# External Examining

## Putting the Principles into Practice

# Contents

# About this advice

This advice has been developed with, and for, the higher education sector. It links closely to the External Examining Principles published as an addition to the UKSCQA Statement of Intent on degree classification but, like those principles, it is not regulatory in any part of the UK. The Statement of Intent, developed by the sector on behalf of the UKSCQA, aims to protect the value of UK degrees. This external examining advice supports that aim by promoting effective external examining practice.

The External Examining Principles complement the guidance set out in the Quality Code for Higher Education - Advice and Guidance: External Expertise.

This advice expands on the External Examining Principles to give practical help to external examiners and the degree-awarding bodies that appoint them. It describes activities that we know are taking place in the sector and also sets out functions and practices that are optional for external examiners and institutions to follow. It can be applied to postgraduate as well as undergraduate courses.

While specific sections of this document are addressed to either external examiners or institutions, both groups of readers will benefit from considering the advice as a whole.

## Reflective questions

Alongside this advice, we have produced a set of reflective questions based on the principles which examiners and institutions can use as a quick tool to evaluate their roles and approaches to external examining.

## Context

In the UK higher education system, each institution with degree awarding powers has responsibility for setting and maintaining the academic standards of its degrees - engaging with sector reference points and standards. To do this, institutions rely on a range of external expertise for advice, including through their approval, monitoring and review processes. External examining is a key component of this system.

External examiners enable institutions to consider how their practices compare with those of other institutions. Based on their qualifications and experience, external examiners provide carefully considered advice on the academic standards of the awards, courses and/or modules to which they have been assigned. They can also offer advice on good practice and opportunities to enhance the quality of those courses /modules. A key part of their role is their ability to offer an informed view of how academic standards compare with the same or similar awards at other higher education institutions (primarily in the UK, and sometimes overseas).

External examiners are commonly appointed to work at module or course level, either for single courses or for clusters of subjects. Institutions can also appoint chief external examiners to give an organisation-wide perspective on standards, and can appoint external advisers to help with the production of degree outcomes statements, as suggested by the Statement of Intent.

# External Examining Principles

The principles address examiners and institutions. This section sets out the principles without additional explanatory text.

To be effective, external examiners should:

1       protect standards and ensure comparability and consistency

2       act as an expert in providing independent critical review, performing the role with integrity and supporting enhancement

3       ensure fairness and transparency in assessment

4       maintain the currency of their knowledge

5       support inclusivity and equity in teaching, learning and assessment.

To promote an effective external examining system, institutions should:

6       appoint the right examiners, ensuring that conflicts of interest are avoided

7       provide adequate training to enable external examiners to fulfil the role

8       ensure the role is fully understood

9       enable students to understand the value and purpose of external examining

10      engage with and support the external examiners they appoint

11      engage with and support their own staff acting in the role elsewhere

12      review their policies and practices against these principles on a regular basis.

## Principle 1 - To be effective, external examiners should protect standards and ensure comparability and consistency

### Reference points and comparing student performance to standards

1       One way that external examiners can be supported in their role to protect academic standards is by engaging with sector reference points. These include the threshold standards in The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies, as well as the classification descriptors for bachelor's degrees with honours in Annex D appended to that document. While Annex D's classification descriptors can be used by providers as the basis for developing their own descriptors, they can also be used by external examiners as a baseline indicator for student achievement. QAA Subject Benchmark Statements (SBS) are also useful reference points as they articulate student achievement at a subject level.[1] Standards may also be published by relevant professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) in accredited or approved subjects. External examiners can then compare these standards to the assessment standards/marking criteria being used by the institution to which they are appointed.

2       External examiners also protect academic standards by giving feedback to the awarding institution on the comparability of standards and student achievement, based on the external examiner's experience of other institutions. This experience might be gained as

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[1] The Office for Students has its own definition of 'Sector recognised standards' with which institutions in England are required to comply as part of the conditions of registration in that nation.

a member of staff or through other external examiner roles. This comparability can be across modules within a single course, courses as a whole and student cohorts, and between different locations (transnational education (TNE)). Data (relevant to the course) on an institution's grade profile should be made available to external examiners, to enable this comparison (see paragraph 59). Some institutions have chief externals who may also be asked to comment on an institution's use of algorithms used to calculate students' degree classifications. However these roles are organised, institutions will benefit from external examiners' views on degree classification trends and the factors that contribute to changes in them.

3        In some cases, especially at postgraduate level, courses can be very specialist, limiting the extent to which comparisons can be made. Some external examiners may also be asked to perform additional duties as part of the quality assurance of higher and degree (or graduate) apprenticeships, in particular the End Point Assessments (EPAs) in England. More information is available in the [Designated Quality Body's handbook on end-point assessment external quality assurance](#).

## Sampling assessed work

4        External examiners for taught courses are not responsible for, or involved in, the assessment of individual students - for example, they do not mark assessed work. However, to fulfil their role, external examiners view student work - ranging from reading essays or examination scripts to viewing performances (live or recorded), media or artefacts. This allows external examiners to see whether markers have assessed student performance against the standards of the course, as well as helping to form a view on whether those standards are in line with national thresholds.

5        The volume of assessment generally means that an external examiner is unlikely to be able to view all the assessed work, unless the cohort is small, so they are usually viewing samples. Samples need to be of sufficient size to enable them to form a view on marking practices on courses and should include examples from different degree classifications, including fails. External examiners should be familiar with the marking and moderation policies of the institution, which should set out the sampling protocol they use. In viewing samples of students' assessed work, external examiners should not expect or encourage an examination board to raise or lower marks for individual students, because this would be unfair to those candidates whose work is not part of the sample.

6        Institutions should have clear procedures for considering and acting on external examiner reports. These procedures should make explicit what action will be taken immediately to address any concern the external examiner has about the internal marking. This may include providing the external with access to a larger sample or wider range of assessed work. The institution should inform the external examiner if it decides not to take action in relation to any particular comments, and explain why.

## Reports

7        External examiner reports are the main formal mechanism for submitting feedback to the institution. These reports can cover the areas outlined below. However, each institution is able to determine the format, design and content of external examiner reports to account for different contexts, quality assurance approaches, and subject focus. It will be helpful for institutions to be clear about their expectations on what the externals they appoint should focus on and the level of detail they want to see in these reports.

8        The report template or guidance should cover the areas the institution wishes to consider in a way that elicits informative responses - for example, by using open rather than closed questions and asking for the inclusion of supporting evidence.

9　　　External examiners' annual reports should provide clear and informative feedback to the institution on areas, which are likely to include:

- whether 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

- whether the assessment process measures student achievement rigorously and fairly against the intended outcomes of the course(s) and is conducted in line with the institution's policies and regulations

- whether the academic standards and the achievements of students are comparable with those in other UK higher education institutions of which the external examiner has experience

- how teaching and learning approaches align with intended course outcomes

- confirmation that sufficient evidence was received to enable the role to be fulfilled (and give details if the evidence was not sufficient)

- whether issues raised in any previous report(s) have been, or are being, addressed to their satisfaction

- any issues as specifically required by any relevant professional body

- whether they have received the required support to fulfil the role, including adequate time to consider samples of work and contribute to examination boards

- collaborative provision from a degree-awarding body

- an overview of their term of office (when concluded).

## Suitability of reports for students and other stakeholders

10　　　Where reports are made more widely available - for example, to students - institutions will need to ensure that they comply with GDPR requirements. For instance, care should be taken about naming individual staff and students. PSRBs may view reports and may also require additional reporting from external examiners where they are considering regulated or accredited courses.

## Examination board responsibilities

11　　　Where external examiners are asked to be members of examination boards, they are not usually the final arbiter for the award of marks/grades - either within a module or for the final award. Such decisions are the responsibility of the relevant examination board collectively. Institutional regulations or procedures need to be clear about how decisions will be reached in difficult cases, especially those where candidates' performances are deemed borderline. Regulations will also need to be clear about the role of the external examiner at the board, differentiating between external examiners and any chief external examiners engaged by the institution.

## Institutional regulations

12　　　Institutions should clarify the extent to which they can expect external examiners to be familiar with institutional regulations and to comment on their correct application. This may also include commenting on the regulations themselves. There is value in consulting external examiners, alongside other forms of externality and consultation, when establishing new policies or reviewing existing ones. External examiners should be careful not to suggest changes which mirror regulations at their home institution on the grounds of familiarity alone.

## Principle 2 - To be effective, external examiners should act as an expert in providing independent critical review, performing the role with integrity and supporting enhancement

### Independent review

13      From the start of their period of appointment, external examiners should be provided with information about the institution's particular context, policies, course learning outcomes, assessment criteria and marking conventions, sufficient to allow them to give a fully-informed, independent critical review. The institution should ensure that external examiners have all the information they need to perform the role appropriately - whether this is provided in induction (see section for Principle 7) or through other means. It is good practice for external examiners to be proactive in requesting any information they think may be missing from induction briefings or introductory materials that the institution provides.

### Integrity

14      Examiners need to behave in a way that is consistent with the importance of their role. This will include declaring any conflict of interest or potential conflict at the appointment stage or, where the conflict is likely to interfere with the performance of the role, refusing an offer from an institution to become an external examiner. Conflicts of interest that may arise during an external examiner's tenure - for example, from a change in employment - should also be declared at the time.

15      They will review assessed work and submit written comments and reports on time, and act with integrity at all times.

### Enhancement

16      Awarding institutions should ask their external examiners to provide informative comment and recommendations on good practice, and innovation in learning, teaching and assessment they identify through their dialogue with course teams, as well as any opportunities to enhance the quality of the learning opportunities provided to students. Institutions draw on this feedback as part of their established module/course review cycle, sharing good practice internally.

17      These contributions can focus on assessment design, timing, and balance between assessment and learning and teaching. For instance, consulting with external examiners on draft coursework tasks and examinations allows the external examiners' expertise to inform institution practice as it occurs, rather than being retrospective.

## Principle 3 - To be effective, external examiners should ensure fairness and transparency in assessment

### Assessment

18      An important element of the external examiner's role is to provide assurance that the assessment process is properly designed and applied, and is carried out in a manner that is transparent, fair and equitable to all students concerned as well as supportive of achieving the intended module and course outcomes. External examiners can consider whether:

- the types of assessment are appropriate for the subject, the students, the respective level of study and the expected learning outcomes

- the marking scheme/grading criteria have been properly and consistently applied, and whether internal marking is therefore fair and reliable

- the assessment processes are carried out in accordance with the institution's regulations and procedures, whether they take place onsite or at a collaborative partner.

19      This role should not be entirely retrospective; in order to meet this principle, external examiners need to have reviewed an assessment before it is given to students.

### Mitigating circumstances and academic integrity

20      Decision-making on mitigating circumstance and academic integrity issues are the responsibility of the degree-awarding body and external examiners do not usually have a role in individual cases. Institutions may wish to draw on external examiners' experience across cases and/or when reviewing existing or drafting new policies in these areas. External examiners should be informed of decisions affecting a module result or a progression/award decision if they relate to the remit of an examination board.

## Principle 4 - To be effective, external examiners should maintain the currency of their knowledge

### Expertise

21      One of the primary functions external examiners provide is a subject-expert view on student outcomes and awards, whether that is from an academic or industry perspective. To maintain this, external examiners will need to make sure that their expertise is kept up-to-date and they take opportunities to further develop their knowledge. This applies throughout the period of appointment. This can be done with the support of their employing higher education institution and with that of the HEI where they are carrying out their external examining activity.

22      Academics who are external examiners should stay informed of recent developments in their field as part of their substantive role at their employing institution, through periodically reviewing relevant journals and keeping up with new publications. Retired academics can also stay up-to-date in similar ways. Industry-based external examiners should maintain current knowledge of developments in their profession and/or workplace. To support this

process, external examiners should be aware of significant trends in, and changes to, assessment in their discipline. They will also need to be aware of any changes and developments in higher education policy areas that are likely to impact their role, such as degree classification profiles.

### External examiner professional development

23      Fostering one's own development is part of being an external examiner. This includes taking advantage of the range of support mechanisms available, within the institution they are appointed to and nationally. Preparation for the role of external examiner is part of professional academic practice and can be reflected in development opportunities provided by institutions for their own staff, such as Advance HE's professional development course. Development activity may also draw upon key sector reference points and relevant QAA advice on, for example, education for sustainable development or creating inclusive subject communities.

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## Principle 5 - To be effective, external examiners should support inclusivity and equity in teaching, learning and assessment

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24      Inclusivity in a higher education assessment context aims to improve the experience, skills and attainment of all students, in particular those with different social and cultural backgrounds and in protected characteristic groups. It is about students seeing themselves reflected in the subject content and in how it is taught, ensuring the content and context of teaching and assessment is appropriately inclusive and reflects the diversity of the student body.

25      External examiners can make reference to how each institution's policies for inclusive practice in teaching, learning and assessment are being, or plan to be, incorporated. Externals can also support inclusive curricula by engaging in dialogue with course teams about course content, reading lists, study environments (including placements) and materials. Ensuring assessment is relevant and aligned with appropriate learning outcomes can help external examiners to discuss ways of mitigating attainment gaps with course teams.

26      External examiners may benefit from consulting guidance for QAA Members on creating inclusive subject communities. It will be important for institutions to support the external examiners they appoint, and for externals themselves to seek support in this area.

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## Principle 6 - To promote an effective external examining system, institutions should appoint the right examiners, ensuring that conflicts of interest are avoided

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### Appointment

27      External examiners are appointed in a range of capacities. The institution should be clear about which particular role and set of responsibilities each external examiner is being asked to fulfil at the time of their appointment.

28      The most common roles are as subject experts overseeing one or more modules. External examiners appointed at course or award level may also have oversight relating to a cohort's continuation as well as providing subject expertise.

29      Some institutions also engage a 'chief' or 'principal' external examiner who may have a cross-faculty responsibility or oversee multiple pathways. Institutions may appoint external examiners who have no direct subject expertise but can advise the institutions on other specialist areas, such as digital learning and assessment. Institutions, notably those in England, may appoint dedicated external advisers on degree classification - a suggestion made by the Statement of Intent - which is distinct from the more traditional external examiner role. External examiners can also be drawn from business, industry or the professions as they may possess considerable professional experience which meets the specific needs of professional or vocational subjects. They can also assist academic external examiners where the workload may be extensive (due to cohort size, for example).

30      Institutions should aim to have a suitably diverse external examiner pool, with that diversity contributing to the inclusiveness of their teaching, learning and assessment processes for students. Periodic (ideally annual) analysis to track any trends in the diversity of appointments is recommended.

## Processes for appointment

31      Institutions should have explicit policies and procedures that normally include:

*       the nomination and appointment of external examiners

*       criteria for appointments

*       the term to be served

*       termination arrangements

*       avoiding reciprocal appointments with cognate courses of other institutions, and for dealing with conflicts of interest where such appointments are unavoidable

*       keeping a central register of appointments and periods of tenure, to help institutions to avoid inadvertent conflicts of interest and ensure the pool of external examiners is refreshed

*       sufficient information about the role external examiners are being asked to undertake.

## Criteria for appointment

32      Institutions should develop criteria for appointment, including a person specification, that are designed to ensure that external examiners, either as individuals or as teams, have the qualifications, experience and expertise they need to fulfil the roles and functions expected by the institution.

33      When developing criteria for appointment, institutions should take into account the need to ensure that the pool of external examiners is not restricted, and, in particular, that it is possible for suitable people to undertake their first post as an external examiner and so gain experience in that role.

## Person specification

34      It is good practice for institutions to have a person specification for the external examiner role. Such a document is likely to cover:

a)      expertise, credibility and breadth of experience within the discipline to be able to command the respect of academic peers and, where appropriate, professional peers

b)      relevant academic and/or professional qualifications to at least the level of the qualification being externally examined, and/or extensive and equivalent practitioner experience where appropriate

c)      knowledge and understanding of UK reference points as outlined in the threshold academic standards in *The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies*, Subject Benchmark Statements, the Quality Code for Higher Education, relevant credit frameworks, regulatory requirements and the course learning outcomes that students need to meet in order to achieve the award

d)      competence and experience relating to designing and delivering a variety of assessment tasks appropriate to the subject

e)      awareness of current developments in the design and delivery of relevant curricula

f)      fluency in English and, where awards are delivered and assessed in languages other than English, fluency in the relevant language(s) (unless other secure arrangements are in place to ensure that external examiners are provided with the information to make their judgements)

g)      competence and experience relating to the enhancement of the student learning experience

h)      they hold no more than two external examiner appointments for taught courses (or equivalent) at any point in time.

## Conflicts of interest

35      Institutions should consider the following points in seeking to avoid conflicts of interest. A conflict will occur when appointing:

a)      a current employee, or a member of a governing body or committee, of the appointing institution or one of its collaborative partners

b)      anyone with a close professional, contractual or personal relationship with a member of staff or student involved with the course of study

c)      former staff or students of the institution unless a period of five years has elapsed and all students taught by or with the external examiner have completed their course(s)

d)      an external examiner from another institution when that institution appoints one from the first institution in a cognate course in return (known as a reciprocal arrangement).

36      These points may present barriers to appointing someone to the role, particularly in circumstances where there is a limited potential pool of examiners to choose from in small and specialist courses. Therefore, it may be appropriate to put additional safeguards in place to avoid the perception of conflicts, such as additional contractual requirements or oversight by a chief external examiner.

## Collaborative provision, joint and dual degrees

37      Degree-awarding bodies are responsible for the academic standards of their awards, so appointing external examiners is their responsibility, even if all or part of a course is delivered by a collaborative partner (or partners).

38      For joint awards (where a course leads to an award granted jointly by two or more institutions) and dual awards (where provision leads to separate but interdependent awards of two or more institutions), the arrangements for external examining are determined as part of the partnership agreement. Where one degree-awarding body is UK-based and the other is not, the former needs to ensure that the standards of its awards and the quality of its provision are secure. Other countries may have other means of assuring the standards and quality of higher education courses and awards - for example, national programme accreditation. It is the responsibility of the UK institutions to ascertain the quality assurance arrangements that are in place in the partner's country, and therefore the levels and types of scrutiny by the UK institution that are appropriate.

## Duration of appointment

39      Terms of appointment are a matter for the institution, but the typical period is four years, achieving a balance between the need to bring in a fresh perspective with the need to benefit from the external's knowledge and insight gathered over a period of time. Institutions can consider an exceptional extension of one year or more - for example, where a course is being brought to an end and a fresh four-year appointment would be inappropriate.

## Professional, statutory or regulatory body requirements

40      Where the appointment of the external examiner(s) is by a professional, statutory or regulatory body, rather than by the institution in question, the extent to which these criteria apply is a matter for the relevant body.

## Welsh language

41      Institutions in Wales need to take account of the responsibilities set out in the Welsh Language Standards. These allow students to request for their work to be examined in Welsh, so degree-awarding bodies need to ensure they have systems and processes in place to ensure their work can also be allocated to external examiners proficient in the Welsh language.

## Principle 7 - To promote an effective external examining system, institutions should provide adequate training to enable external examiners to fulfil the role

## Training

42      Training provided by the recruiting institution can include regular updates on assessment policy and procedures, drawing as appropriate on national support mechanisms for the external examining process, such as Advance HE's professional development course. A clear understanding by external examiners of the ways in which their work contributes to the institution's quality processes will help them to fulfil their role effectively. Institutions may also wish to consider calibration activities, where staff in subject communities come together to discuss, review and compare student work in order to reach a shared understanding of the academic standard which such work needs to meet.

## Induction

43    Institutions should provide induction for new external examiners, providing opportunities for externals to familiarise themselves with the institution and its assessment procedures as well as the particular role to which they have been appointed. The content and the means for delivery will vary across institutions, but should consider the specific needs of the external examiner, especially their level of experience in the role, and the size of the institution. For example, small institutions may only be appointing one or two new external examiners each year and therefore less formal arrangements may be appropriate.

44    Induction should also cover:

- relevant institutional and course regulations

- the institution's external examining and assessment guidelines including reporting requirements

- information such as student and course handbooks, and marking and classification criteria

- learning, teaching and assessment strategies

- any IT platforms used for student work and board activities

- relevant professional issues, such as fitness to practise, and any features that relate to the specific discipline

- GDPR and confidentiality requirements, particularly for external examiners recruited from non-academic backgrounds.

45    Institutions may refer external examiners to guidance and advice that has been developed by sector bodies and subject communities.

## Appointment of first-time external examiners

46    There is a risk of limiting the opportunity for staff to become external examiners, notably in specialist areas, by requiring previous experience. Where the nominee has no previous experience as an external examiner for any institution, appointment is usually made to a team of external examiners and/or with agreement that a more experienced external examiner will act as a mentor. There will be occasions when such an arrangement is not possible - for example, the size and nature of the provision may make it impracticable to have more than one external examiner.

## Professional candidates

47    External examiners from industry as distinct from those with academic backgrounds may not be able to fulfil all the criteria - for example, understanding higher education sector reference points, possessing formal qualifications, or having sufficient experience of assessment. Institutions should consider such cases as exceptions to their normal criteria. As with first-time external examiners, institutions should consider appointing them to a team of externals, or having them work with a mentor. Institutions should also provide appropriate additional training and support.

## Principle 8 - To promote an effective external examining system, institutions should ensure the role is fully understood

### Written terms of appointment

48      The appointing institution needs to be clear to their external examiners what they expect from them. This is most simply done through written terms of appointment but should also be reinforced through briefings, induction and training.

### Information for external examiners

49      Institutions should ensure that external examiners are clearly briefed to carry out the role, both at appointment and throughout their term. Briefings will need to confirm the module(s), course(s) or award(s) to which they are appointed, and the evidence they require to provide advice on standards. Institutions should also make external examiners aware of the processes for raising any serious concerns about the academic standards being applied on the course(s) or module(s).

50      They will also need clarity about their role in assessment tasks (such as in sampling or adjudicating in cases of disagreement), their remit in relation to endorsing the outcomes of assessment processes, and the type of commentary they are expected to provide on those outcomes. Any additional tasks they need to carry out for higher, degree or graduate apprenticeships will also need to be clearly stated. Providing written guidance for external examiners, setting out key roles and responsibilities, is recommended.

### Information for other stakeholders

51      Institutions need to be clear about the role that external examiners play in their quality processes to stakeholders such as PSRBs and government bodies. This may include the level of the external employed (for instance, chief, course or module), and the functions they carry out. In some cases, a specialist adviser may be asked to comment on the grade profile of an institution over time in the institution's Degree Outcomes Statement, and this individual may also be an external examiner.

### Membership of examination boards

52      External examiners may be appointed to relevant examination board(s), whether at module, course, award or other level. Where this happens, degree-awarding bodies need to be clear, to both the examiner and the rest of the board, what the external examiner's role is, as well as their expectations for attendance at meetings (including reassessment boards where applicable).

## Principle 9 - To promote an effective external examining system, institutions should enable students to understand the value and purpose of external examining

### Enhancing student understanding of external examining

53      Students play an important role as partners in the management of quality in their institution. Students are not always fully aware of the role external examiners play in the processes to maintain academic standards and enhance quality. It is good practice for institutions to consider how they can promote greater understanding among their student body.

54      One of the most useful ways for students to understand the value of external examining is by reading external examiner reports and by meeting with externals directly, to discuss their learning experiences (but not individual assessment grades). Some institutions also invite comments from students on the external examiner reports.

55      Institutions can explain to students how they can engage formally with the quality management processes through which institutions consider and respond to external examiners. Students who are asked to meet with external examiners are given clear guidance by the institution about the purpose of that meeting and what is outside the scope of the meeting (for example, individual assessment outcomes).

56      In the interests of transparency, institutions should make external examiner reports available to students, and to staff who are part of the course team in question. Where reports are made available to students and staff in this way, the reports should not enable individuals to be identified. It is good practice to actively involve students in conversations with course teams about the role of the external, their feedback and how the institution responds.

## Principle 10 - To promote an effective external examining system, institutions should engage with and support the external examiners they appoint

57      Listening to external examiner comments and feeding back on actions taken is a key part of the system. Institutions should have processes in place for handling these aspects, not just at the individual level, but for consideration of cumulative views.

### Supporting external examiners from outside higher education

58      Where institutions appoint external examiners from outside higher education, they may need to consider engaging with employers about the nature and extent of the commitment required. How do you ensure that external examiners views are listened to?

### Provision of information and data

59      Institutions should ensure that external examiners have all the information they need to perform the role appropriately. This includes providing information about their particular context, policies, course learning outcomes, assessment criteria and marking conventions. This may also include data looking at trends in student outcomes over time as well as across

modules/courses. Much of this should be covered by induction offered by the institution, but it is good practice for external examiners to be proactive in requesting any information they think may be missing from induction briefings or introductory materials that the institution provides.

## Submitting reports

60    The primary mechanism for institutions to listen to external examiners is via the reports they produce each year. External examiner reports should feature recommendations for changes to modules, assessments and sometimes even entire courses. These reports are based on what they have observed of the institution's assessment processes and student-assessed work. The reports provide invaluable independent feedback for consideration at module, course and institutional level.

61    The institution determines the timing of the report, reflecting the nature of the provision, the duration of teaching and assessment periods, and their timing in the academic year.

## Consideration and feedback to external examiners on their reports

62    Institutions need to consider external examiner reports at an appropriately senior level. For instance, those responsible for assessment and course delivery should consider the relevant external examiner report and make sure to monitor any changes that occur as a result. This gives assurance to institutions that their academic standards are being maintained. They also decide how recommendations which relate to institution-level policies and practices can be dealt with and who will respond to the external examiner on these issues.

63    Institutions need to give external examiners a considered and timely response to their comments and recommendations. Any actions to be taken in response should be formally recorded and circulated, as should the reasons for not taking any action. This will demonstrate that the institution has considered the comments from the external examiner. While institutions do not have to agree with or accept them all, external examiners need to have confidence that the institution is giving proper consideration to their comments and recommendations. Institutions can ask additional questions of the examiners, if necessary, to better inform any changes needed to their provision.

## Consideration of reports at an institutional level

64    It is good practice for institutions to provide an annual summary of external examiner comments to senior management and/or governance structures. This enables common themes to be identified across courses and over time, and it can also assist with the prioritisation of any actions, ensuring they are addressed fully at the appropriate level. In smaller institutions it may be appropriate to present reports in full, although it will still be valuable to identify themes and trends. Where the requirements of professional and regulatory bodies are involved, the institution may need to inform those bodies of action taken in response to an external examiner's report.

## Serious concerns

65    In exceptional cases, external examiners may have serious concerns about the academic standards or quality of provision at the institution. Institutions will need to have a clear process in place for how concerns are raised, and ensure this is communicated to their external examiners. These processes may be as straightforward as the submission of a separate, confidential written report to the appropriate senior figure or committee. These

processes do not supersede or replace the serious concerns frameworks operated by regulators and/or funding bodies across the four nations of the UK.

## Remuneration

66      It is for institutions to decide the appropriate level of remuneration for the external examiners they appoint. However, the sector sees external examining as a crucial professional role which should be remunerated appropriately. Institutions may also consider paying for professional development activities.

## Principle 11 - To promote an effective external examining system, institutions should engage with and support their own staff acting in the role elsewhere

### Recognising the work of external examiners

67      External examining is valuable, not only for the institution which contracts the external examiner, but also for the examiner's home institution. It is important that institutions recognise the significance, and mutual benefit, of the work undertaken by their staff as external examiners for other institutions. External examining depends, nationally, on the availability of staff to fulfil the role.

68      Institutions can support staff who wish to become external examiners by giving them adequate time to carry out the role, enabling them to manage and balance those commitments with their contractual duties. Institutions can also support staff to find vacancies and promote the requirements of the role to them so it is understood.

69      It is for individual institutions to decide how they recognise external examining work by staff - for example, through reward, recognition, promotion criteria or other means. Institutions may provide and/or support development opportunities in external examining for new and experienced staff alike. Regional networks and consortiums, for instance, may provide development opportunities of which smaller providers can take advantage. By doing this, institutions recognise the aspirations of staff to work as external examiners as part of their career development as well as enabling a better understand of the role in relation to their own provision.

70      Institutions can draw upon the experience their staff gain from external examining activities at other institutions. For example, institutions can engage with their staff who are external examiners to gain insight on themes and practices that are emerging across the sector - both in terms of good practice but also where there may be challenges that are common across institutions. There would be benefit in institutions considering how best they can access these insights - for example, by organising annual meetings of their own staff who hold external examining positions elsewhere, or a staff intranet site to share information.

71      As a starting point, institutions should consider holding a record of their staff who are active external examiners, which can be shared internally so other external examiners can see who else performs this role in their own institution. This would facilitate informal conversations but could also help to avoid reciprocal arrangements. This practice can also help institutions in ensuring there are staff development opportunities for those performing an external examiner role. For example, internal staff who act as externals elsewhere can act as mentors for newer external examiners at their own institution.

## Principle 12 - To promote an effective external examining system, institutions should review their policies and practices against these principles on a regular basis

72      The External Examining Principles are intended to reassert the value and purpose of the system, set agreed sector reference points that institutions and individuals can consult, and show that the sector is reviewing its practices and improving for the benefit of the academic community including students and staff. The principles are enabling, rather than prescriptive. They represent not only a roadmap for building new systems and improving existing ones, but also an invitation - institutions are asked to review their processes and regulations against the principles as this will help to reinforce the benefits of the external examiner system in protecting UK academic standards and the value of qualifications over time.

73      This review should take a deliberate, systematic form and happen periodically. In this way, relying on the well-embedded systems of self-reflection and internal review, institutions can support the work of external examiners to carry out their role more effectively and transparently, and ensure that institutions can realise the full value of the network of expert examiners who are engaged across the sector.

## Additional resources

External examiners and institutions may find the following resources helpful:

QAA External Examining Principles

Universities UK Statement of Intent

Advance HE professional development course for external examiners

Universities UK principles for effective degree algorithm design

Designated Quality Body handbook on end-point assessment external quality assurance

**QAA resources**

UK Quality Code for Higher Education

Creating inclusive subject communities (for QAA Members)

Hallmarks of Success resource on Assessment in Digital and Blended Pedagogy (for QAA Members)

The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies, and the classification descriptions for bachelor's degrees with honours Annex D to the Framework

Subject Benchmark Statements

Advice on education for sustainable development (for QAA Members)

Advice on producing Degree Outcomes Statements

Quality Code Advice and Guidance: External Expertise

Quality Code Advice and Guidance: Research Degrees

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