

Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality
and standards in higher education

Section 4: External examining - January 2000

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Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education: External examining

Foreword

1 This document is a code of practice for external examining in UK higher education institutions. It is one of a suite of inter-related documents which, taken together, will form an overall ***Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*** for the guidance of higher education institutions subscribing to the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (the QAA).

2 The overall ***Code*** and its constituent sections are being prepared by the Agency in response both to the Reports of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education and its Scottish Committee (the 'Dearing' and 'Garrick' Reports) and the consequent remodelling of the national arrangements for quality assurance in higher education. The completed ***Code*** will identify a comprehensive series of system-wide expectations covering matters relating to the management of academic quality and standards in higher education. In so doing, it will provide an authoritative reference point for institutions as they consciously, actively and systematically assure the academic quality and standards of their programmes, awards and qualifications. The ***Code*** assumes that, taking into account nationally agreed principles and practices, each institution has its own systems for independent verification both of its quality and standards and of the effectiveness of its quality assurance systems. In developing the ***Code***, extensive advice is being sought from a range of knowledgeable practitioners.

3 Each section of the ***Code*** will be structured into a series of precepts and accompanying outline guidance. The precepts identify those key matters which the Agency expects an institution to be able to demonstrate it is addressing effectively through its own quality assurance mechanisms. The accompanying outline guidance is provided to assist institutions in maintaining and enhancing the quality of provision for students and other stakeholders. The guidance is not intended to be either prescriptive or exhaustive: its purpose is to offer a framework for quality assurance and control which institutions may wish to use and adapt according to their own needs, traditions, cultures and decision-making processes. Nonetheless, in many institutions the guidance will constitute appropriate good practice.

4 To assist users, the precepts are listed, without the associated guidance, in Appendix 1 to the code.

5 During the course of its quality assurance reviews, the QAA will consider the extent to which individual institutions are meeting the expectations of the precepts in the available sections of the ***Code of practice***. The Agency will report on how effectively higher education institutions individually are meeting these expectations and are discharging their responsibilities for the academic standards and quality of their programmes and awards. In doing so it will focus on the precepts themselves, and not on the associated guidance: the latter may, however, provide a helpful starting point for discussion. Some of

the precepts in this section of the code are preceded by brief contextual matter; this is intended to help readers to understand why the precepts have been included and does not form part of the precepts or of the Agency's expectations of institutions.

6 External examining provides one of the principal means for the maintenance of nationally comparable standards within autonomous higher education institutions. This section of the **Code** looks forward to likely developments in the way academic quality and standards are assured in the UK. It makes reference, for example, to subject benchmarking, the national qualifications frameworks and institutional programme specifications in the expectation that these will increasingly become part of the publicly available information that will inform judgements on standards and their assurance. A transition period is anticipated for the development of such work within institutions but the Agency expects that from autumn 2001 all institutions will be able to demonstrate progress towards adherence to the precepts.

Introduction

7 In the UK's system of higher education, institutions are responsible for the standards and quality of the education they provide and the awards they offer. This code assumes that all institutions will use external examiners to assist them to monitor the standards of all of their awards except those granted on an honorary basis. External examiners act as independent and impartial advisors providing institutions with informed comment on the standards set and student achievement in relation to those standards. External examining is therefore an integral and very important part of institutional quality assurance.

8 The main purposes of external examining are to verify that standards are appropriate for the award or award elements which the external examiner has been appointed to examine, to assist institutions in the comparison of academic standards across higher education awards and award elements, and ensure that their assessment processes are fair and are fairly operated and are in line with the institution's regulations. In addition to undertaking these essential functions, external examiners may be given other responsibilities by particular institutions. This code does not seek to restrict such extensions of the role, although it does state the need for both parties to be agreed on them, and on any associated powers assigned to undertake them effectively. Any extensions of the role(s) of external examiners should not in any way reduce the effectiveness of, or conflict with, the main purposes of external examining.

9 There is wide variation between institutions in the detail of their practices for external examining. This code seeks to ensure that, without inhibiting such local diversity or hindering innovative approaches, a UK-wide basis exists for the security of the standards of the awards of individual institutions.

10 In the new approach to quality assurance being developed by the QAA, academic reviewers will be engaged at both programme and institutional levels. It is important that there should be no misunderstanding about the respective roles of academic reviewers and external examiners. Academic reviewers will not be involved in the examination process and will have distinctly different responsibilities from those of external examiners. It is the external examiners' task to scrutinise on a continuing basis and report to their contracting institutions on whether particular students' performances have been judged properly against the institution's awards standards and whether the assessment process has measured outcomes appropriately and been conducted fairly. Once every six years academic reviewers will identify more broadly whether the standards set by an awarding institution are at an appropriate level. In doing so they may wish to comment on the standards of particular programmes in comparison to similar programmes elsewhere; they will not intervene with respect to the assessment of individual students. One part of the information sought by academic reviewers in their assessment of an institution's standards and practices will be provided by scrutiny of the effectiveness of an institution's procedures relating to external examining, and the extent of its adherence to the precepts of this code. The respective roles of external examiners and academic reviewers are summarised in appendix 3.

11 In view of the importance of external examining to the assurance of the standards of the awards of individual institutions, the QAA expects that institutions will wish to encourage staff both to prepare for, and undertake, external examining, as part of their continuing professional development. The increasing diversity of programmes and modes of study within higher education also suggests that it is likely that institutions will see merit in appointing, where appropriate, external examiners with professional or practice-based expertise, in addition to those with more typical academic backgrounds.

12 It is not part of the QAA's remit to comment on how much institutions should pay their external examiners. However, institutions will wish to ensure that they are able to recruit and retain suitable individuals to maintain the effectiveness of the external examining process.

13 This section of the QAA's *Code of practice* covers the external examining of programmes and programme components, rather than instances where external examiners are appointed to consider an individual student (eg for the examination of research theses). It makes reference to, and should where appropriate also be applied with, other sections of the *Code* including those dealing with collaborative provision and postgraduate research programmes.

Precepts and guidance

General principle

The external examining function should assist institutions to ensure that:

- the academic standard for each award and award element is set and maintained by the awarding institution at the appropriate level and that student performance is properly judged against this;
- the assessment process measures student achievement against the intended outcomes of the programme appropriately, and is fair and fairly operated;
- institutions are able to compare the standards of their awards with those of other higher education institutions.

To facilitate confidence in the external examining system at a UK-wide level, a core set of functions required of all external examiners is identified in precept 1.

1

An institution should require its external examiners, in their expert judgement, to report on:

- i) whether the standards set are appropriate for its awards, or award elements, by reference to published national subject benchmarks, the national qualifications frameworks, institutional programme specifications and other relevant information;
- ii) the standards of student performance in those programmes or parts of programmes which they have been appointed to examine, and on the comparability of the standards with those of similar programmes or parts of programmes in other UK higher education institutions;
- iii) the extent to which its processes for assessment, examination, and the determination of awards are sound and have been fairly conducted.

The roles of external examiners

Institutions employ external examiners in a range of roles. Besides the primary role in the assurance of the academic standards of their programmes and awards, institutions may ask external examiners to undertake additional roles. Any such additional roles should not conflict with or compromise the primary role.

2

Institutions should state clearly the various roles, powers and responsibilities assigned to their external examiners.

In considering the functions of external examining, institutions will need to determine how their processes relate to, for example:

- the setting of their own standards, including any associated with professional and statutory bodies;
- the maintenance and verification of these standards;
- the design of programmes and their component parts;
- evaluation of the soundness of their assessment policies and procedures, and their development;
- evaluation of the standards of achievement;

and whether these are articulated as a general statement applying to all of their external examiners, or as particular statements for each programme as required.

In considering the roles of external examiners, institutions will need to decide whether external examiners:

- should make judgements separately from internal examiners, and/or act as moderators of assessments and/or, exceptionally, act as additional markers on a par with internal examiners;
- should have the power to adjust marks or decisions for individuals or students collectively, and on what basis of [sampled] assessed work.

Institutions should indicate the extent of their external examiners' powers to:

- obtain reasonable access to the assessed parts of any programme, including evidence about a student's performance on placement where this is an assessed part of any programme;
- overrule assessments or change marks made by internal examiners;
- determine the method for, and the extent of, sampling of students' work for external scrutiny;
- request additional marking of students' work;
- select candidates for, and determine the nature of, *viva voce* examinations;
- determine the extent of any compensation within aggregated assessments;
- participate in decisions relating to cases of suspected or proven cheating/assessment offences by students.

Institutions may wish to define other roles for their external examiners, and grant them additional powers.

3

Prior to the publication of mark lists, pass lists or similar documents, institutions should require external examiners to endorse the outcomes of the assessment(s) they have been appointed to scrutinise.

Institutions should consider carefully:

- the significance of the signature of external examiners when attached to pass lists, assessment marks or similar documents, and clarification of this to external examiners;
- in the event of an external examiner being unwilling to endorse the outcomes of the assessment processes, how the matter will be determined within the institution.

There is at present wide variation in practice in respect of the significance of external examiners' signatures: institutions will need to inform external examiners of the extent to which their signature, in addition to indicating their endorsement of the decisions of the examination or awarding board:

- may limit any further consideration of the marks or awards at any subsequent stage of the examination process;
- is taken to indicate that processes have been carried out in accordance with the conventions of the institution.

Nomination and appointment

Good practice in the nomination, selection and appointment of external examiners is likely to be achieved when a senior academic body takes direct or indirect responsibility for approving applications for the appointment of external examiners within an institution, and when it ensures that:

- criteria for the identification, nomination and appointment of candidates are understood and accessible to all staff initiating appointments;
- nominations are assessed effectively and rigorously.

4

Institutions should define explicit policies and regulations governing the nomination and appointment of external examiners, and premature termination of their contract.

Institutions are responsible for the number and deployment of their external examiners. In discharging this responsibility, institutions should consider carefully the need to:

- develop criteria, where appropriate in discussion with statutory and professional bodies, to support the nomination and appointment of external examiners, and monitor whether these criteria are being followed;

- develop criteria that are sufficiently inclusive to allow for the nomination of external examiners with little or no prior experience of external examining;
- identify the period of appointment, that might normally be for between three and five years;
- have an approval process that includes consideration of appropriate documentation in support of nominations;
- maintain and operate systems for the appointment of external examiners that include consideration and confirmation of nominations at institutional level;
- avoid reciprocal appointments with departments/schools of other institutions [see * to precept 6];
- keep a central register of appointments and periods of tenure;
- develop criteria and procedures for the early termination of an external examiner's contract.

Where more than one examiner is appointed to a programme or programme unit, institutions may wish to seek the phasing of examiner appointments to enable the mentoring of new examiners.

5

Institutions should ensure that their external examiners are competent to undertake the responsibilities defined in their contract.

Institutions should consider developing and employing criteria to support the appointment of external examiners, which will normally make reference to:

- appropriate levels of academic and/or professional expertise and experience in relation to the relevant subject area and assessment;
- the ability to command the respect of colleagues;
- the need not to exclude otherwise well-qualified candidates on the grounds that they have no previous experience as external examiners.

6

Institutional procedures should ensure that potential conflict(s) of interest are identified and resolved prior to appointment of external examiners.

Institutions should consider:

- the maximum number of external examinerships they would normally expect or allow their appointees to hold*;
- the normal number of reappointments and periods between reappointments*;
- how they would normally avoid appointing external examiners with any direct interest or ties to the institution or its staff, programmes or students, and how conflicts of interest will be dealt with where such appointments are unavoidable*;

- the period which should elapse before a former member of staff or student could be appointed*;
- other than in exceptional circumstances, the avoidance of reciprocal arrangements between departments*;
- whether an examiner can be succeeded by another from the same institution*.

*** *Institutions will need to identify any particular exceptions to their normal policies to allow for subject areas where there are a very limited number of potential external examiners.***

7

Institutions should ensure that potential external examiners are provided with sufficient information to enable them to identify whether they can carry out their responsibilities effectively.

Institutions should consider carefully how they can provide potential external examiners with adequate documentation to enable both the nominee and the institution to proceed to the approval stage of appointment with a shared understanding of the role. Such information might include, for example:

- an introduction to the institution's policies, procedures and regulations concerning the structure and administration of its examining and awarding boards;
- the general responsibilities of the external examiners;
- the institution's policies on equal opportunities;
- information on the programmes and units, and their assessment, for which the external examiner will have responsibility;
- contractual arrangements, including rates of payment, expenses, tenure and dates of examiners' meetings;
- relevant aspects of policies and procedures of the institution, including those relating to academic quality assurance and standards, teaching and learning, and equal opportunities;
- an individual examiner's role in relation to the examining team as a whole and the extent of their discretion.

Preparation of external examiners

8

An institution should provide for the proper preparation of its external examiners to ensure that they understand and can fulfil their responsibilities. This should include a written briefing, for all of its examiners, on the institution's policies for assessment and external examining in general, together with appropriate specific course documentation.

Institutions should consider:

- providing opportunities for the external examiner to become familiar with the institution and to discuss their responsibilities and other matters prior to the first visit to undertake assessments;
- the particular support needs of external examiners with little or no previous experience of the role, or examiners who are appointed from outside higher education.

External examining

9

At least one external examiner should be appointed for all educational programmes or parts of programmes that contribute to an award of an institution.

In employing external examiners to assist in establishing their standards, institutions should consider carefully:

- how the judgements of their external examiners are expected to relate to agreed reference standards eg subject benchmark statements, and are informed by appropriate evidence;
- the relationship between the numbers of external examiners and the quantity of assessed material being examined;
- whether external examiners are to be involved in scrutinising work required solely for progression to subsequent stages of a programme leading to an award;
- whether different levels of scrutiny are acceptable for those assessments that would normally be required solely for progression rather than contributing directly to an award, eg level 1 work that does not contribute specific marks to an award at degree level;
- whether more than one examiner is needed for a programme that is academically diverse;
- how examiners will be deployed to assess the overall standards and coherence of combined studies and multidisciplinary programmes.

10

Institutions should discuss with their external examiners the evidence the examiner deems necessary to discharge his/her responsibilities.

In determining the external examiner's role in setting or approving assessment mechanisms, institutions should consider carefully:

- whether external examiners should be entitled to hold a **viva voce** at their discretion;
- whether external examiners should be entitled to meet students on programmes and programme units they are examining;

- what evidence might be provided to satisfy an external examiner that students had not been trained merely to be able to answer set examination questions/coursework and no more;
- how external examiners are to be provided with adequate opportunity to hold meetings with internal examiners;
- how external examiners can be given early notification of their required attendance at the institution;
- under what exceptional circumstances external examiners would not be required or expected to attend the examiners' meetings, or awarding boards that consider the modules, programme parts or programmes they were employed to examine.

11

In respect of collaborative provision, external examining procedures for programmes offered by a partner organisation should be the same as, or demonstrably equivalent to, those used by the awarding institution for its own programmes. The procedures should be clearly specified and documented, and rigorously and consistently applied.

Institutions should also refer to the ***QAA Code of practice: Collaborative provision***, and in particular to precepts 27 to 31 inclusive and their guidance notes, and the QAA ***Guidelines for distance learning***.

External examiners' reports

External examiners are appointed by an institution and their reports are an important component of both an institution's internal and any external quality assurance processes. Institutions should consider carefully their requirements with regard to such reports and advise external examiners explicitly.

12

Institutions should require external examiners to prepare at agreed times a written report that provides comments and judgements on the assessment process and the standards of student attainment.

When identifying the reporting requirements for their external examiners, institutions should consider:

- the timing of reports;
- the level of confidentiality that reports will be afforded;
- requesting the submission of an overview report prepared at the end of a term of office;

- how, on an exceptional basis, provision might be made for the submission to the head of the institution of a confidential report where the external examiner wishes to raise matters of particular importance and/or sensitivity.

13

Institutions should indicate the required form and coverage of external examiners' reports.

An institution should specify:

- those aspects that it requires external examiners to comment upon. These should be consistent with the roles and duties specified on appointment;
- whether it requires the use of standard report forms, or particular question headings which indicate the nature and type of information sought from external examiners;
- what action it will take if an external examiner does not comply with the required form and coverage of report.

Reporting requirements will be tailored to the arrangements and needs of the institution but reports might normally be expected to comment on, for example:

- the standards demonstrated by the students;
- the extent to which standards are appropriate for the award or award element under consideration;
- the design, structure and marking of assessments;
- the procedures for assessments and examinations;
- whether or not external examiners have had sufficient access to, and the power to call upon, any material needed to make the required judgements;
- where possible, students' performance in relation to their peers on comparable courses;
- the coherence of the policies and procedures relating to external examiners and their consonance with the explicit roles required of them;

and might additionally comment on, for example, some or all of the following:

- the curriculum, its aims, content and development;
- resources as they impact upon student performance in assessments;
- the basis and rationale for any comparisons of standards made;
- the strengths and weaknesses of the students as a cohort;
- the quality of teaching and learning methods which may be indicated by student performance.

Use of external examiners' reports within the institution

The reports of its external examiners are a crucial element of the process by which an institution assures the quality of its standards and awards. As such, the reports should be received by the head of the awarding institution.

14

Institutions should request that external examiners' reports are formally addressed to the head of the institution, or to specific individuals designated by the head of the institution to exercise responsibility for the handling of these reports. Institutions should ensure that the reports are considered within the institution at a senior level.

15

Full consideration should be given by the institution to comments and recommendations contained within the reports of external examiners, and the outcomes of the consideration, including actions taken, should be formally recorded.

Institutions should consider carefully how their procedures will:

- provide for the detailed consideration of the reports;
- take account of the evidence within the reports along with the responses from departments concerned, and maintain a record of such consideration;
- ensure that those responsible for a particular examination or assessment are made aware of and, if necessary, monitor any changes which occur as a result of the relevant external examiner's report;
- specify the forms of feedback used to inform external examiners of any consequential action taken as a result of their reporting.

In cases where the requirements of external professional bodies are the focus of comments, there may be a need to inform those bodies of action taken in response to the external examiner's report.

Feedback to external examiners on their reports

16

Institutions should ensure that external examiners are, within a reasonable time, provided with a response to their comments and recommendations, including information on any actions taken by the institution.

In identifying how they have responded or will respond to the reports of their external examiners, institutions should consider providing external examiners with:

- information on the detailed consideration of their report(s);
- an indication of any actions taken as a result of their reporting;
- clear reasons for not accepting any recommendations or suggestions.

Appendix 1

The precepts

General principle

1

An institution should require its external examiners, in their expert judgement, to report on:

- i) whether the standards set are appropriate for its awards, or award elements, by reference to published national subject benchmarks, the national qualifications frameworks, institutional programme specifications and other relevant information;
- ii) the standards of student performance in those programmes or parts of programmes which they have been appointed to examine, and on the comparability of the standards with those of similar programmes or parts of programmes in other UK higher education institutions;
- iii) the extent to which its processes for assessment, examination, and the determination of awards are sound and have been fairly conducted.

The roles of external examiners

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Institutions should state clearly the various roles, powers and responsibilities assigned to their external examiners.

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Prior to the publication of mark lists, pass lists or similar documents, institutions should require external examiners to endorse the outcomes of the assessment(s) they have been appointed to scrutinise.

Nomination and appointment

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Institutions should define explicit policies and regulations governing the nomination and appointment of external examiners, and premature termination of their contract.

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Institutions should ensure that their external examiners are competent to undertake the responsibilities defined in their contract.

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Institutional procedures should ensure that potential conflict(s) of interest are identified and resolved prior to appointment of external examiners.

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Institutions should ensure that potential external examiners are provided with sufficient information to enable them to identify whether they can carry out their responsibilities effectively.

Preparation of external examiners

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An institution should provide for the proper preparation of its external examiners to ensure that they understand and can fulfil their responsibilities. This should include a written briefing, for all of its examiners, on the institution's policies for assessment and external examining in general, together with appropriate specific course documentation.

External examining

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Institutions should discuss with their external examiners the evidence the examiner deems necessary to discharge his/her responsibilities.

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External examiners' reports

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Institutions should require external examiners to prepare at agreed times a written report that provides comments and judgements on the assessment process and the standards of student attainment.

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Institutions should indicate the required form and coverage of external examiners' reports.

Use of external examiners' reports within the institution

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Institutions should request that external examiners' reports are formally addressed to the head of the institution, or to specific individuals designated by the head of the institution to exercise responsibility for the handling of these reports. Institutions should ensure that the reports are considered within the institution at a senior level.

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Full consideration should be given by the institution to comments and recommendations contained within the reports of external examiners, and the outcomes of the consideration, including actions taken, should be formally recorded.

Feedback to external examiners on their reports

16

Institutions should ensure that external examiners are, within a reasonable time, provided with a response to their comments and recommendations, including information on any actions taken by the institution.

Appendix 2

Membership of the working group for the Code of practice: External examining

Professor Sally Brown	Deputy Principal, University of Stirling
Professor James Calderhead	Dean of Access & Continuing Studies, University of Bath
Mr Peter Griffiths	Head of Quality Development Centre, Cheltenham & Gloucester College of Higher Education
Professor Ian Haines	Dean of Faculty of Science, Computing & Engineering, University of North London
Dr John Hogan	Registrar, University of Durham
Mr Edward Landor	Director of Education & Training, RICS
Dr Bill Macmillan	Chair, Undergraduate Studies Committee, General Board of Faculties, University of Oxford
Dr Peter Milton	Director, Programme Review, QAA
Professor David Warren Piper	Dean, Academic Information Service, Southampton Institute
Mr Peter Williams (Chairman)	Director, Institutional Review, QAA
Professor Nick Harris (Deputy Chairman)	Assistant Director, Development, QAA
Mr Greg Wade	SCOP
Mr David Young	CVCP

Appendix 3

A note on the respective roles of external examiners and academic reviewers

Institutions' external examiners and the QAA's academic reviewers perform different roles as follows:

- external examining is part of an institution's student assessment processes: academic review has no part to play in the assessment of individual students;
- external examiners undertake a continuing engagement with the assessment of students for the period of their appointment: academic reviewers scrutinise the quality and standards of provision once every six years;
- external examiners are concerned with the standards set in a subject, and those achieved by particular students and groups of students, as described in this code: academic reviewers are concerned with the relationship between the institution's subject standards both set and achieved over a period of years, and national reference points such as subject benchmarks and levels of awards, and also with the match between the intended learning outcomes and the actual achievements of students;
- academic reviewers also scrutinise the effectiveness of the external examining process in meeting the expectations contained in the precepts contained in this code;
- academic reviewers will expect to see evidence of the general effectiveness of assessment procedures, including samples of students' work: they will not look at work currently subject to assessment, intervene in assessment procedures, re-mark assessments or query the judgements of external examiners in respect of individual students' marks or grades.