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## **External examiners' understanding and use of academic standards**

### **Introduction by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education and the Higher Education Academy**

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) and the Higher Education Academy (HEA) are pleased to publish this jointly commissioned research exploring external examiners' understanding of standards. The research was commissioned to help the higher education sector understand how external examiners understand academic standards and how they use that understanding to give advice and recommendations to the university.

The research emphasises the key importance of a shared understanding (between internal and external examiners) of the standards applicable to the programmes and the qualifications to which they lead. It shows the value of communication between examiners to promote this understanding within a specific subject, and to ensure awareness of how achievement is reported within the subject and across the institution as a whole. In addition, it highlights the importance of the guidance in the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code) and the HEA's *A handbook for external examining*.

If the guidance on external examining is followed, we believe the external examining system acts as a robust safeguard of standards in UK higher education. This research suggests that there are some issues that need to be addressed in terms of the level of engagement with the guidance, and the sector should take that seriously.

We hope that the findings of this research will be used to inform future support and guidance for higher education providers.

### **The role of external examiners**

The role of external examiners is essentially that of a moderator. They do not carry out the marking of individual students' assessed work but moderate the marking carried out by internal examiners. This involves viewing student work (whether reading scripts or viewing live or recorded performances), usually on a sample basis. This enables the external examiner to form a view as to whether the internal marking has been carried out so as to rigorously judge students' performance against the university's standards, and against the sector's threshold standards as described in *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*.

Formally, external examiners are part of the decision-making process of the university, including in most cases being members of board of examiners, the assessment panel and/or the programme board. This body will exercise delegated authority from the senior academic body of the institution (such as a Senate or Academic Board), and will make the decisions about final marks.

Where an external examiner has concerns about the internal marking of assessed work the stated procedures of the institution are followed. If appropriate these concerns are acted

upon, whether through consideration of a larger sample, re-marking or the scaling upwards or downwards of the marks for the entire cohort of work in question.

## **The Quality Code**

The definitive reference point for external examining in the UK is *Chapter B7: External examining* of the Quality Code. This Chapter built on and incorporated most of the recommendations of the UUK/GuildHE review of external examining, chaired by Dame Janet Finch. This review, which reported in 2010, looked at how external examining could be enhanced as a key mechanism through which degree-awarding bodies in the UK secure the standards of their awards. The development of the Chapter was guided by an advisory group comprising experts representative of UK higher education providers across the UK.

*Chapter B7* sets out the following Expectation which all higher education providers are required to meet:

Higher education providers make scrupulous use of external examiners.

Also of relevance is the recently published *Chapter B6: Assessment of students and the recognition of prior learning* of the Quality Code, and the research reinforces the need for this guidance. *Chapter B6* emphasises the value of academic exchange over standards, whether as part of, or underpinning the process of moderation (internal and external). It also highlights the importance of developing students' understanding of assessment, in particular how academic standards operate within national and institutional frameworks, and the complexity of professional academic judgement.

*Chapter B6* sets out the following Expectation which all higher education providers are required to meet:

Higher education providers operate equitable, valid and reliable processes of assessment, including for the recognition of prior learning, which enable every student to demonstrate the extent to which they have achieved the intended learning outcomes for the credit or qualification being sought.

As the Quality Code makes explicit, responsibility for the academic standards of higher education awards rests with the degree-awarding body. External examiners are appointed to provide the university with independent external advice; whether that advice is accepted or not is a matter for the university, but it is advice which is not declined lightly or without reason. External examiners who have concerns about the maintenance of academic standards have the right to make a confidential report to the head of the institution. Ultimately if internal processes have been exhausted, they can make a complaint to QAA through its concerns scheme. Specific guidance, *QAA's concerns scheme: guidance for external examiners*, has been produced by QAA for external examiners about this scheme.

The HEA's *A handbook for external examining* also has an important role to play. It provides advice on external examining that is valuable for staff development purposes, providing practical guidance on undertaking such a complex role. Through the HEA's related work on assessment, particularly the publication *A Marked Improvement: Transforming assessment in higher education*, the importance of engaging both staff and students in dialogue about assessment standards is emphasised, so that a common understanding of the meaning of standards can be developed.

**Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education  
Higher Education Academy**

# University of Cumbria and Oxford Brookes University research report: External examiners' understanding and use of academic standards

'External examining provides one of the principal means for maintaining UK threshold academic standards within autonomous higher education institutions' - *Chapter B7: External examining* of the Quality Code.

The external examining system is seen as a key tool in assuring assessment standards in the UK. It is, however, an expensive tool and there have been recurring concerns that it is no longer able to warrant comparable standards across universities (Silver and Williams 1996). Criticisms have included a lack of consistency in examiners' appointment and role (HEQC 1994) and unwelcome variability in examining practices in different programmes, subject disciplines and universities resulting from weak or inconsistent institutional processes (QAA 2005). Also noted have been anxieties about the potential for 'cosy' relationships between examiners and departments (Universities UK, Guild HE and QAA 2010), and concerns about clarity (HEFCE 2009) and authority (BIS 2009) in examiners' role in assuring standards (HEFCE 2009) as they move from arbiter of standards and having the final word to being a 'critical friend'.

Solutions to these problems have concentrated on examiner recruitment, procedures and stakeholder understanding of examining (Universities UK, Guild HE and QAA 2010; Universities UK 2011) now reflected in the new Quality Code. Furthermore, in its re-design of the expectations of the external examiner role, QAA endeavoured in *Chapter B7: External examining* to make more 'transparent, rigorous and as consistent as possible' (QAA 2011) the processes involved in the external examining system. In this regard, it is worth noting that the data for this research was collected roughly a year after the introduction of *Chapter B7* (Dec 2011). Therefore, the expectations set out with regards to the external examiner role may not yet be fully embedded in the sector. Nevertheless, the underlying UUK reports did not focus on a central tenet on which external examining rests: the capacity of examiners to hold and consistently apply a shared knowledge of academic standards. In general, previous inquiries have avoided the issue of what standards mean and how they are established, influenced and used by external examiners. This omission is despite broader research on academic judgement and grading, the outcomes of which provide little confidence regarding the consistency of academic standards in use in higher education (see summary of research and references in Bloxham and Price 2013).

In the context of this broad research, is it appropriate to assume that external examiners can apply shared knowledge of academic standards and assure that these are consistent and aligned with national frameworks?

The general aim of a QAA and HEA-sponsored qualitative research project on standards, the findings of which are presented in this report, was to investigate current practices in how academic standards are conceived, constructed, and applied in external examining processes.

The research objectives were to explore:

- how, and to what extent, individuals' judgement relating to standards are shaped by variations in personal assessment histories and involvement in professional and/or disciplinary communities
- the importance of student work in shaping the construct of standards 'in use' and the relative influence of grading experience and other elements of the assessment environment
- the relative influence of the examiner's home institution, the examined institution, and national reference points in shaping constructs of academic standards
- the consistency of constructs between examiners within and between disciplines.

## Methodology

The project methodology encompassed an innovative mixed-methods design, the purpose of which was to collect data about the cognitive activity of the external examiner and the socio-contextual environments in which these activities occur. This combination provides a mixed-methods advantage to the methodology (Johnson 2008) and an extra level of robustness to the data gathered about examiners' standards in use which could not be presumed solely from reported behaviour.

Twenty-four experienced examiners in four contrasting subjects were recruited from 20 diverse UK universities through open advertisement. Examiners in the subjects of chemistry, history, psychology and nursing (that is, six per subject) were provided with five 2i/2ii borderline examples of student work, and with the exception of chemistry, relevant assessment criteria. Contextual information, such as year and place of study, previous marks of the work and weight of module, was not provided.

| Attribute  | Number                          |
|--|---------------------------------|
| Male/female  | 10 participants/14 participants |
| Average age  | 48 years                        |
| Age range  | 30-66 years                     |
| Average number of years of external examining experience   | 8 years                         |
| Range of external examining experience   | <1 year - 20 years              |
| University of employment: Post-1992 (university acquiring full university status in 1992 or shortly after) | 13 participants                 |
| University of employment: Research Focused (but non-Russell Group)   | 5 participants                  |
| University of employment: Russell Group  | 3 participants                  |
| University of employment: Post-2000 (university acquiring full university status after 2000)               | 3 participants                  |

Researchers worked with examiners individually, using a Repertory Grid (KRG)(Kelly 1991) exercise to facilitate the participants in articulating the nuanced constructs they use in distinguishing between pieces of student work. A week before the KRG exercise, examiners were sent five assignments to read. During the activity, interviewees were presented with a

combination of three out of the five assignments and were asked to identify how two of them were the same but differed from the third. This process was repeated until all possible combinations of three were exhausted, that is ten times in total, or until time ran out. In this way, the examiners generated constructs based on an in-the-moment evaluation of actual student work, rather than on idealised notions or espoused practice of marking. Examiners then ranked each assignment against these self-generated constructs and, finally, provided an overall grade for each piece. As the grading was not an exacting exercise, analysis concentrated on the relative worth of the five assignments when compared with each other, rather than the absolute grade given.

Completing the grid exercise and discussing the constructs provided a 'way in' to the second part of the interview, which was on the standards external examiners hold and their provenance. The interview incorporated the construction of a social world map (modified from Clarke 2005), the underpinning premise of which was the socially constructed nature of standards. The purpose of the map was to discover the provenance of the constructs generated during the KRG by inquiring into the social worlds in which the constructs resided, and the commitment of the external examiner to these worlds. The maps were constructed in conversation with the researcher, and conversations were audio recorded, transcribed and analysed using a thematic qualitative analysis. Initial codes were developed through close reading of the data and a shared understanding of the meaning of each code was developed by independent coding and discussion of any differences. Emergent themes were identified from this initial coding framework.

In keeping with a qualitative research design, the analysis and presentation of findings refrain from making statistical inferences from the relatively small number of participants and the non-exacting data collection methods. Rather, analysis concentrates on disclosing examiners' positions with regards to the standards they hold, including how they apply them and where they are located.

## **Findings**

Findings can be categorised into three sections: standards in use (based on the KRG exercise), location of standards, and standards in the context of external examining (based on the interview and map-making exercise).

### **Standards in use**

Analysis of the KRG data attended to the range of constructs, ranking of constructs by importance, shared constructs across a discipline, consistency of scoring within each construct, and consistency of overall judgement for each piece. Also considered were constructs that participants offered as important but that were not generated during the KRG exercise. A classification of 'surface' and 'global' constructs was used, with global constructs referring to disciplinary knowledge and academic qualities such as depth of knowledge and understanding, analysis, and argumentation, and surface constructs referring to more generic and technical qualities such as spelling, punctuation, grammar and citation as well as presentation, appropriate register and use of language. Interpretation of the KRG results was further informed by participants' comments about the KRG activity within the interview. In particular, examiners commented on issues of language (its nature, use and interpretation) and the contextual information (level, nature of teaching and knowledge of students) that they feel is necessary when evaluating student work.

The examiners generated a wide range of constructs. The greatest commonality emerged amongst surface criteria. Few clear patterns emerged within or between the four disciplines. Where similar constructs were shared they were interpreted differently, appearing to result in

manifestly different standards - that is, examiners used similar language to describe apparently different qualities, which led them to rank assignments differently along the same constructs.

The overall marks that external examiners assigned to the student pieces were translated into relative rankings prior to analysis in recognition of the limited contextual information available to the examiners. Analysis of these rankings revealed little inter-examiner agreement. Of the 20 assignments used in the research, only one was assigned the same rank (highest or joint highest) by all six examiners in a discipline. All other assignments were given grades that 'ranked' them against the other assignments in at least three different positions (that is best, second best, and so on). Nine of the 20 assignments were ranked both best (or joint best) and worst (or joint worst) by different examiners. Even where the overall judgements about an assignment were similar, examiners frequently made different judgements about the strengths and weaknesses of particular aspects of the work, for example, the quality of argument. Due to the small number of participants in this exercise and the lack contextual information available to them, wider conclusions about the consistency of judgement between examiners in a given discipline should not be drawn from these findings.

### **The provenance of external examiners' standards**

During the map exercise, the second part of the interview, examiners created a visual depiction of what they believe to be the provenance of the standards they use as first markers and/or as external examiners. They put 'elements' (people, experiences, organisations, and so on) on the maps and organised these by relative importance around a core and periphery. Initial analysis of the elements on all the maps led to the construction of a framework of four locations where standards might be seen to reside (for example elements such as 'school attended' suggested standards can be seen as internalised, and elements such as 'assessment criteria' suggested standards can be seen to reside in explicit documents). The four possible locations identified were: in explicit standards documents, embedded in the individual, in community processes,<sup>1</sup> or in student work. The interviews and maps were then analysed in light of this framework.

Analyses of the interviews and maps revealed that external examiners mostly locate standards in either documents or see them as internalised. Examiners conceive of community processes merely as a tool to check internalised standards or help in the interpretation of documented standards. Examiners rarely conceive of standards as located in student work. Some examiners were more reflexive about the provenance of their standards and their practices than others; some identified contradictions between different ways of conceiving their standards and were troubled, while others found it possible to hold a number of different perspectives at any one time. The examiners who most strongly expressed commitment to a particular way of conceiving standards were those who located standards in documents. The examiners who saw standards as internalised identified a wide range of elements as influential, including educational and professional ideologies, and personal experiences. Examiners commented in the interviews that there were few opportunities to reflect on the provenance of their standards or how their standards aligned with those held within the broader disciplinary community.

### **Standards in the context of external examining**

Examiners took up a number of often contrasting standpoints with regard to what external examining entails and what standards should be used in examining processes. Examiner

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<sup>1</sup> Community processes refer to activities such as moderation, external examining or other disciplinary fora where the motivation is to discuss and calibrate standards.

positions with regards to standards were analysed along two dimensions: one, whether they emphasised the role as either custodian of the discipline or custodian of assessment procedures, and two, the extent to which they drew on the stated standards of the examined institution versus standards brought with them to that institution. In other words, the first dimension is about what the role entails, the second is about whose standards are being used in the external examining process. Using these dimensions as x and y axes created four quadrants, which allowed the description of four conceptions of the examiner role: the independent, the national safeguarder, the process checker and the thwarted independent.

External examiners predominantly adopting a position of independent expect to use their own standards and perceive their role as custodian of discipline standards within the external examining process. The national safeguarder position is one where the external examiner draws on the standards of the awarding institutions to satisfy themselves that they are aligned with national standards (for example national benchmark statements and qualification framework or professional body requirements) as required. The process checker position focuses on whether assessment procedures are followed and uses the stated standards of the awarding institution. Finally, the thwarted independent is a position where external examiners wish to bring their own standards into the assessment process but the role they are expected to play is that of process checker.

## **Conclusions**

This study set out to focus on the question of standards, which is elided in much of the existing literature about examining. The general aim of the research was to investigate current practices in how academic standards are conceived, constructed, and applied in external examining processes. The study did not seek to problematise the full range of activities that are part of the external examiner role. However, an observation made in the interview phase that some examiners do not see a place for their own standards in external examining led to the incorporation of the question of not only how, but also whether, standards are applied in external examining. Thus, the study looked at the role of the external examiner, but only insofar as it is relevant to the question of the application of standards.

The examiners interviewed had contrasting views about the role of the examiner with regard to standards: at one extreme, examiners import their own personal standards that may or may not be aligned with national standards, and use these alone to judge the quality of a programme's assessment; at the other extreme, examiners defer to the awarding institution's standards and focus only on assessment procedures. In the latter conception (that is, process checker) the examiners do not see guaranteeing standards as part of their role.

The KRG highlighted that even if examiners do believe that applying standards is part of their role (that is, they take up the national safeguarder or independent roles), there is still considerable potential for different judgements about quality; for example, examiners' relative ranking of assignments was inconsistent. Reference points direct examiners towards what they should focus on, but the KRG findings indicate that listing criteria is an insufficient basis for examiners to be able to deliver consistent judgement. Shared language does not ensure shared interpretation of common criteria in judging complex academic work. Examiners may be unaware of the individualised nature of their own standards, remaining confident that they are reflecting a consensus about subject disciplinary standards, but the existence of such a consensus is not supported by the KRG findings. The inconsistency found from the KRG exercise is not propounded as a criticism of external examiners, rather, it is in recognition of the complex and intuitive nature of judgement at the higher education level. It does, however, indicate ways in which judgement in examining, indeed in marking in general, is problematic.



Taken together, the findings raise the question of how external examiners should conceive of their role with regard to safeguarding standards (other responsibilities of examiners are outside the scope of this research). Analysis of the interviews revealed that some examiners were troubled by the implications of the role they believed they are expected to take. Their anxiety may not be relieved by turning to official guidance, which, in attempting to accommodate discipline and institutional diversity, is open to interpretation. To illustrate, *Chapter B7: External examining* explains: 'External examiners are appointed to provide each institution with impartial and independent advice, as well as informative comment on the institution's standards and on student achievement in relation to those standards'. *Chapter B7* makes clear that final responsibility for the standards of its awards lies with the awarding institution. To what extent, then, are institutions expected to solicit independent advice from external examiners in relation to standards of student work? And should it be the institution who determines the role that external examiners play in safeguarding standards?

If part of the *raison d'être* of the examiner system is to maintain some sense of UK threshold standards, and student work is the key output measure of those standards, then stakeholders should not be satisfied with the process checker role alone. The critical friend role perhaps lessens the risk of 'rogue examiners' or concerns about clarity and authority and so on. However, taking away all these risks in the name of transparency, rigour, and consistency poses a new risk, which is rendering the system meaningless with regard to maintaining a sense of national standards. Some external examiners described their role as 'rubber stamping', indicating that they already perceive this risk as a reality.

The implications of this study are twofold: firstly, it is important to clarify whether and in which way the examiner role should continue to include oversight of standards and, secondly, if so, opportunities for examiners to improve their ability to hold and apply consistent community standards should be fostered. The new Quality Code places emphasis on institutions' autonomy with regard to responsibility for standards, though it guides it with a number of principles and expectations. Therefore, the responsibility for clarifying the role of the examiner with regard to standards lies with individual institutions. In deciding what role they wish an examiner to take, higher education institutions should determine the extent to which they want examiners to draw on wider disciplinary standards and reference points or whether they are satisfied with independent oversight of assessment procedures. While institutions need to be aware of the differentiated nature of professional judgement and should be wary of asking programmes to attend unquestioningly to external examiners' recommendations, a move towards examiners as merely process checkers is unlikely to be sufficient to uphold UK threshold standards. Such a shift could limit the potential benefits to safeguarding standards of the expensive system of independent examiners. Far better would be to retain the national safeguarder role of the examiner but with greater confidence that examiners are using disciplinary standards informed by both national reference points and a clear grasp of the value and limitations of academic judgement.

To develop a shared understanding of standards, agencies and institutions should provide examiners with opportunities to engage in a range of activities. These activities should include processes for external examiners to calibrate their standards within their discipline communities at national level and to align with available reference points. These processes should be underpinned by a recognition of the limitations of explicit standards and their relationship to tacit understandings. Furthermore, institutional processes should offer opportunities for examiners to reflect on the provenance of the standards they use; not with the purpose of eliminating personal influences, but rather to raise awareness of them such that examiners can endeavour to resolve inconsistencies between their personal standards framework and national standards.

## Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Higher education institutions should clarify the expectations that they have for their external examiners in relation to both standards and assessment processes, recognising that safeguarding of UK threshold standards cannot be achieved by checking processes alone. That is, external examiners must attend to the quality of student output to contribute to assuring national standards. This clarification would best form part of examiner induction.

Recommendation 2: Higher education institutions should encourage external examiners to engage more fully with explicit standards (including the National Framework of Qualifications, subject benchmark statements and professional standards, as well as local standards, such as grade descriptors and assessment criteria) and to participate in greater discussion regarding the meaning of these standards within a discipline and within the institution where they are an external examiner.

Recommendation 3: The Higher Education Academy should promote and facilitate disciplinary community processes beyond local practices to include inter-institutional disciplinary benchmarking processes for sharing, developing and assuring standards. Higher education institutions should actively support external examiners in participating in these processes.

Recommendation 4: Both the Higher Education Academy and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education should consider providing concise, accessible resources to support institutions in the development of external examiners and implementation of *Chapter B7: External examining* of the Quality Code, particularly in relation to the areas identified in recommendation 5 below.

Recommendation 5: Institutional and national induction and training for external examiners should include:

- raising awareness of variation in standards
- engaging in community processes to share and develop understanding of standards
- developing external examiners' understanding of the provenance of their standards and the uniqueness of their own standards' framework
- developing external examiners' knowledge and skills in higher education assessment and judgement (assessment literacy)
- a focus on the importance of national reference points for academic standards.

Recommendation 6: Any future review of the UK Professional Standards Framework should involve a consideration of whether the ability to evidence purposeful involvement in calibration processes for academic standards might be included as an expectation for all four descriptors in the framework.

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