The Role of the External Examiner

Anthony Turjansky
Director of Quality Assurance
Academic Quality & Development Unit
Edge Hill University
Context

• The external examiner system dates back to the 19th century but is 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 first 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)

2014-15: HEFCE responds to continuing criticism of standards (supported by HEA research) by proposing a national External Examiners’ Register with sector-level training – 2016: still on the table for discussion
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)
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.
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 Education 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

• Did the administrative procedures permit you to carry out the role effectively?
  – Please provide comments on the administrative procedures
• Were you provided with sufficient information relating to the programmes(s) and its/their assessment for you to carry out your duties and responsibilities?
  – What information helped you carry out your role?
• Have responses by the Programme Team to issues raised in your previous report(s) been satisfactory?
  – If no please explain why
• Please comment on how far the assessments reflect the learning outcomes of individual module/programmes
• Were the assessments appropriately structured and scheduled?
The examiner’s report (contd)

• Did the assessments permit fair and equitable assessment of individual students?
  – Please provide additional comments here
• Was the standard of marking of assessments and their moderation satisfactory?
  – If no please provide additional comments here
• Was there anything in the curriculum or teaching, learning assessment strategy that you feel might be worthy of wider dissemination?
• (Where applicable) Please comment on the assessment of Work-Based Learning (WBL) in the programme
• What is your perception of students’ knowledge and academic skills in the module(s)?
• Please comment on the extent to which there is evidence that students are achieving the intended learning outcomes
• Are there any improvements that you can suggest that would enhance the student learning experience?
  – Please provide additional comments here
The examiner’s report (contd)

- Are the standards of the module(s)/programme appropriate and are the students achieving them?
  - If NO please elaborate
- In your view are the standards being set for and achieved by Edge Hill students comparable with similar subjects offered at this level elsewhere?
  - If NO please elaborate
- Are there any comments you wish to make about the module(s)/programme that would be of interest to the relevant PSRB?
- 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?
‘The Business of External Examining’
(workshop activity – Professor Mark Schofield)

Working in tables and using the example external examiner report in the pack:

1. Read the report individually (10 minutes)
2. Via group discussion, agree up to 3 strengths in the writing of the report and up to 3 areas for possible development (10 minutes)
3. Table rapporteur feeds back to the whole room with comments and any questions (10 minutes)
References


