

## **Part 9**

# **The External Examiner System**

## **1 Introduction**

- 1.1 The external examiner system is the process by which we assure ourselves that the academic standards of our courses are comparable with similar courses offered elsewhere and that the assessment process has been conducted fairly, in accordance with the approved structure, content and regulations and without prejudice to any student. Detailed below are the rights and responsibilities of external examiners and the procedures for their appointment.
- 1.2 UEL retains responsibility for the appointment, briefing and payment of all external examiners, whether appointed to on-campus provision or to courses and modules delivered in collaboration with a partner. All reports are submitted to UEL.

## **2 The Rights and Responsibilities of External Examiners**

- 2.1 External examiners are full members of both the Department Progression Board and Department Award Board. Each school will appoint a Lead External Examiner who will attend the Department Award Board to ensure that due process is followed. Whilst the remit is different depending on the board attended, external examiners should:
  - 2.1.1 Be able to judge each student impartially on the basis of work submitted for assessment, without being influenced by previous association with the course, the staff or any of the students.
  - 2.1.2 Be able to compare the performance of students with that of their peers on comparable courses of higher education elsewhere.
  - 2.1.3 Approve the form and content of proposed assessment tasks which are prescribed as counting towards the relevant award(s) in order to ensure that all students will be assessed fairly in relation to the course/module specification and regulations and in such a way that examiners will be able to judge whether they have fulfilled the objectives of the course/module and reached the required standard.

- 2.1.4 Attend relevant Assessment Board meetings and have access to all assessed work. They should contribute to decisions on progression/awards and ensure that those decisions have been reached by means according with UEL's requirements and standard practice in higher education.
- 2.1.5 See samples of students' work in those modules for which they have designated responsibility, in order to ensure that each student is fairly placed in relation to other students.
- 2.1.6 Where professional body requirements stipulate, should be involved in meeting students and mentors within placement areas, as well as reviewing practice assessment documentation.
- 2.1.7 Have the right to moderate the marks awarded by internal examiners in accordance with UEL's policies regarding assessment.
- 2.1.8 Ensure that assessments are conducted in accordance with approved regulations.
- 2.1.9 Participate as required in any reviews of decisions about individual students' awards taken during the examiner's period of office.
- 2.1.10 Report back to UEL, at least once annually or as may otherwise be prescribed, on the effectiveness of the assessments and any lessons to be drawn from them (see section five below).
- 2.1.11 Comment on the overall development of the modules or course. External examiners can consult on modifications up to 25% of the course design, however in order to protect their independence they should not concurrently be used as external advisers for course validation, revalidation or review.

(A full list of the responsibilities of both roles can be found in the external examiners manual.)

- 2.2 Where it is deemed to be valid and relevant, external examiners may be consulted when establishing new policies or reviewing existing ones, alongside other forms of scrutiny or consultation.

### **3 The Appointment of External Examiners**

- 3.1 External examiner appointments must be approved on behalf of the Academic Board by the External Examiner Peer Review Team of the Education & Experience Committee on the recommendation of the relevant school quality committee. All nominations are scrutinised against clearly specified criteria agreed by Academic Board.

- 3.2 New examiners take up their appointments on or before the retirement of their predecessors. External examiners should remain available after the last assessments with which they are to be associated in order to deal with any subsequent reviews of decisions. Nominations for replacement or extension of contract should reach the External Examiner's Administrator a minimum of **three months** before the expiry date of the contract of the External Examiner being replaced.
- 3.3 Where an examiner is not in place prior to the academic session commencing the school will ensure that the outgoing examiner approves the draft assessments. Where the outgoing examiner has approved the draft assessments, the school will ensure that the new examiner is made aware that the draft assessment has been approved by the previous examiner.
- 3.4 Each school is responsible for ensuring that all modules with students registered against them are allocated to an external examiner. This should be monitored via the school-based systems in place for the school quality committee.
- 3.5 Normally, appointments will run from October to September. The duration of an external examiner's appointment will normally be for four years. Only in exceptional circumstances, where there is a need to ensure continuity, will an extension of up to one year be considered.
- 3.6 External examiners should hold no more than two external examiner appointments for taught courses/modules at any point in time. The External Examiner Peer Review Team will expect to see convincing arguments in support of proposals for a heavier workload for an examiner.
- 3.7 Where a module is offered at more than one centre of delivery, for example in collaboration, the external examiner should be appointed to examine the module at all centres of delivery, where possible. The examiner will be sent samples of work from each centre of delivery (separate detailed guidance is available) and will be required to comment on standards and processes at each centre.
- 3.8 External examiners covering courses/modules at a 'Franchise' partner should have access to a sample of UEL on campus materials in order to examine their comparability. Schools should ensure that the necessary arrangements are in place.
- 3.9 In approving the appointment of external examiners, the External Examiner Peer Review Team will seek to ensure that the external examiners are competent and impartial, and that the Assessment Board(s) as a whole maintains an appropriate balance and diversity in order to ensure that students are fairly assessed.
- 3.10 New external examiners must be briefed on their task as soon as possible after appointment, preferably by visiting the institution to meet staff in the

relevant school. The briefing will cover: the dates of examiners' meetings; the examiner's role in relation to the examining team as a whole; module specifications and teaching methods; the methods of assessment and marking scheme; and academic regulations. In addition, all new examiners will also be invited to attend an institutional induction day organised by Quality Assurance and Enhancement. The External Examiner Peer Review Team will expect to see details of the support offered to external examiners with no previous examining experience and have the right to request further detail of the support to be offered.

- 3.11 External examiners may wish to meet students and this should be facilitated by the Head of Department or department team, making clear that the role of the examiner in meeting students is to obtain general feedback on the course experience. The Head of Department should provide details of the arrangements for meeting teaching staff including module leaders/placement providers and assessors.
- 3.12 Institutional guidance to external examiners on their role is provided by an External Examiners' Manual which is accessible via the external examiner webpage and referenced in the letter of contract.
- 3.13 The fee payable to an external examiner is at the discretion of the School but should take into account the current guidelines provided by the External Examiner Peer Review Team.
- 3.14 If termination of the appointment of an external examiner is considered desirable, grounds for such a decision must be clear and incontrovertible and the decision will be made by the External Examiner Peer Review Team. Appropriate grounds will include non-fulfilment of duties, non-submission or late submission of reports, or a change in circumstances compromising the impartiality of the external examiner. Our university reserves the right to terminate an appointment forthwith if an annual report is not submitted within the first term following the session from which the report was due.

#### **4 Criteria for the Appointment of External Examiners**

The following are the minimum criteria for consideration of proposed external examiners. The notes beneath each criterion provide a checklist of issues considered both in selecting and nominating external examiners and are used during scrutiny of nominees for approval.

##### **4.1 *An external examiner's academic/professional qualifications should be appropriate to the awards/department to be examined.***

The examiner:

- Should demonstrate competence and experience in the subjects covered at the Board.

- Have relevant academic or professional qualifications to at least the level of the qualification being examined, or extensive practitioner experience where appropriate.

**4.2 *An external examiner should have appropriate standing, expertise and experience to maintain comparability of standards.***

The examiner should:

- Show evidence of knowledge and understanding of UK sector agreed reference points for the maintenance and enhancement of academic standards and assurance and enhancement of quality;
- Have sufficient standing, credibility and breadth of experience within the discipline to be able to command the respect of academic peers/professional peers as appropriate.
- Demonstrate fluency in English (or for courses delivered and assessed in a language other than English, fluency in the relevant language).

Standing, expertise and breadth of experience may be indicated by:

- The present [or last, if retired] post and place of work.
- The range and scope of experience across Higher Education/ professions.
- Current and recent active involvement in research/scholarly/ professional activities in the department of study concerned.

**4.3 *An external examiner should have enough recent external examining or comparable related experience to indicate competence in assessing students considered at the Board. The examining experience will normally be in an external context.***

The examiner should be able to demonstrate:

- Competence and experience in designing and operating a variety of assessment tasks appropriate to the subject.
- Competence and experience in operating assessment procedures.
- Awareness of current developments in the design and delivery of relevant curricula.
- Familiarity with the standard to be expected of students to achieve the award in which students are to be assessed.
- Where relevant, evidence of meeting applicable criteria set by professional, statutory or regulatory bodies.

If the proposed examiner has no previous external examiner experience at the appropriate level, the application should be supported by either:

- Other external examining experience.
- Extensive internal examining experience.

- Other relevant and recent experience likely to support the external examiner role.

Proposed examiners without experience as external examiners should, where possible, join an experienced team of external examiners and the school will allocate a mentor. Where there is only one external examiner they should work initially alongside another experienced external examiner in a related area. This initial period should include involvement in the final stages of assessment for the award.

**4.4 *External examiners should be drawn from a wide variety of institutional/professional contexts and traditions in order that the Department Award/ Department Progression Board benefits from wide-ranging external scrutiny.***

There should not be:

- More than one examiner from the same institution in the team of external examiners in a department or associated department.
- A reciprocal arrangement involving cognate programmes at another institution.
- Where a UEL department sources a new examiner from the same department and provider as an outgoing examiner, the module allocation of the new examiner must differ in its entirety from the module allocation of the outgoing examiner.

In order to facilitate this, Schools should hold details of the external examiner appointments held by members of staff at other institutions.

**4.5 *Examiners should not be over-extended by their external examining duties.***

External examiners should hold no more than two external examiner appointments for taught courses/modules at any point in time. An examiner should not be allocated in excess of 15 modules.

The External Examiner Peer Review Team will expect to see convincing arguments in support of proposals for a heavier workload for an examiner.

**4.6 *There should be an appropriate balance and expertise in the team of external examiners for each department.***

The proposed examiner should complement the external examining team in terms of expertise and examining experience. There should be an appropriate balance between academic and professional practitioners. If the department contains modules associated with courses leading to a professional award at least one practitioner with appropriate experience should be in the team. The phasing of appointments to the team should be structured to ensure continuity.

Lead External Examiners should have sufficient external examining experience to take an overview of the range of awards for which the Board is responsible.

**4.7 *External examiners should be impartial in judgement and should not have previous close involvement with the institution which might compromise objectivity.***

Over the last five years, the proposed examiner should not have been:

- A member of staff, a governor, a student, or a near relative of a member of staff associated with the department or award.
- An external examiner on a cognate department or award in the institution.
- Involved as external examiner for the modules or associated awards when they were approved by another validating body.

The proposed examiner should not be:

- Personally associated with the sponsorship of students.
- Currently a member of a governing body or committee of UEL or one of its collaborative partners, or a current employee or teacher on a course leading to a UEL award at a collaborative partner institution.
- In a close personal, professional or contractual relationship with a member of staff or student in the area associated with the Board.
- Required to assess colleagues who are recruited as students in the area associated with the Board.
- In a position to influence significantly the future employment of students in the area associated with the Board.
- Significantly involved in recent or current substantive collaborative research activities with a member of staff closely involved in the delivery, management or assessment in the area associated with the Board.
- Likely to be involved with student placements or training of UEL students in the examiner's organisation.

## **5 External Examiners' Annual Reports**

5.1 The reports provided by external examiners are an integral part of the quality assurance and enhancement processes. They form part of the documentation requirements for the Continual Monitoring Process and periodic Academic Review. In all cases, a Department Committee is required to demonstrate how it has responded to the views of external examiner(s). This helps to assure existing standards and, where possible, introduce changes which will enhance the quality of the courses. The guidelines issued to external examiners concerning the format of their report are also provided below.

- 5.2 Providing the report is a contractual requirement for external examiners. Reports should be submitted within one month of the boards taking place. Reports are received by Quality Assurance and Enhancement, which authorises payment of the external examiner's fee.
- 5.3 Senior staff of Quality Assurance and Enhancement read all External Examiners' reports on receipt and identify areas where a response is required. This information, together with the original report, is sent to the relevant Head of Department and copied to the Dean of School, School Leader for Quality Assurance and Senior Administrator. In the case of reports relating to collaborative provision, Schools are responsible for sharing these with staff in partner institutions. Where fundamental issues are raised by an external examiner, the Pro Vice-Chancellor Education and Experience contacts the Dean of School directly for an immediate response.
- 5.4 Any issues of institutional significance that require a response from a member of staff not attached to a School, are identified by Quality Assurance and Enhancement and the relevant member of staff is asked to respond.
- 5.5 Where an external examiner is unable to confirm one or more of the statements in Part 1 of the report (see 6.2 below), the School will be required to submit an action plan to the Education and Experience Committee, identifying the actions that will be put in place to address the examiner's comments. The school quality Committee must initially approve the action plan and submit it to the Education and Experience Committee for approval. The actions will then be monitored to completion by Quality Assurance and Enhancement. Where the action relates to provision at a collaborative partner, the action plan must be drawn up in collaboration with the partner.
- 5.6 Each School is responsible for ensuring that timely and adequate responses are made to all external examiner reports. The Head of Department will normally respond to the examiner or where deemed appropriate may delegate this to the course leader (the school should put the necessary mechanism in place to facilitate this). This includes responses to external examiners for collaborative provision. To this end, the school quality committee designs, manages and maintains School based systems for receiving, responding and implementing any actions that arise from external examiners' reports. This will include a process to ensure that responses or feedback from collaborative partners are incorporated into the response from the School to the external examiner. The Education and Experience Committee will approve such processes, prior to their implementation.
- 5.7 All responses to external examiners are lodged with Quality Assurance and Enhancement.
- 5.8 An annual overview report of issues arising in external examiners reports is prepared by the Quality Manager (Validation & Review) for consideration by Education and Experience Committee.



## **6 The Format of External Examiners' Reports**

6.1 Each external examiner is asked to produce an annual report which addresses the following quality assurance issues, according to their role as Department External Examiner or Lead External Examiner. A standard report form is provided. Where modules are offered at other centres of delivery, e.g., collaborative partners, it is important that the examiner is provided with information to enable them to comment on matters relating to each centre of delivery.

6.2 The form is completed online and each examiner is sent a unique link to their personalised report template. The report comprises of three parts, with Part 1 requiring the external examiner to confirm that:

- The standards set within the department, (as evidenced by the modules reviewed) are appropriate at the level, in the department.
- The marks awarded for student assessments are appropriate and comparable with marks that would have been attained at other institutions with which the examiner is familiar.
- The processes for assessment, examination and the determination of credit for modules are sound and fairly conducted, in line with university regulations and relevant Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body requirements.
- The students have the opportunity to achieve standards beyond the threshold level and that this is comparable with other institutes with which the examiner is familiar.

6.3 Part 2 of the report gives a series of statements which the examiner then indicates the extent to which they agree with statements:

### **6.3.1 The standards attained by the students:**

- The standards of the students meet threshold benchmarks, internal, and external, including professional body requirements/standards
- The subject knowledge of our students is comparable to their peers
- The standard of academic skills of our students is comparable to their peers
- The failure rates of our students are comparable to their peers
- These comparisons above extend similarly to modules delivered at our collaborative partners.

### **6.3.2 The design and structure of the assessment:**

- All learning outcomes are assessed appropriately
- The assessment methods are fair
- The assessment methods are inclusive

- There is an appropriate range of assessments
- Assessment methods stretch students to perform above threshold levels
- These statements above apply similarly to assessments provided by our collaborative partners.

### **6.3.3 *The general conduct of assessment:***

- I received all of the draft assessment tasks (for the modules in my allocation that ran in the current academic year)
- The nature and level of the assessment tasks was appropriate
- Suitable arrangements were made to consider my comments
- *If required by a professional/ statutory/ regulatory body.* I was involved with meeting/observing students and/or meeting work placed mentors
- *If you examine modules at a 'Franchise' partner.* I was given access to a sample of UEL on campus materials in order to examine their comparability
- Appropriate procedures are in place for the moderation of papers
- Assessment boards are conducted appropriately
- It is easy to distinguish between students at each centre of delivery
- Progression decisions were made fairly and consistently, in adherence to the regulations

### **6.3.4 *Marking:***

- I received examples of assessment for all modules
- The method of selection was satisfactory
- Suitable arrangements were made to consider my comments
- Internal marking is accurate
- Internal marking is consistent
- Appropriate procedures are followed for marking
- There is implementation of UEL's policy on Second and Anonymous Marking
- There are clear marking criteria
- There is appropriate use of the full range of marks
- Feedback is appropriate
- Feedback is consistent
- These statements apply similarly to marking at our collaborative partners.

### **6.3.5 *The modules:***

- The standards of modules meets internal and external threshold benchmarks, including professional body requirements
- The content of modules is appropriate
- The structure of modules is appropriate
- Modules are up to date with current thinking in the discipline
- Teaching on modules exceeds sector norms
- The modules prepare students for employment
- The modules prepare students for further study

#### **6.3.6 *Learning Environment:***

- Students are engaged at UEL
- Students who are underrepresented in Higher Education can succeed at UEL
- Appropriate resources are in place to help students succeed
- The learning environment is stimulating for students, providing the right level of challenge
- Opportunities exist for students to engage in activities that benefit their personal development
- Opportunities exist for students to engage in activities that benefit society

#### **6.3.7 *Execution of the examiner role:***

- I have a productive relationship with the academics responsible for modules in my remit
- Administrative arrangements are in place to help me succeed in my role
- Matters arising from previous examiner reports were adequately addressed
- Overall, things have improved since last year

#### **6.3.8 *Further comments:***

- The examiner is asked to comment on areas of good practice that they would like to highlight.
- The examiner is asked to comment on areas that could be improved.
- There is a final comment section for general comments and may be completed if this is the examiner's final report to provide a summary of their findings over the term of their appointment.

#### **6.3.9 *Notification of any change in circumstances:***

- A prompt for examiners to notify UEL of any changes in circumstances that may impact on their impartiality as an external examiner is included at the beginning of the form

6.4 Part 3 of the report is completed by the Lead Examiner only (the examiner that attends the Department Award Board) and is asked to comment on the following:

6.4.1 The first section requiring the external examiner to confirm that:

- The standards set for the award are appropriate for the qualifications at the level.
- The standards of attainment and completion are comparable with similar courses or subjects in other UK institutions with which the examiner is familiar.
- The processes for assessment, examination and the determination of awards are sound and fairly conducted in line with university regulations and relevant Professional, Statutory Body requirements.

Then there are a series of statements which the examiner then indicates the extent to which they agree with statements:

- The standards of student attainment is equivalent to peers on comparable courses elsewhere
- The standard of the courses on which awards have been made are appropriate for the awards to which they lead
- Appropriate procedures are in place for operation of the assessment board
- Matters arising from previous examiner reports were adequately addressed

#### **6.4.2 Further comments:**

- The examiner is asked to comment on areas of good practice that they would like to highlight.
- The examiner is asked to comment on areas that could be improved.
- There is a final comment section for general comments and may be completed if this is the examiner's final report to provide a summary of their findings over the term of their appointment.

#### **6.4.3 School response:**

- There is a section at the end of the report for the school response.
- There is also a section for additional responses, where a UEL service/department may be asked to respond to a particular point.

## **7 Exceptional Circumstances**

- 7.1 There may be times when an examiner is unable to undertake their duties, due to unforeseen circumstances. In these situations the school should ensure that another examiner looks at the modules. The school should look to re-allocate the modules to an existing examiner (with the relevant expertise). If this is not possible then the school should source a new examiner.
- 7.2 If an examiner is unable to attend an assessment board the school should ensure that the examiner is involved in some way, either by submitting their comments via email, Skype or phone.

### ***Manuals, Forms and Guidance notes relevant to Part 9***

- External examiner manual
- External examiner website