

# Quality Assurance Committee (QAC) Digest (Summer 2019)

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Welcome to the QAC Digest, a review of QAC activities in Academic Year (AY) 2018-19 and a look forward to AY 2019-20.

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## Review of the five QAC initiatives launched in AY 2018-19:

### 1. *Changes to assessment processes:*

Several changes to assessment practices, grading processes and classification algorithms have been approved by Senate in late 2017-18 and in 2018-19. The reason for proposing these changes was to improve transparency to students regarding how their degrees were classified and to improve consistency across the Institution. The changes can be summarised as:

- i. Use of the Grade Point Average (GPA) as the only method to classify Honours degrees; approved in May 2018 for those entering Honours in 2018-19;
- ii. Capping of resit grade at D3 (for Honours students) and allowing the capped grade to be used in classification calculations; approved in May 2018 and approved to be applied retrospectively as this is to the advantage of the students;
- iii. Resit rules for repeat fails clarified in March 2019;
- iv. Reduction in the size of the borderline (now 0.5 below a boundary); approved in March 2019 to be applied to students graduating from AY2019-20;
- v. Abolishing the rounding up of course grades; approved in March 2019 and to be applied to all students from AY2019-20;
- vi. Clarification on what can/cannot be used to determine final classification for borderline students; approved in March 2019 to be applied to students graduating from AY2019-20;
- vii. Greater consistency in weighting of Honours years (L3, L4, L5). Schools can choose from

only 50:50 or 30:70 (L3:L4 for four-year programmes) or equivalent for 5-year programmes.

Full details of these changes can be seen in the [Code of Practice on Assessment](#). A [timeline](#) to show when the various changes apply to Honours classification is also available.

### 2. *Changes to Code of Practice on Student Discipline (Academic)*

The code of practice on student discipline (academic) sets out the procedures to be followed, and the standard penalty to be applied, in the case of disciplinary offences by students. The Code (available [here](#)) was updated and approved by Senate in May 2019. The main changes are:

- i. Collusion (defined as collaboration between students in an assignment that has not been authorised by the course coordinator) has been brought into the same category of cheating as plagiarism, allowing Schools to hear, and determine the penalty to be applied to, a first case of collusion. This enables Schools to use their hearing in a more formative, rather than punitive manner;
- ii. A new category of cheating is “contract cheating”. “Contract cheating” is an umbrella term to denote the submission of work by a student that has been produced by someone other than that student with the intention to deceive. This can be achieved through having another person, or commercial service, produce work that is subsequently submitted for an assessment, whether that person/commercial service is paid or not. Whilst this has always been covered in the

Code of Practice on Student Discipline (Academic) putting it into its own category highlights the offence to students and staff. The standard penalty for any student found guilty of contract cheating is expulsion from the University.

### **3. Role descriptors for QAC members:**

To ensure everyone knows what the QAC members spend their time doing, role descriptors for QAC members were produced and are available [here](#). Each School has one member on the Committee (composition available [here](#)) and they oversee the QA of a different School. Please use your School QAC member for advice on any QA issues or on any changes you may want to make to your courses.

### **4. Annual QAC School visits:**

In AY 2018-19 the annual QAC-School visits were carried out in October-November to enable focused discussions on the School's Annual Programme Reviews (APRs) and External Examiners' reports (EERs). The view from Schools was that these discussions were much richer, more enhancement focused and provided more detailed and useful feedback compared to the written reports that QAC had provided in previous years. These QAC-

School meetings will occur every October/November to deal with UG teaching matters, but written reports will continue to be provided in semester 2 for PGT-related matters unless the School requests an additional visit. One topic raised by multiple Schools during these visits was the low rate of SCEF returns and the difficulties perceived by course organisers in using these to amend their courses. Schools were informed of the outcomes of the SCEF working group (see below) and reminded that SCEF was only one way to obtain feedback from students.

### **5. Revised Internal Teaching Review (ITR):**

The ITR process was revised in 2018 and has now been trialled in three Schools, Language Literature Music and Visual Culture, Biological Science and Education. Two key features of the new process are the use of existing data from Annual Course Reviews (ACRs), APRs and EERs to satisfy the QA aspects of the review so that the ITR becomes more focused on enhancement and a jointly devised action plan, prepared during the ITR visit by School staff, students and the ITR panel. Overall feedback has been positive, and the process has been approved for use in all future ITRs. Guidance notes for the new ITR process are available [here](#).

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## **Let's talk about: getting meaningful student feedback on your course**

The Student Course Evaluation Form (SCEF) is the cornerstone of the University's mechanisms for seeking feedback from students on their courses. SCEFs provide course coordinators with information on how their course is being received by students and this information can then be used to enhance the course. A SCEF Review Working Group, chaired by the QAC Convenor, was convened in Academic Year 2017-18 (continuing in AY2018-19) in response to rising disquiet amongst academic staff about the effectiveness of the course review system, particularly regarding response rates. A full report from the working group was included in the 15<sup>th</sup> May Senate papers, available [here](#). Some key findings from the group are:

- i) Students often do not understand what the SCEF process is for, or even what the acronym stands for, feel this is a "centrally-devised process" (and therefore not course-specific) and that we don't really listen to their feedback anyway because they rarely get any response to the feedback they give.
- ii) Students also have survey fatigue. Many class reps send the class mid-course surveys prior to Student-Staff liaison meetings and many staff also do separate mid-course surveys so by the time the SCEFs are released students feel they have already responded to a survey on the course and that reduces engagement with SCEF.
- iii) Many members of staff don't feel any ownership of their own SCEFs and are

unclear about how they can adapt the SCEF system; this highlights a need to develop clearer guidance as to what can be done with the system.

- iv) The group heard of examples of good practice in terms of closing the feedback loop, such as making time in class for students to complete the SCEF and providing post-SCEF feedback to the whole class. These measures have resulted in increased feedback response rates.
- v) The group considered whether buying in a new commercial system would help to address these issues and give better Institutional oversight. However, the conclusion was that unless we address the underlying problem, that students feel we don't really listen to their feedback, it is unlikely to produce many benefits.

The evidence suggests that it is not the SCEF system *per se* that is broken but the way in which we use it. As a result, the group have made the following recommendations:

- i) Re-brand SCEF as the Course Feedback Form and this title should not be abbreviated
- ii) Redesign the form to reduce the number of standard, recommended questions but also make it clear that staff are free to use these or to use their own questions
- iii) Update the Academic Quality Handbook (AQH) to clarify who is responsible for the Course Feedback Form, questions used, and timing
- iv) Generate student-facing guidance to explain the value of the course feedback process
- v) Provide staff development to promote understanding and more flexible use of the course feedback process

- vi) Generate a 'good practice in closing the feedback loop' website.

Work on these changes will be carried out over the summer 2019 with a view to relaunching the course evaluation process in term 1 of AY 2019-20.

The group understood why course coordinators made use of mid-course feedback but suggested that instead of class reps and course coordinators each sending out separate mid-course surveys they should work together to produce a single survey that would satisfy both their needs.

## 5 top tips for authoring survey questions:

1. Keep the survey short and simple – make sure every question is necessary; don't add questions for the sake of it; too many questions and the respondents will lose interest.
2. Make your questions direct and to the point – avoid jargon and long, convoluted questions that the respondents may not understand.
3. Ask one question at a time – look for “and” in your question; that could indicate that there are two questions, making it difficult for the respondent to answer.
4. Avoid leading and biased questions – using descriptive words or phrases in your question could bias the respondent to give a particular answer
5. Don't forget to add a 'not applicable' option in order to avoid skewing your responses.

Finally, ask a colleague to pilot your questions; it is too easy to overlook an ambiguous question if you have written it.

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## Celebrating good practice from across the Institution:

The first [Principal's Teaching Excellence Award](#) (PTEA) was launched in autumn 2018 to encourage and support staff to enhance their teaching through sharing examples of effective and innovative practice. Staff were invited to submit a case study, which required them to reflect on their teaching and evidence the educational impact of their practice. Twenty-nine members of staff

submitted a case study and four monetary prizes were awarded.

The winner of the 2018-19 PTEA was [Derek Scott](#) from the School of Medicine, Medical Sciences and Nutrition, for his [case study](#) on “Using Objective Structured Practical Examinations (OSPE's) to consolidate practical skills and assess graduate

attributes in life sciences". This approach, which is frequently used to evaluate clinical practical skills, was adapted for medical science students to formally examine a wide range of communication, ethics, numeracy, graphic interpretation and science laboratory practical skills and helped prepare students for research projects and enhanced their graduate attributes and employability skills.

Three [Runners-up](#) were:

[Mirjam Brady-Van den Bos](#), School of Psychology for her [case study](#) on the use of flipped classrooms

[Dr John McKeown](#), School of Medicine, Medical Sciences & Nutrition for his [case study](#) on "general practice live"

[Dr Tavis Potts](#), School of Geosciences for his [case study](#) on "Creating Environmental Leaders in the MSc in Environmental Partnership Management".

Information on how to submit your case study for the 2019-20 awards can be found [here](#) and advice on how to design or implement any new activities or to plan your evaluation and dissemination strategy can be obtained from the [Centre for Academic Development](#).

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## Good/innovative practice highlighted in annual monitoring

### Alternative types of assessments

Assessments don't have to be always the same type; essays, lab reports and exams. These all have their place, but we can mix it up a little and have more "real-life" assessments. Several course coordinators are using alternative continuous assessments or exam formats. For example, History of Art ([HA408A](#)) assesses their field work using 'Flogs' (field work logs) and e-portfolios; Blog-based assessments are used in Politics and International Relations ([PI4076](#)); a mind map assessment has been used in chemistry ([CM2012](#)); [SMMSN](#) have replaced one of their traditional 2000-3000 word essays in all their medical science courses with a New Scientist-style short essay (800 words) giving students experience of writing for different audiences; a [question time-style debate](#) is used (and assessed) in [GG4016](#) to provide an effective means of linking theoretical and applied aspects of the course; change of exam format from essay-based to discriminating MCQs in [first year chemistry](#) courses and incorporating several challenging questions (with higher weighting) in an MCQ test at PGT level ([PU5526](#)).

### Helping students understand their assessments, grading and feedback

Enabling students to get the most out of their assessments requires several things; they need feedback on their assessments to highlight where

they have done well or where they need to develop their skills; they need to understand what is actually expected of them for particular assessments and they need to understand the grading system we use so they can reflect on their own work. The following Annual Course Reviews illustrate how some course coordinators are approaching this:

- Video feedback for assessments using Panopto has been used in [PH2535](#) and [PH354G/PH454G](#). The course coordinator noted in the ACR that this method "allowed me to provide much more verbal feedback than written feedback and took the same amount of time. The students seemed to appreciate receiving a greater amount of feedback."
- Course coordinators in psychology have also used video feedback in several courses and they also use [pre-recorded videos](#) to give students detailed assessment criteria and staff expectations for individual pieces of coursework
- Use of peer review to enhance students' critical analytical skills ([PI2009](#)). The course coordinator comments in the ACR that "Students commented on the usefulness of seeing other students' essays and it appears that the fact they themselves had to engage with the Common Grading Scale made them more reflective both of their peers' work and their own."

## Areas for development:

External Examiners' (EEs) reports (for AY2017-18, as those for 2018-19 are not yet available) have again been very favourable with EEs confirming that standards were being maintained, were comparable to other higher education institutions and that our assessments were fair and rigorous. Most were happy to hear that Senate had agreed on the use of a single classification system, the Grade Point Average, and were accepting of the lead-in period that is required. Areas for development expressed by several EEs included:

- the need to ensure adequate differentiation of marks in courses that have a heavy group work-load. **Action:** QAC members will continue to query new course proposals/ changes to course proposals where group assessments are the major form of assessment and request this element be reduced and/or an individual element of assessment is introduced.
- the need for "internal externality", i.e. the presence of someone from outside of the School/Discipline at examiners meetings, to ensure that University procedures are being

properly followed. This is routine in many other Institutions but is not standard practice here. **Action:** *The practicalities of this, and who is best placed to do this, will be discussed at the next QAC in AY2019-20.*

- lack of consistency in feedback provided to students within a School/Discipline. Whilst EEs expressed satisfaction with the feedback students are given in many areas of the University there were inconsistencies. **Action:** *Schools are asked to review their processes and share good practice within their Schools to ensure greater consistency.*
- lack of consistency in moderation procedures. Whilst EEs were happy with our moderation procedures there appears to be inconsistency in the visibility of this process in some areas of the University. **Action:** *Schools are asked to review their processes and ensure greater consistency.*

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## QAA Scotland (QAAS) Enhancement Themes

AY2019-20 will see us in the third year of the 'Evidence for Enhancement: Improving the Student Experience' Enhancement Theme. The last two years of the theme have provided a wealth of resources from the University of Aberdeen and all other Scottish universities and it is well worth exploring the [Enhancement Themes website](#).

The Learning and Teaching Enhancement Programme (LTEP) was established internally at the University of Aberdeen to encourage the introduction of enhancement activities in learning and teaching and to disseminate effective practice throughout the Institution. The 2018/19 LTEP aligned with the Evidence for Enhancement Theme with the focus on how generating evidence (either qualitative or quantitative) might be used to improve the student experience. This year the Institution matched the QAA funding which was available. Sixteen proposals were submitted of which nine were funded. Funded projects included

the introduction of mindfulness into teaching Chemistry, evaluating the SUCCESS PLUS programme (socio-cultural coaching for careers and employability to support success), developing an open text book for Community Music and exploring the effect of pre-submission feedback on student engagement and performance. The 2019-20 round of LTEP will be launched in the autumn of 2019 and it is likely that the focus for new projects will be on evaluation and dissemination of innovative teaching practices. The [LTEP website](#) will be updated with information on the next round in due course.

## Items to be taken through Committees in AY 2019-20:

The following issues will be considered by the QAC, and from there to UCTL, UG and PG committees (where relevant), and ultimately to Senate during AY 2019-20:

- Use of adjunct teaching staff, specifically the training of such staff in our teaching and related processes
- Consistency in penalties applied for late submission of course work. We have different policies across the Institution, and even across a School/Discipline, leading to confusion in students
- There needs to be some discussion about joint Honours students, particularly how their degrees are classified and whether there need to be “rules” to follow in cases where there is discrepancy in outcome between the two disciplines
- To respond to EE concerns, the QAC will investigate the best way to introduce internal-externality to examiners’ meetings.

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## And finally, some great news - ELIR 4 outcome

Enhancement-led Institutional Reviews (ELIR) of all HEIs in Scotland are undertaken by QAAS on a rolling 5-year programme. Our last ELIR took place in November 2018 and the full outcome of this review is available on the [QAA Scotland website](#). The report states that we have “effective arrangements for managing academic standards and the student learning experience”, the highest accolade they give.

We were commended for a number of areas of good practice, including the commitment we make to supporting a diverse population of students, the measures we have taken to improve widening access to the University, the progress we have

made to developing strong partnership working with the Students’ Association, and the recent developments that we have made to our quality processes to ensure these support self-evaluation and enhancement.

Of course, there were some recommendations too, but these commendations show the level of commitment from across the university to improving the student experience. So, well done everyone!