

**SEN10D029**

**Title:** Report to the Senate – External Examiners’ Reports: Undergraduate Provision (2007/08 – 2009/10; Postgraduate Taught Provision (2007-2010)

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**1. Introduction**

1.1 This report from the Learning and Teaching Committee (LTC) has been prepared following detailed consideration of external examiners’ reports at School, Faculty and University level.

1.2 Previous reports to LTC addressing external examiners’ reports (2005-06 to 2008-09) in relation to taught provision were considered at its meetings on 18 March and 21 May, 2010. PGR provision for 2008-09 was considered at the meeting on 9 December, 2009.

1.3 Our aim remains the achievement of swifter throughput to the Learning and Teaching Committee, within one academic session or less, in order to promote effective dissemination of good practice, share issues and discuss any implications for University-wide regulations, policies, procedures and practices. The timescale this session has been affected by the University’s major integration project but despite this, we have nonetheless achieved our aim, which is a tribute to all colleagues involved. The draft report to Senate on PGR provision, 2009/10, was considered on 17 March, 2011.

1.4 The process for consideration of external examiners’ reports is governed by the requirements of the University’s Code of Practice on Assuring and Enhancing Teaching Quality in relation to taught programmes and the Code of Practice on Research Degree Programmes. The Codes take into account the roles and responsibilities of Faculties (in particular that of the Learning, Teaching and Quality Committees) and the Quality Assurance Agency’s Code of Practice, with particular reference to the sections on External Examining and Assessment and on Postgraduate Research.

1.4 As in previous reports, student members of the LTC and the Academic Officer of the Union of UEA Students, have participated in the consideration of this report. The report will be made publicly available via the internet. The LTC believes that this remains a positive step in demonstrating that the University is engaging with faculty, external examiners and students in maintaining the standards of its awards and enhancing the quality of the student learning experience. The Committee is aware of the recently published report on external examiners and will be considering the recommendations at its meeting in June, 2011.

## 2. Awards made by the University 2007-08 to 2009-10

Session	Higher Degrees	First Degrees	Certificates and Diplomas
2007-08	1434	2281	753
2008-09	1575	2264	735
2009-10	1605	2461	647

(Source: Facts and Figures booklets, 2007-08 to 2009-10)

**Appendix A** attached sets out the number of first degrees awarded, including classifications.

### 3. The Role of the External Examiner

3.1 As indicated in Section 1.2 above, the role of the external examiner is governed by the appropriate University Codes of Practice informed by relevant external Codes.

***The purposes and functions of external examiners of taught awards are to ensure that:***

- the academic standards for each award are at the appropriate level and that student performance is judged against this;
- assessment processes measure student achievement against intended learning outcomes and are fair and fairly operated;
- standards at UEA are comparable with those of other higher education institutions.

***In order to achieve these purposes external examiners are expected:***

- to participate in assessment processes for University awards (taught programmes, including viva voce examinations where these are held);
- to arbitrate or adjudicate on problem cases;
- to contribute to the evaluation and consideration of the impact of extenuating circumstances upon students' performance;
- to evaluate assessment policies and procedures, including those with regard to professional practice, where relevant;
- to comment and give advice on the design of courses, on module content, balance and structure, on the appropriateness of learning outcomes, on standards of achievement and on professional practice placements, where relevant.

For postgraduate research degrees, the role of the external examiner is critical in the maintenance of standards and ensuring the comparability of awards. The UEA Code of Practice in this area continues to require that only persons of seniority, experience and expertise are appointed. The Code also requires the use of internal assessors where an academically qualified external examiner does not have recent experience of postgraduate examining in the UK.

3.2 The Senate is reminded that the institutional audit by the QAA in April, 2009, found that confidence 'could reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future academic standards of the awards that it offers' and 'of the institution's present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students'. The audit report confirmed that 'the University makes strong and scrupulous use of external examiners in summative assessment and that institutional procedures play an effective role in the management of academic standards'. Scrutiny of the reports of external examiners between 2007-08 to 2009-10 (undergraduate and postgraduate taught) indicates that this confidence in the quality of the student learning experience and the standards of awards remains justified.

3.3 In terms of the procedure for scrutiny, external examiners were once again invited to complete a pro-forma report. In response to a number of views expressed about its

presentation, a major overhaul was undertaken leading to the introduction of a new pro-forma for use from 2008-09. The new pro-forma (with appropriate adaptations for different types of provision, such as taught postgraduate, PGCE and Nursing and Midwifery) appears to have supported examiners in providing helpful and constructive narrative comments and to be easier to read.

#### **4. The Process of Consideration of Reports**

4.1 The process of consideration of reports by Schools and Faculty Learning, Teaching and Quality Committees (LTQC) regarding taught provision continues to be that in operation last session. Briefly, Schools are required to draft a reply to each external and to present the report and draft response to their Faculty LTQC. Following scrutiny at Faculty level, the Faculties in their turn confirm to the Learning and Teaching Committee that the process has been properly undertaken, highlighting any University-wide issues and sharing examples of useful practice and enhancements.

4.2 In a continuation of the revised approach to consideration at University level in respect of taught provision, the Director of Taught Programmes has again selected one School from each Faculty and reviewed relevant external examiners' reports across a longer period from 2007-08 to 2009-10, inclusive. This approach has been adopted to track how Schools have responded to any issues or concerns and how provision has developed or been enhanced as a result. The exercise is also designed to discern features of good practice, to verify that standards remain appropriate and to determine whether the University's provision and/or the students' demonstration of the achievement of learning outcomes have changed/improved. The Schools considered in this report are:

**Faculty of Arts and Humanities:** Language and Communication Studies (LCS)

**Faculty of Health:** Medicine, Health Policy and Practice (MED)

**Faculty of Science:** Environmental Sciences (ENV)

**Faculty of Social Sciences:** Law\*

\*The School of Law was reviewed last session and, in the light of some issues raised by some external examiners, it was considered appropriate to review the 2009-10 reports to discern how the School/Faculty have responded. (See Section 5 below)

**Appendix B** lists the Schools that have previously been audited in this way. In addition, the review has also ascertained that the process of consideration by School and Faculties has been appropriately carried out in accordance with procedure.

#### **5. Undergraduate and Taught Postgraduate Degree Programmes: academic standards and the quality of student learning opportunities**

##### **5.1 Process**

The process of consideration at School and Faculty level in respect of reports for 2008-09 has been undertaken in accordance with procedure and has been appropriately conducted. This has been verified by inspection of the report of external examiners and the accompanying tracking forms used by Faculty LTQCs.

We received a total of 114/120 reports from external examiners of undergraduate provision and 80/99 in respect of postgraduate taught provision for 2009-10. There is a process in place for requesting outstanding reports (up to three "chaser" requests), the sanction being withholding of the fee.

##### **5.2 Standards and Quality**

Overall, the reports for 2009-10 confirm that academic standards and the quality of the provision remain acceptable and comparable with other UK Universities (and at times exceeds them). This is echoed by the 90% of 2010 UEA graduates (first degrees) who in the

National Student Survey expressed their satisfaction/high satisfaction with their experience – the same percentage as in the previous year (source: National Student Survey 2010).

The University also participated in a similar review of postgraduate taught provision (the 'Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey – PTES) in 2010. The response rate was higher than in the previous year (at 22.30% compared with 12.80%) with 88.00% (another increase compared with last year's 85.50%) of those who responded indicated their satisfaction with the overall experience of their course.

Both surveys continue to demonstrate that students are not as impressed with aspects of assessment and feedback – areas that tend not to score as highly in other Higher Education Institutions.

Turning to the four Schools whose progress was tracked in terms of the views of external examiners over a three-year period, what follows are some illustrative comments about the nature of the provision.

**FACULTY: Faculty of Arts and Humanities**  
**SCHOOL: Language and Communications Studies**  
**AWARDS: BA, Graduate Diplomas, MA**

The following issues and themes emerged during the three year period of the external examiners' reports between 2007-08 and 2009-10:

#### **Undergraduate programmes**

##### ***Points of commendation:***

- the high level of achievements of students leading to development in a wide range of skills. Learning outcomes for all modules lead to the development of not only language skills and sub-skills (communicating with fluency, report writing and translating), but also study skills (e.g. researching, analysing, developing an argument) and professional and transferrable skills (group working, giving oral presentations and using media resources);
- well thought out structure and innovative content which is evident in the language honours programmes. ("I was impressed by the reflective diary which I saw for the first time this year and also by the specialised translation option considering that the portfolio of work and commentary represent good practice." Twomey, 2007-2008)
- the placement of the year abroad in language honours programmes is well integrated in the course objectives facilitating the preparation for the final year and development of self-learning and evaluation skills. External examiners also commented on students' reports on the year abroad which centred on the effectiveness of the placement in providing students with the opportunity to engage with people, language and society;
- the School takes marking and feedback seriously and external examiners commented on meticulous marking in both coursework and examinations as well as considerable staff time spent providing students with useful feedback and guidance;
- the simplifying of the overcomplicated oral marking scheme of by reducing it from ten criteria to six criteria was much welcomed by external examiners;
- excellent organisation of Boards of Examiners, duties were made clear early on to external examiners, they received samples of coursework in plenty of time and queries were answered immediately by tutors and administrators alike;

##### ***Issues which need further attention:***

- for language honours programmes, develop more detailed marking criteria for translation into the target language;
- consider extending the examination board schedule by building in more time to enable external examiners to more fully participate in the moderation process and in general external examiners' activities;
- provide students with more guidance on marking criteria with regards to examination papers;
- consider introducing an attendance requirement;
- provide external examiners with information on how the School monitors requirement of nine hours of self study and evidence of samples of home work or non-assessed work to monitor students' progress to assess if there is a clear progression;

### **Postgraduate Programmes:**

#### ***Points of commendation:***

- external examiners commented on high teaching standards which are reflected in the high achievement of engaged students in assessments and dissertations resulting in the delivery of first rate courses;
- innovative course design e.g. the inclusion of a work experience module on the MA Applied Translation Studies was considered an important feature of the programme which helped students to acquire valuable employability skills;
- assessment methods were considered to be creative and innovative, e.g. external examiners commented particularly on new modes of assessment such as blogs and diaries. Equally, assessed student presentations were considered to be very helpful in developing students' transferable skills.
- marking standards are applied consistently and impartially and were considered accurate, neither too harsh nor too generous;
- outstanding feedback is offered to students giving them a clear rationale for marks being awarded. ("Across the spread of modules sampled, great care is taken to speak to the strength and weaknesses of each piece and the highly ranked pieces are given as much attention to areas of development as the weaker pieces of work." Shaw, 2009-10).

#### ***Issues which need further consideration:***

- external examiners would welcome the provision of a complete portfolio of selected students' work, e.g. in the case of borderline students or narrow fails;
- improve the paperwork presented to Boards of Examiners by ensuring clarity of marks presented to Boards of Examiners as well as provision of a full breakdown of marks for each module to in order to properly scrutinise a module and the distribution of marks;

### **Commentary**

External examiners' reports are complimentary highlighting in particular high teaching standards, innovative assessment methods and excellent feedback to students. External examiners are also impressed by the outstanding administrative arrangements of the process. The School is open minded and receptive to recommendations for improvements by external examiners. For example, a number of external examiners commented on the overcomplicated marking criteria for language orals, this was promptly addressed by the School by introducing a year later a more simplified marking scheme. It would seem that the University's decision to tighten up the attendance and engagement criteria would be welcomed by external examiners as introducing an attendance requirement was one of the major recommendations made by them. Another major recommendation by external examiners is the request that paperwork presented to Board of Examiners should be clearer and should be improved. In preparation for the introduction of the new academic model, it would seem that the University ought to make a considerable effort to address this issue.

**FACULTY: Faculty of Health**

**SCHOOL: School of Medicine, Health Policy and Practice**

**AWARDS: MBBS, PG Diploma Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, MSc Health Sciences, MD, MRes Health Research, Doctoral Programme in Clinical Psychology**

The following issues and themes emerged during the three year period of the external examiners' reports between 2007-08 and 2009-10:

#### **Undergraduate programmes**

##### ***Points of commendation:***

- An excellent, well designed, well run, innovative and fully integrated course providing a good mix of clinical and academic teaching, with appropriate learning outcomes, closely linked to GMC requirements.
- Teaching standards, including those in clinical teaching, are high (comparable with other research led universities). The School excels in the close linkage of basic science, social science and clinical learning and the application of problem based learning techniques.
- Evidence that clinical placements are sufficiently challenging.
- Good relationship between the School and the local NHS. Many of the examiners for the OSCE are NHS consultants and there are excellent working relationships.
- Assessment designed and undertaken by world leaders in testing theory, and the blue printing, benchmarking, scoring and conduct reflect this. There is a good range of assessment methods and these enable all candidates to demonstrate the achievement of learning outcomes. OSCE exams well managed with evidence of innovation in stations and assessment techniques.
- The organisation and commitment of staff to providing a high quality assessment experience are impressive and the administrative staff very efficient. Examiner briefing and education are excellent and examinations are conducted in a competent and professional manner.
- Candidates generally well prepared, happy with course and assessments and performed well. Students have excellent educational and pastoral support.
- Previous comments from external examiners have been acted upon.

##### ***Issues which need further attention:***

- Ongoing minor issues with OSCEs (see commentary).
- It was suggested that statistical feedback re exam performance be provided to compare reliability of individual OSCE stations etc. One examiner would also welcome a spreadsheet in which specific learning outcomes from the units being assessed in the OSCE would be blueprinted against each station/onto a spreadsheet, to show what is being tested at each station.
- Some external examiners noted that some exam papers had been sent to them for review with errors and typos, suggesting inadequate preparation.
- There was a request for statistical analyses to be available in advance of the Board. Data could be reviewed at the Board to demonstrate quality assurance.
- Re: the role of the external examiners. One external examiner would like a 'job description', and a formal induction process. Some external examiners would like to be more involved in standard setting in advance of the Board. There was comment to the effect that review of SSCs, projects and portfolio gives external examiners a substantial workload and that the work is not always received early enough and there are no clear guidelines for the role of external examiners in this matter. External examiners would appreciate receiving a detailed written scheme of assessment for the course.
- Generally the external examiners were happy with the assessment process but individual comments about assessment included the following: there is an imbalance apparent in the MBBS assessment results with very few students failing the extended matching questions paper but many failing the short answer questions; some of the short answer questions address topics which are too large; there are a large number of long written assignments; possibly too many summative assessments overall; details of OSCE stations and EMQ possibly released too soon in advance.
- Several external examiners commented that the School awards a relatively low number of Distinctions – the criteria used meaning that students can miss out as a result of a low mark on one OSCE station. Post graduate training places can depend on obtaining a distinction. School agreed to modify criteria to allow c 10% of students to obtain a distinction, and also to take up with the University the issue of whether regulations should be amended in order for extenuating circumstances to be considered when awarding distinctions.
- Some external examiners would like to see more clarity and consistency around the consideration of extenuating circumstances.
- Some external examiners questioned the relative weightings of the MCQ and the OSCE elements of the finals exam, and also suggested splitting the two.

#### **Postgraduate Programmes:**

##### ***Points of commendation:***

- MSc course addresses the reference points laid out in the QAA framework both in terms of organisation and assessment procedure.
- Students receive an excellent grounding in both quantitative and qualitative research methods.
- Modules well structured to meet learning outcomes of courses as a whole. Learning outcomes clearly stated, rigorously applied, and appropriate to the module content and assessment.
- High teaching standards – learning and teaching methods wide-ranging and appropriate.

Reflective learning is encouraged.

- General quality of students' work good, with high standard dissertations.
- Academic standards high and rigorous and students' assessed work similar to similar courses nationally (any low standard work is consistently failed).
- Excellent range of assessment methods, with consistent and fair marking standards.
- Extent and quality of feedback is excellent.
- Administrative processes around the process of external examining excellent.
- Appropriate information sent to external examiners.
- Course team responsive to comments and suggestions.

***Issues which need further consideration:***

- MSc and PG Diploma candidates' work varies considerably and the School must continue to provide appropriate support for weaker students.
- Some issues with lenient marking of research methods module. Insufficient moderation in one or two cases.

**Commentary**

External examiners consistently confirm the academic standards of the programmes and comment favourably on their comparability with those of other institutions.

External examiners were contacted in good time re exam dates and provided with appropriate information in advance. Administrative issues noted by the externals have been addressed by the School, eg one external examiner was unclear whether suggested revisions had been incorporated into the written exam questions. The School agreed to respond shortly after receiving the externals' comments to clarify what revisions had been incorporated (this was already done for the OSCE questions).

The responses from the School indicate that the School is open minded and receptive to comments and issues identified by external examiners and that the School clearly often gave active consideration to suggestions from external examiners. For example, a suggestion for an increase in contact time for students on the CBT Diploma course was adopted by the School. The external examiners' reports themselves indicate that issues are appropriately addressed by the School, for example, a concern about the double function of the Board of Examiners, which also functioned as the Fitness to Practise Committee, was addressed by the School. A suggestion made in 2008 that students who fail the final exam should repeat the final year before re-sitting has been adopted by the School for students entering 2011/12 and after. The School did not enforce this earlier as there is a cost to the student which needed to be made clear from the outset of the course, though affected students have been strongly encouraged to repeat the year and all have done so.

On the whole, the examiners praised the manner in which the OSCEs were conducted, but various minor issues have been raised, which is not surprising with such a complex process. The School has addressed these appropriately and responded to comments and suggestions from external examiners. For example, one external examiner noted that some examiners could not resist the inclination to conduct a viva role which was not indicated in the assessment, and the School addressed this issue via enhanced briefing and monitoring of examiners. Other examples included one external examiner raising concern over how marks had been adjusted to allow for problems in the performance of an OSCE station, asking that a clear rule be devised for this. It was noted that some OSCEs are not using the full range of

marks, and there were also some comments about the physical environment. The School continues to consider such comments and to modify the OSCE structure and process as appropriate.

A question was raised by an MBBS external examiner as to whether the final written exams were easier than at some universities. The School responded that questions were drawn from EMQ / MCQ bank of national questions and therefore nationally validated. Nevertheless, the School noted the comment and pledged to continue to consider standards carefully.

Overall, running through all the reports was a very positive view of the School, the courses, teaching standards, assessment, organisation, and calibre of the students.

**FACULTY: SCI**

**SCHOOL: ENV**

**AWARDS: BSc, MSc and MRes**

The School of Environmental Sciences offers a number of courses across environmental sciences, geophysical sciences, earth sciences, meteorology, oceanography, atmospheric sciences and touching on social sciences. This range of programmes is overseen by a number of Boards of Examiners and requires a breadth of expertise from its external examiners. The School has phased the appointment of external examiners to ensure that there is a mix of new and experienced examiners.

The reports consistently confirm the academic standards of the courses and in some cases overflow with praise for the course, the teaching team and the quality of educational experience offered to students. There is also consistent praise for the administration of the assessment process and liaison with external examiners. The external examiners also confirm that the courses are aligned with the relevant QAA Benchmark statements.

There is clear evidence of the external examiners suggesting enhancements to course design and delivery and of contributing to the School's review and redesign of its undergraduate programme.

The following issues and themes emerged during the three year period of the external examiners' reports between 2007-08 and 2009-10:

#### **Undergraduate programmes**

##### ***Points of commendation:***

- Thorough consideration of individual students by the Board of Examiners
- Good links between modules made by students
- Innovative teaching styles and good range of assessment types
- High quality of the graduates produced by the programme
- Efficient and helpful administration of the assessment process and communication with the external examiners
- Exemplary integration of research into teaching

There is clear evidence from the reports of the School responding promptly to comments raised by external examiners.

##### ***Issues which need further attention:***

- Consideration of the way in which viva voce examinations are used (specifically the number of students selected and whether some issues could be resolved by a pre-Board), allied with a concern that external examiners were spending too much time resolving borderlines and not enough time looking more broadly at standards and course design – addressed to some extent in subsequent years

- Supervision and guidance available to students completing a dissertation, including adoption of appropriate academic style
- Need to contingency plan for dissertation projects conducted outside the UK or give further consideration to the type of projects that are approved
- Integration of disciplines within joint and interdisciplinary courses, including consideration of modules that combine both subjects and clarity of different expectations between Schools
- Consideration of progression, particularly between Years 2 and 3, and degree weightings
- Clearer indication / annotation of the internal marking process on scripts (a theme seen in other Schools) – this appears largely to have been rectified in the subsequent year, but some issues remain and resurface in 2009/10
- Provision of marks / information to the Board from SITS (a continuing issue through years)
- (As part of the teaching review undertaken by ENV) consider the reduction of module choice and flexibility to ensure that students cover material expected of a named degree
- Consideration of the way in which marks from partner institutions in international exchanges are translated into the UEA mark profile (noting that the scheme planned when the exchange was set up, which was not tested, proved to be unworkable in practice and had to be amended) and the weighting that these marks carry (how useful is a single mark worth 60 credits to a Board?). External examiners felt that these were issues that should have been picked up at course approval stage.
- Concern in respect of mechanisms for scaling marks, the prompt for so doing and the consistency with which scaling is applied across modules (the Committee may recall that this issue was also the subject of a complaint to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator and that the University has subsequently provided further guidance on this matter)
- Typographical errors in examination papers and the internal review process
- Recycling of examination questions from year to year (which allows question spotting)
- Moderation sample was not discussed with the external examiner and there were suggestions that reviewing a broader range of work (specifically in respect of the final project) would be helpful in determining academic standards (noting that in ENV external examiners review work at UEA rather than being sent a sample)
- Concern at clarification of the purpose and conduct of viva voce such that it assists the deliberations of the Board rather than provide an opportunity for external examiners to discuss the course with students.

One external examiner made some suggestions of good practice in respect of the conduct of Assessment Boards which may be of more general interest and which might be integrated in to the New Academic Model / Code of Practice on Assessment:

- An external examiner leads the discussion of borderlines / extenuating circumstances to ensure fair and objective handling
- Regular rotation of staff attending Assessment Boards and/or extenuating circumstances boards to ensure regular input of fresh views in order to protect standards and also to provide all staff with an opportunity to see how the process works
- Consideration of whether all staff should be members of the Board (echoed in other reports)

The majority of external examiners strongly recommend that viva voce examinations be retained.

The external examiners also raised issues which the University is now addressing through the development of the New Academic Model. For example, as noted above, external examiners encouraged the School to think about a tighter definition of module choice within courses to ensure that courses mapped on to the named degree title. There were also calls for Assessment Board paperwork that was a direct output from SITS and the development of a course structure that ensured progression between Years 2 and 3. Another external examiner commenting on 2007/8 assessment noted

*Assessment is a necessary evil with very little to do with learning. The process is as well managed in ENV as elsewhere but in the University system as a whole it is becoming the be all and end all. This is a highly undesirable trend, which erodes proper motivation and development of students and generates the attitude that the only things worth doing are those for which marks can be grubbed. Effective responsibility for the decline can be laid at several politically driven doors. It is time for the upper echelons of the University system collectively to rebel and reassert their primacy over the educational process.*

In a 2008/9 report, an external examiner commented

*The School may wish to consider ... why it is that students do less well in exams than they do in [continuous assessment] – i.e. do students get sufficient training and practice in this mode of assessment when it is used quite heavily to assess most modules?*

In addition there was support for the provision of feedback on examination performance across examiners and years.

### **Postgraduate Programmes:**

#### ***Points of commendation:***

- Variety and scope of assessment methods, including innovative approaches, which comprehensively test students
- Good quality, well trained graduates and high standard of student work and particularly projects / dissertations
- Emailing material to the external examiner (e.g. marks profiles and electronic copies of assessment) prior to Boards
- Integration of research and teaching, including student access to research data to support their dissertations
- Interesting placements (which provided the basis for research projects) and the opportunity provided to students to apply knowledge
- Efficient and fair Assessment Boards
- Support and guidance provided to students, particularly when undertaking their research projects
- Feedback given to students on written assignments

One external examiner noted that it had been helpful for Boards to meet at the same time as this provided an opportunity for external examiners for different programmes to discuss and compare their experience and conclusions on standards. This may be a model worthy of wider dissemination.

#### ***Issues which need further consideration:***

- Role of the external examiner (noting that some courses have small numbers and share modules with other courses which will have been moderated by other external examiners)
- Whilst some examiners commended the use of the full marking range, others encouraged greater use of marks above 80% to distinguish the very best students
- Marking of dissertations – tends to be impressionistic so consideration should be given to more structured marking criteria / framework

### **Commentary**

The summary of issues and issues considered by the Faculty LTQC continue to focus on areas for action rather than the dissemination of best practice. This is unfortunate given the

high praise given to the ENV courses at undergraduate and taught postgraduate level in respect of innovative assessment methods and the use of a range of assessment methods which comprehensively test the abilities of students. There is also little evidence within the consideration of the reports of the School or Faculty having sought to share best practice to address concerns raised in the reports – for example in respect of dissertation marking criteria or methods of annotating scripts to explain grades.

As noted above, the comments of the external examiners suggest that clarification or a common understanding of the role of the external examiner is required. Hopefully national debates and any subsequent revisions to the University's Codes of Practice may help to address this.

The practice of sending samples of work in pdf format should be considered for wider dissemination and implementation.

In common with the comments we see in the National Student Survey, external examiners at both levels comment that marking criteria are not applied consistently by staff, and that on occasion comments or annotations on the script do not align with the mark given. Whilst ENV (like other Schools where this issue has been raised) puts in place action to remind staff of the marking scale and seeks to foster a common understanding, this remains an issue. Across years, levels and examiners there was consistent comment on the need for annotation of scripts to explain marks awarded, to assist the external examiners in their role and also to provide transparency. Whilst the University has provided some guidance on this to individuals, a policy statement (potentially forming part of the Code of Practice on Assessment) would appear to be of benefit, taking into account the method of internal verification used and the requirements of the Data Protection Act (balancing operational need against the possibility of a request being made). It was notable that a number of external examiners encouraged the School to provide feedback to students on examinations.

One external examiner commented that he had not had a response from the University to issues raised in his report. It is hoped that the School explained that their response integrated issues relating to the course team, the School and University policy and practice. In another report the response (to an issue raised about the display of marks to two decimal points) appeared not to take account of the School's ability to raise this issue with the University or to explain the University's position on this. As noted in previous reports, we reverted to the previous practice of members of the Learning, Teaching and Quality Office reading reports as they are received by the University to facilitate a prompt University-level response, which can be fed in to the School response at the earliest possible stage. This process also ensures that the University has a clear and comprehensive overview of issues being raised by external examiners in their reports.

The amended external examiners' report proforma appears to have been effective in supporting examiners to make their reports. The amendments appear to have been welcomed, although one examiner commented that even more free form format would be welcome. The new format continues to be easier to audit. The use of tracking / response forms has not been consistent. Despite the insertion of a note to emphasise that the "Action Plan reviewed by" should be completed at a future point, this section is still being completed at the same time as the response. The Committee may recall that the tracking proforma was introduced in response to issues raised during the 2004 QAA Audit, where the Auditors found minimal documentary evidence of actions arising from the consideration of external examiners' reports. As noted above, the proformas still emphasise actions to address issues raised by examiners rather than identifying practice worthy of dissemination.

**FACULTY: Faculty of Social Sciences**

**SCHOOL: Law**

**AWARDS: LLB, BA (Law), Certificate of Higher Education in Common Law, Graduate Diploma in Legal Studies, LLM, PG Certificate in Employment Law**

The following issues and themes emerged during the three year period of the external

examiners' reports between 2007-08 and 2009-10:

### **Undergraduate programmes:**

#### ***Points of commendation:***

- A very positive suite of reports on the Undergraduate degrees in which external examiners remarked that '(academic standards were) excellent and compare very favourably with those set in other UK Law Schools with which I am familiar' (RW Painter, 2009-10) and that '(academic) standards suggest a research-led faculty where teaching is driven by active scholars' (Tridimas, 2009-10).
- There is relatively little trace of the concerns – particularly around communication problems and standards - that were raised by some examiners in respect of previous sessions. One examiner who had previously expressed such concern declared that 'the process was much improved', that 'last year's difficulties have been addressed' and that '(there was) good communication with internal examiners', also praising the thoroughness of marking (McEwan, 2009-10).
- Innovative assessment methods were identified particularly in the areas of Evidence and Criminology and 'feedback from the internals to the students on the coursework assignments was particularly helpful' (Painter, 2009-10).
- Learning outcomes were considered to be 'clearly expressed and apposite' with particular admiration reserved for the efforts made to test levels of comprehension and capacity especially in Family Law and Land Law (Carey-Miller, 2009-10).
- A sense of careful consideration of the reports and responsiveness to external examiners' comments pervade: RW Painter (2009-10), for example, noted that the full range of marks was used in the first class and as such 'I do not think that this was an issue this year'. The School has introduced 'anonymised' Boards in response to a recommendation by Giliker (2007-08) and there is now a convention to advise the Board on how the marks for the year abroad are taken into consideration.
- Administrative support for the Board of Examiners was singled out for repeated compliment: 'The administrative staff supporting this award should be commended for their efficiency and 'client care' (Painter, 2009-10)
- **Conventions**

#### ***Point for dissemination across the University***

- A point worthy of dissemination across the University is made by Painter (2009-10) who records that 'it was particularly gratifying to witness established members of staff mentoring newly appointed staff in the procedures'.

#### ***Issues which need further consideration***

- In relation to marking procedures, Penner (2009-10) suggested that all upper year scripts which contribute to a student's degree classification should be second marked not just moderated. (The University's internal verification procedures have been observed by the School)

### **Postgraduate Programmes:**

#### ***Points of commendation:***

- External examiners were generally very satisfied with the Postgraduate courses offered by the School
- The responsiveness of the School to external examiners' comments is also reflected in the postgraduate arena. Dialogue with internal examiners was described by Foster (2009-10) as being conducted in a 'very efficient, positive and constructive manner'. His criticism (in 2008-09) of the process of scrutiny of assessment material was not repeated in 2009-10. The recommendation (by Maher, in 2007-08) that student anonymity be preserved at the Board of Examiners, has been implemented and Griffiths (2008-09) has commented that 'the School responded very clearly to my recommendations last year'. An issue raised last year where questions were set by someone from another School has not re-surfaced
- The high level of teaching in well-designed courses was also commended by Foster

(2009-10) whilst Maher (2008-09) commented that 'excellent research training (is) evident' with 'varied and innovative assessment'

- Painter (2008-09) describes the quality of feedback provided by the internals to the student (and to the external examiner) as 'excellent' and Foster (2009-10) commends 'the extensive comments on each piece of assessed work', with Painter (2009-10) perceiving this to be a strength. Foster (2009-10) describes the students as being 'clearly engaged'
- Academic standards were considered satisfactory on the whole (Painter (2009-10) 'Standards expected (and often achieved) have been excellent', although Foster (also 2009-10) discerns that the standards achieved by students, whilst 'OK', varies
- Standards of administrative support appear once again to have been consistently high, with Stothers (2009-10) noting that the administrative side was 'smoothly handled' and the Boards conducted 'in exemplary fashion' (Maher, 2007-08) and 'well-conducted and well-chaired' (Painter, 2008-09)
- Links between learning outcomes and assessment were 'tightly knit' (Maher, 2008-09). Griffiths (2007-8) and a number of positive comments were made regarding the use of assessment: Griffiths (2007-8) sees the School excelling in its innovative use of applied learning in the area of IP; Maher (2008-09) identifies 'varied and innovative assessments' and that these are 'relatively unusual in LLM modules' and Painter (2008-09) commends the School for its 'challenging assessments in instruments which address issues at the cutting edge'

#### ***Issues which need further consideration***

- Word limits. This issue was raised by Foster (2008-09) and, whilst there has been no repetition of the comment in 2009-10 by any externals, it would be useful to have confirmation as to the action taken
- Marking criteria. Foster (2009-10) notes that 'some aspects of the criteria...might usefully be reviewed' noting a specific instance where the criteria 'could relate more specifically to law and refer in particular, to the citation of appropriate legal authority'
- Expertise. Foster (2009-10) expressed a concern that where comparative essays addressed jurisdictions in other countries, the School should consider how to ensure appropriate expertise is available and to look at appropriate methodology
- Merit grade. There remains a groundswell of opinion that a merit grade at 60% should be introduced. It is noted that the School has introduced a system of 'Dean's list' whereby distinction and merit-worthy performances are recorded, for students to use in any further study or job applications, recognising that the regulatory framework is a matter for the University

#### **Commentary**

It is clear that the issues raised by examiners do not detract significantly from what they regard to be high-quality courses with a high-quality student experience with standards consistent with the National Qualifications Framework. There is clear evidence that the School has responded to issues raised by the external examiners in previous years as far as possible. (The issue of a merit grade at master's level remains a matter for consideration by the University as it develops its new academic model). Good practice has been discerned (eg mentoring new staff in assessment processes) which is worthy of wider dissemination. Positive reference is made to innovative assessment vehicles and their linkage with learning outcomes and to feedback to students.

## **6. Issues for the University arising from external examiners' reports on taught provision**

6.1 Over all, external examiners have presented a largely positive picture of taught provision. They appear generally satisfied with the academic standards and quality of the student learning experience on offer and have identified numerous examples where both the standards achieved and the learning opportunities provided are outstanding and, indeed, exemplary. It is gratifying to see so many examples of commendation in relation, inter alia, to learning outcomes and opportunities (MED), innovative assessment vehicles and feedback to

students (LAW), innovative teaching styles (ENV), skills acquisition (LCS) and collaborative working with professional (NHS) colleagues (MED).

6.2 Clearly, there are areas for improvement. Assessment is once again a recurrent theme in all the four Schools scrutinised, with particular regard to methods and operation of assessment (particularly the MED OSCE examinations), marking criteria, clarity of guidance and information to students, ensuring a consistent relationship between marks and the relevant criteria and, importantly, feedback to students. (Even here, though, there were examples of good practice – see section 6.1 above). There were also specific issues relating to course structure in ENV regarding the integration of disciplines in joint/interdisciplinary courses, a concern that has been raised at a more general level in other fora by students. One comment in respect of the MB BS appeared to question the standards set for the final MBBS. It is noted that the School responded that the questions were drawn from a nationally validated databank but nevertheless has undertaken to keep this under review. An ongoing issue for the University is whether an award of a Masters degree may be made “with merit”. It is recognised that this is a recurring comment from some external examiners, but LTC has to date not been persuaded to change the Common Masters Framework. However the introduction of the new academic model is an opportunity for the proposal to be considered and particularly in the light of University’s increased focus on employability. In the meantime it is noted that the School concerned (LAW) has responded by introducing a “Dean’s List” of commended students.

## **7. Conclusion and Recommendations**

7.1 Taking all the above in account, the Learning and Teaching Committee is pleased to confirm to the Senate that:

- academic standards and the quality of provision as commented upon by external examiners in respect of taught provision at undergraduate, and master’s level remain acceptable and comparable with, and in some cases exceed, those of other UK Universities;
- academic standards and the quality of provision as commented upon by external examiners in respect of research degree programmes remain acceptable and comparable with, and in some cases exceed, those of other UK Universities;
- there is evidence of generally sound and some outstanding practice in relation to the conduct and management of teaching, learning and assessment, to course content and, in several instances, to the feedback given to students;
- Schools and Faculties continue to consider and respond to the issues raised by external examiners and there is a sense that this has been an improvement in some areas

### **7.2 Areas for attention and improvement**

Whilst a generally strong position, there is nonetheless room for improvement in the following areas:

- Assessment. It is imperative that Schools and Faculty LTQCs continue to pay particular attention to and keep under review, assessment to students, including methods of assessment, criteria, clarity of guidance and information to students and ensuring a consistent relationship between marks and the relevant criteria;
- Feedback to students. Of equal importance is the necessity for Schools to continue to pay attention to feedback/forward to students. This area and that of assessment generally, are the aspects in which the University (along with many other comparable institutions) performs relatively poorly in the NSS and PTES. It is encouraging to see examples of good practice identified by externals but this must be captured and implemented more consistently across all areas of provision before we can expect to

discern an upwards trend in NSS/PTES scores. The development of the New Academic Model (to be implemented from 2013-14) will assist Schools and Faculties to plan more coherent assessment methods and feedback/forwards arrangements;

- Course Proposals. Schools that are introducing a year abroad should, as part of their course proposal, include details of how marks/grades from partner institutions in international exchanges are translated into UEA marks profile. Schools with joint/interdisciplinary subjects must set out how the student experience will be appropriately managed. This question is already included in the relevant pro forma and must be rigorously considered;
- Use of the new academic model. The Learning and Teaching Committee should continue to use the development of the New Academic Model to increase the focus on assessment and feedback. The recent visit by Professor Graham Gibbs has done much to stimulate interest and awareness and there is evidence that some Schools are making good progress with their planning for the new model;
- Annotations on assessed work. The Taught Programmes Policy Group of the Learning and Teaching Committee should consider the preparation of guidance to Schools on the approaches to written annotations on items of work for assessment;
- Dissemination. Given the benefits that flow from sharing and disseminating practice concerning learning and teaching, it is suggested that each School and Faculty and the Learning and Teaching Committee should identify and implement one (or more) way(s) of stimulating engagement within and across Schools, Faculties and the University in addition to existing approaches. Enhancement of the student learning experience is a 'watchword' and it is difficult to see how continuous improvement can blossom if colleagues are not assiduously pro-active in this area.

**7.3 The Committee is asked to approve the draft report prior to the meeting of Senate on 15 June. If endorsed by Senate, this report will be placed on the LTQ website.**

## APPENDIX A

Of the first degrees awarded, these were classified as follows:

SESSION	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10
<b>Class</b>			
<b>First</b>	286 (12)	281 (12)	332 (13)
<b>Upper Second</b>	1285 (56)	1253 (55)	1323 (54)
<b>Lower Second</b>	536 (23)	535 (24)	578 (23)
<b>Third</b>	76 (3)	78 (3)	107 (4)
<b>Ordinary Pass</b>	3 (1)	12 (1)	6 (0)
<b>MBBS</b>	95 (4)	103 (5)	113 (5)
<b>Other Unclassified Honours</b>	0 (0)	2 (0)	2 (0)
<b>TOTAL</b>	2281 (100)	2264 (100)	2461 (100)

\* (Figures in brackets are percentages)

\*\* (A degree that is awarded on a pass/fail basis)

## APPENDIX B

FACULTY				
Report to LTC/Senate In Session	Arts and Humanities Schools	Health Schools	Science Social Schools	Science Schools
<b>2007-08</b>	World Art Studies and Museology	Medicine, Health Policy and Practice	Development Studies	Mathematics
<b>2008-09</b>	Literature and Creative Writing	Allied Health Professions	Norwich Business School	Chemical Sciences and Pharmacy
<b>2009-10</b>	Political, Social and International Studies	Nursing and Midwifery (post-registration)	Law	Computing Sciences
<b>2010-11</b>	Language and Communication Studies	Medicine, Health Policy and Practice	Law	Environmental Sciences