

FEATURE ARTICLE

Enhancing Support for External Examining

There is a shared belief in UK HE that external examining is an important, valued, skilled and useful peer review process. It provides impartial advice to institutions to ensure that students are treated fairly, to enable teaching teams to understand their standards better, and to improve the quality of the education which they provide. The process has been systematized in the UK as in few other countries. Over the last fifteen years, as higher education has been transformed, external examiners have been central to the management of academic risk and the quality assurance of standards in a world of profound and continuous change. External examiners have perhaps been key agents in enabling us to change.

In recognition of their important role and to encourage further development, the Teaching Quality Enhancement Committee (TQEC) argued that:

- institutions should improve the way they prepare their own staff for external examining, i.e. through an apprenticeship programme for internal examiners;
- there should be improved induction of external examiners by the institution employing their services; and

- a programme of activities should be created by the Higher Education Academy to support institutions and disciplinary communities.

These proposals were endorsed in the January 2003 White Paper¹ and incorporated into the HEFCE strategic plan. Universities UK (UUK) and the Standing Conference of Principals (SCoP) responded by developing an action plan, and invited the Higher Education Academy to lead a research and development project aimed at achieving these objectives. The collaborative project was undertaken between January and July 2004 and aimed to:

- develop an evidence base which would provide decision-makers with accurate and reliable information about external examining and how external examiners are currently supported by HE institutions;
- develop ideas for how the Higher Education Academy might support external examining and external examiners.

The project focused mainly on taught undergraduate programmes, and on academic external examiners. It aimed to advance understanding about:

A report commissioned by the GEES Subject Centre

The Motivations and Professional Development Needs of Aspiring and Serving External Examiners in the GEES Disciplines

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Abstract

This article explores the results of a small-scale survey of serving and aspiring UK external examiners for research (PhD) and courses in the GEES disciplines. The research aimed to provide information for input into a strategy for further supporting and developing the external examining system. The findings included that the most frequent motivations for becoming an external examiner were the opportunity to learn from other institutions, and a sense of academic duty. Ensuring standards and safeguarding students' interests were perceived to be the most important aspects of the role of external examining. The informal nature of appointments and the lack of formal induction or training for the role were frequently perceived to be potential drawbacks of the current system. Two main recommendations arising from this research are, firstly, for the provision of opportunities to discuss current issues with other external examiners, and, secondly, the setting up of a database and communication channels to improve on the existing informal appointment system.

Introduction

The purpose of this research was to conduct a small-scale scoping survey of serving and aspiring UK external examiners in the GEES disciplines with a view to identifying:

- motivations for becoming an external examiner;
- methods through which external examiners are currently identified and recruited;
- current sources of professional development for external examiners;
- barriers experienced by those aspiring to become external examiners;
- opportunities for the GEES Subject Centre to support aspiring and existing external examiners;

- research priorities related to the role of external examiners in the GEES disciplines.

The survey was administered through two self-completion questionnaires, one targeted at serving external examiners, the other targeted at aspiring external examiners. The precise response rate of this survey is difficult to determine, as the total number of individuals on the discussion lists to which the invitation to participate was sent is unknown.³ Furthermore, it was likely that numerous individuals received the invitation who were neither existing nor aspiring external examiners and so were not specifically targeted to participate in the survey.

Table 1. Employing institutions of survey respondents

Home Institution	Existing EEs	Aspiring EEs
Pre-1992 University	11	0
Post-1992 University	12	3
HE College	0	0
FE College	0	0
Other	0	0
Total	23	3

The 'home' institution is the institution in which the external examiner is substantively employed. For example, if an external examiner was employed at institution A and was an external examiner in institution B,

3. The invitation to participate was sent to three GEES-related jiscmail lists. This paper is an edited abstract of the full report which can be found at: <http://www.gees.ac.uk/>

- what external examiners do, and what they think their professional development needs are;
- how course/programme leaders support external examiners and external examining;
- what institutions do to induct and support their external examiners;
- how institutional frameworks for continuing professional development might be used to support external examining;
- the services and activities that the HE Academy might provide to different constituencies.

These aims were addressed through:

- four commissioned research studies;

- five regional discussion meetings in Edinburgh; Cardiff, Bristol, Hatfield and Manchester;
- a questionnaire survey completed by 48 HE institutions;
- discussions within three Working Groups, one of which was a group of external examiners.

Further information, including the findings, on this project can be found online at

<http://www.ltsn.ac.uk/genericcentre/index.asp?id=21232>

(1) DfES, January 2003, The Future of Higher Education at: <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/hegateway/strategy/hestrategy/pdfs/DfES-HigherEducation.pdf>

External Examining in Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences

In order to develop additional information to support the project, Subject Centres were each invited to discuss the issues with their discipline communities through focus groups or surveys. Due to the short timescale and limited funding available, the GEES Subject Centre commissioned a small scoping survey of current and aspiring external examiners. The findings from this survey are reported below.

Respondent profile

A total of 26 completed questionnaires were returned, of which 23 were from existing external examiners and 3 were from aspiring external examiners. The 'home' institutions of serving external examiners responding to the survey were divided almost equally between pre- and post-1992 institutions (Table 1). All three aspiring external examiners were employed in post-1992 institutions. There were no respondents from Higher Education (HE) or Further Education (FE) Colleges.

Collectively, the profile of respondents showed variations in both academic and external examining experience. The most experienced respondent had 37 years academic experience, whilst the minimum was 3 years. The mean academic experience of respondents was 23 years. The minimum experience as an external examiner was 2 years, with a maximum of 30 years, while the mean external examining experience was 9 years. Aspiring external examiners had, on average, less experience in academia, with a mean of 8 years. Twelve serving external examiners held multiple examinerships, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Examinerships held according to institutional type

Number of examinerships held				
Home institution	1	2	3	Total
Pre-1992 University	7	2	1	14
Post-1992 University	3	8	1	22
HE College	0	0	0	0
FE college	0	0	0	0
Total		10	10	2

A total of 36 external examinerships were held between the 23 serving external examiners. A breakdown showing the home institution of external examiners and the institutional type in which their examinership is held is presented in Table 3. This shows that for the respondent group, post-1992 respondents had

Table 3. Home and Examinership institution of respondents

Examinership Institution	Home Institution				Total
	Pre-1992 Uni	Post-1992 Uni	HE College	FE College	
Pre-1992 University	9	4	1	0	14
Post-1992 University	9	8	4	1	22
HE College	0	0	0	0	0
FE college	0	0	0	0	0
Total	18	12	5	1	36

the majority of the examinerships, spread evenly between pre- and post-1992 institutions, with an additional 4 HE college and one FE college examinerships. In contrast, pre-1992 respondents exhibited a focus of their examinerships in pre-1992 institutions.

Survey results

Motivations to become an external examiner

A summary of the motivations of serving external examiners is presented in Table 4 (overleaf). The most commonly cited motivation was the opportunity to observe and learn about practice in other institutions, particularly related to learning, teaching and assessment.

There was a strong sense of academic duty evident in the answers from nine respondents. This was summed up by one respondent who commented that "the system would break down if people were unwilling to take their turns". Career development and continuing professional development were also motivating factors for a small number of serving external examiners. For example, one respondent described their motivation as resulting from the "need to bulk up the CV for promotion". In another case, a respondent felt that becoming an external examiner would benefit their work at their home institution. Interestingly, only 3 respondents considered their

Table 4. Motivations to become an external examiner

Motivations cited	Frequency
To learn from other institutions	12
Academic duty	9
Career development and CPD	5
Develop personal network	3
Monitor and compare standards	3
See new research (PhD)	2
Total	34

main motivation for taking the role as an external examiner to be the monitoring and maintenance of academic standards. The payment for external examining was not identified as a motivating factor, with several respondents specifically making comments to this effect. For example, one respondent commented that their motivation was “not the money!!”.

Initial invitation to be an external examiner

The appointment of external examiners does not take place through open competition for an advertised post; instead, the process has a reputation as being somewhat informal. Respondents were asked to identify how they had initially been invited to become an external examiner.

Seventeen respondents (74%) were invited to become an external examiner either directly by a personal contact or through the recommendation of a personal contact. Two respondents were invited to act as an external examiner as a result of their research record. One was “approached by someone who had read an article I published in the *Journal for Geography in Higher Education*. We were working with similar students in similar institutions”.

Perceived role of the external examiner

Existing and aspiring external examiners were asked to rank, in their view, the relative importance of different aspects of the role of external examiners, with a rank of 1 being most important, 2 next most important, and so on. Table 5 presents a summary of the results. This clearly shows that the primary role of external examiners is perceived to be to ensure standards at the institution in which the examinership is held. Safeguarding students' interests was perceived to be the second most important aspect of the role of external examiners, although this exhibited much less agreement amongst the sample.

Exchanging practice was perceived to be the third most important aspect of the role of the external examiner. Comments associated with this answer stressed that one of the key benefits of being an external examiner was the opportunity it provided for incumbents to learn and gain ideas to enhance their own teaching practice. One respondent considered the exchange of practice to be the most important aspect of the role of an external examiner. The lowest ranked aspect of the role was curriculum development. This is highlighted by comments from one respondent: “I don't think that curriculum development should be part of external's remit. The QAA code has been a bit ambiguous about this, giving externals responsibilities for structural issues that should have been determined at validation and confirmed at review”. In addition to the answers presented in Table 6, eight respondents identified 'other' issues as important aspects of the external examiner role. The issues identified

Table 5. Relative importance of aspects of the role of external examiner

Rank	Aspect of role	Mean ¹	Count
1	Ensuring standards	1.28	26
2	Safeguarding students' interests	2.09	23
3	Exchange practice	2.81	22
4	Curriculum development	3.55	23

(1) Mean indicates the average of the ranks awarded by respondents. Count indicates the number of respondents who ranked that item (from a possible maximum of 26).

showed little pattern, but included a role in enhancing practice, providing a voice for staff concerns, and helping departments through periods of change.

Induction to External Examiner role

Serving external examiners were asked to comment upon any training or induction they received upon their appointment as an external examiner.

The nature and formality of the induction received by external examiners upon appointment was found to be very variable. The most frequent answer, given by 13 respondents (38%), indicated that they received no formal induction to the role of external examiner or the institution in which the examinership was held. In contrast, 9 respondents (27%) commented that they did receive formal induction from the 'new' institution. Opinions surrounding the usefulness of formal induction or training events varied. For example, one respondent commented that such events were “absolutely invaluable”. However, another respondent was more sceptical, commenting that; “I'm not sure that the training was particularly valuable. It is more important to visit the actual Department where the degree is based and to meet the staff (and if possible students) before and during the period as external examiner”.

A source of induction received by 3 respondents was from their home institution. Three respondents also identified learning from other externals as a key induction process. This is typified by the comment that “the most important aspect of training is to watch the conduct of external examiners that one has known and to compare and contrast how effectively they have performed their task”. Other externals said that they relied upon the documents their 'new' institution provided as induction (such as course specifications and quality assurance procedures). One respondent reported having voluntarily attended a national meeting on external examining in order to seek some form of induction to their new role.

An underlying theme apparent amongst the responses, albeit not explicitly mentioned as primary sources of induction, was the prior experience of contact with external examiners, typically through having been a course leader or through holding a relevant role within their home institution (such as chair of a teaching quality committee). There was also a strong feeling evident that learning 'on the job' was typical once appointed as an external examiner. Indeed, for those examiners for whom no induction was provided, there was no choice in this matter.

Continuing professional development provided

A summary of the results of the continuing professional developmental opportunities provided by the institution employing the external examiners is presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Ongoing opportunities for personal development

Opportunity for personal development	Frequency
None	13
Annual meeting of external examiners at institution of examinership	4
Direct and indirect experience	3
Observation of conduct of other externals	2
External examiner staff development at 'home' institution	1
Total	23

A majority of respondents (57%) received no further support or opportunities for personal development in their role as an external examiner from the institution in which their examinership was held. One respondent described their experience as “nothing formal, but usually something happens informally in a particular visit that I have found useful”.

Formal developmental activities for external examiners provided by the employing institution were reported by four respondents. These either took the form of specific staff development workshops (1 case) or an annual meeting to discuss relevant issues with other external examiners, often in different subject areas (3 cases). Such meetings were considered positively. For example, one respondent considered that they were invaluable “since practice changes nearly every year”. One theme (noted by 3 respondents) was that external examining is an idiosyncratic activity that can only be ‘learned’ through practice. For example, another respondent commented, “the best personal development has come from gaining a wide experience of the actual practice of externalling and in seeing how different Departments work”. Two respondents considered observing and discussing issues with more experienced external examiners to be a form of personal development. Finally, one respondent identified that their home institution provided ongoing development opportunities for external examiners.

Continuing professional development needs

As presented in Table 7, a total of 10 serving external examiners considered that they did not require any further professional support for their role as an external examiner. This was largely due to the respondents in question having developed practice through learning ‘on the job’. For example, one respondent commented that they would require “none now as I have plenty of experience”. However, several of these respondents did identify the need for support during the early stages of an appointment as an external examiner.

The remaining 12 serving external examiners who answered this question each identified specific areas of professional development they would find useful. The most commonly cited need (6 respondents) was to have opportunities for “exchange of practice aimed at enhancement”. The format of such an event was described by a different respondent as a “live forum / discussion group for peer examiners in the subject to share issues. Support regarding how to handle plagiarism cases. Support regarding vivas - nature, role and practice”. A potential role for the GEES Subject Centre was specifically identified by one respondent as follows, “in the realm of GEES, simply arranging training sessions within which prospective and experienced examiners can meet and exchange ideas would be excellent”.

The second common area of development, identified by 4 serving externals, was in the area of policy, standards, and the

Table 7. Continuing professional development required by external examiners

Support required	Frequency
None	10
Practice exchange	6
Policy, role and standards	4
Observation of existing externals	1
More formal induction	1
Total	22

role of external examiners. Specifically, respondents required professional development regarding government and HEFCE policy towards external examiners. Two further respondents stated that greater opportunities to simply observe more experienced externals would be welcome, as would a more formal induction to the role.

Aspiring external examiners

Motivations to become an external examiner

The motivations of the three aspiring external examiners matched closely those of serving external examiners, with the exchange of practice, comparison and enhancement of standards, and personal career development all receiving at least one specific mention. However, there was no comment amongst the answers of aspiring external examiners regarding the contribution of the role to the overall operation of the academic system.

Aspiring external examiners were asked to consider the barriers they faced to becoming appointed as an external examiner. Each respondent provided a different answer. One considered that “there are few institutional barriers to becoming an external examiner, so the main barrier is probably just one of opportunity”. Another felt that they were “too young, too radical, too innovative, not connected in the hierarchical nepotism of auto-selection!”; whilst another considered their personal “time constraints” and availability the key barrier. Certainly, there is no current mechanism for aspiring external examiners to advertise their availability, nor for aspiring external examiners to find out about suitable vacancies outside their immediate network.

In order to begin to explore the professional developmental needs of aspiring external examiners, respondents were asked to consider what immediate concerns they would have if appointed as an external examiner. The answers to this question again showed little pattern. One respondent commented that “in the absence of any formal training, I feel that I would have to seek guidance from my peers (i.e. informal training) to how some specific aspects of the role needed to be undertaken. ...”.

The specific ongoing professional development activities each respondent would welcome reflected the concerns they expressed in the previous question. However, two respondents identified two similar developmental needs. These were: (1) that workshops are required to introduce institution-specific practices; and 2) that the GEES Subject Centre could provide opportunities to “link in with other external examiners to share experiences”. This response reflected comments made by serving external examiners. The final respondent was more sceptical of the role of professional development in this context, considering it to be “arguably pointless because appointments are made on the basis of nepotism rather than ability in teaching and learning”. This comment again reflects the view that networking rather than ability influences external examiner appointments.

Conclusion

The conclusions of this research report are somewhat tentative as they are based on a relatively small number of responses. For clarity, the conclusions are divided into specific sub-sections as presented below.

- There is an evident tendency amongst respondents to this survey for external examiners from pre-1992 universities to undertake the role of external examiner in pre-1992 universities. In contrast, external examiners from post-1992 universities undertake external examining at similar levels in both pre- and post-1992 universities.
- The main motivation to take a post as an external examiner is to learn from practice elsewhere. However, in reality, exchange of practice and curriculum development were the least important aspects of the role of the external.
- The primary role of an external examiner is perceived by respondents to be ensuring standards, yet this was the least common reason for undertaking the role.
- Serving external examiners considered it their duty to undertake the role to assist function of the overall academic system in the UK. However, in doing so, they obtained specific personal benefits, including learning from practice elsewhere, network building, career development, and exposure to new research.

The main motivation to take a post as an external examiner is to learn from practice elsewhere.

Appointment of external examiners

- External examiners are identified and appointed based on their standing within academic networks. As a result, informal invitations are made to the potential candidate to take the post.
- Aspiring external examiners highlighted that not being aware of external examinership opportunities was a significant barrier to their appointment. There was also some concern that the informal process of appointment served to disadvantage suitable candidates and favour those well-established in the academic hierarchy.

Professional development in the GEES disciplines

- Experienced external examiners would have welcomed training and induction at the start of their examinership.
- Annual meetings for external examiners, held by employing institutions, appear to be useful for both induction and continuing professional development of external examiners. They also provide a useful institution-specific opportunity to meet and discuss issues with other external examiners. However, it was also evident that not all external examiners in this survey have had such events offered to them.
- Observing and discussing issues with more experienced external examiners was considered to be a valuable form of professional development by both serving and aspiring external examiners.

Recommendations for the GEES Subject Centre

There are two main recommendations arising from this research for the Subject Centre. The first is related to the provision of opportunities for aspiring and serving external examiners to meet on a subject-specific basis to discuss concerns and to support the enhancement of their role. Specific recommended events are as follows, however, there is scope for delivery at a single event, which could provide opportunities to:

- Discuss the role, expectations, and policy context of external examining (for aspiring external examiners).
- Network and discuss current issues related to external examining, particularly enhancement opportunities (for both serving and aspiring external examiners).
- Network and discuss current issues related to external examining with experienced external examiners in order to identify and share good practice (for newly appointed external examiners).

A second recommendation, is for the GEES Subject Centre to maintain and promote a database of aspiring external examiners and to offer a communication service to institutions seeking external examiners.

Recommendations for further research

Given the low response rate from aspiring external examiners, further research is required to:

- investigate the barriers to appointment and the potential mechanisms to overcome those barriers. A revised methodology might be to undertake a series of personal interviews with appropriate individuals identified through a widely distributed questionnaire.
- Investigate the experience of course teams' engagement with external examiners in order to identify strategies to support and enhance their relationship.
- To determine from Heads of Departments (and/or course leaders) the appointment method of external examiners. Specific areas of investigation would include the characteristics they look for in external examiners, and whether they would be willing to openly advertise their external examiner vacancies.

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