INTRODUCTION

1.1 This paper forms a general overview, highlighting good practice, common themes and key areas of concern highlighted by the 117 External Examiners' Reports for postgraduate taught programmes.

1.2 It should be noted that the majority of the issues raised by these External Examiners were programme based and are being effectively monitored through the University's Statement of Procedures: External Examiners' Reports (Taught Programmes of Study). The areas of concern outlined below constitute common themes which cross programme, discipline and College boundaries.

REPORT FORMAT

2.1 The online report form was used for the first time for postgraduate taught programmes this cycle.

COLLABORATIVE PROVISION

3.1 The External Examiners for programmes at University College Plymouth St Mark & St John where Exeter students remain, completed a Word format report which was returned electronically for the 2010/11 cycle.

3.2 The majority of the issues raised by these External Examiners were programme based and are being carefully monitored through the University's Statement of Procedures: External Examiners' Reports (Taught Programmes of Study).

3.3 External Examiners highlighted aspects of good practice which have been relayed to the University College Plymouth St Mark & St John.

3.4 This paper includes areas of concern raised by these Externals which constitute common themes which cross programme and partner institution boundaries.

GOOD PRACTICE

4.1 Of the 117 reports received, 90 External Examiners highlighted aspects of good practice. Many of the examples of good practice are specifically related to the programme concerned and have been relayed to the relevant College. The aspects of good practice outlined below were identified by External Examiners from across the University:

4.2 Teaching and learning:

   (i) Many of the Externals commended both academic and administrative staff for their dedication and excellent work;

   (ii) Around a third of the Externals who highlighted examples of good practice spoke of diverse and innovative teaching and learning methods, of high quality which added great value to the student experience. In addition, a
number of Externals noted subject specific teaching and learning activities that were excellent examples in their field;

(iii) 6 External Examiners commented on the contemporary research in evidence, and the ways in which students’ exposure to this quality staff research was enhancing teaching provision;

(iv) A number of Externals commented on the value of work placements, field trips, practical tasks and links with industry such as guest lectures, as part of the wider student experience.

4.3 Assessment:

(i) 15 External Examiners commented on the high quality and standard of assessment processes. Many of these reported diverse, innovative and challenging methods of assessment;

4.4 Marking and moderation:

(i) 11 Externals explicitly commended the organisation, transparency, fairness and consistency of the marking and moderation processes and a number of others alluded to it through their comments. It was pleasing to note a number of Externals praising the quality and evidence of second marking, as this has been an area of concern for some in the past;

4.5 Feedback:

(i) The quality of feedback to students was commended by 27 External Examiners; particular reference was made to the level of detail and constructive nature of the feedback provided.

5 Common Themes/Key Areas of Concern Classified as Essential:

5.1 Of the 117 reports received, 61 External Examiners made Essential recommendations. The majority of the recommendations are specifically related to the programme concerned and have been relayed to the relevant College.

5.2 Learning and teaching:

(i) 1 External commented on the need to encourage students to undertake reading from further reading lists and to make use of contemporary journal articles to support writing;

(ii) 1 External commented on the difficulties for both the participants and the programme team that the geographical separation of two campuses introduces. He suggests that adequate time should be built into the work loads of both to enable staff on the Cornwall campus to receive an equivalent experience;

(iii) 1 External noted the reliance of the discipline on external partners for a large fraction of the programme’s delivery. While such enterprise is commended there is a need to ensure the minimisation of risk through adequate contract and payment arrangements. 1 External commented on a partner institution with a full partnership agreement who had not returned module marks in good time under the contractual requirements, causing difficulties for the programme.

5.3 Assessment:
(i) 4 Externals commented on exam papers. 2 stated that exam papers should not contain typographical mistakes. 1 External indicated that the rubric of the exam papers and the numerical weighting of each question should be clearly stated on the title page. The 4th External felt that External Examiners should be shown the proposed topics of assessment in advance to check that they are appropriate to the aims and objectives of the course;

(ii) 1 External commented on the need for parity of assessment across all modules;

(iii) 1 External urged markers to be realistic, pointing out that high marks should not be given for work in language study containing significant grammatical mistakes;

5.4 Marking and moderation:

(i) 4 Externals commented on the award of Distinction at Masters level. 1 felt that Distinction should not be awarded without a Distinction mark having been achieved for the dissertation. 2 Externals raised concerns about the marking criteria and the bunching of marks around the 69/70 borderline, indicating that Distinction level work should be rewarded with marks above 70. It was suggested by 1 External that a grade should be introduced to distinguish exceptionally good students from other excellent students.

(ii) 6 Externals referred to the need for clear grade descriptors, which should be used consistently by all markers;

(iii) 14 External Examiners commented on the process of second marking and moderation. Their comments were as follows:

- That there was a need for the double blind marking of dissertations;
- That there must be transparent guidelines for the process of second marking and moderation;
- That such guidelines should insist on a record that clearly indicates why the mark was given and how differing marks were reconciled;
- That comments on mark sheets should be legible;
- The need for Externals to see all, or a good spread of scripts, to monitor the equity of mark allocation.

5.5 Feedback:

(i) 8 Externals commented on the feedback provided to students. Their concerns were as follows:

- Variations in the quality and quantity of feedback across the discipline;
- That all sections of cover sheets should be completed fully and comprehensively, especially for dissertations;
- The need to link student feedback to the grade descriptors;
- The need for all feedback to be legible and type-written where possible.

5.6 Public information:

(i) 2 Externals commented on the availability of information to students on the internet stating that it should be up to date and include any changes recently made to module descriptors.
5.7 Processes:

(i) Almost half of the 117 External Examiners commented on the External Examining process in Colleges including Board of Examiners meetings. Their concerns were as follows:

- The lack of forward planning, short notice and changing of dates for Boards of Examiners meetings;
- The marking timetable and the time allowed to Externals for moderation and review of work;
- Marking criteria, model answers and dissertation/essay titles not provided for marking and moderation purposes;
- Insufficient programme documentation provided to support External Examining duties e.g. module descriptors;
- Issues around the documents provided for Boards of Examiners including:
  a) The structure of student lists; whether to be organised by name or student number, when it is appropriate to redact student names; requests for Final mark lists to be clear, easy to read and in a consistent format across the programme;
  b) The need for clarification of the role of the External Examiner on the day of the Board of Examiners itself, and in relation to moderation and the changing of marks etc.

6 Common Themes/Key Areas of Concern Classified as Advisable:

6.1 Of the 117 reports received, 58 External Examiners made Advisable recommendations. The majority of the recommendations are specifically related to the programme concerned and have been relayed to the relevant College.

6.2 Marking and moderation:

(i) 11 Externals made comments on marking and moderation which the QRWP may wish to consider in relation to the wider University. Their comments are as follows:

- Concerns that the University regulations allowed students to be awarded an MSc with Distinction when they had not received a Merit or Distinction mark for their project/dissertation work;
- The use of higher marks than 70 for the very best work;
- The marking of work for students with dyslexia;
- The expectations and marking of work for students for whom English is a second language;
- That there was some variability in project and dissertation marks;
- That dissertations should be double marked and the second markers comments available to the External.

6.3 Feedback:

(i) 2 Externals stated that relevant and pertinent feedback should be returned to students within the time scales set by the University;

(ii) 4 Externals suggested that coversheets for feedback should be consistently used and legible.

6.4 Processes:
(i) 3 Externals reported incidences of disorganisation in the sending of documentation for review and the time allowed for marking and moderation to take place.

(ii) 3 Externals commented on handling of borderline cases at the Board of Examiners. Their concerns were as follows:

- That student profiles should be shown in rank order so that borderline cases can be considered together;
- That Externals should see all cases of borderline marks and that time should be allocated for this to take place before the Board of Examiners meeting.

6.5 Staffing:

(i) 2 Externals in Drama noted ongoing staffing issues for the MA/MFA Staging Shakespeare programme.

7 Common Themes/Key Areas of Concern Classified as Desirable:

7.1 Of the 117 reports received, 66 External Examiners made Desirable recommendations. The majority of the recommendations are specifically related to the programme concerned and have been relayed to the relevant College.

7.2 Assessment:

(i) 2 Externals commented on the timing of assessments. 1 indicated that the timetable of assessed work should be such as to evenly spread the students’ workload. The second recommended that coursework assignments do not overlap with exams;

(ii) 2 Externals made comments on assessment which bear wider consideration. The first recommended the use of common assessment criteria for projects, indicating that this would also assist with student feedback. The second suggested a need for more detailed exam reports.

7.3 Marking and moderation:

(i) 2 Externals expressed a wish to see the use of the full range of marks especially for the very best Distinction level work;

7.4 Feedback:

(i) 2 Externals commented that the amount and type of feedback to students on dissertations was varied;

(ii) 4 Externals made comments on feedback which bear wider consideration:

- That students should be encouraged to provide feedback on assignments;
- That student expectations should be carefully managed about the timeliness and level of detail provided in feedback;
- That feedback should be full and presented in typed formats;
- That fuller use should be made of feedback for those students working in the Distinction range.

7.5 Resources:
(i) 1 External noted that staff appointments will be necessary if the MSc in Energy Policy programme is to be expanded;

(ii) 2 Externals called for a dedicated study space for Masters students, 1 at CSM and 1 in English.

7.6 Public information:

(ii) 3 Externals commented on the availability of information to students on the internet: Their comments related to:

- The fact that the most up to date module descriptor should be available online;
- That the contents of student handbooks should be up to date and easily accessible;
- That information about learning difficulties and support should be clearly signposted.

7.7 Processes:

(i) 2 External Examiners found there to be poor English language skills among some of the students on programmes in UEBS and Geography. They queried whether or not the IELTS score the University demands is set at an adequate level;

(ii) 2 Externals commented on their role in the External Examination process. 1 External in Modern Languages suggested that more could and should be required of him by the discipline. The second External asked that comments and recommendations made by Externals be taken seriously and addressed appropriately. The College will respond to the first suggestion and the Statement of Procedures: External Examiners' Reports (Taught Programmes of Study) outlines clearly the processes by which External Examiners recommendations will be addressed;

(iii) An External Examiner for the DClinPsych programme has suggested that inexperienced examiners might be paired with more experienced colleagues for the viva voce examinations.

(iv) 6 Externals commented on the External Examining process in Colleges including Board of Examiners meetings. Their concerns were as follows:

- Insufficient programme documentation provided;
- Insufficient documents and time made available for moderation;
- The timing of External Examiners' duties in Colleges, and tight turnaround time for the External to consider documentation sent for review.

8 Common Themes/Key Areas of Concern for the University:

8.1 Cornwall Campus:

(i) 5 of the 117 Externals commented on programmes delivered at Cornwall campus, their comments being largely positive. 1 External in Humanities reiterated comments made under Essential on the difficulties for both the participants and the programme team that the geographical separation of two
He suggests that adequate time should be built into the work loads of both to enable staff on the Cornwall campus to receive an equivalent experience.

9 Recommendations

9.1 The Dean and Professional Services are asked to consider the issues outlined above and identify those, if any, which should be brought forward, in the form of a paper, to the Board of the Faculty of Taught Programmes, DVC Education, and other Professional Services staff as appropriate, for response.

Quality Review
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