

QUALITY FRAMEWORK

EXTERNAL EXAMINERS (ANNEX 1)

EXTERNAL EXAMINERS: ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

1. Introduction

External Examiners (EEs) have an essential role to play in the assurance of quality and standards within UK Higher Education. They are employed by the University principally to ensure that:

- the academic standards set for an award are appropriate for the qualification
- the academic standards of student performance are comparable with similar programmes or subjects in other UK institutions with which they are familiar
- the processes for assessment, examination and the determination of awards are sound and have been fairly conducted, in line with University regulations, policies and procedures

External Examiners are also expected to provide feedback and comment on good practice observed and to suggest actions to enhance the quality of the learning opportunities provided to students.

2. Context

In accordance with The UK Quality Code for Higher Education⁶, Sheffield Hallam University employs external examiners to advise on whether:

- The University is maintaining the threshold academic standards set for its awards in accordance with frameworks for higher education qualifications and applicable subject benchmark statements
- The assessment process measures student achievement rigorously and fairly against the intended outcomes of the programme(s) and is conducted in line with the University's policies and regulations;

⁶**UK Quality Code, Chapter B7, External Examining, Indicator 1 (extract from guidance on defining the role of the EE)**

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 academic standards and the achievements of students of the University are comparable with those in other UK higher education institutions of which the external examiners have experience.

2. Types of External Examiner

The University has two main types of external examiner role⁷:

- 2.1. Course External Examiner:** responsible for a course or group of courses and associated modules and for representing a course or group of courses at the Assessment Board. They may personally examine all modules which contribute to the course(s) they represent in their role at the Board or they may also represent a larger group of module external examiners at the Board;
- 2.2. Module External Examiner:** responsible for a set of modules. Module external examiners are not required to attend the Board unless they are specifically invited to do so.

3. Verification of Assessment Tasks and Moderation of Student Work

External examiners have an important role in both the **verification** of assessment tasks/assignment briefs and in the **external moderation** of student work:

- 3.1. Verification** - Examiners are expected to verify all newly created or significantly amended assessment tasks. External examiners also have an advisory role in respect of all curricula and may request to see all assessment tasks and student work irrespective of the level⁸.

⁷ **Chief External Examiner:** exceptionally, a CEE may be appointed to meet specific course or programme requirements that cannot be met by a Course or Module examiner. The CEE has no specific module responsibility but is responsible for representing a course or group of courses at the Board. Currently this type of external examiner exists only in the SHU Institute of Education where there is one CEE role to represent Primary Education and one to represent Secondary Education.

⁸ **UK Quality Code, Chapter B7, External Examining, 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
- 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.

- 3.2. Moderation** - Examiners are expected to externally moderate (usually by sampling) student work that will contribute to the intended award. External examiners are not required to moderate student work at levels which do not contribute to the calculation of the intended award (e.g. level 4 work for UG honours degree students is not externally moderated unless this is a professional, statutory or regulatory body requirement). However, in the case of Foundation Degrees, HNC and HND awards, where level 4 work will contribute to award classification, external examiners are required to externally moderate level 4 student work.
- 3.3. Provision of Information** - External examiners should be provided with relevant information to enable them to fulfil their role regarding what and when they will be expected to externally moderate. This should include a copy of the module descriptor, module and/or Course Handbook and, prior to the Assessment Board, a copy of the relevant reports to be considered at the Board, including summary statistics. External moderation of student work takes place either by making work available in advance to external examiners, but may also be done via an on-site moderation visit prior to the Assessment Board (see EE Methods of Engagement, below).
- 3.4. Referrals and Deferrals** - Because 'first sit' student work will have already been sampled and moderated, and the same marking criteria are employed for referrals and deferrals, it is not necessary for external examiners to look at referral and deferral student work.

4. External Examiners' Methods of Engagement

- 4.1.** Each Departmental Assessment Board (DAB) will decide how they would like their external examiners to engage with moderation by choosing one of six approved methods of engagement (if additional/alternative methods are proposed, these will be subject to approval by the relevant Department Board):
- External examiner receives student work for external moderation and attends to meet with relevant academic staff (e.g. course team) for discussions prior to the Board and attend the DAB (i.e. one visit) – *Course External Examiners*
 - External examiner attends the University twice, once to review student work and to meet with relevant academic staff for discussions prior to the Board with the course team and then to attend the DAB (i.e. 2 separate visits) - *Course External Examiners*
 - All external examiners associated with the Board attend the University to review student work and meet with relevant academic staff for discussions prior to the Board. The nominated Course External Examiner will represent the overall group of Examiners at the DAB - *Course External Examiner and Module External Examiners*
 - External examiner(s) attend the University over several separate or consecutive days to review student work, possibly meet with students and meet with relevant academic staff for discussions prior to the Board. Course External Examiner attends the DAB – *Course External Examiner and Module External Examiners*
 - External Examiner receives student work for moderation and attends the University prior to the DAB to meet with relevant academic staff for discussions but does not attend the DAB – *Module Externals only*

- External Examiner receives student work for moderation and engages with relevant academic staff via email, SKYPE, etc. but does not attend the University or the DAB
- *Module Externals only*

5. Departmental Boards

- 5.1.** Departmental Boards (DBs) are responsible for the academic and quality management of all award-bearing provision, including collaborative, that is 'owned' by a department. The timing of Departmental Boards is aligned with the annual quality management cycle. Departmental Assessment Boards (DABs) meet to ratify marks, student profiles and awards (see 6, below). The functions of DBs and DABs are carried out at separate meetings.
- 5.2.** Course External Examiners must attend at least one Departmental Board meeting per year (usually the January to March meeting to coincide with annual review processes). Course External Examiners will act in their capacity as both an independent external examiner and as a 'critical friend' to the department, providing advice and overall independent academic oversight as distinct from external, **course-specific** subject expertise. The Board should provide the Course External Examiner with an opportunity to input to the annual review process, hold discussions with representatives of the department's academic staff and/or students and provide advice on the academic standards of provision and on good practice.

6. Departmental Assessment Boards

- 6.1.** The timing of Departmental Assessment Boards (DABs) is aligned with the standard UG and PG Academic Calendars. Departmental Assessment Boards are the culmination of moderation and assessment processes which take place leading up to the Board. Assessment processing includes an opportunity for academic staff to undertake a comparative analysis of marks and performance between modules and between cohorts of students. Any anomalies in assessment processing (e.g. scaling of marks) should be discussed with the Course External Examiner and reported to the Departmental Assessment Board.
- 6.2.** Through their attendance and participation at Department Assessment Boards, **Course External Examiners** will:
- verify the standards of the University's awards
 - agree the marks, recommendations and decisions of the DAB
 - ensure that assessment processes are sound, consistent and fairly operated in line with University Assessment Regulations and related policies and procedures
 - confirms that the DAB is operating with consistency and fairness, according to University regulations and associated policies and in line with current HE sector practice DABs
 - provide advice on Board decisions, where necessary
 - provide comment and advice, as necessary, on specific course/module assessment and performance matters.

The Chair of the DAB should seek the views of Course External Examiners and discuss any issues which may inform the immediate business of the Board, as appropriate to verify that academic standards are secure. The Course External Examiner may wish to raise issues relating to module or course assessment, delivery and/or performance at the DAB and may wish to give further advice in relation to these areas.

- 6.3. Through their verification of assessment instruments and external moderation of students' assessed work, **Module External Examiners** will confirm module results and engage with module teams, allowing the preparation of student profiles for agreement at the DAB.

7. Meeting with Students and Student Feedback

- 7.1. All external examiners (course and module) should discuss with the course team whether it is beneficial for them to meet with students. Although there is no formal requirement for examiners to do this however, they should be provided with the opportunity to engage with students as and when appropriate. This will, in part, be determined by the nature of the discipline and assessment methods used for an individual course or group of courses. External examiners find it useful to meet with students in order to assist them in their evaluation of assessment methodologies and in forming a view on standards and on quality of delivery. Where external examiners have the opportunity to meet with students, the focus of discussion should be on the students' experience of learning and assessment.
- 7.2. The University expects external examiners to exercise judgement when reporting on student views, and interpret them against their wider knowledge of the course. Students should be encouraged to support and illustrate their views with examples of practice. The contribution from the external examiner is to provide an independent critical perspective on what students have to say. The University values student feedback and the course team should already have a good understanding of student opinion. It does not always add value for examiners to simply report student views as stated without placing them first in a critical context.
- 7.3. Student feedback gathered at module level, such as via module evaluation questionnaires, should routinely be provided to Course and Module External Examiners, as and when available.

8. Visits to Students' Placement Settings and/or UK or Overseas Collaborative Partners

- 8.1. Module and/or Course External Examiner visits to students' placement settings should be arranged by the course team, as necessary and where required.
- 8.2. Where an external examiner (this would usually be the nominated Course External Examiner) is responsible for provision which is delivered at a collaborative partner institution, the external examiner is expected to visit the collaborative partner location and meet with students at least once during their four year tenure. NB: Visits to placement settings and partners should be arranged by the relevant course team and the associated costs are met by the relevant department.

9. Submission of an Annual Report

- 9.1. All Course and Module external examiners are required to submit an annual report within one month of the main Departmental Assessment Board, using the template provided by the University. The University makes a formal response to all examiners' annual reports within a specified period.

10. Course External Examiners: Specific Role and Responsibilities

Course External Examiners are responsible for:

- Advising on assessment design and modifications

- Advising on curriculum design and modifications (currency, relevance, coherence)
- Verification of assessment tools and instruments - assignments, exercises, examination questions etc, as appropriate
- Confirming that internal assessment and moderation processes for courses and modules have been followed in line with the University's requirements
- Confirming the standards achieved by students on modules and courses offered by the University
- External moderation of level 5 and 6 students' work, and also sampling students' level 4 work as required, to assure that it provides an adequate preparation for level 5 study. For Foundation Degrees and Pearson Higher National awards, students' work at all levels should be examined
- Considering and advising on the comparability of standards where courses and modules are delivered at more than one location, including those delivered in collaboration with a University-approved partner organisation
- External moderation of module marks and confirmation of all module marks awarded (NB: External examiners are not employed as 'third markers' and should not be treated as such by course teams)
- Liaison and dialogue with the nominated University academic contact(s) for the relevant courses and/or modules
- Raising issues of concern for debate
- Sampling students' assessed work and sampling the assessment of student work, and externally moderating as necessary
- Considering statistical analyses (performance indicators) relating to courses and modules with which they are associated
- Auditing and confirming the rigour of assessment practices and protocols adopted by the relevant assessment board
- Conducting *viva voce* examinations in cases where the assessment board or the external examiner requires
- Reporting on all of the above matters, either verbally at the relevant assessment board and/or in the External Examiner's annual written report, as appropriate
- Reviewing and confirming progression decisions and recommendations for the award of qualifications, as agreed by the relevant assessment board
- Reviewing and confirming student profiles
- Advising in relation to aegrotat awards and similar exceptional student cases, when required

11. **Module External Examiner: Specific Role and Responsibilities**

Module External Examiners are responsible for:

- Advising on assessment design and modifications
- Advising on curriculum design and modifications (currency, relevance, coherence)
- Verification of assessment tools and instruments - assignments, exercises, examination questions etc, as appropriate
- Confirming internal assessment and moderation processes for modules have been followed in line with the University's requirements
- Confirming the standards achieved by students on modules offered by the University
- External moderation of level 5 and 6 students' work, and also sampling and auditing students' level 4 work as required, to assure that it provides an adequate preparation for level 5 study. For Foundation Degrees and Pearson Higher National awards, students' work at all levels should be examined

- Considering and advising on the comparability of standards where modules are delivered at more than one location, including those delivered in collaboration with a University-approved collaborative partner organisation
- Considering statistical analyses (performance indicators) relating to modules with which they are associated
- External moderation of module marks and confirming all module marks awarded (NB: External examiners are not employed as 'third markers' and should not be treated as such by module teams)
- Liaison and dialogue with the nominated University academic contact(s) for the relevant modules
- Raising issues of concern for debate
- Reporting on all of the above matters in the External Examiner's annual written report.
- Sampling students' assessed work and sampling the assessment of student work, and externally moderating as necessary

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