

## Role and Duties of External Examiners

### Scope

This procedure covers the role and the duties of External Examiners for all undergraduate and postgraduate taught programmes of study. It does not cover research degrees or non-award-bearing continuing education.

### Associated Documents

External Examiner nomination form

External Examiner Guidelines

Guidance for Subject Examination Boards and Degree Examination Boards

Academic Regulations

External Examiners Report Pro-Forms (Undergraduate, Undergraduate SMD, Postgraduate)

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### Accountability of External Examiners

The formal responsibility of External Examiners is to the Principal; their annual reports are addressed to the Principal (although sent to the Academic Registrar), and an External Examiner has the right to make a confidential report to the Principal at any time.

External Examiners have a crucial role in quality assurance:

- their primary duty is to ensure that the standard of the degree is consistent with those awarded across the UK university system in that discipline. In addition, the *intercollegiate examiners* (members of other colleges of the federal University of London) have responsibility for ensuring consistency in standards across the University;
- External Examiners have a key responsibility to ensure that all candidates are treated fairly, and that decisions in relation to individual students are taken after due deliberation;
- External Examiners are asked to review the examination process, and to comment on its operation. The reports of External Examiners are a key source of information in the monitoring of modules and programmes of study;
- because of their experience of assessment procedures at other institutions, External Examiners are in a position to offer valuable advice and counsel to examination boards and module organisers;

Many first degree programmes of study have **Intercollegiate Examiners**, i.e. External Examiners drawn from the other colleges of the University of London. In addition to all the other duties of External Examiners, the Intercollegiate Examiners have the responsibility of ensuring that the standard of the degree offered at Queen Mary is comparable with that at other colleges of the University.

## **Duties of External Examiners**

External examiners have the following 'core' duties:

### **General**

- to comment on the assessments for each module for which they are responsible, the extent to which the assessments cover the syllabus, and whether they enable candidates to demonstrate their achievement of the learning outcomes;
- to consider, comment upon and approve all examination question papers and to comment on marking schemes for individual papers, assessment criteria and model answers;
- to confirm whether or not the standard of marking is satisfactory by scrutinising a sample of scripts for each module and, if necessary, a sample of coursework;
- to comment on the standards of achievement of candidates and the comparability of this achievement to standards elsewhere;
- to comment on the standards of proposed awards and their comparability to similar awards elsewhere;
- to make known any causes for concern in relation to academic standards achieved by candidates, the standards of modules and the standards of awards to be made, should such cause arise;
- to provide independent opinion where there is a significant unresolved difference between the marks awarded by the first and second markers on any script or piece of work;
- to advise the Subject Examination Board on appropriate action where the marks for any module are significantly outside the normal pattern;
- to attend, or conduct, oral examinations, where applicable;
- to attend meetings of the Subject Examination Board, and participate fully in decision making;
- to endorse results and progression decisions, and recommendations for award, by signing the relevant documentation;
- to attend meetings of the Degree Examination Board, where they choose;
- to submit a full report, including an optional confidential report to the Principal;
- in addition, for those External Examiners who are also intercollegiate examiners, to comment on the standard of the University of London awards conferred by Queen Mary and their comparability with similar awards at other colleges of the University of London;
- to perform any other duties requested by Academic Board or the Degree Examination Board, following appropriate consultation over the nature of those duties.

By agreement with the Subject Examination Board and in consultation with the relevant department(s), External Examiners may also carry out other duties including: the approval of project topics and essay titles, interviewing students about their programme of study and experience of it, comment informally on proposed changes to the curriculum, comment on proposed changes in assessment methods.

External Examiners also have a less tangible role in encouraging good practice, and advising the examination board on dealing with difficult problems.

Where the method of programme delivery is non-standard (for example, distance learning), the External Examiners will wish to discuss with the internal examiners the arrangements for sampling work and moderating the internal marking, to satisfy themselves that the standards are appropriate and that individual candidates are being treated fairly. This discussion should take place at a very early stage in the session and both internal and External Examiners should collaborate in monitoring the effectiveness of the arrangements throughout the session. External Examiners are particularly requested to comment on the effectiveness of the sampling and moderation procedures as they relate to non-standard programme patterns in their annual reports.

### **Moderating Examination Question Papers and Scripts**

The Subject Examination Board is responsible for overseeing the production and agreement of examination papers; this is often delegated to a small sub-committee of examiners. Examination papers are prepared by internal examiners and reviewed, and agreed by external examiners according to the deadlines set by Student Administration. This applies to papers for both summer and late summer. External Examiners should review and agree all examination papers, even where individual questions have been agreed separately in the past.

The draft question paper should be accompanied by model answers or, where this is not appropriate (for example, in question papers that required essay-type answers), by an indication of the length, style and content of the desired answer.

The External Examiner must satisfy him/herself that the question paper:

- is appropriate to the level of the option;
- is an appropriate means of testing whether candidates' have achieved the stated outcomes of the option;
- covers the full range of the syllabus;
- is fair – i.e. that some candidates will not be at an advantage other than by virtue of their academic ability and commitment.

In the event that an External Examiner refuses to agree an examination paper, for whatever reason, this is reported to the chair of the DEB and the Academic Secretary, or nominee. The Chair of the DEB makes a decision on whether or not the paper should be approved or if amendments are needed. This decision is based on consideration of the objections detailed by the External Examiner and the viewpoint brought forward by the department setting the paper.

For all programmes, except for the MBBS, at least 50% of the assessed work for each module must be double marked in accordance with the QMUL Code of Practice on Marking and Double Marking. This will usually include all examination scripts (which invariably count for at least 50% of the marks), and substantial items of coursework. For MBBS different arrangements exist whereby only short answer question scripts from resit examinations are double marked. Where a module is

assessed wholly by coursework, the elements selected for double marking must as far as possible be the same for all students. Where assessment is based on selection of coursework (for example, the best 3 of 4 essays), the elements to be double-marked must be drawn from those that contribute to the assessment.

External Examiners have the right to examine any script or other assessed material. The role of the External Examiner is to moderate the marking of internal examiners. They must not be involved in double marking. The selection of scripts/assessed work to be sent to the External Examiner is a matter for determination between the External Examiner and the Chair of the Subject Examination Board. The External Examiner must have sufficient evidence to determine that internal marking and award recommendations are of an appropriate standard and are consistent. Sampling arrangements will therefore normally provide for an External Examiner to see the following:

- a sample of scripts or assessed work from the top, middle and bottom of the range;
- scripts of borderline candidates;
- scripts assessed internally as first class or failures;
- scripts where the internal examiners differ significantly on the mark to be awarded.

The scripts must be accompanied by the comments of the Internal Examiners.

Where moderation by the External Examiner indicates the need for a significant alteration to the mark for a script, the relevant internal and External Examiners should consider whether the change relates to that script alone, or whether the marks for the whole cohort should be reviewed. If the latter appears necessary, the examiners have discretion on whether to remark all scripts, or to scale marks in relation to agreed benchmarks. Such re-scaling should be reported to, and endorsed by, the assessing Subject Examination Board.

### **Moderating Assessed Coursework**

External Examiners have the right to see any items of significant assessed coursework produced by a student, though they will normally only do so in borderline cases, and where the coursework contributes significantly to the overall mark for that option. The definition of 'significant' will vary between disciplines, but Subject Examination Boards should ensure that individual items of coursework which count for more than 25% of the overall mark are available to the external for scrutiny if required. Where coursework has been returned to students, the Subject Examination Board must have a means of having these available to External Examiners if required.

### **Examination Boards**

The College has a two tier system of Examination Boards: Subject Examination Boards (SEBs) consider marks, progression and any circumstances that may have impacted on these, and make recommendations for award. Degree Examination Boards (DEBs) are award boards and approve awards and classifications as well as ratify other results achieved and progression decisions.

All External Examiners are required to attend the Subject Examination Board for the programme to which they have been appointed and may attend the Degree

Examination Board should they wish to do so. Exceptionally where an External Examiner is unable to attend a Subject Examination Board, the meeting may proceed in their absence provided that they provide comments on the candidate's performance prior to the meeting. These will be reported to the meeting and the External Examiner will be asked to endorse all recommendations and decisions. At least one External Examiner from outside the University of London must be present at a Subject Examination Board meeting.

It should not be necessary for External Examiners to undertake more than three visits each year and this is the maximum the College will fund. Exceptions may be made where an external has to be present at a re-sit board, a College Board meeting or for the late viva of a borderline candidate.

Subject Examination Boards expect to receive marks that have already been moderated by External Examiners, except in the rare occasion where the performance of a candidate(s) raises an issue of policy on which the whole board must decide. The chair of the Subject Examination Board therefore has the responsibility of ensuring that the marks and other information put before the Board incorporates the comments of externals. Some Boards ask External Examiners to send their comments in writing a week before the board meeting; others organise a 'pre-meeting' at which all outstanding issues are resolved.

### **Debtors and alleged offenders**

Students who are flagged as being in debt to the College related directly to the programme of study – i.e. tuition fees, library fines, field course fees and bench fees should be considered by the Subject Examination Board, but their results must be withheld until confirmation has been received that the debt has been settled.

Students who are alleged to have committed any examination offence must not be considered, but the board should agree arrangements for determining their performance when the question of the alleged offence has been resolved. The normal procedure is for the examination board to authorise its chair, together with a named External Examiner, to act on behalf of the Board when the question of alleged malpractice has been determined.

### **Extenuating circumstances**

Students are required to notify any extenuating circumstances that they feel may have affected their performance to the Senior Tutor or other person designated by the department in writing, as soon as possible after the examination, and not later than 24 hours before the meeting of the Subject Examination Board, so that their performance can be considered in the light of the relevant facts. Submissions must be supported by written evidence such as a medical certificate.

Most Subject Examination Boards have set up an Extenuating Circumstances sub-committees to review claims in advance, and to identify those that require consideration by the Subject Examination Board; these will normally be cases where a candidate's grade/s or class of degree might be affected. The sub-committee cannot act on behalf of the Subject Examination Board in deciding how to deal with extenuating circumstances: it can only identify those cases requiring consideration by the Subject Examination Board.

## **Vivas**

Viva voce examinations are oral examinations. The viva may be an integral part of the assessment (all students being involved), or selective (to assess a borderline candidate). Where a viva is selective, examiners may raise a candidate's mark/grade or leave it unaltered: they may not lower it. Where *all* candidates are given a viva, the examiners have full discretion on any adjustments to the mark or grade within the Regulations.

A viva related to a single module may be conducted by one examiner: if the viva may result in a mark being lowered, two examiners must be involved. A viva may be used to determine the classification of an individual candidate with marks at the borderline. All vivas relating to honours classification must include two examiners, at least one of whom must be an External Examiner.

## **Dyslexia**

Dyslexic students may be granted additional time in written examinations. The scripts of dyslexic students will be flagged. Scripts should be assessed 'as seen'; except that no marks should be deducted for poor sentence construction, punctuation or spelling, unless these are factors that are being assessed in the examination.

## **Classification for Honours**

Degrees that are classified are based on a College mark which is calculated by using the appropriate method as outlined in the Academic Regulations. A Subject Examination Board does have discretion to take into account other factors when determining the class of degree. For example it can raise a candidate who is marginally below the boundary between two classes. In all cases, where discretion is applied, it must be recorded clearly in the minutes of the meeting. The decision may have to be defended on academic grounds in the event a candidate requests a review of the decision. The opinions of External Examiners will be especially influential in such cases and the agreement of the External Examiner must be recorded in the minutes of the Subject Examination Board.

## **Field of Study**

**Only applicable to students who enrolled in September 2007 or earlier.**

The 'field of study' is the title of award made to the candidate based on the modules taken and completed. This reflects the modules that the student has passed, and will not necessarily be the same as the programme of study for which the student was originally registered. For example, a student admitted to the programme of English and History who eventually takes (and passes) far more History modules than English may be awarded a degree in History with English. There are complex rules which govern this; the internal examiners should settle any outstanding questions about the field of study before the Examination Board meeting, so that the time of Externals is not wasted on technicalities.

## **Opinions of External Examiners**

Chairs of Examination Boards must ensure that externals are invited to express their opinions, particularly on difficult and contentious cases, and these opinions will always carry a particular weight. In routine cases where there are disagreements within the board, the final decision will normally be reached by the majority vote (the

Chair having a second and casting vote in the case of a tie). Where, however, an external examiner expresses grave concern that a particular decision would be improper (for example, as being unfair to a candidate or a violation of appropriate standards), the Chair must seek the views of all of the External Examiners on that issue. If the majority of External Examiners are in agreement, the examination board must defer to their views, and the substance of the discussion must be recorded in the minutes or report.

Where the External Examiners, or the Examination Board, recommend a course of action which contravenes the Regulations, or the Subject Examination Board Guidelines, the Academic Secretary must be consulted without delay, and the discussion of the Examination Board on that item deferred until advice has been sought.

### **External Examiners Reports**

After the Examination Board has completed its deliberation on candidates, the External Examiners will each be invited to give a brief oral report, which should cover:

- their opinion of the assessment procession, including its fairness, accuracy and efficiency;
- their opinion of the academic quality of the cohort(s) that they have just examined;
- their opinion of the quality of the teaching, as judged by their examination of the students;
- any recommendations to the Examination Board for improvements in the teaching or examination process;
- their opinion as to whether recommendations made in previous years have been properly followed up.

Examination Boards are normally very willing to respond to External Examiners' comments. If, however, the chairman of an Examination Board fails to respond to critical comments in a positive manner, the External Examiner should contact the Academic Secretary as a matter of urgency.

External Examiners will be informed that they can make representations to the Chairs of the Degree Examination Board and Academic Board if they are dissatisfied with a decision.

The report from a Subject Examination Board to the Degree Examination Board must detail any case where the majority of External Examiners disagreed with a decision concerning the classification of a particular candidate.

External Examiners are also required to make a formal annual report to the Principal (though addressed and sent to the Quality Assurance Officer) following the principal Subject Examination Board meeting each year. This is an essential part of the College's quality assurance framework. For example, External Examiners reports form a major source of information in the annual review of the College's teaching programmes.

The Quality Assurance Officer will read all External Examiner reports and highlight comments that require a formal response. All reports are also considered by the Vice-Principal (Teaching and Learning). Chairs of Examination Boards are required to respond to the points made by External Examiners, both directly (within a month

after the submission of the report) and through the documentation produced for the reviews mentioned above.

The Chair of the Examination Board sends a written response to the External Examiner, with a copy to the Quality Assurance Officer. Where the External Examiner raises an issue of principle which has not already been addressed by the department (or equivalent), it should first be discussed at a staff meeting, or the examiners' next meeting, or at a meeting of the responsible curriculum/teaching committee, as appropriate to the circumstances.

External Examiners' comments and the responses from Chairs of Examination Boards are considered by the Quality Assurance Officer. An annual summary report of this consideration is then presented to the Faculty Boards and the Quality Enhancement Committee. Quality Enhancement Committee submits this summary report, after consideration by the Faculty Boards, to the Academic Board and the University of London.

In cases where an External Examiner's report contains particularly serious or pressing criticism, the Chair of the Quality Enhancement Committee will contact the appropriate Chair of Examiners or Head of Department immediately when the report is received. The Vice-Principal (Teaching and Learning) will normally require a written response to serious criticism.

Report pro-formas are sent to External Examiners by the Academic Secretariat and completed reports should be returned to the Quality Assurance Officer. An External Examiner's fee is released only on the submission of a report. The Academic Secretariat pursues the non-submission of an External Examiner's report and reports the non-submission to the Vice-Principal (Teaching and Learning).

The College aims to establish and maintain constructive and effective relationships with its External Examiners. However any problems, experienced either by an External Examiner or an Examination Board, should be reported immediately to the Academic Secretary or alternatively to the Vice-Principal (Teaching and Learning).

## **Payment**

External Examiners for programmes of study leading to awards of the College are paid their fees and expenses by the Department / School of the Subject Examination Board according to a schedule agreed periodically by the Quality Enhancement Committee and calculated by Chairs of Examination Boards. External Examiners are paid their fees only on receipt of their report. Expenses are reimbursed immediately on receipt of a signed expenses claim form with all receipts attached.