

Degree Standards Project

Briefing number six – October 2020

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.

Professional development provision

To date, the following has been achieved:

- A **blended professional development course** (PDC) for external examiners has been designed and evaluated, enhanced and established through working with 51 higher education providers that have agreed to run the PDC on an institutional basis.
- The PDC has been delivered on a **regional basis** on 17 occasions in locations across the UK involving aspiring, new and experienced external examiners from 142 providers.
- The **online PDC** has been delivered on nine occasions, involving participants from 139 higher education providers.
- The **Develop the Developer programme**, which supports staff to become recognised facilitators of PDC, has now certified 40 developers from 21 higher education providers.

The reach of the PDC has been extensive: 2,664 participants have completed the course (across all modes of delivery) involving staff from 215 higher education providers. In their end-of-year report (2019-20), DEWR, the independent evaluator, concludes:

‘The PDC is clearly credible, and seen as beneficial, to most academics across a range of institutional settings and contexts. The grounding in the academic literature helps with credibility ... The course is highly valued and seen as something to recommend’

The [project website](#) provides institutional case studies that capture progress relating to organisational development and improving dialogue on standards.¹ Two communities of practice are becoming established through Advance HE’s Connect platform: one for external examiners, enabling the exchange of good practice (284 members), and a network for facilitators of the PDC (32 members).

In response to the impact of the pandemic, more online PDCs were delivered in 2019-20 than originally planned. In addition, the Develop the Developer programme has been adapted for remote delivery for 2020-21, which has entailed the development of a **new model of the PDC** that can be run remotely. This model involves preparatory work online, followed by two separate sessions conducted through video conferencing (ideally on consecutive days) with further online work between the sessions. The model retains the highly effective sequential and interactive nature of the course, whilst reducing the amount of content delivered in the sessions by using video and having additional work undertaken between sessions.

Calibration of academic standards

The generic PDC can only do so much to improve the comparability of academic standards. Assessment is rooted in disciplinary practice and bringing together external examiners to calibrate

¹ <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/degree-standards-project>

their standards has so far been shown to be invaluable as the second strand of project activity. To date, the following has been achieved:

- Free-standing calibration events have been run with the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, the Royal Society of Chemistry, the Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers) and Conservatoires UK.
- Integrated courses have been designed and delivered (a subject-based PDC followed by a calibration event) in Geography, Law, and Sport and Exercise Science.
- Case studies and toolkits have been produced in Geography, Music, and Veterinary Education and showcased for other subject communities to emulate.
- A North-West Consortium has been established, comprising 13 universities eager to collaborate in the delivery of the PDC and calibration activity.
- A synthesis report on calibration has been published to help professional bodies and subject associations undertake their own calibration activity.

Through the project, social moderation has emerged as the preferred method of delivering calibration, involving a process of peer review carried out by members of a subject or professional area who discuss and compare student work in order to reach a shared understanding of the academic standards which such work needs to meet. The project has therefore been investigating the feasibility, viability, portability and sustainability of different models for the delivery of subject-based calibration.

Plans were in place for 2019-20 to run integrated PDCs for two further disciplines: Psychology, and Business and Management Education, which attract large numbers of undergraduate students and are accredited by influential professional bodies, the British Psychological Society (BPS) and the Chartered Association of Business Schools (CABS). The impact of the pandemic prevented the delivery of these integrated PDCs, but a **new approach for calibration activity** has been devised to replace integrated courses.

Prior completion of the established *generic* PDC (online or blended) is now a prerequisite for participation in calibration activity (rather than a subject-based PDC). *Subject-based* calibration activity is then delivered remotely by means of two video conferencing sessions. This adaptation of the integrated model has potential benefits as it should lighten the workload on academic staff, and facilitate scheduling as the calibration activity is offered as a stand-alone option for those who have taken the PDC and have the relevant subject expertise. This revised method and mode of delivery for calibration will be trialled with Psychology, and Business and Management Education in 2020-21 to establish further exemplar subjects.

Summary of provision

The provision now includes a range of delivery options appropriate to a rapidly changing environment:

- the blended PDC;
- a new remote-delivery version of the PDC;
- the online PDC;
- the Develop the Developer programme (blended);
- the Develop the Developer programme (remote version),
- a new accelerated online route through the Develop the Developer programme using the online PDC
- the integrated subject-based PDC (including calibration activity);
- and a new stand-alone model for calibration activity.

Future arrangements

There is clear endorsement of the enhanced professional development of external examiners as this contributes to the maintenance of degree standards and their reasonable comparability. The

[Statement of Intent](#) on degree classification, published by the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment, points to how institutions can enable academics to be external examiners and engage in training, as offered by Advance HE's professional development programme.

The Office for Students and the devolved nations involved are considering a **strategy for the sustainability of the provision** after the funded project is due to end in July 2021. Future arrangements for the oversight, management and delivery of the professional development provision will be determined in 2021. We will keep you posted on developments.

Any queries? Please email us: external.examining@advance-he.ac.uk