



# **UK Quality Code for Higher Education**

**Part B: Assuring and Enhancing  
Academic Quality**

**Chapter B7: External Examining**

PART  
**B**

# Contents

<b>The Quality Code</b>	1
<b>About this Chapter</b>	3
<b>Introduction: External examining in the UK</b>	4
<b>Expectation</b>	6
<b>Indicators of sound practice</b>	7
Defining the role of the external examiner	7
The nomination and appointment of external examiners	11
Carrying out the role of external examiner	17
Recognition of the work of external examiners	20
External examiners' reports	20
<b>Appendix 1 - The Expectation and Indicators</b>	25
<b>Appendix 2 - Sufficient evidence pro forma</b>	29
<b>Appendix 3 - Membership of the advisory group for Chapter B7: External examining</b>	30
<b>References</b>	32

# About the Quality Code

The UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code) is the definitive reference point for all UK higher education providers.<sup>1</sup> It makes clear what higher education providers are required to do, what they can expect of each other, and what the general public can expect of them. The Quality Code covers all four nations of the UK and all providers of UK higher education operating internationally. It protects the interests of all students, regardless of where they are studying or whether they are full-time, part-time, undergraduate or postgraduate students.

The Quality Code has three Parts. Part A: Setting and Maintaining Academic Standards contains three Chapters and seven Expectations. Each of the 11 Chapters of Part B: Assuring and Enhancing Academic Quality, and Part C: Information about Higher Education Provision contain a single Expectation. An Expectation expresses the key principle that the higher education community has identified as essential for the assurance of academic standards and quality within the area covered by the respective Chapter or Part. Higher education providers reviewed by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) are required to meet all the Expectations. The manner in which they do so is their own responsibility. QAA carries out reviews to check whether higher education providers are meeting the Expectations.<sup>2</sup>

The Expectations in Part C and each Chapter of Part B are accompanied by a series of Indicators that reflect sound practice, and through which providers can demonstrate they are meeting the relevant Expectation. Indicators are not designed to be used as a checklist; they are intended to help providers reflect on and develop their regulations, procedures and practices to demonstrate that the Expectations in the Quality Code are being met. Each Indicator is supported by an explanatory note that gives more information about it, together with examples of how the Indicator may be interpreted in practice. Indicators are grouped into clusters under a heading. There are no Indicators in Part A. The explanatory text provided directly supports the relevant Expectation.

Each Part and Chapter has been developed by QAA through an extensive process of consultation with higher education providers; their representative bodies; the National Union of Students; professional, statutory and regulatory bodies; and other interested parties.

The *UK Quality Code for Higher Education: General Introduction*<sup>3</sup> should be considered in conjunction with this document. It provides a technical introduction for users, including guidance concerning the terminology used and a quick-reference glossary. A more detailed glossary is available on QAA's website.<sup>4</sup>

## The Quality Code and legislation

Higher education providers are responsible for meeting the requirements of legislation and any other regulatory requirements placed upon them, for example by funding bodies. The Quality Code does not interpret legislation nor does it incorporate statutory or regulatory requirements. Sources of information about other requirements and examples of guidance and good practice are signposted within the Part or Chapter where appropriate. Higher education providers are responsible for how they use these resources.

## Equality and diversity in the Quality Code

The Quality Code promotes an inclusive approach by embedding consideration of equality and diversity matters throughout. Promoting equality involves treating everyone with equal dignity and worth, irrespective of the group or groups to which they belong, while also raising aspirations and supporting achievement for people with diverse requirements, entitlements and backgrounds. An inclusive environment for learning anticipates the varied requirements of learners, for example, because of a declared disability, specific cultural background, location or age, and aims to ensure that all students have equal access to educational opportunities. Higher education providers, staff and students all have a role in and responsibility for promoting equality.

Equality of opportunity involves enabling access for people who have differing individual requirements as well as eliminating arbitrary and unnecessary barriers to learning. In addition, disabled students and non-disabled students are offered learning opportunities that are equally accessible to them, by means of

inclusive design wherever possible and by means of reasonable individual adjustments wherever necessary. Offering an equal opportunity to learn is distinguished from every student having an equal chance of success, because this is dependent on a range of factors including their motivation and engagement in learning.

All higher education providers have legal obligations which they must meet, for example in relation to equality of opportunity and eliminating unlawful discrimination (in the UK particular considerations, such as the anticipatory duty to provide reasonable adjustments, apply to disabled students). The Quality Code does not seek to duplicate or interpret these requirements.

# About this Chapter

The following supersedes the *Code of Practice for the Assurance of Academic Quality and Standards in Higher Education (Code of Practice), Section 4: External Examining* (2004), published by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), and forms a Chapter of the new UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code). It incorporates the recommendations of the Universities UK (UUK)/GuildHE review of external examining published in 2011.<sup>5</sup>

The indicators in this chapter build upon, and incorporate, the recommendations of the UUK/GuildHE review, and are therefore explicit about the actions or ways of working that will demonstrate that scrupulous use is being made of external examiners.

# Introduction: External examining in the UK

In the UK's system of higher education, higher education providers are responsible for the quality of the education they provide and, in the case of providers with degree awarding powers, they are responsible for the academic standards of the awards they offer.

External examining provides one of the principal means for maintaining UK academic standards within autonomous higher education providers. External examining is therefore an integral and essential part of institutional quality assurance.

Degree-awarding bodies appoint as external examiners people drawn from higher education, industry, and professions ranging from medicine to law. Those appointed are suitably qualified and experienced in the subject, or specialism within the subject, to which the appointment relates. They are external to, and therefore independent of, the appointing body.

Based on their qualifications and experience, they are able to provide carefully considered advice on the academic standards of the awards, programmes and/or modules to which they have been assigned, and can offer advice on good practice and opportunities to enhance the quality of those programmes/modules. They are also able to offer an informed view of how standards compare with the same or similar awards at other higher education providers (primarily in the UK, and sometimes overseas as well) of which they have experience.

An important feature of external examining in the UK is the provision of annual written reports to the degree-awarding body by each external examiner based on what he/she has observed of the degree-awarding body's assessment processes and student assessed work (in whatever form).

These reports provide invaluable independent feedback to the degree-awarding body at module and/or programme level, and sometimes also at institutional level. Degree-awarding bodies consider these reports carefully, and either take action in response to any recommendations or make clear the reasons for not taking action. In very exceptional cases, an external examiner may have serious concerns about the quality or standards of the provision. He/she may in such cases provide a written report to the head of the degree-awarding body, in confidence. As a last resort, external examiners may ask QAA to investigate using its concerns scheme. Such an investigation will be appropriate where there is evidence of systemic failings in quality management in the degree-awarding body, but not where there is a one-off case of ineffective practice.

Higher education providers recognise the importance of the role of students in contributing to the management of standards and quality. External examiners' reports are therefore made available to students, often through student representatives, as part of involving students in quality management processes.

This Chapter is designed to ensure that external examining can operate in a way which is transparent, rigorous, and as consistent as possible across all UK higher education providers, taking into account their autonomy and differences in their mission, size, organisational structures and range of provision. It also recognises that in many subjects awards undergo varying degrees of oversight or regulation by professional, statutory or regulatory bodies (PSRBs). Degree-awarding bodies therefore ensure that they are clear about the requirements of each applicable PSRB, whether these requirements relate to the appointment of an external examiner, and/or providing a copy of the external examiner's report and evidence of action taken in response to that report.

## Threshold standards

Throughout this Chapter reference is made to threshold academic standards. The following is the definition applicable within the Quality Code:

Threshold academic standards are the level of achievement that a student has to reach to gain an academic award. For equivalent awards, the threshold level of achievement should be the same across the UK.

# General principles

As part of their joint review of external examining in the UK in 2010-11, UUK and GuildHE agreed with higher education providers the following general principles for external examining.

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

**Principle 2:** Notwithstanding their autonomy, it is right that institutions degree-awarding bodies should be accountable for the way in which they exercise their responsibility for setting and maintaining standards. The principal mechanism for this is Institutional review, which should test whether or not external examining is working in practice. External examining arrangements should remain one of the key areas for Institutional review and a critical factor in determining the outcome of Institutional review.

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

# Expectation

The Quality Code sets out the following Expectation about external examining, which higher education providers are required to meet.

**Higher education providers make scrupulous use of external examiners.**

# Indicators of sound practice

## Defining the role of the external examiner

### Indicator 1

**Degree-awarding bodies appoint one or more external examiner(s) to carry out the role(s) defined in this Chapter for all provision that leads to a higher education qualification of the degree-awarding body.**

### External examiner(s)

External examiners are individuals drawn from academia and also from industry, business and the professions, who are appointed in accordance with the criteria set out in Indicator 5. Not every external examiner necessarily meets all the criteria. Degree-awarding bodies ensure that exceptions to Indicator 5 are carefully considered and approved at institutional level, and that arrangements for providing oversight of provision are robust.

External examiners are appointed to provide each degree-awarding body with 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. The specific responsibility of each external examiner is dependent on the role allocated by the degree-awarding body on appointment, and may be at different levels depending on the nature of the provision and the way in which a degree-awarding body's decision-making processes about assessment are structured. For example, external examiners are appointed to oversee one or more modules and to contribute to decision making at module level through a module board. External examiners are also appointed at programme or qualification level, a role which may be less dependent on their subject expertise, being more concerned with their oversight of the assessment process at programme/qualification level (for example, relating to progression and classification). Some degree-awarding bodies also engage a 'chief' or 'principal' examiner (in addition to other external examiners) who may have a responsibility which is cross-faculty (or equivalent) or involves overseeing multiple pathways.

The Indicators set out in this Chapter are designed to be sufficiently flexible to allow degree-awarding bodies to appoint external examiners to fulfil the roles they require. In all cases the degree-awarding body is responsible for ensuring that external examining arrangements are in place for subjects/specialisms/modules through which credit is achieved and qualifications awarded.

It is also responsible for ensuring that those (to be) appointed as external examiners, and all internal examiners, are clear about the extent and nature of the appointment, including whether the external examiner is to report on standards and quality at module or programme/qualification level, or both. The Indicators do not, therefore, assume a specific model of assessment oversight, recognising for example that some degree-awarding bodies operate what are sometimes referred to as 'single-tier' systems (including one level of boards of examiners); others operate 'two-tier' systems (usually including module and programme/qualification boards).

The roles of external examiners are defined in Indicator 2 (academic standards) and Indicator 3 (quality enhancement). Indicators 7 and 10 explain more about how these roles are fulfilled.

## The degree-awarding body and its responsibilities

The awarding institution is responsible for the standards of its qualifications. Therefore, the appointment of an external examiner is explicitly the responsibility of the degree-awarding body making the award, irrespective of whether all or part of the programme is delivered by a partner, delivery organisation or support provider. The extent to which such an organisation becomes involved in aspects of the process (for example nominating and briefing external examiners) is a matter for the degree-awarding body to determine with the organisation. Such arrangements are explicitly covered in the written agreement setting out the arrangements or a related document.<sup>6</sup>

All such provision is therefore the subject of scrutiny by an appropriately appointed external examiner (or examiners). For joint awards (where a programme leads to an award granted jointly by two or more degree-awarding bodies) and dual awards (where provision leads to separate but interdependent awards of two or more degree-awarding bodies) the extent of the coverage of, and arrangements for, external examining are determined as part of the partnership agreement. Where one body is UK-based (and therefore subject to this Chapter on external examining) and the other is not, the former needs to ensure that the standards of its qualifications and the quality of its provision are secure. Other countries have equivalent means of assuring the standards and quality of higher education programmes and qualifications, for example national programme accreditation. It is the responsibility of the UK degree-awarding body to ascertain what means of quality assurance are in place in the partner institution's country, and what levels and types of scrutiny by the UK body are therefore appropriate.<sup>7</sup>

Further guidance on arrangements involving partners, delivery organisations or support providers can be found in *Chapter B10: Managing Higher Education Provision with Others*.

## Awards

External examining is designed to help degree-awarding bodies ensure that the standard of each award is maintained at the appropriate level, and that the standards of student performance are properly judged against this. Degree-awarding bodies therefore ensure that external examiners are appointed to oversee their awards, including those which may be deemed interim or exit awards. A degree-awarding body may think it appropriate to state explicitly, for example, that any student achievement that contributes to a named award will be moderated by an external examiner. Alternatively, a degree-awarding body might deem that, in confirming the academic standards of a final award, an external examiner confirms that he/she endorses the level and standards of its component parts as appropriate to the structure of that award. The precise allocation of responsibilities is a matter for each degree-awarding body, including the extent to which external examiners scrutinise work at different levels within their awards.

## The requirements of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies

Any requirements of professional, statutory or regulatory bodies (PSRBs) are in addition to the Indicators set out in this Chapter. Each degree-awarding body is responsible for ensuring that it can satisfy the specific requirements of the PSRB. Such requirements vary from one organisation to another. For example, appointing or nominating external examiners, being informed of appointments, and receiving copies of reports.

## External examining of research degree provision

External examining in relation to the provision of research degrees is addressed in *Chapter B11: Research Degrees*. Some programmes may contain both research and taught elements. It is appropriate to appoint external examiners to fulfil the role set out in this Chapter for the elements classified as 'taught', in addition to appointing external examiners to consider the research element. Arrangements for approving such programmes make explicit where a programme falls within this category, defining those elements that are 'taught' and therefore subject to scrutiny by an external examiner under this Chapter.

## Indicator 2

**Degree-awarding bodies expect their external examiners to provide informative comment and recommendations upon whether or not:**

- **the degree-awarding body is maintaining the threshold academic standards set for its awards in accordance with the frameworks for higher education qualifications and applicable Subject Benchmark Statements<sup>8</sup>**
- **the assessment process measures student achievement rigorously and fairly against the intended outcomes of the programme(s) and is conducted in line with the degree awarding body's policies and regulations**
- **the academic standards and the achievements of students are comparable with those in other UK degree-awarding bodies of which the external examiners have experience.**

Indicator 2 defines the essential role of the external examiner in assisting the degree-awarding body to maintain the academic standards of its awards. Responsibility for the setting of academic standards is clearly that of the degree-awarding body and is carried out through formal processes of approval (or validation) using other forms of externality. The use of externality in relation to setting and maintaining academic standards is addressed in Part A of the Quality Code.

## Maintaining academic standards

Fundamental to carrying out this part of the role is to provide feedback on whether:

- the programme and its component parts continue to be coherent and their outcomes aligned with the relevant qualification descriptor set out in the applicable qualifications framework, supplemented where applicable by one or more subject benchmark statements
- the programme reflects any additional PSRB requirements
- assessments in modules of the same level are of a comparable standard the curriculum remains current
- assessment criteria, marking schemes and arrangements for classification are set at the appropriate level.

## Measuring achievement, rigour and fairness

An important element of the external examiner's role is to provide assurance that the assessment process is properly designed and applied, and is carried out in a manner that is fair and equitable to all students concerned as well as supportive of achieving the intended outcomes.

External examiners pay attention to whether:

- the types of assessment are appropriate for the subject, the students, the respective level of study and the expected outcomes
- the marking scheme/grading criteria have been properly and consistently applied, and whether internal marking is therefore of an appropriate standard, fair and reliable
- the assessment processes are carried out in accordance with the degree-awarding body's regulations and procedures
- procedures governing mitigating/extenuating circumstances, academic integrity/misconduct and borderline performances have been considered fairly and equitably applying institutional regulations.

The explanatory note to Indicator 7 addresses the circumstances where an external examiner considers that internal marking is not at the appropriate level (too generous or too harsh).

External examiners have no special role in individual cases relating to mitigating circumstances or academic integrity except to ensure that the degree-awarding body's relevant procedures have been

applied. Decision making on such issues may be delegated to specialist panels operating as subcommittees of examination boards or be the responsibility of faculty/institutional-level bodies. However, as such decisions affect the remit of an examination board,<sup>9</sup> external examiners can legitimately expect to be informed of decisions affecting a module result or a progression/award decision. They can also expect to be informed of any applicable regulations or procedures.

Degree-awarding bodies clarify the extent to which they can reasonably expect external examiners to be conversant with their regulations, and to comment on the extent of their correct application.

Degree-awarding bodies also determine the extent to which they will involve external examiners in commenting on their regulations rather than on their application. There can be value in consulting external examiners, alongside other forms of external scrutiny or consultation, when establishing new policies or reviewing existing ones.

## **Comparability of standards and student performance**

External examiners provide feedback to the degree-awarding body on the comparability of standards and student achievement. This feedback is based on their experience of other higher education providers (whether as a member of staff, external examiner or other role).

However, the external examiner is only one of a number of sources of external opinion which degree-awarding bodies consider, including external advice received through approval, monitoring and review processes. External examiners are therefore not the sole guarantors of the comparability of standards achieved.

Comparability focuses on standards and student achievement in one or more of the following (according to the specific role of each external examiner):

- across the modules within a single programme
- across programmes within a single subject area in an awarding institution
- across programmes within a single subject area across higher education providers of which the external examiner has experience
- any of the above, across cohorts during the examiner's period of appointment.

The programme and subject area need to be understood in the context of the specific provision. In some cases, especially at postgraduate level, programmes can be very specialist, limiting the extent to which comparisons can be made by external examiners.

Other issues of comparability arise where, for example, the same programme is delivered at different sites or delivered by partners, delivery organizations or support providers. Degree-awarding bodies ensure that each instance of delivery receives adequate scrutiny and comment, and that the appointment and expertise of external examiners reflects such considerations and therefore assures the consistent application of standards. Similarly, in the case of modules which are shared across more than one programme (including those designed to facilitate inter-professional learning), degree-awarding bodies ensure there is clarity over which external examiner(s) are responsible for each module.

Unless specifically appointed for the purpose, and provided with appropriate data, an external examiner cannot be expected to comment on the comparability of student performance across different disciplines in the degree-awarding body.

Degree-awarding bodies determine whether, when and how it is appropriate to provide external examiners with quantitative data to support their evaluation of student performance. In addition examination boards may be provided with descriptive statistical analyses for each cohort at module and programme level.

### Indicator 3

Degree-awarding bodies expect their external examiners to provide informative comment and recommendations on:

- good practice and innovation relating to learning, teaching and assessment observed by the external examiners
- opportunities to enhance the quality of the learning opportunities<sup>11</sup> provided to students.

External examiners contribute much to the development of a higher education provider's provision through identifying examples of good practice and potential areas for development. Higher education providers draw on this feedback as part of their annual monitoring and periodic review of programmes. Higher education providers disseminate internally, and encourage consideration of, recommendations by external examiners that will impact on the enhancement of the provider's provision and the students' learning experience.

Consulting with external examiners on draft coursework assignments and examination questions allows the external examiners' expertise to inform providers' practice as it occurs, rather than providing an exclusively retrospective comment on past practice.

### Additional roles

Degree-awarding bodies make clear any additional roles that they wish external examiners to undertake. In making such requests, degree-awarding bodies bear in mind the essential roles identified in Indicators 2 and 3, the time commitment involved, and the recognition afforded.

## The nomination and appointment of external examiners

The procedures for nominating and appointing external examiners within a degree-awarding body are an important part of the assurance of academic standards. Good practice in this area is likely to be achieved when a senior academic body takes responsibility for ensuring 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
- any potential intellectual property difficulties, such as might arise from the need for commercial confidentiality, are resolved prior to appointment.

It is normal practice for a formal letter of appointment, or equivalent, to be sent to an external examiner confirming the terms of the appointment.

## Indicator 4

**Degree-awarding bodies have explicit policies and regulations governing the nomination and appointment of external examiners.**

**Degree-awarding bodies can terminate an external examiner's appointment at any time, subject to approved institutional procedures, for failure by the external examiner to fulfil his/her obligations or if a conflict of interest arises which cannot be satisfactorily resolved.**

## Appointment

Degree-awarding bodies appoint external examiners in accordance with the criteria specified in Indicator 5. They are responsible for the number and deployment of their external examiners.

In discharging their responsibilities, degree-awarding bodies:

- develop guidance for the processes of nominating and appointing external examiners
- develop policies for avoiding reciprocal appointments with departments<sup>12</sup> of other degree-awarding bodies, and for dealing with conflicts of interest where such appointments are unavoidable
- put in place an approval process that includes consideration of appropriate documentation in support of nominations; this can help to reassure students and others about the rigour of the appointments process
- establish systems for appointing external examiners that include consideration and confirmation of nominations at institutional level; this can help to reassure the degree-awarding body about the integrity and objectivity of procedures operated by those acting on its behalf
- keep a central register of appointments and periods of tenure; this can help degree-awarding bodies to avoid inadvertent conflicts of interest and ensure the proper rotation of external examiners
- ensure external examiners are clear about their duties
- develop criteria and procedures for the early termination of the contract by either party
- provide external examiners with sufficient information about the role they are being asked to undertake to enable them to make sound decisions about accepting or declining an appointment.

Where more than one examiner is appointed to a programme or part thereof, degree-awarding bodies consider phasing examiner appointments to enable and encourage the mentoring of new examiners. Where one external examiner is appointed to a programme or part thereof, support shadowing or handover arrangements are considered.

## Termination of contract

The importance of the role of the external examiner in contributing to a degree-awarding body's management of standards and quality means that any failure to fulfil the role is viewed seriously by the degree-awarding body. Action is taken, including early termination of the contract, in appropriate cases.

In particular, the failure to attend examination boards (where attendance is required) without making alternative arrangements, the failure to submit reports, or the provision of incomplete reports might be appropriate grounds for early termination. In some instances degree-awarding bodies operate with one-year renewable contracts to facilitate such action.

The power to terminate the appointment is not restricted to a particular time period, such as the end of the academic year, but degree-awarding bodies ensure that decisions are made on sound evidence of non fulfilment and make such decisions in accordance with procedures set out in their policies and/or regulations. These policies make clear the level of authority (such as a senior manager or institutional committee) at which such a decision is made.

A conflict of interest (as set out in Indicator 5) may arise during a term office. Where this cannot be resolved, normal practice would be for the external examiner to resign. However, as a last resort a degree-awarding body could terminate the appointment to protect the independence of its external examining arrangements, again following the appropriate procedures.

With regard to whistle-blowing, neither the raising of well founded concerns about academic standards, nor the submission of a confidential report to the head of the degree-awarding body (whether or not followed by the submission of a concern to QAA or a relevant professional body), is a valid ground for termination.

## **Indicator 5**

**Degree awarding bodies apply the following UK-wide set of criteria for appointing external examiners and make every effort to ensure that their external examiners are competent to undertake the responsibilities defined by the institution.<sup>13</sup>**

**Degree awarding bodies use the criteria to ensure that potential conflicts of interest are identified and resolved prior to appointing external examiners or as soon as they arise.**

### **Person specification**

**a. Degree-awarding bodies appoint external examiners who can show appropriate evidence of the following:**

**i) knowledge and understanding of UK sector agreed reference points for the maintenance of academic standards and assurance and enhancement of quality**

**ii) competence and experience in the fields covered by the programme of study, or parts there of**

**iii) relevant academic and/or professional qualifications to at least the level of the qualification being externally examined, and/or extensive practitioner experience where appropriate**

**iv) competence and experience relating to designing and operating a variety of assessment tasks appropriate to the subject and operating assessment procedures**

**v) sufficient standing, credibility and breadth of experience within the discipline to be able to command the respect of academic peers and, where appropriate, professional peers**

**vi) familiarity with the standard to be expected of students to achieve the award that is to be assessed**

**vii) fluency in English, and where programmes are delivered and assessed in languages other than English, fluency in the relevant language(s) (unless other secure arrangements are in place to ensure that external examiners are provided with the information to make their judgements)**

**viii) meeting applicable criteria set by professional, statutory or regulatory bodies**

**ix) awareness of current developments in the design and delivery of relevant curricula**

**x) competence and experience relating to the enhancement of the student learning experience.**

## **Conflicts of interest**

**b. Degree-awarding bodies do not appoint as external examiners anyone in the following categories or circumstances:**

- i) a member of a governing body or committee of the appointing body or one of its partners, delivery organisations or support providers, or a current employee of the appointing body or one of its partners, delivery organisations or support providers**
- ii) anyone with a close professional, contractual or personal relationship with a member of staff or student involved with the programme of study**
- iii) anyone required to assess colleagues who are recruited as students to the programme of study**
- iv) anyone who is, or knows they will be, in a position to influence significantly the future of students on the programme of study**
- v) anyone significantly involved in recent or current substantive collaborative research activities with a member of staff closely involved in the delivery, management or assessment of the programme(s) or modules in question**
- vi) former staff or students of the higher education provider unless a period of five years has elapsed and all students taught by or with the external examiner have completed their programme(s)**
- vii) a reciprocal arrangement involving cognate programmes at another higher education provider**
- viii) the succession of an external examiner by a colleague from the examiner's home department and provider**
- ix) the appointment of more than one external examiner from the same department of the same higher education provider.**

## **Terms of office**

- c. The duration of an external examiner's appointment will normally be for four years, with an exceptional extension of one year to ensure continuity.**
- d. An external examiner may be reappointed in exceptional circumstances but only after a period of five years or more has elapsed since their last appointment.**
- e. External examiners normally hold no more than two external examiner appointments for taught programmes/modules at any point in time.**

Degree-awarding bodies ensure that the criteria in Indicator 5 are met for their awards through one or a combination of external examiners. This ensures the integrity of external examining while facilitating the appointment of first-time external examiners and those drawn from industry, the professions, or with a background primarily in research.

## **National criteria for appointment**

The national criteria for appointment are designed to ensure that external examiners, either as individuals or as teams, have the qualifications, experience and expertise they need to fulfil the roles and functions for which a degree-awarding body employs them. Degree-awarding bodies apply the criteria, taking account of the implications of any specific role the appointee is being asked to undertake, for example at module, programme/award or other level. Where a degree-awarding body applies additional criteria, it takes into account the need to ensure that the pool of external examiners is not restricted, and in particular that it is

possible for suitable people to undertake their first post as an external examiner and so gain experience in that role.

The criteria for appointment also support degree-awarding bodies in identifying, prior to nomination and appointment, whether there are potential conflicts of interest that would need to be resolved by the degree-awarding body. Particular attention is paid to nominees who have been involved in the development of the programme or its component parts, for example as an external consultant, or who have acted as a member of the validation panel (or equivalent) which approved the programme. Degree-awarding bodies balance the benefits of engaging someone who is familiar with the programme and its rationale with any risk to their ability to provide a fully independent perspective.

Degree-awarding bodies typically engage external examiners for four years, achieving a balance between the need to bring in a fresh perspective with the need to benefit from the external's knowledge and insight gathered over a period of time. An exceptional extension of one year allows degree-awarding bodies to achieve continuity, for example where a programme is being brought to an end.

## **Application to professional, statutory or regulatory body requirements**

Where the appointment of the external examiner(s) is by a professional, statutory or regulatory body, rather than by the degree-awarding body in question, the extent to which these criteria apply is a matter for the relevant professional, statutory or regulatory body.

## **Exceptions and special cases**

The purpose of national criteria is to enhance the transparency and consistency of institutional practice in appointing competent staff as external examiners who are free from potential conflicts of interest and therefore sufficiently independent to fulfil the role. Degree-awarding bodies ensure that where there is a legitimate case for making an appointment that does not fulfil all the criteria, there is a rigorous and transparent process for making the appointment, with approval at senior institutional level and reporting to an appropriate body (such as a senior academic committee). This ensures that the degree-awarding body has effective oversight of such decisions and can monitor trends across all areas of its provision.

External examiners drawn from business, industry or the professions make a significant contribution to external examining across a range of disciplines. Nominees from these backgrounds may be unable to fulfil all the criteria set out in Indicator 5. For example, they may possess considerable professional experience but not the formal qualifications anticipated, the academic background, or sufficient experience of assessment. Likewise, a degree-awarding body may wish to appoint an external examiner who has, as a researcher, eminent standing in the respective discipline, but lacks experience in providing and enhancing the student learning experience. Degree-awarding bodies consider such cases formally as exceptions to the criteria. This consideration may be assisted where the appointee is not the sole external examiner for the award, hence his or her expertise is complemented by that of others who do satisfy the criteria. Where an appointee does not fulfil all the criteria degree-awarding bodies take steps to provide appropriate training and support in relation to academic expectations.

Degree-awarding bodies also make appropriate use of exceptions when addressing nominations for external examiners in disciplines which are very small and specialist and where the pool of potential external examiners is therefore restricted.

## **Appointment of first-time external examiners**

Where the nominee has no previous experience as an external examiner for any degree-awarding body, appointment is - wherever practicable - made to a team of external examiners and/or with agreement that a more experienced external examiner will act as a mentor. There will be occasions when such an arrangement is not practicable. For example, the size and nature of the provision may make it impracticable to have more than one external examiner.

Thus there is a risk of limiting the opportunity for staff to become external examiners, notably in specialist areas. This can be mitigated by supporting an appointment through development or mentoring by an experienced external examiner in a different field.

Degree-awarding bodies consider whether first-time external examiners have additional information and development needs when compared with experienced examiners.

### Indicator 6

**Degree-awarding bodies ensure that all external examiners they appoint are informed about organisational procedures, practices, and academic regulations, and the crucial value of external examiners' feedback to the degree-awarding body as part of the broader system of quality assurance and enhancement.**

## Information for external examiners

Degree-awarding bodies induct external examiners, providing opportunities for external examiners to familiarise themselves with the organisation and its assessment procedures. Arrangements for induction reflect such factors as the size of the organisations (for example, small organisations may only be appointing one or two new external examiners each year and therefore less formal arrangements may be more effective). The content and the means for delivery of such an induction is for the appointing body to decide, and takes into consideration the specific needs of the external examiner in question, especially his/her level of experience as an external examiner.

As a minimum, degree-awarding bodies, working with their partners, delivery organizations or support providers (where applicable), provide their external examiners with information about, and access to:

- relevant institutional and programme regulations
- the degree-awarding body's external examining and assessment guidelines
- information such as student and programme handbooks, and marking and classification criteria
- learning, teaching and assessment strategies.

Information is also provided about relevant professional issues, such as fitness to practise, and any features that relate to the specific discipline.

Degree-awarding bodies may refer external examiners to guidance and advice that has been developed by sector bodies and subject communities.

## External examiners' professional development

Part of being an external examiner is fostering one's own development in the role, taking advantage of the range of support mechanisms available, locally and nationally.

Preparation for the role of external examiner is part of professional academic practice and may be reflected in development opportunities provided by higher education providers for their own staff (see also Indicator 11). Home providers may, for instance, consider developing their staff so that they better understand the role of external examiners in relation to their own provision. Support provided by the recruiting degree awarding body will include regular updates on assessment policy and procedures, drawing where appropriate upon national support mechanisms for the external examining process.

A clear understanding by external examiners of the ways in which their work contributes to the degree-awarding body's quality assurance processes will help them to fulfil their role effectively.

# Carrying out the role of external examiner

Degree-awarding bodies ensure that external examiners are clearly briefed to carry out the role. Briefing includes: confirming the module(s), programme(s) or award(s) to which the external examiner is appointed; the evidence that he/she requires to provide oversight; clarity about his/her precise role in respect of scripts sent (for example, sampling or adjudicating in cases of disagreement); his/her remit in relation to endorsing the outcomes of the assessment process; and the type of commentary that he/she is expected to provide on the outcomes of the assessments conducted within those programmes/modules.

## Indicator 7

**Degree-awarding bodies communicate clearly in writing to all concerned the:**

- **modules, programmes and/or qualifications(s) to which each external examiner is appointed**
- **various roles, powers and responsibilities assigned to their external examiners, including the extent of their authority in examination boards.**

Degree-awarding bodies ensure that those appointed as external examiners, and their own staff, are clear about which awards (and/or parts of awards or programmes) will be scrutinised by which external examiner. A letter of appointment provides an effective way of communicating this information to an external examiner. (Information for students is addressed in Indicator 8.)

Factors that have a bearing on the number of external examiners appointed include:

- the capacity of existing external examiners to make competent judgements relating to all agreed external reference points (including the requirements of PSRBs)
- the need for an appropriate match between the number of external examiners and the quantity and complexity of assessed material being examined
- whether more than one examiner is needed for a programme in a subject with a number of specialisms
- how examiners will be deployed to assess the overall standards and coherence of combined studies and interdisciplinary or inter-professional programmes (including where modules are shared across more than one programme)
- how external examiners will be deployed where provision includes work-based learning, practice-based learning or live assessments (such as performances).

## Membership of examination boards

Fundamental to carrying out the role of external examiner is the membership of the relevant examination board(s), whether at module, programme, award or other level. All involved need to be clear what the external examiner's role is in relation to the board, and what the degree-awarding body's expectations are for attendance at meetings (including reassessment boards where applicable). See also *Chapter B6: Assessment of Students and the Recognition of Prior Learning*.

## Sampling assessed work

External examiners are not normally responsible for, or involved in, the assessment of individual students to the extent that they do not carry out marking of assessed work. However, to fulfil their role external examiners view student work, which ranges from reading essays or examination scripts to viewing performances (live or recorded) or artefacts. The volume of assessment generally means that an external examiner is unlikely to be able to view all the assessed work unless the cohort is small. Samples are of sufficient size to enable him/her to form a view as to whether the internal marking has properly assessed student performance against the appropriate standards.

In viewing samples of students' assessed work, external examiners are not normally in a position to expect or encourage an examination board to raise or lower marks for individual students, on the basis that such a practice would be unfair to those candidates whose work is not part of the sample. Where the external examiner has concerns about the internal marking, departmental or degree-awarding body procedures make explicit what action will be taken immediately to address the concern. This may include providing the external with access to a larger sample or wider range of assessed work. The degree-awarding body would inform the external examiner if it decides not to take any action and is thereby rejecting his/her view.

Degree-awarding bodies distinguish between concerns expressed by the external examiner that need to be addressed before the final decisions relating to the current assessment process, and those that might be appropriately addressed on receipt of the external examiner's report.

## **Examination board responsibilities**

As members of the relevant examination board(s) external examiners are rarely considered to be the final arbiter for the award of marks/grades, either within a module or for the final award. Such decisions are the responsibility of the relevant examination board collectively. Degree-awarding body regulations or procedures make transparent how decisions will be reached in difficult cases, especially those where candidates' performances are deemed borderline. Exceptionally there may be cases where internal examiners wish to seek the opinion of the external examiner in an individual case. In such circumstances the final decision would still be made by the examination board, with the views of the respective examiners made known to the board.

### **Indicator 8**

**Higher education providers include the name, position and institution of their external examiners in module or programme information provided to students.**

To ensure that degree-awarding bodies' external examining arrangements are transparent, and to support the involvement of students in quality management processes, students are made aware of the identity and current position of the external examiners appointed to their modules/programmes and awards. Degree-awarding bodies decide how this is best achieved without unnecessary workload or overloading students with information.

Where the external examiner has been appointed to fulfil a role on behalf of a professional body this is stated.

Higher education providers make clear to students that it is inappropriate for students to make direct contact with external examiners, in particular regarding their individual performance in assessments, and that other appropriate mechanisms are available, such as an appeal or a complaint. Degree-awarding bodies explain to students how they can engage formally with the quality management process through which degree-awarding bodies consider and respond to external examiners. (See also Indicators 15 and 16.)

Degree-awarding bodies advise their external examiners that it is appropriate to refer any direct contact received from students to the institution.

Equally, students who are asked to meet with an external examiner are given clear guidance by the degree-awarding body about the purpose of that meeting and its limitations (particularly with regard to individual assessment outcomes).

## Indicator 9

**Prior to the confirmation of mark lists, pass lists or similar documents, degree-awarding bodies expect external examiners to endorse the outcomes of the assessment processes they have been appointed to scrutinise.**

As indicated above, decisions about assessment outcomes are the collective decisions of examination boards to which external examiners contribute as board members.

A key way in which the external examiner provides an expert view of the rigour and fairness of the assessment process is by endorsing, or not, the decisions of the board. Such endorsement indicates not that the external examiner agrees with every individual assessment decision, but that he/she is satisfied with the conduct of the assessment process (as indicated in Indicator 2).

Institutions have clear procedures for how external examiners record their endorsement, and communicate these to their external examiners. For example, the external examiner might sign the completed mark list during/at the end of the examination board meeting.

Degree-awarding bodies make clear to external examiners whether such results are final or are subject to further endorsement by a higher body (such as an institutional-level committee).

Procedures also make clear what happens in the event that an external examiner is unwilling to provide endorsement, including whether written reasons are to be recorded or a separate report is to be made to the degree-awarding body or its senior committee. A particular reason for this is to ensure that the consequences are understood for students whose marks are being considered. Students are informed if there is to be any delay in finalising and communicating their results.

## Indicator 10

**Degree-awarding bodies provide external examiners with sufficient evidence to enable them to discharge their responsibilities.**

In order for external examiners to fulfil their role in relation to academic standards, degree-awarding bodies determine with their external examiners what evidence will be available, including how and when it will be available. This includes the nature and size of the samples of assessed work, ensuring that they address the range of assessments used, including those relating to placements.

To fulfil their role in a rigorous manner, external examiners are informed of:

- whether they are entitled to meet students on programmes or parts of programmes they are examining, and if so the purpose of any such meeting
- what evidence they need in order to judge the quality and appropriateness of assessment and to assure themselves that assessments are testing the intended learning outcomes
- how they will be given adequate opportunity to communicate with internal examiners and others involved in teaching and assessment (such as placement providers/assessors).

External examiners have the opportunity to confirm that they have been provided with sufficient evidence to carry out their role in the annual report (see Indicator 13).

# Recognition of the work of external examiners

## Indicator 11

**Higher education providers recognise the importance, and mutual benefit, of the work undertaken by many of their staff as external examiners for other providers and agree with staff the time they need to fulfil these duties.**

External examining depends, nationally, on the availability of staff to take on and fulfil the role. In order to ensure that there is a continuous and sufficiently large supply of external examiners available, higher education providers need to support staff who wish to become external examiners. Primarily, this means ensuring that they are given adequate time to carry out the role, and are enabled to manage and balance the timing and commitments of external examining with coinciding internal duties. Where degree-awarding bodies appoint external examiners from outside higher education, they may need to consider engaging with employers regarding the nature and extent of the commitment required to fulfil the role.

It is for individual higher education providers to decide how they recognise external examining work by staff, for example through reward, recognition or promotion criteria or other means.

Higher education providers may provide development opportunities in external examining for new and experienced staff alike. In so doing, higher education providers recognise the aspirations of members of staff to work as external examiners as part of their professional academic practice at an appropriate stage of their career.

It is for each appointing degree-awarding body to decide, and articulate in policies and/or regulations, the level of fees and expenses paid to its external examiners.

Higher education providers benefit from being in a position to have an overview of staff who are active external examiners (in particular to ensure that reciprocal arrangements are not put in place; see Indicator 5). Staff who are likely to take on work as external examiners tell appropriate contacts within their home organisation, who in turn ensure that this additional commitment is recognised. Likewise, external examiners let their home organisation know if external examining arrangements come to an end or undergo changes during the term of appointment. Such communication is not intended to allow the home organisation to be in any way involved in the appointment procedures of the recruiting degree-awarding body or to give the home organisation any kind of oversight over the external examiner's work. Rather, it raises the profile of the role and its commitments, and enables higher education providers to facilitate staff development, for example staff-to-staff coaching.

External examining is valuable, not only for the institution which contracts the external examiner, but also for the examiner's home organisation. In relation to maintaining standards and promoting quality enhancement, both the contracting and the home organisations benefit from the experience of staff who gain insights into practice across the sector and develop expertise in evaluating practice through their work as external examiners.

Higher education providers facilitate the consistent dissemination of experience gained from external examining activities across the provider as appropriate.

## External examiners' reports

Formal written reports provided by the external examiner to the degree-awarding body are a critical element of robust processes for maintaining threshold academic standards and assuring and enhancing quality. As such they formalise the giving of feedback in respect of the areas set out in Indicators 2 and 3.

## Indicator 12

**External examiners submit a report annually, at a time determined by the degree-awarding body, to the head of the degree-awarding body or to one or more named individuals that he/she designates.**

The timing of the report is a matter for the degree-awarding body to determine. It reflects the nature of the provision, the duration of teaching and assessment periods, and their timing in the calendar/academic year. To ensure transparency and clarity, and to manage external examiners' expectations about their commitment, timing is determined at organisational level rather than being a matter for individual negotiation.

The need for annual reporting is modified in respect of modules or programmes which do not operate on an annual basis.

The submission of a report to a named person at organisational level reinforces the importance of organisational oversight of the way external examining is conducted within the degree-awarding body. This is reflected in Indicators 15 and 16 regarding the consideration of reports, and Indicator 4 relating to action in the event that an external examiner does not fulfil his/her obligations.

Degree-awarding bodies ensure that external examiners are clear about how they should submit their report (for example, electronically or in hard copy).

Degree-awarding bodies have oversight of PSRBs' information requirements in relation to external examiners' reports and will make these available to the bodies concerned, together with any action plan or response from the programmes concerned.

## Core content of reports

Whether degree-awarding bodies use standard report forms or provide external examiners with guidance concerning the expected contents of the reports, degree-awarding bodies and external examiners ensure that the core content is addressed in each report. This ensures consistency with the roles identified in Indicators 2 and 3. External examiners are made fully aware that individual staff and students must not be identified.

## Indicator 13

**External examiners' annual reports provide clear and informative feedback to the degree-awarding body on those areas defined for the role in Indicators 2 and 3 (the core content).**

**In addition, their reports:**

- **confirm that sufficient evidence was received to enable the role to be fulfilled (where evidence was insufficient, they give details)**
- **state whether issues raised in the previous report(s) have been, or are being, addressed to their satisfaction**
- **address any issues as specifically required by any relevant professional body give an overview of their term of office (when concluded).**

As part of ensuring the consistency of external examining across UK degree-awarding bodies, Indicator 13 makes explicit what is addressed in external examiner's reports. There is no UK-wide template; degree-awarding bodies determine the format and design of their report form (or guidance if no form as

such is used) and include their own questions to suit institutional needs, provided the core content is addressed.

The report form or guidance covers the core content in such a way as to elicit, where required, informative responses, including supporting evidence, from the external examiner (rather than yes/no answers), for example by using open questions. This approach enables degree-awarding bodies to gain the full benefit of external examining in managing standards and quality effectively.

The core content is explicitly aligned to the role definition in Indicators 2 and 3, and includes coverage of provision delivered through partners or delivery organisations where applicable.

By confirming that sufficient evidence has been provided, the external examiner assures the institution that he/she has received the required support to fulfil the role, including adequate time to consider samples of work and contribute to examination boards. The national review suggested that this could be done effectively by means of a simple checklist appended to a report pro forma that can quickly be completed by the external examiner when finalising the report.<sup>14</sup>

It is also important that the external examiner confirms whether previous issues have been addressed, or are being addressed in cases where the matter might take longer to resolve. In so doing, he/she provides further evidence to the degree-awarding body that its procedures for external examining are being implemented effectively.

Providing an overview of the term of office is of value both to the degree-awarding body and to the incoming external examiner(s).

Degree-awarding bodies remind external examiners that reports will be made available to students (see Indicator 14) and for that reason individual staff and students must not be named in a report.

Where professional bodies require certain issues to be addressed, it is important that the standard pro forma (or guidance to the external examiner) does not constrain external examiners from providing the relevant information. Requirements vary from body to body and discipline to discipline, and some information that is not of immediate value to the degree-awarding body as a whole will be valuable at subject level and to the professional body (especially in relation to assessment of clinical or practice placements).

#### **Indicator 14**

**Higher education providers make external examiners' annual reports available in full to students, with the sole exception of any confidential report made directly, and separately, to the head of the degree-awarding body.**

Reports are made available to students, reflecting the general principles of engaging students in quality management processes. There is no expectation that external examiners' reports be published, and higher education providers therefore decide the most appropriate way to make their reports available.

Reports are amended where the external examiner has contravened the requirement not to identify individuals, or in very exceptional cases where the external examiner has included something intended to cause harm to the higher education provider or to bring it into disrepute.

Higher education providers, working with student representative bodies, agree a policy on what support and guidance is provided to students to enable them to benefit from reading the reports, in particular linking the reports to the degree-awarding body's consideration of what actions to take in response to the reports (see Indicator 15). Although reports are made available, they relate to quality management within the degree-awarding body and are seen in this context rather than as information provided explicitly for students.

## Indicator 15

**At both organisational and subject/programme level, degree-awarding bodies give full and serious consideration to the comments and recommendations contained in external examiners' reports. The actions taken as a result of reports, or the reasons for not taking action, are formally recorded and circulated to those concerned.**

**Degree-awarding bodies ensure that student representatives are given the opportunity to be fully involved in this process, enabling them to understand all the issues raised and the degree-awarding body's response.**

**At organisational level the general issues and themes arising from the reports are reviewed.**

To derive maximum benefit from the work of their external examiners, degree-awarding bodies have in place effective ways of:

- considering the reports and, where appropriate, taking action as soon as possible
- ascertaining that subject/programme-level staff have taken account of the reports; for example, by recording the responses from the subject areas concerned and specifying how external examiners will be informed of actions taken
- ensuring that those responsible for a particular assessment are made aware of the relevant external examiner's report and are monitoring any changes that occur as a result
- deciding how recommendations which relate to organisational-level policies and practices will be dealt with and who will respond to the external examiner on these issues.

At senior management level, it is established practice for degree-awarding bodies to provide a summary of external examiners' responses annually. This enables them to draw out any themes or recurring recommendations, and ensure that these are fully addressed at appropriate levels. A first step in this process may be to produce an overview report for consideration by the relevant quality assurance committee(s). Decisions can then be made about consequent actions to enhance provision.

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

## Indicator 16

**Degree-awarding bodies provide external examiners with a considered and timely response to their comments and recommendations, outlining any actions they will be taking as a result or the reasons for not taking action.**

External examiners need to have confidence that the degree-awarding bodies they are assisting are giving proper consideration to the comments and recommendations they have made. This does not mean that degree-awarding bodies have to agree with or accept them all.

The formal response from a degree-awarding body to the external examiner is an important part of the feedback process. Responses to external examiners from degree-awarding bodies include considered feedback on their comments and recommendations, together with details of any actions taken as a result, or the reasons for not taking action. The degree-awarding body has final responsibility for the standards of its awards and the quality of its provision (irrespective of any arrangement with a partner or delivery organisation). Therefore the degree-awarding body has the right to reject the view of the external examiner. However, such rejection must proceed only from careful consideration of the issues raised and (in the event of significant issues) would normally be made in consultation with senior staff or a senior-level committee of the degree-awarding body.

## Serious concerns

In exceptional cases, external examiners may have serious concerns about the academic standards or quality of provision at the degree-awarding bodies on which they are reporting. There must be an opportunity for such concerns to be raised directly with the head of the degree-awarding body. As a last resort, and where the concern is systemic and not a one-off case of ineffective practice, the matter can be raised externally. This is done through an independent mechanism for the consideration of concerns (see Indicator 18).

### Indicator 17

**Degree-awarding bodies inform external examiners, in writing at the beginning of their term of office, that they have a right to raise any matter of serious concern with the head of the degree-awarding body, if necessary by means of a separate confidential written report.**

**Degree-awarding bodies provide a considered and timely response to any confidential report received, outlining any actions they will be taking as a result.**

External examiners have the right to make a confidential report, in writing, to the head of the degree-awarding body - for example, where it is necessary to name a member of staff. Such a report would be made as well as the normal annual report, the latter containing matters not deemed confidential.

Degree-awarding bodies determine the most appropriate way of informing external examiners of this right, normally using the letter of appointment and/or induction information.

Staff and/or student representatives are informed of the implications of any confidential report, or of the action arising from such a report, where these have implications for them.

### Indicator 18

**Where an external examiner has a serious concern relating to systemic failings with the academic standards of a programme or programmes and has exhausted all published applicable internal procedures, including the submission of a confidential report to the head of the degree-awarding body, he/she may invoke QAA's concerns scheme or inform the relevant professional, statutory or regulatory body.**

For information about how the concerns scheme applies to external examining, reference should be made to QAA's concerns scheme: guidance for external examiners.<sup>15</sup>

Recourse to the scheme will only take place in cases where internal mechanisms for following up concerns have been exhausted. The scheme's focus is explicitly on systemic failings in a higher education provider's management of standards or quality. Therefore, the scheme must not be used for one-off cases of ineffective practice, or to raise a personal grievance or issues relating to an external examiner's appointment.

Degree-awarding bodies ensure that their procedures are transparent so that there is no doubt between themselves and their external examiners whether internal procedures have been exhausted.

There may be occasions where a concern is properly a matter for the applicable professional body rather than for QAA.

# Appendix 1 - The Expectation and Indicators

## External Examining

### The Expectation

The Quality Code sets out the following Expectation about external examining, which higher education institutions are required to meet.

**Higher education providers make scrupulous use of external examiners.**

### The Indicators

#### Indicator 1

Degree-awarding bodies appoint one or more external examiner(s) to carry out the role(s) defined in this Chapter for all provision that leads to a higher education qualification of the degree-awarding body.

#### Indicator 2

Degree-awarding bodies expect their external examiners to provide informative comment and recommendations upon whether or not:

- the degree-awarding body is maintaining the threshold academic standards set for its awards in accordance with the frameworks for higher education qualifications and applicable Subject Benchmark Statements<sup>3</sup>
- the assessment process measures student achievement rigorously and fairly against the intended outcomes of the programme(s) and is conducted in line with the degree awarding body's policies and regulations
- the academic standards and the achievements of students are comparable with those in other UK degree-awarding bodies of which the external examiners have experience.

#### Indicator 3

Degree-awarding bodies expect their external examiners to provide informative comment and recommendations on:

- good practice and innovation relating to learning, teaching and assessment observed by the external examiners
- opportunities to enhance the quality of the learning opportunities<sup>5</sup> provided to students.

#### Indicator 4

Degree-awarding bodies have explicit policies and regulations governing the nomination and appointment of external examiners.

Degree-awarding bodies can terminate an external examiner's appointment at any time, subject to approved institutional procedures, for failure by the external examiner to fulfil his/her obligations or if a conflict of interest arises which cannot be satisfactorily resolved.

#### Indicator 5

Degree awarding bodies apply the following UK-wide set of criteria for appointing external examiners and make every effort to ensure that their external examiners are competent to undertake the responsibilities defined by the institution.<sup>6</sup>

Degree awarding bodies use the criteria to ensure that potential conflicts of interest are identified and resolved prior to appointing external examiners or as soon as they arise.

## Person specification

a. Degree-awarding bodies appoint external examiners who can show appropriate evidence of the following:

- i. knowledge and understanding of UK sector agreed reference points for the maintenance of academic standards and assurance and enhancement of quality
- ii. competence and experience in the fields covered by the programme of study, or parts thereof
- iii. relevant academic and/or professional qualifications to at least the level of the qualification being externally examined, and/or extensive practitioner experience where appropriate
- iv. competence and experience relating to designing and operating a variety of assessment tasks appropriate to the subject and operating assessment procedures
- v. sufficient standing, credibility and breadth of experience within the discipline to be able to command the respect of academic peers and, where appropriate, professional peers
- vi. familiarity with the standard to be expected of students to achieve the award that is to be assessed
- vii. fluency in English, and where programmes are delivered and assessed in languages other than English, fluency in the relevant language(s) (unless other secure arrangements are in place to ensure that external examiners are provided with the information to make their judgements)
- viii. meeting applicable criteria set by professional, statutory or regulatory bodies
- ix. awareness of current developments in the design and delivery of relevant curricula
- x. competence and experience relating to the enhancement of the student learning experience.

## Conflicts of interest

b. Degree-awarding bodies do not appoint as external examiners anyone in the following categories or circumstances:

- i. a member of a governing body or committee of the appointing body or one of its partners, delivery organisations or support providers, or a current employee of the appointing body or one of its partners, delivery organisations or support providers
- ii. anyone with a close professional, contractual or personal relationship with a member of staff or student involved with the programme of study
- iii. anyone required to assess colleagues who are recruited as students to the programme of study
- iv. anyone who is, or knows they will be, in a position to influence significantly the future of students on the programme of study
- v. anyone significantly involved in recent or current substantive collaborative research activities with a member of staff closely involved in the delivery, management or assessment of the programme(s) or modules in question
- vi. former staff or students of the higher education provider unless a period of five years has elapsed and all students taught by or with the external examiner have completed their programme(s)
- vii. a reciprocal arrangement involving cognate programmes at another higher education provider
- viii. the succession of an external examiner by a colleague from the examiner's home department and provider
- ix. the appointment of more than one external examiner from the same department of the same higher education provider.

## Terms of office

- a. The duration of an external examiner's appointment will normally be for four years, with an exceptional extension of one year to ensure continuity.

- b. An external examiner may be reappointed in exceptional circumstances but only after a period of five years or more has elapsed since their last appointment.
- c. External examiners normally hold no more than two external examiner appointments for taught programmes/modules at any point in time.

### **Indicator 6**

Degree-awarding bodies ensure that all external examiners they appoint are informed about organisational procedures, practices, and academic regulations, and the crucial value of external examiners' feedback to the degree-awarding body as part of the broader system of quality assurance and enhancement.

### **Indicator 7**

Degree-awarding bodies communicate clearly in writing to all concerned the:

- modules, programmes and/or qualifications(s) to which each external examiner is appointed
- various roles, powers and responsibilities assigned to their external examiners, including the extent of their authority in examination boards.

### **Indicator 8**

Higher education providers include the name, position and institution of their external examiners in module or programme information provided to students.

### **Indicator 9**

Prior to the confirmation of mark lists, pass lists or similar documents, degree-awarding bodies expect external examiners to endorse the outcomes of the assessment processes they have been appointed to scrutinise.

### **Indicator 10**

Degree-awarding bodies provide external examiners with sufficient evidence to enable them to discharge their responsibilities.

### **Indicator 11**

Higher education providers recognise the importance, and mutual benefit, of the work undertaken by many of their staff as external examiners for other providers and agree with staff the time they need to fulfil these duties.

### **Indicator 12**

External examiners submit a report annually, at a time determined by the degree-awarding body, to the head of the degree-awarding body or to one or more named individuals that he/she designates.

### **Indicator 13**

External examiners' annual reports provide clear and informative feedback to the degree awarding body on those areas defined for the role in Indicators 2 and 3 (the core content).

In addition, their reports:

- confirm that sufficient evidence was received to enable the role to be fulfilled (where evidence was insufficient, they give details)
- state whether issues raised in the previous report(s) have been, or are being, addressed to their satisfaction
- address any issues as specifically required by any relevant professional body
- give an overview of their term of office (when concluded).

**Indicator 14**

Higher education providers make external examiners' annual reports available in full to students, with the sole exception of any confidential report made directly, and separately, to the head of the degree-awarding body.

**Indicator 15**

At both organisational and subject/programme level, degree-awarding bodies give full and serious consideration to the comments and recommendations contained in external examiners' reports. The actions taken as a result of reports, or the reasons for not taking action, are formally recorded and circulated to those concerned.

Degree-awarding bodies ensure that student representatives are given the opportunity to be fully involved in this process, enabling them to understand all the issues raised and the degree-awarding body's response.

At organisational level the general issues and themes arising from the reports are reviewed.

**Indicator 16**

Degree-awarding bodies provide external examiners with a considered and timely response to their comments and recommendations, outlining any actions they will be taking as a result of the reasons for not taking action.

**Indicator 17**

Degree-awarding bodies inform external examiners, in writing at the beginning of their term of office, that they have a right to raise any matter of serious concern with the head of the degree-awarding body, if necessary by means of a separate confidential written report.

Degree-awarding bodies provide a considered and timely response to any confidential report received, outlining any actions they will be taking as a result.

**Indicator 18**

Where an external examiner has a serious concern relating to systemic failings with the academic standards of a programme or programmes and has exhausted all published applicable internal procedures, including the submission of a confidential report to the head of the degree-awarding body, he/she may invoke QAA's concerns scheme or inform the relevant professional, statutory or regulatory body.

## Appendix 2 - Sufficient evidence pro forma

External examiners' report checklist:

[www.qaa.ac.uk/en/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/Documents/Quality-Code-B7-Appendix-2.pdf](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/Documents/Quality-Code-B7-Appendix-2.pdf)

## Appendix 3 - Membership of the advisory group for Chapter B7: External examining

<b>Name</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Organisation</b>
Dr Jack Aitken	Director, Senate Office	University of Glasgow
Dr Stephen Bostock	Head of the Centre for Learning, Teaching and Assessment	Glyndwr University
Hilary Burgess	Senior Academic Adviser HEA Subject Centre for Social Policy and Social Work	University of Southampton
Dr Tim Burton	Assistant Director, Research, Development and Partnerships	QAA
Prof Peter Bush	Pro Vice Chancellor Academic	The University of Northampton
John Davies	Head of Programme Development	Pearson
Jane Durant	Director of Quality and Performance	Gloucestershire College
Stephen Griffiths	Head of Quality Assurance and Enhancement	Cardiff University
Dr Frank Haddleton	Director of Academic Quality Assurance and Enhancement	University of Hertfordshire
Prof David Heeley	Pro Vice-Chancellor (Academic Development)	University of Abertay
Dr Anett Loescher	Development Officer, Research, Development and Partnerships	QAA
Dr Martin Lockett	Director of Academic Development	Ashridge Business School

Sophie Richardson	President	Queen Mary University of London Students' Unions
Dr Claire Taylor	Dean of Students and Academic Engagement	Bishop Grosseteste University College

# References

- <sup>1</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code)
- <sup>2</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/how-we-review-higher-education](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/how-we-review-higher-education)
- <sup>3</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=181](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=181)
- <sup>4</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us/glossary](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us/glossary)
- <sup>5</sup> UUK/GuildHE (2011) *Review of External Examining Arrangements in Universities and Colleges in the UK. Final Report:*  
[www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/highereducation/Documents/2011/ReviewOfExternalExaminingArrangements.pdf](http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/highereducation/Documents/2011/ReviewOfExternalExaminingArrangements.pdf)
- <sup>6</sup> B10 Indicator 21-23
- <sup>7</sup> B10 Indicator 22
- <sup>8</sup> Further information on the frameworks for higher qualifications and subject benchmark statements can be found in Part A of the Quality Code.
- <sup>9</sup> Further information on the frameworks for higher qualifications and subject benchmark statements can be found in Part A of the Quality Code.
- <sup>10</sup> Any reference to 'examination board' includes any equivalent body whether the term 'assessment', 'award' or other terminology is used by the institution.
- <sup>11</sup> In Scotland 'quality enhancement' is defined with reference to the 'student learning experience'.
- <sup>12</sup> 'Department' means the (nearest) equivalent unit or entity within each institution as determined by the institution.
- <sup>13</sup> For consideration of exceptions and special cases see the explanatory text on page 15.
- <sup>14</sup> Available on QAA's website at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/concerns](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/concerns).
- <sup>15</sup> Available on QAA's website at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=159](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=159).

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