



SWAP Event – 5 March 2010

External examining: origins of QAA's work and the context - extracts from relevant reports

Origins of the work

QAA Thematic Enquiries Report

Thematic enquiries into concerns about academic quality and standards in higher education in England Final report - April 2009, QAA¹

Recommendations

81 Based on the information gathered and the analysis undertaken, there is evidence to indicate that the following actions are required:

- the external examining process should be made more transparent and better explained in order to facilitate understanding of its intentions, limitations, operation and role
- there should be further discussion, at national level, and development of appropriate guidance, about the procedures used to identify, train and support external examiners
- a nationally agreed and mandatory set of minimum expectations for the role of all external examiners should be developed and implemented.

QAA Code of practice

Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education Section 4: External examining - August 2004²

General principles

The external examining function should help institutions to ensure that:

- the academic standard of each award and its component parts is set and maintained by the awarding institution at the appropriate level, and that the standards of student performance are properly judged against this;
- the assessment process measures student achievement appropriately against the intended outcomes of the programme, and is rigorous, fairly operated and in line with the institution's policies and regulations;
- institutions are able to compare the standards of their awards with those of other higher education institutions.

The core functions of institutions' external examining processes are outlined in precept 1.

¹ <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/standardsandquality/thematicenquiries/FinalReportApril09.pdf>

² <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/default.asp>

Precept 1

An institution should ask its external examiners, in their expert judgement, to report on:

- i. whether the academic standards set for its awards, or part thereof, are appropriate;
- ii. the extent to which its assessment processes are rigorous, ensure equity of treatment for students and have been fairly conducted within institutional regulations and guidance;
- iii. the standards of student performance in the programmes or parts of programmes which they have been appointed to examine;
- iv. where appropriate, the comparability of the standards and student achievements with those in some other higher education institutions;
- v. good practice they have identified.

Wider context

The Dearing Report, 1997

National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education, Higher Education in the Learning Society, 1997³

10.93 The second major function [of the QAA] will be to manage a strengthened external examiner system. We propose the creation of a UK-wide pool of recognised academic staff from which all universities and other degree-awarding institutions must select external examiners. Examiners should be academics of high standing and integrity who are sufficiently specialised within degree disciplines. The pool could be created through nomination by institutions of appropriately qualified staff, with a small panel – managed by the Agency – to approve the inclusion of any individual on the nationally recognised list.

10.94 The remit of the external examiner will need to be consistent across the UK, necessitating thorough familiarisation, training and preparation, including a trainee/apprentice model for new external examiners. Examiners will need to be fully aware of the aims, teaching methods and approach of programmes under examination...

QAA Outcomes papers

Outcomes from institutional audit External examiners and their reports

Second series Sharing Good Practice, QAA, 2008⁴

Consideration of the 59 institutional audit reports published between December 2004 and August 2006 shows that, in almost all cases, institutions had policies and practices in place to specify the roles and responsibilities of external examiners and procedures relating to their appointment and briefing, and to receive and respond to their reports. The reports show that in most cases these procedures were making a significant contribution to institutions' work to safeguard the academic standards of awards... Overwhelmingly, the evidence of the audit reports indicates that institutions' external examining arrangements were working satisfactorily.

³ <https://bei.leeds.ac.uk/Partners/NCIHE/>

⁴ <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/institutionalAudit/outcomes/series2/ExternalExaminers.pdf>

House of Commons Select Committee Report

*House of Commons Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee, Students and Universities, Eleventh report of Session 2008-09, 20 July 2009 (HC 170)*⁵

272. From the evidence that we received we would say that the problems of the external examiner system at present can be summarised as:

- the remit and autonomy of external examiners is often unclear and may sometimes differ substantially across institutions in terms of operational practices;
- the reports produced by external examiners are often insufficiently rigorous and critical;
- the external examiner's report's recommendations are often not acted upon—partly because their remit is unclear; and
- the appointment of external examiners is generally not transparent.

273. Notwithstanding these deficiencies, we agree with Universities UK that the external examiner system is fundamental to ensuring high and comparable standards across the sector and that is why we believe that it is worth making the effort to refurbish the system. The starting point for the repair of the external examiner system is the recommendation made by the Dearing Report ... We conclude that the sector should now implement this recommendation ... We strongly support the development of a national "remit" for external examiners, clarifying, for example, what documents external examiners should be able to access, the extent to which they can amend marks—in our view, they should have wide discretion—and the matters on which they can comment. This should be underpinned with an enhanced system of training.... We conclude that higher education institutions should only employ external examiners from the national pool. The system should also be transparent and we conclude that, to assist current and prospective students, external examiners' reports should be published without redaction, other than to remove material which could be used to identify an individual's mark or performance.

Government Response to the Select Committee Report

*House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, Students and Universities: Government Response to the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee's Eleventh Report of Session 2008–09, Eighth Special Report of Session 2008–09, HC 991, 20 Oct 2009*⁶

104. The Government agrees in principle with the need for external examiner arrangements to be reviewed to ensure their continuing effectiveness in contributing to consistency of standards across institutions. The Government welcomes the sector's recent announcement to undertake this review (10 September 2009 – UUK Conference). The Government's response to recommendations 77–81 refers to the fact that the Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) thematic review report has already made recommendations for improvements to external examining arrangements, and further recommendations are made in the Teaching, Quality and the Student Experience Committee report. The sector has also already announced plans to review external examining arrangements. Such a review must consider how the current arrangements can be improved and ensure that they are fit to meet future demand.

⁵ <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmdius/170/170i.pdf>

⁶ <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmsctech/991/991.pdf>

See also the Parliamentary debate on the report – 10 Dec 09
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmhansrd/cm091210/debtext/91210-0008.htm#09121054001143>

Announcement by UUK

Professor Steve Smith's keynote speech to Members' Annual Conference 10 September 2009⁷

2. Quality, standards, and reputation: UUK's priority is to support high quality learning and teaching; address public concerns about standards; and defend the autonomy of the sector. The UK has a Quality Assurance architecture (not just the QAA, but crucially, external examiner arrangements) which far exceeds that of our competitors, and all the evidence is that high quality and autonomy go hand in hand. The message which we must get across is about building on our strengths and addressing areas which could be improved. We expect HEFCE's sub-group on quality, chaired by Colin Riordan, to make similar points in their report due at the end of this month. Critically UUK has to ask how we can more visibly lead the quality agenda, and so we have been working with HEFCE, QAA and others to produce concrete proposals for improvements to our quality assurance arrangements in England and Northern Ireland. And I can announce that on Tuesday, the UUK Board approved our proposal that, with Guild HE and the QAA, we lead a UK-wide review of external examiner arrangements to ensure that it is a robust system which delivers on expectations.

HEFCE Sub-Committee Report

Report of the sub-committee for Teaching, Quality, and the Student Experience, HEFCE's statutory responsibility for quality assurance, HEFCE October 2009/40⁸

Sub-committee's judgement on the external examiner system

Is there substance to the allegations? The system is under strain, and some substantive areas would benefit from support and improvement.

Public confidence: Negative public perception is a serious concern. There is a need to educate the wider public about the role of the external examiner system and what it can and cannot do.

HEFCE's statutory duty: The sub-committee considers that there is sufficient evidence to be confident that the external examiner system is robust enough to enable HEFCE to fulfil its statutory duty at present. It is not certain, however, that this will continue unless changes are made to the system.

Recommendation:

R5. The sub-committee considers that a full review of the external examiner system is needed, and that it is particularly important to consider the following:

- a. Provision of sufficient confidence to all relevant stakeholders, including HEFCE, that standards of awards are at an appropriate level and comparable across the sector. External examiners' role in this regard should be clarified and communicated to a wider audience.
- b. Provision of an independent recourse by which external examiners feel able to raise issues or concerns when routes within institutions' own processes are exhausted (this is of critical importance to public confidence).
- c. Whether the system is sufficiently well supported by institutions to function effectively.
- d. Whether the system is appropriate to changing practice.
- e. Whether external examining is sufficiently well recognised in promotion procedures.
- f. General terms of reference for the external examiner role, including a job description, should be agreed across the sector. This will help to ensure consistency and comparability, and make it easier to explain to the public at large exactly what role external examiners play in

⁷ <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/Newsroom/Speeches/Pages/KeynotespeechtoMembers%E2%80%99AnnualConference,EdinburghUniversity.aspx>

⁸ http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2009/09_40/

assuring standards. It may be most appropriate for QAA to include this in the relevant section of its 'Code of practice'.

g. The sub-committee specifically recommends that at audit a representative sample of external examiners is interviewed by the panel.

Government's Framework for Higher Education

Higher Education Framework 'Higher Ambitions: The future of universities in a knowledge economy'⁹

22 We will also support universities' work to strengthen the role of the external examiner. As a result of the recommendations emerging from the HEFCE and QAA reviews, described in paragraphs three and four, the sector will be undertaking a review of the external examining arrangements which form a key part of a fair and rigorous quality assurance system. The external examiner process is a strength of UK higher education, but there have been recent concerns that in some cases external examiners have not been allowed to play their full role in assuring standards. Sector-led plans to reinforce its authority and role will help guarantee confidence that no one institution is devaluing the currency of the degree award, and will provide a stronger assurance of the quality of the education being provided.

Other ongoing developments

HEFCE Consultation on the Quality Assurance System

Future arrangements for quality assurance in England and Northern Ireland, HEFCE December 2009/47¹⁰ (closing date for responses 5 March 2010)

45. There are currently a number of important ways in which threshold standards are assured across institutions, for example:

- a. The Academic Infrastructure ...
- b. Institutional audit ...
- c. External examiners, who should operate independently and impartially, are drawn from other institutions or from areas of professional practice and comment on the standards of awards, including undergraduate awards...
- d. More than 50 professional, statutory and regulatory bodies ...

46. Comparability of standards is an important issue, and we consider that there is scope in institutional audit to strengthen the way standards are approached. We suggest that we should ask the QAA to consider how it could strengthen audit and/or the Academic Infrastructure to better address the question of comparability of standards, but without compromising institutional autonomy with regard to degree-awarding powers.

Consultation question 5

Do you agree that the QAA should be asked to consider how comparability of standards might be better addressed in institutional audit and the Academic Infrastructure?

⁹ <http://www.bis.gov.uk/policies/higher-ambitions>

¹⁰ http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2009/09_47/

QAA Evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure

Evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure: a QAA discussion paper, QAA¹¹

QAA is discussing with interested parties, through an open process, the extent to which the Academic Infrastructure meets its original aims and its appropriateness in the context of the current debate about academic quality, standards and public information.¹²

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The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2010
Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

¹¹ This will be available from the QAA website – www.qaa.ac.uk – from 26 Feb 2010

¹² The Academic Infrastructure comprises four elements: the Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications, Subject Benchmark Statements, Guidelines for Preparing Programme Specifications and the *Code of practice* – see further <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure>