

## **College Policy and Guidance on the Role of External Examiners for taught degrees**

### **Introduction**

1. The appointment of External Examiners and the scrutiny by them of the marks and awards made by the boards of examiners is a fundamental process of Birkbeck, University of London. This process provides independent and external input into the College's assessment processes and is an important part of the College's quality assurance and enhancement mechanisms.

### **Nomination of External Examiners**

2. In the nomination and appointment of external examiners regard must be given to the following:

- a) Only persons of seniority and experience should be appointed: external examiner nominees will need to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of UK higher education regulatory framework for academic standards; competence and experience in the subject area; relevant academic and/or professional qualifications and/or extensive practitioner experience; and competence in assessing students' knowledge and skills at the relevant level;
- b) In order to have sufficient time for the proper performance of their function, individuals should not normally act as an external examiner for more than two other institutions;
- c) An external examiner should not normally be appointed from a school in an institution where a member of the relevant College School is serving as an examiner, although exceptions may on occasions be unavoidable, for example, in the case of subjects taught only in a very small number of institutions;
- d) Former members of staff or students of the College shall not be appointed as external examiners at the College before a lapse of at least five years or, for former members of staff, sufficient time for students taught by that member of staff to have passed through the system, whichever is the longer;
- e) Persons invited to act as external examiners will be asked at the time of appointment to declare any interest or connection with any student on the programme for which they would be acting as examiner; this includes personal and professional connections. This would normally preclude their appointment. The Academic Registrar or nominee should be advised of any such instances and will make the final decision on whether an appointment can be made;

- f) External examiners must be eligible to work in the UK and provide evidence of this to the College;
- g) A lapse of at least two years should be completed before appointing an external examiner from the same school of an institution as a previous examiner on a specific Sub-Board, although exceptions may on occasions be unavoidable, for example, in the case of subjects taught only in a small number of institutions.

3. Chairs of Boards and Sub-Boards should consider the practicalities of travel involved in enabling an External Examiner's to attend the College as required.

### **Procedure for the appointment of External Examiners**

4. In the year prior to the end of an external examiner's term of office, the Academic Standards and Quality team will remind the Board or Sub-Board Chair that a replacement is required. The Chair (or appropriate colleague) is responsible for identifying a suitable replacement. Having identified a replacement, the following process should be followed:

- a) Sub-Board Chair (or appropriate colleague) completes the application form; the Chair signs the form and submits it to the Academic Standards and Quality team;
- b) Academic Standards and Quality team sends the nomination to the relevant College Board Chair for approval of an external examiner for a Sub-Board or to the Chair of Academic Board for approval of an external examiner for a College Board;
- c) The Academic Standards and Quality team write to the nominee requesting the Ability to Act declaration is signed;
- d) Once the nominee has returned their Ability to Act declaration this completes the formal appointment procedure and formal notification and supporting documentation will be provided to the external examiner;
- e) The College should ascertain whether external examiners have any access requirements or require any reasonable adjustments to carry out their duties and liaise with relevant colleagues to ensure these are put in place; a request for examiners to disclose any adjustments needed will be included in the formal notification communication;
- f) External examiner identification (normally passports) should be photocopied at the first sub-board meeting attended, signed/stamped by an appropriate colleague to confirm that they have seen the original document and sent to the Academic Standards and Quality team.

5. The process for appointing an External Examiner to a College Board is outlined in the Policy on the Operation of Boards and Sub-Boards of Examiners.

6. Boards should avoid appointing excessive numbers of external examiners. Consideration should be given to appointing examiners to work across different levels or sub-boards where possible. The College reserves the right to refuse approval of additional external examiners if no appropriate rationale is given.

7. An external examiner for a Sub-Board or College Board will be appointed for four consecutive years unless either the examiner requests that the appointment be terminated earlier, or Academic Board approves a request that the appointment be terminated earlier (see paragraphs 30-31). Appointments may be extended for one further year at the request of the Chair of the relevant Board or Sub-Board of Examiners, and with the agreement of the examiner. Exceptionally appointments may be extended for one further year beyond this, upon approval of Academic Board. This will normally only be in cases where programmes are being discontinued and one further cycle is needed for all students to complete the programme.

8. An external examiner who has completed their tenure may not be re-appointed to another Sub-Board until five years has elapsed.

9. Undergraduate Boards or Sub-Boards normally should make their nominations of external examiners by 31 January in the academic year in which the assessment will take place. Postgraduate taught Boards or Sub-Boards normally should make their nominations of external examiners by 31 July in the academic year in which the assessment will take place.

10. Boards and Sub-Boards should indicate, when making their nominations of external examiners for which Sub-Boards these examiners will act. This should include details of programmes and/or modules that will fall within the external examiner's remit.

11. Fees for external examining are agreed in advance with the examiners and are normally based on guidelines approved by Academic Board or its nominated sub-committee. Fees will not be paid until a check on the right to work documentation has been completed and a satisfactory external examiner report has been submitted. Expenses will be reimbursed in line with payroll schedules on receipt of a signed expenses claim form with all receipts attached in hard copy.

## **Role of External Examiners**

12. The primary duty of an external examiner is to report on:
- whether the academic standards set for the awards, or part thereof, are appropriate;
  - the extent to which the assessment processes are rigorous, ensure equity of treatment for students, and have been fairly conducted within institutional regulations and guidance;
  - the standards of student performance in the programmes or parts of programmes which they have been appointed to examine;
  - where appropriate, the comparability of the standards and student achievements with those in other higher education institutions;
  - good practice they have identified.
13. Each individual examination paper constituting 50% or more of the assessment of a module must be approved by at least one external examiner.
14. External examiners have the right to inspect any examination script or other assessed material.
15. The Chair of the Sub-Board of Examiners will determine the distribution of duties between external examiners. External examiners may be asked to review a sample of examination scripts or other assessed material (including essays/reports/dissertations) and to observe oral and practical examinations where these are specified. In those cases where it is agreed that the internal examiners should make a selection of scripts to be scrutinised by an external examiner, the principles for such selection must be agreed in advance.
16. External examiners should have enough evidence to determine that internal marking, and determination of award and where appropriate classification is of an appropriate standard and is consistent. External examiners should see a sample of examination scripts and other assessed material from the top, the middle and the bottom of the range. External examiners should also see all scripts and other material assessed internally as failures. To carry out these duties effectively external examiners should not be asked to carry out any marking duties.
17. External examiners should receive evidence of moderation processes in with the sample of assessed work.
18. External examiners may be given an opportunity to meet students to gain more insight

into the views of students about their programme of study. Where this occurs, arrangements will be made by the School administrative team. Students are not permitted to make direct contact with external examiners regarding their individual performance. External examiners may refer to feedback from meetings with students, but this should be anonymised. External Examiners are not expected to be involved in the assessment of any student, including vivas but can be invited to observe assessments where practicable.

19. External examiners should have sufficient time to scrutinise examination scripts and other assessed work adequately, normally by receiving these at least seven days in advance of an Examination Board meeting. This requirement will normally only be waived by request of the external examiner (if, for example, the external examiner prefers to review the scripts by visiting the College in person before the meeting).

20. External examiners should not recommend the amendment of marks for individual students or pieces of work unless they have seen all of the assessed work for the module in question. External examiners can recommend that all marks within a module be “re-scaled” if, as a result of their moderation, they consider that the general standard of marking within the module is too harsh or too lenient.

21. External examiners normally are required to attend meetings of Boards of Examiners at which the majority of sub-board decisions are made. The Chair of the Board of Examiners will ensure that external examiners are invited to attend such meetings and are given sufficient advance notice of the dates of such meetings. Where possible, travel arrangements for external examiners should be made well in advance to ensure the best rates are achieved.

22. External examiners must approve each programme’s report on finalists, normally at the meeting at which awards are recommended or awarded. In so doing external examiners must certify that the standard of the assessment was appropriate for a programme of study at a level consonant with the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications and that the assessments had been conducted in accordance with the relevant regulations and Programme Specification.

### **Induction and Training of External Examiners**

23. Upon appointment each external examiner will be supplied by the Sub-Board with the programme’s regulations and specification, programme handbooks and module specifications, the past year’s External Examiners’ reports and the responses made to these, and minutes of the last meeting of the Board/Sub-Board. These may be provided either

electronically or in hard copy. External Examiners should also be given access to [all College policies relating to assessment, including the Regulations for Taught Programmes of Study, Policy on Marking and Moderation, Assessment Offences Policy and this Policy and Guidance on the Role of External Examiners](#). This may be by provision of links to web-based documents, with hard / electronic copies to be provided on request.

24. The Chair of the relevant Board or Sub-Board of Examiners is responsible for ensuring that external examiners are supplied upon appointment with any additional information on practices relating to assessment on programmes within the external examiner's remit (including details of modules to be reviewed by that external examiner, details of any sampling policies developed in accordance with the [College Policy on Marking & Moderation](#) and any other duties that the external examiner will be expected to perform as part of their role).

25. External examiners will also be provided with any updates to assessment policies and procedures and details of any programme or module amendments by the programme team, during their period in office.

26. Wherever possible, an experienced internal examiner should be nominated to act as a mentor / direct point of contact to individuals who are new to the post of external examiner, in order to give formal and informal advice on the requirements of the role.

### **Reporting**

27. External examiners are required to make annual written reports to the Academic Registrar or nominee following the final Board meeting of the academic year. The Academic Registrar or nominee will arrange for any points requiring a response to be raised, at both subject and, if issues arise, at institutional level, with the Chair of the Board (or Sub-Board); these points will be copied to the Executive Dean of the School concerned and the Chair of the relevant College Board of Examiners. If required, a response to the issues raised should be provided by the Chair of the Sub-Board, approved by the Chair of the relevant College Board and sent to the external examiner in question. This process should be completed within two months of receiving the report. Copies of the external examiners' reports and responses should be provided to all appropriate programme staff by the Sub-board Chair and will be posted on Moodle for staff and students.

28. External examiners will be asked to comment upon:

- a) the academic standards demonstrated by the students and, where possible, their performance in relation to students on comparable courses;

- b) the strengths and weaknesses of the students as a cohort;
- c) the quality of teaching, learning and assessment methods that may be indicated by student performance;
- d) the extent to which standards are appropriate for the award or award element under consideration;
- e) the design, structure and marking of assessments;
- f) the procedures for assessments and examinations;
- g) whether they have sufficient access to the material needed to make the required judgements and are encouraged to request additional information where needed;
- h) the coherence of the policies and procedures relating to external examiners and whether they match the explicit roles they are asked to perform;
- i) the extent to which the external examiner's comments in their previous report have been considered and appropriately acted upon.

29. External examiners have the right to raise matters of serious concern at the highest level of the College through the Academic Registrar. When all institutional avenues have been exhausted, external examiners may contact the QAA through its Concerns scheme.

30. External examiner reports will form part of the evidence base for annual quality monitoring and internal reviews. A summary report on themes arising from external examiner reports across the College will be considered at Education Committee on an annual basis.

### **Termination of Appointment**

31. External examiners may terminate their appointment at any time but should normally arrange this to take effect at the end of an academic year. Where this is not possible, the resignation is subject to three months' notice. A request for termination should be submitted in writing to the Academic Registrar or nominee, and Chair of the relevant Board.

32. The College may, where an external examiner fails to fulfil their duties (including regular non-attendance at boards and non-submission of annual reports) and/or where there is a breakdown in the relationship with the College, terminate that examiner's appointment. A request to terminate an external examiner's appointment may only be approved by Academic Board upon the recommendation of the relevant Board or Sub-Board of Examiners.

2024/25



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