Review of External Examining Arrangements in the UK

Institute of Physics response to a discussion paper from UniversitiesUK, GuildHE and the Quality Assurance Agency

A full list of the Institute’s submissions to consultations and inquiries can be viewed at www.iop.org

1 October 2010
Dear Sir/Madam

Review of External Examining Arrangements in the UK

The Institute of Physics is a scientific charity devoted to increasing the practice, understanding and application of physics. It has a worldwide membership of over 36,000 and is a leading communicator of physics-related science to all audiences, from specialists through to government and the general public. Its publishing company, IOP Publishing, is a world leader in scientific publishing and the electronic dissemination of physics.

The Institute welcomes the opportunity to respond to the discussion paper from UniversitiesUK, GuildHE and the Quality Assurance Agency concerning the review of external examining arrangements in the UK.

If you need any further information on the points raised, please do not hesitate to contact the Institute.

Yours faithfully

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The Institute of Physics

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Review of External Examining Arrangements in the UK

Q1: Are these principles acceptable and are there other principles that should be considered?

The Institute is in broad agreement with the principles listed but does have a number of comments.

Principle 1 is phrased as if to imply that the external examiner process forms part of audit/review by an independent agency. This is not currently the case and the Institute would be concerned if the intention is for an independent agency to oversee the external examining process. This could lead to a reduction in the academic standing of those willing to act as external examiners.

Principle 2 is a welcome acknowledgement of the current status. External examiner reports are also used by PSRBs as part of accreditation processes and this provides a further independent check that the system is working and that institutions are responding to the comments of external examiners.

With regards to principle 3, the Institute fully supports the assertion that more should be done to explain and promote the role of the external examiner. The Institute would have concerns if the ‘expectations’ were to become ‘requirements’ to be enforced by an independent agency for the same reason as given for Principle 1. The Institute would also be concerned if ‘nationally consistent … expectations’ resulted in the same system across all disciplines with no flexibility. Different disciplines require a varying level of support and input from their external examiners and systems must be flexible enough to allow for this difference. The Institute does not accept that more nationally consistent expectations would improve the effectiveness of the external examining process. Standardisation and uniformity will do nothing to improve the effectiveness of external examining and may well be counterproductive given the variety of institutions covered by the process.

Paragraph 12 refers to the need to provide assurance that HE programmes meet threshold standards and are broadly comparable. The Institute is of the opinion that it is more appropriate to talk about threshold standards than comparability of standards. One of the strengths of the UK HE system is that there is a considerable variety in programmes available, even within the same discipline, but to pretend that they are all comparable is unrealistic. The Institute’s degree accreditation scheme is designed to ensure that all programmes in physics meet threshold standards and this system ensures there is consistency across the discipline.

Paragraph 20 refers to concerns being raised as to the independence of external examiners and whether they are sufficiently challenging. While this may be true, care must be taken to ensure that the role of the external examiner does not become routinely adversarial in nature.
Q2: Are these initial ideas and the distinction between judgement and advice a helpful starting point for developing minimum expectations? Where might these initial ideas be clarified or developed to ensure that it is relevant to all institutional practices?

The ideas are on the whole acceptable. We concur with the Review Group (paragraph 53) that the external examiner reports are ‘… primarily a tool to help the institution safeguard academic standards and support the effectiveness of the assessment process’. As such, we have concerns about both the practicality and usefulness of external examiners writing for two audiences, the institution and the student body. There has to be an appreciation that if the external examiner reports are published, there may be a reluctance to make the more critical comments that tend to be the most useful and appreciated by departments.

While the Institute would support the principle of external examiners’ reports being accessible to students we would not support the inclusion of ‘strengths/weaknesses of the programme/course’ as this would be an individual judgement on behalf of the examiner. Any such opinion should of course be reported to the staff and the institution so that suitable action can be taken if there is a consistent trend of such opinions. It is also not clear as to what comments would be made on ‘teaching methods’ or ‘assessment methods’.

The distinction made between setting and maintaining standards is not entirely clear. The primary role of the external examiner is to ensure that the standards are comparable with other institutions, not that the standards set by the institution have been maintained.

Paragraph 31 states that the external examiner ‘does not, on the whole, get involved in the examining and assessment of individual students’. This does not comment on the practice used by many institutions of holding vivas or discussions with students. Such discussions can be an important aspect of making a judgement on the comparability of standards but they can only work if they have potential benefit to the students. We note that there is no mention in the document of the role, if any, that vivas should play in the examining process. This should surely be part of any review of external examining arrangements.

Paragraph 35 includes the statement that institutions have the responsibility for comparing standards across the entirety of their provision. Annexe J outlines the difficulties of assessing comparability across a discipline and it is much more difficult to assess comparability between disciplines. Comparing standards must not be misunderstood as enforcing uniform standards in order to provide an illusion of comparability that is not there. The entrance requirements for the different disciplines within institutions can be vastly different, even between closely related subjects, and this requires appropriate setting of standards to ensure that the needs of all students are adequately met. These standards can be different without compromising the quality of education delivered. This is another reason that the Institute believes that reference to threshold standards rather than comparability is more appropriate.
Q3: In order to increase transparency and public confidence there should be clear expectations about the selection process in institutions and the processes should be publicly accessible, do you agree?

The Institute has no reason to object to the mechanism and procedures involved in the appointment of external examiners being publicly accessible providing details and discussion of individual appointments are not released.

The Institute would like clarification as to what the ‘clear expectations’ would entail. We would have concerns if this was to become a set rules and regulations that would make the appointment process formulaic without commensurate benefit. It is already difficult to secure the services of high calibre individuals and this should not be made more problematic without good reason. The Institute would agree that the consolidation of existing conventions against clear conflicts of interest would be appropriate.

Q4: There should be a national set of generic criteria established for the appointment of external examiners, do you agree? What should be included in the criteria?

The Institute is not fully convinced of the need or usefulness of developing a set of generic criteria. Such criteria would presumably be to ensure that the external examiner had the ability to fulfil the requirements listed on page 13 and all institutions should certainly be encouraged to ensure their appointments meet this standard. However, given the broad spectrum of disciplines and programmes we suspect that such a set of generic criteria could go no further than this and as such, formalising this is not necessary. To do so would increase the complexity of appointing a new external examiner with no effect on the quality of those appointed.

There is a case for clear guidelines on appointments to ensure that there is no conflict of interest or that institutions do not continually appoint externals from similar institutions to their own.

Q5: Should all institutions provide induction for external examiners who are new to the institution, and training and development for first time external examiners? Should a common core programme and template for induction and training be developed?

The Institute would agree that all institutions should provide an induction to their own institution and the relevant procedures and this may involve a common template to be used within that institution. How induction is undertaken should be left up to the institution to judge in collaboration with their external examiner. A one-to-one meeting with the relevant head of department or exam board chair may be sufficient and more useful than a generic induction. Developing a common core programme and template would be expensive and, given the variety of institutions and processes, is not likely to prove beneficial.

The Institute does not agree that the training of first time external examiners should be undertaken by institutions. It would be more appropriate that the first time external examiner be able to demonstrate considerable experience in the examination process
within their own institution, or previous institutions, which they would then employ as an external examiner. Many institutions have more than one external examiner and such institutions could be encouraged to appoint an inexperienced examiner against a more experienced examiner to support the training process.

The Institute believes that the independent nature of the external examiner position will be threatened if training becomes the responsibility of institutions. This could enhance the appearance of a ‘cosy’ relationship between institution and examiner that the Review Group rightly wish to dispel.

If a formalised induction and training process is introduced, it is the Institute’s belief that the time pressures on academics are such that this would reduce yet further the pool of suitable people willing to act as examiners.

Q6: The importance of this role should be recognised by all Universities and institutions with degree awarding powers in promotion procedures, including clear and demonstrable recognition of the value to the institution, the subject and the sector, do you agree? How else should it be recognised?

The Institute agrees that the importance of the external examining role should be recognised by all institutions. We are not convinced that combining recognition with promotion criteria is appropriate for all disciplines. This would be difficult to apply in physics as the external examining role is largely undertaken at the professorial level.

Recognition of the role could be made more explicit within universities through counting external examining as a teaching/administrative task in accounting of hours worked.

Q7: Should there be a national template for external examiners' reports?

The Institute is not convinced that a national template for external examiners’ reports would serve a useful purpose as there is enormous variability between the needs of the different disciplines. Developing a national template would satisfy a desire for standardisation without providing additional benefits.

There should be a basic set of issues that should be addressed in all external examiner reports and a set of guidelines detailing these would be appropriate. Institutions should be permitted to design their own templates that fulfil these guidelines and to allow flexibility to ensure the needs of individual disciplines are met.

Q8: Should there be a specific section for students and should this be made available to all students within the institution, and made available to any external party on request?

The Institute supports the concept that students should be better informed as to the external examining process. The principle that full reports can be made available to external parties on request is appropriate providing the department is able to attach responses.
However, the report notes that a previous exercise in preparing summary statements proved unsuccessful so it is not clear that this proposal will fare any better. The implication that the external examiners should write for different audiences means that it is likely that the section for public consumption will tend to be bland in tone and content. If this suggestion was to be taken up it would be necessary to provide realistic guidelines on what this section should cover. Perhaps consideration should be given to recommending that external examiners hold closed sessions with a selection of students.

Q9: Should all reports and all analysis of reports be shared with student representatives?

It is entirely appropriate that a summary of the external examiners' reports be shared with student representatives and the Institute considers this good practice. However, there are times that comments made in the report need to be treated as confidential, particularly when mention is made of particular student cohorts. The option of confidentiality should not be removed as it allows the examiner to speak freely although this element should not be used without demonstrable good reason. If reports are to be routinely released without the option of confidentiality it will in all probability lead to examiners holding back some comments and reporting them verbally.

Q10: Should all institutions publish names of all external examiners, their job titles and institutions? What would be the most effective way of ensuring that this information is easily accessible?

The Institute believes that this information should be accessible and be published on an institutions' website. Students would need to appreciate that they should make no attempt to contact those responsible for externally examining their programmes.

Q11: Institutions should have in place transparent internal procedures for considering and dealing with robust discussion of issues and concerns which include the possibility of making a report direct to the head of the institution? Do you agree and what else might these procedures include?

The Institute agrees fully with this statement.

Q12: Should there be a clear and independent mechanism for external examiners to use once they have exhausted internal procedures? Does the QAA Causes for Concern procedure represent an appropriate mechanism?

The Institute agrees that there should be a mechanism for external examiners to use and that the Causes for Concern procedure would be an appropriate mechanism.
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