

QUALITY ASSURANCE STANDING GROUP
Confirmed minutes of the meeting held on 15th November 2011

Present: J Taylor (Chair), M Barnard, R Chater, A Diaz, B Dyer, J Edwards, K Jones, A Main, C Merrett, K Randall, N Silvennoinen (Secretary), G Willcocks

Apologies: C Symonds

1 Minutes of last meeting

- 1.1 The Chair welcomed Kirsty Randall and Colin Merrett to the meeting and introductions were made.
- 1.2 The following were noted under matters arising. All other actions had been completed.
 - 1.2.1 The Quality Assurance Standing Group (QASG) had debated in September whether it was appropriate to charge students a £10 administrative fee for a copy of their exam script(s). The Chair had raised the issue with the Fees Board and was advised that this was outside their remit. QASG debated the issue which concerns a very small number of students and agreed that, as students are able to view their scripts free of charge, no further action was necessary at this stage.
 - 1.2.2 Senate had approved the proposed new APL limits for postgraduate taught programmes with immediate effect in its November meeting. The Group agreed that Academic Procedure C2 would be updated with footnotes for the current academic year and circulated to Schools for their information. The APL policy and procedure would be fully revised for 2012-13.

Action: Educational Development and Quality (EDQ) to update Academic Procedure C2 and circulate it to relevant staff.

- 1.2.3 Actions relating to the proposed preparation of staff guidelines on the minimum expectation of exam feed forward/feedback and student facing guidance on assessment processes would be carried forward.

2 Review of external examining

- 2.1 The Chair explained that QASG had taken over the role of the former External Examining Review Group (EERG) in terms of considering the themes emerging from external examiners reports and discussing and recommending any institutional actions, including changes to external examining policy and practice, to Academic Standards Committee (ASC). This year, due to the recent publication of the new *QAA Quality Code Section B7: External Examining* which has policy implications for the University, QASG would report the outcomes of its discussions to ASC in two parts. The first report, which would be submitted to the December meeting of ASC, would concentrate on issues and actions arising from external examining reports during the 2010-11 reporting cycle. The second report would put forward proposals for a revised external examining policy in the light of the new national criteria and expectations once further work had been undertaken.

2.2 Summary of issues raised in 2010-11 external examiner reports

- 2.2.1 Members discussed the summary of issues raised in external examiner reports during the reporting cycle which reflected issues from School Quality Reports (SQRs) and an independent review of all external examiner reports by the Chair. The Chair noted that the University had received three 'NO' responses in the summary section at the end of the external examiners' reports. One of the reports indicated serious concerns regarding the standards of provision whilst two reports highlighted serious concerns regarding assessment processes. Members considered each of the three external examiner reports and the corresponding team responses and concluded that, overall, the observations were fair but that the teams' responses adequately addressed the issues raised and that appropriate action plans had been put in place to address the concerns.
- 2.2.2 The late timing of the responses to externals was also noted and Members agreed that an initial response should be sent to an external examiner's concerns at the earliest opportunity where a 'NO' response is indicated in the summary section. This should then be followed up with a more detailed

response in due course. Members also agreed that external examiners should receive a response which addresses each issue raised point by point to ensure that all concerns which have been raised are clearly covered and that the impression that particular issues are purposely overlooked can be avoided.

- 2.2.3 It was suggested that the external examiner briefing seminar should clearly outline the purpose of the external examiner report and the 'brief' for the external examiner to ensure that comments raised in external examiner reports are both pertinent and useful. EDQ would update the report template for 2012-13. It was also noted that whilst almost all of the external examiner reports submitted during the reporting period had been fit for purpose, and many were excellent, a small number of reports received were deemed inadequate or mentioned student and staff names. The EDQ Manager would contact external examiners whose reports fell into this category.
- 2.2.4 It was evident that not many external examiners had met with students but Members agreed that this could be due to a number of reasons, for instance where provision was well established. Often externals were given opportunities to meet with students but did not take these up. It was also noted that students were often not available due to the timing of assessment boards.
- 2.2.5 Members queried whether comments received from external examiners on the Assessment Board structure had been considered by the Assessment Board Working Group and the Chair confirmed that this was the case. EDQ had also informed those externals who had participated in Unit and Profile Boards that there would be further changes to the board structure during the current year. All external examiners would receive detailed communication regarding the exact nature of the changes in due course.
- 2.2.6 Availability and timing of cohort statistics was discussed and it was suggested that by using standard error rather than standard deviation not all marks needed to be available in order to provide external examiners with statistical data. The Chair confirmed that the Assessment Board Working Group had received this feedback previously. It was noted that the number of reports which had requested sight of additional statistical data to that provided at Boards was minimal this year.

RESOLVED: EDQ to finalise the draft report in the light of the discussion for submission to ASC.

2.3 QAA Quality Code Chapter B7: External examining

- 2.3.1 Members had received a copy of Appendix 1 of the new QAA Quality Code Section B7: External Examining. The document outlines the 'expectations' and 'indicators' which summarise new national criteria for the appointment of external examiners and for making use of external examiners' expertise. All institutions would be required to align with the new sector requirements by September 2012. In addition, some changes were required to address issues raised in the annual external examining reports from the last two reporting cycles. Members were now invited to discuss a document which outlines the policy implications for the University. Based on Members' views, EDQ would prepare a proposed draft institutional policy and procedure for discussion at the January meeting of the Group prior to submission to ASC.
- 2.3.2 Members discussed each of the below areas and made the following recommendations for action:
 - external examiner appointment periods***
 - 2.3.3 The current external examiner appointment period is four years which is in line with the new sector requirements. However, currently the appointment period starts from December and Members were asked whether this should be aligned with academic cycles. All members agreed that the appointment period should be as long as possible but the revised policy should be written with semestrisation and its implications for the academic cycle in mind.
 - Engagement of external examiners in Level C***
 - 2.3.4 Members discussed whether external examiners should be involved in Level C of standard degree programmes to ensure comparability of standards of the University's CertHE awards where students exit at this level. It was noted that this was already the case with a number of HSC programmes with professional body accreditation. Externals are also involved in Level C of Foundation degrees to

ensure they have exposure to the programmes before the final level. A number of views were expressed in support of externality at this level and it was suggested that external examiner engagement at Level C might also encourage better engagement from students at this level. However, Members did not consider that full external examiner engagement would be necessary and it was suggested that could be done on an exception basis. However, this could present problems with students who initially continue to Level I and subsequently fail or withdraw as their work may no longer be available for moderation purposes.

Action: EDQ to carry out sector research in order to establish how other institutions approach external examining at Level C of standard degree programmes and to confirm the number of students who exit with an intermediate Level C award/credit.

the future role of external examiners from industry

- 2.3.5 As the prime purpose of the external examiner role is to assure comparability of standards, the University has discouraged external examiner nominations from industry in anticipation of the new sector requirements. It was noted that the recently published Quality Code will in fact allow nomination of industry externals within teams of examiners. Members debated the usefulness of the role, noting that, where appointed, industry externals could work well together with an academic external examiner. However, it was recognised that there are various other opportunities for frequent industry input into programmes, including industry advisory panels, which may be better utilised for this purpose.

Action: EDQ to include in the revised policy that industry external examiners may be approved in exceptional circumstances. In such cases, the external examiner team must also include at least one academic external examiner.

the use of external examiners in vivas

- 2.3.6 It was noted that although vivas were known to be used occasionally to confirm marks or to test students in relation to academic integrity, it was rare to involve externals in the viva process.

Action: EDQ to clarify when vivas are used currently and the extent of external examiner involvement in the process to inform proposals in the draft policy document.

access to live assessments (e.g. presentations)

- 2.3.7 The Group discussed the extent of external examiner engagement with live assessments. It was noted that externals could be present in person during live assessments or view recorded assessments subsequently although students can find recording unsettling. However, externals have the right to request access to all assessments and recording may be the most practical way to facilitate this when a sample size is agreed. In addition, it was noted that students increasingly hand in assignments in different formats including online assignments and that expectation of external examiner access to all assessed work, not just live assessments, should be clarified. Members agreed that assessment weighting should be used as a guide to establish how important it is for moderation to take place. For instance, access might be arranged because the contribution to the unit mark/award classification is deemed substantial. It was also noted that multiple choice questions are not second marked or sent to external examiners for moderation. This has implications for the University's independent marking policy.

Action: The issue of moderation to be discussed further in the January meeting of QASG when the University's Independent Marking Policy is considered. EDQ to include in the revised external examining policy clarification regarding external examiner access to assessed work which may not be available after the assessment has taken place (e.g. live assessments).

access to myBU

- 2.3.8 Currently external examiners may request access to myBU to help them carry out their duties. Staff access, which some externals have, means that they have unlimited user access whereas others have been set up with a student account with more limited access to the system. Whilst all Members agreed that in principle all externals should have access to myBU, the access rights would need to be set appropriately. This was a university-wide issue which should be explored further with the learning technologist team.

Action: EDQ to explore the issue further with the learning technologist team and report back to the Group in January.

endorsement of students' results

- 2.3.9 Currently students' marks are agreed at the Assessment Board and the Board Reports are signed by external examiners to signal that they agree with the Board decisions. Members suggested that the signing of the results could be made implicit rather than explicit as long as this was made clear at the Board. This would assist with confidential reports needing to be physically transported for signatures.

Action: EDQ to consider whether 'implicit endorsement' of Assessment Board results by external examiners may be appropriate within the revised policy.

fee structure

- 2.3.10 During 2010-11, the standard external examiner fee was £350. In addition, profile externals received an additional £50 in recognition of their additional duties. Members discussed whether a flat fee would continue to be appropriate or whether externals should receive a basic fee which is supplemented by an additional payment, for instance, on the basis of the number of allocated unit responsibilities or the perceived overall workload. The concept of a sliding scale was supported and it was agreed that this should be built into the new policy.

Action: EDQ to include reference to a new external examiner fee model in the revised policy.

allocation of external examiners to programmes/units

- 2.3.11 Under the old Exam Boards, external examiners were attached to programmes. During the Assessment Board pilots, unit and an overall lead 'profile' external examiner made up the external examining team. The University would now need to decide how to meet the new internal and external requirements for external examining. Members discussed whether a revised hybrid model whereby externals have an overview of programme(s) as well as specified unit responsibilities would work in practice. It was noted that some Schools currently have external examiners allocated per level in the same way that named academics maintain an overview of levels rather than programmes. It was also debated whether reallocation of these responsibilities per programme rather than level would increase the length and complexity of Assessment Boards due to the size of frameworks in some Schools.

Action: that this issue be considered further at the January meeting of QASG in line with the emerging outcomes from the Assessment Board Working Group.

BU policy for BU staff acting as external examiners

- 2.3.12 Members agreed that BU policy and practice should encourage BU staff to actively engage with and seek external examining opportunities within the sector. Staff development should be offered in this area and external examining should form part of the academic pay progression criteria.

Action: that EDQ refer the issue to the review of Academic Careers.

frequency of external examiner reports

- 2.3.13 Members agreed that external examiner reports should be received annually at the most appropriate point for the provision, typically after the main Assessment Board. However, postgraduate framework leaders might prefer to receive external examiner reports following the PGDip Assessment Board where these take place.

Action: EDQ to clarify in the revised policy the annual process for external examiner reporting.

external examiner engagement with clinical assessors

- 2.3.14 The HSC representative noted that further reflection was required within the School on the requirement for external examiners to have access to clinical assessors.

Action: EDQ to refer this item to the HSC School Executive for comments.

Action: EDQ to prepare a draft policy and procedure on external examining as per the above discussion (3.2.1.-3.2.12) for further discussion at the January meeting of the Group.

3 Any other business

3.1 None.

4 Date of next meeting

4.1 The next meeting would take place on the 17th January 2012.