The Role of the External Examiner

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Context

• External examiner system dates back to 19th century but still largely confined to the UK and Ireland
• 1997: Dearing Review recommends strengthening the system through induction, training and preparation of examiners
• 2000: QAA publishes its code of practice on external examining (section 4)
• 2003: ‘The Future of Higher Education’ White Paper reinforces the importance of training and support for examiners
• 2008-09: parliamentary select committee report is strongly critical of the system and questions whether it remains fit for purpose – committee proposes a national ‘pool’ of examiners (not taken forward)
• 2011: Universities UK and GuildHE report finds the system is generally in good order but proposes principles and recommendations for improvement
• 2012: QAA revises and re-publishes its code of practice (Chapter B7 of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education)
Other issues considered

In addition to training and support –

• Transparency of the role (to students and the public) - inspector or critical friend?
• Clarification of powers, e.g. to change marks
• Examiners’ contribution to ‘quality enhancement’ (as well as assuring standards)
UKQCHE Chapter B7

Expectation (mandatory): “Higher education providers make scrupulous use of external examiners”

‘Indicators of sound practice’ – includes Indicator 2: Awarding institutions expect their external examiners to provide informative comment and recommendations upon whether or not:

- an institution is maintaining the threshold academic standards* set for its awards in accordance with the 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 institution's policies and regulations
- the academic standards and the achievements of students are comparable with those in other UK higher education institutions of which the external examiners have experience.

* Set by reference to the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications and subject benchmark statements (UK Quality Code Part A)
Chapter B7 Indicators (continued)

Indicator 3 - Awarding institutions 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.

Indicator 12 - External examiners **submit a report annually**, at a time determined by the institution, to the head of the institution or to one or more named individuals that he/she designates.
Chapter B7 Indicators (continued)

Indicator 13 - External examiners' annual reports provide clear and informative feedback to the institution 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).
The Edge Hill examiner also

• Approves examination papers (normally at Level 5 upwards) and other assessment material as agreed with the department and comments on any proposed module or (minor) programme modifications

• Visits the University at least once a year to review samples of assessed student work and confirm that assessment including internal moderation has taken place fairly and in line with the validated learning outcomes (examiners of Initial Teacher Training programmes also visit trainees on school placement)

• Attends the relevant assessment board(s), commenting on the extent to which the Academic Regulations are applied fairly and consistently, discretion used appropriately and procedures relating to extenuating mitigating circumstances and academic malpractice applied fairly
The Edge Hill examiner also

- **In exceptional cases**, may be asked to act as arbitrator on borderline cases or may seek to implement changes to marks, taking due account of the effect of such changes on the rest of the assessed cohort
- Submits their report within 4 weeks of the relevant assessment board(s)
- Provides written comments on proposed (major) programme modifications
The examiner’s report

Specifies clearly the modules/programmes being examined

• Q.B1: Did the administrative procedures permit you to carry out the role effectively?
• Q.B2: Were you provided with sufficient information relating to the programmes(s) and its/their assessment for you to carry out your duties and responsibilities?
• Q.B3: Have responses by the Programme Team to issues raised in your previous report(s) been satisfactory?
• Q.C1: Please comment on how far the assessments reflect the learning outcomes of individual module/programmes
• Q.C2: Were the assessments appropriately structured and scheduled? Did the assessments permit fair and equitable assessment of individual students?
The examiner’s report (contd)

• Q.C3: Was the standard of marking of assessments and their moderation satisfactory?
• Q.C4: Was there anything in the curriculum or teaching, learning assessment strategy that you feel might be worthy of wider dissemination?
• Q.C5: (Where applicable) Please comment on the assessment of Work-Based Learning (WBL) in the programme
• Q.D1: What is your perception of students’ knowledge and academic skills in the module(s)?
• Q.D2: Please comment on the extent to which there is evidence that students are achieving the intended learning outcomes
• Q.D3: Are there any improvements that you can suggest that would enhance the student learning experience?
The examiner’s report (contd)

• Q.D4: Are the standards of the module(s)/programme appropriate and are the students achieving them?
• Q.D5: In your view are the standards being set for, and achieved by, Edge Hill students comparable with similar subjects offered at this level elsewhere?
• Q.E1: Are there any comments you wish to make about the module(s)/programme that would be of interest to the relevant PSRB?
• Q.F1: Are there any comments you wish to make on specific modules or other aspects of the programmes for which you have responsibility or any other matters you would wish to raise?
References

• National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education 1997 (Dearing Report) Higher education in the learning society: qualifications and standards (chapter 10)
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  http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmduis/170/17002.htm

• QAA (2009) Thematic enquiries into concerns about academic quality and standards in higher education in England: Final Report
  http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Documents/FinalReportApril09.pdf

• Universities UK and GuildHE (2011) Review of external examining arrangements in universities and colleges in the UK: Final Report and Recommendations:

• QAA (2012) UK Quality Code for Higher Education Chapter B7 External examining
  http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Documents/B7.pdf

• Higher Education Academy (2012) A handbook for external examining