

# EXTERNAL EXAMINING PRINCIPLES

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The external examining system has been a key mechanism for upholding academic standards in UK higher education for almost 200 years, ensuring comparability across different institutions. Within a system where autonomous institutions develop their own curricula, the UK higher education sector enables a vast range of courses to be offered which are linked to institutional research specialisms, local and industry needs, and student demand.

External examiners perform an essential function in supporting this diversity of subjects, acting as constructively critical peers. For example, they support course teams to ensure that students are assessed fairly and transparently by offering independent advice and support on modes of assessment and learning outcomes.

External examiners form a pan-sector network across UK institutions, offering a wealth of intelligence about academic standards and the quality of provision. External examiners help to assess whether students meet the threshold academic standards set out in the [UK Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications](#). This is a significant part of the systematic quality framework that each institution operates and is often integral to the role of academic staff.

These principles have been agreed by the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assurance (UKSCQA) and form an important addition to the [Statement of Intent on Degree Classifications](#).<sup>1</sup> They reiterate the value of appointing external examiners to work alongside UK institutions, thereby ensuring that students and the public can be confident that the degrees being awarded are a reliable and consistent reflection of graduate attainment. While they are not mandatory under any of the UK regulatory systems, they have been developed with and for the sector and have a strong role to play in protecting quality and standards. Therefore, the UKSCQA calls on institutions to commit to follow them and review their practices against them.

The principles are directed at the two main stakeholders in the system: individuals performing the role, and the institutions that appoint them. Both institutions and individuals will benefit from considering the principles as a whole when operating the system.

Institutions will also benefit from consulting the [Quality Code Advice and Guidance on External Expertise](#). In addition, there are specific contexts for research provision recognised within the [Quality Code Advice and Guidance on Research Degrees](#).

## The principles can be used by higher education institutions and examiners to:

- review processes and regulations in order to reinforce the essential role of the external examiner system in protecting UK academic standards and the value of qualifications over time
- support external examiners to carry out their role more effectively and transparently
- ensure that institutions achieve full value from the network of examiners who are engaged across the sector.

1. These principles are published by the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment and are endorsed by the funder regulators in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Providers in England are subject to the requirements set out in the Office for Students' regulatory framework and these principles are not endorsed by the OfS for the purposes of its regulation. For the avoidance of doubt, the OfS does not impose any particular requirements in relation to external examining arrangements.

## To be effective, external examiners should:

### 1. PROTECT STANDARDS AND ENSURE COMPARABILITY AND CONSISTENCY

External examiners advise and, where necessary, challenge the institution on how their students are achieving threshold academic standards. To do this effectively, examiners need to understand the role that national qualification frameworks, sector agreed standards<sup>2</sup> and, where appropriate, PSRB standards play in supporting student achievement, assuring quality and protecting the value of qualifications over time. External examiners assure the degree-awarding body that the qualifications it awards are comparable to those at other institutions. They do this by commenting impartially and informatively on academic standards, student achievement and assessment processes in the institution and their consistency with others. Wherever possible, they take part in calibration activities within their discipline. Examiners may also act in a role which is not subject focused but instead offers advice to degree-awarding bodies on their quality assurance processes and outcomes of awards, for example as a chief or central external examiner.<sup>3</sup>

### 2. ACT AS AN EXPERT IN PROVIDING INDEPENDENT CRITICAL REVIEW, PERFORMING THE ROLE WITH INTEGRITY AND SUPPORTING ENHANCEMENT

Examiners need to act in a way that is consistent with the importance of their role, by submitting written comments and reports on time, and declaring any conflict of interest (or not working for an institution as an external examiner where there may be a perceived conflict). External examiners, as independent experts, also advise and support course teams to enhance the quality of the course and associated student experience through informed commentary on approaches to teaching and learning, assessment tasks and criteria. They are assessment-literate and familiar with the current literature and research in assessment practice.

### 3. ENSURE FAIRNESS AND TRANSPARENCY IN ASSESSMENT

External examiners play a vital role in ensuring that assessment processes are fair, transparent and reliable. They advise the institution on whether assessment regulations are followed in determining student marks, outcomes, classifications and awards through the examination or awarding board processes.

### 4. MAINTAIN THE CURRENCY OF THEIR KNOWLEDGE

External examiners, as academics with research, scholarship and/or industry expertise in the subject discipline, are responsible for ensuring their expertise remains relevant and current, so they retain and develop their ability to provide appropriate advice and commentary on student outcomes and awards. To do this, they need to understand the most recent developments in their field and in assessment practice. They need to receive and engage with relevant data from the awarding institution on student achievement, as well as information about their particular context, policies, course learning outcomes, assessment criteria and marking conventions.

2. For the purpose of these principles, 'sector-agreed standards' include those within the [Frameworks for HE Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies](#), as well as the classification descriptors appended to that document (Annex D). Subject Benchmark Statements (SBS) are also useful reference points as they articulate student achievement at a subject level.

3. Some external examiners have particular roles (for example, chief or overarching a suite of courses) that mean not all of the subject-specific duties apply and the principles should be interpreted accordingly.

## 5. SUPPORT INCLUSIVITY AND EQUITY IN TEACHING, LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT

External examiners support course teams to ensure the content and context of teaching and assessment is appropriately inclusive and reflects the diversity of the student body. They also advise course teams on inclusive assessment approaches that help to mitigate attainment gaps, and ensure assessment is relevant and aligned with appropriate learning outcomes.

**To promote an effective external examining system, institutions should:**

## 6. APPOINT THE RIGHT EXAMINERS, ENSURING THAT CONFLICTS OF INTEREST ARE AVOIDED

Institutions appoint examiners with expertise in the subject discipline in question, who can comment impartially and informatively on academic standards, student achievement and assessment processes. Institutions should also regularly review their processes for avoiding actual or perceived conflicts of interest in appointing examiners (such as not engaging in reciprocal arrangements, repeated terms of office, or appointing individuals with close personal links to academic staff). Institutions should operate inclusive recruitment policies to ensure that the pool of examiners reflects the richness and diversity of the higher education sector.

## 7. PROVIDE ADEQUATE TRAINING TO ENABLE EXTERNAL EXAMINERS TO FULFIL THE ROLE

Institutions ensure that training and induction, whether at a local or institutional level, covers the minimum activities the external is expected to carry out. Institutions make sure external examiners are sufficiently knowledgeable about national reference points such as the threshold standards expressed within the [Frameworks for HE Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies](#), and, where appropriate, the relevant [Subject Benchmark Statements](#). This may include the [Advance HE training for external examiners](#) and tailored internal briefing on institutional data, processes and practices.

## 8. ENSURE THE ROLE IS FULLY UNDERSTOOD

Institutions ensure that a range of stakeholders are clear about the role that external examiners play, including students, PSRBs and their own governance structures. Appointees need to know precisely what is expected of them by the appointing institution through written terms of appointment. For example, a chief or specialist external may be asked to comment on the grade profile of an institution over time and/or assist in the preparation of [Degree Outcome Statements](#).

## 9. ENABLE STUDENTS TO UNDERSTAND THE VALUE AND PURPOSE OF EXTERNAL EXAMINING

Institutions should support students and/or student representatives to understand the value and purpose of external examining. This may be achieved by students or their representatives engaging with external examiners in a variety of ways and at different points, mediated and arranged by the institution, including through commenting on reports or, where appropriate, by meeting directly with the examiner of a course or module, while protecting the impartiality of the examiner and ensuring individual students' marks remain unaffected. This should help support students in understanding how outcomes are arrived at and how their awards accurately reflect their achievements.

## 10. ENGAGE WITH AND SUPPORT THE EXTERNAL EXAMINERS THEY APPOINT

Institutions ensure examiners' views are carefully considered and that they have clear reporting processes in place for them to submit their feedback. Institutions should ensure they reflect on feedback meaningfully, acting on it appropriately, and systematically reporting back to external examiners on any actions taken or not taken. Institutions should carefully consider examiners' views collectively as well as individually, in order to identify course or institutional trends, and have in place procedures for referring matters to the appropriate level in their governance structure.

## 11. ENGAGE WITH AND SUPPORT THEIR OWN STAFF ACTING IN THE ROLE ELSEWHERE

Institutions support their own staff who act as externals elsewhere and recognise their work in a range of ways, acknowledging that the external examiner system as a whole depends on the nationwide availability of suitable and qualified staff who are supported to carry out the role. This may include funding their professional development and recognising the additional work they carry out when allocating their normal workload. Institutions should also reflect on the value brought to their own provision by staff acting as externals elsewhere and seek to capitalise on the potential benefit for quality enhancement purposes.

## 12. REVIEW THEIR POLICIES AND PRACTICES AGAINST THESE PRINCIPLES ON A REGULAR BASIS

Institutions take a deliberate approach to considering the purpose and value of the external examining system. This can be achieved by reviewing their own arrangements regularly to ensure they are fulfilling the core purposes for effective external examining. A regular review process can also establish whether they are achieving the full value to be gained from having a network of examiners engaged across the sector.

These principles have been developed in consultation with the UK higher education sector and with the support of an advisory group, overseen by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) working in collaboration with Universities UK (UUK) and GuildHE on behalf of the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment (UKSCQA).

The UKSCQA provides sector-led oversight of higher education quality assessment arrangements that continue to be shared across the UK. The committee has members drawn from regulated providers in England and Wales, publicly funded universities and colleges in Scotland and Northern Ireland, and providers currently designated for student support by the Secretary of State in England. Student interests are represented by both the National Union of Students and individual student members. Membership is also drawn from the four UK higher education funding/regulatory bodies, sector bodies and regulatory partners.

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