

## Policy Analysis

### **External Examiner System in the United Kingdom: Fresh Challenges to an Old System**

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#### **Executive summary**

The system of external examining pioneered by the United Kingdom in the 19<sup>th</sup> century has made a major contribution to ensuring comparability of standards within disciplines. The role of external examiners has recently been given fresh impetus by changes in quality assurance arrangements introduced as a result of governmental initiative. In return for the lightening of the burden on institutions through the abandonment of externally organised programme review, institutions are now required to make more information publicly available including summaries of external examiners' reports.

The paper traces the history of external examining and discusses the relevant section of the Quality Assurance Agency's Code of Practice, which is the nearest equivalent to a national system of regulations governing the external examining system. It also discusses the ways in which the system has responded to changes that have occurred, especially the substantial growth in student numbers and the modularisation of degree programmes.

## Introduction

In the mid seventies I visited the United States for the first term to serve as a visiting professor in a large state university. I had no real knowledge of the US system of higher education and had no idea of the basis of grading. When I sought the advice of the chairman of the department his words were to get out of town before the results were published.

I have no idea whether this was a typical attitude in the United States at the time or whether my chairman was untypically insensitive to the needs of his students. But what I did learn was the power of the individual instructor over the grading of students a power which did, and probably still does exist, in a good number of other countries. This was to someone brought up in the British tradition an unpleasant shock. In the UK the grading of students is very much a collective exercise involving not only other faculty members from ones own institution but also faculty members from other institutions, the external examiners, the subject of this paper.

The system is not unique to the UK as it is used in other Commonwealth a countries while aspects of it can also be found in a number of other European countries such as Denmark. This paper will, however, be restricted to the UK experience. The external examiner system works at both research and taught degree but this paper will concern itself with taught degrees.

In order to understand the role that external examiners play in assuring quality in the UK it is necessary to understand the national system of external quality assurance.

### *The UK System of External Quality Assurance in Higher Education*

All Higher Education Institutions in the UK in receipt of public funding are subject to the Quality Assurance Agency in Higher Education (QAA). Institutions are also subject to a range of professional associations who recognise or accredit certain programmes of study, mainly those of a professional or vocational nature, that are not unlike the specialised accreditation agencies in the United States.

The QAA is owned by the organisations that represent the heads of UK universities and colleges (Universities UK, Universities Scotland, Higher Education Wales and the Standing Conference of Principals). It describes itself as being independent of UK governments (QAA 2005, page 5) but this is, perhaps, not an entirely fair description.

The legislation that underpinned the creation of the four UK higher education funding bodies (covering England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) contains the provision that the funding bodies must ensure that there are adequate quality assurance systems in force covering the institutions which they fund. Prior to the establishment of the QAA in 1997 the funding councils were themselves directly involved in quality assurance, but they now contract the QAA to do the work on their behalf. Thus, the QAA is in a contractual relationship with a government agency and it is clear that the government can influence QAA policy and even formulate their policy. This point was demonstrated in 2001 when there was pressure from the universities to lighten the very onerous quality regime that was then in place. The announcement that the system would be changed, the nature of which will be described later in this paper, was made by the then Secretary of State for Education and Skills, David Blunkett, rather than the chairman or chief executive of the QAA (Brown 2004). As will be described latter the government continues to influence the development of quality assurance including the changing role of external examiners.

The QAA operates slightly differently in the four constituent countries of the UK (QAA 2005) but in the main it operates at institutional level.<sup>1</sup> In England it carries out what it describes as “institutional audits”

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<sup>1</sup> It carries out subject reviews in Further Education colleges and of health care programmes under a contract with the Department of Health.

which examine the internal quality assurance systems at institutional level. Institutional audits are undertaken every six years.

The examination of the institution's internal systems is done in the light of the QAA's *Code of Practice*. There are ten sections to the Code, one of which, section 4, deals with external examining. The code includes a number of precepts which are explained as expressing "key matters of principle that the higher education community has identified as important for the assurance of quality and academic standards." (QAA 2004, paragraph 6). The QAA is anxious to stress that the precepts are not the same things as rules to which there must be rigid adherence:

"Institutions will not be asked about their adherence to the *Code of Practice* on a precept by precept basis. They will be expected to explain in their self-evaluation documents how they have addressed the intentions of the precepts, including any resulting changes to their practices. Any areas of difficulty that institutions have experienced should also be discussed in their self-evaluation documents." (<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/fullintro.asp>).

The present system was not arrived at easily and differs markedly from the very onerous system that was introduced with the ending of the binary divide in 1992. One of the reasons why the new system was so onerous was that the external examiner system was not, at that time, held in high regard by senior civil servants and the officials of the Funding Councils.

The new system was far more intrusive than the Polytechnics' experience in the last days of the CNA and certainly far more demanding than the Institutional Audits conducted by the Academic Audit Unit (AAU) that had been established on a voluntary basis, possibly to forestall government intervention, by the CVCP in 1990.

The new approach was twofold; the work of the AAU was taken over by the newly formed Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) while the funding councils themselves conducted programme reviews that afterwards became to be called Teaching Quality Assessments (TQAs). It does appear that one of the reasons why the TQAs were introduced was the belief on the part of the government and its advisers that the external examiner system could no longer deliver on its prime purpose of ensuring comparability of standards. A related issue was that a number of the relevant staff of the funding councils had a school or further education background and appeared to be comfortable with an inspectorial, rather than a peer group, approach and, thus it was, that lectures at the old universities were officially inspected for the first time in their history.

The twin track was ended in 1997 when the QAA was set up to undertake the work formerly carried out by the HEQC and the funding councils, in the latter case the work was carried out under contract with the councils who retained the legal obligation to ensure that all the institutions they funded were subject to an effective quality assurance system.

The level of confidence in the external examiner system has ebbed and flowed over time and 1992 was a time when confidence, particularly on the part of government, was low. For reasons that will be explained later confidence in the external examiner system grew over the decade as reflected in one of the findings of the Dearing Committee, that had undertaken the first major review of UK higher education since the Robins Committee whose report was published in 1963. The Dearing Report recommended the adoption of a lighter approach to quality assurance coupled with a strengthening of the external examiner system (Dearing 1997, page 157).

These recommendations, not all of which have been implemented, will be discussed later in the paper. The recommendation about lightening the external quality assurance was one of those which was not immediately implemented and the fight continued until its successful conclusion, from the university's perspective, in 2001, with the Secretary of State's announcement referred to above. As a result of the change

in policy TQAs were ended<sup>2</sup> but the government was not entirely reassured by the university's stance and insisted on a quid pro quo which involved placing greater reliance on the external examiner system. The way in which this is being done will be discussed later in the paper, but in short it requires summaries of all external examiner's reports to be published on a web site that is intended to provide information to potential students to help them in their choice of institution.

## Policy problem

### *Historical Background*

The notion of importing examiners from other universities was first introduced by the University of Durham when it was established in 1832 (H Silver 1994). These examiners were mostly drawn from the University of Oxford and, while their main purpose was to increase the local "examining capacity", they also provided some evidence to the outside world of the acceptability of Durham's degrees. Thus in the 18<sup>th</sup> century a policy concern was identified which has continued to concern the academic community – namely how to achieve comparability of standards across institutions.

It was, however, the creation of the Victoria University<sup>3</sup> in 1880 that gave birth to the system of external examiners that has existed to the present day. The charter of the Victoria University, as did the charter of the University of Birmingham and other universities founded after 1880, required that examinations be conducted by internal and external examiners with the role of the latter being explicitly recognised as providing public assurance that the standards of the new universities were comparable with those of their more ancient counterparts.

The two main traditional roles of external examiners were

- (i) to ensure that degrees awarded in similar subjects are comparable in standard across higher education institutions, and
- (ii) to ensure that students are dealt with fairly in the system of assessment and classification.  
(Silver, Stennant and Williams, 1995)

While these roles remain basically unchanged, the ways in which they are discharged has been subject to quite substantial change over the last two decades or so.

The ways in which external examiners operated in the past can best be described in the context of the traditional degree programme, without continuous assessment and without any elements of modularity,

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<sup>2</sup> The QAA was allowed to carry out so called "audit trails by which about 10% of the institution's programmes were reviewed as part of the assessment of the effectiveness of the institution's internal procedures. It now appears that the audit trails will be removed from the QAA's armoury (HEFCE 2005)

<sup>3</sup> The Victoria University had colleges in Manchester, Liverpool and Leeds. In 1905 the Victoria University divided into three components based in each of these cities.

where the degree award is based entirely on the student's performance at one, or perhaps two sessions of closed book, proctored, examinations.

In such a world the external examiner had three main tasks

- to take part in the approval of the examination paper
- to check the marking of the scripts usually by inspecting a sample
- to attend the final meeting of the board of examiners.

In some cases the external examiner had the right of veto, in that the examination paper could not be approved or a degree awarded without his or her approval, in other cases the views of the external could be overruled.

We will see later how the introduction of such elements as continuous assessment and modular structures has affected the way in which externals discharged their responsibilities.

In the early days external examiners were usually drawn from the Universities of Cambridge, Oxford and London and from the older Scottish universities but the twentieth century saw the appointment of examiners drawn from a wider range of institutions.

The next major development occurred in the nineteen fifties with the establishment of the National Council for Technical Awards (NCTA) who awarded Diplomas of Technology in newly designated Colleges of Advanced Technology (CAT). The appointment of external examiners was one of the conditions imposed by the NCTA. Within ten years the system changed, the CATS become universities and the diplomas degrees and, in place of the NCTA, the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) was created.

In the nineteen sixties the binary system of higher education was created in the UK under which new forms of higher education institutions were created. Those institutions, the Polytechnics and Colleges, the former generally being multi-faculty large institutions while the colleges were smaller and more specialised, were expected to focus on teaching vocationally related subjects. They were not encouraged to engage in pure research but instead concentrate on applied research and consultancy.

While the new institutions were able to provide courses and research opportunities leading to the whole range of academic qualifications including Ph Ds and higher doctorates, they were not degree awarding institutions; the qualifications were those of the CNAA which acted as a quality assurance body as well as a degree awarding body.

As a quality assurance body the CNAA initially approved and reviewed, usually at five yearly intervals, the programmes of study leading to its awards. It also carried out institutional reviews, also normally every five years. By the time it came to its demise in 1992 the CNAA had given all the polytechnics and many of the colleges the right to approve and review programmes subject to continuing institutional review.

In terms of external examiners the CNAA continued the policy of the NCTA in that it required the institutions to appoint external examiners for all qualifications. Under the CNAA system the institutions nominated external examiners but their appointment was made by the Council. In contrast the universities appointed their own external examiners without the intervention of an external agency.

From its inception the CNAA set out regulations covering the external examiner system but the position in the universities was different. It was not until 1984, when the system was more than a century old, that the then Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (CVCP), now called Universities UK, issued its own external examining recommendations. Up to that date although all universities, with the partial exceptions of Oxford and Cambridge, were fully committed to the external examining system practices varied greatly. The issue of the CVCP recommendations initiated a process of standardisation that has continued to the present day, although there is evidence to suggest that this process still has some way to go.

*The system under strain*

The generally held view in the early seventies in the UK was that the external examiner system was a valuable one that helped ensure reasonable comparability of standards across the country within disciplines. There was very little evidence that it helped ensure comparability of standards across disciplines, but this was not regarded as a matter of great concern

The period 1975 to 1995 saw many changes in UK Higher Education that put great strains on the external examiner system. The most obvious was the move to a modular credit based systems whereby students were no longer assessed at only one or two stages in their programmes. Students now, in very much in the US style, earned credits from separate units or modules, perhaps six to twelve units per academic year, with the final award being made when sufficient credits had been earned or accumulated<sup>4</sup>. A further complication was the introduction of continuous assessment so that, even within the module, there was no single examination on which the external examiner could focus. These changes put the traditional external examination system under considerable strain.

The other change was the very significant increase in the size of the system with full-time student numbers growing from just under 300,000 to close to one million (Dearing 1997, page 15). There was a corresponding, but not proportionate, increase in the number of academics, particularly not of senior academics who were members of those disciplinary based communities in which the members knew, or at the very least knew of, the other members. It was these, the senior members of the professoriate, who had, traditionally, served as external examiners but there were no longer enough of them to go around. The system had to change and these changes have largely occurred over the last decade.

The growing concerns about the external examiner system led to government support for an extensive survey of the system which was conducted by David Warren Piper (Warren Piper, 2004) and which was the first of its type.

The survey indicated that in only a minority of universities were following the recommendations of the CVCP guidelines that examination papers should be double marked and that all external examiners should produce reports addressed to the Vice Chancellor of the examining university. The report also indicated difficulties with multidisciplinary and joint degrees including a lack of effective academic contact between the departments contributing to a joint programme.

Another finding related to the choice of external examiners which was based on their reputed knowledge coupled with the fact that they were known to the senior members of the department and that consultation with those outside the department was rare.

The more recent changes that have taken place in the system are set out in Silver (2005) in which he compares the results of two investigations he carried out into external examining in 1994 and in 2004.

The general view in 1994 was that the external examiner system needed to be retained but that the existing system, which was characterised as a voluntary, self-sacrificing, underpaid and time consuming process in competition with other pressures, needed to be changed. (Silver and Williams, 1994).

The 2004 study (Hannan and Silver 2004) described how the system had changed. The response to increased numbers was, what might be described, as the democratisation of the external examiner system. External examiner appointments were no longer largely made up of members of the senior professoriate. Many more appointments were drawn from the middle ranks of the academy, while the increased proportion of vocationally related programmes was reflected in the increased number of externals drawn from industry and the professions.

The other major change resulted from the changes in the structures of degree programmes. The fact that that a students' final award was based on numerous instruments of assessment, and not a set of end of year examinations, meant that the external could no longer be closely involved with all aspects of the

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<sup>4</sup> The Open University used credit based awards since its foundation in 1970. As a separate development two Polytechnics, Oxford Brooks and the City of London, introduced modular degree schemes in the 1970s. By the end of the century virtually all UK universities had introduced unit or credit based systems.

assessment process. In consequence External Examiners now play little or no part in determining the grades of individual students but act more in as overall monitors or validators of the system. (Silver 2005)

## Content of the policy instrument

In one sense there is no “national system”, each university selects and recruits its own external examiners and each university has its own detailed regulations. There are no rules that specify who is entitled to act as an external examiner, nor is there a qualification that it is necessary to possess before being appointed to the post. The nearest thing to regulations is the External Examiners section of the QAA Code of Practice.

While the precepts are not regulations which must be adhered to at all times, the institution does have to present evidence of a properly functioning external examiner system to the QAA as part of the Institutional Audit and it is much easier to do so if it can be shown that the precepts are being followed.

The precepts will be summarised and discussed in this section. The complete list of precepts is shown in Appendix 1.

The core functions of the external examining process are set out in Precept 1.

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

It can be seen that although the list of functions has been expanded it still includes the traditional objectives described earlier in the paper.

The other precepts may be summarised as follows.

### *Roles and powers*

The institution should communicate to all concerned the roles, powers and responsibilities assigned to external examiners including the extent of their authority in examination/assessment boards (precept 2). Also, institutions should make known the programmes and awards, or parts of programmes, to which each external examiner has been appointed. (precept 8).

The guidance notes to these precepts emphasise the discretion allowed to institutions. While the external may have a right of veto over the decision of an examining board it is also pointed out that “In some institutions it is considered normal practice for a board of examiners to make collective decisions, with no individual having primacy.” (QAA 2004, precept 2).

Precept 2 also deals with the position in modular degrees where different external examiners may have different areas of responsibilities. A number of externals may, for example, be responsible for a number of modules while another might have oversight of the way in which the institution brings the credits together in order to make the award. In such complex cases it is not unusual for the external examiners to be constituted as a team under the leadership of a Chief External Examiner.

In the guidance accompanying precept 8 it is stated that the institution might decide to ensure that an external examiner is associated with the assessment of all student achievement that leads to an award but that

it is acceptable for the external to be only concerned with the academic standards of a Bachelor's programme and only implicitly endorse the levels and standards of a related interim qualification such as undergraduate certificates or diplomas which might count for credit against the Bachelor's degree.

### *Appointment of externals*

Institutions should make every effort to ensure that external examiners are competent (precept 4), should have regulations governing their appointment and premature termination (precept 5) and should ensure that any potential conflicts of interest are resolved before the appointment is made (precept 6). Externals should be provided with sufficient information and support (precept 7). The subjects of training and of conflict of interest will be considered later in the section on current issues.

While the actual precepts do not specifically refer to the point, external examiner appointments are made for a limited duration of about four years in order to ensure that can retain an element of independence from the institution.

### *Methodology*

Prior to the confirmation of mark lists, external examiners are expected to endorse the outcomes of the assessments they have been appointed to scrutinise (precept 3). Institutions are expected to agree with external examiners the evidence that each external considers necessary to discharge their responsibilities (precept 9).

The endorsement referred to in precept 3 is the agreement by the external that the assessment processes have been carried out in accordance with the policy and regulations of the institution. It appears from the guidance notes that the precept distinguishes between the external examiner's agreement that proper process had been carried, which if not obtained would suggest to the QAA that standards were at risk, and agreements with all the outcomes of the assessment, for as is pointed out in relation to precept 2, the institution's regulations might not give the external the right to overrule the collective view of the internal examiners.

### *External Examiner' Reports*

Externals should submit reports at regular intervals providing comments and judgements on the assessment process and the standards of student attainment (precept 10) in a form and coverage specified by the institution (precept 11). The reports should be addressed to the head of the institution, or a person designated by the head of the institution and consideration should be given to the reports at both subject and institutional levels (precept 12). Full and serious consideration should be given to the reports and the outcomes of those considerations, including any action taken, should be formally recorded (precept 13). The institution should provide the externals with feedback including information on any actions taken by the institution (precept 14).

The importance placed by the QAA on the reporting aspects of the external examiner's role is indicated not only by the number of precepts devoted to the subject but also by the fact that the reporting precepts allow very little discretion to the institution.

An important consequence is that the external examining process has become far more open and represents a shift from one of the weaknesses in the way that the system operated in the past which was often based on personal contacts

In the past it was too often the case that the external was effectively selected by the Head of Department and the senior staff of the department from among those that they knew or knew of. A further weakness was that the report, if there was one, was sent to the Head of the Department and not necessarily widely circulated with a content that was more than occasionally devoted more to the quality of the external examiners' refreshments and the well being of the Head of Department's spouse than the attainments of the students. In accordance with the QAA guidelines the institution must now have in place internal procedures

for dealing with possible conflicts of interest, but it is impossible to remove entirely the point that the best people in the institution to judge the subject knowledge and experience of potential external examiner will be the staff of the department over which he or she will, in a sense, “be sitting in judgement”.

## Current Issues of Concern

While there have been considerable improvements in the way the external examiner system has worked in recent years there continue to be a number of areas of concern and debate.

### *The independence of external examiners*

The precepts deal with two aspects of the independence of external examiners. It deals with one in a reasonable fashion but its approach to the other is more debatable.

The first aspect, covered by precept 6, covers such matters as the ensuring that sufficient time has past before a former student or staff member of the institution is appointed as an external. The precept also warns against the danger of reciprocal, or mutual back scratching, appointments whereby institution A appoints an external from institution B and vice versa. The precept also warns against the replacement of an external by someone from the same institution.

A related issue, not strictly related to independence, is the desirability, set out in the guidance notes, of specifying a maximum number of appointments that the institution believes its appointees can hold.

All this seems reasonable enough but there are suggestions that the code of practice deals less well of the other aspect of independence, independence from the design and operation of the assessment model on which judgement has to be passed.

External examiners in the traditional model had the rare privilege of being allowed to be wholly negative in their criticisms. It was argued that should the external examiner start suggesting ways of overcoming problems that they had identified and that if the proposals were implemented, then the external would no longer be able to bring an independent judgement to bear on the process to which they were party. The code of practice takes a far more “liberal” position in that although it points to the potential dangers of employing externals to perform other tasks in respect of the programme they are examining, it also concludes that “It may, in some circumstances, be appropriate for someone who has acted as an external referee or advisor in curriculum design or in the development of a new programme to become an external examiner subsequent to fulfilling the advisory role” (QAA 2004, section 2).

Not all would agree with this view.

### *Modular and joint degrees*

This is a long standing issue that was identified by Warren Piper in his 1988 study (Warren Piper 2004).

An underlying issue that has been long recognised but largely accepted, if only by default, is the disciplinary differences that are found in grading. For example the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) statistics reveal that in 2003/04 70% of graduates in Languages and History and Philosophy were awarded first or upper second class honours degrees while the corresponding figures for Education and Business and Administration were 50% and 46% respectively <sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> In most disciplines the majority of bachelor degrees are honours degrees which are awarded in four classes, first, upper second, lower second and third. Many employers only recruit graduates with a first or upper second class honours degree.

([www.hesa.ac.uk/holisdocs/pubinfo/stud.htm](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/holisdocs/pubinfo/stud.htm)).

Thus a student taking a joint honours degree in say Mathematics and Business, a not unusual combination, would have a final overall grade that is the aggregate of marks from disciplines with rather different approaches to the granting of good honours degrees. The external examiners who will be drawn from those disciplines are not in a position to compensate for these differences.

The problem is compounded in modular degree structures where students study different subjects in varying proportions. In such cases the final honours classification will usually be based on an arithmetical calculation based on the grades obtained from the individual modules and in many institutions the work of the external examiner would be only at the level of the module. An external examiner might be involved at the final examination board where the overall grade is decided but in such cases they will, as stated earlier, play little or no part in determining the classification of individual students but instead act more as overall monitors of the system. (Silver 2005)

#### *The training and selection of external examiners*

As has already been pointed out the most recent major enquiry into UK higher education, the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education under the chairmanship of Sir Ron (now Lord) Dearing recommended the adoption of a lighter approach to quality assurance coupled with a strengthening of the external examiner system ((Dearing 1997, page 157). The proposed strengthening included the creation of a UK-wide pool of recognised academic staff from which universities and other degree awarding bodies would have to select their external examiners. It was suggested that the pool be managed by the QAA who would also be responsible for selecting its members. In order to achieve consistency of approach it was suggested that external examiners would have to undergo a process including thorough familiarisation, training and preparation, including a trainee/apprenticeship model for new external examiners (Dearing (1997) page 162).

While these specific recommendations did not come to pass the period following the publication of the Dearing Report did see the increased recognition of the need to strengthen the external examining system.

Concerns were expressed about any move towards a compulsory period of training for external examiners for perhaps two overlapping reasons. One was the view that an experienced academic did not need any training to discharge the role. The other reason was that it was felt that the requirement to undergo a compulsory period of training would deter many potential external examiners, especially those with the most experience, from accepting appointments. The Teaching Quality Enhancement Committee (TQEC) which was established by HEFCE, Universities UK and the Standing Conference of Principals firmly rejected the principle of compulsory accreditation (Cooke R 2003) but did make a number of proposals with the aim of strengthening the external examiner system. These included

- Improved induction of external examiners by the institution employing their services. Such institutional induction programmes might be submitted on a voluntary basis for external accreditation.
- Improved institutional preparation, i.e. through an apprenticeship programme for internal examiners, which prepare them to take on the role of external examining. Such institutional preparation might also be submitted for external accreditation on a voluntary basis
- The availability of a national programme for the training of external examiners.

The system for voluntary accreditation of institutionally based programmes is not yet in place but the newly established Higher Education Academy (HEA) is engaging in, and commissioning, research in a number of areas that would support the practice of external examining. It is, for example, finding out more about what external examiners actually do and finding out what information and support would be helpful. In terms of training and preparation it is examining the idea of a voluntary continuing professional

development programme that might be used to support external examiners and is considering how recognition might be given to institutional programmes for the preparation and development of external examiners.

The HEA also maintains two email discussion groups, one for external examiners themselves and one for the institutional administrators that support the system.

### *External Examiners' Fees*

Silver identifies an interesting difference between the results of the two research projects, one carried out in 1994-95 and one in 2004, with which he was associated (Silver 2005). The respondents to the first survey complained they had been underpaid but by the second survey the burden of the complaints had moved from the level of the fees to the apparent unjustified variations in the level of fees paid for what appeared to be the same work.

There is as yet no national survey of the level of fees paid although there is a good deal of demand for the publication of these figures. At a 2005 seminar on external examiner organised by the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (CHERI) of the Open University, Professor Howard Colley a Senior Advisor to the HEA reported that a recent survey of external examiners fees carried out in 2004 revealed that some institutions paid a fixed fee while others paid a variable fee depending on such matters as the number of students or the number of courses. The fees reported to the researchers ranged from £250 to £650 (<http://www.open.ac.uk/cheri/index.htm>)

When considering the fees paid to externals it must be remembered that, with a few exceptions, they are full-time academics paid by their employers. A rigid view, that would not be held by many academics, is that since they are doing the work in "office time" they are lucky to be paid anything. The more commonly held view among the external examiner community is that they already do more than they are paid for and hence they deserve to be paid as the external examining role adds to their existing overload.

## **A Fresh Challenge**

In the earlier section of the paper reference was made to the intervention of the government, at the best of the leading universities, to reduce the burden of external quality assurance. This was achieved by the elimination of the system of programme or disciplinary related reviews. A price, however, had to be paid and part of that price was that institutions would need to publish more information about its quality and standards (Brown 2004, page 133).

The information required is set out in HEFCE 2003/15 "Information on quality and standards in higher education" and the web site is to be found at [www.tqi.ac.uk](http://www.tqi.ac.uk).

As far as external examiners are concerned institutions are required to publish summaries of the findings of external examiners, at programme or subject level, on an annual basis.

It is recommended that the summaries should be written by the external examiners themselves. Where it is more appropriate for the institution to prepare the summaries, the text should be approved by the relevant examiners. The template for the entry to the website includes the opportunity for an institution to respond to the findings of examiners.

The TQI website is, at the time of writing this paper, still in the course of development and no research has yet been done to the test the notion of government ministers, and their advisers, that the publication of the summaries of external examiner reports will help to sustain standards and will be of significant help for a student deciding where to study.

## Costs

It is impossible to obtain a precise cost of the system of external examining in the UK. One reason for this is that the cost falls on different shoulders; including the home institution of the external examiners and possibly the external his or her self if the fee does not provide a fair return for their services. The costs of the employing institution are difficult to estimate for, while the fees and expenses are easily measured, the other costs associated with providing the necessary information and support for the externals is less easy to measure with any degree of objectivity.

While a precise figure is difficult to obtain it does seem possible to estimate its order of magnitude and to compare that estimate with the total cost of UK higher education. In their 1995 study Silver et al estimated that there were between 10,000 and 15,000 external examiners (Silver, Stennant and Williams 1995), since student numbers have increased by about 25% over the period let us assume a proportionate increase in the number of external examiners and take a conservative upper estimate of 20,000. An alternative approach is to start with the figure of 2.2 million students in UK higher education in 2003/04 and if one assumes an average of 1 external examiner for every 100 students there would be 22,000 externals. In order to maintain the spirit of prudence this figure will be rounded up to 25,000.

The 2004 study referred to earlier found the most fees fell in the range £250 to £650, to be prudent an average of £500 will be assumed to which £200 will be added for expenses. The direct costs of externals would thus be in the order of £17.5 million (\$30.2 million) and if one, again to be prudent, added an overhead percentage of 50% the total cost would be about £26 million or £12 (\$21) a student. The total expenditure of UK higher education institutions in 2003/04 was £16,900 million so the overestimated cost of external examiners would be of the order of 0.15% of the total spend.

## Conclusions

It is open to judgement whether these admittedly very crude calculations suggest that the external examiner system is an expensive one or not, but the general view is that it is an expensive system but worthwhile. To quote the words of the words of the Teaching Quality Enhancement Committee,

“The committee notes that the UK has a nearly (sic) unique system of external examining. Most HE systems have no equivalent. The system of external examining represents a substantial cost to the sector but it also demonstrates a tangible commitment to standards and quality. External examiners are appointed by higher education institutions (HEIs) and are widely recognised by HEIs and other stakeholders to be a crucial component of the operational quality assurance arrangements within the sector and institutions.” (Cooke 2003)

It is very difficult to present solid evidence of the impact of the of the UK external examiner system by virtue of the fact that in modern times it has always been with us and it is not possible to present a “before and after” picture or present the results of a controlled experiment comparing the results with and without external examiners.

As stated earlier there are periods when confidence in the system has been relatively low but on close examination the concerns are usually fundamentally about whether the methods of student assessment used by institutions are appropriate and rigorous rather than about the role of the external examiners. (Brown 2004)

All the studies made of the system either made by the great and the good such as the TCEC committee or the Dearing committee, or of the actual practitioners suggest that, despite its faults and weaknesses including those related to joint honours and modular programmes, the system is an effective way of helping to ensure comparability across institutions, if not across disciplines, and of ensuring fairness for students.

The overwhelming consensus is that while the system needs to be supported and cosseted from time to time, and occasionally given a good shake up, it remains an essential part of the UK higher education system which is supported by the overwhelming majority of academics and students who would not wish to see it disappear.

## References

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## Resources

- **Higher Education Academy** [www.heacademy.ac.uk/externalexaminers.htm](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/externalexaminers.htm)

See especially:

Good Assessment Practice for External Examiners

[http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/embedded\\_object.asp?id=21888&prompt=yes&filename=EXE022](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/embedded_object.asp?id=21888&prompt=yes&filename=EXE022)

Guide to the process of academic external examining

[http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/quality/EXE018\\_ProcessofAcademicEE.doc](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/quality/EXE018_ProcessofAcademicEE.doc)

Working Paper 4: The Process of Academic External Examining

[http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/embedded\\_object.asp?id=21162&prompt=yes&filename=EXE005](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/embedded_object.asp?id=21162&prompt=yes&filename=EXE005)

A Grounded Theory of External Examining: Analysis of Personal Accounts of External Examining

[http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/embedded\\_object.asp?id=21602&prompt=yes&filename=EXE018](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/embedded_object.asp?id=21602&prompt=yes&filename=EXE018)

Enquiry into the Nature of External Examining (Final Report)

[http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/embedded\\_object.asp?id=21174&prompt=yes&filename=EXE014](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/embedded_object.asp?id=21174&prompt=yes&filename=EXE014)

- **Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (CHERI)** [www.open.ac.uk/cheri](http://www.open.ac.uk/cheri)
- **Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)** [www.hefce.ac.uk](http://www.hefce.ac.uk)
- **Quality Assurance Agency** [www.qaa.ac.uk/](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/)

## **Appendix 1: Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education.**

### **Section 4: External examining - August 2004**

#### **THE PRECEPTS**

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.
2. Institutions should state clearly and communicate to all concerned the various roles, powers and responsibilities assigned to their external examiners, including the extent of their authority in examination/assessment boards.
3. Prior to the confirmation of mark lists, pass lists or similar documents, institutions will expect external examiners to endorse the outcomes of the assessment(s) they have been appointed to scrutinise.
4. Institutions will make every effort to ensure that their external examiners are competent to undertake the responsibilities defined in their contract.
5. Institutions should define explicit policies and regulations governing the nomination and appointment of external examiners, and premature termination of the contract by either party.
6. Institutional procedures should ensure that potential conflicts of interest are identified and resolved prior to the appointment of external examiners.
7. Institutions should ensure that, once appointed, external examiners are provided with sufficient information and support to enable them to carry out their responsibilities effectively. Specifically, external examiners must be properly prepared by the recruiting institution to ensure they understand and can fulfil their responsibilities.
8. Institutions should state clearly, and communicate to all concerned, the programmes and awards, or parts of programmes, to which each external examiner is appointed.
9. Institutions will wish to agree with their external examiners the evidence each considers necessary to ensure the effective discharge of external examining responsibilities, and will provide them with a range of relevant information.
10. Institutions should require external examiners to submit at agreed times a written report that provides comments and judgements on the assessment process and the standards of student attainment.

11. Institutions should indicate the required form and coverage of external examiners' reports.

12. Institutions should ask external examiners to send their reports to the head of the institution, or named person(s) designated by the head of the institution to exercise responsibility for the handling of these reports. Institutions should ensure that the reports are considered within the institution at both subject and institutional levels.

13. Full and serious consideration should be given by the institution to comments and recommendations contained within external examiners' reports, and the outcomes of the consideration, including actions taken, should be formally recorded.

14. Institutions should ensure that external examiners are, within a reasonable time, provided with a considered response to their comments and recommendations, including information on any actions taken by the institution.