Briefing for Examination Board Chairs and Deans’ Representatives

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Aims of the Briefing

• To ensure that Chairs of Boards and Deans’ Representatives are aware of current University policies and procedures

• To thereby promote consistency of Boards’ practice across the University
Outline of the Briefing

1. Background
2. Role of the Deans and their Representatives
3. Role of the Chair of the Exam Board
4. Role of the External Examiner
5. Role of The Chief External Examiner
6. Overview of Examination Guidelines
7. Good Practice – some examples
8. Possible Pitfalls – some examples
9. Other Issues
10. Questions and Discussion
1. Background

- **QAA Code of Practice**
  - External examiners should be trained

- **University Regulations**
  - All Chairs, irrespective of designation, shall attend one of the ‘Examination Board Chairs’ training session

**Three types of boards**

1. **Course Review Board**
2. **Progression Board**
3. **Award Board**

These are known as exam boards
Course Review Board

• There should be no joint Course Review/Exam Board

• Course Review boards should be held before and separately from Progression and Award boards

• Composition
  – The Head of School, or nominee, as Chair
  – The members of academic staff involved in the teaching and assessment of the course
Examination Boards

• **Progression Board:**
  – **Quorum**
    The quorum of a progression and/or award board is three members of the board or one third of its membership, whichever is larger.

  – **Composition**
    • Chair (HOS, DoLT or nominee approved by QSC)
    • At least one representative of the academic staff involved in the teaching and the setting and marking of examinations and assessment of each
    • The School Examinations Officer
    • Dean, Associate-Dean or Dean’s representative *(as an observer and who does not count towards the quorum).*

• **Award Board**
  – As progression board with the addition of the External Examiner(s).
## Decision Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SAS Code</th>
<th>Decision (short form)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1A</td>
<td>Proceed to next year of study/part of programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1B</td>
<td>Proceed to next year of study with attend or re-attend courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1D</td>
<td>Proceed to next year of study with reassessment/resubmission in next Academic Year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1F</td>
<td>Proceed to next year of study – transfer to different programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2A</td>
<td>Continue in the same year/part of programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2B</td>
<td>Cannot Proceed – Repeat/Re-attend programme or courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2C</td>
<td>Continue in same year – Reassessment may be required</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2D</td>
<td>Continue in same year with reassessment/resubmission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2E</td>
<td>Continue in same year – continued affiliation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2H</td>
<td>Continue to dissertation in the next Academic Year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2X</td>
<td>Continue in same year – no progression decision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3C</td>
<td>Cannot continue – reassessment/resubmission required before next Academic Year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3D</td>
<td>Cannot continue – reassessment/resubmission required in next Academic Year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3F</td>
<td>Cannot continue on current programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4A</td>
<td>Confirmation of results – no progression decision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4C</td>
<td>Reassessment required for award</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4D</td>
<td>Deferred decision – reassessment/resubmission required</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4G</td>
<td>Deferred decision – awaiting outcome of Discipline Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4H</td>
<td>Continue to dissertation/project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4X</td>
<td>Decision pending further consideration of additional assessment information</td>
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</table>
2. Role of Deans and Representatives

• Deans or Deans’ Representatives
  – are required to attend all undergraduate and postgraduate taught Progression/Award Boards

• Role at Exam Boards
  – Observers not members of the Board
  – Monitor the operation of the Board
  – Have the authority to request that the Chair suspend the Board
  – Complete a short report on the operation of the Board*

[These reports are collated by the Deans, who may report on any Exam Board matter (specific or generic) to the Learning and Teaching Board, the Quality and Standards Committee or direct to the Deputy Principal of Learning and Teaching]
3. Role of the Chair of the Exam Board

- Chair of the Exam Board
  - Moderates the meeting
  - Ensures
    - the Agenda is followed
    - University Regulations, Policies and Procedures are followed
    - Professionalism at the Board is maintained
  - Is a full member of the Exam Board
  - Has both a deliberative and casting vote
  - Has the authority to suspend the Board
4. Role of the External Examiner

• Preliminaries
  – Schools are responsible for ensuring External Examiners are fully briefed on their role
  – Note that HWU custom and practice in relation to the role of the External Examiner may differ from that in other Universities

• Role of the External Examiner
  – Comment on academic standards and the appropriateness of the University’s internal processes
  – Are full members of the Exam Board
  – But note they are NOT ‘super members’ (they do NOT have a casting vote)
  – Consequently External Examiners should not adjudicate on borderline cases (these are matters for the whole Board)
4. Role of the External Examiner cont’d

- Role of the External Examiner cont’d

  - External is entitled to comment on marks and recommend an alteration (as indeed is any other member of the Board)
    - This refers specifically to whole groups/sets of marks, not an individual student’s marks

  - The Board should consider the External’s recommendation, but is not duty bound to accept any such alteration

  - **The decision is for the Board.** Schools would defend any such collective decision if the External commented negatively in the end of year University report
5. Role of the Chief External Examiner

• **Role**
  - Comment on different versions of a programme, including: curriculum, structure, assessment processes, marking/classification, quality of provision
  - Oversight of effectiveness of School's moderation procedure, with comments to the Board of Examiners

• **Attendance at Boards**
  - Attend Boards of Examiners meetings, as appropriate
  - Attendance at a Board of Examiners is mandatory in the first year of appointment; thereafter, Schools may permit the Chief External Examiner to conduct his/her role by correspondence
  - The Chief External Examiner should, however, attend a Board of Examiners where there has been a significant increase in the scale or scope of multi-location, multi-mode provision during the period of office (e.g. first time a programme is delivered at a new campus or an ALP)
6. Examination Guidelines

Guidelines distributed to:

• Deans and Deans’ Representatives
• School Examination Officers
• Heads of School and Organisational Development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Document Number</th>
<th>Document Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Undergraduate and Postgraduate Assessment Procedures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Decisions and Decision Codes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Guidelines on the Discretionary Award of Credits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Heriot-Watt University Assessment and Progression System (HAPS)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Guidelines on Complying with SCQF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Guide to Medical Certificates under the HAP System</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Policy on Mitigating Circumstances in Relation to Assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Policy on Withholding Awards due to Outstanding Debts: Implementation Procedures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Appeals Against Examiners' Recommendations of Award</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Managing Suspended Examination Boards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Briefing Session: Chairs of Examination Boards; Deans' Representatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Guidelines for Deans, Associate Deans and Representatives</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Note: HAPS – Heriot-Watt Assessment and Progression System
7. Good Practice – Examples

• Organisation of the Board
  
  – Clear Agenda
  
  – Appropriate papers provided
    • Information to be presented in a clear and consistent way
  
  – Complete and correct marks provided
  
  – Board proceeds at an appropriate pace (due care and attention, not too long / too short)
  
  – After board, papers are collected and destroyed
7. Good Practice – Examples cont’d

• **Roles and Responsibilities**
  
  – Appropriate staff are present
  
  – Staff are well prepared and understand the role of the External Examiner and Deans
  
  – External Examiner has been thoroughly briefed about course / programme / University policies
  
  – External Examiner has good understanding of his / her own role (and acts accordingly)
7. Good Practice – Examples cont’d

• Procedures

  – Use of pre-meetings to discuss:
    • difficulties to ensure efficient and effective operation of main Board
    • mitigating circumstances and make recommendations to main Board
    • issues that Deans / Deans’ Representatives should be made aware of before main meeting

  – Staff to have clear understanding of procedures for:
    • considering marks
    • dealing with borderline cases
    • dealing with extenuating circumstances
    • recording decisions
    • notification / publication of results
    • confidentiality issues

  – Check that decisions reached have been recorded correctly
7. Good Practice – Examples cont’d

- **Conduct of business**
  - Observe social conventions at beginning of Board (welcome and introductions)
  - Agenda item for External Examiner and Dean / Deans’ Rep to give views
  - Conduct of Board - professional, interaction between Board members to be respectful and courteous (sometimes robust)
  - Chair to intervene where opposition between board members threatens to undermine quality of decision making
8. Possible Pitfalls - Examples

1. The wrong marks

In discussing the marks for a course, someone suddenly pipes up “These aren’t the right marks, I’m sure Sydney got better grades than these. I think the marks have been put onto the wrong spreadsheet.”

- Board must have correct information in order to arrive at decisions. If there is any doubt, the collator of the marks should be asked to check immediately. Board should take a view on whether this is a general problem with all marks or confined to one course.

If general doubt, suspend Board to check marks.
2. The disagreeing internals

– It’s clear that there is some animosity between two members of staff, Mary and Michael. When considering the results for a course they have both been teaching on, Michael says that he still doesn’t agree with the marks given by Mary. He second marked the work, and expressed his views at the time (the grades seemed far too low to him) but Mary refused to accept his judgement.

Agreement should have been reached **before** the meeting (using a third marker to advise). Suggest adjudication outwith meeting?
8. Possible Pitfalls - Examples cont’d

3. External examiner disagrees with marking standards

– The External suddenly announces that she doesn’t agree with the marking standard, specifically for the borderline students. She insists the borderline students really belong to the lower degree band, while the internal examiners feel that the borderline students should be considered more positively.

➢ The final decision is one for the whole Board of Examiners. The Chair should be prepared to be firm in reminding the External of the University’s guidelines.
4. Disagreement in Standards between Externals

- The internal examiners have given Jamie a 59%. The External for the programme thinks this should allow him a 2.1 since it’s close enough. Another External disagrees, and is arguing that the student should be given a 2.2

- The Board should listen to the views of the Externals, but the final decision is one for the Board and not any one (or two) Externals. Note the importance of consistency if more than one programme is being considered.
5. Extenuating Circumstances

- Sydney’s results are causing discussion among the internal examiners. His performance got worse in the final year and his final result is disappointing. He has submitted a letter, tabled at the Board, pleading extenuating circumstances. His studies were disrupted in the final year by serious illness in the family. The internal examiners are largely sympathetic. Do you consider the letter or not?

- Ideally such letters should have been presented at a pre-meeting to consider the extenuating circumstances. If tabled, ask for comment (from mentor). If letter alludes to medical condition some sort of formal certification is required.
8. Possible Pitfalls - Examples cont’d

6. The Disgruntled External

– The External Examiner states during the board that she has had inadequate time to participate properly in the examination process. The examiner says this means that she can’t have full confidence in the deliberations of the Board.

➢ Should not happen if administration of Board is correctly carried out. Chair should ask other Board members for their view. If only the External feels this way, Chair may courteously remind External that decisions are made by the Board.
8. Possible Pitfalls - Examples cont’d

7. The Skype Link

– The Exam Board has a Skype link to another campus and the video link fails. What do you do?

➢ Before the meeting ensure that contingency plans are in place (e.g. telephone link). Difficult in large boards.
8. Possible Pitfalls - Examples cont’d

8. Incomplete Marks

– Sydney is in his final year and has always been an outstanding student. However, he has a mark missing since he failed to sit one of his exams. He said afterwards that he forgot to turn up to a particular exam.

➢ Board should consider whether it has enough evidence to award a particular class of degree. Use normal algorithm for calculating final mark with zero for this exam. (May use DC against the absence but MUST record reasons for doing so.)
8. Possible Pitfalls - Examples cont’d

9. The Absent External

– You receive a phone call on the morning of the exam board to say the only External Examiner who was to be present has fallen ill and can’t attend. Neither can you communicate by phone. What do you do?

➢ Board should convene. Regulations allow Board to continue without the External.

[“The External Examiner(s) shall normally be present at any meeting of the Award / Progression Board which makes recommendations for the award of degree. Any External Examiner who is unavoidably absent from the meeting shall normally be required to submit written comments for consideration…In the absence of the External Examiner, A Dean of the University or his or her nominee shall be present at the meeting.”]
9. Other Issues - Discretionary Credits

• Discretionary credits are allowed **IF** the board is satisfied the learning outcomes of the programme have been achieved

• Availability within an entire programme of study:
  – UG: 30 credits (45 for Combined Studies)
    • Award and progression (but not for prerequisites)
  – PG: 15 credits (not dissertation or other research project)
    • Award only
Questions and Discussion