UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

CODE OF PRACTICE ON THE EXTERNAL EXAMINER SYSTEM FOR TAUGHT PROGRAMMES

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Code of Practice on the External Examiner System for Taught Programmes

This Code of Practice is based on the precepts and guidance listed in the QAA Code of Practice: 4 External Examining.

1. Purposes and Functions

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

.1 degrees awarded in similar subjects are comparable in standard in different universities in the United Kingdom;

.2 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;

.3 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 to:

.1 participate in assessment processes for the award of degrees;

.2 arbitrate or adjudicate on problem cases;

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

2. Formal Requirements

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

.2 No University degree, diploma or certificate 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 Board of Examiners.

.3 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.

.4 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 are a large number of students or where a wide range of subject areas are 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.

.5 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.

3. Selection, Appointment and Period of Service

.1 Schools 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:

.1 only persons of appropriate seniority and experience will be appointed, following consultation within the School. As such they are likely to hold the position of Professor or Senior Lecturer and to have had some prior experience of external examining;

.2 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 External Examiner nomination form should clarify that this has been checked with the individual nominated;

.3 an External Examiner will not be appointed from a School in an institution where a member of this University's corresponding School 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;

.4 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;

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

.6 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 assist in the assessment of the academic standards and processes;

.7 in cases where an External Examiner does not meet the above criteria the Examiner may be appointed exceptionally, subject to approval by the Deputy Pro-Vice-Chancellor.

.2 A report of the appointments of External Examiners made in each year must be reported to the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee (QAEC) annually. External Examiners are appointed on an annual basis, up to the normal limit to the period of service of three consecutive years. Only in exceptional circumstances will this be extended by an additional year, subject to approval by the Academic Quality Unit and/or the Deputy Pro-Vice-Chancellor, on behalf of Senate.

.3 Appointments may be terminated early, at the request of either party, or by mutual consent. An External Examiner's appointment may be terminated by the University if the External Examiner fails to fulfil appropriately their roles and responsibilities, or if they fail to submit their annual report within a reasonable period of time.

4. Initial Briefing and Induction Materials

.1 On appointment the External Examiner will receive a confirmation of appointment letter from the University, specifying the programmes to which the External Examiner is assigned.

.2 The University will send all newly-appointed External Examiners:

.1 a copy of this Code of Practice;

.2 a copy of the 'Guidance for External Examiners' document, which details generic information for External Examiners during their appointment;

.3 relevant University weblinks (e.g. the web link to the report form template);

.4 guidance on claiming fees and expenses, and a FIN14 claim form;

.5 an invitation to one of the University's induction events for External Examiners.

.3 In addition to this Schools will supplement this information with documentation specific to the External Examiner's appointment. Schools are required to send the following information to newly-appointed External Examiners, as a minimum:

.1 programme handbooks (to include programme specifications);

.2 module specifications;

.3 student handbooks;

.4 marking and assessment criteria;

.5 guidance on marking and moderation practices;

.6 QAA Subject Benchmark statements for comparison with national standards;

.7 details of professional, statutory or regulatory body requirements where appropriate;

.8 a copy of relevant External Examiners' reports and actions resulting from issues raised;

.9 dates of meetings where the External Examiner is required to attend (e.g. Board of Examiners meetings);

.10 in advance of the assessment period, a timescale for the moderation and return of students' work, with clearly stated deadlines.

.4 The responsibility for the distribution of External Examiner induction materials should be clearly defined by the School. The Academic Quality Unit will send out a reminder during the Spring Term asking Schools to confirm that all External Examiners have been sent the appropriate briefing materials as specified in this Code of Practice.

.5 All External Examiners should be advised of a School-level contact, who they are able to approach with queries during their appointment.

.6 All continuing External Examiners (i.e. those in year 2 of appointment or beyond) should be sent notification of any substantive alterations to School and University information or policies.

5. Participation in Assessment Procedures

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

.2 All draft degree examination papers must be sent to an External Examiner for approval. An External Examiner may be asked to comment on the questions or papers that have been set and make any recommendations that they feel are appropriate.

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

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

.5 If the inviting School 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.

.6 External Examiners should as a minimum be given:

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

.2 all scripts of borderline candidates; and

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

.7 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 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. In addition, External Examiners should also have access to all relevant information and policies relating to Mitigations Panels held by the School.

.8 If an external examiner does not agree with marks awarded within a sample they may request further action such as the re-marking or moderation of the cohort of students' work.

.9 External Examiners should not be expected to adjudicate between internal markers. Disagreements between internal markers should be resolved before a sample of work is seen by the External Examiner. This may be through the use of a third marker, or consultation with senior colleagues within the School. In all cases it should be transparent to the external examiner how the final mark was decided. The views of an External Examiner should be particularly influential if, exceptionally, a mark has not been agreed internally for a particular unit of assessment.

.10 External Examiners, as full members of the relevant 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.

.11 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 endorses the classification.

.12 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 may be 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.

6. Discussion of Course Structure and Degree Programmes

.1 Schools 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 and an explicit decision made about whether or not to introduce changes.

.2 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

7. Reports

.1 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.

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

.3 External Examiners should send their reports to the Vice-Chancellor or his duly appointed nominee, whose duty it is to see that appropriate action is taken in light of them.

.4 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 Vice-Chancellor or his duly-appointed nominee.

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

.6 Where the External Examiner is appointed to a programme that is in collaboration with a partner organisation the report will be made available to the partner on a confidential basis.

.7 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.

.8 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.

.9 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.

8. Quality Assurance

.1 External Examiners' reports are reviewed by the Vice-Chancellor or his duly-appointed nominee. Their recommendations are reported to both the University and College Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committees, and fed into the University's internal quality assurance processes.

.2 Feedback from External Examiners is vital in informing the University's processes for assurance of academic standards and the enhancement of the quality of learning opportunities through;

(i) Annual Programme Review;

(ii) Comprehensive Quinquennial Programme Review;

(iii) School Quality Review.

9. Data Protection Act

.1 The Data Protection Act 1998 regulates the processing of personal data, both as electronic and paper records. The University requires all staff and agents to abide by the provisions of the DPA.

All personal information supplied by the External Examiner for the purposes of their appointment will be held securely and for no longer than is necessary, and in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998

It should be noted that External Examiner reports will be disclosable upon receipt of a Subject Access Request.

10. Freedom of Information Act

.1 The University of Birmingham has been designated a Public Authority for the purposes of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

Upon receipt of a request for copies of External Examiner's Reports the University has a statutory obligation to consider their release subject to any applicable exemption under the provisions of the Act.