

ACADEMIC QUALITY HANDBOOK

SECTION 9

**EXTERNAL EXAMINING:
TAUGHT COURSES AND PROGRAMMES**

This section should be of particular interest to Heads of School and External Examiners, and all those involved in the assessment and examination of undergraduate and postgraduate taught students. All External Examiners for taught programmes are given the Academic Quality Handbook web address upon appointment directing them to this section and to Section 7 which relates to assessment and examination policies and practices.

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9.1 Introduction

9.1.1 This Section of the Academic Quality Handbook (AQH) should be read in conjunction with Section 7 Assessment and Examination Policies and Practices: Taught Courses and Programmes. These Sections of the AQH were revised in June 2013 in light of revisions to Chapters B6 and B7 of the Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) UK Quality Code for Higher Education (The Quality Code), which relate to assessment of students and external examining, respectively, the revised versions of which were published in December 2011. Chapter B7 of the Quality Code: External Examining can be found on the QAA website¹.

9.2 Purposes and functions of the External Examiner system

9.2.1 The primary roles of External Examiners are to ensure that:

- the standards set for the University's awards and a programme's constituent courses are appropriate by reference to relevant national subject benchmark statements, the National Qualifications Frameworks, the relevant programme specification and, where appropriate, the requirements of relevant professional and statutory bodies;
- the standards of student performance in a programme and its constituent courses are appropriate and comparable with those of similar programmes in other UK higher education institutions;
- the processes for assessment, examination and the determination of awards are sound, have been conducted fairly and are in line with the institution's policies and regulations.

9.2.2 In order to fulfil these roles, External Examiners should:

- be familiar with the national subject benchmark statements for their subject and, where appropriate, the requirements of relevant professional and statutory bodies;
- be provided with adequate information on course and programme content and the University's assessment policies;
- participate in the setting of examination papers;
- review a sufficient number and range of assessments to allow them to confirm the marks to be awarded to students;
- moderate internal marks where appropriate;
- participate in other assessment activities (e.g. clinical and oral examinations), where relevant;
- comment and give advice on course and programme content, balance and structure, and on assessment processes;
- formally comment on the appropriateness of the standards of the University's awards by completing annually an External Examiner's report.

9.2.3 In undertaking the above, External Examiners, in conjunction with internal examiners, are required to approve the overall CAS marks for courses and recommend the degree classification or postgraduate taught award, as appropriate. External Examiners are not necessarily involved in the award of non-honours degrees or diplomas or certificates that are purely governed by the University's regulations (i.e. those that are awarded on the achievement of the requisite number and level of credits following confirmation that a candidate has satisfied the regulatory requirements for the award of the qualification

¹ www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Documents/Quality%20Code%20-%20Chapter%20B7.pdf

concerned). However, External Examiners assure the overall standards of these awards by approving the overall CAS marks for the constituent courses, thereby confirming that a student has achieved the requisite number of credits towards an award consistent with the National Qualifications Framework.

9.3 The University's formal requirements

- 9.3.1 External Examiners make recommendations to the Senate, which authorises the award of degrees, diplomas and certificates.
- 9.3.2 Normally, no degree of the University will be awarded without participation in the examining process by at least one External Examiner, who should be a full member at the final Examiners' Meeting (see also paragraphs [7.12.19](#), 9.2.3 and 9.8.2).

9.4 The roles and responsibilities of External Examiners

- 9.4.1 In line with the expectations of the QAA Quality Code, the primary role of an External Examiner is to verify that the academic standards of the University's programmes and awards are appropriate and are being maintained, and that the assessment process is appropriate, fair and in line with institutional policies and practice, and that standards and student performance are comparable with that of other institutions (see also paragraphs 9.2.1 and 9.2.2) In addition External Examiners are expected to provide comment and recommendations on good practice and innovation relating to learning, teaching and assessment and on opportunities to enhance the quality of the learning opportunities provided.
- 9.4.2 In addition to the above, Schools should ask External Examiners to comment on:
- the design, structure and content of the degree programme and its constituent courses;
 - proposals for amendments to courses or programmes, including proposed revisions to the assessment procedures, before submitting these to the University's central committees for approval. (This would be particularly appropriate where changes were being proposed in response to comments from an External Examiner);
 - the soundness of the assessment policies and procedures, and their development;
 - an evaluation of the standards of achievement.
- 9.4.3 External Examiners may engage in discussions with schools at any stage during their appointment. Ideally, if time permitted, it would be appropriate to set aside a formal period for such discussions when an External Examiner visited the University to attend an Examiners' Meeting.
- 9.4.4 Any comments or suggestions made by an External Examiner either informally during a visit to the University or in formal External Examiner examination meetings should be discussed by the School. The outcomes of such discussions should be included in the School's response to the External Examiner's formal Annual Report (see Section 9.10), and should include whether or not the School has decided to introduce any changes (after approval by the University, where appropriate), and should give reasons if any suggestions will not be adopted.
- 9.4.5 External Examiners should inform the relevant Head of School immediately if any conflict of interest arises at any point during their appointment.

9.5 Nomination and period of service of External Examiners

- 9.5.1 Heads of School are responsible for nominating External Examiners for first degrees, including those components of joint degrees which are the responsibility of their School, and for taught postgraduate programmes under their School's purview. Examiners should be nominated using the form in [Appendix 9.1](#).
- 9.5.2 For the degrees of MBChB External Examiners are nominated by the Phase Co-ordinators.
- 9.5.3 For validated degrees, the head of the relevant academic unit is responsible for nominating External Examiners to his/her head of institution, who should then submit the nomination to the University for consideration: nominees must be external both to the associate institution and to the University.
- 9.5.4 The number of External Examiners for any particular degree programme must be sufficient to cover the full range of studies and the quantity of assessed material to be examined. More than one External Examiner may be needed where there is a large number of students or where the degree programme covers a wide range of content and is academically diverse.
- 9.5.5 Only persons of seniority and experience in the relevant subject area and who are able to command authority and the respect of colleagues should be nominated. The UK-wide criteria for the appointment of External Examiners, as set out in the QAA Quality Code Chapter B7 External Examining² were revised in 2011 and the University has therefore revised its criteria in line with these.

The University will appoint External Examiners who can show appropriate evidence of the following:

- substantial experience in teaching and examining in the UK higher education sector and holding an academic appointment of at least senior lecturer level;
- notwithstanding the above, those from outside the higher education system (e.g. from industry or the professions) are appropriate in certain circumstances. Well-qualified candidates should not be excluded on the grounds that they have no previous experience as External Examiners. If such candidates are appointed, Heads of School are responsible for providing the necessary support to allow them to fully understand the role of External Examiners and the University's expectations;
- knowledge and understanding of the reference points for the maintenance of academic standards and assurance and enhancement of quality in the UK higher education sector;
- competence and experience in the fields covered by the programme of study;
- relevant academic or professional qualifications to at least the level of the qualification being examined or extensive practitioner experience;
- competence and experience of designing and operating a variety of appropriate assessment methods;
- sufficient standing, credibility and breadth of experience within the discipline to be able to command the respect of academic and professional peers;
- familiarity with the standard to be expected of students to achieve the award being assessed;
- fluency in English;

² www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Documents/Quality%20Code%20-%20Chapter%20B7.pdf

- where programmes are delivered and assessed in languages other than English, fluency in the relevant language(s) as well as fluency in English;
- meeting the criteria set by any professional, statutory or regulatory bodies;
- awareness of current developments in the design and delivery of relevant curricula;
- competence and experience relating to the enhancement of the student learning experience.

A special case must be made on the nomination form (see paragraph 9.6.1 below) for any nominee who does not fulfil the above criteria.

The University will not appoint as External Examiners:

- anyone who is a member of a governing body or committee of the University;
- anyone who is a current employee of the University;
- anyone who is from a cognate discipline in one of the University's collaborative partners;
- anyone who has a close professional, contractual or personal relationship with a member of staff or student involved with the programme of study;
- anyone who is a colleague of persons recruited as students to the programme of study;
- anyone who is or knows they will be in a position to influence significantly the future of students on the programme of study;
- anyone involved in recent or current collaborative activities with a member of staff involved in the delivery, management or assessment of the programme of study;
- former staff or students of the University, unless a period of five years has elapsed and all students taught by or with the External Examiner have completed their programme of study;
- anyone who is from an institution where a member of staff at Aberdeen is an External Examiner for a cognate programme (e.g. a reciprocal arrangement);
- a colleague of an outgoing External Examiner;
- more than one External Examiner from the same department of the same institution.

Terms of office:

- All appointments should normally be for four years, thus allowing External Examiners to gain some familiarity with the programme and to participate in the assessment at all levels of at least one cohort of students.
- An External Examiner cannot be re-appointed until there has been a break of at least five years.
- An external examiner's appointment may be extended in exceptional circumstances for one year only to allow continuity.
- An external examiner may be reappointed, but only in exceptional circumstances and only after a period of five years or more has elapsed since their last appointment.
- External examiners should not hold more than two external examiner appointments for taught programmes at any point in time.

9.5.6 Those responsible for nominating External Examiners should contact the proposed examiner to obtain his/her willingness to act before submitting a formal nomination. External Examiners should not indicate a willingness to be appointed if there is any conflict of interest.

9.5.7 Where more than one External Examiner is being nominated, Heads of School may wish to seek the phasing of appointments, where practicable, so that at least one existing External

Examiner is involved with the assessment process with a newly appointed External Examiner, to provide a degree of continuity.

- 9.5.8 Nominations should be submitted to the Registry by 31 December for appointment in the following academic year (i.e. approximately nine months in advance of the academic year in which they would first serve. Nominations should be submitted on the appropriate form ([Appendix 9.1](#)), which can also be downloaded from our External Examiner webpages³, and should be accompanied in all cases by a brief CV (2–3 pages) for the nominee.
- 9.5.9 If an External Examiner’s appointment is terminated prematurely, for whatever reason, before the end of the appointment, the Head of School must immediately nominate a replacement examiner.

9.6 Appointment of External Examiners and termination of contract
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- 9.6.1 Nominations for the appointment of External Examiners are scrutinised by the Head of the relevant College (or his/her nominee) and by the Vice-Principal Learning and Teaching who, in approving or rejecting nominations, will monitor that the criteria indicated in paragraph 9.5.5 above are applied.
- 9.6.2 External Examiners are appointed by the University Court on the recommendation of the above Panel.
- 9.6.3 In accordance with the requirements of the QAA Quality Code Chapter B7: External Examining, December 2011, the Senate has the power to recommend to the University Court that an External Examiner’s contract be terminated prematurely at any time if he/she does not fulfil the University’s requirements as set out in sub-sections 9.2, 9.4 and 9.8. Reasons for termination might include: failure to return students’ assessed work with comments within an acceptable period of time; unreasonable refusal to attend Examiners’ Meetings or to participate by phone or video-conference when due notice has been given; persistent failure to provide written reports when requested by the University; failure to maintain appropriate levels of confidentiality regarding students and assessed material reviewed. In such circumstances, Heads of School should try to resolve the issue informally to ensure that the External Examiner understands what is expected and to allow the appointment to continue to the benefit of all parties. If no resolution is possible, the Head of School should recommend in writing to the Vice-Principal Learning and Teaching that the appointment should be terminated, given reasons for the recommendation. If the recommendation is endorsed by the Vice-Principal Learning and Teaching, he/she will recommend to the Senate that the appointment be terminated. If the Senate endorses the recommendation, Senate will recommend termination of appointment to the University Court.

³ www.abdn.ac.uk/staffnet/teaching/nomination-and-appointment-1654.php

9.7 Induction of External Examiners

9.7.1 Information on the role of the External Examiner, assuring quality, information provided to examiners by Schools, information on examiners provided to students, confidentiality, reporting, and payment and expenses is sent to External Examiners by the Registry. They are also advised of the following web address: www.abdn.ac.uk/staffnet/teaching/for-examiners-1163.php where they will also find this information including links to the relevant sections of the AQH.

9.7.2 Heads of School should ensure that External Examiners are given the following information at the beginning of each session:

- Course Guides/Programme Handbooks, including syllabuses, at the beginning of each session and/or at an appropriate point prior to the assessment (e.g. when draft examination papers are sent for scrutiny);
- Schedule for the scrutiny of draft examination papers.
- Schedule for the review of student assessments (continuous assessment and examination scripts).
- Dates of the examination meetings as soon as these had been agreed (see [section 7](#), paragraph 7.12.19).

In addition, on appointment, Schools should provide the examiner with:

- A written statement about how the courses being examined fit within the relevant programme(s) and the School's approach to education in that subject.
- A copy of the outgoing External Examiner's Final Report.

Further information for staff can be found on the following web page: www.abdn.ac.uk/staffnet/teaching/for-staff-1162.php.

9.7.3 Schools should also provide opportunities for External Examiners to become familiar with the University and to discuss their responsibilities and other matters prior to their first visit to undertake assessments.

9.7.4 Following the requirements of the revised Chapter B7: External Examining of the QAA Quality Code, Schools should ensure that details of all External Examiners (name, position, institution) are published in course and programme handbooks. Students should be advised that they may not contact External Examiners directly.

9.8 Participation in assessment procedures

9.8.1 Full details of the University's assessment and examination policies and practices for taught courses and programmes are provided in [section 7](#) of the AQH. Sub-sections 7.9 and 7.12, in particular, outline the specific roles of External Examiners in the assessment procedures.

9.8.2 At least one External Examiner must be present at all final Examiners' Meetings (see [section 7](#), paragraph 7.12.19).

9.9 Comments and advice to Schools

- 9.9.1 External Examiners should be encouraged to comment on the assessment process and the schemes for marking and classification. In some subjects participation in the devising of such schemes is essential.
- 9.9.2 External Examiners may often be able to give valuable advice to internal examiners, especially the inexperienced, either direct or through the Head of School.
- 9.9.3 Schools and External Examiners should use the opportunity afforded by the visits of External Examiners to discuss the design, content and structure of the degree programme and its component courses. There should be an evaluation of the soundness of the assessment policies and procedures and their development as well as an evaluation of the standards of achievement. Feedback from External Examiners on existing programmes should be gathered by all Schools, who should ensure that the matter is a standing item on their agendas for Examiners' Meetings. Schools should also discuss with External Examiners the setting of their own standards, including any associated with professional and statutory bodies and how these standards are maintained and verified. Any comments or suggestions made by the External Examiner should be discussed by the School and an explicit decision made about whether or not to introduce change, subject to approval by the University, where applicable (see Section 9.4.4).

9.10 External Examiners' reports and fees

- 9.10.1 Undergraduate External Examiners are required to submit an annual report to the University by 31 August, with postgraduate External Examiners having to submit an annual report by 30 November. All External Examiners are required to submit a final report (as part of their last annual report) at the end of their period of office. In late May each year, the Registry reminds all External Examiners of how to submit their annual reports for the current academic year and of the dates for submission.
- 9.10.2 In addition to answering the set questions on the form (see [Appendix 9.2](#)), External Examiners are encouraged to add any other comments they wish to make, including any observations on teaching, course and programme structure and content, and assessment policies and practices.
- 9.10.3 As reports will be discussed widely within the University (see paragraph 9.10.5 below), External Examiners may, if they wish, send an additional, separate and confidential, report to the Principal if they consider that this, exceptionally, would be appropriate.
- 9.10.4 Examiners' fees are paid on receipt of a fully completed report. Where a report is incomplete, External Examiners will be asked for further comment where deemed necessary.
- 9.10.5 External Examiners' reports are considered by an officer within the Registry who highlights on the report examples of good practice as well as any areas of concern or suggestions raised by an External Examiner. The reports are then circulated to the following:
- the Convener of the University Committee on Teaching and Learning (UCTL);
 - the Convener of the Quality Assurance Committee (QAC);
 - the College via the Assistant College Registrar (Teaching and Learning);

- the Head of the relevant School (via the School Administrative Officer, where appropriate) or, in the case of MBChB and BSc MedSci, the appropriate Phase Coordinator;
 - for validated degrees, the head of the relevant academic unit.
- 9.10.6 If the Convener of the QAC identify areas of concern or suggestions not highlighted by the Registry, they will bring these to the attention of the relevant College via the Assistant College Registrar (Teaching and Learning), who will refer the issue to the Head of the relevant School/Phase Coordinator.
- 9.10.7 Heads of School/Phase Coordinators are responsible for discussing the Report with relevant staff and sending their School's response to issues highlighted on the Report to their College.
- 9.10.8 Heads of Schools'/Phase Coordinators' responses to issues raised by External Examiners are collated by Colleges. A College response and this, together with the School responses, are submitted to the QAC for consideration in the Spring Term.
- 9.10.9 Any concerns raised by the QAC are referred back to the Head of School/Phase Coordinator via the College. Policy issues are referred by the QAC to the UCTL.
- 9.10.10 The QAC will close the 'feedback loop' by informing External Examiners of the action taken by the School or QAC in response to their comments. If a matter is referred to the UCTL by the QAC, the Clerk to UCTL will inform External Examiners of any action taken by that Committee in response to their comments.
- 9.10.11 The University circulates External Examiners' reports extensively within the institution, including to student representatives through the Staff-Student Liaison Committees. External Examiners should be made aware that the University may be required to provide copies of reports, or summaries or other information derived from them, to professional and statutory bodies, to panels of internal and external audit or teaching reviews, or to other agencies.