

**For the Academic Policy &
Regulations Committee
August 2009**

University of Birmingham

Changes to the Code of Practice on the External Examiner System for Taught Programmes

Purpose of Paper

1. To propose changes for effect in 2009/10 to the Code of Practice on the External Examiner System for Taught Programmes.

Proposals

2. APRC is requested to approve the following changes to the Code of Practice on the External Examiner System for Taught Programmes 3.2 (additions underlined; deletions struck through):

3.2. 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~~ a 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.

Background

3. At present external examiners appointed to taught degree programmes at Birmingham serve a 3-year period, with re-appointments to years 2 and 3 made on an annual basis. The re-appointment process begins in the March of the preceding academic session with Schools required to confirm those external examiners to be re-appointed to years 2 and 3, and to identify replacements for external examiners at the end of their period of service. Exceptionally Schools can request an extension into a 4th year for an external examiner if sufficient grounds are met.
4. The Academic Quality Unit (AQU) have considered this aspect of the external examiner system in relation to its current efficiency, taking into account practice across the sector and recent statistics on period of service.
5. The suggested amendments cover moving to a system of a straight 3-year appointment process with no annual re-appointing for those externals in years 2 and 3. Colleges and Schools will still be required to submit new nomination forms and requests for extensions of appointment to AQU as before.
6. The amendments would come into effect for the next re-appointment period, which is for the 2010/11 academic session.

Arguments in Support of Proposal

7. In the last two years only 3% of external examiners have not served the expected 3-year period of service. In all cases this has been due to changing

work commitments for the external examiner, who has then informed the University that they are unable to continue into the next session. There have been no instances where a School has requested the early termination of an appointment.

8. A clause was inserted into the University's Code of Practice on External Examiners (Taught Programmes) in 2008/09 to cover the early termination of appointments (Clause 3.3, see appendix 1). Therefore if the University moves to a straight 3-year appointment system there is still the ability to terminate appointments should it prove necessary. This clause will be stressed to all external examiners on their appointment.
9. Practice across the Russell Group in terms of the appointment of external examiners is divided, with just over half appointing external examiners to a straight period of service (usually 3 or 4 years) as opposed to an annual re-appointment process.
10. The timing of the re-appointment process does make it difficult for Schools to be able to confirm they are content with the current external examiner. The process takes place in the spring, often before an external examiner will have done the bulk of their duties for the year, or submitted their annual report to the University.
11. Collecting information from Schools on re-appointments to years 2 and 3 is a labour-intensive process for AQU. Birmingham has some 400 external examiners with appointment paperwork currently sent to all when positions are confirmed. Moving to a 3-year appointment process would allow AQU to concentrate on gathering information on the external examiners to be replaced and consideration of any extension forms submitted.
12. At the May 2009 meeting of the University's Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee (U-QAEC) it was resolved that postgraduate research external examiner reports should be monitored in the same way as taught external examiner reports. AQU is currently considering the implications of implementing such a process, and altering the appointment process for taught external examiners as described above would allow greater capacity for the monitoring of postgraduate research external examiner reports.

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