

**KEELE UNIVERSITY**  
**COVER SHEET FOR SENATE AND SENATE COMMITTEE PAPERS**

|  |   |                                |                          |
|--|---|--------------------------------|--------------------------|
| <b>Committee</b>   | Faculty Education Committees  |                                |                          |
| <b>Author and Sponsor</b>  | Quality Assurance   | <b>Date of meeting</b>         | w/c 10 <sup>th</sup> May |
| <b>Title of Item</b>   | PG update to the External Examining Overview Report relating to 2019/20 |                                |                          |
| <b>Category</b> (delete as appropriate and use only one box)   |   |                                |                          |
| <b>Item for discussion</b>   | ✓   |                                |                          |
| <b>Executive Summary of paper:</b>   |   |                                |                          |
| <p>The Committee received in November 2020 an external examining overview report for undergraduate provision. The attached paper is an update summarising the findings of postgraduate external examiners, providing an analysis of the comments made by external examiners for postgraduate taught provision.</p>             |   |                                |                          |
| <b>Action required from Senate/Senate Committee:</b>   |   |                                |                          |
| (Please include a clear indication where formal approval is required)  |   |                                |                          |
| To note the assurance provided by external examiners regarding academic standards and student achievement.   |   |                                |                          |
| <b>At which Committee (if any) has this paper been considered previously?</b>  |   |                                |                          |
| <b>Committee of Senate:</b><br>(Please specify)  |   |                                |                          |
| <b>University Executive Committee</b>  |   | <b>Other:</b> (Please specify) |                          |
| <b>At which Committee (if any) will this paper be considered at next?</b>  |   |                                |                          |
| <b>Committee of Senate:</b><br>(Please specify)  | Quality and Academic Standards Sub-Committee<br>Education Committee     | <b>Council:</b>                |                          |
| <b>Communication/Next Steps:</b>   |   |                                |                          |
| The overview report will be considered by QAS before approval at Education Committee and reported to Senate. A copy of the report will be made available on the website and circulated to external examiners   |   |                                |                          |
| <b>Student Consultation:</b>   |   |                                |                          |
| As a University, we are committed to developing policies and procedures in partnership with our students, where this is appropriate and possible to do so. Therefore, please provide details below of how this paper has been consulted with, or developed in partnership with students or with student union representatives. |   |                                |                          |
| <b>Has student consultation been undertaken to develop this paper?</b><br>(Please tick one box)  | <b>Yes</b>  |                                |                          |
|  | <b>No</b>   |                                |                          |
|  | <b>Not Applicable</b>   |                                | ✓                        |
| <b>Consultation Method and Outcome:</b>  |   |                                |                          |
| (Please provide details of the consultation taken and the outcomes delivered as a result. If <b>no</b> consultation has been taken, or it is not applicable to this paper, please provide the reason why.)   |   |                                |                          |
| Report is a collation of responses from external examiners.  |   |                                |                          |

## Update incorporating postgraduate taught provision

The first iteration of this report covered undergraduate provision and was received by Senate in December 2020 following consideration by the Education Committee and Quality and Academic Standards Sub-Committee (QAS).

This addendum takes account of external examiner reports for postgraduate taught provision, which typically follows an extended academic year cycle, with reports received later in the year.

The scope of the report covers all reports received to date (see statistical data regarding report completion in Annex A).

### 1. Quality, standards and issues raised by postgraduate examiners during 2019/20

- 1.1. Following the national lockdown period in March, all teaching was moved online, assessments for semester two modules were amended as necessary and examination boards conducted remotely. External examiners were informed of the adaptations made, which included being provided with a summary of the approach to semester two assessment for the relevant programme(s). They were also informed of the automatic extension given to students for all coursework assessments and the revisions to the conduct and constitution of examination boards agreed by Senate. In order to capture the views of external examiners about these changes, additional questions were added to the report form template.
- 1.2. Covid-19 disruption: external examiners were asked whether, in their view, 'the processes put in place by the University in response to assessment, examination and the determination of awards in light of Covid-19 were sound and fairly conducted'. There was unanimous support for the approach taken by the University and external examiners' comments included:
  - *"Staff worked extremely hard to support students in changing direction with their research projects at short notice due to COVID-19. Their success in doing so is seen in the significant number of students who managed to submit their research projects within the one month standard COVID extension without needing any additional time and the grades achieved, which would have been impressive even in a non-disrupted year. Grading took COVID into account but still maintained rigour and adhered to Keele marking criteria."* [Geoscience Research, Geographical and Environmental Research]
  - *"There has been huge disruption to all the examining processes this year. But these have been soundly and fairly conducted in my experience."* [History, MRes Humanities – History]
  - *"I thought the various measures taken to mitigate the impact of Covid 19 on students' ability to perform to the best of their ability (extensions, inviting students to submit short statements on the impact of Covid with their work; individual meetings the convenor of the MRES held with students as well as a number of meetings with student reps.) were exemplary and necessary."* [MRes Humanities Senior External Examiner]
  - *"Very happy with the mitigating adjustments to Covid-19, and the students were similarly understanding and appreciative."* [Biomedical Engineering, Cell & Tissue Engineering, Medical Engineering Design, MRes Bioengineering]

- *“Considering the current situation, meaningful arrangements for conducting exams were in place through which the students were able to demonstrate their achievement of learning outcomes.”* [Accounting & Financial Management]
- 1.3. Feedback on assessed work: as well as asking external examiners for their confirmation that Keele’s processes were fairly conducted, they were also asked for their views as to whether the quality and standards of Keele awards compared favourably with other UK institutions: of this they were all in agreement. As in previous years, feedback on assessed work was seen as a strength by many external examiners, and examples of their comments included:
- *“Feedback to students provides enough to develop thinking, but not so much as to swamp students with additional reading, for example. Signposting for developing thinking and understanding is clear throughout.”* [Higher Education Practice]
  - *“The feedback I’ve seen has been clear, constructive and of sufficient quantity. It would support student development.”* [Advanced Computer Science]
  - *“A particular quality of the feedback is where tutors make time to provide ‘feed forward (feedback)’ for all, irrespective of the grade achieved, supporting learners to advance their performance. The feedback is highly supportive and informative; it was encouraging to see tutors prompting students to consider publication of their work.”* [Medical Education]
- 1.4. Assessment arrangements: each year external examiners are asked to comment on whether they feel assessments were conducted rigorously, fairly and with due consideration for the equitable treatment of students. Where assessments for semester two had to be amended, the approval of the tasks by external examiners was optional in light of the need to provide students with details of alternative assessments quickly.
- 1.5. Comments from external examiners related to the changes to assessment included:
- *“In the light of COVID 19 changes I am confident that the social work team has ensured equitable treatment of students and that assessments have continued to be conducted with rigour.”* [Social Work]
  - *“I think the university and the team have responded brilliantly to the challenges presented by Covid-19. It was evident that the team had good relationships with their students which helped them achieve as much as they did under the circumstances. They showed a good duty of care both in terms of pastoral and academic support.”* [Biomedical Blood Science]
- 1.6. Examination boards: all examination boards were conducted online through Microsoft Teams or Google Meet. External examiners praised the work of programme teams and professional services staff in ensuring the smooth running of the boards.
- 1.7. Academic standards: the report template included a specific question entitled ‘Response to the challenges presented by Covid-19’ and asked examiners whether they felt the measures put in place by the University and the steps and implementation by the School struck an appropriate balance between maintaining high academic standards and support for students.
- 1.8. External examiners were also asked whether the University had been able to strike an appropriate balance between upholding academic standards and the fair treatment of students. External examiners agreed that the measures adopted had struck an appropriate balance, as evidenced by the following comments:
- *“Revised assessments were put in place as required, and were appropriate. I observed some instances of marking moderation decisions that explicitly referenced making reasonable adjustments that were generous but appropriate. Although these accommodations erred on the side of generosity, I conclude that*

*high academic standards were nevertheless maintained.*” [Social Science Research Methods]

- *“This is an incredibly challenging time, especially for professional healthcare programmes. The module team should be applauded for their work during this time, which has involved developing alternative ways of offering a blended learning experience, developing alternative assessment strategies at short notice, and supporting students to learn online, as well as in constantly changing practice settings. Students were supported to opt in and opt out of practice.”* [Adult Nursing]
- *“I think the university and the team have responded brilliantly to the challenges presented by Covid-19. It was evident that the team had good relationships with their students which helped them achieve as much as they did under the circumstances. They showed a good duty of care both in terms of pastoral and academic support.”* [Psychology programmes]
- *“Like all universities these have been incredibly challenging times and it seems that Keele and this programme have done everything to support their students while still maintaining high academic standards. They have also been very fair.”* [Creative Writing]
- *“The school should be congratulated on their response to Covid in their adjustments to assessment and communication with the EE. All adjustments were considered reasonable.”* [Health Sciences]
- *“I have been very impressed with the support mechanisms put into place in response to Covid-19. Taught classes were quickly moved online, and this was preceded by a session specifically guiding students on how to take care of themselves during the lockdown period while working on topics of a sensitive nature for the course. The team also increased the available one-to-one tutorials.”* [Counselling and Psychotherapy]

1.9. Support for external examiners: there was recognition across the reports of the work programme teams and professional support services had done to ensure external examiners’ duties ran as smoothly as possible, and the external examiners acknowledged this in their reports:

- *“The Guidance for Local Examination Boards, 2020, made available to me was particularly useful to understand the institutional approach to mitigating the challenges presented by Covid-19, and the students were knowledgeable and satisfied with the safety net put in place, whilst still maintaining rigour and standards in learning and assessment. I have to agree with the students and I am completely satisfied with the School and University’s treatment of students at the end of the 2019/20 academic year. On the whole, I would like to congratulate staff on maintaining a happy student cohort during very difficult circumstances, whilst at the same time maintaining and improving the quality of their programmes and procedures.”* [Biomedical Engineering, Cell & Tissue Engineering, Medical Engineering Design, MRes Bioengineering]
- *“Everyone had to work at speed and in unusually pressured systems but I observed no drop in standards and was pleased (but not surprised) to see very fair treatment given to all students. The School prides itself on its attention to its students and their interests and it is to its credit that it maintained these standards through the difficulties created by the pandemic”* [Politics and International Relations].

1.10. Good practice: external examiner reports include a section to identify aspects of good practice. A number of external examiners used this section to comment further on the work of programme teams and schools to support students during the pandemic:

- *“The support provided for all students during the pandemic allowing maximum flexibility to accommodate their unique circumstances of finding themselves at the*

*front line of healthcare while trying to complete their PG studies” [Clinical Pharmacy]*

- *“In previous years, I already commented favourably on the innovations I had seen at Keele, in the form of student presentations, critical literature reviews, and case study research reports. This year I saw further evidence of innovation, in response to the Covid-19 crisis, in the form of individual and group posters (replacing student presentations), which worked very well” [International Business and Management].*
- *“I think Keele has managed very well in examining terms during the coronavirus crisis. A good balance is being struck between making appropriate allowances for the students and getting the whole process completed in a timely fashion so that results can be released.” [History]*
- *“It is clear that all staff have worked extremely hard during the pandemic to pivot at pace to on-line teaching and ensure students felt supported and were not disadvantaged. The complexities and workload involved in this for staff should not be underestimated.” [Medical Science]*

1.11. Other aspects highlighted as good practice included: *“The clarity and consistency of guidance provided for assessment tasks along with the simplicity and accessibility of the assessment criteria” [Environmental Sustainability and Green Technology]; “The range of modules, the variety of assessments, the best forms of feedback, the widespread attention to students’ interests and the pedagogic values upheld by staff members are all worthy of praise” [Politics and International Relations]; and “Research informed teaching” [Criminology and Criminal Justice].*

1.12. External examiners completing their final term of office provide an overview of their time overseeing the programme. Many were effusive of their praise for postgraduate provision at Keele, for example:

- *“I have learned a lot about approaches to assessment in particular which are much more imaginative and test a wider range of skills than in my own institution.” [History, MRes History]*
- *“The MA programme(s) remain full of exciting, challenging content that is developed and taught by research-oriented staff. They engage and develop students and it is a constant feature of my work that I see students develop through taught modules to a dissertation that is very often the outcome of staff interests, expertise and enthusiasm. Students who perform well here are very well prepared both for further study at a higher level and for taking their PG skills into the workplace. I have seen the full adoption of online assessment and feedback over the past four years ... Both formative and summative comments are judiciously applied and aptly phrased to tread the line between being critical and friendly.” [English Literatures, Contemporary Literature and Film, MRes Humanities]*
- *“It has been an absolute pleasure to be external examiner for the MSc in Analytical Science for Industry degree. This is an excellent course that produces highly employable graduates. The course has been developed and is taught by an extremely dedicated and supportive team. Staff were very receptive to my comments and feedback on the course. Everything was always exceptionally well organised for my visits to Keele for the exam board and for my final exam board, which had to be conducted virtually – this made review of coursework, assessment criteria etc very straightforward. I have really enjoyed working with staff at Keele – thank you!” [Analytical Science for Industry]*

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April 2021

## Annex A: Contextual data for postgraduate provision in 2019/20

### 1.1. Report completion: (at the time of writing)

|   |  |
|---|--|
| Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences | <b>24 out of 29</b> reports (83%)            |
| Faculty of Medicine & Health Sciences   | <b>17 out of 20</b> reports (85%)            |
| Faculty of Natural Sciences             | <b>6 out of 6</b> reports (100%)             |
| TOTAL                                   | <b>47 out of 55</b> reports submitted (85%)* |

*\*this compares with 91% in 2018/19, 96% in 2017/18, 97% in 2016/17 and 97% in 2015/16*

Due to extensions given to students, a few external examiners had not at the time of writing this report had chance to look at dissertations and complete their reports for the 2019/20 academic year.

Examination boards for 2019/20 were all completed electronically and put back by a few weeks, which has had an impact this year on report completion, Quality Assurance continue to work with those external examiners with outstanding reports and these will be circulated to schools upon receipt.

### 1.2. Exam Board attendance: (based on responses on report forms, attendance for 2019/20 was virtual)

|   |   |
|---|---|
| Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences | <b>18 out of 24</b> examiners attended (75%)  |
| Faculty of Medicine & Health Sciences   | <b>15 out of 17</b> examiners attended (88%)  |
| Faculty of Natural Sciences             | <b>6 out of 6</b> examiners attended (100%)   |
| TOTAL                                   | <b>39 out of 47</b> examiners attended (83%)* |

*\*this compares with 76% in 2018/19, 79% in 2017/18, 87% in 2016/17 and 94% in 2015/16*

It was noted that due to the changes in timescales for the examination boards, some external examiners were subsequently unable to attend due to clashes with their own institutions.