

## **Acting as external examiners in UK: going beyond quality assurance**

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### **Abstract**

Traditionally the role of the external examiners (EEs) in UK universities or more formally Higher Education Institutions (HEI) is for quality assurance (QA). Typically, an experienced academic not affiliated with the HEI (i.e. someone from another university) is invited to act as an EE for a particular course or a module. The EE's primary role is to provide impartial and independent advice to ensure academic standards are upheld for a degree programme; and that the degree is comparable with similar programmes across the country and that the achievements of students are also comparable with students on courses at other universities. This primary role makes external examiners highly valued people in most UK HEIs, and as a result, their views are nearly always taken seriously. Over and above this recognised primary role of quality assurance, external examiners can also be engaged by the inviting university in other ways. These additional roles or tasks of the EE can help enhance the teaching and learning in higher education. This chapter will reflect on the range of roles including the ones that go beyond the quality assurance.

## **Background to external examining in the UK**

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the UK often have a large number of external examiners on their books. We realize that having external examiners for undergraduate and postgraduate courses is not universal. For example, having an external examiner in the United States is uncommon, for example Columbia University's 21<sup>st</sup> century Public Health Master's programme does not mention external examiner at all (Begg, 2014).

In 2018, the UK Quality code for Higher Education published by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), a national quality body for Higher Education, states that the role of the external is to *“provide each degree-awarding body with impartial and independent advice, as well as informative comment on the degree-awarding body's standards and on student achievement in relation to those standards”*.

External examiners are hence perceived as crucial for maintaining the academic standards within Higher Education settings. Careful and well-balanced advice provided by experienced external examiners reflects their experience and awareness of many higher education providers in the UK and sometimes overseas experience. They are then able to compare the standards of assessment process and students' assessed work between the institutions and provide independent feedback in an annual written report. These external examiners' reports often go to the top of the university hierarchy, which is a sign that they are taken seriously and that they are being used by HEIs to take actions to improve quality. In the instance of systematic serious breach of the quality, the external examiners can write to the Head of the School or Faculty in confidence and in extreme cases has the remit to ask the Quality Assurance Agency to investigate any serious concerns/failings. All universities in UK have clearly defined role for EE. We list here the example from Durham University highlighting the roles and responsibilities of external examiners:

### **Box 1: Roles and Responsibilities of External Examiners in Durham University**

- to evaluate all forms of assessment which contribute to students' degree results;
- to evaluate, and help ensure fairness and consistency in, the assessment process;
- to moderate summatively assessed work at module and programme level;
- to comment on draft examination papers and assessment tasks as appropriate;
- to report on the structure, content, academic standards and teaching of programmes;
- to comment, if invited to do so, on any alleged cases of assessment irregularities.

Usually, each degree programme has at least one examiner, while the larger programmes may have several examiners. External examiners can be selected for specific modules or sub-disciplines in a programme or to individual years in an undergraduate degree. External examiners are typically appointed for three or four years, to ensure some consistency over a longer period. They often receive a small annual fee, the height of which is often depending on the number of students on the course. External examiners are expected to attend the university at least once a year usually to attend the exam board meeting at the end of the year. Some HEIs expect external examiners to attend twice a year, either once a term or for the final exam board meeting and the resit exam board meeting.

While the primary role of external examiners is quality assurance, the role of EEs can go beyond this call to improve the standards to teaching and assessments and improve student experiences. In this chapter we address the following external examiners' roles: (a) transforming student experience; (b) being a strategic sounding board; (c) becoming mentors or role models to less experienced staff; (d) acting as a referee; and (e) being a supportive but critical friend. Last but not least we highlight the advantage for the external examiner's home institution. The latter benefit through examples of good practice and ideas for innovation brought home by the external examiners.

**Transforming student experience:** Universities, first and foremost, will normally use external examiners only for QA, whom they see primarily as the person doing the overall quality control of the course. For example, the policy and guidelines for external examiners published by University of Oxford in 2018 regards external examiners as ‘arbiters of standards: “Individuals may be nominated to serve as external examiner in one of two categories: either (1) as an external arbiter of standards; or (2) to provide academic expertise not otherwise obtainable within the University.”

With subject expertise and level of experience, EEs assure quality by making sure the subject specific content of the individual courses/modules fits with the overall programme, assessments are appropriately designed and organised, marking adheres to the standard criteria set using a marking rubric, looking at standards across the sector and ensure adherence to faculty and/or university policies. EEs accomplish these tasks through the pedagogical knowledge, confidence and the teaching experience, both in understanding the quality assurance approaches relevant for the country and understanding the academic standards for a given course or a module. This quality assurance monitoring involves checking and approving the questions for continuous assessments and examination papers. This usually involves commenting and editing questions prior to exams as well as assessing model answers drafted by academics on the course. External examiners also check a sample of work by the students to ensure consistency in marking and making sure a fair assessment process was followed. Typically external examiners get a few of the top, middle and bottom marks to assess both the fairness and the accuracy of the marking.

Some universities use the EEs as an independent referee to give a third (or second) opinion on students' work, course-related issues, for example in the event of discrepancies between the internal markers of a thesis or dissertation; HEIs can also bring the external examiners in as a moderator where the internal exam board could not arrive on an agreement. All of these approaches used and activities carried out by the EEs can be very much hands off, with some EEs rarely meeting any students on the course or even many of the lecturers on the course. Whilst on other occasions however, HEIs may introduce the EEs to all or selected number of students, perhaps at a semi-informal meeting, such as poster presentations or oral presentations. External examiners will sometimes ask to directly examine the student performance in the form of viva, to endorse the level of degree classification to be awarded to the student (e.g. pass/fail or distinction/commendation categories).

This role, in its absolute, can be done to some degree without meeting any students or other lecturers on the course/module. The reliable judgements on the academic side can be desk-based, i.e. made with no interaction with the students at all. However, many would argue that argue that best practice would include the meeting of students and lecturers to get a more holistic view of the education provision. In the wider view of external examining, in addition to bringing in an independent evaluation of the courses or modules and their standards of achievement, the external examiner can improve the learning process and experience of the students. The interaction with the independent evaluator in the form of external examiner does provide the students with richer experience extending the learning process beyond the end of the exams. From the authors' experiences, interactions ranged from examining every student for a 10 to 15 minute viva in order to determine the level of award to examining every borderline category (fail/pass; normal pass/commendation; commendation to distinction) to have the assurance that the right classification was awarded. It is the matter of striking a

balance between the strict process of quality assurance by making the external examiner meet all the students in the exam setting and not meet the students at all. In one case study, instead of the external examiner meeting with all the students with borderline classification, the EE examined the students, for whom the internal exam board could not come to a decision. This was followed by an opportunity to attend a poster presentation by all the students. The interaction helped motivate the students to meet the EE and also enhance the learning through conference style presentation.

**Strategic sounding board:** Some of the HEIs are a little more strategic in their approach in using the EEs for advice on curriculum development and the future directions of a programme, or the way forward regarding ways of marking or specific course content. Nearly all external examiners come with experience of co-ordinating their own programmes, have experiences of reviewing programmes to improve the quality of the courses and ways of attracting more and better students. Often they also have past experience from acting as external examiners in other HEIs or from teaching elsewhere, including teaching abroad. This makes them experts in understanding the national and international level thresholds of quality of teaching and learning. With this wider experience, external examiners can bring in the ‘outsider’ and ‘unbiased’ perspective to strategic development of courses. They can become a critical friend by casting a fresh eye over the course content, not constrained by the internal politics of the institution. Course coordinators may ask the advice from their external examiners on developing a new module on an existing programme or coordinators may seek advice on changing assessment methods for a particular module or the balance of various assessment methods across all modules of a programme. They can provide honest and sincere feedback, be encouraging and supportive but speak truthfully and constructively. They can also bring their experience from the university where they are employed and from other HEIs

where they have acted as external examiners. Simple suggestions, based on what works elsewhere can help programme coordinators a lot, for example, offering statements like; “Are you aware that the University of XXX does this slightly differently, namely they .....”; or “When I was external at the University of YYY the programme team decided that it would be better to change the assignment to oral exams from written exams on a similar module to what you are discussion today. Initially this did not work, but it went much better, and was much better appreciated by the students after they also did .....” While some critical comments might be uncomfortable for programme coordinators, teaching staff or heads of department to hear, such reliable judgements, advice on good practices and impartial advice can help the institutions to enhance the quality of the programmes/modules.

**Mentors or role models to less experienced staff:** Sometimes the role of the external goes beyond quality assurance in acting as a mentor for slightly less experienced teachers/coordinators. Experienced externals use their own experience of being lecturers, coordinators and new external examiners to offer reassurance and support to less experienced staff. It might be difficult for a junior member of staff and new co-ordinators to bring about a change in the way the courses are run, assessments are conducted and feedback is provided. The external examiners, with their experience can provide sound advice in helping the new members assess the robustness of the proposed changes and to help negotiate the changes with the institution. In some circumstances, the external examiners can vocalise the support for the changes proposed by the junior member of staff. An agreement from the external examiner will be respected by the HEI and will carry a great deal of weight to bring about changes, which otherwise the department or faculty or HEI might be resistant to (Eggs, 2014).

Observing an experienced external examiner in action at the external exam boards is in itself a great learning experience for junior members of staff. When a junior member first is appointed as an external, they can believe that their appointment as external is to be critical, that they have an obligation to highlight every shortcoming of the course and to provide a list for improvement. As mentors, external examiners can gently teach the junior members of staff to get the right balance into accomplishing the quality assurance role of identifying any weaknesses and bringing it to the attention of the department at earliest opportunity, while stepping back from interfering with institutional policies. For example, while some Universities follow the policy of terminating the student's study period immediately if they plagiarised their work, some have a policy of warning the students in the first instance or investigate the issue through a devolved committee with penalty and only terminate the students when it is repeated. Junior external examiners, either out of compassion to the students or feel a sense of injustice, can try to resist the university policies. Experienced externals are more likely to be skilled to have that balance and can provide mentorship to juniors in handling this sensitively and constructively.

Mentoring junior members of staff in the context of external examining can become long lasting and sustainable mentorship. Our experiences have shown that experienced EEs continue to support the junior staff beyond the fixed term of exam board interactions, both in terms of developing their skills in educational context but in furthering research collaborations, if they have similar interests. The social interactions that happen over coffee and working dinners in the exam board context with co-ordinators and lecturers can lead to discussions and academic exchanges with colleagues which later on can trigger collaborative research projects. For example, we have previously taken forward ideas that gradually developed into a funded international educational workshop, visiting new places and institutions. This furthers the learning experience for all involved in teaching, understand the



student views in international context, which can then be brought back to UK to suggest possible improvements. This is really rewarding experience that can continue beyond the mentoring that happens during the external examining.

**Acting as referee:** Some HEIs use external examiners as adjudicators in difficult and sensitive situations. These can be tricky situation between colleagues teaching on a programme or situations dealing with difficult students. Since the external examiner is not a stakeholder in the situation and therefore not advantaged or disadvantaged by the decisions made, he or she can act more independently than other decision-makers. For example, a conflict between colleagues about the relative weight of a module in a programme or an assignment in a module can affect the status of module or the workload of certain members of staff. Usually, such education management decisions are assigned to a dean or a director of education, occasionally the outcomes might affect the dean's workload or the director of education's module. In these circumstances HEIs might consider it safer to seek advice or arbitration from the external examiner. For example, one of the situations encountered by the EEs was where there was an on-going conflict between pragmatists and purists in a particular discipline. The purists found that their module (i.e. their specific discipline) was not valued enough within the overall programme, whilst the pragmatists argued that this one module should not dominate the overall postgraduate programme. This had been a long-running issue for years, and when the internal efforts were not effective to address the issue, it was brought to the attention of the newly appointed external examiner by a senior staff in the school. This examiner, as an independent referee, was able to look at it objectively without being influenced by the internal conflicts. The external examiner's adjudication brought an end to this long-running conflict that the HEI internally had not managed to solve.

One of the common situations where EE will be asked to be a referee is when there are wide discrepancies between two internal markers. Normally within the institutes, the solution would be that both the markers will discuss the students work to reconcile the marks. However, in a situation when this is not achieved, the next line of action will be to bring in another internal independent marker with the subject and/or methodological expertise to give it a mark. If the issue is still not resolved, either due to personality clash or deeper conviction of either of the markers that they have judged it rightly, then the external will be called in to referee and assess this piece of work. In one of these situations, the refereeing was more difficult for the external examiner as there was no documentation of the marking process for the EE to comprehend the whole situation. Then it falls to the external to read through the whole thesis with no insight into the process or issues identified by the individual markers. This issue would have been solved much more easily and smoothly, if time and space was provided to the markers to have a good discussion and to document the reasons. In this situation, the external provided a suggestion to the markers to use an individual mark sheets with scores and comments given by each marker; and then a clear documentation of overall mark sheet, logged in a consistent format, explaining how differing marks were reconciled by staff generating a definitive score. This improved the process of marking and with the clear documentation it also became easier for the external, coming in as a referee, in terms of clarity and saved a lot of time.

With the growing emphasis of students as ‘education customers’ among at UK universities, dealing with poor and/or difficult students has become more problematic. One of the tricky situations experienced by the external examiners related to a student with issues. The particular student was seen by the external examiner as one of the pass/fail students in an oral exam. The student performed poorly (not just in the oral exam) and as a result failed the final year. The student appealed however, arguing that the university had not followed the correct

procedures. In most UK universities, students cannot appeal against the academic judgment linked to their marks, but can appeal only against the incorrect use of procedures that led to the poor performance by the student. To prove that the correct procedures had been followed, the HEI asked the external examiner to give evidence to help defend the university. At about the same time, the student also contacted the external examiner directly. This is something that is highly unusual in the UK, especially as the student demanded access to notes taken at the oral exam under the freedom of information act. The external examiner's diplomatic approach to both helped solve the issue for the university concerned.

**Being a supportive but critical friend:** Where external examiners go into a HEIs as an outsider and as a referee, it is quite easy to display a hawk-like (threatening) behaviour towards the members of staff. This could come from a keen sense to be objective, uphold standards to the dot and an elevated sense of privilege. In addition, given the time pressures for marking and strict turnaround times for the institutions, sometimes the EEs do not receive the samples of work or the final exam spread sheet in time to proper review. EEs sometimes are required to return the feedback in a few days' time. If EEs are required to conduct oral examinations for borderline fail/pass candidates, a short period of time to read several theses can put a strain on the examiners. In those situations, it is easy to display impolite behaviour with the academic and administrative staff. This could create an uncomfortable and tense atmosphere at exam boards where the constructive and supportive element can become lost. In these situations, it is recommended that the EEs gently encourage the admin team to provide adequate time for commenting on students work in the future. This gentle behaviour can inculcate supportive atmosphere while being a critical friend. While some universities provide exam board dates well in advance (provide all the dates for the whole year), some universities are not well organised. If several external examiners are involved per programme, getting dates for exam boards that will suit all examiners can be complicated.

Negotiating the dates for exam board attendance is quite important as the presence of EE at the exam board can be quite constructive, to facilitate an improved service to students. Sometimes while sending the external examiner report to the institutions, it is important that an appropriate language is used, that is supportive, while being transparent to highlight any weaknesses identified, retaining the critical element. It is also very important to highlight the positive elements of the programme, appreciate the admin and the support staff. Sometimes, if in doubt, it is helpful to send a draft report to staff to ensure that EE has not penned anything factually incorrect, before submitting the formal report. Recognising that it is not just a one-way transfer of ideas from a visiting expert to the host institution but a two-way process encourages staff to share issues and opportunities with their external and to exchange ideas. This notion of being a critical friend is not without its own problems as Bloxman and Price (2015) note, since there are concerns about clarity in the external examiners' role in assuring standards when they are more a critical friend than an arbiter of standards.

There are other times when EEs have to be critical, while being supportive. For example, situations around support systems for staff, such as when the virtual learning environments (VLEs) are clunky, unwieldy or incompatible with the EEs institutions or they still be paper based or only partly electronic, and which can pose problems for the external examiner. In these situations, examiners will be confronted with delays in accessing the relevant information before the exam board or faced with piles of papers on arrival to check things over in a restricted time period. In these scenarios, the external has to be supportive of the teaching and admin staff accepting the issues that electronic platforms can cause, however, highlighting the issues. For some examiners, this can be a burden. For example, one of us is external at a UK university where they use a fairly similar VLE as the one at the home HEI. As in all good bureaucracies, fairly similar means in practice that there are subtly incomprehensible differences. Being used to one operating system at home and, as an

external, dipping into the visiting HEI's system only occasionally is frustrating, difficult and time consuming.

**Lessons for home:** Our experience is that over the years we, as external examiners, have brought back evidence of good practice from the places we visited as examiner to our home HEI. This being an EE may help the academic, who might be co-coordinating their own programme or leading other teaching staff in their institutes, to adopt some of the lessons learnt in their own practice. We have brought back to our respective institutions, many innovations related to improving assessment, or ideas for new modules. We have also returned home with insight that are wider than just the course or module we acted as EE for, such as novel ideas about marketing of our own courses and/or ways of academic working. For example, one of us came across a good working example of academic writing weeks which was discussed at an examiners' meeting in The University of Sheffield. Listening to both the staff's enthusiasm and the evidence they provided, one of us used this to draft a one-page proposal. After presenting this to our dean, it resulted in the introduction of a similar scheme at the home HEI.

### **Final thoughts**

Being external examiner can be a demanding and definitely not a well-paid role. However, in the UK, external examiners volunteer to do it to enhance their career (i.e. something to add to the academic's CV), motivation to learn from the other institutions and out of a sense of duty to academia (France & Fletcher, 2015). From our experience, it is unlikely that they do it for the money. As we have summarised, external examiners go beyond the primary role of quality control to become referees, mentors and strategic sounding boards. In the process, they develop friendships and help support each other. However, not all HEIs make best use of the external examiners. A recent study of staff and students on the Doctor of Physical

Therapy (DPT) programme at Riphah International University in Islamabad, Pakistan identified “use of external examiners, reliability and validity of assessment tools, scrutiny of assessments by external examiners” as the programme’s key weaknesses (Shakil-Ur-Rehman et al., 2018, p.1582). Having external examiners elsewhere can also be beneficial for the external’s own university, not just in status of the academic who is involved, but also in gaining insight into elements of good practice at similar HEIs. In spite of the valuable role the external examiners play in upholding the standards of academia with higher education institutes and safeguarding student interests, there is no single standard protocol across the UK to identify and recruit external examiners. Our experience concurs with France and Fletcher (2015) who concluded that most of the time, these are informal invitations or personal contacts. There is a lack of strategies to provide professional development and support for the academic staff to take on the role of examining externally. In conclusion, External examiners do go beyond the role of assisting with maintaining the function of the academic system and quality assurance; and there is a need to provide opportunities for aspiring and serving external examiners to support them in enhancing their roles.

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