



Northumbria University – External Examiner Policy

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Contact:	ar.qte.regs@northumbria.ac.uk

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1 Purpose of the Policy

The External Examiner Policy is a key part of the quality assurance processes at Northumbria University. It assures the University that the quality and standards of its awards are secure and robust in terms of internal standards and external benchmarks by ensuring that awards at the same level and in similar subjects are comparable with those in different higher education providers in the UK. It also ensures that the system of assessment is fair and is objectively operated in the determination of awards made to students.

This Policy aims to assist the University, its external examiners, staff and students by setting out how national and University expectations concerning external examining are met. It sets out the University's requirements of its external examiners, the ways in which they are used across the University and their participation in its programmes and the awards process.

2 External Context

This policy is designed to meet the requirements, expectations and guidelines of:

- 2.1 The Office of Students and the Section B Ongoing Conditions of Registration¹, in particular:
 - The delivery of well-designed courses that provide a high-quality academic experience for all students, which enable a student's achievement to be reliably assessed.
 - The delivery of successful outcomes for all students, which are recognised and valued by employers, and/or enable further study.
 - Ensuring that qualifications awarded to students hold their value at the point of qualification and over time, in line with sector recognised standards.
 - The delivery of a course meets the academic standards as they are described in the Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications at Level 4 or higher.
- 2.2 The UK Quality Code for Higher Education² Expectations for Standards - Core Practice:
 - Using external expertise, assessment and classification processes that are reliable, fair and transparent.
- 2.3 The UK Quality Code for Higher Education Expectations for Quality - Common Practice
 - The approach to managing quality takes account of external expertise.

¹ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/regulation/conditions-of-registration/initial-and-general-ongoing-conditions-of-registration/>

² <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code>

- 2.4 The Quality Assurance Agency Advice and Guidance³:
- External Expertise.

3 Relationship to other University Policies

- Programme Framework for Northumbria Awards (PFNA).
- Continuous Programme Performance Review (CPPR).
- Assessment, marking and moderation policy (*under review*).
- Student Survey (Voice) Policy (MEQ).
- Approval and Review.

4 Key Principles

The University expects its staff and external examiners to set assessments that are appropriate to the stated learning outcomes and Level, and to apply the relevant marking and moderation standards that are consistent with the national norms associated with the subject and/or practice. It also expects that regulations governing progression and award are applied consistently and fairly across the institution, and that there is a focus at programme level.

The external examiner process, related activity, and outcomes are designed to be transparent and clear to staff, students and all stakeholders. External examiners are expected to consider the academic context, procedural and regulatory context, moderation process, and the quality of feedback. They are also expected to consider and propose changes to modules and programmes as appropriate. Detailed Roles and Responsibilities are found in section 6.

5 Criteria for Appointment

- 5.1 External examiners should be drawn from academic institutions and professional contexts (see section 5.2) to ensure that the programme benefits from high-level and impartial external scrutiny and expert practitioner advice. It is expected that external examiners assuring academic quality should be appointed from an institution with a demonstrable track record in the subject to be examined. A list of preferred institutions (by subject) will be maintained by the Governance and Enhancement Team (G&E Team), based in Quality and Teaching Excellence (QTE), updated annually.
- 5.2 Where programmes are subject to Professional Statutory and Regulatory Body (PSRB), or other practice-based requirements, and where it is stipulated that one or more of the external examining team should represent the profession or be a practitioner, this should be recorded by the G&E Team. There will be a definitive list for each programme, maintained by the G&E Team, detailing the number and type of external examiners associated with it. Professional and practice-based appointments will be judged primarily against the criteria most related to the requirements of the role.

³ <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/quality-code/advice-and-guidance/external-expertise>

5.3 External examiners will be required to demonstrate:

- i) high standing, credibility, and breadth of experience within the subject, and command the respect of academic and professional peers.
- ii) competence and experience in the fields covered by the programme/module/subject to be examined, and awareness of current developments in the design and delivery of relevant curricula.
- iii) knowledge and understanding of UK sector national benchmarks for the maintenance of academic standards, assurance, enhancement of quality, and understanding of fair and equal learning outcomes for all students.
- iv) familiarity with the standard expected of students to achieve the award that is to be examined, and with any applicable criteria set by PSRBs.
- v) relevant academic and/or professional qualifications to at least the level of the qualification being externally examined, and/or extensive practitioner experience where appropriate.
- vi) competence and experience relating to the design and operation of a variety of assessment tasks appropriate to the subject, sufficient recent examining/assessment experience preferably as an external examiner and an understanding of enhancement of the student learning experience.
- vii) fluency in English, and where programmes are delivered and assessed in languages other than English, fluency in the relevant language/s.

5.4 External examiners are not eligible for appointment to programmes where they have participated on approval or periodic review panels, or PSRB accreditations in the role of external assessor until two years after the end of their tenure.

5.5 To ensure impartiality the University will not appoint as an external examiner anyone in the following categories or circumstances:

- i) a member of a governing body or committee of the University or one of its collaborative partners, or a current employee of the University 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 to be examined.
- iii) anyone who is, or knows they will be, in a position to significantly influence the future of students on the programme/module to be examined.
- iv) anyone significantly involved in current or recent substantive collaborative research activities with a member of staff closely involved in the delivery, management or assessment of the programme to be examined.
- v) former staff or students of the University unless a period of five years has elapsed and all students taught by or with the external examiner have completed their programme/s.
- vi) where a member of Northumbria University staff holds an external examiner appointment in the same subject area at the academic institution of the proposed external examiner.⁴
- vii) the succession of an external examiner from an academic institution by a

⁴ In the event of a member of Northumbria staff being appointed as external examiner to an institution where there is an existing external examiner appointment to Northumbria the case will be judged against compliance with the other criteria by QTE and a recommendation made to Quality and Standards Sub-Committee. In the event of concern the recommendation will be that the external examiner appointment will be terminated.

- colleague from the same subject area in the same institution within a five-year period.
- viii) the succession of an expert practitioner external examiner by a colleague from the same non-academic company or organisation within a five-year period.
 - ix) the appointment of more than one external examiner from the same subject area in the same academic institution or professional context. To avoid a predominance of external examiners from any one institution (regardless of subject) the G&E Team will monitor the number of appointments at each institution.
 - x) anyone who has previously served as external examiner for the same programme at any time within the previous five years.
 - xi) anyone who already holds two or more concurrent appointments as external examiner at first degree and/or higher degree levels.
- 5.6 External examiners are appointed to programmes, with responsibility for modules or clusters of modules. They have a responsibility to consider the outcomes of the programme(s) and module(s) for which they are responsible across all deliveries. Where there is sufficient volume one of the external examiners will be appointed as the lead external examiner (see section 7). On programmes where there is only one external examiner they will undertake the role and duties of the lead examiner.

6 Roles and Responsibilities

- 6.1 The following are the primary roles and responsibilities of its external examiners who certify that:
- i) academic standards (and professional standards if relevant) are set at the correct level for the programme and award.
 - ii) student performance is assessed against these standards.
 - iii) there are fair and equitable outcomes for all students.
 - iv) assessment, in all of its aspects, is conducted fairly.
 - v) the quality of the programme provided is, as a minimum, appropriate to meet national and international expectations.
 - vi) there is evidence that students are sufficiently challenged in their academic learning.
 - vii) there is consistency with and reference to the Assessment Regulations for Taught Awards (ARTA) and to this Policy.
- 6.2 In meeting their primary roles and responsibilities external examiners are expected to:
- i) comment and offer informed judgements on all draft examination papers and other assessments at FHEQ Level 5 and above (except in the instances outlined below).⁵
 - ii) receive and moderate representative samples of student work across the full ability range, checking for quality, consistency and completion of the moderation process and feedback to students.

⁵ External examiners may receive, for information only, draft FHEQ Level 4 assessments, except where the programme is wholly at FHEQ Level 4, or the programme is new, in which case the assessments will be for consideration, comment and approval.



- iii) confirm that the University grade descriptors and marking schemes have been applied correctly.
 - iv) observe students as appropriate (e.g. in drama productions, or professional practice settings), or attend final shows/exhibitions (e.g. Design, Architecture).
 - v) visit the University (either in-person or virtually) to participate in programme-focused meetings including a meeting with current students.
 - vi) review the level and range of marks, and the consistency of marking, within and between modules, and across the whole programme, and multiple deliveries (where relevant).
 - vii) consider the relationship between learning outcomes and assessment methods.
 - viii) attend Examination Boards and submit reports.
- 6.3 External examiners will access the relevant University grade descriptors and associated marking schemes/criteria for individual assessments through the SITS eVision portal. They will also have access to:
- i) the assessments and moderation samples.
 - ii) all marks contributing to a module mark, and marks for all modules.
 - iii) module evaluation forms (student feedback).
 - iv) internal moderation forms.
 - v) statistics on each module, including maximum, minimum and mean (average) mark, and standard deviation, split by characteristic (where possible).
 - vi) a commentary where there is a discrepancy between marks.
 - vii) the Module Performance Review Proforma as designated in the CPPR guidance.
- 6.4 Departments will expect an external examiner to attend the University to review assessed work prior to the meeting of the Examination Board. External examiners will receive work in accordance with the assessment, marking and moderation policy, which specifies that work will be provided across the whole ability range demonstrated by the students. External examiners are required to verify marking standards, not re-mark and thus the adjustment of an individual's marks based on that sample alone is not appropriate. If an external examiner deems that marks are inconsistent across the sample, they may request a re-marking of all the assessed work in that module. The external examiner may also propose an adjustment of all marks if, in his/her view, the assessment is consistently over- or under-marked.
- 6.5 External examiners will be expected to meet a group of graduating students for discussions about their programme of study. It should be made clear to all that such discussions do not involve any (re)assessment of any individual students.
- 6.6 Additionally, external examiners may be asked to:
- i) comment on changes to the Academic Regulations for Taught Awards.
 - ii) engage in consultation on structural changes to programmes.

7 Lead External Examiners

The University will require its external examiners to be involved in all of the duties in section 6. In addition where a lead external examiner is appointed they will also be expected to:

- i) receive the reports of all the external examiners who review work which contributes to the programme/award, and the supporting datasets and information, for them to take an informed view of the programme as a whole, including comments on any attainment gaps.
- ii) confirm that a consistent and acceptable standard is being maintained across the programme.
- iii) where relevant act as a mentor for new or inexperienced external examiners.
- iv) attend all Examination Review Board meetings where an external examiner is required, and by agreement also attend the Programme Award Board where their responsibility is to ensure that regulations are consistently and fairly applied at the progression and award stage.

8 Nomination and Appointment Process

- 8.1 External examiners are appointed for a period of four years and five months (1 August – 31 December), in order to assess four successive cohorts of students and deal with any subsequent review of decisions. There will be no extensions to contract (except in the circumstances specified in section 8.5).
- 8.2 The G&E Team will provide annually in January a list of those external examiners whose contract is due to end the following December. The Programme Leader is responsible for identifying suitable candidates who meet the criteria outlined in section 5, and for submitting the nomination form by the end of May. Nomination forms and other relevant documentation are accessible here (link to be added). All submitted forms should be signed off by the Head of Department, supported at Faculty Executive, and forwarded to the G&E Team who will coordinate the recruitment process. Failure to comply with the nomination deadline will be reported to the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Education).
- 8.3 Nominations are scrutinised against the appointment criteria by the Quality and Standards Sub-committee on behalf of Education Committee. A list of recommendations is then made to Education Committee, and a list of all appointments is submitted annually to Academic Board and the Board of Governors.
- 8.4 Once approved a formal letter of appointment is issued by the G&E Team which details specific roles and responsibilities, and directs examiners to the relevant web pages where regulatory and other information including the moderation task (which covers arrangements for approval of assessment tasks and the sampling of assessed work) and reporting requirements is provided.
- 8.5 Extensions to contract will only be considered where a programme has only one year left to run and all students are in their final year (if there are any concerns over the feasibility of appointing a suitable successor this needs to be discussed with the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Education)). Proposals for contract extensions should be submitted on the appropriate form for scrutiny by the Quality and Standards Sub-committee on behalf of Education Committee.

9 Change of Duties

Where there is a need to change significantly the originally allocated duties the external examiner should be consulted. Following agreement the change of duties should be reviewed by the relevant Head of Department and approved by the Quality and Standards Sub-Committee on behalf of Education Committee.

10 Termination of Appointment

- 10.1 Under certain circumstances, the appointment of an external examiner may be terminated before the completion of his/her period of office. Premature termination may occur in the following instances:
- i) Resignation of the external examiner.
 - ii) Changes in module/programme or programme structure which renders the appointment no longer applicable.
 - iii) A conflict of interest arising during the term of office.
 - iv) Non-fulfilment of external examiner's duties, such as: failure to undertake moderation; failure to attend relevant training, induction or meetings with students; persistent failure to respond to communication from the University; failure to provide annual reports; persistent non-attendance at examination boards.
 - v) Retirement or career change.
 - vi) Unprofessional conduct.
 - vii) Irretrievable breakdown of relationship with module/programme teaching teams. such as to disadvantage students on the module/programme.
 - viii) Non-completion of the right to work check within 3 months of appointment.
 - ix) Appointment of the examiner as an employee of Northumbria University.
- 10.2 Termination of appointments should be signed off by the relevant Head of Department and approved by the Quality and Standards Sub-Committee on behalf of Education Committee. Where an appointment is terminated the Programme Leader should seek a replacement as soon as possible in line with the criteria and process outlined above.
- 10.3 Where appropriate, and with the agreement of the Faculty Director of Quality Assurance, a notice period may be agreed.

11 Publication of External Examiner Names

External examiners are identified by their name, position and institution/organisation in module and programme information provided to students, normally in the programme handbook. Registrars are responsible for ensuring this information is up to date. A full list (insert link) of external examiners is maintained by the G&E Team.

12 Induction and Information Sources

- 12.1 Following an individual's appointment, the University requires attendance at a University induction event (arranged by the G&E Team), which will cover:
- at University level:
 - expectations in relation to quality and standards, including reporting.
 - roles and responsibilities.
 - key University systems and processes (including the moderation task via SITS eVision for agreeing the assessment and accessing sample assessments).
 - academic standards and regulations.
 - at Department/Faculty level:
 - overview of programme(s)/modules/partners.
 - key timescales.
- 12.2 The G&E Team will provide the external examiner access to specific information to expedite their duties including:
- General Information:
 - the student handbook, including the programme and module specification(s).
 - a list of the accountable staff at programme and module level.
 - a schedule of assessment for the academic year.
 - dates for visits and/or meetings of the Examination Board.
 - Programme/Module Information:
 - Programme and module sites on the VLE (Blackboard Ultra), and other information as specified in section 6.3 above.

13 Examination Boards

- 13.1 External examiners are expected to attend the Examination Review Board (title to be confirmed) which considers and reviews the following:
- i) module/programme statistics (including split metrics, comparative historical data, programme distribution curve).
 - ii) student outcomes.
 - iii) Module Evaluation Questionnaires.
 - iv) any other student feedback on the module.
 - v) issues arising from the moderation process.
 - vi) external examiner input and comments.
 - vii) programme outcomes (lead examiners).
- 13.2 One or more lead external examiners are also expected to attend the Programme Awards Board (PAB) board. The emphasis of the role at the PAB is the consistency of the application of the regulations and for cases where discretion is applied due to Personal or Technical Extenuating Circumstances.

14 Reports and Feedback

14.1 External examiners are required to:

- i) Feedback to module tutor/programme leader on specific aspects in relation to their duties. This feedback is ongoing throughout the academic year, and as designated in the CPPR process, and will also be available to:
 - o Deputy Faculty Pro Vice-Chancellor.
 - o Faculty Director of Quality Assurance.
 - o Head of Department.
 - o The G&E Team and QTE.
- ii) Complete an annual overview report (coordinated by the G&E Team). It is a condition of contract that external examiners' reports must be submitted before fees can be paid. Annual reports should be submitted by 31 July in any given year.⁶

14.2 The University expects its external examiners to take their reporting responsibilities seriously and it, in turn, makes careful use of those reports. External examiners are required to include informative comment and recommendations in their report in relation to the roles and responsibilities outlined in section 6 and specifically as follows:

- i) whether the University is maintaining the threshold academic standards set for its awards in accordance with the frameworks for higher education qualifications and applicable subject benchmark statements.
- ii) the programme of study itself (clarity of programme aims and learning outcomes; the structure and content of the programme in relation to the general aims and learning outcomes).
- iii) student feedback (through the Module Evaluation Questionnaire and any face-to-face meetings), and the programme response.
- iv) the organisation and administration of assessment procedures and adherence to procedures, regulations and rules for progression and the classification of awards.
- v) that any issues are addressed as specifically required by any relevant professional body.
- vi) confirmation that sufficient evidence was received to enable the role to be fulfilled (where evidence was insufficient, they give details).
- vii) areas of strength.
- viii) whether issues raised in previous report(s) have been, or are being, addressed to their satisfaction.

14.3 External examiners' reports are received through the SITS eVision portal and coordinated by the G&E Team on behalf of the Vice-Chancellor. The reports are made available via the SITS eVision Portal to the following:

- Programme Leader.
- Director of Education.
- Head of Department.

⁶ It is acknowledged that there will be different timescales for examiners involved in postgraduate programmes, or programmes that operate outside the standard academic calendar.

- Faculty Director of Quality Assurance.
- 14.4 Where external examiners have raised matters of serious and urgent concern the report is also passed to the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Education). In such cases a response is requested from the Faculty within four weeks for consideration and approval by the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Education) before responding to the external examiner.
- 14.5 The responsibility of the Head of Department is to ensure that the reports are considered by the Department Management Group.
- 14.6 The Faculty Director of Quality Assurance is responsible for producing an overview of key issues and actions relating to external examiner reports, for sign-off by the Head of Department and Faculty Executive Group. QTE collates a University summary of the Faculty reports, which is considered by Education Committee and Academic Board. This summary highlights any issues requiring institutional action. This report forms part of the annual report to Board of Governors ensuring academic quality and standards.
- 14.7 Student representatives have the opportunity to consider external examiners' reports and related action plans at Staff/Student Programme Committees.

15 Improvement and Enhancement

External examiners are expected to contribute to the improvement/enhancement of the programmes that they scrutinise for the University by providing informative comment and recommendations on:

- good practice and innovation relating to learning, teaching and assessment observed by the external examiners.
- opportunities to enhance the quality of the learning opportunities provided to students.