

# Fundamentals of External Examining

March 2019

# Table of Contents

<b>1. Introduction .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2. Higher education policy context.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>3. Becoming an external examiner .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>4. The external examiner in post.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>4.1 Role and responsibilities of an external examiner .....</b>	<b>6</b>
Box 1. Responsibilities of external examiners.....	6
Box 2. A typical year in the life of a newly appointed external examiner.....	7
<b>4.2 Assessment strategies and regulations .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>4.3 The evidence base .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>4.4 Degree levels .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>4.5 Sampling of student work and activities .....</b>	<b>9</b>
Independent, practical and creative work.....	10
Clinical practice and work-based learning .....	10
<b>4.6 Meeting with students.....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>4.7 Moderation processes .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>4.8 Examination boards.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>4.9 Two-tier examination board systems .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>5. The external examiner’s report .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>References .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Further information and resources .....</b>	<b>14</b>

# 1. Introduction

This publication provides general information and guidance on external examining of taught programmes at foundation, undergraduate and postgraduate levels. <sup>1</sup> It is designed to be used by all external examiners and will be of particular interest to aspiring or 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 guidance can be used as a reference source. As a resource, it complements and is aligned to the [Advice and Guidance on External Expertise](#) (QAA, 2018) of the [UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#). <sup>2</sup>

External examiners are usually experienced academics in higher education 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 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 academic 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 programme team and institution on overall strengths and weaknesses through a formal annual report.

This publication focuses on the ‘universal’ aspects of external examining, though there is some variation in the way that external examiners are used in different subject areas and at some institutions. In the case of joint or combined degrees, there are normally external examiners appointed for the discrete subject areas.

## 2. Higher education policy context

The [UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#) developed by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) on behalf of the [UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment](#) provides a sector-owned framework for higher education providers to assure the standards and quality of their higher education provision. This Code includes expectations for standards and quality; advice and guidance on key themes, such as assessment and external expertise; and key reference points, particularly qualification and credit frameworks, and subject benchmark statements. With regard to external examining, the [Advice and Guidance on External Expertise](#) provides guiding principles for providers, as well as practical considerations relevant to the role and responsibilities of external examiners. <sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> *Fundamentals of External Examining* is based on *A Handbook for External Examining*, which was written by Professor Howard Colley and produced by the Higher Education Academy in 2012. *Fundamentals of External Examining* has been updated by Dr Erica Morris and Dr Geoff Stoakes for the Degree Standards project to reflect developments and current practice relevant to external examining. *Fundamentals* therefore replaces the *Handbook*.

<sup>2</sup> The *UK Quality Code* is available at: <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code>

<sup>3</sup> All of the code Expectations and the core practices which sit underneath the expectations are mandatory across all of the UK, and providers are regulated against them by their respective funders/regulators. The

In recent years, there have been key developments in external examining, particularly as external examiners have a significant role to play in the maintenance of degree standards in higher education. A review of external examining in the UK assessed the effectiveness of the external examining system in safeguarding academic and quality standards in higher education and considered possible changes for external examining (HEFCE, 2015). One of the main recommendations of this review undertaken by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) concerned the need ‘to professionalise external examining ... so that those conducting the role are skilled and knowledgeable about assessment and the assurance of academic and quality standards’ (HEFCE, 2015, pp. 92-93). It was also emphasised that external examiners should engage in activities for the calibration of standards within their subject, discipline or professional community. Institutional support for academic staff who are external examiners for other higher education providers was viewed as crucial, entailing the:

‘development of staff for the role, clear reward and recognition for the role, appropriate resourcing including time, and effective use of examiner knowledge and experience’ (HEFCE, 2015, p. 95).

The [Degree Standards](#) project (2016-21) on external examining originated in the Revised Operating Model for Quality Assessment (HEFCE, 2016). Informed by the 2015 review of external examining arrangements, it was highlighted ‘that it would be beneficial to the sector ... to consider further strengthening the external examining system’ (HEFCE, 2016, p. 8) through investigating ways to support the professional development of external examiners. The [Degree Standards](#) project, which is led by Advance HE and managed by the Office for Students on behalf of England and the devolved administrations in Northern Ireland and Wales,<sup>4</sup> has explored sector-owned processes focusing on the professional development of external examiners. This has involved establishing a professional development course for aspiring, new and experienced external examiners, and the delivery of ongoing professional development using a range of mixed-mode and flexible models.

This project, which is focused on professional development for external examiners and exploring approaches to the calibration of academic standards within subject, discipline and professional areas, is primarily a result of continuing concern about the reliability and comparability of degree standards in UK higher education. This publication, *Fundamentals of External Examining* has been produced for the Degree Standards project to reflect current practice relevant to external examining, and as a complementary resource for the professional development course for external examiners.

## 3. Becoming an external examiner

### 3.1 How do you become an external examiner?

Generally, there is an expectation that an external examiner will be an experienced academic and an established expert in their discipline. The Quality Code’s [Advice and Guidance on External Expertise](#) provides details relating to institutional policy and procedures on the nomination, appointment, contractual arrangements and engagement of external examiners, including the requirements of the role in terms of experience and expertise. An external examiner appointment is usually for four

---

common practices are mandatory in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. They are not mandatory in England. The advice and guidance is advice and guidance only.

<sup>4</sup> In 2016-17 the project was funded by the four nations; in 2017-18, it was funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), the Department for the Economy Northern Ireland (DfENI) and the Office for Students (OfS). During 2017-18, the management of the project was transferred from HEFCE to the OfS.

years. Higher education providers may arrange a mentor (who is an experienced external examiner) for first-time external examiners and/or make arrangements for an overlap of appointments to enable a new external examiner to shadow a predecessor in the role.

Advance HE oversees a JISC mailbase to promote discussion between external examiners (external-examiners@jiscmail.ac.uk), which includes regular postings from higher education providers to advertise external examiner posts. Institutions rarely advertise more widely for external examiners and the knowledge of availability of posts may rely on networks within a subject, discipline or professional area. One way of exploring possibilities of becoming an external examiner is through networking with discipline colleagues at conferences and meetings or through links developed in research or teaching and learning.

## 3.2 Induction and briefing

Institutions normally run induction events for newly appointed external examiners. In some cases, attendance at an induction event is a requirement for newly appointed external examiners. If an external examiner cannot attend an event, there is the need for some other type of briefing, such as a formal meeting during the first visit with the programme lead. Institutions also tend to provide web pages devoted to the briefing of external examiners, as well as a handbook or code of practice for their external examiners.

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

In general, induction or briefing sessions 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 and moderation protocols (question and assignment setting; model answers; double marking; blind marking; moderation);
- information on sampling and selection of student work to provide the evidence base for the external examiner;
- examination procedures and requirements for attending examination boards, including dates for board meetings;
- access to recent external examiner reports and minutes of examination boards;
- the annual report of the external examiner and how it is used by the institution;
- contact protocols and details for key staff.

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, which may be in the form of a handbook or code of practice, should also contain details of what action an external examiner can take in the event of problems or concerns arising which cannot readily be resolved at departmental or faculty level.

## 3.3 Professional development

The benefits of being an external examiner include the professional recognition that an appointment brings and the exposure to alternative ideas and practice particularly with regard to curriculum design and student assessment. A guiding principle of the Quality Code's [Advice and Guidance on External Expertise](#) states that higher education providers 'ensure that external experts are given sufficient and timely evidence and training to enable them to carry out their responsibilities' (p. 5). This is likely to involve induction sessions or annual briefing events for external examiners (see 3.2 Induction and briefing). Institutions may make arrangements for experienced external examiners of their programmes to mentor new external examiners.

[Advance HE](#) have developed approaches for the professional development of external examiners and works with higher education providers to deliver a professional development course using a range of mixed-mode and flexible models. Further information is available at: <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/degree-standards>

### 3.4 Fees and expenses

The fees paid to external examiners by institutions can vary over quite a range. Fees at the lower range will generally relate to programmes with small numbers of students and perhaps a more limited module-level role for the external examiner. At the higher 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).

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 policy.

## 4. The external examiner in post

### 4.1 Role and responsibilities of an external examiner

The Quality Code's [Advice and Guidance on External Expertise](#) describes the key responsibilities of external examiners, as provided in Box 1.

#### Box 1. Responsibilities of external examiners

*'Degree-awarding bodies engage external examiners to provide impartial and independent advice, as well as informative comment on the degree-awarding body's standards and on student achievement in relation to those standards. External examiners confirm that the provider consistently and fairly implements their own policies and procedures to ensure the integrity and rigour of assessment practices. They also comment on the quality and standards of the courses in relation to the national standards and frameworks and comment on the reasonable comparability of standards achieved at other UK providers with whom the examiner has experience. External examiners also comment on good practice, and make recommendations for enhancement' (p. 1).*

In practice this means that external examiners act in a moderating role 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. An external examiner's responsibilities therefore embrace the following:

- assessing the standard of academic awards and student performance with regard to internal reference points (e.g. institutional regulations) and external reference points (e.g. [Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications](#), [subject benchmark statements](#));
- ensuring the integrity, rigour and fairness of assessment procedures;
- commenting on the comparability of student performance and standard of awards of the institution in respect to their experience of other higher education providers;
- identifying good practice and providing advice for the enhancement of modules and programmes.

A typical year in the life of a newly appointed external examiner is provided in Box 2. 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 through, for example:

- clarifying their role in the approval process for examination question papers and coursework assignments;
- agreeing, if needed, 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.

#### Box 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 here relate to a conventional type of three-year undergraduate degree programme 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.
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 the quality unit and subject staff. In some institutions induction may be largely carried out through online processes. Induction and briefing material usually includes the institutional handbook or code of practice on external examining, assessment regulations, a programme specification and student or programme handbook. The new external examiner is also provided with copies of annual reports made by their predecessor.
3. As institutions need to ensure assignment tasks are available to students at the start of semester one (e.g. in programme handbooks), the external examiner may be asked before the semester begins to comment on examination papers and assignments for modules. However, before semester one, the external examiner may only be given early sight of assessment tasks rather than asked to comment at this stage, with a later opportunity to give feedback for the next round of assessments.
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.

5. During the early to middle part of the semester two the external examiner will be asked to comment on the form and content of coursework assignments and examination papers for semester two modules.
6. Soon after the end of the semester the external examiner may receive one or more of the following samples of student work (depending on the subject): examination scripts; coursework assignments; projects and dissertations; audio and video recordings of live assessments (e.g. student presentations and performances), or the external examiner may be required to attend live 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 accessed 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 often the case where the external examiner needs to review student performances.
7. The external examiner attends examination boards at the institution.
8. Usually within a few weeks of the sitting of the examination board the external examiner submits an annual report; the date when the report is due will be specified by the institution.

There can be variation in the role of an external examiner and their responsibilities depending on the appointing institution. For example, an institution may appoint subject external examiners (as well as programme external examiners); chief external examiners who oversee a number of similar programmes; or have two main types of roles, such as an award external examiner and module external examiner. The appointing institution provides information and guidance for external examiners about the specific nature of their role and associated duties.

## 4.2 Assessment strategies and regulations

Through the induction and briefing process an external examiner will receive documentation explaining institutional assessment strategy and regulations for assessment and examination. Institutions have assessment strategies to provide advice and guidance on the design and balance of assessment tasks, with regard to formative and summative purposes. An important aspect of an institutional strategy is to attain consistency and parity in assessment practice across the institution. The key aspects of assessment strategies may include:

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

Assessment regulations are usually more formal documents setting out policy and procedures for the assessment and examination of students (though regulations may include principles relevant to the design of assessment). The regulations will tend to set out principles and procedures for: the conduct of assessment; the composition and function of examination boards; application of marking and grading schemes; marking and moderation, including the use of second markers; extenuating circumstances affecting student assessment; student progression; classification of awards; reasonable adjustments for students with disabilities; and dealing with cases of academic misconduct and student appeals. Careful briefing from departmental staff, particularly on marking and grading will be of considerable assistance to the external examiner, as they will not be able to assimilate all the detail of the regulations.

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 complete an equivalent 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 can be 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.

### 4.3 The evidence base

External examiners should have a clear idea of the information and evidence needed to be able to fulfill their role. Typically, the information required will be covered in the induction and/or briefing process, and is likely to involve the following:

- the institution's assessment regulations;
- the institution's assessment strategy, and marking guidelines and criteria;
- guidance on which years of a programme will be scrutinised and on reviewing examination papers and coursework tasks;
- a student or course handbook with programme specifications;
- assignment briefs, marking schemes and criteria;
- the range of student work for scrutiny and the regime used by the institution to provide a sample of exam scripts, coursework assignments, and dissertations and other independent project work;
- opportunities to meet with the programme team;
- guidance on meeting with groups of students about their learning experience;
- requirements, particularly in practice and studio-based subject areas, to attend demonstrations of practice (e.g. exhibitions, performances, presentations) or, where appropriate, to review these through virtual or digital media;
- access to predecessors' reports and minutes of relevant examination boards.

### 4.4 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, though this may depend on how an institution determines final degree classifications (e.g. institutions may not necessarily give additional weighting to final-year work as part of the degree classification algorithm). 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 or synoptic assessment at the programme level. For taught postgraduate awards the external examiner will scrutinise examination work, as well as focus on the dissertation or equivalent final project work.

### 4.5 Sampling of student work and activities

Typically, the institution will provide guidance to an external examiner about the range of student work for scrutiny and the method adopted to provide a representative sample of student work. For example, for a module with a cohort of several hundred students a sample of around 10% of the work may be regarded as sufficient, or with smaller cohorts up to 25% of the work might be sampled. A sample usually captures all work across the degree classes (i.e. first class work, a selection of work from classification borderlines, work falling within the mid-range of a classification grade, and work graded as a fail).

### **Independent, practical and creative work**

The external examiner is likely 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 this work would encompass the final show or performance.

As individuals – even in the role of an external examiner – vary in their approach to moderation, it is difficult to give any clear measure of the time it might take 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.

### **Clinical practice and work-based learning**

External examiners for disciplines that carry a professional award will have to take note of any requirements set by the professional or regulatory body. Placements, both for professional programmes and as work-based learning, are a key component of many programmes. It is important that the external examiner appreciates the context of placement or work-based learning. This context may require a student to maintain a journal detailing the application of professional skills as well as presenting an eportfolio as a formal assessment. With some professional programmes there may be a requirement to comment on 'fitness to practice' elements within the programme.

## **4.6 Meeting with students**

Although institutions do not usually require external examiners to meet with students, they are usually encouraged to meet with groups of students so that they can gain an understanding of the student learning experience, including general feedback on, for example, the quality of teaching and academic support for the relevant programme or subject.

It is not now established practice for external examiners to conduct viva voce examinations with students. The appointing institution will provide guidance to external examiners about potential meetings with students with regard to their external examiner responsibilities, as there can be some variation in practice for certain subject areas, such as in visual and performing arts.

## **4.7 Moderation processes**

Institutions have in place moderation processes for the assessment of student work, such as an approach to second or double marking. Through the sampling of student work the external examiner acts as an external moderator to check overall the accuracy and fairness of marking. To assist this process, the external examiner will be provided with assessment briefs, marking schemes and/or model answers for the assessment tasks. 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 programme or 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, then more immediate action can be requested. For example, in consultation with the programme lead, the external examiner can recommend a systematic 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 particularly inconsistent in relation to the lower end of the scale. The external examiner and the programme lead can 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 the process of external moderation. In institutions the practice of providing descriptive

statistics (e.g. mean, median, mode and range) for student performance on a module is well established. A scan of such data may indicate anomalous marking patterns in modules.

## 4.8 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. Institutions will provide detail to external examiners on how they may be expected to endorse assessment outcomes at examination boards. However, an external examiner's influence can be exercised in a collegiate manner with collective agreement on decisions and actions relating to student performance and achievement.

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. Ideally, this brief oral report should capture the feedback and recommendations that will be included in full in the written report (see 5. The external examiner's report). 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 programme 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.

## 4.9 Two-tier examination board systems

Higher education providers can 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 academic 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 professional programmes there may a sub-board that is focused on the assessment of practice, which then reports to the main examination board.

# 5. The external examiner's report

The submission of an annual report is arguably the most important responsibility of an external examiner. Institutions usually require submission of external examiner reports fairly promptly after the sitting of an examination board. 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 and for external reviews. Institutions will provide external examiners with a template or pro-forma usually electronically, which the examiner completes following the examination board. Typically, the content of the external examiner's report covers:

- the appropriateness of standards of the programme in relation to internal and external reference points;

- the alignment of outcomes, how coherent the programme is and whether it achieves the standards appropriate to the programme;
- the quality and validity of assessment methods;
- the fairness and rigour of the assessment process, including arrangements for marking and moderation;
- areas of innovative practice and possibilities for the enhancement of teaching and learning.

External examiners are usually asked to indicate that the information and support they have received has been sufficient to undertake their responsibilities. To maintain confidentiality, students and staff should not be referred to by name in reports. In completing the annual report, an external examiner will generally be asked to 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, reviewing of student work, and meetings 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 that the examiner has experience of;
- 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 the application of assessment regulations;
- the overall health of the programme with regard to identified areas of good or innovative practice and suggestions for further enhancement.

An important principle in writing the report is that it is consistent with the comments and judgements given to examination boards or through contact with internal staff, such as the programme leader. 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.

Within an institution external examiners' reports figure prominently in the annual monitoring of programmes. Given that the reports are a vital source of information for an institution's quality assurance processes, it is important that reports are robust and strongly evidence-based. External examiners should also be aware that there is an expectation that reports will be shared with student representatives and are more generally available to students on the programme. The wording of reports must be carefully chosen in the light of the multiple audiences: staff, students, senior staff at the institution and external bodies, such as professional regulators.

As highlighted in the Quality Code's [Advice and Guidance on External Expertise](#), an external examiner will receive a response from the institution to their annual report. For example, this response, along with identified actions relevant to the programme, might be provided in a later section of the report template. It is established institutional practice that annually higher education providers summarise common themes and key recommendations from across external examiner reports. Accordingly, institutional or programme-based action plans may well be devised to address external examiner recommendations.

Institutions include the name, position and institution of each external examiner in programme details provided to students. Consequently, it could occasionally be the case that students might be tempted to try a direct appeal to external examiners of 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 guidance should make clear to students of appropriate channels to use in these cases (e.g. talking

with a programme leader), as well as providing information to external examiners as to whom they should refer the students in the event of any such approach.

It is common for an external examiner to establish strong, collegiate working relationships with internal staff. In some situations and perhaps 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 student dissatisfaction. It is best to be open and candid about major problems at the earliest opportunity. Another possible dilemma arises from departmental staff pressing the external examiner to act as an advocate and supporter in areas of contention with central administration, for example. Typically, these involve debates 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. It can be difficult to appreciate the complexity of arguments about resourcing and regulation. Nevertheless, there may be occasions when the external examiner might agree with departmental staff that the quality and standard of provision is being jeopardised and a strong recommendation can be made in the 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 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.

In those rare instances where the external examiner believes that quality and standards are being seriously compromised either at departmental or institutional level then the external examiner has a responsibility to communicate in writing with the head of the institution.

## References

Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) *Revised operating model for quality assessment*. March 2016/03.

Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) (2015) *A review of external examining arrangements across the UK. Report to the UK higher education funding bodies by the Higher Education Academy*, June 2015.

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) (2018) *UK Quality Code, Advice and Guidance: External Expertise*. Available at: <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/quality-code/advice-and-guidance/external-expertise> [Accessed 28 January 2019].

## Further information and resources

Advance HE: Degree Standards project – <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/degree-standards> [Accessed 28 January 2019].

Bloxham, S. and Price, M. (2015) External examining: fit for purpose? *Studies in Higher Education*, 40 (2), 195-211. Available at: [http://insight.cumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/1504/1/Bloxham\\_ExternalExamining.pdf](http://insight.cumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/1504/1/Bloxham_ExternalExamining.pdf) [Accessed 28 January 2019].

QAA (2018) *UK Quality Code for Higher Education*. Available at: <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code> [Accessed 28 January 2019].

QAA (2018) UK Quality Code, Advice and Guidance: External Expertise. Available at: <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/quality-code/advice-and-guidance/external-expertise> [Accessed 28 January 2019].

Qualifications and Credit Frameworks. Available at: <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code/qualifications-and-credit-frameworks> [Accessed 28 January 2019].

Subject Benchmark Statements. Available at: <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/quality-code/subject-benchmark-statements> [Accessed 28 January 2019].

UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment – <https://ukscqa.org.uk/> [Accessed 28 January 2019].



## Contact us

+44 (0) 3300 416201

[external.examining@advance-he.ac.uk](mailto:external.examining@advance-he.ac.uk)

[www.advance-he.ac.uk](http://www.advance-he.ac.uk)

[in](#) [f](#)@AdvanceHE

### (Registered Office)

Innovation Way, York Science Park,  
Heslington, York YO10 5BR

-

First Floor, Westminster Tower  
3 Albert Embankment, London

-

Peer House, 8–14 Verulam Street  
London WC1X 8LZ SE1 7SP

### © 2018 Advance HE. All rights reserved.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and not necessarily those of Advance HE. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any storage and retrieval system without the written permission of the copyright owner. Such permission will normally be granted for non-commercial, educational purposes provided that due acknowledgement is given.

To request copies of this report in large print or in a different format, please contact the Marketing and Communications Team at Advance HE:  
+44 (0) 3300 416201 or [external.examining@advance-he.ac.uk](mailto:external.examining@advance-he.ac.uk)

Advance HE is a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales no. 04931031. Registered as a charity in England and Wales no. 1101607. Registered as a charity in Scotland no. SC043946. Advance HE words and logo should not be used without our permission. VAT registered no. GB 152 1219 50.