UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

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Code of Practice on the External Examiner System for First Degrees and Taught Masters:

Purposes and Functions

1. The purposes of the External Examiner system are to ensure:

   i. first and most important, that degrees awarded in similar subjects are comparable in standard in different universities in the United Kingdom though their content does of course vary;
   ii. secondly, that the assessment processes, including examinations, and for determining the final marks of awards, are rigorous and have been fairly conducted within the University's regulations and guidance.
   iii. thirdly, that the academic standards set are appropriate for the awards, or part thereof.

2. In order to achieve these purposes External Examiners need to be able:

   a to participate in assessment processes for the award of degrees;

   b to arbitrate or adjudicate on problem cases;

   c to comment and give advice on course content, balance and structure, on degree schemes and on assessment processes.

Formal Requirements

3. External Examiners are responsible to the Senate. In some cases External Examiners will also have a responsibility to a professional body.

4. No University degree will be awarded without participation in the examining process by at least one Examiner external to this University, who will be a full member of the relevant School/Department or Subject Board of Examiners.

5. External Examiners concerned with programmes validated by the University in associated institutions will be external both to the University and to the institution concerned. The procedures outlined in this Code will apply similarly to the examining process in the University and in the associated institutions.

6. The number of External Examiners should be sufficient to cover the full range of studies concerned. More than one External Examiner may be needed where there is a large number of students or where a wide range of subject area is covered. Where more than one External Examiner is serving on one programme the School should clarify to all the Examiners whether their roles differ at programme or module level and how their reports will be considered.

7. In this Code the term 'degree examination' means any examination or assessment in any year of study, including orals, practicals and clinicals, the result of which contributes, or which may contribute, directly to the award of a degree. External examiners may, but need not, also be concerned with other University examinations. The Code does not include departmental and class tests which do not contribute to the award of a Degree.

8. For the purpose of this Code, Certificates and Diplomas are included in the general term ‘degree’.

Selection, Appointment and Period of Service

9. Schools/Departments are natural sources of recommendations for the appointment of particular persons as External Examiners. The criteria which must be applied to the selection of External Examiners are that:

a. Only persons of seniority and experience who are able to command authority will be appointed, following consultation within the School/Department. As such they are likely to hold the position of Professor or Senior Lecturer and to have had some prior experience of external examining.

b. In order to have sufficient time for the proper performance of their functions, individuals will normally be expected to hold no more than two substantive appointments concurrently. The recommendation to the Dean for appointment should clarify that this has been checked with the individual nominated.

c. An External Examiner will not be appointed from a School/Department in an institution where a member of this University's corresponding School/Department is serving as an Examiner. Exceptions may however occasionally be unavoidable. Where this is the case, justification for the appointment must be appended to the recommendation for specific approval by or on behalf of the Senate.

d. Former members of staff will not be invited to become External Examiners before a lapse of at least five years or sufficient time for students taught by that member of staff to have passed through the system, whichever is the longer.

e. External Examiners who have completed their period of appointment shall not be eligible for reappointment before a lapse of at least five years.

f. External examiners from outside the UK Higher Education system, for example from overseas Universities, industry or the professions, are appropriate in certain circumstances. Where possible an External Examiner with experience of the UK Higher Education system should serve at the same time to assess the academic standards and processes.

g. In cases where an External Examiner does not meet the above criteria the Examiner may be appointed exceptionally.

10. All nominations for the appointment of External Examiners must be reported to the Senate. External Examiners are appointed annually. The normal limit to the period of service is three consecutive years. Only in exceptional circumstances will this be extended by an additional year, subject to approval by or on behalf of Senate.

Initial Briefing

11. Each new External Examiner on appointment should be sent:

    i. a copy of this Code of Practice;
    ii. a briefing of their role and responsibilities
    iii. a copy of the relevant Handbook (to include the syllabuses of programmes and modules on which the examinations are set);
    iv. details of the specific departmental requirements, the marking schemes and information about the examiners' meetings;
    v. report form;
    vi. Fin 14 claim form (plus up-to-date expenses guidelines).

12. Continuing External Examiners should be sent notification of any substantive alterations to School and University information, and a list of relevant links from the Academic Quality Unit website.

Participation in Assessment Procedures

13. An External Examiner has a general right to see all items of assessment, of whatever nature, which contribute to the overall result.

14. All draft degree examination papers must be sent to an External Examiner for approval. An External Examiner may be expected to set questions or papers.

15. In some subjects it may be essential for model answers to be prepared and scrutinised.

16. An External Examiner has the right to see all degree examination scripts.

17. If the inviting School/Department is to make a selection of scripts to be sent to an External Examiner, the principles for such selection will be determined by agreement with the External Examiner in advance. The guiding principle for any selection of scripts is that an External Examiner should have enough evidence to determine that internal marking and classification are of an appropriate standard and are consistent.

18. External Examiners should as a minimum be given:

    a. a sample of scripts from the top, the middle and the bottom of the range;

    b. all scripts of borderline candidates; and

    c. all scripts assessed internally as first class or as failures.

19. An External Examiner has the right to see any work that contributes to the assessment and degree classification e.g. projects and other work. In some cases it may be agreed that the School/Department should make a selection of such work to be sent to the External Examiner, the principles for such selection being agreed with her or him in advance.

20. External Examiners, as full members of the relevant School/Department or Subject Board of Examiners, have the right to be present at all Examiners' meetings at which significant decisions are to be taken in regard to the subject with which they have been concerned (including the setting of papers). They are normally required to be present at any meeting where degree examination results are determined for the subject(s) in which they have been involved. In all cases, external examiners' approval must be obtained for any change to a result that they have previously agreed.

21. The views of an External Examiner must be particularly influential in the case of disagreement on:

    a. the mark to be awarded for a particular unit of assessment; or

    b. the final classification to be derived from the array of marks of a particular candidate at the Examiners' meeting.

22. The signature of an External Examiner must be appended to the list of any degree examination results arising from the Board of Examiners of which he or she is a member, as evidence that he or she accepts the classification.

23. External Examiners are 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. External Examiners may often be able to give valuable advice to Internal Examiners, especially the inexperienced, either directly or through the Head of School/Department.

Discussion of Course Structure and Degree Programmes

24. Schools/Departments should use the opportunity afforded by the visits of External Examiners to discuss the structure and content of the course and of the degree programme, and the assessment procedures. Any comments or suggestions made by the External Examiners should be discussed by the School/Department and an explicit decision made about whether or not to introduce changes.

25. External Examiners should be provided the opportunity upon request to informally meet groups of students to gather their views of the programme. These views may provide important feedback to the School.

Data Protection Act

26. The Data Protection Act 1998 requires registration of all use of personal data stored on word processors, computers and similar automatic equipment and requires that any information so held should be disclosed to the data subject on application. External Examiners are required to observe the terms of the Act in respect of their duties.

Reports

27. External Examiners must make written annual reports. A standard report form is provided by the University for this purpose which should be submitted electronically where possible.

28. External Examiners are free to make any comments they wish including observations on teaching and module and programme structure and content.

29. External Examiners should send their reports to the Academic Quality Unit, whose responsibility it is on behalf of the Vice-Chancellor to see that appropriate action is taken in light of them. Any examiners may also submit a separate report, openly or in confidence, to the Vice Chancellor at any time during their term of appointment.

30. Schools should provide a response to External Examiners about their comments and recommendations, including information on any actions taken. These responses should be copied to the Academic Quality Unit.

31. Payment of fees will be conditional upon the satisfactory receipt of annual reports.

32. In addition to open discussion of reports internally the University may be requested to provide copies of reports from External Examiners to external bodies, such as professional groups and Research Councils, but will only do so with the Examiners' permission. The reports will not have a direct bearing on internal resource allocation decisions.

33. Reports will be circulated to the staff responsible for delivering programmes and/or modules reported on, and to the relevant programme committees, or equivalent, including the student representatives on those groups.

34. Where an appeal is made by a student, the relevant External Examiner's report may need to be seen by the appeal body and the student.

Quality Assurance

35. External Examiners’ reports are reviewed by the Deans and the Pro-Vice Chancellor. Their recommendations are reported to the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee, and fed into the University's internal quality assurance processes.

36. During the normal annual academic audit process the views of External Examiners will be discussed widely. In addition, each programme of study is reviewed in depth every five years. Previous External Examiners' reports are scrutinised in the course of this review and former External Examiners may be asked to participate in the review itself.

(Code Revised in January 2007)