

Guidance by the General Board on the arrangements for External Examiners

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1. Purpose

The principal objectives of the external examining system are to ensure that:

- The standards set for an award are appropriate for the qualification and comparable with similar programmes in other UK institutions;
- Assessment procedures are sound and measure student achievement rigorously against the intended learning outcomes;
- The examination process is conducted fairly and in line with internal policies and regulations; and
- good practice is identified and disseminated.

This guidance is intended to provide information relating to the nature of the external examining role, the process by which External Examiners are appointed and the expectations of the General Board. This guidance has been informed by the QAA's UK Quality Code for Higher Education: Part B Assuring and enhancing academic quality, particularly Chapter B7 External Examining.

2. Roles and responsibilities

External Examiners are appointed by the General Board or Degree Committee¹ to:

- act in a moderating capacity;
- provide an independent assessment of academic standards; and
- comment on the validity of the examination process.

The reports of External Examiners contribute to the University's monitoring and quality assurance activities.

The General Board is aware that there may be some variability in the roles of External Examiners across the University due to the complexity and breadth of the courses and their underlying philosophies. Nevertheless, it considers that all External Examiners shall undertake certain duties.

The duties prescribed below apply to all undergraduate and postgraduate taught programmes,² as well as MPhil Degrees with taught elements. Exceptions relating to the Medical, Veterinary and Natural Sciences Triposes, are indicated within the document.

Please note that any reference to the Chair of Examiners is taken to be read as Senior Examiner in the case of Natural Sciences Tripos (NST) Parts II and III, and for some MPhil Degrees. Senior Examiners are also appointed to the Human, Social and Political Science (HSPS) Tripos to act in conjunction with the Chair.

Setting and reviewing question papers: External Examiners should receive relevant

¹ In the case of MRes and MSt degrees only.

² Refer to Ordinances (Chapter III) for examinations specified in the Schedule:
<http://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/univ/so/2017/chapter03-section9.html>

draft examination papers with supporting material such as model answers/marketing criteria. They should be provided the opportunity to make comments on or suggest appropriate amendments to the draft examination papers and/or supporting material. External Examiners should be made aware of the outcomes of their comments and advice.

External Examiners should discuss with the Chair of Examiners any other material they may require and a suitable timeframe for providing comments.

Moderating examination scripts: External Examiners are not normally expected to carry out marking of assessed work.³ Rather, they are involved in assessing whether internal marking has been appropriately and consistently applied. External Examiners are entitled to see all scripts and any other work that contributes to the assessment and subsequent classification. More usually however, External Examiners will review a sample of scripts to ensure that internal marking is accurate and consistent and that classifications are of an appropriate standard. External Examiners are expected to advise on the borderlines between classes and between passing and failing.

The principles for the selection of marked scripts should be agreed in advance between the External Examiner and Chair of Examiners. Ideally, the sample should include scripts across the top, middle and bottom of the range, borderline candidates, mark sheets and evidence of internal moderation. External Examiners should discuss with the Chair of Examiners the number and types of scripts to be received.

In circumstances where the External Examiner raises a legitimate concern regarding marks, it would generally not be appropriate to adjust the marks of a limited number of students whose work has been sampled. Under such circumstances, adjustments to marks should be made with reference to the entire cohort.

Adjudicating disagreement: Internal examiners should attempt to agree marks where possible. The External Examiner should be in a position to report on the soundness of the procedures used to reach a final agreed mark, by obtaining information on the method used to reconcile divergent marks. In exceptional circumstances, where marks cannot be reconciled, the External Examiner may be asked to provide their view.

Role in viva voce examination: The External Examiner may be invited to participate in oral examinations, where they are allowed by the examination regulations. The External Examiner should discuss with the Chair of Examiners how these duties are undertaken.

Decisions relating to individual candidates are taken by the Board of Examiners as a whole, including the External Examiner(s). In an equality of votes the Chair has a second or casting vote.

Practical examinations: The External Examiner may act in a moderating capacity for practical examinations and should have the same degree of involvement as he or she would

³ **Assessors** should be appointed to act as second markers and paid the appropriate university rates. Assessors are not expected to take responsibility for the overall conduct of the examination or the classing decisions for individual candidates nor do they report on the fairness of the assessment and the standards of the candidates for that part of the examination.

have for written papers.

The Chair of Examiners should discuss with the External Examiner the nature of their involvement.

Attendance at meetings: An External Examiner is appointed as a full and equal member of a Board of Examiners, which is appointed as a body to propose and settle the examination requirements and draw up a list of successful candidates, within the regulations for the examination concerned.⁴ All decisions are made as a consensus of the Board as a whole. Where voting takes place, the External Examiner has an equal vote to other members of the Board of Examiners.

The Chair of Examiners should clearly discuss the structure and role with the External Examiner.

External Examiners have a right to be present at all Examiner's meetings and, with the exception of the Medical and Veterinary Sciences Tripos and Parts IA and IB of the Natural Sciences Tripos,⁵ are **required** to attend the final meeting of Examiners at which classifications are agreed and class lists signed. External Examiners appointed to MPhil Degrees are also expected to attend the final meeting of Examiners.⁶

If, exceptionally, the External Examiner cannot be present at a final meeting, they should discuss this with the Chair in order to obtain dispensation from attendance. Such dispensation may be granted provided that the External Examiner certifies that they are prepared to allow their name to be added to the class list. Applications for dispensation should be made to Educational and Student Policy using the form: <http://www.student-registry.admin.cam.ac.uk/examinations-further-guidance-staff/examiners/appointment-examiners-and-assessors/dispensation-non>

Medical cases and other allowances: The University does not expect the External Examiner to make decisions relating to medical cases. Such cases are considered in a manner different to that of most other institutions. Examiners assess students solely on the basis of the work submitted for examination. No account is taken of personal or individual circumstances in the marking of examination scripts and other work. The only exception to this is in the case of candidates with documented Specific Learning Difficulty (SpLD) such as dyslexia. The Chair of Examiners will receive a list of SpLD candidates from the Student Registry and Examiners are asked not to penalise their work for minor spelling and grammatical errors, except where they form a moderating part of the assessment e.g. language papers.

Consideration of medical and other personal circumstances which may have a bearing on performance, is a matter for the following central bodies:

⁴ For MPhil examinations, other Examiners' Committee arrangements fulfil a similar role to a Board of Examiners.

⁵ Note that for the Natural Sciences Tripos and the Medical and Veterinary Sciences Tripos, only Senior Examiners are required to attend the Final Examiners' meeting to finalise marks and sign the class list.

⁶ In the case of MPhil Degrees, the Examiners consider the marks at the final meeting before recommending them to the Degree Committee for approval.

The Board of Examinations

Candidates, through their College Tutors, may make applications to the Board of Examinations to sit examinations under special conditions; e.g. sitting the examination in isolation, being given extra time, or being provided with appropriate additional or alternative materials. Examiners are not informed of special conditions and are expected to mark the scripts and other work in line with other candidates.

The Applications Committee

The Applications Committee includes professionally qualified medical advisers. The Committee's role is to consider cases of students whose examination performance may have been hindered by mitigating (typically health-related) circumstances. In undertaking its work, the Applications Committee considers the medical or other supporting evidence submitted on behalf of candidates by their Colleges, including supervision reports together with details of their previous and current examination performance.

If, in the Committee's opinion, the evidence strongly suggests that a candidate's performance in the examination was not representative of his/her abilities, the Committee may agree to 'Declare the candidate to Deserve Honours'. This replaces whatever class (if any) was determined by the Examiners.

The Applications Committee may, in some circumstances, invite the Chair of Examiners, after consultation with other Examiners, to move a candidate's name to a higher class, if the Committee considers that the candidate was hindered in a small part of the examination and there is sufficient evidence from the remainder of the candidate's examination to justify the award of a higher class.

The Board of Graduate Studies (applies to MPhil Degrees)

If a candidate for the MPhil has been hindered by illness or other grave cause in preparing for or taking any part of the examination for the degree, his or her Tutor may apply to the Board of Graduate Studies. The Board has the power, providing satisfactory evidence of hindrance has been given, to:

either (a) approve the candidate for the degree without further examination, provided that the Degree Committee concerned judge the candidate to have acquitted himself or herself with credit in a substantial part of the examination

or (b) allow the candidate to be examined or re-examined under such conditions and at such time as may be determined by the Board after consultation with the Degree Committee.

Examiners should not themselves make any allowances for illness or other cause when assessing a candidate's work.

Additional duties: The Faculty Board, Degree Committee, or other comparable authority should familiarise themselves with the expectations in this guidance and the essential roles identified in Indicators 2 and 3 of Chapter B7 of the UK Quality Code before requiring the External Examiner to undertake additional duties.

<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code/the-existing-uk-quality-code/part-b-assuring-and-enhancing-academic-quality>

Where additional duties are required, these should be communicated with, and agreed to by, the External Examiner in advance.

Any revised role should also be communicated to Educational and Student Policy.

3. Nomination and appointment

With the exception of the MRes degree and the MSt degree, the General Board is responsible for appointing all Examiners, including External Examiners, following nomination by the Faculty Board, Degree Committee (or comparable authority). In the case of the MRes or MSt degrees, the Degree Committee is responsible for appointing the Examiners, including the External Examiner.

Where more than one External Examiner is appointed due to the nature or size of the examination, then they are jointly responsible for assuring academic standards. This will generally be achieved through their attendance at the final Board of Examiners' meeting, notwithstanding that their individual report may pertain specifically to the parts of the examination for which they were involved.

Faculty Boards or Degree Committees should ensure that each External Examiner is aware of other appointments.

Please note: It is expected that External Examiners will be recruited from within the United Kingdom. Faculty Boards wishing to nominate an External Examiner from outside the UK will need to make a case for General Board consideration. Requests of this nature should be sent to examiners@admin.cam.ac.uk. If granted, the Faculty may be required to reimburse a percentage of the travel expenses.

Length of service: External Examiners are appointed for one year at a time, but may be re-appointed. No External Examiner shall normally serve for more than three consecutive years for a particular examination and thereafter may not be appointed until a period of five years has elapsed; exceptions to this rule may be possible if a nominating body can demonstrate that there are special circumstances (e.g. in a minority subject). To allow sufficient time for the proper performance of their duties, individuals should normally be expected to hold not more than two External Examiner appointments at first degree level concurrently.

Faculty Boards and Degree Committees should review the conduct of the External Examiners before nominating them for re-appointment or re-appointing them in the case of the MRes or MSt degrees. In particular, they should bear in mind the requirements for the submission of appropriate reports for quality assurance and public reporting requirements. The General Board may choose not to re-appoint an External Examiner who has not fulfilled his or her reporting duties from the previous year.

Suitability: To ensure the suitability of appointment, the General Board may request a statement of support for appointment or reappointment from the nominating body; such a statement would normally include a current CV for the nominated person and an indication of their suitability for the role.

Although seniority is not, in itself, a necessary qualification for appointment as an External Examiner, those appointed should normally be persons of seniority and must certainly have appropriate experience and/or knowledge and the ability to command respect in the subject. In certain circumstances, it is appropriate that persons from outside the higher education system, e.g. from industry or the professions, be invited to act.

Every External Examiner will be expected to have:

- Competence and experience in the field covered by the course
- Academic qualifications/professional qualifications to at least the level of the qualification being externally examined
- Experience of setting examinations and running assessment procedures (either externally or internally)
- Familiarity with the standard to be expected of students in the course to be examined
- Fluency in English
- Met the criteria set out by professional and accrediting bodies
- Awareness of modern developments in the design and delivery of the flexible curriculum
- Expertise in the enhancement of the student experience

Conflict of interest: Care should be taken to avoid nominations where *conflicts of interest* (either professional or personal) may arise. The General Board will consider such appointments on a case-by-case basis. In line with the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, the following points should be noted:

- An External Examiner shall not hold an office in the University, or a Fellowship or some office or post in a College and should not teach any course of instruction which forms part of the teaching programme for the examination concerned
- Former members of staff and students of the University shall not be eligible to become External Examiners until at least five years have passed since their departure
- Retirees can be considered provided they have sufficient evidence of continuing involvement in the academic area in question
- Reciprocal arrangements between Examiners from Cambridge institutions and other institutions should be avoided, wherever possible

- An Examiner being succeeded by another from the same institution should also be avoided and no more than one External Examiner for an examination should be appointed from the same institution

To avoid potential conflicts of interest, External Examiners should not be appointed if they are covered by any of the following categories: near relative of a member of staff or student involved with the programme of study, an examiner on a cognate course in the institution, anyone closely associated with the sponsorship of students on the course, anyone closely associated with placements or training, anyone required to assess colleagues who are recruited as students to the programme of study, anyone in a position to influence significantly the future of students on the programme of study, or anyone who has been directly involved as an external member of a validation panel for the programme.

The appointment of more than one External Examiner from the same department of an institution should be avoided.

Documentation and course materials: On appointment, all External Examiners should be supplied with the information needed to undertake their role.

External Examiners will receive the following documentation from Educational and Student Policy:⁷

- A letter of appointment
- A link to a copy of this guidance
- A link to the report coversheet
- Information on fees and expenses

The Chair of Examiners is expected to supply the External Examiner with the following material *prior to the commencement* of their duties:

- Relevant course materials such as a handbook or programme specifications
- Details about the examination, including the regulations and any recent changes to the conduct of the examination
- Information on marking schemes and classing conventions
- A timetable for the examination process, including dates of Examiners' meetings
- Copies of recent External Examiners' reports and any responses

⁷ External Examiners appointed to MRes and MSt degrees will receive comparable material from the Degree Committee.

- Details of any agreed additional duties for External Examiners

The Chair of Examiners should make the following available to the External Examiner during *the course* of their duties:

- Draft examination papers and accompanying criteria and/or model answers
- Access to all scripts and other material submitted by candidates
- A sample of scripts, as agreed (refer to the section on roles and responsibilities above)
- Evidence of internal marking and moderation
- Opportunities to meet with students, if requested by the External Examiner ⁸

The guiding principle is that External Examiners should have enough evidence to determine that internal marking and classifications are of an appropriate standard and are consistent.

Briefing: The External Examiner will be contacted by the Chair of Examiners to discuss particular aspects of the duties required of them before the examinations begin. This is particularly important for a new External Examiner, who may not be familiar with the University's examination arrangements. The External Examiner's primary point of contact will be the Chair of Examiners and should liaise with Chair in most matters.

4. Reporting requirements:

On completion of their duties the External Examiner is required to submit a written report to the Vice Chancellor, which is then made available for discussion by the appropriate Board or Committee within the Faculty or Department concerned.

Format: There is no standard reporting template, but a coversheet provides guidance on the report's format and content.

Cover sheet

The cover sheet asks External Examiners to comment on the following:

- Are you satisfied that you received sufficient programme materials (programme handbooks, regulations, and marking criteria)?
- Are you satisfied that you were consulted adequately on draft examination papers,

⁸ There is no formal requirement for External Examiners to meet with students to determine the quality or standards of the course or obtain feedback on the student experience. However, it may be appropriate depending on the subject area or the assessment method. Clear guidance should be provided to students about the purpose of any meeting.

and that the level of questions was appropriate?

- Were you given sufficient opportunity to scrutinise the general standard and consistency of marking of examination scripts and coursework?
- Have issues raised in previous report(s) been addressed to your satisfaction?

Report content

The report is expected to cover four main areas:

- The extent to which standards are appropriate for the examination and the qualification;
- The extent to which standards are comparable to similar programmes in other UK Institutions with which you are familiar;
- The extent to which processes for assessment, and the determination of awards were sound and fairly conducted; and
- Any good practice which the External Examiner feels could be usefully identified for further dissemination

Additional commentary

Reports may also include commentary on the following topics, at the discretion of the individual External Examiner.

the examination

- the design, structure and marking of the examination
- the procedures for assessment, including the basis and rationale for any comparisons of standards made
- the strengths and weaknesses of the students as a cohort

the course

- the curriculum, its aims, content and development
- resources as they impact upon student performance
- the quality of teaching and learning, which may be indicated by student performance.

Process of submission: the report (with appended coversheet) should be addressed to the Vice Chancellor and emailed to vcexternalexaminers@admin.cam.ac.uk or by post to the Vice Chancellor, University of Cambridge, The Old Schools Cambridge CB2 1TN

Consideration and response: On receipt of the report, the Vice Chancellors Office passes it to Educational and Student Policy, Academic Division, for scrutiny and collation

and then forwarding to the appropriate Faculty or Department. Reports are normally received in Faculties and Departments by either the Secretary of the Faculty Board or the Head of Department. The Faculty Boards or Degree Committees are the appropriate forum for discussion of the External Examiners' reports. Faculty Boards and Degree Committees are requested to formulate responses to each External Examiner based on the outcomes of such discussions. The written response is also forwarded to the to the General Board's Education Committee, along with any additional commentary they care to make.

When considering their responses to External Examiners, Faculties and Departments should ensure that interested parties are consulted, where relevant and appropriate. These may include the Chair of Examiners (and other Examiners), teaching committees, course management committees and course organisers, student-staff consultative committees and Directors of Studies committees.

The responses should address each issue raised by the External Examiner and should be appropriate to the seriousness of the concern. This may include a commitment to ongoing consideration of issues, a report on action taken or action considered, and/or the identification of issues to be referred to other internal and external bodies to the Faculty or Department (e.g. General Board's Education Committee, Senior Tutors' Committee, Admissions Forum).

Educational and Student Policy prepares an annual report for the General Board's Education Committee, highlighting themes arising from the External Examiners' reports and how the Faculties/Departments have addressed the issues identified therein.

The Education Committee will determine whether the responses to External Examiners' reports are adequate and will further consider any issues that are of wider import.

Disclosure: The University will publish the name and home institution of the External Examiner on the web via the University Reporter, in line with University Policy.

All External Examiners' Reports should be made available to students, with the exception of any confidential report which may be made to the Vice-Chancellor.

The Faculty Board, or Degree Committee, should decide how best to share the reports with its students and how to make them aware of the reports. The University may publish the contents of the coversheet and summary report for the purpose of making publicly available information on teaching quality standards. In accepting the appointment, External Examiners give their consent to such processing.

Please note that reports are usually considered by the senior committees in the relevant Faculties and Departments, which include student representatives in their membership. Reports should ideally be written in a form that avoids discussion of individual candidates or members of staff.

External Examiners should refrain from identifying individual candidates where possible and/or Faculties and Departments must ensure that any such details are redacted from the report prior to making them publically available.

5. Payment

All External Examiners are paid fees and expenses including the cost of overnight accommodation for up to two nights where appropriate. Requests for payment of more than two nights should be made to examiners@admin.cam.ac.uk before appointment. The fees & funding team administer the payment of such fees to Examiners in accordance with the rate of payment specified in Chapter III of the Statutes and Ordinances:

Payment for acting as an External Examiner is set at £600 in accordance with the Regulations: <http://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/univ/so/2017/chapter03-section10.html>

Payment of fees and expenses is conditional on receipt of the External Examiner's report.

External Examiners should complete a Fees and expense claim form available on the website: <http://www.student-registry.admin.cam.ac.uk/examinations-further-guidance-staff/appointment-examiners-and-assessors>

The Chair of Examiners, Senior Examiner (in the case of Natural Sciences Tripos and the Medical and Veterinary Sciences Tripos), or Degree Committee (in the case of MPhil Degrees) are responsible for authorising payment of fees and expenses. The relevant Faculty or Department will then forward the completed claim form to Student Registry so that these payments can be processed.

Pensions and automatic enrolment obligations

From March 2013, the University has had a legal obligation to automatically enrol eligible jobholders into a qualifying pension scheme. Temporary workers may fall into this category if they meet the eligibility criteria determined by reference to an income threshold of £787 in any one month (currently). Given the nature of External Examiner appointments, the assessment of whether an External Examiner should be automatically enrolled will be postponed for a period of three months. If after this time, the External Examiner is not eligible, then he or she will not be automatically enrolled. However, the University has a statutory duty to notify the External Examiner about the pension scheme and provide him or her with the ability to opt in voluntarily. This communication will be sent by the pensions provider, NOW Pensions, as they handle the administration relating to the scheme on behalf of the University.

Holiday Pay

Holiday pay is incorporated in the fee.