The Higher Education Academy

A handbook for external examining

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1.1 Outline of the handbook

The handbook seeks to provide guidance, advice and general information on external examining. It is designed for use by all external examiners and be of particular interest to new external examiners or those examiners who need to be more familiar with academic institutions and their practices. For more experienced examiners the intention is that the handbook will be used as a reference source and it is designed so that readers can select sections and topics to suit their need. Where appropriate the advice and guidance is supported by evidence derived from the collective experience of practising external examiners, staff who support the examining process, research studies and publications. Case studies are included and illustrate some of the difficult situations that can arise in carrying out the duties of an external examiner. To keep the handbook as concise and readable as possible supporting material is made available through embedded URL links in the text and in the reference section. The handbook primarily concerns external examining of taught programmes at foundation, undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

Increasingly, there has been considerable public debate on external examining. In 2008-09 the external examining system was considered by a parliamentary select committee reporting on students and universities. The report was strongly critical and questioned whether the system was still fit for purpose. This public focus on the quality and standards of degree awards and the recommendations of the Teaching Quality and Student Experience sub-committee of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE-TQSE) led Universities UK (UUK) and GuildHE to conduct a review of external examining arrangements in universities and colleges in the UK and their final report was published in 2011. The report found that the system was generally in good order but that improvements could be made, and a set of principles and recommendations were put forward; the principles are provided in Appendix 1 to this handbook. At the same time the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in 2011 was also reviewing and revising the Code of practice which included a section for external examining. These recent developments are covered in more detail in the handbook.

1.2 Inspector or critical friend?

External examiners are experienced higher education teachers who offer an independent assessment of academic standards and the quality of assessment to the appointing institution. Acting as an external examiner generally involves the review of a selection of exam scripts, assignments and dissertations followed by informal engagement with staff to discuss the assessed work and the formal meeting of the examination board. There are, of course, variations in the way that external examiners are used in different subject areas. For example, while in many disciplines it is now the norm that externals do not meet with individual students, in others, such as the visual and performing arts, meeting with students to discuss their work may be a fundamental aspect of the external examiner's role. The handbook addresses 'universal' aspects of external examining as well as the differing ways in which examiners perform their role.

As described in more detail later, the role of the external examiner has changed significantly in recent years. The aspects of the role around scrutiny and inspection outlined above have increasingly been based around collegiate discussion and interaction. The critical friend approach is now more or less universal with the expectation that the external examiner will identify strengths, weaknesses and good practice of the provision and play a role in quality enhancement.

This duality of approach to external examining and potential ambiguity resulted in a UUK/GuildHE review of external examining and ongoing work by the QAA, which resulted in the 2011 revision of the QAA Code of practice, forming Chapter B7 of the UK Quality Code.[1] For external examining Indicator 2 of the revised guidance covers the four areas of the role related to maintenance of standards: achievement of standards: fairness and rigour; comparability of standards; and alignment of outcomes. Indicator 3 addresses the role of the external examiner in promoting quality enhancement.

1 http://www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/quality-code/Pages/default.aspx

2.1 The origin of external examining and recent developments

The external examining system began in the 19th century when the newly formed Durham University reached an agreement with the University of Oxford for it to supply examiners to increase the available pool of expertise, and also to demonstrate acceptability and comparability of its awards. In the later 19th century and 20th century newly created universities in Great Britain and Ireland also adopted this system of external examining. Today external examining as a means of assuring the standards of undergraduate awards remains largely confined to UK and Ireland. External examining at doctorate level is more widespread, for instance, in countries of the Commonwealth.

The expansion in the UK of universities in the early 1990s saw former polytechnics being designated as universities. The polytechnics had used external examiners for many years, but they had also been subject to external review through the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA). This approach of Government-sponsored external review was now extended across the expanded university sector and eventually managed by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). As part of its responsibilities the QAA established, through consultation with the HE sector, a Code of practice. The Code covered various aspects of academic activity; in 2000 it published section 4, dealing with external examining, which was revised in 2004, and in 2011 to form Chapter B7 of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education.

The external examining system was also reviewed by the Dearing committee and their report in 1997 recommended a strengthening of external examining as follows:

> The remit of the external examiner will need to be consistent across the UK, necessitating thorough familiarisation, training and preparation, including a trainee/apprentice model for new external examiners. Examiners will need to be fully aware of the aims, teaching methods and approach of programmes under examination.

Aspects of Dearing's recommendations, particularly with regard to appointment and induction of external examiners, were supported by the QAA. By the early part of the 21st century the external examining system was seen to be under strain as there had been a very rapid increase in student numbers over the preceding decade and also widespread adoption of modular systems of delivery and assessment. Consequently the Government White Paper of 2003 The Future of Higher Education made a number of recommendations on strengthening and enhancing the external examining system. The White Paper recognised external examiners as "guardians of the reputation of UK higher education", but noted the need for appropriate training and support.

In 2004 the Higher Education Academy was established, and it was invited by the Higher Education Funding Council for England to provide a programme of support to secure improvements in the external examining system. A number of the proposed improvements related to the broad field of staff development and included: enhancing induction for external examiners; encouraging institutional preparation of internal examiners to take on the role of external examiners; and consideration of a national programme of support for external examiners. This handbook is part of the continuing commitment from the Higher Education Academy to support the external examining process.

In 2008-09 academic standards were again under review by the QAA and also by the House of Commons Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee. Both reviews confirmed the importance of the external examining system in assuring academic standards and both made recommendations for improving the system.

The House of Commons committee (2009) opted for implementation of the Dearing proposal for a national pool of external examiners. Subsequently a QAA thematic enquiry (2009) made the following recommendations for external examining:

- The external examining process should be made more transparent and should be better explained in order to facilitate understanding of its intentions, limitations, operation and role.
- There should be further discussion at national level and development of appropriate guidance about the procedures used to identify, train and support external examiners.
- A nationally agreed and mandatory set of minimum expectations for the role of all external examiners should be developed and implemented.

In response to the House of Commons committee report, the HEFCE-TQSE sub-committee recommendations and the QAA thematic enquiry, Universities UK and GuildHE (UUK/GuildHE) conducted a consultation process on external examining and their report of 2011 endorsed and expanded on the recommendations shown above. A key objective of this handbook is to support the first two recommendations listed above.

2.2 A changing focus for external examining – is the title still relevant?

For much of the 20th century the university sector remained relatively small and elite and the external examiner commonly acted as an independent marker and assessor with the opportunity and power to adjust student marks at examination boards. Over time though, and particularly in the last couple of decades of rapid expansion in student numbers, the external examiner could no longer review the work of the entire student cohort. With selective sampling of student work came the view that it would be unfair for an external examiner to adjust the marks of the limited number of students whose work had been sampled while the majority of the cohort retained the marks assigned by internal markers.

So the focus of the external examiner has, over time, shifted away from providing an independent mark for assessed work of an individual. If marks are to be adjusted for a cohort of students then generally this is done by the examination board as a whole rather than on the recommendation of the external examiner. The major role of the external examiner is the scrutiny and evaluation of a body of evidence for cohorts of students, which typically consists of:

• a course or programme specification;
• examination question papers and coursework/assignment tasks;
• a sample of assessed student work;
• discussions with teaching staff and, where appropriate, students;
• attendance at examination boards.

From this body of evidence the external examiner will provide an overall judgement on student performance and the quality and standard of the programme. The external examiner provides feedback to the teaching team and institution on overall strengths and weaknesses through a written report.

Given that the great majority of external examiners no longer carry out a marking function but act in the moderating role described above, we may question whether the title is still appropriate. Within academic circles there is a clear understanding of what the title entails, but to the broader world of students, parents, business people and politicians the title can be confusing and misleading. The recent enquiries by the QAA and UUK/GuildHE noted this public confusion and misunderstanding and recommended greater clarity in explaining the function of the external examiner.

2.3 External examining and the broader context of quality and standards in the HE sector

Recent public and political interest in the quality and standard of higher education has indicated that beyond academic institutions there is a poor understanding of quality assurance systems used within higher education. A common misconception is that external examining is somehow the sole means of assuring quality and standards. There is no doubting its central importance, but it operates within a broader framework of quality assurance generally referred to as the academic infrastructure.

The academic infrastructure, which is also referred to in section 6 of this handbook, has been developed by the QAA in consultation with the HE sector, and has the following components:

- frameworks for higher education qualifications (FHEQ), against which all programmes must be validated, approved and reviewed;
- a Code of practice;
- subject benchmark statements;
- programme specifications.

The FHEQs (there are different versions for Scotland and for Wales, England and Northern Ireland) provide qualification descriptors that set out generic outcomes and attributes for the level of award. The current Code of practice has ten sections covering various aspects of academic activity[2] (see below regarding the incorporation of the Code into the UK Quality Code, which will replace the Academic Infrastructure).

Subject benchmark statements set out expectations about standards of degrees in a range of subject areas. They describe academic features that give a discipline its coherence and identity, and define what can be expected of a graduate in relation to the abilities and skills needed to develop understanding or competence in the subject. Finally the programme specification gives a concise description of a programme including how it is assessed. From the external examiner viewpoint the programme specification is the key document as, in drawing up the specification, staff will have addressed the requirements of the FHEQ and the subject benchmark statement. In addition, external examiners for disciplines that carry a professional award will have to take note of any requirements set by the professional or regulatory body.

Section 7 of the Code of practice summarises the other major facets of quality assurance used in higher education. The first step is programme approval and this involves internal and external review of the programme proposal; a key objective is to set the academic standards for the programme. Some institutions will involve their current external examiners in this approval. A major outcome of the process is the programme specification. Once the programme is running it is subjected to an annual monitoring process and this includes consideration of external examiner reports for a discipline area with responses and actions addressing issues identified by the external examiner. Finally, discipline areas are required to carry out periodic review, usually on a five - to six-year scale, which includes consideration of external examiners' reports and the arising responses and actions. A major outcome of periodic review is the reapproval of programmes within the discipline area. Periodic review ensures that programmes remain topical and up to date with disciplinary, teaching and learning developments.

In addition to these internal procedures institutions are reviewed externally by the QAA on a five- to six-year cycle. Institutional review looks at the manner in which an institution is addressing the quality and standard of its provision and how it is exercising its responsibility for awarding degrees. Review of external examiners' reports has always been an important element of QAA institutional review and planned changes to the process will see an increased importance attached to the views of external examiners with review teams having the option to have direct contact with external examiners. Reference to external examiner findings and views will become one of the key areas for institutional review and have a strong impact on the judgement of the review.

The Academic Infrastructure is being replaced by the UK Quality Code for Higher Education following an extensive consultation and evaluation process conducted by QAA with the sector. The Code brings together all the existing components of the Academic Infrastructure and will incorporate those reference points which have traditionally been closely related to, but not part of, the Academic Infrastructure (such as the doctoral and master's characteristics papers). During 2011-13 QAA is embarking on a full programme of reviewing and revising existing reference points (including all the sections of the current Code of practice) and developing four new chapters on areas identified by the sector as being needed: learning and teaching, student engagement, information about higher education (often referred to as public information), and student support.

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2 The Code sections are: 1 – Postgraduate research programmes; 2 – Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning); 3 – Disabled students; 4 – External examining; 5 – Academic appeals and student complaints on academic matters; 6 – Assessment of students; 7 – Programme design, approval, monitoring and review; 8 – Career education, information, advice and guidance; 9 – Work-based and placement learning; 10 – Admissions to higher education.

The Quality Code is structured in three parts:

* Part A: setting and maintaining threshold academic standards
* Part B: assuring and enhancing academic quality
* Part C: providing information about higher education.

Chapter B7 on external examining is the first of the chapters to be published and replaces Section 4 of the QAA Code of practice. Institutions are expected to engage with the new chapter and to make any changes required to their regulations and procedures by the start of academic year 2012/13.

3.1 How do you become an external examiner?

Generally there is an expectation that the external examiner will be an experienced academic with five or more years of experience of acting as an internal examiner, perhaps coupled with experience of being a programme leader

Institutions rarely advertise in the press for external examiners and the knowledge of availability of posts may still rely heavily on word of mouth and networks within a discipline area. This has brought the charge that the appointment system is too 'cosy' and possibly in the past this was a justifiable criticism. Now institutions have rigorous appointment procedures. There is a JISC mailbase for external examiners, mentioned in Appendix 5, and the most common usage of the mailbase is to advertise external examiner posts. In general, however, the most effective way of becoming an external examiner is through networking with discipline colleagues at conferences and meetings or through links developed in research and teaching.

3.2 Appointment procedures

Institutional appointment procedures should now adhere to the guidelines set out in the UK Quality Code, chapter B7 and key features include:

- External examiners must have appropriate experience and expertise.

- Former staff and students of an institution cannot take up external examining appointments at that institution within five years of leaving and external examiners should not have any other close links with the appointing institution (e.g. research collaborator, near relative taking a programme to be reviewed by the external).

- External examiners should not hold more than two appointments.

- Academic departments must not 'exchange' external examiners and new appointments should not be from the same department of the current external examiner.

- Appointments should be for four years.

- Inexperienced academics or non-academics with a professional or vocational background should operate as part of a team or be mentored by an experienced external examiner. Such appointments are to be approved by the appropriate senior committee of the institution.

- Name, position and institution of each external examiner should be included in programme details provided to students.

Applicants generally fill out an appointment pro forma and submit a detailed CV. Appointment criteria capture the items listed above with the main focus being to ensure that appointees have an appropriate level of academic and professional experience in the discipline area, knowledge and experience of a range of assessment techniques, a good understanding of quality assurance procedures and good communication skills. Some discipline areas with strong vocational or professional relationships, for example architecture, engineering and design, may seek external examiners from outside academia.

Initial appraisal of an application is usually carried out at departmental level to ensure that the appointee meets their specific discipline requirements. If a department wants to support an applicant who does not fully meet the institutional criteria then it will need to provide an explanation on how this deficit will be compensated for. Generally the approach is to suggest that inexperienced applicants will be members of a larger external examining team. The application then goes through an institutional procedure with final approval being granted by a senior committee. It is now recommended that appointments are generally made for a four-year period with a significant number of institutions having regulations that allow the appointment to be extended for a further year.

3.3 Induction and briefing

A significant number of institutions run induction events for newly appointed external examiners. In some cases attendance at an induction event is a requirement for newly appointed external examiners; however, given the busy lives of academics, attendance is more commonly considered to be optional. If an external examiner cannot attend an event, there will need to be some other type of briefing: usually a formal meeting during the first visit with a member of the internal teaching team for the programme. A small number of institutions also provide web-pages devoted to the briefing of external examiners.

Most induction events follow a similar pattern. A morning session, which is generally delivered by senior managers and central administrative staff, provides institutional information on characteristics of the curriculum design and the regulation of assessment and examination. Post-lunch sessions are hosted by faculties and departments giving new external examiners an opportunity to meet teaching staff and to be briefed on the particular programme(s) they will scrutinise.

The expectation is that induction or more informal briefing will cover the following:

- the validation history of the programme;
- the design and delivery characteristics of the programme as set out in the programme specification;
- assessment regulation including detailed explanation of institutional policy in respect of condonation and/or compensation, resits, retakes and other mechanisms used to support student progression;
- arrangements and reasonable adjustments to assessment procedures for students with disabilities;
- marking protocols (question and assignment setting; model answers; double marking; blind marking; moderation);
- discussion of sampling and selection of student work to provide the evidence base for the external examiner;
- procedures for oral examination or formal review of student work or performance;
- opportunities for meeting students on a more informal basis;
- examination procedures and requirements for attending examination boards;
- terms of reference for examination boards;
- rules and penalties for academic misconduct;
- procedures for student appeals and complaints;
- access to recent external examiner reports, minutes of examination boards and examination question papers;
- the annual report of the external examiner and how it is used by the institution;
- contact protocols and details for key staff (especially important for external examiners of collaborative provision).

In those institutions not providing separate induction events, briefing and preparation of the new external examiner usually involves provision of documentation on the role and verbal briefing, usually at departmental or faculty level, on the external examiner's first visit. The information provided should also contain details of what action an external examiner can take in the event of problems or concerns arising that cannot readily be resolved at departmental or faculty level including the option of a direct approach to the Head of the institution. A description of a typical year for a newly-appointed external examiner is provided in Appendix 2.

3.4 Fees and expenses

There is general agreement that an external examiner does not take up an appointment for the fee! The fees paid by institutions vary over quite a range, but even the highest fees will only translate into a modest rate of hourly pay. The real benefits from being an external examiner include the professional recognition that an appointment brings and the exposure to alternative ideas and practice particularly in regard to curriculum design and assessment.

Surveys by academic registries between 2006 and 2009 of the level of fees paid to external examiners show the majority of fee payments for undergraduate duties falling in the range from £300 to £700 per annum. The low end will generally relate to programmes with small numbers of students and perhaps a more limited module-level role for the external examiner. At the high end will be responsibilities for programmes and modules with large student numbers. The way the fee is constructed varies from institution to institution and typical factors in calculating the fee include the:

- number of students;
- number of modules;
- number of visits (especially relevant for the visual and performing arts);
- level of responsibility (module, programme, subject, institutional).

For taught postgraduate programmes a basic fee is often based on the number of students on the programme and then further fee payments relate to the number of dissertations to be examined.

In addition to fees, an institution pays all reasonable expenses incurred in carrying out the duties, typically the costs of travel and accommodation according to the institution's standard expenses regulations. Payment of fees by an institution is usually dependent on the external examiner submitting the annual report. Expenses should be reimbursed more promptly, however; the long wait for reimbursement is a common complaint from external examiners.

3.5 Early termination of contract

Institutional external examining guidelines should set out reasons why an institution would terminate a contract prematurely. Section B7 of the UK Quality Code (2011) recommends termination of a contract should poor performance occur at any point within the contracted period. Generally the main reasons for early termination are that the external examiner does not attend examination boards and makes no alternative arrangement, fails to submit annual reports as required or continues to submit inadequate reports, and does not respond to enquiries from the teaching team or institution. More rarely early termination may result from a breakdown in trust between the external examiner and the teaching team. Early termination in these circumstances is just as likely to be sought by the external examiner as by the institution. If an external examiner feels that key recommendations are being ignored then the first step is to write, in confidence, directly to the Head of the institution raising concerns about the potential threat to quality and standards. If all internal procedures for dealing with external examiner concerns have been used and result in continuing disagreement, the external examiner may also raise a concern of sufficient gravity with the QAA through the process outlined in Raising concerns about standards and quality in higher education.[3]

This process is not a formal right of appeal for external examiners above the institution and should be used as a last resort; earlier resolution of major problems is more desirable.

3.6 Internal recognition of external examiner duties

There is a tacit assumption in institutions that senior staff will be acting as external examiners. In a similar vein an institution filling a senior academic post will expect candidates to be acting as external examiners. Thus there is the expectation that part of the professional development of an academic teacher is being appointed as an external examiner. However, relatively few institutions offer formal recognition of staff carrying out external duties at other institutions, although in some cases it may feature in the criteria for promotion. This lack of recognition was noted in the UUK/GuildHE review (2011). A related issue, also noted in the report, is the lack of training offered by institutions to prepare their staff to act as external examiners. As a consequence recommendation 6 in the report states:

All universities and higher education colleges should recognize the importance of the external examiner role in promotion procedures and demonstrate commitment and support for their own staff acting as external examiners for other institutions.

3 http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/QAA_concerns_guidance_external_examiners.aspx

One way of addressing such a recommendation has been piloted in a small number of institutions. They have organised a one-day workshop for staff aspiring to become external examiners. As part of the day senior members of the institution with long experience of external examining present personal histories and case studies to illustrate the variety of situations that face an external examiner. Such workshops are well received and serve to encourage staff to take up appointments as well as providing recognition for senior staff who have an authoritative voice on external examining.

There is also a named award for external examining available through the Staff and Educational Development Association's (SEDA) Professional Development Framework. It is designed for those who have been appointed as external examiners and is particularly useful for relatively inexperienced staff. [4]

4.1 Role and rights of an external examiner

The traditional role of the external examiner identified by Silver, Stennant and Williams (1995) included:

- ensuring that degrees awarded in similar subjects are comparable in standard across higher education institutions;
- ensuring that students are dealt with fairly in the system of assessment and classification.

These elements are embraced by the QAA Code of practice for external examining and remain key components in Chapter B7 of the UK Quality Code.

Invariably external examiners now act in a moderating role supporting the internal examining team whereby through the study of a selection of student work they can make a judgement on the academic standard of a module or programme as demonstrated by overall student performance and achievement. So now the role is commonly partly that of an external moderator and partly that of a critical friend with duties that embrace the following:

- ensuring the integrity, rigour and fairness of assessment procedures;
- assessing the standard of academic awards and student performance;
- commenting on the comparability of student performance and standard of awards of the institution in respect to their experience of other HE institutions;
- identifying good practice and providing advice for the enhancement of modules and programmes;
- assessing a programme's approach to 'fitness to practice' (professional programmes).

While external examiners are in effect employed by the institution whose programmes they are to scrutinise, it is important that they engage actively in discussion about their role, for example by:

- clarifying their role in the approval process for examination question papers and coursework assignments;
- specifying, through consultation, the selection and composition of the body of student work to be scrutinised;
- requesting specific items of student work if they deem there is a problem with a module or programme;
- communicating in writing with the Head of the institution if there is a problem that has serious implications for the quality and standard of the institution's awards.

4.2 Duties and responsibilities of the external examiner

The appointing institution should ensure that external examiners have a clear understanding of their duties and responsibilities. The core duties are bulleted in the section above and relate to independently assuring the quality and standard of an institution's awards. During the appointment process an external examiner should ask for clarification on the extent, if any, of additional responsibilities.

4.3 Collaborative provision

A further complication for some external examiners is that they are appointed to review programmes and modules delivered by a partner institution. The sections of the QAA Code of practice on external examining and collaborative provision provide detailed guidance on the role of the external examiner in these circumstances.

The fundamental point is that the awarding institution assumes full responsibility for external examining. In long and well-established relationships the partner delivering the programmes may put forward a candidate for an external examining post, but it remains the responsibility of the awarding institution to formally appoint that person to the role.

For external examiners taking on duties in a partnership it is very important that they have a clear understanding of their responsibilities and interactions with both the partner and the awarding institution. For example, external examining reports are submitted to the awarding institution; however, actions arising from their reports will probably have to be carried out by the partner. The external examiner should ascertain how feedback on reports and consequent actions will be handled.

4.4   Two-tier examination board systems

Many HE institutions operate what is known generally as a two-tier examination system. In this approach there are external examiners who have responsibility for a module or group of modules and their focus will be on assessment and examination at this level. External examiners at this level generally meet staff to discuss student performance within modules at a pre- or sub-examination board, and generally they are not required to attend the full examination board. In addition there are external examiners with responsibilities for a programme or group of cognate programmes with a focus on overall student performance and standards of awards. Commonly these external examiners also retain some responsibilities at module level and in addition to attending a sub-board they will normally attend the full examination board where degree awards to students are agreed. In some circumstances the two-tier systems can create friction where external examiners operating exclusively at module level feel disenfranchised as they are not invited to attend the full board and comment on overall student performance. In professional programmes there may a sub-board that is focused on the assessment of practice, which then reports to the main examination board.

4.5   Degree levels

Most external examiners are appointed to evaluate undergraduate programmes. It is common practice for them to concentrate on student work that contributes to the final degree classification. In practice this means that they usually do not review the work of first-year students, although this may be the case for professional programmes. Generally the bulk of the scrutiny will address final-year work. In many subject areas particular importance is attached to independent work in the final year and so the external examiner will generally give special attention to dissertations, project work, final show and performance. For foundation degrees the external examiner will scrutinise a similar body of work, a significant amount of which may be assessment of work-based learning.

For taught postgraduate awards the external examiner will scrutinise examination work but will focus especially on the dissertation or equivalent final project work. It is common practice for external examiners to review the dissertation or project work of the entire graduating cohort as it is felt that this is the best way to judge a student's aptitude for independent thought and creativity backed up by rigorous research and scholarship. Such independent thought and research is of course at the heart of postgraduate study.

4.6   Joint or combined degrees

With the growth of modular programmes there has been a proliferation of joint or combined degrees. For these degrees there are normally external examiners appointed for the discrete subject areas. Decisions on student performance at module level are taken by the appropriate subject examination board with degree classification decided by aggregation of module marks from the contributing subjects. A regular difficulty is that the performance of a particular cohort can vary significantly across the two subjects, so average cohort performance may be in the upper second range for one subject and the lower second for another. Normally it is not proper for the external examiner to request marking adjustments at examination boards because for any individual module the cohort will be made up generally of full Honours and joint Honours students, and 'partial' adjustment for the joint Honours cohort would not be acceptable. What the external examiner can do, through the reporting procedure, is to request a review of marking and student performance on a joint or combined degree programme.

4.7 Assessment strategies and regulations

On appointment an external examiner will probably receive documentation explaining institutional assessment strategy and regulation of assessment and examination. Assessment regulations also feature prominently in institutional induction procedures and ongoing briefing of external examiners because institutions review and revise their assessment regulations frequently.

Many institutions have introduced assessment strategies to provide advice and guidance on the design and balance of assessment tasks. An important aspect of an institutional strategy is to attain consistency and parity in assessment practice across the institution. Such strategies commonly provide information about formative and summative assessment. Other key aspects of assessment strategies may include:

• assessment guidelines outlining, for example, the alignment of module and programme learning outcomes with assessment tasks;
• providing detailed advice and guidance for staff on the nature, extent and timing of feedback to students;
• providing marking criteria to ensure a consistent approach to marking.

Assessment regulations are more formal documents setting out procedures for the assessment and examination of students. Among other things the regulations will set out procedures for: the conduct of assessment; the composition and function of examination boards; application of marking and grading schemes; the use of second markers; student progression; classification of awards; reasonable adjustments for students with disabilities; and dealing with cases of academic misconduct and student appeals. Again lack of time probably means that an external examiner will not be able to assimilate all the detail of regulation. Careful briefing from departmental staff, particularly on marking, grading and degree classification, will be of considerable assistance to the external examiner. Given the complexity of regulation and the frequency of modification it is often the practice for a member of the institution's examination unit to attend examination boards to provide advice on items such as student progression and degree classification.

It is common with modular systems to have various rules to assist student progression. These vary from institution to institution but broadly speaking fall into three major categories:

• condonement is a mechanism of allowing a student to fail a very limited number of modules, usually not core or compulsory modules, and still progress to the next stage of their studies;
• compensation is a mechanism where failure in one module can be compensated by a pass in another related module or group of modules;
• resit allows a student to repeat the assessment task for the module without having to take the whole taught module again; usually a student can only undertake a very limited number of resits.

There are subtle variations from institution to institution in the definition of condonement and compensation and so external examiners need to ensure they understand how an institution is using the terms.

4.8 Calculating degree classifications

Another area of considerable variation across the sector is the manner in which degree classifications are calculated. Generally institutions will have developed algorithms that ensure that core, required and compulsory modules are included in the calculation. The algorithm may also allow one or two low-scoring optional modules to be omitted from the calculation of the degree classification (e.g. best 12 modules from a programme where a student has taken more than 12 modules). Computer programmes process the algorithm; however, it is important for an external examiner to be aware of the principles and practices used to calculate the degree classification.

4.9 The evidence base

External examiners should have a clear idea of the evidence and information needed to be able to discharge their duties effectively. Discussion and clarification of these requirements should be carried out soon after appointment. Generally the internal team will provide what the previous external examiner requested but the new appointee should be sure that this is sufficient. Typically an external examiner will require information and an evidence base along the lines of the following:

- a student handbook with programme specifications;
- the institution's assessment regulations and in particular rules governing student progression and associated compensation and condonation;
- the institution's assessment strategy and marking guidelines and criteria;
- policy and practice on assessment procedures for students with disabilities;
- guidelines on dealing with plagiarism and other academic misconduct;
- guidance on which years of a programme will be scrutinised;
- guidance on reviewing examination papers and coursework tasks;
- the range of student work for scrutiny and the regime used by the institution to provide a sample of exam scripts, coursework and assignments, and dissertations, theses and other independent project work;
- requirements to meet with students;
- requirements, particularly in practice – and studio-based subject areas, to attend demonstrations of practice (eg exhibitions, performances, presentations) or, where appropriate, to review this work through virtual or electronic media;
- the opportunities to meet internal teaching staff informally and at formal examination boards;
- access to predecessors' reports and minutes of recent examination boards.

4.10 Sampling and study of student work and activities

Possibly one of the trickiest aspects of an external examiner's work is to decide on how to sample student work. Even with very small cohorts of students generally there is not enough time to review the entire inventory of a student's assessed work so a selection has to be made. Invariably the selection of student work for external review is decided by the external examiner following consultation with the internal teaching staff. There are no firmly established norms for sampling; however, commonly applied sampling tactics would have the following characteristics:

4.10.1 Examination scripts

For a module with a cohort of several hundred students a sample of around 10% of the work may be regarded as sufficient. For modules with smaller cohorts up to 25% of the work might be sampled. The sample usually captures all work with first class or fail marks, a selection of work from classification borderlines and a selection of work falling within the mid-range of a classification grade.

4.10.2 Independent, practical and creative work

Normally there is a limited amount of time for an external examiner to scrutinise and given this constraint it is near universal practice for the external examiner to concentrate on reviewing coursework that requires independent thought and high academic skills. Such work is usually the culmination of a student's undergraduate programme and includes synoptic investigations, project work and dissertations. For arts programmes such work would encompass the final show or performance. At postgraduate level the external examiner is normally expected to review all the theses or final projects for a cohort. If there is a large number of theses more than one external examiner may be required as it can take a significant amount of time just to review the conclusions of a thesis let alone read the whole document.

4.10.3 Clinical practice and work-based learning

Placements, both for professional programmes and as work-based learning, are an important component of an increasing number of programmes. The external examiner can carry out sampling in the manner described above; however, it is important to understand and appreciate the context of placement or work-based learning. The context may require a student to maintain a diary or journal detailing the application of practical skills rather than presenting more formal pieces of assessment. With some professional programmes there may be a requirement to comment on 'fitness to practice' elements within the programme.

4.11 Oral examination

Perhaps one of the most notable changes in external examining in recent years is the decline of the practice of external examiners conducting viva voce examinations with students or meeting with them for more informal discussion of their experience and progress
Two major factors have contributed to this decline:

- with rapidly growing cohorts of students it has become impossible for external examiners to meet even a significant proportion of students let alone the whole cohort and therefore there is an argument over the fairness of the process if only a small fraction of students have the opportunity to benefit from oral examination;
- for an external examiner to meet students usually means an extra visit to the institution to see the students in term time and this adds to the already very considerable cost for external examining facing an institution.

So now it is the norm for a majority of disciplines that external examiners do not meet students. However, a meeting with students remains a vital part of an external examiner's duties in some arts disciplines. The most reliable way for an external examiner to explore the creative thought and practice of students in the visual and performing arts is considered to be through direct discussion. However, it will normally be made clear to both to the external examiner and to the students concerned that the aim will be to enable the external examiner to take a view across the cohort as a whole rather than to take a view on the performance of individual students.

4.12 Moderation and scaling

Almost all institutions have a system of double marking of student work, particularly examination scripts and key pieces of independent work. Through the sampling of student work the external examiner now acts as a moderator to check the accuracy and fairness of marking. To assist the external examiner internal marking teams may provide model answers or marking schemes for examination questions and coursework assignments. The external examiner usually provides comment on the marking of modules to the examination boards and also refers to the integrity of marking in the written annual report. If there are minor problems the external examiner usually requests the internal marking team address these and take action prior to the next running of the module.

In the rarer cases where the external examiner feels that there is a substantial problem with the marking of the module, for example notably harsh or lenient marking, then more immediate action can be requested. In consultation with the relevant internal marking team, the external examiner can recommend the scaling up or down of marks. This usually applies to the entire cohort though there may be a differential component if the external examiner feels, for instance, that the marking is unduly harsh at the lower end of the scale. The external examiner and the internal team then put the recommendation to the examination board for discussion and approval.

Institutional provision of quantitative data on student performance can be of considerable assistance in addressing moderation and scaling. In some institutions the practice of providing mean, median, mode and standard deviation for student performance on a module is well established. A scan of such data will quickly show anomalous marking patterns in modules.

4.13 Examination boards

Most external examiners are required to attend a full examination board, that is, a board where degree classifications for the graduating cohorts are discussed and approved. It is helpful to have an opportunity early in the board meeting for the external examiner to raise items for consideration of the board. The external examiner is required in a majority of institutions to endorse mark lists and 'sign off' degree pass lists. Indicator 9 in Chapter B7 of the UK Quality Code gives further detail on how external examiners may be expected to endorse assessment outcomes. In addition, their influence is exercised in a collegiate manner with collective agreement on decisions and actions relating to student performance and achievement. Occasionally, internal staff may look to the external examiner to be the key arbiter in situations where internal markers cannot agree on a mark for a key piece of student work such as an undergraduate dissertation.

In addition to providing opinion on student performance an important role for the external examiner on examination boards is to ensure fair treatment of all students. Almost every board will consider students who have experienced difficulties arising from, for instance, ill health or personal circumstances. Their performance and progress will have been affected. Normally the external examiner will just need to be assured that these circumstances have been taken into consideration and usually spreadsheets of marks will have a column for flagging mitigating circumstances. To preserve confidentiality it is common practice to consider these exceptional circumstance cases through a separate sub-board. If required though, the external examiner may provide an independent and objective viewpoint in these situations. The external examiner will also need to be assured that students with disabilities have been given the "reasonable adjustments", such as extra time for an examination, set out in the institution's policy for students with disabilities. Appendix 8 to this handbook sets out good practice in the external examining of students with disabilities. In some institutions the external examiner may be asked to comment on student work where there is suspected academic misconduct.

Generally towards the end of examination board meetings the external examiner is invited to comment on the overall quality and standard of provision and student performance. An external examiner should be prepared for this to ensure that the key issues and problems are placed before the board. These can then be recorded in the minutes of the board along with the response from internal staff. It would not be good practice for teaching teams to discover a major problem highlighted in the external examiner's report that had not been brought to their attention earlier when a resolution may have been found through discussion of the problem directly with staff. This is the opportunity for the external to act as a 'critical friend', highlighting strengths, weaknesses and good practice.

For those external examiners only attending 'pre-board' meetings where module marks are considered there can be a feeling of disenfranchisement. This is especially the case if the pre-boards are not provided with data and information on the overall performance of a student. If major problems are identified with the marking of a module or treatment of students then the modular external examiner needs to thoroughly brief the external examiner who will be present at the full board.

4.14 Time constraints

Surveys of external examiner opinion invariably raise the issue of the very limited time available for an external examiner to carry out the duties of the role. The principal reason is that arrival of student work for scrutiny and the timing of examination boards overlaps with the very busy period of examination in the external examiner's home institution. Time problems can be exacerbated if a person holds more than one external examiner position, and Chapter B7 of the QAA UK Quality Code states that external examiners should normally hold no more than two external examiner appointments for taught programmes at any point in time. A short outline of a typical year for an external examiner is provided in Appendix 2.

As individuals vary in their approach to marking and scrutiny it is difficult to give any precise measure of the time it takes to scrutinise a batch of examination scripts or undergraduate dissertations. Taking an average overall loading for an external examiner, the time needed for scrutiny is likely to run to at least a couple days. Examination material may be sent out by the institution so that scrutiny of the student work may be done by the external examiner prior to visiting the institution for examination boards.

There are a couple of ways to ease the time pressures:

• request marking plans or model answers for examination questions;
• look quickly at the overall distribution of marks in each module to be scrutinised and then start the detailed scrutiny with modules that have more anomalous distributions.

5 The external examiner's report

The submission of an annual report is arguably the most important duty of an external examiner. These reports should provide independent and objective appraisal of the standard and quality of provision within an institution.

As such they constitute a crucial body of evidence for both internal quality assurance procedures such as periodic review and for external institutional review. The UK Quality Code, Chapter B7, has indicators that set out the core content in the external examiner's report:

- the comparability of standards between modules within a course and between different courses in different institutions;
- the alignment of outcomes, how coherent the programme is and whether it achieves the standards appropriate to the programme;
- the fairness and rigour of the assessment process;
- possibilities for enhancement.

There were also recommendations that, to maintain confidentiality, students and staff should not be referred to by name in reports and that the external examiners should indicate the information and support they have received to carry out their duties.

Most of the above is already in place in many institutions and the norm is for institutions to provide an electronic pro forma for the report. The usual format is to have a tick-box first section, which asks a series of basic questions about quality and standards and institutional support for the external examining process. A second section has a more open format and seeks comment and opinion from the external examiner on student performance and achievement and the quality of the programme. Consequently reports will generally comment on:

- whether the standards are appropriate to the level of award (e.g. through the rigour of examination questions and assignment tasks, match of the programme to level descriptors set out in subject benchmark statements);
- a description of the evidence base used to make judgements (the sampling of assessed student work, viewing of student work and interviews, and other contact with staff and students);
- the extent to which comments and recommendations made in previous reports have been considered and the appropriateness of actions;
- the standard of student performance and achievement with perhaps a comparison to students on similar programmes in other institutions;
- the strengths and weaknesses of a student cohort;
- the quality of teaching and learning demonstrated by examples of student work;
- the design, structure, variety and marking of assessments and the match of assessments to programme learning outcomes;
- the procedures for examination and assessment and application of assessment regulations;
- the overall health of the programme with suggestions for further enhancement.

The UUK/GuildHE review (2011) provided a very useful checklist for external examiner reporting and this is reproduced in Appendix 3 of this handbook.[5]

Within an institution the external examiners' reports figure prominently in the annual monitoring of programmes. It is now widespread practice for Deans or Assistant Deans of faculties and schools to summarise key points from all the external examiner reports in their discipline areas. The Deans' reports are then collated and condensed into an institutional annual report on the outcomes of external examining that is considered by the senior committees. In periodic review and external institutional review the study of external examiner reports across a five - or six-year period gives a longitudinal view on how a discipline area responds to external review.

Given that the reports are at the heart of quality assurance it is very important that they are robust and strongly evidence-based. Short and sketchy reports are unhelpful to everyone: in strong programmes, there will be a lack of evidence to support claims for high quality and standards, and in programmes where there are issues to be addressed, these will be allowed to continue to the detriment of students. External examiners should also be aware that there is an expectation

that reports will be shared with student representatives and more generally with students on the programme. The wording of reports must be carefully chosen in the light of the multiple audiences: staff, students, senior staff from the HEI and external bodies such as professional regulators.

Chapter B7 of the UK Quality Code requires an institution to give the name, position and institution of each external examiner in programme details provided to students. Consequently it could sometimes be the case that students might be tempted to try a direct appeal to external examiners on their programme if they feel that they have been unfairly treated in some way or that they have not got the results they expected. Institutional documentation should make it clear to students that such approaches are inappropriate, but external examiners will also want to be clear as to whom they should refer the students in the event of any such approach.

External examiners submitting inadequate reports will usually receive a polite request from a senior member of the appointing institution to submit more comprehensive reports in future. External examiners who persist in submitting poor reports, or no report at all, will normally have their contract terminated.

It is common for an external examiner to establish a strong, collegiate working relationship with internal staff. In some situations and out of a sense of well-meaning loyalty the external examiner's report may not give sufficient gravity to a major problem. In the longer term this is of no help to the staff as such problems have a tendency to grow and come to light commonly through serious student dissatisfaction. It is better to be open and candid about major problems at the earliest opportunity. On the opposite side of the coin internal staff may dismiss external examiner comments and recommendations as having little relevance, or the response to comments may be barely adequate. Staff do this at their peril for one of the most common causes for a poor external review of an institution, either by the QAA or a professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRB), is inadequate response to major criticisms in external examiners' reports.

Another common dilemma arises from departmental staff pressing the external examiner to act as an advocate and supporter in areas of contention with central administration. Typically these involve debates and arguments about the level of resourcing or about the fairness of assessment regulations. As a general rule an external examiner would be well advised to be wary of acting as an advocate. On a short visit it is very difficult to appreciate the complexity of arguments about resourcing and regulation. Nevertheless there may be occasions when the external examiner will agree with departmental staff that the quality and standard of provision is being jeopardised and a strong recommendation can be made in the report.

In those rare instances where the external examiner believes that quality and standards are being seriously compromised either at departmental or institutional level then many institutions give the external examiner the right to directly contact the Head of the institution. Indicator 17 in Chapter B7 of the UK Quality Code recommends universal application of this right.

An important principle in writing the report is that it is consistent with the comments and judgements given to examination boards or in other informal contact with teaching staff. It would be unfair if serious new issues and criticisms were raised in the report that had not been raised with staff during the external examiner's visit.

Institutions usually require submission of external examiner reports fairly promptly after the sitting of an examination board. This means that for undergraduate courses external examiners should have submitted reports by the end of September in time for incorporation into departmental annual monitoring events and reports. The annual fee paid by the institution is usually dependent on submission of the external examiner's report.

If the report has identified serious problems or issues then the external examiner should expect to receive feedback from the institution on how it will respond. Depending on institutional policy the feedback may be provided by a senior member of the teaching team or head of department if the issues relate directly to the programme. If the issues raised by the external examiner have an institutional dimension, for example comment on assessment regulations, then the feedback will probably be made by a senior manager with responsibility for quality assurance.

6 Judging standards

Arguably the most poorly understood and practised aspect of external examining is around the judging of standards. There is an assumption outside of the higher education community that external examiners are more or the less the sole guardians of standards in higher education. Thus there is a perception that any weakness in external examining procedures will have a strong impact on standards. In response the higher education sector has pointed out that external examining is just one facet of the safeguarding of standards within a broader academic infrastructure. The following sections place external examining in this broader context.

6.1 Subject benchmark statements and programme specifications

Subject benchmark statements set out expectations about standards of degrees in a range of subject areas. They describe what gives a discipline its coherence and identity, and define what can be expected of a graduate in relation to the abilities and skills needed to demonstrate understanding or competence in the subject. Currently there are 73 Honours-level subject benchmarks and ten Masters-level benchmarks. Almost all subject provision is covered by a benchmark statement and in those rare instances where there is no statement, principally in vocational subjects, institutions may refer to other guidance such as the National Occupational Standards. During programme approval and re-approval events the programme will be mapped against the appropriate benchmark statement. In the case of interdisciplinary programmes more than one statement may be applicable, and for professional programmes there may be additional requirements from the regulator.

The programme specification gives a concise description of the programme including how it is assessed. From the external examiner's viewpoint the programme specification is the key document as, in drawing up the specification, staff should have addressed the requirements of the appropriate subject benchmark statement.

6.2 Programme approval, periodic review and external review

The first step to securing the standard of a programme is during the approval process. At this stage the programme development team will ensure that the FHEQ descriptors are followed and that the programme is mapped onto an appropriate subject benchmark statement(s). This work is generally referenced in the programme specification. The approval procedure involves review by an approval panel that will have at least one external subject expert and, if professional accreditation is required, a representative from the appropriate PSRB. It is common practice to keep the external examiner who is in post informed of new programme development and for some institutions the formal endorsement of the intended programme by the external examiner may be required.

For a newly appointed external examiner the most convenient way to check that the programme is applying national standards is to look carefully at the programme specification. For further assurance the approval documentation can be reviewed. Some institutions, as a matter of course, provide new external examiners with the approval documents.

The second key element in securing standards is through the periodic review of discipline areas. This review usually operates on a five- to six-year cycle and is carried out by a panel that has expert external members. As part of the process, programmes within the discipline go through a re-approval process on similar lines to those described above. In addition the review panel will consider an array of quality assurance evidence, which will include external examiner reports for the period under review. These reports are regarded as crucial evidence and the review panel will consider very carefully how the discipline area and institution have used the reports and responded to criticisms and recommendations made by the external examiner. If there is an inadequate response then this is likely to be highlighted by the review panel with a strong recommendation for appropriate action in response to external examiners' reports. If external examiner reports are short or sketchy the review panel will probably want to know if the institution took action to improve the quality of reporting.

The final element in assuring quality and standards is through external review. Such review will include the various forms of institutional review carried out by the QAA, inspection of teacher training provision by Ofsted or equivalent national bodies, and accreditation by PSRBs. In all these procedures the reports of external examiners provide vital evidence on the quality and standards of the academic provision. In those rare instances where QAA review panels do not express full confidence in the maintenance of quality and standards of an institution the trigger is commonly the persistent ignoring of criticisms in external examiner reports. Useful background on how QAA institutional reviews have considered approaches to assessment and external examining are provided in the outcomes series of publications.[6]

6.3 How do external examiners judge standards?

It is now generally acknowledged that external examiners are not in a position to make comparative judgements on the quality and standard of a programme at one institution with 'national' standards across the entire spread of a discipline in the HE sector. Consequently, standards are increasingly being seen as thresholds and the revised UK Quality Code uses the following definition:

> Threshold academic standards are the minimum acceptable level of achievemen that a student has to demonstrate to be eligible for an academic award. For equivalent awards, the threshold level of achievement should be the same across the UK. Individual awarding bodies are responsible for setting the grades, marks or classification that differentiate between levels of student achievement above the threshold academic standard within an individual award.

The institutional pro formas now usually ask the external examiner to make comparison with other programmes falling within their own experience. The idea that a single external examiner could make a comparative judgement on the national, and indeed international, standard of a programme has always been flawed. Current trends are to identify and use threshold standards and a definition is provided by the revised UK Quality Code, as above.

A programme specification should define the threshold standard through reference to the appropriate FHEQ and subject benchmark statement.

To gather more insight on the judgement of standards a focus group study carried out by the Higher Education Academy in 2006-07 asked 124 external examiners from nine institutions and representing 14 discipline areas how they judged standards. Firstly, the external examiners felt that subject benchmark statements and professional body requirements played important roles only in curriculum planning and programme validation. In this respect they assumed, on taking up their external examining posts, that this aspect of assuring standards was in place and merited little further attention. Secondly, there was a good deal more awareness of quality and standards in the 'institutional' context, with mixed views about what information should be provided. This information included programme specifications, assessment regulations, question papers, guidance for disability and mitigating circumstances, and statistical analysis of student performance. Given the time constraints placed on an external examiner most of the participants in the study indicated only limited use of this information in judging standards. A particular issue raised by them was about the timing of dispatch of such information and whether all that was sent was relevant. Thirdly and clearly of most importance for the judgement of standards in the view of the great majority of the participants was the variety of experience gained in one's own teaching, assessment of students, participation in the examination board process, and interaction with one's own colleagues and other external examiners.

Given that personal experience appears to be of prime importance in judging standards, there would seem to be a strong case for institutions in preparing staff to take up external examiner posts.

6 See http://www.qaa.ac.uk/ImprovingHigherEducation/Pages/Outcomes.aspx

Case study one

After reviewing a selection of exam scripts from a couple of compulsory modules taken in semester one, you feel that the marking has not been rigorous and is overgenerous. This is compounded by question-setters providing vague and poorly structured model answers.

There is no full exam board after semester one so you send a detailed analysis and argument and request the Head of department consider re-marking or at least a review of the marking on these two compulsory modules.

At the final exam board after semester two you find that nothing has been done and your views appear to have been put aside. The module leaders maintain they have spoken to colleagues and see nothing out of order with the marking. You feel marginalised and ask why there was no earlier response to you. The module leaders reply that as far as they were aware this exam board was the appropriate point to respond. You maintain that the marking of the modules does not meet the standards you have experienced in other institutions. The chair of the exam board cuts short any debate stating that there is no time now for review or re-marking as results and classifications have to be with the exams office by the end of the day. Reluctantly, and for the sake of graduating students, you agree to sign off the award lists but refuse to sign off the module mark sheets. The chair of the exam board signs these off.

Key issues in this scenario

1   Poor quality of model answers.

2   Marginalisation of the external examiner.

3   No clear procedures for the timely addressing of the external examiner's comments on semester one modules.

4   Process (results must be with exams office) taking precedence over integrity and fairness.

Possible line of action

1   Inform staff at the exam board that you will be taking the issue up in your report. Put a strongly worded paragraph in the report about the lack of response to your recommendations and request feedback on this aspect of your report.

2   If there is still no satisfactory response write a confidential letter to the Head of the institution outlining the case and ask that the institution clarify the powers of the external examiner.

3   Depending on the response from the Head decide whether or not you need to resign – an inadequate response from the Head probably means you are a difficult position with lack of trust and mutual respect shown by departmental staff.

Case study two

On a validated programme at a collaborative partner to the awarding HE institution you see that there is a large failure rate (55%) on a compulsory core module in year 2. A selection of scripts is available to you on the afternoon before the exam board. There is no model answer or marking guide for the exam paper and you see that the exam has been marked by a team of staff. Your analysis shows that the problem appears to arise from students getting very poor marks on two questions and in your opinion some pretty harsh marking of their answers. Both questions appear to have been marked by the same member of staff. There is no evidence of double marking on any of the scripts. From informal conversations you gather that staff are not too worried by the high failure rate; it is a level 2 module and in aggregate level 2 modules only account for 20% of the marks going towards degree classification.

Key issues in this scenario

1   Has the partner institution followed the awarding institution's policy on assessment and examination? For example, does the awarding institution's assessment policy require double marking and/or provision of marking guides?

2   Does the partner institution have a policy on internal moderation of team marking?

3   Had the team actually carried out double marking or discussed the aggregate marks?

4   Did the two questions with poor performance have sufficient clarity and content to allow students to produce answers with the rigour expected?

5   Does the casual attitude of staff toward year 2 performance permeate all modules at that level?

Possible line of action

1   Request a short meeting with the marking team prior to the main exam board to discuss your concerns informally.

2   If there is no satisfactory outcome to the above, at the exam board ask the secretary to clarify the 'official' institutional position with regard to double marking and provision of marking guides.

3   Request the chair of the exam board/head of department to explain how question papers are constructed and agreed.

4   Having gained a clear understanding of the procedures in the presence of departmental staff discuss whether or not they have been following the awarding institution's assessment guidelines.

5   If there appears to be deviation from the examination policy of the awarding institution then the matter needs to be brought to the attention of the awarding institution.

6   Point out that poor performance in year 2 can have a real impact on those students around classification borderlines.

7   Indicate to staff that you will include in your report the need for a more professional approach to the setting and marking of year 2 modules.

8   Await a satisfactory response from the awarding institution on the issue raised in your report and expect that in the coming year there will be a much more professional approach to year 2 modules at the collaborative partner institution.

Case study three

At the final exam board just under two-thirds of the finalists for a programme are around the upper second/lower second borderline. The board has discretionary powers to allow students within 1% of the borderline (60%) to be considered for the higher award, but apart from that there is no further guidance or policy on considering borderline cases.

Ten students fall within the 58.8-59.3 range. Six of these students have a mark greater than 59.0 but only two have a dissertation/major project mark of over 60%. Four students have marks of 58.8-58.9, but three of these have dissertation/project marks well over 60% including one with a borderline first class dissertation/project.

A long debate ensues covering such things as:

• simply sticking by the rules so all over 59% get put up;
• suggestions that only those with >59% overall and >60% on dissertation/project be put up;
• less than 60%;
• suggestion of 'finding' additional marks for the three students with <58% overall and >60% dissertation/project so that they can be put up;
• the need to agree to consider all borderline students on an individual basis.

Key issues in this scenario

1   Does the HEI need to write tighter or clearer criteria for discretionary powers of exam boards considering borderline cases?

2   How rigorous is the marking of dissertations/major projects? Is there blind double marking with arbitration from a third marker if agreement cannot be reached?

3   Is the assessment strategy exacerbating the tendency for bunching at borderlines (e.g. too many pieces of assessment having an equalising effect on candidate performance)?

4   Is poor student performance at level 2 endemic and leading to bunching around the borderline?

Possible line of action

1   Support the proposal that you consider best maintains integrity and fairness to all students. A majority of the board should support the proposal. The simplest option would be to apply the institutional guideline and have all those above 59% awarded an upper second. In practice boards often consider each borderline student individually rather than as a collective cohort of borderlines.

2   In your report request the institution to review its policy on the discretionary powers of exam boards in borderline cases and ask for a response.

3   Ask the department to review its assessment strategy to see if it can identify reasons for the severe bunching of candidates around the lower second/upper second boundary.

Case study four

In your first annual report on a foundation degree run by a partner college you point out a serious weakness in the assessment of a particular module. Exam results are poor and assignment briefs are poorly structured and vague.

You recommend urgent action and review of the module. At the next end-of-year examination board you see the same problems with the module and that no action has been taken. You raise this at the board and the module leader says that this is the first he has heard of your comments. In a rambling discussion that follows it seems that your first annual report, sent to the awarding institution, took a long time to reach the partner institution and missed the annual programme review meeting. The module leader also maintains he did not attend a subsequent committee meeting when the report was discussed and no one informed him that there was a problem.

Key issues in this scenario

1   Poor communication between awarding institution and partner institution and no mechanism in place to check timely arrival of external examiner's annual report.

2   The value of the partner institution conducting an annual review meeting without the external examiner's annual report.

3   Poor communication within the partner institution with the chance that some academic staff may not see the external examiner's report.

4   Potential for a very damaging QAA audit report for both the partner institution and the awarding institution.

Possible line of action

1   Ask the exam board to review all the marks there and then for students on the current run of the module making comparisons with mark patterns on similar modules and making adjustments to the marks of all students if appropriate.

2   Request that a review of the module be carried out with a report to you before you write your annual report.

3   Refer to the lack of action in your report and write to the Head of the awarding institution pointing out the risk to standards raised by poor communication with the partner institution.

4   Be firm with the board pointing out that it is in the best interest of all (awarding institution, staff at the partner institution, students) to have a rapid resolution to the issue.

Appendix 1   UUK/GuildHE general principles for external examining

The principles were established through the UUK/GuildHE review of external examining published in April 2011 and have been incorporated in Chapter B7 of the UK Quality Code.

The following principles should underpin the operation of the external examining system:

Principle 1: In the UK higher education system, each institution with degree awarding powers has responsibility for setting the standards of its degrees within the context of common guidelines (that is, subject benchmark statements, professional body requirements, and so on) and is subject to internal quality assurance procedures and external audit/review by an independent agency (the QAA). This should continue to be supported and strengthened. External examining is only one part, albeit a very important part, of this system.

Principle 2: Notwithstanding their autonomy, it is right that each institution is accountable for the way in which it exercises its responsibility for setting and maintaining standards. The principal mechanism for this is institutional review, which should test whether or not external examining is working in practice. External examining arrangements should remain one of the key areas for institutional review and a critical factor in determining the outcome of institutional review.

Principle 3: The role of the external examiner should be comprehensible to students, the media and the general public. Explanations of it should be articulated clearly and simply at all times. More nationally consistent, developed and supported external examining expectations would improve the effectiveness, transparency and credibility of the system, especially with external audiences.

Appendix 2   A typical year in the life of a newly appointed external examiner

One way of sketching the role and responsibilities of an external examiner is to review the activities across an academic year. The activities described below relate to a traditional type of three-year undergraduate degree programme in an institution with a two-semester modular system of delivery and assessment, and an external examiner appointed to review a typical arts, science or humanities discipline.

1   Appointment usually takes place prior to the start of the academic year and the appointment process should set out the responsibilities and expectations of the external examiner. As part of the appointment procedure the proposed external examiner will normally fill in a pro forma application and submit a CV.

2   Early in semester one the external examiner may be invited to a one-day induction event by the institution where there will be an opportunity to meet staff from central administrative units and subject staff. In some institutions induction may be largely carried out through online procedures. Induction material usually includes documentation on assessment regulation and assessment strategy, a programme specification and student handbook for the programme. In most institutions the new external examiner is provided with copies of annual reports made by their predecessor.

3   During the early to middle part of the semester the external examiner should be asked to comment on examination papers and assignments for semester one modules.

4   Between semester one and two the external examiner may be provided with a selection of student examination material and coursework assignments and perhaps asked to attend a module examination board. If the examiner attends the board there is usually an opportunity to carry out informal induction if this has not occurred so far.

5   During the early to middle part of the semester two the external examiner will be asked to comment on examination papers and assignments for semester two modules.

6   Soon after the end of the semester the external examiner may receive one or mor
     of the following sets of student work: examination scripts; coursework assignments;
     projects and dissertations; audio and video recordings of student performances;
     invitations to attend student presentations and performances. For some institutions this
     may include student work and exams from both semester one and two. This material
     may be provided in hard copy or digitally and can be reviewed prior to visiting the
     institution. Alternatively the material may be reviewed during the visit and prior to the
     meeting of the examination boards. This is commonly the case where the external examiner
     needs to review student presentations and performances.

7   The external examiner attends examination boards at the institution.

8   Usually within three months of the sitting of the examination boards the external
     examiner submits an annual report.

Appendix 3 UUK/GuildHE checklist for external examiners' reports

Programme materials: did you receive:

a Programme handbooks?
b Programme regulations (these may be in the programme handbook)?
c Module descriptions (these may be in the programme handbook)?
d Assessment briefs/marking criteria?

Draft examination papers

a Did you receive all draft papers? If not, was this at your request?
b Was the nature and level of questions appropriate? If not, were suitable arrangements made to
   consider your comments?
c Were suitable arrangements made to consider your comments?

Marking examination scripts

a Did you receive a sufficient number of scripts? If you did not receive all the scripts, was the
   method of selection satisfactory?
b Was the general standard and consistency of marking appropriate?
c Were the scripts marked in such a way as to enable you to see the reasons for the award
   of given marks?

Dissertations/project reports

a Was the choice of subjects for dissertations appropriate?
b Was the method and standard of assessment appropriate?

Coursework/continuously assessed work

a Was sufficient coursework made available to you for assessment?
b Was the method and general standard of marking and consistency satisfactory?

Orals/performances/recitals/appropriate professional placements

a Were suitable arrangements made for you to conduct orals and/or moderate performances/
   recitals/appropriate professional placements?

a   Were you able to attend the meeting?
b   Was the meeting conducted to your satisfaction?
c   Were you satisfied with the recommendations of the Board of Examiners?

If you respond 'No' to any of the above, please make sure a note of explanation is included in your annual report.

Appendix 4   Personal accounts

The Higher Education Academy has gathered together a number of personal accounts of external examiners. These explore common practice as well as a number of recurrent issues. The accounts can be accessed at: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/externalexamining/Personal_accounts_of_external_examining_(2004)

Appendix 5   Supporting the search for external examiners

A recurring theme raised by university staff over the past years has been the increasing difficulty in finding external examiners. In response to this the HEA facilitates a JISC mailbase to promote discussion between external examiners (external-examiners@jiscmail.ac.uk), including regular postings of calls for external examiners.

Databases of external examiners are also compiled and maintained by some subject associations, e.g. the National Association for Music in Higher Education (NAMHE).

Appendix 6   Resources and discipline-based guides

A considerable range of resources is available through the external examining web-pages of the HEA website. The pages contain reports on work carried forward by the HEA, including commissioned work, as well as other published work. The pages can be accessed at: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/universitiesandcolleges/externalexamining.

Discipline-specific guides include:

1   External examining: An Engineering Subject Centre guide (Cowan 2009).

2   Handbook for external examiners: guidance for degree in social work (SWAP 2009).

3   External Examining - Examiner's Audit Tool (UK Centre for Bioscience 2009).

4   External Examining - Institutional Audit Tool (UK Centre for Bioscience 2009).

5   Supporting External Examiners on Architecture Courses in UK Universities [Briefing Guide No. 07] (CEBE 2006).

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Appendix 8   External examining and students with disabilities

National Disability Team
External examining

Definition/remit of theme for this resource

This checklist has been designed to pose questions relating to disability issues within the external examining function in higher education. The focus of this checklist on institutional practices will enable 'internal facing' review and reflection by staff; raise awareness of key issues to be addressed and identify gaps or omissions in institutional systems and procedures.

Target audience

Of primary use to: staff within higher education institutions (HEI) with responsibility for engaging and working with external examiners (EE), and those staff involved in the examinations and assessment process. These may be staff within quality assurance departments, within registry or learning and teaching departments. The checklist will also be useful to faculty-based staff with responsibility for quality issues.

Of secondary use to: senior managers and policy makers within HEI, disability officers and examinations officers.

Strategy, policy and procedures

1   Do all policies, procedures and practices in place in the institution applying to external examining, including those relating to the engagement of EE, take into account issues relating to disabled students?

2 Does the institution ensure that all EE are aware of, and understand policies, procedures and practices in place in the institution relating to reasonable adjustments made to examinations and assessments for disabled students, e.g. extra time, marking for content, transcribed oral assessments, etc.?

3 Are disability issues placed as a standing item on the agendas of committees that have responsibility for assessment, grading and moderation of modules or courses?

4 Does the institution proactively seek the advice of the EE on acceptable reasonable adjustments in order to ensure the maintenance of academic standards?

Confidentiality

5 Does the institution ensure that staff and EE involved in assessment, grading and moderation activities are aware of and utilise the institution's systems for sharing information about disabled students?

6 How does the institution ensure fair practice in moderation and external examining when a student has disclosed a disability?

Examinations, assessment and moderation

7 Does the institution and its departments or staff teams ensure that EE are fully cognisant of any reasonable adjustments made for individual disabled students?

8 How does the institution ensure parity and fairness of sampling by EE to include assessments for disabled students? (e.g. Does the institution flag student work and mark sheets to indicate that disability has been taken into account?)

9 Does the institution present to EE, or work with the EE to consider mitigating circumstances in relation to the specific issues presented by disabled students?

Monitoring, evaluation and disputes

10 Does the institution, its departments and staff teams apply the QAA Code of practice Section 6: Assessment of students in relation to disabled students?

11 How does the institution deal with disputes that arise during the EE process in relation to assessing disabled students' learning?

12 Does the institution: implement an external examining buddying scheme for new and inexperienced EE?; monitor and evaluate any such scheme?'

13 Does the institution inform EE of the actions taken in the light of their comments and recommendations for future years, cohorts of student and types of reasonable adjustment? For example: a whole institutional approach to 'flagging' written exams that have required adjustments for disabled students.

14 How does the institution ensure that good practice in relation to disability issues and assessment is shared across different subject areas within the institution and with the EE in cognate subject areas?

Reporting and feedback

15 Does the institution make use of EE reports and take cognisance of comments about issues such as whether academic standards are maintained during the application of reasonable adjustments offered to disabled students?

16 Does the institution make use of the breadth of experience of EE as critical friends to inform institutional policies and practices for assessing disabled students?

Staff development

17   Is professional development provided to EE by the institution on issues relating to institutional policy and practices for assessing disabled students?

18   Does the institution ensure that EE are fully briefed on current legislation and new institutional procedures relating to disabled students?

Other specific issues

19   How does the institution engage with EE in relation to issues of professional bodies and 'fitness or licence to practice' that might impact on assessing the learning of disabled students?

About this publication

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The HEA is a national body for enhancing learning and teaching in higher education in the UK. We work with institutions across the HE system to help bring about change in learning and teaching to improve the outcomes for students. We do this by recognising and rewarding excellent teaching, bringing together people and resources to research and share best practice and by helping influence, shape and implement policy.

The HEA supports staff in higher education throughout their career from those who are new to teaching through to senior management. We offer services in 28 disciplines throughout the UK and have offices in England, Wales and Scotland. Through the partnership management team we work directly with institutions to understand individual circumstances and priorities and bring together resources to meet them.

The HEA has knowledge, experience and expertise in higher education. Its service and product range is broader than any other competitor, and it is trusted to deliver HE system advancements in partnership with its subscriber institutions.

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