UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

CODE OF PRACTICE ON EXTERNAL EXAMINING (TAUGHT PROVISION)

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Appendix A – University Criteria for Appointment of External Examiners

Code of Practice on External Examining (Taught Provision)

1. Principles

1.1 This Code of Practice is based on the Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) chapter (B7) on external examining in the UK Quality Code for Higher Education.

1.2 External Examiners are appointed to provide the University with impartial and independent advice and informed comment on the institution's academic standards and student achievement in relation to those standards, through oversight of the assessment process at the module and programme/award level.

1.3 All University programmes of study, and modules therein, leading to an award of credit at foundation, undergraduate or postgraduate (taught) level must have one or more External Examiner(s) appointed to carry out the role of External Examiner as laid out in this Code of Practice.

1.4 All External Examiners appointed by the University are required to adhere to the clauses contained in this Code of Practice.

1.5 Within the University it is the responsibility of the Head of School or their nominee to ensure the information in this Code of Practice is adhered to and communicated to the nominated Examinations Officer and all academic staff designated as internal examiners.

1.6 The information contained in this Code of Practice also applies to External Examiners appointed to all programmes accredited and validated by the University through collaborative provision arrangements. Schools should ensure that, where they have a collaborative provision arrangement in place, staff from that organisation are aware of their responsibilities with respect to this Code of Practice.

2. Appointment of External Examiners

2.1 The number of External Examiners appointed to each programme of study should be sufficient to ensure the appropriate expertise is available to cover all areas of the syllabus under assessment.

2.2 All nominations for External Examiners must be submitted using the University's standard nomination form.

2.3 All nominations for External Examiners should meet the criteria for appointment as listed in Appendix A of this Code of Practice.

2.4 If, in exceptional circumstances, a nomination is put forward which does not meet all the criteria for appointment the School should provide a detailed statement in support of the nomination. This will then be considered the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education) or their nominee.

2.5 Completed nomination forms should be signed by the Head of School or nominee and then submitted to the College Director of Education for approval at College-level.

2.6 Once approval has been given at College-level the form should be passed to the

University Registry for scrutiny and subsequent approval at institutional level by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education) or their nominee, on behalf of the Senate.

2.7 All nominations should state clearly the programme(s) or module(s) to which each External Examiner is appointed. On appointment, External Examiners should be made fully aware by the School of their role and duties at module and/or programme level. Where more than one External Examiner is assigned to a programme their individual responsibilities should be made clear.

2.8 The annual fee paid to External Examiners should be determined by the School, with advice from the University Registry, and should be representative of the workload of the role. Information on the annual fee will be set out in the External Examiner's letter of appointment. Schools (and where appropriate Colleges) should review the fee levels paid to External Examiners on a regular basis, informing the Registry of any changes resulting.

2.9 All External Examiners will be appointed for a fixed term of 4 years. Schools may, in exceptional circumstances, request an extension of the appointment for one additional year using the form provided. All requests for an extension of appointment will be considered by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education) or their nominee.

2.10 It will be the responsibility of the Head of School, or their nominee, to request from staff and hold information regarding where current University of Birmingham staff hold appointments as External Examiners in order to ensure there is no potential reciprocity in the nominations made. This list should be consulted when considering nominations for new External Examiners. Schools will submit an annual report to the Registry on the External Examiner appointments held by their academic staff.

2.11 The University may terminate an External Examiner's appointment at any point during their term if they fail to fulfil appropriately their roles and responsibilities as set out in this Code of Practice.

2.12 If an External Examiner wishes to resign from their appointment they should do so in writing to the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education) and the Head of School, giving a three month notice period.

2.13 The University Quality Assurance Committee (UQAC) will receive an annual report on information relating to all External Examiner appointments.

3. Induction

3.1 On appointment each External Examiner will receive a confirmation of appointment letter from the University, specifying the programme(s) or module(s) to which the External Examiner is assigned and details of the fee to be paid.

3.2 All newly-appointed External Examiners will also receive an invitation to attend the University's External Examiner induction event.

3.3 The University will send all newly-appointed External Examiners:

- a copy of this Code of Practice;
- a copy of the University 'Guidance for External Examiners' document;
- web links to relevant University legislation;
- the web link to the External Examiner online resource

(www.birmingham.ac.uk/external);
- guidance on claiming fees and expenses;
- links to the relevant national regulatory framework (QAA UK Quality Code for Higher Education).

3.4 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:
- programme handbooks (to include programme specifications);
- module specifications;
- student handbooks;
- marking and assessment criteria;
- guidance on marking and moderation practices;
- relevant QAA subject benchmark statements;
- details of Professional, Statutory or Regulatory Body (PSRB) requirements where appropriate.

3.5 Schools should also provide newly-appointed External Examiners with a copy of the previous External Examiner's final report and any actions resulting from the issues raised therein.

3.6 Schools should ensure that appropriate support mechanisms are in place for External Examiners, particularly in the case of less experienced External Examiners who may benefit from some form of mentoring or working within a team of External Examiners.

3.7 Schools should inform External Examiners of the dates of meetings they are required to attend (e.g. Board of Examiners meetings) at the earliest opportunity.

3.8 Schools should also provide, in advance of the assessment period, the process and timescale for the moderation and return of students' work, with clearly stated deadlines.

4. Enhancement of quality

4.1 External Examiners should have the opportunity to contribute to the enhancement of the student learning experience during their term of appointment.

4.2 Schools are encouraged to utilise the External Examiner's experience through discussions with academic staff on the structure and content of programmes of study. External Examiners may also be asked to comment on any proposed changes to programmes of study or to provide advice following changes to PSRB requirements or similar.

4.3 Informal meetings between External Examiners and groups of students are also encouraged and guidance on these meetings is set out in Section 9: Student Involvement.

4.4 External Examiners are requested, through their annual report, to comment on particular strengths or distinctive or innovative features in relation to standards and assessment, and to provide suggestions for the enhancement of the provision under scrutiny.

5. Scrutiny of marking

5.1 External Examiners are appointed to act as a moderator of academic standards, to

comment on the quality of academic provision and comparability of standards and student performance.

5.2 University programmes at foundation level should be scrutinised in accordance with points 5.5 – 5.15 below.

5.3 The role of the External Examiner in the scrutiny of work at level C should be agreed between the School and the External Examiner.

5.4 All modules at levels I, H and M should be scrutinised in accordance with points 5.5 - 5.15 below.

5.5 For programmes of study with only one appointed External Examiner, the examiner should have access to all assessments set for each module that contributes to the final degree classification. Where a team of External Examiners is appointed to a programme, modules should be allocated to individual External Examiners by agreement on the basis of their subject expertise.

5.6 External Examiners should be provided with all draft examination papers and other major pieces of assessment that contribute to the final award for comment and approval, together with model answers where appropriate. Where suggestions for amendment are provided by an External Examiner, Schools should reply to the External Examiner to confirm how their advice has been acted upon.

5.7 External Examiners are required to consider the consistency and accuracy of marking standards for a programme of study, through reviewing the marking within each module, and between modules of the same level. Schools are required to ensure student anonymity is extended to the stage at which scripts are considered by External Examiners, in accordance with clause 10.3.1 and 10.3.2 of the Code of Practice on Taught Programme and Module Assessment.

5.8 External Examiners should be provided with marking criteria used in relation to the assessment of a module, and a mark spreadsheet for each module to which they have been assigned. The mark spreadsheet should list the mean, standard deviation and pass/fail rate for each module with corresponding figures for the previous 3-5 years.

5.9 External Examiners should review a sample of all forms of assessment from across the full mark range (including, for team-taught modules, a selection which shows the full mark range for each assessment question). This exercise should be completed for all modules that contribute to the final award.

5.10 Schools should agree in advance with the External Examiner(s) the size and scope of the sample of work to be scrutinised, within the parameters outlined in 5.5 above, in order to provide sufficient evidence for the External Examiner to determine that internal marking is of an appropriate standard.

5.11 If an External Examiner does not agree with the marks awarded within a sample of work they may propose a level of moderation (additional to that already undertaken under School policy) or re-marking to be undertaken by the internal markers. This must apply to all students who had undertaken the unit of assessment.

5.12 External Examiners are not permitted to alter the mark of any student.

5.13 External Examiners should not normally 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. If, in exceptional cases, a mark has not been agreed internally, the views of the External Examiner can be taken into account in determining the final mark.

5.14 In exceptional circumstances, where a disagreement between the School and an External Examiner in relation to marks awarded cannot be resolved locally this will be referred to the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education) or their nominee for a decision.

5.15 An External Examiner may, as agreed with the School, complete further duties (e.g. participation in clinical assessments) in respect of the assessment processes , for instance where required by a PSRB. The University Registry should be notified of such arrangements by the School.

6. Board of Examiners meetings

6.1 External Examiners should be informed, in advance of the meeting of the Board of Examiners, of the recommendations to be made by the Extenuating Circumstances Panel/s, including relevant supporting information where appropriate.

6.2 External Examiners are full members of the Board of Examiners and should attend relevant meetings, relating to the provision to which they are appointed.

6.3 For Supplementary Boards of Examiners it is recognised that not all External Examiners for a particular programme may be able to attend. However, Schools should ensure that their External Examiners endorse all progression and award decisions taken at Supplementary Boards of Examiners.

6.4 Where a team of External Examiners is appointed to scrutinise different modules within a programme of study and there are separate meetings of Boards of Examiners to consider module-level and programme-level results, a representative from the team may be identified to attend the relevant Board of Examiners to endorse programme-level decisions.

6.5 Where an External Examiner is unable to be present at the relevant Board of Examiners meeting this should be agreed with the School in advance without contravening 6.2-6.3. A mechanism should be put in place for obtaining the External Examiner's agreement with the marks and awards confirmed at the meeting. Where possible, telephone or video conferencing may be utilised.

6.6 External Examiners attend Board of Examiners meetings to scrutinise and endorse the outcomes of the assessment processes to which they have been appointed, whether confirming a set of results at module-level or the decisions taken (e.g. awards, withdrawals) at programme-level.

6.7 The endorsement of the decisions taken by the Board of Examiners should be given through the signature of the relevant External Examiner(s) on the mark lists, award lists or similar documents.

6.8 Any instances where an External Examiner does not endorse a decision taken by the

Board of Examiners should be recorded and referred to the University Progress and Awards Board (PAB) for consideration. Schools should ensure that where this occurs the final decision of the PAB is communicated back to the External Examiner.

7. Reporting

7.1 As part of their duties all External Examiners are required to complete a written annual report, using the template provided by the University.

7.2 External Examiners are required to submit their reports, via email directly to the University Registry, according to the deadlines set by the University (undergraduate, end of July, postgraduate taught, end of November).

7.3 If an External Examiner is appointed to programmes at both undergraduate and postgraduate taught level then separate reports are expected to be submitted by the respective deadlines.

7.4 In their annual report External Examiners are expected to provide comment on:

- The academic standard of the University's awards in accordance with the QAA Framework for HE qualifications and any applicable subject benchmark statements, and in comparison with other similar HE institutions of which the External Examiner has experience;
- The rigour of the assessment process which measures student achievement against the intended learning outcomes of the programme and in line with the University's policies and regulations;
- Any instances of good practice observed and opportunities to enhance the learning opportunities of the students;
- Any issues specifically required by the relevant Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body (PSRB).

7.5 External Examiners are also expected to confirm whether:

- sufficient evidence and information was available to them in order to fulfil their role;
- issues raised in previous reports have been addressed satisfactorily.

7.6 External Examiners in their final year of appointment are requested to give an overview of their term of appointment at the end of the report form.

7.7 External Examiners may, at any point during their appointment, submit a separate confidential report to the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education). This may be to raise confidential concerns such as instances where the External Examiner considers it is necessary to identify an individual member of the University. In such cases the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education) or their Deputy will respond to the External Examiner on actions resulting from their report.

7.8 The University reserves the right to terminate an External Examiner's appointment if a report is not received within a reasonable timeframe of the deadline.

7.9 The University also reserves the right to request additional information from an External Examiner if the report submitted is considered to be of insufficient detail to assess their opinion of the academic standards of the programme(s) or module(s) concerned.

7.10 Payment of the annual fee to External Examiners is conditional upon the timely receipt of a satisfactory annual report.

8. Consideration of External Examiner reports

8.1 All External Examiner reports will be read by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education), or nominee, and the University Registry before being passed to the School to prepare a written response to the External Examiner.

8.2 Schools are expected to consider any issues raised in the report through the appropriate forum (programme team meeting, School committee etc) and construct a response detailing how appropriate actions will be taken. Where an External Examiner's suggestion is not to be acted on a detailed explanation should also be given.

8.3 Responses, in the form of a letter from the Head of School, should be sent to the External Examiner within 6-8 weeks of receipt of the report by the School. Where, for good reason, it is not possible to inform the External Examiner of the resulting actions within this timeframe an initial response acknowledging that this issue is under discussion can be given, provided a follow-up communication is sent.

8.4 A copy of each School response should be forwarded to the University Registry and, if required, to the appropriate staff at College-level.

8.5 Schools may be requested to respond initially to the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education) where an issue has been raised with a School which it is deemed necessitates a response from the University. In these instances the response to the External Examiner will be sent by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education) or nominee.

8.6 Where an External Examiner raises an issue at University-level (e.g. relating to the academic regulations) it will be the responsibility of the University Registry, in conjunction with the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education) or nominee, to provide a response. In these cases a copy of the response will be forwarded to the School for information.

8.7 The University's Quality Assurance Committee (QAC) will consider separate UG and PGT summary reports of External Examiner comments in order to identify, and where necessary act upon, any common themes emerging at School, College or University level.

8.8 External Examiner reports and School responses will be used to inform the University's annual review and periodic review processes.

9. Student Involvement

9.1 Schools should include information as to the name, home institution and post held of the External Examiner(s) appointed to the programme(s) of study in programme documentation made available to students (e.g. student handbook, programme specifications).

9.2 Schools should provide External Examiners with the opportunity, normally once per academic year, to informally meet representative groups of students to gather their views of the programme.

9.3 Where an External Examiner has responsibilities at the level of the programme it is

expected that they will accept the invitation to talk with a representative group of students on a minimum of one occasion during their term of appointment.

9.4 Where a meeting is arranged with an External Examiner clear guidance should be given by the School to the students present about the purpose of that meeting and its limitations, particularly with regard to not influencing individual assessment outcomes.

9.5 Under no circumstances should students attempt to contact an External Examiner and, External Examiners are not permitted to respond to contacts made by third parties including students or their representatives. If any such contacts are attempted the External Examiner should report the details immediately to the University, through the Head of School.

9.6 If a student is found to have contacted an External Examiner they may be subject to University disciplinary procedures as set out in Regulation 8: Conduct.

9.7 External Examiner reports (and the School responses) should, as a matter of course, be discussed with Student Representatives as part of Staff Student Committee meetings. These discussions should be minuted, published and available for all students on the programme to access.

9.8 All students may request access to an External Examiner's report, and the actions resulting from the School's response. Schools should ensure they have a mechanism in place to respond to these requests.

9.9 Students may also request access to an External Examiner's report, and the actions resulting from the School's response, directly from the University Registry.

9.10 Sabbatical Officers of the Guild of Students will be present at University and College Quality Committees where summaries of issues raised by External Examiners and responses at School, College and University level will be discussed.

10. Data Protection Act & Freedom of Information Act

10.1 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.

10.2 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. As stated in 9.1 the name, home institution and post held will be included in programme information made available to students (e.g. student handbook).

10.3 It should be noted that External Examiner reports will be disclosable upon receipt of a request. Therefore the University would not expect any identifiable reference to individual staff or students (by name or ID number) in the report.

10.4 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 Examiners' reports the University has a statutory obligation to consider their release subject to any applicable exemption under the provisions of the Act.

11. Causes for Concern

11.1 Through the normal reporting process, as laid out in Section 7 of the Code, the University should be able to respond to any concerns an External Examiner may raise in relation to their duties or which may arise during their tenure.

11.2 In exceptional cases External Examiners may have serious concerns about academic standards and quality of provision which cannot be resolved through the normal reporting process. In such an instance an External Examiner may write, in confidence, directly to the Vice-Chancellor.

11.3 If an External Examiner still has a serious concern about academic standards or quality of provision, and has exhausted all internal procedures, including writing to the Vice-Chancellor, they can invoke the Quality Assurance Agency's Concerns scheme or inform the relevant PSRB.

Appendix A – University Criteria for Appointment of External Examiners

Person specification

a. Institutions appoint External Examiners who can show appropriate evidence of the following:

i) knowledge and understanding of UK sector agreed reference points for the maintenance of academic standards and assurance and enhancement of quality

ii) competence and experience in the fields covered by the programme of study, or parts thereof

iii) relevant academic and/or professional qualifications to at least the level of the qualification being externally examined, and/or extensive practitioner experience where appropriate

iv) competence and experience relating to designing and operating a variety of assessment tasks appropriate to the subject and operating assessment procedures

v) sufficient standing (normally holding a position of Senior Lecturer or higher), credibility and breadth of experience within the discipline to be able to command the respect of academic peers and, where appropriate, professional peers

vi) familiarity with the standard to be expected of students to achieve the award that is to be assessed

vii) fluency in English, and where programmes are delivered and assessed in languages other than English, fluency in the relevant language(s) (unless other secure arrangements are in place to ensure that External Examiners are provided with the information to make their judgements)

viii) meeting applicable criteria set by professional, statutory or regulatory bodies

ix) awareness of current developments in the design and delivery of relevant curricula

x) competence and experience relating to the enhancement of the student learning experience.

Note: The nomination of a retired academic may be permissible within a maximum of three years after the date of the retirement. Sufficient evidence should be provided of the nominee's continuing involvement in the academic subject to be examined.

Conflicts of interest

b. Institutions do not appoint as External Examiners anyone in the following categories or circumstances:

i) a member of a governing body or committee of the appointing institution or one of its collaborative partners, or a current employee of the appointing institution or one of its collaborative partners

ii) anyone with a close professional, contractual or personal relationship with a member of staff or student involved with the programme of study

iii) anyone required to assess colleagues who are recruited as students to the programme of study

iv) anyone who is, or knows they will be, in a position to influence significantly the future of students on the programme of study

v) anyone significantly involved in recent or current substantive collaborative research activities with a member of staff closely involved in the delivery, management or assessment of the programme(s) or modules in question

vi) former staff or students of the institution unless a period of five years has elapsed and all students taught by or with the External Examiner have completed their programme(s)

vii) a reciprocal arrangement involving cognate programmes at another institution

viii) the succession of an External Examiner by a colleague from the examiner's home department and institution

ix) the appointment of more than one External Examiner from the same department of the same institution.

Note: Particular attention will be paid to nominee's who have been involved in the development of the programme or its component parts (e.g. as an external consultant), or who have acted as an External Adviser as part of the University Programme Approval process. In such cases the University will consider the benefits of appointing an external examiner who is familiar with the programme against the risk to their ability to provide a fully independent perspective.

Terms of office

c. The duration of an External Examiner's appointment will normally be for four years, with an exceptional extension of one year to ensure continuity.

d. An External Examiner may be reappointed in exceptional circumstances but only after a period of five years or more has elapsed since their last appointment.

e. External Examiners normally hold no more than two External Examiner appointments for taught programmes/modules at any point in time.