Degree Standards Project

Briefing number five – July 2019

The Degree Standards project, led by Advance HE and managed by the Office for Students on behalf of England and the devolved administrations in Northern Ireland and Wales, has explored sector-owned processes focusing on the professional development of external examiners. The purpose of this five-year initiative (2016 – 2021) is to design, evaluate and deliver different approaches for this professional development, which are sustainable in the longer-term. To complement this provision, approaches to the calibration of academic standards are being explored within subject communities.

A conference on Protecting the Value of HE Qualifications in the UK was recently held by Advance HE, GuildHE, Universities UK and QAA (22 May 2019, London) to explore responses to sector work on degree classification and to highlight the achievements of the Degree Standards project. 122 delegates attended this forum, which was also an opportunity to consider the Statement of Intent, published by the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment on transparency, reliability and fairness of degree classification. This statement points to how institutions can enable academics to be external examiners and engage in training, as offered by Advance HE’s professional development programme.

Professional development provision

To date, more than 1,800 academic staff from 168 higher education providers have completed the professional development course (PDC) for external examiners (blended and fully online). More specifically:

- A blended PDC has been designed and evaluated, enhanced and established through working with 35 higher education providers to deliver the course on an institutional basis.
- The blended course has been delivered on a regional basis (13 courses) at locations across the UK, including Belfast, Birmingham, Cardiff, Edinburgh and London.
- An online version of the course has been designed, with delivery of five online courses in 2017-18. In 2018-19, the online course was re-configured to involve larger cohorts; a course involving 106 online participants (44 completers) was recently run.

A Develop the Developer programme has been devised, run and evaluated to support staff working within institutions to become recognised facilitators of the PDC. Since 2017, 39 people from across 20 higher education providers have become recognised facilitators of the course, participating in regional workshops about the course and co-facilitating courses delivered at their institution. Thirty-five providers have adopted the PDC, so that facilitators within their institution can deliver the course to their own staff.

A diversity of institutional types has been represented through the project, with the PDC involving participants with various levels of external examiner experience, working in a wide range of subject areas and institutions from across the four nations. A Policy for Higher Education Providers Delivering the PDC has been produced including guidance for those involved in the project. The PDC is aligned to the UK Professional Standards Framework and the Advice and Guidance on External Expertise of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education. Fundamentals of External Examining has been produced for the project to reflect current practice on external examining, and as a complementary resource to the PDC. The project website includes institutional case studies that capture progress relating to organisational development, supporting aspiring external examiners, and improving dialogue on standards.

The project is currently exploring a ‘Northern Ireland Group’ of providers, as well as a ‘London Group’ of smaller institutions. The aim of these is to enable staff at these institutions to become adopter institutions and to participate in a Develop the Developer programme.

Through the Advance HE Connect platform, the project has recently launched two networks: to establish a community of practice for external examiners, enabling potential mentoring or the exchange of good practice when issues arise, and an online community for facilitators of the PDC. Within two weeks of the launch, 157 individuals have joined the network for external examiners.
**Calibration of academic standards**

During the first two years of the project, the ‘social moderation’ process for the calibration of academic standards was carried out with four professional bodies and subject associations. ¹ A series of workshops, toolkits and case studies have been developed for other subject communities to emulate such calibration activity. A synthesis report on calibration has also been produced, designed to help subject associations and professional bodies arrange their own calibration activities.

The project has set up a North-West Consortium involving 13 higher education providers to explore how integrated courses, tailored to a subject and including calibration activities, can be designed and delivered for a subject community. Following the success of integrated courses for Geography and Law, the project is committed to developing further courses relevant to a subject community. Most recently, the project, in collaboration with the British Association for Sport and Exercise Sciences (BASES) has developed an integrated course for Sport and Exercise Science to be offered to external examiners in institutions within the Consortium. There are also plans to develop an integrated course for Psychology.

The main aim of the work on calibration is to investigate the feasibility, viability, portability and sustainability of such approaches as models for the development of subject-based calibration of academic standards. The anticipated impact of these approaches to developing calibration will be the establishment of a community of practice around degree standards and increased comparability of academic standards across particular subject communities.

**Plans for 2019-20**

During the fourth year of the project, Advance HE is committed to:

- leading two Develop the Developer programmes, including 15 assisted and 15 observed courses;
- holding six regional courses across England, Northern Ireland and Wales;
- running the online course to involve a cohort of up to 150 people;
- designing and delivering two additional subject-based integrated courses;
- managing communities of practice through Advance HE Connect to enable exchange of good practice when issues arise for external examiners and, separately, for PDC facilitators.

Aimhigher Research and Consultancy Network (ARC) is evaluating the longer-term impact of the professional development provision. Evaluation reports have continued to show positive feedback on the delivery of provision across the different modes of delivery, and on the impact on changing understanding and practice amongst external examiners, in which:

‘the evidence suggests that the PDC is credible across the academic community; all sections of higher education have been involved, the feedback is very positive, and there is appetite for using the PDC materials in different contexts’ (ARC, 2018, p. 2) ²

**External engagement and dissemination**

Advance HE will continue with external engagement work designed to disseminate project outcomes across the sector. In 2019-20, this will include the Association of University Administrators, Heads of Education Development Group, QAA’s Heads of Quality forum, PSRBs and the Academic Registrars Council.

**Further information**

https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/degree-standards

To get involved

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¹ Conservatoires UK, the Royal Geographical Society, the Royal Society of Chemistry and the Veterinary Schools Education Group.