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### Responsible QA – committing to impact

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### Paper proposal form

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#### Author(s)

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**Short bio (150 words max):** Nichola Kett is an Academic Policy Manager within Academic Services at the University of Edinburgh. She leads the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Team and her role focuses on the implementation and management of the quality framework and engaging with and contributing to key University learning and teaching activities. Prior to joining the University in 2012, she worked in a diverse range of universities and the Scottish Funding Council.

#### Proposal

**Title:** External Examining: Using Data to support Effective Quality Assurance and Enhancement at the University of Edinburgh

**Abstract (150 words max):** This paper session will cover how the University of Edinburgh has made improvements to data available to support quality assurance and enhancement processes using a project to develop a system to support external examining as an example. Background on what external examining is and how it operates within the context of both the UK and the University will be provided. The changes made to external examiner reporting within the University and the resulting impact will be outlined. Attendees will then have the opportunity to discuss how external examining (or equivalent/related processes) are managed within their institutions and aspects or approaches outlined in the paper that would be relevant/helpful within their institutions.

**The paper is based on:** practice

**Has this paper previously been published/presented elsewhere?** No

**Text of paper (3000 words max):**

#### **University – Background**

Founded in 1583, the University of Edinburgh is one of Scotland's ancient universities. It is a large, diverse and devolved university, with three Colleges consisting of 20 Schools. The University's provision covers a wide range of subjects across arts, humanities, social sciences, science and engineering, and medicine and veterinary medicine. Students study degree programmes which are composed of courses as units of teaching and learning.



In academic year 2016/17 the University had nearly 40,000 students and 14,000 members of staff. Of those students, 64% are undergraduate students, 23% are postgraduate taught students and 13% are postgraduate research students. 32% of students studying at the University in 2016/17 were from Scotland, 25% from other areas of the UK, 13% from the European Union, and 30% from overseas. Additionally, 85% of undergraduate students, 54% of postgraduate students and 56% of postgraduate research students study full time. In 2016/17 the University had nearly 3000 online distance learning students.

The University is consistently ranked one of the top 50 universities in the world and is 19<sup>th</sup> in the 2016/17 QS World University Rankings. The University is a member of the Russell Group which “... represents 24 leading UK universities which are committed to maintaining the very best research, an outstanding teaching and learning experience and unrivalled links with business and the public sector”<sup>1</sup> and the League of European Research Universities, a group of research-intensive universities.

### **External Examining – Background**

This paper covers external examining for taught programmes and courses. A different structure of external examining operates for postgraduate research provision which is focussed around the individual student.

Within the UK, external examining is an integral part of quality assurance as one of the main ways for universities to ensure that they are maintaining academic standards, “... the standards that individual degree awarding bodies set and maintain for the award of their academic credit or qualifications.”<sup>2</sup>

At the University, external examining forms a key part of the University’s quality assurance and enhancement processes. External examiners help to ensure that degrees awarded by the University are comparable in standard to those of other equivalent departments in UK universities. They also ensure that the assessment process is operated equitably and fairly and in line with the University’s policies and regulations. External examiners also advise on the quality and enhancement of learning, teaching and assessment.

External examiners are typically academic members of staff from other universities or, in some cases, someone from a relevant industry. At the University, each course must have an external examiner appointed to it and there must be at least one programme external examiner appointed who has responsibility for oversight of each programme. The role of the external examiner is primarily that of a moderator of the assessment process and they are not typically asked to directly assess the work of individual students.

In practical terms, external examiners participate in assessment procedures and comment and give advice on assessment procedures and standards and jointly agree, as members of the Board of Examiners, the detailed assessment, award and final degree results. An important requirement of the role is the production of an annual report based on their observations of the University’s assessment processes and students’ assessed work.

Schools are responsible for ensuring that individual external examiner reports are considered and responded to and for taking appropriate actions to themes and issues identified from all reports submitted to the School on an annual basis. Students have the right to view external examiners’ reports and Schools make themes and a summarised response available to student representatives.

### **The UK Quality Code for Higher Education**

The UK Quality Code for Higher Education “... sets out **Expectations** that higher education providers are required to meet to ensure: that appropriate and effective teaching, support, assessment and

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.russellgroup.ac.uk/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code/quality-code-part-a>



*learning resources are provided for students; that the learning opportunities provided are monitored; and that the provider considers how to improve them.*<sup>3</sup>

Chapter B7 of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, External Examining “...is designed to ensure that external examining can operate in a way which is transparent, rigorous, and as consistent as possible across all UK higher education institutions, taking into account institutions' autonomy and differences in their mission, size, organisational structures and range of provision.”<sup>4</sup> The overall expectation of Chapter B7 is that “Higher education providers make scrupulous use of external examiners.” Chapter B7 was reviewed and the current version published in December 2011.

Indicator 15 of Chapter B7 states:

- “At both organisational and subject/programme level, degree-awarding bodies give full and serious consideration to the comments and recommendations contained in external examiners' reports. The actions taken as a result of reports, or the reasons for not taking action, are formally recorded and circulated to those concerned.”
- “At organisational level the general issues and themes arising from the reports are reviewed.”

### **External Examiner Reports – Challenges**

The Higher Education Academy's Handbook for External Examining notes “The submission of an annual report is arguably the most important duty of an external examiner” and “...they [the reports] constitute a crucial body of evidence for both internal quality assurance procedures such as periodic review and for external institutional review.”<sup>5</sup> Therefore, it is essential that the University is able to systematically collate, process, respond to and analyse (at multiple levels within the University) external examiners reports.

At the University of Edinburgh, prior to academic year 2014/15, external examiners' reports were submitted on paper using a variety of templates. The subsequent distribution of paper reports across Schools for response was carried out manually and the process of extracting themes and issues arising from all of the School's external examiners' reports was complex and time consuming. The collation, processing and analysis of external examiners reports is particularly challenging within a large, diverse and devolved university such as Edinburgh. With diverse practice across Schools and Colleges it was also challenging to ensure institutional oversight of the outputs from hundreds of external examiners' reports.

### **External Examiner Project**

In response to a recognition that the processes for collating, processing and analysing external examiners reports were in need of improvement and the revision of Chapter B7, the University initiated the External Examiner Project in 2013.

The External Examiner Project aimed to develop a revised external examiner policy, external examiner handbook, business process changes and IT tools. These developments would facilitate effective qualitative and quantitative analysis of external examiner reports so as to inform the University's strategic direction to quality assurance. The project would enable the production of routine reporting metrics from the external examiner reports. The project should facilitate the University, Colleges and Schools to reflect and act upon issues arising from external examiner reports. The IT tools developed would assist with the extraction of common themes from the reports. The IT tools would enable the University to disseminate good practice identified in external examiner reports which have University wide-application.

### **External Examiner Reporting System**

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code/quality-code-part-b>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code/quality-code-part-b>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/downloads/HE\\_Academy\\_External\\_Examiners\\_Handbook\\_2012.pdf](https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/downloads/HE_Academy_External_Examiners_Handbook_2012.pdf)



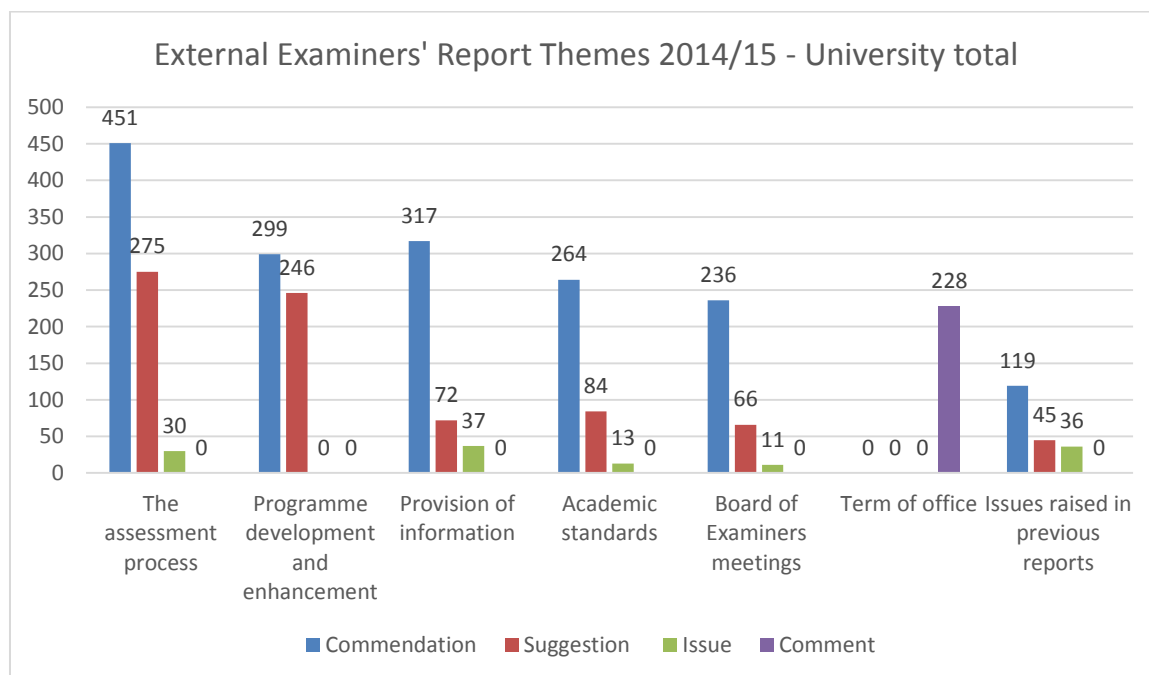
As part of the External Examiner Project, the University developed an external examiner reporting system (EERS) which was fully implemented in academic year 2014/15 following successful pilots. EERS enables external examiners to submit their reports online and for Schools to respond to reports online within the same system. EERS did not replicate the paper-based exercise, but is a highly structured and interactive system. When an external examiner makes a particular response, for example they are not satisfied with a specific aspect of the assessment process, they are automatically prompted for more information. Additionally, EERS categorises report contents as commendations, comments, issues and suggestions. These categories are also assigned a theme (e.g. assessment process or academic standards) and sub-theme (e.g. marking or student feedback). Furthermore, EERS allows for escalation of report contents to School, College and University level. This structure allows for extensive analysis of reports at multiple levels. Finally, EERS allows the University to see how many reports and responses have been received, including the stage of each report and response.

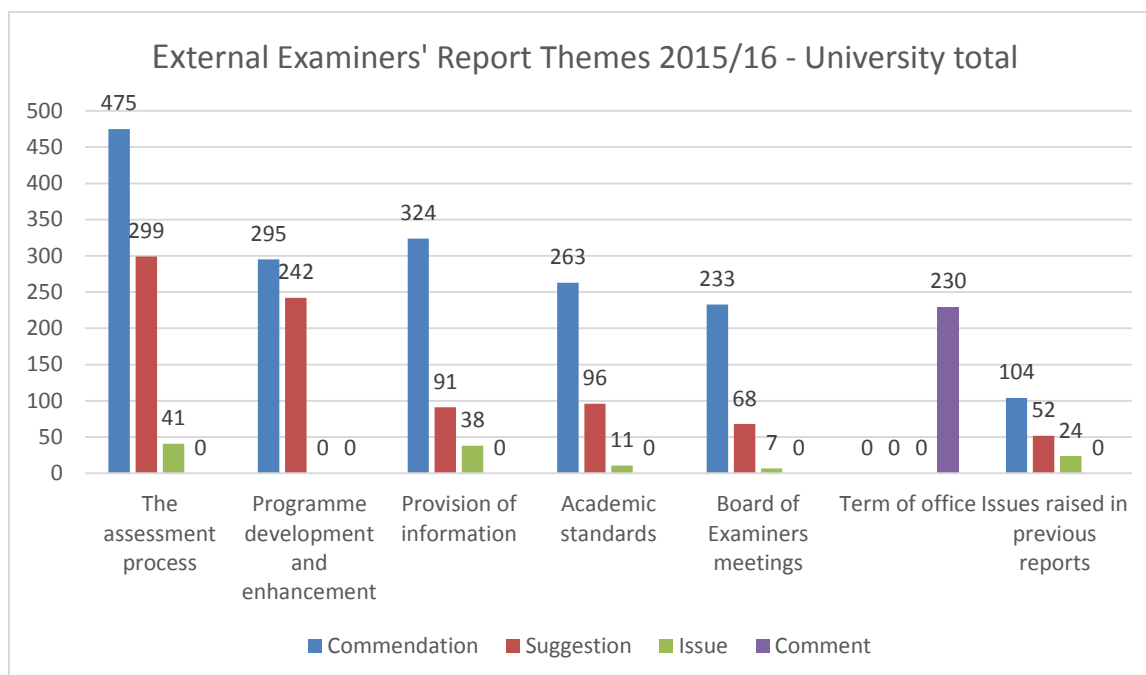
External examiners' reports and responses are available to staff across the University through EERS itself and analysis can be undertaken through the University's reporting and analytics tool, BI suite. The implementation of the online system was supported by the new policy and handbook developed as part of the External Examiner Project.

**Impact**

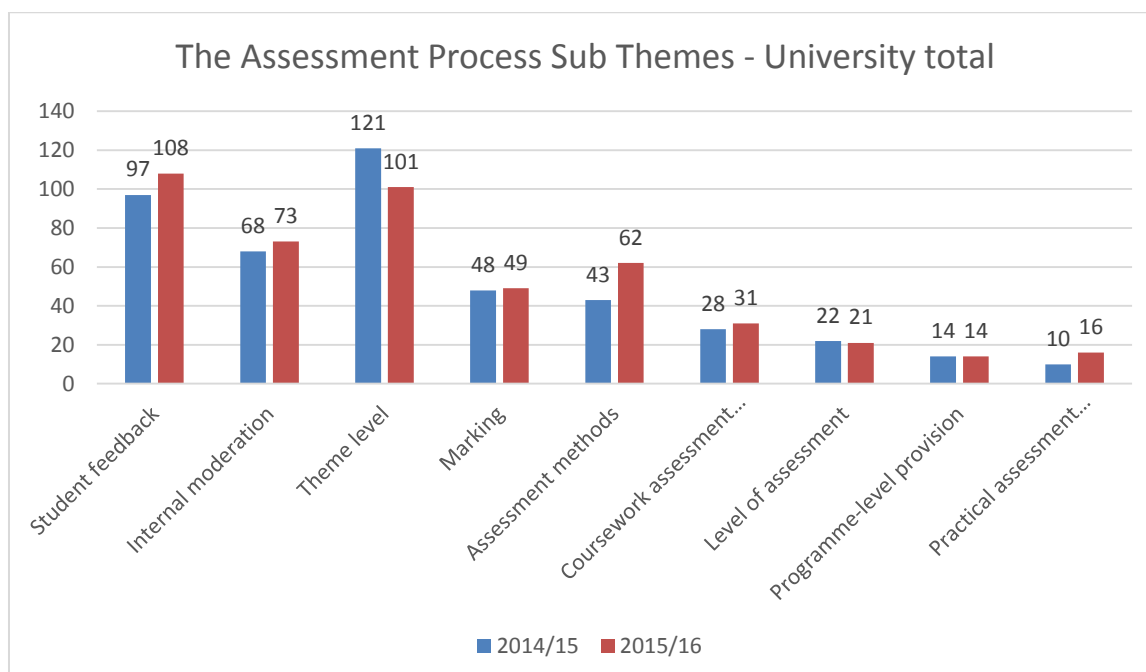
In terms of numbers of reports, in academic year 2014/15 415 reports were submitted and in academic year 2015/16 396 reports were submitted. Therefore, to be able to easily analyse this number of external examiners' reports is an extremely positive development.

Using the system, it is possible to see at multiple levels the themes that external examiners are commending, making suggestions about, are raising issues about, and are commenting on by academic year.



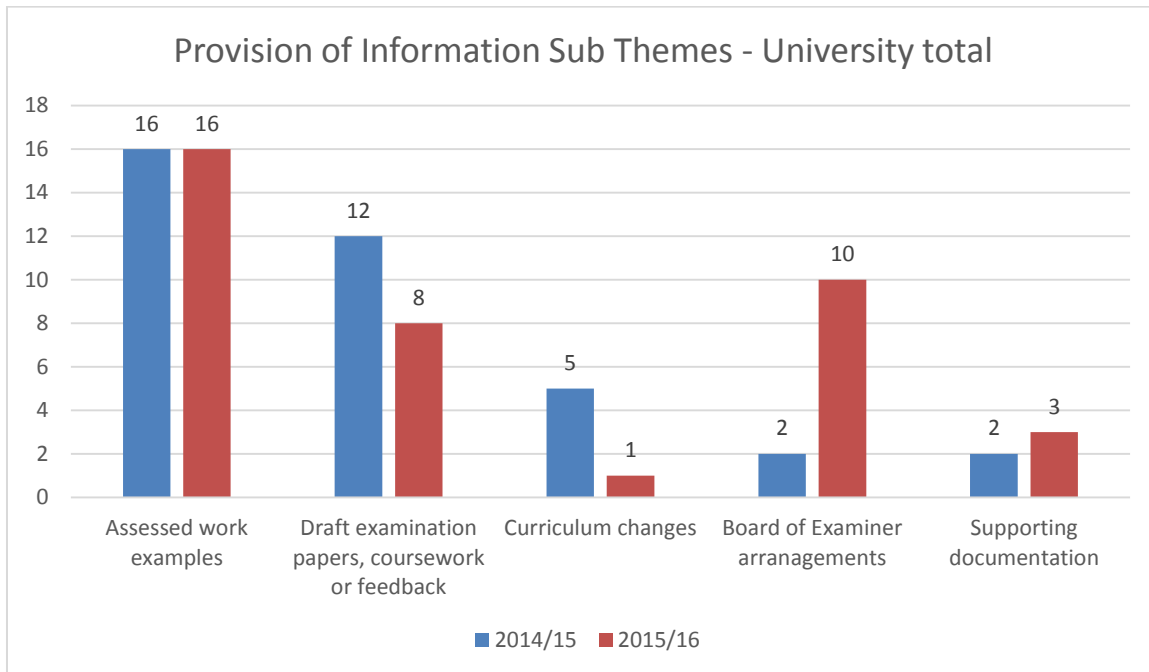


Looking at the theme which received the most commendations over 2014/15 and 2015/16, the assessment process, we can break this down further into the following sub themes (the sub theme “theme level” refers to commendations given to the assessment process as a whole):



The sub theme which received the most commendations was ‘theme level’ where external examiners are generally commending the assessment process, rather than the individual sub themes.

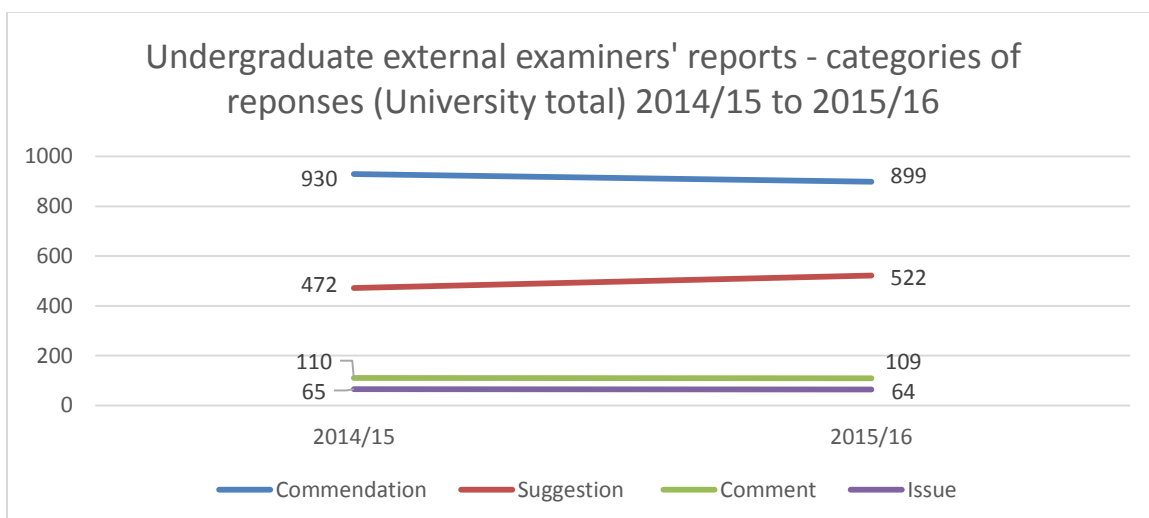
Looking at the theme which received the most issues over 2014/15 and 2015/16, provision of information, we can break this down further into the following sub themes:



The sub theme which received the most issues was 'assessed work examples' where remarks generally relate to the organisation and timing of providing assessed work examples to external examiners.

#### **Practical Example**

The University's Quality Assurance Committee considers a thematic analysis of external examiners' reports annually, undergraduate in November and postgraduate taught in February. The following is an example of the type of information that they consider and a resulting action:



This trend analysis shows that there continues to be a low number of issues across the University and a high number of commendations. The number of commendations has reduced slightly, with a similar increase in the number of suggestions. The comment and issue categories remain at similar levels.



Further analysis of issues raised by external examiners by theme showed an increase related to “the assessment process”. Analysing this further by looking at free text comments within this theme, these related to the need for clarity and consistency of moderation processes and marking criteria. Therefore, Committee members were encouraged to ensure that moderation processes and marking criteria are made clear to external examiners. Additionally, College representatives on the Committee were asked to ensure that the outcomes of the Committee's discussions were made available to and considered by the relevant College committee(s). Consistency and clarity of assessment and feedback processes was a theme identified through other quality assurance and enhancement processes. There is evidence of Schools giving this careful consideration and that plans are underway to address this issue, both at School- and University-level, also aligning with the outcomes of the University's periodic external review (Enhancement-led Institutional Review) in 2015.

### ***Evaluation***

In terms of the aims of the External Examiner Project outlined above, these were all met. In January 2017, key staff stakeholders were sent a survey to evaluate the project outputs, implementation and impact. The survey responses relating to the system were:

- 75% of respondents thought that the system had achieved or somewhat achieved the effective qualitative and quantities analysis of reports.
- 67% of respondents thought that the system had made it easier or somewhat easier to process and analyse reports.

Respondents were asked to provide comments on the impact of the External Examiner Project and the main themes identified were:

#### Positive impacts:

- Provided an easily accessible, central repository of reports and responses.
- Less paperwork and chasing of reports.
- More efficient and streamlined process.
- Professional and of a standard expected of a top-tier university.
- More reports completed on time and ease of seeing status of ongoing reports.

#### Challenges:

- Difficulty of making changes and corrections to information on the system.
- No easy interaction with the central records system, for example reporting course/programme allocation to external examiner.
- Online reporting process is only a small part of external examiners' interaction.
- Duplication of effort when sharing draft responses outside system.
- Where external examiners are responsible for multiple courses it is difficult to identify which course individual reports refer to.

Although the evaluation results were positive, there were two factors which were felt to have impacted on the survey responses:

- 1) The survey was sent to all Academic Response Coordinators, who are members of staff responsible for the reviewing, collating feedback prepared by designated readers and responding to External Examiner reports. Following receipt of the survey responses, it was clear that a number of staff had been added to the system as Academic Response Coordinators without prior knowledge of the project and/or not yet having been assigned this role, and they were thus not able to comment authoritatively.
- 2) It was originally hoped that a complete lifecycle system would be developed for managing external examining, from nomination through to payment, however, the final system focussed on the reporting process.



### **Successes**

Accessibility of data: EERS gives staff across the University the ability to analyse the contents of external examiners' reports. This ensures that information is easily available and considered as part of quality assurance and enhancement processes. Themes from external examiners' reports are considered through programme, School and College annual monitoring, review and reporting of academic provision. External examining themes and actions taken are considered as part of internal periodic review of degree programmes.

Institutional oversight: contents of external examiners' reports flagged for University-level attention can be easily identified and acted upon. The University's Quality Assurance Committee considers a thematic analysis of external examiners' reports annually and uses this to make recommendations.

Evidence base: data from external examiners' reports can be used to support enhancement activity. It has been used to inform areas of work, including action taken in response to the University's 2015 Enhancement-led Institutional Review on assessment and feedback and the development of guidance on moderation. The theme and sub-theme categories can be used to explore and analyse the data, from high level trends to individual comments.

Sector good practice: there has been interest in the system from across the Higher Education sector and the University's 2015 Enhancement-led Institutional Review report commended the External Examiner Project, noting: "*The team considered the project to represent positive practice that will enhance the University's analysis of its external examiner reports.*"<sup>6</sup>

### **Challenges**

Implementing change: there was some resistance to moving towards consistent and highly structured practice within a large, diverse, and devolved University. The University has 20 schools and reaching consensus across them all when making changes to existing policy and practice is not always possible. This can lead to resistance in, for example, use of new systems such as EERS, especially where an existing local system is felt to better suit the needs of a particular School. The implementation of the system was supported by briefing and training sessions and overall engagement with the system across the University has generally been very positive. The system continues to be consistently promoted as a key source of data to support quality assurance and enhancement processes through documentation and meetings with key stakeholders such as School Directors of Quality. It is worth noting that the number of reports submitted offline (outwith the system) has reduced from 26 in 2014/15 to 11 in 2015/16. No reports have yet been submitted offline for 2016/17.

Structure of the report: the highly structured nature of the report can present problems. Because external examiners are reporting at programme(s) level, when external examiners are responsible for multiple courses, staff comment that it is challenging to identify to which course a comment relates. To accommodate this function with the reporting system would require a major change to both process and systems. Feedback doesn't indicate that this is an extensive issue across the University and this will continue to be monitored. Additionally, when external examiners comment 'see above' or similar, this presents challenges with analysing the data. The External Examiners' Handbook contains guidance on completing the form and the Handbook continues to be promoted to external examiners as a key document.

Thematic analysis: the consideration of the thematic analysis of external examiners' reports at the University's Quality Assurance Committee is still a relatively new process and it is felt that the structure of the reports is still not right. At its meeting in February 2017 it was suggested that in line with the Committee's strategic remit, the reports should contain higher level analysis and practical recommendations in order to be more useful for decision making and action setting in relation to

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/ReviewsAndReports/Documents/University%20of%20Edinburgh/University-of-Edinburgh-ELIR-Technical-15.pdf>





identifying what the Committee could take forward. Academic Services will progress the development of the thematic analysis of external examiners' reports.

### **Relevance beyond Edinburgh**

For those institutions that operate external examining, it is anticipated that the concepts outlined in this paper around creating a structured system for collating, processing, responding to, and analysing external examiners' reports are relevant and applicable. For those institutions who do not operate an external examining system, the concepts could be applied to any type of external engagement, such as with industry, in order to collate, process, respond to, and analyse feedback.

### **References:**

UK Quality Code for Higher Education Part A: Setting and Maintaining Academic Standards

<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code/quality-code-part-a>

UK Quality Code for Higher Education Part B: Assuring and Enhancing Academic Quality Chapter B7:

External Examining <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code/quality-code-part-b>

The Higher Education Academy, A handbook for external examining

[https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/downloads/HE\\_Academy\\_External\\_Examiners\\_Handbook\\_2012.pdf](https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/downloads/HE_Academy_External_Examiners_Handbook_2012.pdf)

Enhancement-led Institutional Review: University of Edinburgh, Technical Report, November 2015

<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/ReviewsAndReports/Documents/University%20of%20Edinburgh/University-of-Edinburgh-ELIR-Technical-15.pdf>

University of Edinburgh External Examiners for Taught Programmes Policy

<http://www.ed.ac.uk/files/atoms/files/externalexaminerstaught.pdf>

University of Edinburgh Handbook for External Examiners of Taught Programmes

<http://www.ed.ac.uk/files/atoms/files/externalexaminerhandbook.pdf>

University of Edinburgh External Examiner Report System Guidance and Frequently Asked Questions

<http://www.ed.ac.uk/student-systems/support-guidance/academic-staff/external-examiner-reporting>

### **Discussion questions:**

- 1) How is external examining (or equivalent/related processes) managed within your institution? What works well? What are the challenges?
- 2) What aspects or approaches outlined in the paper would be relevant/helpful within your institution?

*Please submit your proposal by sending this form, in Word format, by 24 July 2017 to [QAForum@eua.be](mailto:QAForum@eua.be). The file should be named using the last names of the authors, e.g. Smith\_Jones.doc. Please do not send a hard copy or a PDF file.*