

**Southampton Solent University**

**To:** Academic Board

**Meeting Date:**  
14/03/2018

**Agenda item:**  
13

**Paper Ref:**  
18/AB/09

**Presented by:** Dr Dave Dowland, Academic Registrar

Written by: Mike Firth, External Examiner Officer, Academic Services

**THEMES FROM 2016-17 EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORTS**

---

**Executive Summary**

This paper provides an analysis of the external examiner reports received for 2016-17 and identifies the key themes arising from the reports.

The University has received all reports for the 2016-17 academic year. Overall the majority of reports were positive and external examiners have confirmed that the standards of the University's awards and student performance are secure and align with the framework for higher education qualifications and applicable benchmark statements.

All reports have been responded to by the relevant schools/services. Just under three quarters of the responses were issued to external examiners within the stipulated timeframe of six weeks. The Quality Management department is currently conducting a review of this timeframe and will present any proposed changes to policy to the Learning, Teaching and Student Achievement Committee (LTSAC).

The substantive themes identified in the reports were: feedback; range and design of assessments; marking and internal moderation; employability and 'real world learning'; and external examiner support. The externals noted areas of good practice within these themes however inconsistencies were identified in the execution by staff of the feedback, marking and internal moderation processes.

**The Board is asked to:**

1. Note the contents of this paper.

**Background**

2. External examiners reports confirm the alignment of overall standards and student performance with the framework for higher education qualifications, applicable benchmark statements and sector practice. External examiners submit their reports in line with the requirements specified in Section 21 (External Examiners) of the Academic Handbook.
3. External examiner reports are reviewed by Academic Services and allocated a RAG code (Red, Amber or Green) which indicates the status of the report contents.

**ACTION REQUIRED:** Consideration and noting

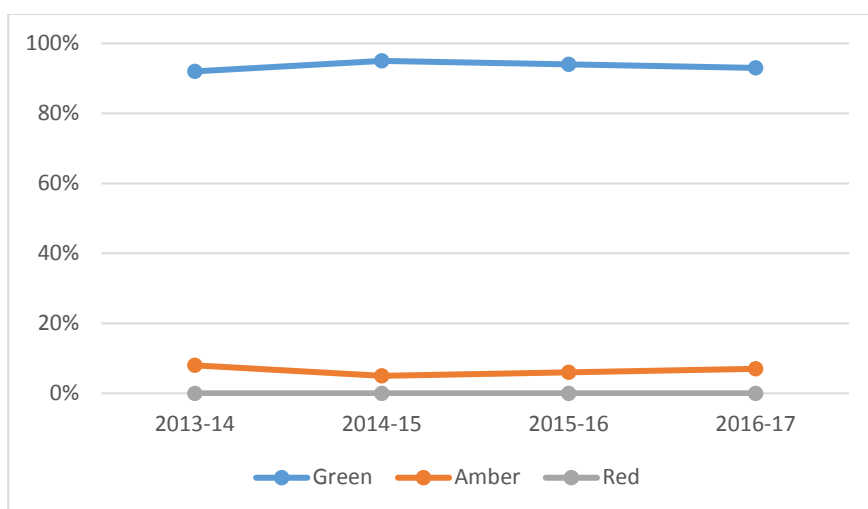
---

- 4. Academic Services forward the RAGged reports to the schools/services who then carry out their own analysis and provide a detailed response to each external examiner. The reports are also considered as part of the Course Review process and discussed at Course Committees. Student course representatives are provided with access to relevant External Examiner reports.

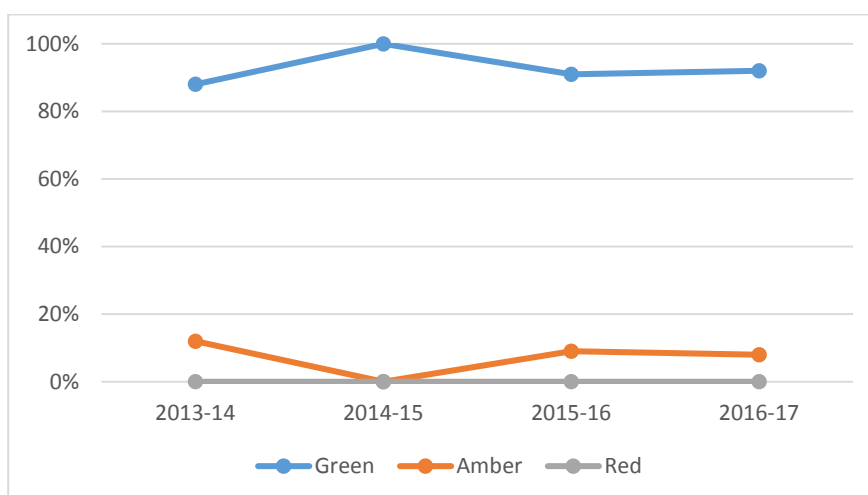
**For Information**

- 5. The University has received all external examiner reports for 2016-17. Overall the reports were positive as evidenced by the number that were RAGged green (175). No reports from unit or award external examiners were coded red for the sixth year in succession.

- 6. RAGging of unit external examiner annual reports:



- 7. RAGging of award external examiner reports:



- 8. Just under three quarters (73%) of the responses issued to external examiners were sent within the time limit stipulated in the University's policy of six weeks from the date the report was received. 96% of the responses were sent within twelve weeks of the report being issued. This is a significant improvement on 2015-16 when 45% of

**ACTION REQUIRED:** Consideration and noting

---

responses were issued within six weeks and 86% were issued within twelve weeks. A breakdown per school/service is shown in table 1 below.

9. It is important that responses are provided within the timeframe stated in the policy. Course teams were actively reminded at appropriate intervals by Academic Services when responses were due; responses that were outstanding after the six week period were flagged with the relevant Directors and the Head of Quality Management. All responses have now been issued to the external examiners.
10. The Quality Management department is currently conducting a review of the six-week response timeframe. Feedback received from the schools and services indicates that this timeframe may not be appropriate for reports received in the summer as most academic staff take leave during that period. The review and any proposed changes to policy will be presented to the Learning, Teaching and Student Achievement Committee (LTSAC).

**Table 1 - External examiner response rate per school/service**

School/Service	Number of Responses Issued on Time (within 6 weeks of receipt)		Number of Responses Issued within 12 weeks	
	2015-16	2016-17	2015-16	2016-17
Art, Design and Fashion	16 (55%)	22 (76%)	28 (97%)	28 (97%)
Business, Law and Communications	26 (40%)	51 (77%)	53 (80%)	66 (100%)
Warsash School of Maritime Science and Engineering	4 (26%)	11 (69%)	14 (93%)	14 (88%)
Media Arts and Technology	11 (29%)	22 (55%)	32 (84%)	36 (90%)
Sport, Health and Social Sciences	8 (47%)	13 (68%)	14 (82%)	19 (100%)
Solent Learning and Teaching Institute	1 (100%)	1 (100%)	1 (100%)	1 (100%)
New College of the Humanities	5 (100%)	5 (100%)	5 (100%)	5 (100%)
Various (Award EEs)	11 (100%)	13 (100%)	11 (100%)	13 (100%)
Overall	82 (45%)	138 (73%)	158 (86%)	182 (96%)

11. The following themes have been identified from the qualitative comments of the unit external examiner reports: feedback; range and design of assessments; marking and internal moderation; employability and 'real world learning'; and external examiner support. The externals noted areas of good practice within these themes however inconsistencies were identified in the execution by staff of the feedback, marking and internal moderation processes. The themes are summarised below.

**Feedback to Students**

12. Overall, external examiners commended the quality of feedback issued to students, noting that feedback was comprehensive and constructive which helped the students to progress through their courses.
13. A small number of external examiners commented on the inconsistency of feedback provided between units, noting that some feedback was minimal and too generic.

## **ACTION REQUIRED:** Consideration and noting

---

The relevant course teams proposed that they would standardise the type and delivery of feedback to students to ensure consistency.

14. The University has shown a gradual improvement over the last five years in the quality of feedback issued to students. This is reflected in the comments from external examiners; in particular there has been a significant decrease in comments from externals on the use of handwritten feedback, reflecting the efforts by the course teams to ensure that feedback is typed and legible.

### **Range and Design of Assessments**

15. As in previous years, external examiners praised the range and type of assessment tasks provided to students and the innovative design of these tasks. Some recommendations were made regarding specific unit assessments; the course teams have considered these recommendations and have made appropriate modifications to assessments taking into consideration the feedback received from external examiners.
16. In line with University policy, all assessment briefs should be made available to external examiners for advice and feedback prior to the assessment being released to the students. The majority of externals confirmed that this process had been followed however, a few stated that they had not received the briefs before they were released to students. The course teams have been reminded of the importance of this requirement and the Assessments Team will work with the teams to ensure compliance. The Assessments Team are trialling a new method this academic year in an effort to improve this process by placing more responsibility on academic staff in meeting deadlines to ensure that briefs are made available to externals examiners before they are released to students. The success of this new process will be monitored and subsequently reported on in next year's report.

### **Marking and Internal Moderation**

17. Overall external examiners commented positively on the standard and consistency of marking, praising the use of the full range of marks available. Inconsistent marking of assessments was a recurring theme throughout the reports RAGged amber. The issues raised were specific to individual units and have been addressed and actioned through the Course Review process.
18. A small number of externals highlighted some inconsistency with the format and presentation of internal moderator comments, highlighting instances where the comments were minimal.
19. In order to address the issues, a number of teams held meetings at the start of the academic year where they shared good practice and set actions to improve the consistency of marking and internal moderation. In addition, the Assessments Team will continue to remind the schools of the template to be used for internal moderation to ensure consistency in the presentation of the moderator comments.

### **Employability and 'Real World' Learning**

20. The embedding of employability skills and real world learning has been an area of good practice highlighted in external examiners' reports since the University

introduced a policy in 2011-12 which stipulated the inclusion of real-world learning in the core curriculum of all traditional awards.

21. External examiners once again commended the embedding of 'real-world' learning within the curriculum of the University's provision. They commented that the numerous links with employers and professional bodies provided the students with a distinctive edge in terms of securing employment following graduation.

#### **External Examiner Support**

22. On the whole external examiners thought that they were effectively supported and provided with the necessary information and resources to carry out their role. Unit external examiners valued their interim visits to the University to meet with course teams and to conduct moderation. In addition, feedback from the annual external examiners' briefing was positive.
23. A number of externals experienced difficulties accessing the University's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE); this has been an ongoing issue since 2015 and the Quality Management department has been liaising with ICT and Learning Technologies in order to resolve this. In August 2017 the University's ICT department applied a new password policy to the log in credentials for external examiners. The password expiry was extended to 12 months which will ensure external examiners' passwords do not expire at the time they are conducting their moderation duties. The delay in implementing this change meant that the externals continued to face log-in issues whilst completing their 2016-17 moderation duties and therefore continued to report on this in their annual reports. The issues have now been resolved and the External Examiners Officer will monitor the success of the changes over 2017-18.

#### **Award External Examiners**

24. From 2016-17, award external examiners were required to submit a report for each Progression and Award Board they attended. Overall the reports were positive. The externals praised the support they received and commended the conduct and professionalism of the boards. The external examiners confirmed that the application of assessment regulations were robust and decisions on all awards were considered and fair.
25. A number of queries were raised regarding patterns of student attainment, i.e. the distribution of award classifications and in particular the number of first class honours awarded. Units that contributed to the classification of an award were subject to internal and external moderation and all unit external examiners confirmed the standards of the units that they were responsible for. The positive results in student attainment is a reflection on the University investing in the support of staff to better enable students to achieve a good classification; this support was provided through a dedicated Learning and Teaching Institute and Student Support Services to support and enhance the delivery of learning and teaching activities. The University is currently conducting a full review of its assessment regulations and the feedback from all external examiners will be taken into consideration.

**Conclusion**

26. All external examiners have confirmed that the standards of the University's awards and student performance are secure and align with the framework for higher education qualifications and applicable benchmark statements.
27. The majority of themes arising from external examiner reports are either examples of good practice or issues that are already being addressed at University or school/service level. The themes identified in this paper are areas that have been consistently highlighted in external examiners reports throughout the last five years, demonstrating that the University has taken a consistent, yet progressively improved, approach to learning and teaching activities.