

## Thematic Report on Enhancement-led Institutional Review Reports 2013-16: External Examiners

### Overview

In this report we highlight good practice and areas for development as featured in the ELIR Outcome and Technical Reports 2013-16. The key findings emerging from Outcome Reports in relation to External Examiners were:

#### Activity to promote good practice

- **Enhancement from quality assurance processes** - the University of Dundee has been successful in ensuring that the design of its quality assurance processes contributes to enhancement of the student learning experience by, for example, including quality enhancement as a standard heading in templates for annual monitoring reporting and the external examiner system. The quality assurance processes, alongside the committee structures and college roles, also facilitate the deliberate and systematic sharing of good practice across the Institution.
- **Management of academic standards across delivery modes and locations** - Heriot-Watt University has developed a number of mechanisms for ensuring the effective management of academic standards, including securing these standards across the diversity of its worldwide provision. The University's principle of securing identical academic standards is underpinned by the implementation of its own Code of Practice for the Management of Multi-Location, Multi-Mode Programmes and through its Chief External Examiner system.
- **Documentation in support of quality procedures** - the handbooks and materials, produced by the University of the Highlands and Islands, to support key quality processes are clear and comprehensive. The External Examiner Guidance, the Postgraduate Code of Practice for Students and Supervisors, the Academic Standards and Quality Regulations and the Collaborative Handbook represent particularly positive practice.
- **Data analysis and reporting of information from external examiners and student surveys** - at the University of Strathclyde, the outcomes of student surveys and external examiners' reports are systematically considered as part of the University's annual monitoring processes, and are used to enhance the student learning experience and inform institutional policy and practice.

## Areas for development

- **Communication with students** - Abertay University is to review the approach to communicating with students, ensuring formal information relating to policy and regulatory matters is visible to the student population. The University has a multi-channel approach for student communications and is asked to review this to ensure the mode of communication appropriately reflects the information being disseminated and to avoid important information becoming lost in the high volume of messaging. In addition, the University is encouraged to progress with its intention to make the external examiner reports and associated school and programme responses more visible to students.
- **Consistent application of assessment regulations in relation to exam boards** - the University of Glasgow to continue to monitor the impact of the University's guidelines on the use of discretion by exam boards to ensure consistent application of the assessment regulations across all exam boards.
- **Institutional oversight and academic leadership** - as a matter of priority, Scotland's Rural College (SRUC) has to establish regular and systematic arrangements to ensure there is institutional oversight of the conduct and outcomes of key quality processes, such as annual programme monitoring, external examiner reports and student feedback. This should ensure that processes are carried out as intended, avoiding over-reliance on individuals, and that the outcomes of the processes are evaluated critically within programme, departmental and institutional level committees, drawing on the contributions of a wide range of academic staff and managers. Related to this, SRUC should ensure there is strong academic leadership, particularly at the institutional level, and that academic dialogue and debate take place at all levels.
- **Publication of external examiner reports** - the University of St Andrews to publish external examiner reports in order to give students the opportunity to engage in discussion and consideration of this element of the assessment process.
- **Availability of external examiner reports** - the University of the Highlands and Islands to promote student understanding of the external examiner role by making examiners' reports available to all students as promoted in the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code).

## Introduction

As part of the ELIR 3 method, QAA Scotland produces regular Thematic Reports to support learning from the outcomes of individual ELIR reports. The purpose of the Thematic Reports is to inform future development work in the sector and, in particular, to inform future QAA activity including work carried out in collaboration with the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee (SHEEC).

## Scope and structure of this report

This report identifies material relating to external examiners contained within the ELIR reports for all 18 Scottish higher education institutions reviewed in the ELIR 3 cycle (2013-16). The institutions included in this report are: the University of Aberdeen; Abertay University; the University of Dundee; the University of Edinburgh; Edinburgh Napier University; Glasgow School of Art; Glasgow Caledonian University; the University of Glasgow; Heriot-Watt University; the University of the Highlands and Islands; Queen Margaret University; Robert Gordon University; the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland; Scotland's Rural College (SRUC); the University of St Andrews; the University of Stirling; the University of Strathclyde; and the University of the West of Scotland.

This report summarises examples of positive practice and areas for development as highlighted in the ELIR Outcome Reports (see pages 1-2), and the more detailed findings included within the ELIR Technical Reports (see below). It is possible that additional practice takes place in these 18 institutions, but only those elements of practice included within the ELIR reports is included here. The report then outlines briefly the next steps in the ELIR process following the publication of the reports.

The annex includes references to external examiners within the ELIR Technical Reports. The paragraph numbers used in the annex are taken directly from the original reports.

## Areas highlighted in the ELIR Technical Reports

In ELIR 3, each Outcome Report sets out the ELIR team's views of positive practice and areas for development at the institution. These key findings in relation to external examiners are summarised on pages 1 and 2 of this report. This section identifies current interesting practice at the 18 institutions as identified in the longer ELIR Technical Reports.

### Activity to promote good practice

#### Induction and Support

Many institutions provide induction and support to external examiners once they have been selected. The Technical Report notes that Glasgow School of Art provides institutional and school induction for external examiners on appointment as well as update sessions for established external examiners. Since the 2009 ELIR, Queen Margaret University has developed new coordinated support for external examiners. The Technical Report for the University of Aberdeen noted that the external examiner's remit is clearly defined and that a range of information and resources is made available to support external examiners, including a direct link to the Higher Education Academy's External Examiner Handbook. At the time of the ELIR visit the University was also considering developing an online induction pack.

The University of Glasgow's Technical Report noted that there is an effective approach to induction for external examiners and that the University provides guidelines on report completion. At the University of the West of Scotland, a handbook is provided and a one-day

induction event is held in each academic year for newly-appointed external examiners. The Technical Report notes that at the University of Edinburgh all external examiners have the opportunity to attend face-to-face training, for which the feedback is overwhelmingly positive and the resources are available online for those who cannot attend. On appointment at Glasgow Caledonian University, external examiners receive a contract letter, an External Examiner Guidance Handbook and Assessment Regulations. In 2014-15, the University reintroduced a central face-to-face induction workshop for new external examiners. At the University of Stirling external examiners are provided with documentation to enable them to carry out their role, including an External Examiners Handbook.

### **Availability of external examiner reports to students**

The ELIR Technical Reports recognised the efforts institutions were making in providing student access to the external examiner reports in line with the indicator in Chapter B7 of the Quality Code. Glasgow School of Art's Technical Report noted that staff-student consultative committees considered the external examiner reports. Queen Margaret University's (QMU) report states that external examiner reports are seen by student representatives on programme committees, with annual summary reports posted on the Quality at QMU website. The Queen Margaret University Student Experience Committee also receives an annual summary report on the good practice identified in external examiner reports. The University of the West of Scotland has initiated a pilot project that has placed external examiners' reports on a student-accessible virtual learning environment (VLE) site. The Technical Report for Glasgow Caledonian University noted that the University is committed to the publication of external examiner reports and the ELIR team was told by senior staff that this will be taken forward in 2015.

At Heriot-Watt University there are two formal routes through which students can access external examiner reports: through School Studies Committees, which includes student representatives and receives summaries of comments from the Chief External Examiner, and external examiner reports and recommendations for action; and through student involvement in annual monitoring review processes. Schools can also use additional communication arrangements if they wish, for example, by using Student-Staff Liaison committees or posting reports on the University VLE for all students to see. Guidelines to students should clarify that schools are not required to accept all recommendations made by external examiners, rather that their comments are one of a number of sources of information used by schools in their annual review processes.

At the University of Edinburgh, external examiner reports are discussed routinely in school Staff-Student Liaison committees, and each student has a right of access, arranged by schools, to the reports. At the University of Stirling, students are represented on learning and teaching Committees where external examiner reports are considered.

### **Responding to external examiner reports**

The ELIR Technical Reports provide examples of institutions taking action in response to external examiner reports. The Queen Margaret University Student Experience Committee considers an annual analysis of the points raised by external examiner reports and monitors the action taken to address institutional action on issues of a cross-institutional nature that are raised by external examiners. The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (RCS) is identified as having a well-structured process in place for capturing and responding to external examiners' comments with individual staff being identified as responsible for carrying out follow-up action. RCS also track the responses to the reports through their committee structure. At the time of their ELIR, the University of Aberdeen was intending to revise its Common Assessment Scale (CAS) as a result of feedback from external examiners.

The University of Glasgow reports the analysis of trends and issues arising from the external examiner reports to their Academic Standards Committee for action, which the ELIR team identified as an effective arrangement. The University of Strathclyde is able to systematically consider external examiner reports as part of the University's annual monitoring processes, using the findings to enhance the student learning experience and inform institutional strategy. At Glasgow Caledonian University a commentary on external examiner reports forms part of the Annual Programme Analysis. Programme boards are responsible for ensuring that external examiners receive feedback on their reports. The Department of Governance and Quality Enhancement considers external examiners' reports and prepares an overview report on external examiner comments for the Learning and Teaching Subcommittee and the Academic Policy Committee.

At the University of Edinburgh, external examiners provide their reports online, which supports more consistent reflection on their comments across the school, college and institutional levels. Themes arising across several reports can be extracted and considered, and staff at all levels can be provided with access to the reports and the analysis. The Technical Report for Heriot-Watt University noted that an annual summary report is submitted to the Learning and Teaching Board, and the Quality and Standards Committee, to highlight common themes or issues for consideration at the institutional level. The annual report also informs any areas for policy development, and supports the identification and dissemination of good practice across schools.

The University of St Andrews has plans to widen the sources of good practice for its Annual Academic Dissemination Event to include external examiner reports. At the Robert Gordon University annual reports prepared by external examiners are incorporated into annual course appraisal reports and the responses are considered as part of the school reports to each school academic board, with overarching themes and recurring issues from school reports incorporated in the faculty reports to the Quality Assurance and Enhance Committee (QAEC). The QAEC considers a summary evaluation of external examiner reports, including data from the previous two years, in order to gauge direction of travel. Overarching good practice and areas for development are identified. A similar arrangement operates for research degrees, in that a summary of external examiner reports is considered annually by the Research Degrees Committee.

At the University of Stirling, the Governance and Review Team within Academic Registry and Governance Services undertakes a number of functions to assure quality and academic standards including scrutiny of external examiners' reports. An institutional-level report is considered by the Education and Student Experience Committee. In addition, any areas of concern are drawn to the attention of the Deputy Principal (Education and Students).

### **Consistency of approach**

A number of Scottish institutions have multiple campuses, within Scotland and internationally. The ELIR Technical Reports recognised the work that some institutions are doing to ensure a consistent approach to external examining across their various campuses. SRUC nominates external examiners for approval by the relevant awarding university and provides its own External Examiner Handbook, which explains their remit within the SRUC. The external examiners must submit a report to both the Principal of the awarding university and to SRUC. Glasgow School of Art's Technical Report also describes its partnerships with the Singapore Institute of Technology. Glasgow School of Art ensures a comparable student experience between students in Singapore and Glasgow by including external examiner reports from both campuses as part of their quality assurance system. Staff involved in the delivery of transnational education (TNE) activity at the University of Edinburgh confirmed the effective operation of key elements of the Collaborative Partnership Agreement, including common external examiners for programmes delivered in Edinburgh and at TNE

partners. At Glasgow Caledonian University, external examiner reports covering collaborative provision form part of collaborative courses' annual monitoring reports and are considered at the University's School Programme Boards. School programme teams are responsible for monitoring the academic standards of collaborative provision through the programme boards.

At Heriot-Watt University, where programmes are delivered in more than one location or by more than one mode of study, a chief external examiner is appointed to provide oversight of the entire provision across the various modes and locations. The ELIR team considered that this arrangement represented positive practice. New collaborative programmes are discussed by the Curriculum Approvals Group and require comments from external examiners at the University of St Andrews. The Technical Report for Abertay University noted that external examiners are appointed by the University to provide externality to its collaborative provision, confirming that programmes are subject to the same oversight as those delivered in Dundee and that academic standards are comparable. At the Robert Gordon University, where exceptions are made to assess and deliver in a language other than English, the Contract of Collaboration will state what arrangements the University requires in order to secure academic standards by having clear oversight of student achievement. For example, in relation to one particular collaborative link, the contract stipulates the appointment of bilingual external examiners with internal moderation being carried out by University staff who are also bilingual.

### **Areas for development**

While there were examples of positive practice relating to external examiners provided in the ELIR Technical Reports, a number of areas for development were also identified.

This section of the paper outlines the areas for development identified relating to external examiners in a higher education institution in the ELIR Technical Reports. There are areas of overlap between the issues highlighted below.

#### **Availability of reports**

It was noted that students at SRUC were not aware of external examiner reports or the role of examiners, therefore the Technical Report recommended that SRUC should consider how it will make external examiner reports available to students. The University of Dundee's Technical Report noted that there was no systematic approach to making external examiner reports available to all students and encouraged the University to consider publishing the reports so that all students have the opportunity to engage with them. The University of St Andrew's Technical Report noted that the University is asked to reconsider its decision to not publish external examiner reports.

At Heriot-Watt University it was noted that additional benefit could be derived by publishing external examiner reports, including making assessment processes more transparent to all students and providing the opportunity for students to engage more widely in quality management processes. The Technical Report for the University of the Highlands and Islands noted that student understanding of the external examiner role would be enhanced by making the examiners' reports available on a regular basis, as indicated in the Quality Code. At the University of Stirling, the University expects that external examiner reports are made available to students by schools on request. The ELIR Technical Report noted that students who met the ELIR team were generally aware of the role of the external examiners in the assessment process, and this is set out in modules and programme handbooks. Students were less clear how they would access external examiner reports, and this would benefit from clarification.

## **Oversight of reports**

It was identified that while SRUC is able to consider an overview of the external examiner reports, there is currently no mechanism within SRUC for all the external examiner reports to be considered.

## **Enhancement**

The University of Glasgow's report noted that there would be benefit in external examiners providing more details in the enhancement section of the report.

## **What happens next?**

QAA Scotland follows up the ELIR outcomes with institutions individually through annual discussion visits, and each institution is required to produce a Follow-up Report indicating how it has addressed its own ELIR outcomes. QAA Scotland also promotes collaborative working between institutions to share good practice and to find collective solutions to common areas for development. Each institution is invited to participate in a follow-up event to engage with the ways other institutions who were reviewed at around the same point of the ELIR cycle have addressed their review outcomes.

## Index of references to External Examiners in the ELIR 3 Technical Reports

A link to each institution's ELIR 3 Technical Report is included in the left-hand column. Paragraph numbers are indicated in the middle column.

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	69	Scrutiny of external examiner reports, role in identifying innovative approaches to the design and delivery of the curricula
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<a href="#">Abertay University</a>	143	External examiners role in collaborative provision
<a href="#">University of Dundee</a>	80	External examiner reports, student access to reports
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<a href="#">Edinburgh Napier University</a>	91	External examiner moderation role, contribution to programme boards, external examiner training
<a href="#">University of Glasgow</a>	52	University's Academic Quality Framework procedures and external examining
	61	External examiner approach, UK Quality Code for Higher Education, analysis of external examiner reports, Academic Standards Committee, induction, report completion
	105	Terminology around external examiners, procedures for their appointment, role and responsibilities, annual reports consideration, Assessment Regulations, procedures revision,



<a href="#"><u>Glasgow Caledonian University</u></a>		role of the Department of Governance and Quality Enhancement, External Examiner Guidance Handbook, induction workshop
	106	External examiner reports and Annual Programme Analysis, feedback to external examiners on their reports, overview of reports, publication of reports
	142	External examiner reports and collaborative arrangements
<a href="#"><u>Glasgow School of Art</u></a>	59	External examining and research degrees
	64	External examiner appointment, induction and update sessions, report publication
	65	Review and analysis of reports and feedback to external examiners on their reports, use of reports in Periodic Review
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	78	Monitoring and review processes and external examiners
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<a href="#"><u>Heriot-Watt University</u></a>	91	Role of the chief external examiner, external examiner appointment
	92	External examiner report consideration and action
	93	Student access to external examiner reports
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	64	Analysis of external examiner reports at university level
	70	School level annual monitoring and analysis of external examiner feedback
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	90	Collaborative provision and action in relation to external examiners' reports

<a href="#"><u>Robert Gordon University</u></a>	90	Analysis of external examiner (taught and research provision) reports at school, faculty and university levels, use of external examiners who have a professional practice background
	129	Collaborative arrangements and external examiners
<a href="#"><u>Royal Conservatoire of Scotland</u></a>	50	Action on, and response to, external examiners' comments
	52	Role of external examiners who are directly involved in assessing student performance
	70	Tracking of responses to external examiner reports
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<a href="#"><u>Scotland's Rural College (SRUC)</u></a>	92	Use of external examiner reports at programme and university level
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	94	External examiner report pro forma and responses
	95	Scrutiny of external examiner reports
	96	Availability of external examiner reports to students
	97	Summary of external examiner comments and awarding universities
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<a href="#"><u>University of Stirling</u></a>	86	Governance and Review Team scrutiny of external examiners' reports
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