

Policy for the External Examining of Taught Programmes



Summary			
The Policy and its related forms are reviewed annually to ensure that the external examiner process remains effective and aligned with current external requirements.			
Scope - This document applies to:			
External Examiners, Heads of Schools for compliance/ guidance.			
Student year of entry	n/a	Current students	n/a
Document Control			
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Division	Education Services		
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Superseded documents	External Examiner Policy for Taught Programmes 2024-25		
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Keywords	External examiners, nomination of, appointment of, examiner report		

Policy for External Examining of Taught Programmes at the University of Bristol

1. Introduction

- 1.1 External examining provides a crucial means for maintaining and improving academic standards and is an integral part of the University's Quality Framework. External examiner expertise is an essential aspect of the quality assurance and enhancement processes operated by the University. The University views the external examiner system as a key mechanism for the review of academic standards and reflection on the quality of the student learning experience.
- 1.2 This Policy summarises the University's expectations for the conduct of external examining of taught programmes. This Policy can be found on the Academic Quality and Policy Office (AQPO) website: <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/academic-quality/assessment/exexs/>.
- 1.3 This Policy should be read in conjunction with the Regulations and Code of Practice for Taught Programmes: Rules for Assessment, Progression and Award of a Qualification, which can be found at: <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/academic-quality/assessment/codeonline.html>.
- 1.4 The External Examining Handbook, which sits alongside the Policy, can be found here: <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/academic-quality/assessment/exexs/>

2. Role

2.1 The role of an external examiner is to:

- Assist the University in ensuring that the Degrees awarded by the University of Bristol meet or exceed the academic standards stipulated in external points of reference;
- Offer an independent and comparative view of academic standards, assessment and marking processes and programme structures and ensure that relevant processes are conducted in accordance with the relevant University Policy and Regulation;
- Assist the University in ensuring that the academic standards and achievement of students are comparable with other UK higher education institutions;
- Assist the University in enhancing the quality of teaching, learning and assessment by advising on good practice identified within the University and beyond.

2.2 Where there are specialist units requiring particular expertise in marking student work, the School may appoint external assessors. External assessors are not external examiners as covered by the scope of this policy.

3 Duties

An external examiner is expected to carry out the **duties** that will enable them to fulfil the role, as summarised below:

Assessment design

3.1 External examiners should:

- Review and advise on draft assessments and suggest enhancements;
- Confirm that the assessments are set at the right level, of an appropriate standard and accurately reflect the content of the curriculum;
- Confirm that the mark scheme/ marking criteria is appropriate;
- Review how the assessment fits together with other programme or stage level assessments;
- Check that students are not being over or under assessed in relation to the same intended learning outcomes;
- Give an opinion on the appropriateness of the format of the assessment for the discipline, the students, the stage or level of study and the intended learning outcomes.

Inform Programme Enhancement

3.2 External examiners should:

- Ensure the programmes/ units are coherent and are in alignment with internal and external frameworks;
- Comment and provide advice on matters of curriculum content, balance and structure, in so far as these affect the programme academic structure;
- Act as a critical friend to the programme team to highlight any key strengths and weaknesses;
- Have the opportunity to meet with students (online or in person) to hear the student experience of learning and assessment and identify possible enhancements;
- Attend the Programme APR meeting (or similar convened meeting) to meet with programme staff and engage in constructive discussion about any issues identified and programme enhancement plans.

Maintenance of Quality and Standards

3.3 External examiners should:

- Carry out a review of a sample of student work, marking and moderation ahead of the date of the relevant meeting of the School exam board for the programmes to which they have been appointed as external examiner;
- Assure themselves that the institution is maintaining academic standards and rigour in its marking, including moderation;
- Comment on proposed actions (e.g., to scale marks) to address instances where an assessment has not performed as intended ahead of the School exam board;
- Provide confirmation in writing to the designated contact (usually the Programme Director), ahead of the School exam board, on their view of the standards and rigour in the operation of the assessment, marking and moderation processes against University regulations and procedures.
- If issues are identified, external examiners should alert the Programme Director (who will in turn notify the School Education Director). Where there are concerns regarding the overall standard of marking in advance of the relevant School exam board; they should not propose changes to individual marks.

The external examiner is **not** required to attend the School exam board. The external examiner may be invited to attend other meetings by the School, in order to fulfil Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body (PSRB) requirements.

External Examiner Reports (see also Section 6)

3.4 External examiners should:

- Submit an annual report, providing recommendations and highlighting good practice as appropriate on the conduct of the assessment processes, academic standards, assessment, and the curriculum design and delivery;
- Satisfy themselves that the School has given due consideration to any recommendations given in the previous year's report, with any actions or rationale for the status quo noted.

4 Nomination and Appointment

4.1 On behalf of Senate, the Faculty Board is responsible for appointing external examiners, in accordance with Senate Delegation Schedule. This power is further delegated to Schools for operation with Faculty Board oversight. The Head of School is responsible for ensuring that a sufficient number of external examiners are appointed so that adequate expertise is available to cover programmes, including the requirements of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies.

4.2 There are three approved models for appointing external examiners. At least one external examiner must be appointed for each (i) programme or group of cognate programmes, (ii) each stage or level for large or more complex programmes or (iii) each broad theme or grouping of units. External examiners will not normally be appointed to cover single or small numbers of units only.

4.3 Schools are no longer permitted to appoint external examiners to cover both UG and PGT levels of study (and for this purpose integrated master's programmes are counted as UG).

4.4 The Head of School (or nominee) must ensure an appropriate match between the numbers of external examiners and the quantity of material being reviewed. A risk-based model is adopted to make best use of the external examiners' expertise during their term of appointment, with each unit being sampled at least every other year.

4.5 All educational partnerships leading to an award from the University of Bristol must be the subject of scrutiny by an external examiner(s). For joint awards, the arrangement for external examiner appointments will be set out in the institutional collaboration agreement.

4.6 All external examiners must be formally appointed to the role by completing a nomination form, authorised by the Head of School (or delegate), prior to starting the role. UG external examiners will require a Right to Work check as part of the appointment process. All appointments will be confirmed in writing by the Academic Quality and Policy Office (AQPO) who are responsible for maintaining the central record of all current external examiners.

4.7 It is the responsibility of the Heads of School (or nominee) to monitor all appointments and to ensure adherence to the appointment procedures for external examiners. The nature and extent of the commitment required should be made clear to the nominee, particularly if a nominee is from outside the higher education sector (perhaps from industry).

4.8 External examiners should be able to show evidence that they meet specific appointment criteria set by the University, which are predominantly based around knowledge, competence, experience and qualifications in the subject area and an understanding of UK academic standards and quality assurance. The appointment criteria are set out in an appendix on the nomination form for ease of reference.

4.9 Heads of School should aim to have a suitably diverse external examiner pool working for the programmes across the School, with that diversity contributing to the inclusiveness of teaching, learning and assessment processes for students.

Avoiding reciprocal and long-standing arrangements

4.10 The incoming external examiner should not have been an external examiner for a taught programme at the University of Bristol for at least five years. Former staff (including those with honorary appointments) and students of the University of Bristol can only be appointed as external examiners after a lapse of at least five years.

4.11 There should not be any reciprocal arrangements between cognate programmes with another institution in external examining. Where there is more than one external examiner covering a programme/s, the incoming external examiner should not be from the same department in the same institution as any other external examiner covering the programme/s. An incoming external examiner should not be from the same department in the same institution as an outgoing external examiner.

Conflicts of interest

4.12 The nominated external examiner and members of the School involved in the nomination should declare any potential conflicts of interests that should be given due consideration before the nominated external examiner can be formally appointed.

4.13 The nominated external examiner must not hold an unreasonable number of other external examiner appointments that would interfere with their ability to engage with the programme at Bristol. It is recommended that there are no more than two appointments at any one time.

Duration

4.14 The normal period of appointment of external examiners for undergraduate and postgraduate taught programmes is four years (for the MBChB, BDS and BVSc professional programmes it is five years). The appointment may be exceptionally extended for a further one year period to ensure continuity, for example when a programme is coming to an end, with the permission of the Head of School (or nominee).

Discontinuation of Appointment

4.15 The appointment of an external examiner may be discontinued by the University or the individual examiner before the completion of their period of appointment.

4.16 Where the external examiner resigns from their position, they would normally be expected to complete duties related to the current academic year. Where this is not possible and the external examiner wishes to resign during the academic year, they should do so in writing, giving a three-month notice period.

5 Induction

5.1 The School is responsible for ensuring that external examiners receive appropriate induction and support to enable them to carry out their duties. Guidance for Schools on what to include in inductions is available in the External Examining Handbook and in the Bristol Education Administration Manual (BEAM).

6 Reports and Responses

6.1 External examiners should submit an annual written report, using the approved University template. Separate reports for undergraduate and postgraduate level programmes are required. Where an external examiner has been previously appointed to cover both UG and PGT level programmes and submitting a combined report, the report must cover both unit levels explicitly and clearly distinguish whether any recommendations apply for either or both levels. Consideration will need to be given to the timeline for report submission and alignment to the UG deadline.

6.2 The External Examiner Report must be submitted by the following maximum deadlines:

- **01 July for undergraduate programmes**
- **20 December for postgraduate taught programmes**

6.3 Specific taught programmes that have a non-standard structure may have a different deadline. Where the normal deadline is unsuitable, Schools may apply to the Academic Quality and Policy Office for a separate maximum deadline. Where this is agreed, the School will communicate the bespoke deadline to their external examiner.

6.4 In the final year of their period of appointment, the examiner should provide an overview of their experience at the University of Bristol, including comment of the University's academic standards in the relevant subject and in particular any significant changes in standards over the appointment period.

6.5 The nominated representative in the School should respond to the external examiner report within four working weeks of receipt of the report, and by the following maximum deadlines:

- **01 August for undergraduate programmes**
- **31 January for postgraduate taught programmes**

The Head of School (or nominee) is responsible for ensuring that responses are returned to the external examiner by these deadlines.

- 6.6 Submitted reports from external examiners and responses provided by the School will be held in accordance with data retention schedules. Copyright in all external examiner reports will be owned by the University.

7 Fees and Expenses

- 7.1 Schools have the discretion to determine the appropriate fee payable for each external examiner using the fee bands published by AQPO. The fee will be paid upon receipt of the annual report(s) and submission of a valid fee claim form. HMRC require that tax is deducted at source from payments to UG external examiners. Where an external examiner is covering units on both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, separate claim forms will need to be submitted for the work completed at each level to ensure the correct tax treatment is applied (and for this purpose integrated master's programmes will count as UG).

8 Information Provided to Students

- 8.1 The report (and the response form) will be made available by the School to students via the relevant virtual learning environment and may be discussed at relevant Student Academic Representation Forums.
- 8.2 External examiners should ensure that any comments do not identify individual students in the report form. Schools that identify where an external examiner has identified a student in the report should contact AQPO to edit the form before publishing it to the student body.

9 Serious Concerns

- 9.1 In the event that an examiner has a serious concern relating to academic standards and internal procedures, which they are unable to resolve with the appropriate academic staff, they may draw these to the attention of the Associate Pro Vice-Chancellor (Quality Assurance and Enhancement) by submitting a special report to them at any time (exex-admin@bristol.ac.uk). The Associate PVC will notify the University Academic Standards and Quality Committee that a special report has been received and will investigate the points raised.
- 9.2 The University shall provide a timely response to any special report received, which will describe the actions taken to address the concerns. The Associate PVC, or nominee, will consider whether changes to Policy are required and provide an update to the University Academic Quality Committee once the investigation has taken place and any actions to resolve the issues have been agreed.

10 Institutional External Examiner

10.1 Role

The University will appoint an institutional external examiner to provide external input on the operation of exam board processes and matters of academic regulation and policy. The institutional external examiner will work with colleagues from the University's Academic Quality & Policy Office, liaising with the A-PVC (Quality

Assurance and Enhancement), Head of Assessment, Deputy Director of Education Quality and Policy as necessary. They will report to the A-PVC (Quality Assurance and Enhancement).

10.2 Duties of the Institutional External Examiner:

The institutional external examiner will:

- familiarise themselves with the Regulations and Code of Practice in place at the University;
- receive and review exam board material in advance of exam boards that they are asked to attend;
- attend a selection of exam board meetings across the University as an observer of proceedings rather than a member of the exam board;
- review exam board minutes;
- act as a critical friend to the Quality Team providing input and commentary on proposed policy, regulation changes or other matters where external input could be beneficial;
- submit an annual written report to the A-PVC (Quality Assurance and Enhancement).

10.3 The institutional external examiner will immediately report any serious concern to the A-PVC (Quality Assurance and Enhancement) copied to the exam board chair, if they have specific and serious concerns about academic standards.