AQH-G1 Policy on the Role of External Examiners
Version 7.0 September 2016

1. General Terms of Reference

1.1 External examiners fulfil three core roles:

a) to assure the standards of awards especially in terms of comparability with similar programmes elsewhere in the sector. This includes verifying that standards are aligned with the requirements of subject benchmarks and the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ). In this context external examiners may also comment on the alignment of standards with the requirements of Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs);

b) to ensure the quality of the assessment process. This includes ensuring that University processes and procedures are followed and that the assessment of individual students is fair and equitable. External examiners are expected to assure the standard of students' awards, including interim awards. To this end they may be involved in the scrutiny of assessments at all levels but their role is most crucial at the level of the target award;

c) to provide comment on course content, balance and structure, and on the modes of teaching, learning and assessment used, to support on-going development of the curriculum.

1.2 Where awards are offered both on- and off-campus, external examiners are expected to ensure that the standards of the awards are demonstrably equivalent.

1.3 While it is expected that in most cases examiners will provide advice directly to the programme or module teams via discussion and reports, in exceptional cases external examiners have the right to report promptly to the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) any unacceptable deviation in standards or conduct by the Assessment Board. As a last resort, where the concern is systemic failings with the academic standards of a programme or programmes, and the examiner has exhausted all applicable internal procedures, including the report above, the matter can be raised externally via the Quality Assurance Agency’s concerns scheme and/or via the relevant professional, statutory or regulatory body.

2. External examiner appointments

2.1 External examiners are appointed by Quality Management Sub Committee (QMSC) or the Postgraduate Research Degrees Sub-committee (PRDSC), acting on behalf of the University's Academic Board, for a maximum of four years. Subject to further approval by QMSC/PRDSC, a maximum of one
year’s extension of appointment can be granted in exceptional situations only (for example: where a programme only has a one year more of teach-out; to provide a cross-over year with a new examiner) Nominations for initial appointment or extension of duty must be made on the relevant University nomination forms.

2.2 External examiners must have appropriate current levels of academic and/or professional expertise and experience in relation to the relevant subject area and its assessment. Where an external examiner’s expertise is professional (i.e. from commerce, industry, the media or a relevant profession) but not academic, at least one other external examiner with current academic expertise must be appointed to oversee the same modules/programme(s).

2.3 To avoid conflicts of interest, anyone in the following categories or circumstances should not be appointed as an examiner:

a) a member of a governing body or committee of the appointing institution or one of its collaborative partners, or a current employee of the appointing institution or one of its collaborative partners
b) anyone with a close professional, contractual or personal relationship with a member of staff or student involved with the programme of study
c) anyone required to assess colleagues who are recruited as students to the programme of study
d) anyone who is, or knows they will be, in a position to influence significantly the future of students on the programme of study
e) anyone significantly involved in recent or current substantive collaborative research activities with a member of staff closely involved in the delivery, management or assessment of the programme(s) or modules in question
f) former staff or students of the institution unless a period of five years has elapsed and all students taught by or with the external examiner have completed their programme(s)
g) a reciprocal arrangement involving cognate programmes at another institution
h) the succession of an external examiner by a colleague from the examiner’s home department and institution
i) the appointment of more than one external examiner from the same department of the same institution.

2.4 The appointment of external examiners who have recently retired is permitted only in exceptional circumstances (for example, to oversee a final year of teachout), and a case for this must be made to QMSC/PRDSC. In such a situation, an external examiner may not be appointed more than one year after he/she has retired from relevant employment. An external examiner who retires during his/her term of office will also be permitted to remain as examiner for one year after his/her retirement date.

2.5 External examiners should have no more than two more substantial taught programme external examining commitments.

2.6 In exceptional circumstances, any request to Quality Management Sub Committee/Postgraduate Research Degrees Sub Committee to vary these restrictions must present the case as to why no alternative is possible.

2.7 Where there is only a single examiner appointed, thought should be given to the hand-over process, particularly where the new examiner does not have
significant experience. This might include a cross-over year, where both appointments overlap, shadowing the departing external at the last set of Boards, or a planned hand-over period.

2.8 The University is required to check that all examiners are eligible to work in the UK in accordance with the Immigration, Asylum and Nationality Act 2006. Appropriate checks must be carried out to ascertain an individual's eligibility to work in the UK at the earliest possible opportunity. All appointments are subject to the examiner producing documentation to demonstrate this. For further information see AQH-G7 Draft Guidance - Checking Eligibility to Work in the UK https://docushare.sunderland.ac.uk/docushare/dsweb/Get/Document-8219/

2.9 Although examiners are appointed for a term of four years, situations may arise where due to a change in circumstances an external examiner is unable to continue in her or his duties. In these circumstances, the University expects that the examiner will notify the University in writing. Letters of resignation should be addressed to the Dean of Faculty, who will inform Academic Services.

Where possible a notice period should be given which completes examining duties for the current year or allows the University to make timely arrangements for replacement, and in any event should not be less than two months.

3. Duties of the external examiner for taught programmes and the taught elements of doctoral programmes

3.1 External examiners may be appointed as examiners for modules, programmes, or both. Module external examiners are required to attend the relevant assessment boards. Programme external examiners are required to be present at the main assessment board at which progression and award decisions are made. For undergraduate programmes this usually takes place in late June and for taught postgraduate programmes it usually takes place in September. External Examiners should be invited, but are not required, to attend meetings of Boards convened to consider referral results and deferral results. In some subject areas, external examiners may also be required to attend at other times, such as for presentations or performances, or to conduct viva voce examinations where that forms part of the approved assessment process for the programme.

3.2 External examiners are required to assure the quality and standards of assessment at the level of the award. To this end they must approve examination questions and be consulted about coursework, sample the assessment of work and attend assessment boards where results contribute to the final award.

They may be asked to comment on work at other levels, for example where internal markers are unable to agree or where there are complex mitigating circumstances, or where professional body requirements mandate attendance, and they may exceptionally request to see work from another level to assist in verifying standards or to ensure that an individual student is assessed fairly.
External examiners are not required to act as second or third markers (although they may adjudicate on individual student marks when requested by internal markers to do so). Assessment Boards reach collective decisions on student results and awards, advised by the external examiner as a member of that Board. They are required to scrutinise a suitable sample of assessments as defined in the University's Assessment Policy, which offers an appropriate range of evidence for the particular award or group of modules allocated to the external examiner.

3.3 The University may also request that external examiners undertake additional roles, such as to provide comment on course content, balance and structure, and on review of the curriculum.

3.3 In addition to programmes where a viva voce is part of the approved assessment process, after consultation with the external examiner, the Chair of the Assessment Board may request external examiners to carry out viva voce examinations for the following reasons:

(a) to assist the Board to come to a conclusion if the student has been unable to complete all the required assessments due to extenuating circumstances, in accordance with the academic regulations.

(b) to assist internal assessors to come to a conclusion where there is a difference of opinion e.g. in the dissertation or project

(c) to assist in the determination of plagiarism in cases where plagiarism is suspected, but the source has not been found.

A viva voce examination may take place at Module or Programme Board level but the reasons for using it must be agreed with the external examiner and minuted. It is recommended that an internal assessor is also present at all such examinations.

3.4 Faculties may arrange for external examiners to meet with students to discuss enhancement issues; the purpose of the meeting should be made clear to the students concerned. This may inform comments in the external examiner's report, but will not be separately reported upon.

3.5 Each module being assessed at the Module Board will be allocated to one external examiner. Each programme at the Programme Board will be allocated to at least one external examiner. Where a group of cognate awards is the responsibility of one Programme Board, or if the subject area is broad, some programmes may be allocated to more than one external examiner.

3.6 External examiners are required to sign a mark sheet to reflect their attendance and indicate their satisfaction with the conduct of the Assessment Board. If an external is unwilling to sign the reasons for this should be recorded in writing and within 48 hours of the Board the Faculty Executive should pass the case to Academic Services for consideration by the DVC (Academic) as to whether to approve the marks of that Assessment Board on behalf of Academic Board.
3.7 External examiners are invited to attend an induction session (which may be delivered online) which will provide an introduction to the University’s policies, procedures and regulations together with information about the programmes and/or modules for which the external examiner will have responsibility.

New external examiners with no previous external examining experience are required to attend the annual institutional External Examiner Induction (which may be delivered online) as well as any induction operated by the Faculty for taught programmes or an induction programme for doctoral programmes; new external examiners with previous experience must at least attend any Faculty induction, and can also choose to attend the institutional induction. All examiners, however inducted, must receive the documentation set agreed annually for the institutional induction.

Letters of appointment are sent by the Faculty for taught programmes and by Graduate Research Support for doctoral programmes and must include:

- date of commencement
- date of termination
- which programmes and modules the examiner has responsibility for
- which assessment boards they are required to attend
- details of any off campus provision for which the examiner has responsibility
- details of sample sizes
- details of fee and expenses
- information about induction
- the external examiner report pro-forma
- information that the examiner’s name, institution and position will be published to students in the list of examiners.
- this Policy
- details of documentation which must be produced to demonstrate eligibility to work in the UK

3.8 It is the responsibility of external examiners to declare an interest if placed in a position of making a judgement about any student with whom there may be a potential, a perceived or an actual conflict of interest. This declaration should be made in writing to the Chair, and recorded in the minutes of the Board, and the external examiner should absent him or herself from the Board for the duration of any discussion about that student, and should not contribute to any assessment decision related to that student.

3.9 In the event that an external examiner is unavoidably prevented from attending an Assessment Board (for example, due to illness, accident or bereavement) the examiner must inform the Faculty (for taught programmes) or Graduate Research Support (for doctoral programmes) as soon as possible in order to agree an alternative process. This could be phone or video conference, by written statement, or by attendance by an examiner from a cognate discipline who can ensure equity of process, or by a combination of these methods. The Faculty/programme leader should seek approval from the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic), of the alternative arrangements, via Academic Services who will advise on the options available.

3.10 Failure to fulfil the responsibilities outlined in this document may result in early termination of contract. Early termination of the appointment of an external
examiner shall be made by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor on the recommendation of the relevant Dean, for taught programmes or the Chair of PRDSC for doctoral programmes.

4. **External Examiner Reports**

4.1 External examiners are required to produce their annual report within six weeks of their attendance at a meeting of the Assessment Board.

4.2 Reports must be submitted on the pro-forma supplied by the University.

4.3 Reports will be discussed at Boards of Study where student representatives are present, and those representatives will be given the full report, and expected to disseminate issues arising from the report and discussions at the Board to the wider student body.

4.4 Reports will be further disseminated within the University in the normal processes for quality management and enhancement.

4.5 Reports will also be published on the intranet by Academic Services, and made available to students. Any references in reports to individual members of staff or students will be redacted by Academic Services. Any redactions will be authorised by the Director or Assistant Director of the Service, in consultation with the Faculty where appropriate or Graduate Research Support.

5. **Specific Terms of Reference of Programme Board External Examiners**

5.1 To ensure that the performance and classification of students is comparable with that of their peers on similar programmes of Higher Education elsewhere, and to ensure comparability of standards across the programmes within the remit of the Board.

5.2 To agree with the Chair of the Board any particular area of responsibility with respect to the programme(s) which have been allocated to them.

5.3 To advise the Programme Assessment Board so as to ensure that all students are assessed fairly in accordance with the programme regulations and that students have met the objectives of the programme.

5.4 To satisfy themselves that the Programme Assessment Board has been conducted in accordance with University regulations and to provide a formal Annual Report to Academic Board.

5.5 To advise the Programme Assessment Board and the Dean of Faculty or Chair of PRDSC where relevant; on matters of policy and good practice in assessment of similar programmes elsewhere.

5.6 To receive comment from external examiners from relevant Module Assessment Boards, and to represent those comments at the Programme Assessment Board.

5.7 To advise on any changes to assessment regulations or modifications to programmes affecting the final assessment.
5.8 To report promptly to the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) any unacceptable deviation in standards or conduct by the Programme Assessment Board.

6. Specific Terms of Reference of Module Board External Examiners

6.1 To ensure that the standards set are appropriate for modules in this subject at this level.

6.2 To advise on the form and content of proposed assessments (including examinations and other forms of assessment) for modules in this subject area.

6.3 To scrutinise a sufficient sample of students’ examination scripts, coursework assignments, projects/dissertations etc. to assure the standard of assessments for modules compared with like modules elsewhere.

6.4 To advise the Module Assessment Board to ensure that all students are assessed fairly in relation to the relevant syllabus and regulations and that students have fulfilled the objectives of the modules and reached the required standard.

6.5 To satisfy themselves that the Module Assessment Board has been conducted in accordance with University regulations and to provide a formal report to the University.

6.6 To advise the Module Assessment Board on matters of policy and good practice in assessment of the subject area.

6.7 To inform external examiners appointed to the relevant Programme Assessment Boards if there are issues to be brought to their attention.

6.8 To advise on amendments to existing modules or proposals for new modules. To advise the Module Studies Board on the appropriateness of assessment strategies on the modules.

6.9 To report promptly to the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) and the relevant Programme Assessment Board(s) any unacceptable deviation in standards or conduct by the Module Assessment Board.

7. Duties of the External Examiner for PhDs, MPhils and the Research Phase of a Taught Doctorate

7.1 Details of the assessment process are set out in the regulations for the relevant programmes:

- PhD/MPhil
  (https://docushare.sunderland.ac.uk/docushare/dsweb/View/Collection-2788)

- Professional Doctorate
  (https://docushare.sunderland.ac.uk/docushare/dsweb/View/Collection-2788)
- DBA
  (https://docushare.sunderland.ac.uk/docushare/dsweb/View/Collection-2788)
- PhD by Existing Published Works
  (https://docushare.sunderland.ac.uk/docushare/dsweb/View/Collection-2788)
## VERSION HISTORY

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<td>S Sutcliffe</td>
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