External Examiner feedback from 2011/12, and
College QA Committee responses

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Below is a summary of the main External Examiner feedback on courses in 2011/12, based on what Neil and I prepared for our annual QA report. Also included below are some points that arose from discussion of this at the College QA committee in January. A consideration of and response to these issues is solicited from the present Committee.

1. Presentation of Marks on Exam Scripts
This issue was raised by the External Examiners for 2010/11, and was duly discussed at Teaching Committee, but came around again for 2011/12. External Examiners complained about the mix of positive and negative marking, the use of the right and left hand margins, the inconsistent use of different ‘levels’ of marks, and the range of ink colours used by markers.

The view of last year’s Teaching Committee was that our marking guidelines and policies are clear and appropriate as they stand – it is simply the case that not all staff members comply with these guidelines, despite repeated requests from the ITO. In this year’s QA report, we presented the problem as an issue of enforcement, with the Head of School indicating that a tougher line would be taken in future. At QA Committee, similar enforcement problems were reported by administrative staff from several other schools, and it was felt that there was a general ‘line management’ issue here that should be discussed at the next level up (Senatus QA Committee).

No particular decision is sought regarding this item, but comments are welcome.

2. Electronic Distribution of Draft Exam Papers
Again for the second year running, it was noted that the current exam paper approval process is entirely paper-based, but that it could be enhanced and accelerated via the distribution of electronic draft papers to External Examiners. At last year’s Teaching Committee, the view was that we should continue with our present paper-based distribution system, mainly because of our concerns over security on the External Examiner’s side. Following further discussions with Ian Stark and Michael Rovatsos, we reported this to the QA committee, indicating that we would welcome advice on standard College or University policy.

In response, the QA committee has agreed to set up a working group to discuss the issue and consider various options. If you would be interested in volunteering to take part in this, let me know. The commitment would probably be two or three meetings between now and June 2013. Alternatively, any comments that I could feed in to this working group would be welcome.

3. Feedback on Draft Exam Papers
It was noted that some External Examiner comments had not been acknowledged prior to production of the final versions. In response, we have now changed our policy so that staff are now required to provide a short written response indicating how the EE’s comments have been acted upon.

4. Consistency of Project Marking
One of the MSc External Examiners noted that he believed there to be a continued problem with the lack of consistent project marking; additional feedback on the process was provided in the MSc Projects report submitted by Professor Attwood. The main points raised were as follows; most of
them would seem equally relevant to UG4 projects.

- Different project moderators appeared to understand their roles differently.
- Markers’ use of check-boxes doesn’t always tally with the comments they make, and these in turn don’t always tally with the mark they award.
- The qualitative labels ‘inadequate’, ‘poor’, ‘fair’, ‘good’, ‘excellent’ allow considerable scope for interpretation. Moreover, there are other qualitative terms in use (e.g. ‘The project fails badly on ...’) whose correlation with the former scale is not spelt out. Associating mark range intervals with the check-boxes was suggested as a more satisfactory alternative (e.g. Inadequate [0-30] ... Excellent [70-100].
- Comments on the demonstration of the project are invited on the mark form, but not always supplied by markers. It was felt that such comments were extremely valuable in judging borderline cases.
- The use of Turnitin for plagiarism detection was suggested (see Gillian’s agenda item).

Responses to any or all of these points, or updates on recent developments in this area, would be welcome.