UNIVERSITY OF DUNDEE

LEARNING & TEACHING COMMITTEE

EXTERNAL EXAMINERS’ REPORTS 2011/12

1. On the whole, the reports for 2011/12 were positive and supportive, and provided good reassurance that the procedures across the University are working well and that appropriate standards are being maintained. Most of the issues arising, as my predecessor reported in previous years, were programme or School specific, but there are a few more general issues, that I have highlighted below.

2. As with last year’s report, once again a number of external examiners remarked on the issue of ‘consistency’ across modules and programmes. This year there seemed to be a particular focus on the assessment of dissertations and in particular with respect to the consistent implementation of assessment criteria across programmes within a single School or area. But this issue of consistency also surfaced with regard to internal moderation, annotation of answers, provision of feedback and the handling of mitigating circumstances.

3. Some of the other recurrent comments were around:
   - Timeliness of providing information to externals, and issues around access to My Dundee;
   - Awareness of particular difficulties with modules accessible to students on more than one programme and their proper integration into the relevant programmes;
   - Clarity in the application of classification rules;
   - Use of anonymity at exam boards (a particular marked case is in the MA Exam Board where some Schools have adopted anonymity and others have not);
   - Ensuring parity of experience for different tutorial groups;
   - Feedback is patchy. There are examples of good feedback in every School, but this is not consistent across all levels and all lecturers. Nevertheless, the concerns would appear to be less than in previous years.

4. In last year’s report, three School specific issues were raised by externals that Dr Francis recommended the Committee monitor. This year I can report the following in relation to these areas:
   a. Innovative Product Design (DJCAD): The School would appear to have rectified the organisational issues raised as a serious concern last year.
   b. DJCAD courses in general: Fewer concerns have been raised this year than last, but the issue of cross-programme moderation is still current, as is the use of mitigating circumstances. The issue of consistency was felt keenest by the Animation and Time-Based Art externals, and this should be addressed as a priority. Dissertation organisation and feedback appears to be a particular problem in DJCAD. The externals of the Ballyfermot franchise continue to be content, although there is a concern about ensuring parity with the Dundee-
delivered course that programme directors would be wise to consider as soon as possible.

c. Nursing: Externals are happier than previous years, but there is still an issue around ensuring the externals have access to materials in good time.

5. There are a few issues about the role of external examiners that I would like to highlight and ask members of the Committee to take back to their Schools:

a. Overuse. A small group of externals were concerned that they were being asked to do more than was strictly necessary. There needs to be clarity on the difference between the quality assurance of assessment procedures and ‘examining’. External examiners should be monitoring the assessment process and ensuring its rigour and consistency; they should not be a proxy for internal examining.

b. Approval of exam papers. A small group of externals claimed not to have been asked for their views on the setting of exam questions or assessment tasks. Schools should review their practice in this respect.

c. Dissertations. One external at PG level claimed that s/he was not routinely sent dissertations for review. Notwithstanding 5b) above, it seems to me that an external must see at least a sample of dissertations to be able to be reassured that they are being assessed appropriately.

d. Completion of the report form: A growing number of externals have presented cursory reports which offer little by way of feedback to the institution. It is to be hoped that these externals provided good feedback direct to the Schools; but it might be worth emphasising to externals that their reports are considered both centrally and in Schools, and that the reports represent evidence that the QA process is working well and that the externals’ work is properly considered.

6. One external raised the issue of consistent handling of cheating or perceived cheating in exams, and the Committee might like to consider whether guidance needs to be developed in this area. At present, the Director (PGLA) provides advice to Schools on appropriate penalties following reports from invigilators on individual cases.

7. As always there were comments about the University’s alpha-numeric marking scheme, both positive and negative; but these issues will be addressed as part of a review of the assessment process being led by the Director of QA.

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