty:**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>HSS</th>
<th>S&amp;E</th>
<th>SMD</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UG (16/17)</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PG (16/17)</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected Reports</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual received</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total missing</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>HSS</th>
<th>S&amp;E</th>
<th>SMD</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expected SEB responses</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual responses received</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total missing</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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**Programme Structure**

Examiners were asked to comment upon:
- any particular strengths and weaknesses of the programme;
- the balance and content of the degree programme(s) followed by students;
- the coherence of programmes, and the appropriateness of the core/compulsory modules in relation to the aims and intended learning outcomes;
- the suitability of methods and the adequacy of teaching as reflected by the standards.

- Commended for distinctive and innovative content which also included diversity within the curriculum.
- Commended for the level of teaching standards across programmes as evidenced by the amount/quality of support material made available to students.
- Examiners both commended and queried the amount of module choice available. Few noted that there was some overlap in content and rationalisation was
- Examiners commended the use of external practitioners in the teaching of some modules.
- Commended interconnected module choice which prepared graduates for both further study and professional careers.
- Commended the balance between taught and independent research modules.
- Commended the programmes that were taught by Queen Mary research specialists.
recommended to share teaching whilst still advancing the tutors’ own research.

COMMENT

 Once again examiners generally commented favourably on programme organisation, design and teaching, commending the balance between core and elective modules to form coherent and successful programmes.

 Confirmation was given that curricula meet the requirements of accrediting bodies and the taught content reflected the stated learning outcomes.

 Once again examiners cited student achievement as a measure of successful programme design and delivery.

Curriculum Design

Examiners are asked to indicate how well they believe the programme curriculum and assessments are designed.

Total responses by level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Good (16/17)</th>
<th>Satisfactory (16/17)</th>
<th>Poor (16/17)</th>
<th>Did not respond (16/17)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UG</td>
<td>90% (91%)</td>
<td>7% (6%)</td>
<td>- (-)</td>
<td>3% (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PG</td>
<td>90% (91%)</td>
<td>4% (4%)</td>
<td>- (-)</td>
<td>6% (5%)</td>
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Total responses by level and faculty

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faculty/Level</th>
<th>Good (16/17)</th>
<th>Satisfactory (16/17)</th>
<th>Did not respond (16/17)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HSS UG</td>
<td>91% (90%)</td>
<td>4% (3%)</td>
<td>5% (7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HSS PG</td>
<td>87% (92%)</td>
<td>4% (-)</td>
<td>9% (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S&amp;E UG</td>
<td>91% (94%)</td>
<td>6% (6%)</td>
<td>3% (-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S&amp;E PG</td>
<td>100% (89%)</td>
<td>- (5%)</td>
<td>- (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMD UG</td>
<td>88% (90%)</td>
<td>12% (10%)</td>
<td>- (-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMD PG</td>
<td>90% (91%)</td>
<td>7% (9%)</td>
<td>3% (-)</td>
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Standard of student performance

Examiners were asked to give a view on whether the standard of performance at QMUL was comparable to that elsewhere.

UG

 General assurance was given that student performance was ‘as expected’ for a Russell Group institution with many also confirming comparability to their own institution.

 Examiners did note the high amount of students presenting with ECs and those simply not submitting coursework.

 Examiners both praised and requested marking using the full range in the first class zone.

PG

 Examiners confirmed that achievement was not dissimilar to that of comparable institutions.

 Some examiners noted that weaker students, and those who had not undertaken dissertations in their undergraduate studies, would benefit from additional guidance/support with the dissertation element.

 Many examiners commented that statistical data at both module and programme level would be beneficial when reviewing work.

COMMENT

 *Many SEBs provide statistical data on module performance and it is hoped that from 2018/19 SEBs will be provided with more comparative reports for SEB/external examiner consideration. (See General Comments below)
Very few examiners commented on the degree algorithm used for classification in 2017/18 or the criteria for raising those at the border. The professionalism, fairness and transparency of the exam board process was commended by the majority of examiners.

Examiners were once again satisfied that the assessment marking and moderation process was conducted in accordance with Queen Mary Regulations and Policies.

Examiners were commended for the design of assessment which tested differing skills to meet the vocational needs of the programme and were sufficiently discriminatory to reward academic achievement.

SBCS examiners commented on the amount of assessment expected within modules, cautioning against over-assessment.

Some examiners commented on the use of scaling, and sought assurances that this was used to amend an error rather than to standardise marks. Where scaling had been applied the external confirmed that the action was necessary and carried out both fairly and transparently.

COMMENT

Once again examiners noted a variability in the quality and length of feedback given to students, but this was far fewer than commented last year.

SBCS have confirmed that they are undertaking a review of assessment across their UG programmes to address the issue of overassessment. At the February meeting of EQSB, the Board reviewed a Queen Mary wide Assessment Strategy and agreed that a set of common policies would be discussed at Faculty level to review assessment across programmes to guard against overassessment.

2017/18 saw more instances where the legitimate application of scaling was required due to Industrial Action (See General Comments below). SEBs are required to contact ARCS to approve individual scaling policies and the SEB report to DEB has been amended to include a specific section on scaling. The 2019/20 Assessment Handbook includes a statement to remind SEBS that scaling of results to meet predefined norms or targets is not acceptable under any circumstances, and that marking and markings schemes need to be criterion-referenced.

Far fewer examiners, across faculties and levels, noted a variability the quality of both student feedback and marking trails within the same SEB than last year.

Other Issues of Quality

Examiners were asked a series of questions on issues of process around examinations, examination papers, moderation, marking schemes, marking, examination boards and associate assessments

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<tr>
<td>Fewer examiners commented on the internal scrutiny of examination paper questions than last year, with</td>
<td>For the third year running a minority of examiners recommended closer internal scrutiny of examination paper questions. Although</td>
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the sole recommendation that the SEB standardise the language used in the rubric.

- Examiners did comment on the tight turnaround times for exam paper review, this was unavoidable in many cases due to industrial action (see General comments below).
- Examiners commended the use of marking and moderation forms as both an audit trail for marking/moderation but also as evidence of the consideration of results across the module/cohort.
- Examiners for SMD commended the overall organisation, dedication and caring nature of staff during the OSCEs, but once again noted the cramped conditions.

Improvements were noted, examiners still received papers with spelling and grammar errors, some of which were not corrected for the final examination.

- There was an increase in externals requesting more time to review papers/student work. Industrial action required revision of many examination papers to remove/amend any questions relating to content affected by the industrial action. (See General Comments below)
- Externals commended SEBs for their professionalism and noted that their comments were respected and taken into account.

**COMMENT**

- Examiners noted the increase in student numbers which has led to an increase in the amount of work to review. The introduction of semester-based exams may help to alleviate the tight turnaround for the review of module assessment, as this work will be available earlier for externals to review during the summer examination period.
- All SEBs are required to run a sub-Board to review examination papers prior to approval by the external examiner. The Examinations Office circulates a template for all examination papers and all Schools/Institutes should be using the same template across all their modules both at UG and PG level.

**Issues of Procedure**

*Examiners were asked to comment generally on process issues and arrangements made with the SEBs including acting upon previous comments.*

<table>
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<tr>
<td>- Once again Examiners expressed frustration at receiving little or no feedback on their comments concerning examination papers or raised in their annual reports.</td>
<td>- Examiners commended the reflective nature of the SEB which also included review of statistical data.</td>
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<td>- Once again Examiners welcomed the chance to review paperwork prior to the Board via QMplus and praised the efficiency of Exam Board staff in making this available.</td>
<td>- Examiners welcomed the ability to review work either using Dropbox or the VLE.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Examiners praised SEB procedures for their fairness to students and the time taken to ensure student welfare needs were met.</td>
<td>- Examiners noted clear evidence that SEB personnel were working in the interest of the students.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Examiners praised the reflective approach of SEBs where module organisers presented brief summaries of student attainment and discussed current/future developments.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Examiners for the UG MBBS SEBs recommended comparison between the London and Malta cohorts as part of ongoing monitoring processes.</td>
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**COMMENT**
SEBs are instructed to correspond regularly with their external examiners to inform them of important dates and to respond to any comments/issues raised during their review process.

Examiners in the School of Languages Linguistics and Film commented on the restructured Exam Board. Following a restructure of the School, all Departments now report to one SLLF Exam Board rather than multiple disciplinary meetings. The School has confirmed that Departmental sub-Boards were, and will continue to be, held to review module results and allow discussion of overall student performance by department.

General Comments

Externals were asked to confirm that the standards set for the awards were appropriate, to highlight areas of good practice, and make any other comments that did not fit elsewhere.

- Some examiners suggested that the use of first year marks in the classification of awards may warrant review if Queen Mary was to continue to open up entry beyond the traditional A-Level results. This would enable Schools/Institutes to embed study/assessment skills within the first year of study.
- Examiners praised innovative teaching which incorporated contemporary issues and promoted diversity.
- Once again examiners commended the use of differing forms of summative and formative assessment to meet programme level learning outcomes.
- The inclusion of explicit marking schemes/model answers with samples were commended as was the inclusion of module moderation and review reports.
- Examiners commented that the student experience was at the heart of the considerations and pedagogical strategies of staff.
- Externals commended SEBs for their efficient and consistent handling of large number of students.

COMMENT

- No comments were raised about the quality and production of Exam Board reports in 2017/18.
- External examiners commented that more statistical data would aid SEB discussions around student achievement and requested comparative data to accompany samples as well as for SEB consideration. From June 2019 Queen Mary’s Business Intelligence Tool reports provided by Planning and ITS will provide longitudinal data on attainment at a student and module level.

Industrial Action

2017/18 saw Industrial Action taken by both internal and external examiners. The action took place weekly from 26th Feb 2018 to 20 March 2018 and affected teaching across multiple modules and programmes. SEBs were given advice to ensure that the action did not impact negatively on student achievement and some SEBs sought DEB/VP approval for amendments to assessment to achieve this. Surprisingly few examiners commented on the action, and where this was it was in praise for the adjustments made.

Part 3 - External Member’s comments

Queen Mary has one External Member who attends the UG S&E and H&SS DEBs and completes an annual report which is acknowledged by ARCS. 2017/18 was the third year for the UG external member.

A summary of their comments follow;

The award process

External was asked to comment on the processes for the determination of progression and awards and confirm that they are conducted in line with national standards and expectations. They are also asked to comment on;

- particular strengths and weaknesses in the progression and award process;
- the scheme for progression and for the classification of the award;
- the use of discretion, within the permitted scope of QMUL policy;
- the interpretation of regulations.

- Once again the External Member commended the rigorous and consistent application of award, progression and borderline regulations by SEBs citing this as a strength of the Queen Mary system.
- Noted the ongoing challenge (as with all HEIs) in the timescales between completion of assessment and the final Board and commended the tightening of processes that ensured EC students confirmed their wish to resit or accept the award in time for the DEB to approve the outcome.
- Commended the fair and detailed consideration of special cases and the appropriate use of discretion/suspension of regulation requests.
- Commended the introduction of a single late work penalty and noted, again, that work should be undertaken to try to explain the reasons behind late/non submission.
- Once again the examiner raised concern around the use of scaling, recommending that it should be used in exceptional cases only and should be accompanied by the careful consideration of how it can be avoided in future.

**Comment**

- The Student Journey Manager (Engagement, Retention and Success) has been working on the issues around late submission and findings and recommendations will be submitted to the EQSB.
- As noted above the ‘SEB report to DEB’ has been amended to include specific information concerning any scaling undertaken by individual SEBs.

**Examination Board arrangements**

*Externals are asked to confirm that arrangements for, and conduct of, the DEB were satisfactory. They are also asked to comment on;*

- particular strengths and weaknesses in the examination board arrangements;
- the suitability of the examination board documentation;
- the opportunities provided to you to participate fully in the Degree Examination Board meeting.

- Once again the external commended the arrangements for, and conduct of, the Boards and praised the presentation of the Board paperwork/candidate results.
- Acknowledged the effective support offered by the Secretary in relation to matters of policy and regulation both prior to and during the Board.
- Noted again the good practice of briefing the DEB Chair to ensure the business of the Board was conducted efficiently and that time was given to discuss key issues thoroughly.
- Commended the engagement of all members, noting the full participation in discussion of the various concerns raised around scaling and industrial action.
- Noted that there were no suspension of regulation requests due to module registration errors, and commended the action taken to identify and prevent these errors.

**COMMENT**

- The External Member is provided with electronic versions of Board paperwork prior to the Board and asked to provide comment at each Board.

**Standard of student achievement**

*Externals are asked for their view on the patterns of student achievement and the comparability with other UK HEIs they are familiar with.*

- Once again confirmed that the patterns of achievement were comparable with those across the sector.
- Once again noted SEBs’ focus on good honours and strongly advised against conflating this with mark scaling. Once again it was recommended that the institution undertake analysis of student achievement in the context of the student population.

**COMMENT**

- Part or the 2030 strategy is to focus on “value added” where the recommended analyses will be made available assist with individual school educational strategies.

**Issues of Procedure**

*Externals are asked to compare procedures/arrangement with the previous year and confirm if their comments were acted upon.*
Acknowledged receipt of, and response to, the previous year’s comments and noted that recommended action had been taken forward.

Noted that there were no concerns about the accuracy of student data, acknowledging the work undertaken to increased confidence in the system.

Noted that a recommendation for a more rigorous and systematic approach to analysing patterns of achievement at institutional level across cohorts had not been taken forward.

COMMENT

As noted above Queen Mary’s Business Intelligence Tool will provide longitudinal data on attainment at a student and module level. It is hoped that the DEB will also be able to use this data and will consider any developments for future years.

General comments

Externals are asked to provide any further comments including aspects of exemplary practice.

Noted that 2017/18 was a challenging year for all HEIs in dealing with the impact of industrial action.

Commended Queen Mary’s considered efforts to mitigate the impact of the action on students and the assessment process and recommended the evaluation of any complaints to inform policy and practice for subsequent years.

Noted a reduction in the amount of outstanding assessment offence cases reported to the board and commended the significant efforts to expedite the cases of final year students.

Alice de Havillan
2/4/19