



Review of External Examining Arrangements in the UK

A discussion paper from UniversitiesUK, GuildHE and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

Introduction

The University and College Union (UCU) is the largest trade union and professional association for academics, lecturers, trainers, researchers and academic-related staff working in further and higher education throughout the UK. We welcome the opportunity to respond to the discussion paper on the review of external examining arrangements in the UK.

External examining is a vital element in institutional quality assurance within a mass higher education system. However, the external examining system is chronically under-funded, under-rewarded and under-recognised within institutional and national HE priorities. Below we make a number of suggestions as to how we might strengthen the system. However, draconian cuts in higher education teaching funding will make it even harder to realise the laudatory principles outlined in section 1 of the discussion paper. Similarly, we cannot see how resource-intensive recommendations (for example, on induction and training) will be acted upon in a climate of budget cuts and job losses. Above all, we believe that expanding higher education funding and increasing participation, rather than restricting the growth in funded places and slashing public funding, ought to be an important policy lever in coping with the economic downturn.

Section 2 - Role

External examining, which originated in relatively small and informal university networks, is now a major element in the UK quality assurance framework. The role of external examiners has also changed considerably in recent years. For example, there is now much greater emphasis on the ratification of grades and departmental processes than on the detailed assessment of individual student work. In this context we agree that 'more should be done to articulate, explain and promote the role of the external examiner' (principle 3).

At the same time, many outside commentators, including the recent Select Committee inquiry, underestimate the numerous layers of assessment and extensive working hours devoted to fair and robust processes of assessment that are undertaken *before* the external examiner arrives. We believe that more could be done to inform politicians of the crucial role played by *internal* quality assurance processes.

One of the problems with the current discussion paper, however, is that it fails to acknowledge the different levels in which external examiners work. External examiners often report that it is at the postgraduate level, particularly for PhDs, where the greatest discrepancies in conduct lie. For example, the UK doctoral viva is a more informal process than the committee-based systems employed in many other countries. UK Master's degrees are also extremely variable in content and organisation and can be overly influenced by their need to generate additional income, particularly from international students. Given these pressures we are disappointed at the lack of attention paid to the external examination of postgraduate degrees.

Despite these criticisms the initial ideas for minimum expectations for the role of the external examiner (pages 13-14) remain a good starting point. In relation to the section headed 'academic standards – fairness and rigour', we would suggest adding something to the effect "ensuring that double marking has taken place by the teaching team, and concentrating in particular on failed work, borderline cases and those above 70%."

In addition, we recommend that these 'minimum expectations' be developed into a *national job description* for external examiners. The national job description should be negotiated and agreed through an appropriate sub-committee of the Joint Negotiating Committee for Higher Education Staff (JNCHES).

Section 3 – Selection of External Examiners

UCU agrees that the selection procedures for external examiners should be as open and as transparent as possible. As part of this process we recommend that a proper equal opportunities procedure is included in any generic criteria developed for the appointment of external examiners.

Section 4 - Induction and training

UCU agrees that "all institutions should provide induction for external examiners who are new to the institution and training and development for first time external examiners". We recognise that there is a key role for the Higher Education Academy Subject Centres in helping to facilitate disciplinary networks of external examiners. However, staff induction and training are resource-intensive activities and educational development budgets are usually one of the first casualties of public spending cuts.

Section 5 - Recognition

UCU agrees that the ideal scenario would be one in which external examining is considered "*an important part of being an academic in a UK higher education institution and an expected contribution to the academic "health" of the subject, as well as a valuable learning and development opportunity for the external examiner*" (page 18). Currently many over-worked academics undertake the role out of loyalty to colleagues and the profession, and the pressure on individual external examiners continues to increase.

Difficulties in recruiting external examiners result from the lack of recognition for the role, the huge volume of reading and other work to be undertaken in a very short timescale, increased assessment pressures arising from responsibilities within one's own institution, and, of course, the lack of financial reward. It is these structural, workload pressures that may help to explain perceptions of 'cosiness' with the selection of external examiners (see section 3).

Above all, UCU believes that institutional support for external examining needs to be *strengthened*. In particular, we recommend that:

- External examining should be better resourced in terms of financial reward.
- Academic staff duties as external examiners should be considered as part of their work-load allocation *or* academics should be provided with 'time-in lieu' for the hours they undertake as external examiners on behalf of other institutions.
- The contribution made by external examiners should also be more widely recognised within their own institution (for example, by ensuring that it is included in promotion procedures).

UCU believes that there is a crucial role for trade unions in this process and that is one of the reasons why we have pushed for a national rate for external examiners at the Joint Negotiating Committee for Higher Education Staff (JNCHES).

We believe that, unless the external examining system is strengthened along these lines, some of the recommendations in the discussion paper (for example, new reporting responsibilities) will make external examining even less appealing than it is now.

Section 6 - Reporting

In principle, UCU supports greater openness and transparency in relation to external examiners' reports, including publishing the names of external examiners. We do not believe that issues of time and cost are legitimate reasons for not doing this (for example, external examiners reports could be posted electronically). At the same time, there is scepticism as to whether the information is likely to be of use to prospective and existing students. Some academics have suggested that full publication may inhibit external examiners from making honest and frank comments, and may also make it harder to attract new examiners.

Above all, it is important that new reporting initiatives do not inspire another set of oversight procedures that will be costly and, ultimately, largely a waste of effort (as were the previous TQA assessments of a few years ago). The sector already has an apparently built-in suspicion that academic and academic-related staff cannot be trusted to do their jobs thoroughly and without prejudice (a theme which also runs through section 3 of the

discussion paper). Many of these neo-liberal assumptions (i.e. of 'self-interested' professionals and public servants) are highly questionable.

Section 7 - Raising Concerns

UCU receives occasional reports from members about pressure to admit or to pass students, or to approve new programmes, against their academic judgement. The recent case of Dr Paul Buckland at the University of Bournemouth was one of the few cases to reach the wider public domain. In general, institutions are also under pressure in the HE marketplace not to disclose concerns about their own standards. In this context it is important that there is a clear monitoring 'loop' of whether/not and why/not external examiner suggestions have been acted on.

Moreover, the credibility of the external examiner system depends upon individual recourse to an *external* complaints procedure. At the moment we do not believe that the QAA Causes for Concern procedure offers such a mechanism. While this is partly to do with its relative invisibility it may also stem from a belief that the QAA is insufficiently independent from Higher Education Institutions or the Higher Education Funding Councils.

UCU believes that whistleblowing procedures and the academic freedom protections in the 1988 Education Reform Act have proved to be inadequate in protecting academic whistleblowers (for example, in relation to concerns about quality and standards). As a result, we recommend the establishment of an independent body for staff complaints akin to the Office for the Independent Adjudicator (OIA).