Supporting external examiners at Liverpool

This document is intended to support academics who are appointed as external examiners for taught provision at the University of Liverpool. The University appoints around 270 external examiners each year from a range of both academic and non-academic institutions, and each of them is crucial to ensuring that the degree programmes offered are comparable in both standards and quality to other national and international programmes.

The information provided in these pages is intended to support external examiners in their role, and supplements which is provided by the Student Administration and Support Division (SAS) on their website for external examiners here. While the information and resources provided by SAS are generally intended to support externals in the administration of their appointment, this site is intended to provide more insight into the scope and role of the external examiner of taught provision at Liverpool.

New external examiners, experienced examiners who are new to examining at Liverpool and examiners from non-academic backgrounds may find the information offered here especially useful.

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What makes Liverpool unique?

> The key to effective external examining is being able to transfer knowledge about assessment and students' learning from one institutional context to another.
>
> **Guide to the Process of Academic External Examining** (HEA, 2005)

A key challenge for external examiners is gaining an appreciation for the context in which the modules or programmes that they are examining operate. When externals are appointed, there is an implicit assumption that experience of working in one (or more) HEIs has equipped the examiner with the knowledge required to judge taught provision in other institutions. However, there are inevitably things that make different institutions unique, and which can impact on teaching, learning and assessment within the institution. While externals generally report that an understanding of the department or school is more important than the institutional context, it may be useful to have a general feel for the type of institution one is working in and how that might impact on the particular discipline under consideration.

The structure of the University

General information about the University of Liverpool can be found on the University website, but there are certain distinctive things about Liverpool that externals may need to be aware of.
The University of Liverpool characterises itself as a research-led institution, where undergraduate and postgraduate students benefit from being taught by active researchers. The University offers 250 Undergraduate and 130 Postgraduate programmes, some of which are delivered on the University's London campus

The University of Liverpool comprises 14 Schools which are organised into three Faculties: Science and Engineering, Health and Life Sciences and Humanities and Social Sciences.
Central Service departments which are likely to be of particular interest to external examiners include the Student Administration and Support Division (which has webpages dedicated to supporting external examiners as well as information on exams and assessment) and The Teaching Quality Support Division, which is responsible for the Code of Practice on Assessment.

XJTLU

There are 6,000 international students on campus, and Liverpool's Chinese partnership, Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU) allows a relatively large number of Chinese students to study in Liverpool for part of their degree programme. The number of Chinese (and international students more broadly) at Liverpool has impacted on certain degree programmes more than others, and externals may wish to discuss the diversity of the student body (and how that is accommodated and managed in programmes and assessments) with course teams in Schools and departments.

On-line postgraduate degrees

The University of Liverpool is also Europe's largest provider of fully on-line postgraduate degrees, and offers a range of 25 postgraduate certificate, masters and doctoral degree programmes in collaboration with its e-learning partner, Laureate. On-line degrees are available in Management, Information Technology, Law, Health, Psychology and Education.

Programmes, Courses and Modules

External examiners should be familiar with the terminology relating to the different levels at which they may work. It may be that different HEIs use the terms 'module,' 'course' and 'programme' slightly differently and so externals should check their understanding of the language being used.

At Liverpool, a '**module**' is defined as "a discrete component of a programme of study, having stated learning outcomes, teaching and learning opportunities to achieve those outcomes and assessment tasks to enable students to demonstrate achievement of the outcomes. Modules which are not designated 'mandatory', 'required', 'co-requisite or 'pre-requisite' […] are de facto 'optional'. In some programmes, however, it may be a requirement that specified modules which are taken on an optional basis must be passed for a student to progress or be awarded a degree. In these circumstances, this should be made clear in the programme specification and in the information provided to students both at the time of module selection and at the commencement of teaching on the module"(from the glossary in the Code of Practice on Assessment, Appendix C). According to the same glossary, a '**programme**' is "structured teaching and learning provision leading to one or more awards".

'**Course**' is often the preferred term when referring to CPD provision, while '**component**' is often used to refer to non-modular (mainly clinical) provision. Definitions of courses and components are provided by the University's Policy on Module Evaluation. A 'course' is "a credit-bearing standalone course, such as a Continuing Professional Development (CPD) course", while a 'component' is described as "a discrete element or specific part of a non-modular clinical programme"

Induction and appointment of external examiners

Selection of external examiners

Potential external examiners are generally identified and approached by academic colleagues, on the understanding that those who teach on a module or course are well placed to identify appropriate externals (through networking, conference attendance, etc.). Academic colleagues make nominations to Faculty in September/October each year, and external examiners are therefore officially appointed by the Faculty (under delegated powers of the Senate).

Externals who are invited to examine for Liverpool are required to provide evidence of their general suitability for the role via submission of a current CV (and eligibility to work in the UK through a copy of their passport). This ensures that they meet QAA expectations, and are appropriately qualified to take on the role. However, the QAA guidance focuses mainly on the required knowledge and experience of potential examiners, while academic colleagues also report basing their decisions, at least partly, on who they believe might also have the interpersonal skills and right approach to do the job effectively.

These skills include:

➢ An ability to be constructively critical
➢ A collaborative approach to the task
➢ The ability to take a developmental approach to the role
➢ A supportive, helpful attitude
➢ The ability to be tactful and/or diplomatic in interactions with academic and support staff

> How opinions and views are expressed is a critical part of the process. Knowing how and when to give feedback, and how to give feedback in ways that are likely to be accepted and made use of, are important qualities of being an effective External Examiner
>
> **Guide to the Process of Academic External Examining** (HEA, 2005)

Academics who are looking to appoint external examiners also report that they consider:

➢ Whether the person is likely to have empathy for the approach to learning and teaching that is taken in the department
➢ Whether s/he has other roles or responsibilities that might prevent him/her from carrying out the external role effectively and efficiently (such as being an assessment officer in his/her home institution, being a Dean or other senior manager or being an external at several other institutions – each of these roles may mean that a person is, in effect, too busy to carry out their external examiner duties).
➢ The extent to which the potential examiner is likely to be realistic when making recommendations for improvement. Externals may not, for instance, fully realise the implications of the recommendations that they are making, or may raise issues that are more appropriately addressed by an accrediting Professional Body rather than the specific department or institution.

A recent HEA Report also highlights 'assessment literacy' as a key skill for an effective external examiner: "for example, how aware they are of the complex influences on their standards and

judgement processes, how well they understand the provenance of their own standards and the influence of their background and experience; how strong is the temptation to draw largely on their experience as an indicator of what standards should be rather than recognising the potential bias in that approach, and how aware are examiners of the influence of a particular context, student body, or professional experience?" (A review of external examining arrangements across the UK, HEA, 2015)

Appointment of external examiners

External examiners are generally appointed for a **maximum tenure of four years** (although, in exceptional circumstances, the department can apply for an extension of one further year) and are re-appointed annually during that time. Nominations are made during September and October, and Faculties must confirm appointments by 31st October. External examiners who are being re-appointed will have their details rolled over during the summer.

At the end of the period of appointment, externals are asked to comment on their tenure as a whole in a specific part of the annual report form.

Once they are appointed, external examiners will receive an e-mail confirming the appointment and containing their **HERMES** log-in details (note that externals who are reappointed will receive new HERMES log-in details which they must use for that year's work). HERMES (Handling External examiner Reports, Maintenance of appointments, and Expense claim Submissions) is the workflow system that the University of Liverpool uses to manage all aspects of the external examining process for taught provision. Externals must submit their annual report via the system, using the template available. A series of FAQs about the HERMES system is available on the Student Administration and Support Division website along with a User Guide for External examiners.

External examiners will also submit their expenses claim through HERMES (the University cannot accept invoices from businesses or individuals for external examining work), and use the system to view official departmental responses to their reports.

Depending on how they are to receive and review documentation, some externals might also receive log-in details for other University of Liverpool systems, including VITAL (Liverpool's version of Blackboard), for which externals will need a University of Liverpool staff username and password, and/or VOCAL (Liverpool's version of SharePoint). Access to these systems will be arranged, where necessary, by host departments.

Names of external examiners are made available to students on the external examiner directory, but students are reminded that they should not contact examiners directly. In the unlikely event that a student does contact the external with a complaint, the external has several potential courses of action depending on the nature and seriousness of the complaint. Generally, the external would be encouraged not to get involved, but to refer the student back to the department or to the University of Liverpool complaints procedure. However, if the external deems it appropriate, s/he might use the normal channels for reporting concerns or issues open to externals (i.e. raising the complaint with the department as part of the consultation and reporting process, writing in confidence to the VC and/or raising the issue with the QAA)

Induction and preparation

Induction practices for new external examiners vary across the University (and across the Higher Education Sector as a whole). Some schools and departments provide an induction where externals

are introduced to staff, given an overview of the department and programme and given the opportunity to ask questions. Other schools will provide some (or all) of these opportunities when externals attend for Board meetings. It is often the case that externals have some informal contact with the academic who suggested their appointment and/or the module or programme leader, although this is not always the case. External examiners often claim that they learn(ed) about the role form observing other externals at work, although some also report having learned about the role from engagement with learning and teaching networks (HEA report (June 2015). There is also an external examiners Jisc mailing list – this is often used to recruit externals, but is also a forum for discussion around the practice of external examining.

Whether or not a formal induction to the role is offered, externals should expect to have (and contact the department if they don't have):
- a named contact from within the School or department's administrative team who they can direct queries to
- a timeline or set of key dates so that they know when work will need to be carried out (including when examination papers have to be returned, when Board Meetings will be held and when the annual report must be submitted). This helps externals to plan their workload at a time when they will inevitably be busy with assessment in their home institution
- access to, or copies of, relevant paperwork that will help to set the module or programme in context so that externals can get a good sense of what the teaching team is trying to achieve. Annexe 1 of Appendix H of the University's Code of Practice on Assessment contains a checklist of documentation that external examiners should be provided with – externals may wish to check that they have received all of the relevant materials.

In addition to the paperwork suggested by the Code of Practice, external examiners may wish to gather other evidence on which to base their decisions and recommendations. For instance, external examiners may wish to request access to:

- Reports provided by previous external examiners (and the departmental responses)
- Exam Board minutes
- Other information that is given to students and/or model answers.
- Course participants – examiners are often given the opportunity to meet with some students or participants to get their view of the course.

Newly appointed external examiners should feel free to contact their host school or department if they have any queries about the workload, timeline or tasks and responsibilities associated with the role. More general questions about, for instance, the HERMES system or payment of fees and expenses, should be directed to the Student Administration and Support Division via their external examiners e-mail address: extexam@liv.ac.uk

Ending the contract

Most external examiner contracts will be renewed annually and come to an end after a four year tenure. However, there may be certain circumstances in which either the external or the University will wish to end the contract before the period of tenure is up (information on the process of termination of the contract by the University is available in section 6 of Appendix H of the University's Code of Practice on Assessment).Where the examiner wishes to end the contract early, it is better if the current examiner is able to complete the cycle up to and including submission of the annual report. This makes it much easier for a new external to step into the role. Where this is not possible, it is clearly helpful for the external to remain in contact with the department so that alternative arrangements can be made.

External examiners are invited to comment on their tenure as a whole in their final annual report, and this is an opportunity to offer an overview of the development of the module or programme over the last four (or five) years. It also offers out-going externals the opportunity to comment on their experience, and to make any final recommendations for things that might be changed in order to help the next examiner.

What is the role of the external examiner?

<u>Various roles of the external examiner</u>

According to the QAA, the role of the external is to "provide each degree-awarding body with impartial and independent advice, as well as informative comment on the degree-awarding body's standards and on student achievement in relation to those standards". The University of Liverpool's expectations of an external can be found on the <u>Student Administration and Support Division website.</u> There is also a nice post from an experienced external on The Guardian's <u>Higher Education Network Blog</u> where James Derounian outlines his view of the role and offers some tips for success.

> External examining is an important, valued, skilled and useful peer review process. The process enables complex information about students' learning and their standards of achievement to be independently evaluated. From these contextualized evaluations, opinions and judgements are formed and impartial advice is provided to institutions both to ensure that students are treated fairly and to enable teaching teams to understand their standards better and improve the quality of the education they provide.
>
> **Enhancing Support for External Examining:** Report and Action Plan – 24 September 2004
> A collaborative project involving Universities UK, SCoP, AoC, The Higher Education Academy, QAA and HEFCE

External examining is one of a number of peer review processes which academics will be familiar with. However, unlike peer review of research grant applications or journal articles, it relies on the teaching expertise of academics rather than research excellence. The external can fulfil a number of different roles. Experienced externals, for instance, report that when they were first appointed to the external examiner role, they believed it was their job to be critical and to find shortcomings in the provision that they were reviewing. As they gain in experience and confidence however, externals tend to see their role differently and most commonly describe their conception of the role as that of 'critical friend' - someone who "is encouraging and supportive, but who also provides honest and often candid feedback that may be uncomfortable or difficult to hear. In short, a critical friend is someone who agrees to speak truthfully, but constructively, about weaknesses, problems, and emotionally charged issues" (<u>The Glossary of Educational Reform</u>). Note that this definition of 'critical friend' highlights the idea that the role involves delivering feedback that may not be easy to hear, and it is essential that external examiners remember that any problems identified should be brought to the department's attention at the earliest opportunity. Others have conceptualised the role as a connoisseur, defined as "persons who, through training and experience, can make expert and reliable judgements in their specialist fields" (Guide to the Process of External Examining, HEA, 2005).

In addition to this 'critical friend' role, the external examiner may act as:

- ➢ Someone who offers reassurance, especially to less experienced staff, that their teaching and learning processes are robust. In addition, the agreement of the external might help academic staff to bring about change that others within the department may be resistant to.
- ➢ Someone who checks that the School, Department, or even the institution more broadly, is following the processes and procedures that it has set down for itself.
- ➢ An advocate supporter of the Department – comments of external examiners often carry a great deal of weight, and externals can therefore lend their support to Departments who

wish to argue for changes. This is often grounded in the external's experience of other institutions where s/he may have seen greater resources or different approaches having positive impacts on the student learning experience.

➢ A role model to less-experienced staff

One conception of External Examiners is that they help institutions and teaching teams to manage the academic risks associated with complex change…their agency provides an important source of independent and often subtle feedback to enable the institution to gauge the effectiveness of how well it is coping with or managing change

Guide to the Process of Academic External Examining (HEA, 2005)

Given the numerous roles that an external examiner might undertake, The Higher Education Academy's Handbook for External Examining suggests that newly appointed externals engage in a discussion with their appointing department in order to clarify their role, with a particular focus on understanding their role in relation to:

➢ clarifying their role in the approval process for examination question papers and coursework assignments;
➢ specifying, through consultation, the selection and composition of the body of student work to be scrutinised;
➢ requesting specific items of student work if they deem there is a problem with a module or programme;
➢ communicating in writing with the Head of the institution if there is a problem that has serious implications for the quality and standard of the institution's awards.

Those external examiners who are not academics themselves may find that there are certain aspects of the examiner's role as outlined above that they are not able to perform. For instance, examiners from a professional or industrial background may not be in a position to comment on the comparability of the module or programme with those in other HE institutions. However, there are other perspectives that a non-academic External examiner may bring to the process:

"These include the provision of a focused business perspective to vocational academic areas; an input of current technical and professional knowledge into the scrutiny of academic endeavour; a view on appropriate transferable skills and graduateness which complements the academic view; and the furnishing of an additional dimension to the programme enhancement." (Support for External Examiners Not Working in Higher Education: A Report for the Higher Education Academy External Examiner Project)

What tasks does an external examiner do?

External examiners are appointed to one (or more) of three roles:

I. Subject Level – to review assessment practice and performance across a suite of modules or programme components within a particular discipline, to endorse module or component marks, and to attend the Module Review Board of Examiners;
II. Programme Level – to review assessment practice, performance, content and structure across a defined programme (or across defined programmes) of study;
III. Award Level – to endorse final awards and attend Progression Boards of Examiners and Final Boards of Examiners.

Within these broad roles, an external is generally expected to do a number of tasks which are likely to include:

➤ Reviewing, commenting on and/or suggesting amendments to modules/courses (and module/course documentation) and/or exam/continuous assessment question papers.
➤ Reviewing a sample of student work at the end of the module/course to determine whether attainment is in line with what the examiner would expect, and whether assessment decisions seem reasonable (i.e. whether assessors are marking fairly and reasonably in general – the external is not expected to change individual marks, although this was within the external's remit until relatively recently). Externals at Award Level will be expected to advise on and endorse marks.
➤ The external may also be expected to (or wish to) review and comment on the amount and appropriateness of feedback on student work.
➤ Attendance at (and participation in) relevant Examination Board meetings (either in person or remotely)
➤ Completion of reports - may include School or Departmental reporting as well as the annual report.
➤ In certain disciplines, the external may be expected to attend demonstrations, oral examinations, performances or exhibitions.
➤ Examiners at any of the three levels may be expected to moderate any *viva voce* exams that have been permitted by the Academic Quality and Standards Committee. These would be undertaken alongside one or more internal examiners.
➤ Possibly arbitrating where there is disagreement between assessors.
➤ Meet with relevant staff (perhaps the department's assessment officer)
➤ Reviewing BOXI (BusinessObjects) reports, which contain information on the performance of students on modules, components of modules, and across programmes. For help with interpreting BOXI reports, externals should consult their host department.
➤ Externals may also be involved in the assessment process for students undertaking resits.

More detailed information about the specific expectations of externals at the various levels is included in Appendix H of the University's Code of Practice on Assessment, which deals specifically with external examining.

One task that an external examiner at Liverpool is certainly NOT expected to do is changing individual student marks (although it was more common for externals to do this until quite recently, and may still be the case at some institutions). Rather, the external should remember that s/he is acting as a *moderator*, rather than as a third marker (and therefore checking assessment processes and procedures, rather than assessment decisions *per se*).

The Student Administration and Support Division's website contains policies on mitigating circumstances, progression requirements, academic integrity and assessment appeals, all of which externals examiners may wish to consult.

The Higher Education Academy's Handbook for External Examining contains several case studies of challenges and issues that might arise for externals, along with guidance on what action the external might take.

What do external examiners get out of it?

External examiners are paid a fee for their work, but it tends to be nominal and therefore not the reason that most externals agree to take on the role. There are many reasons why academics and professionals agree to act as external examiners, and new externals in particular may wish to consider what they might get from the extra work that they are about to undertake.

External examiners report that their reasons for taking on the role include:

- **A desire to contribute to improving the student experience** and ensuring that students are treated fairly and consistently
- **It allows opportunities for professional and departmental development** – externals bring a fresh perspective to Liverpool, but they also have the opportunity to gain real insight into how their discipline is taught in another institution
- **Service to the academic/HE community** - as with other academic peer review systems, academic s understand that they must contribute to a system that they (and their institution) wish to benefit from.
- **CV development** – having been (invited to be) an external examiner for a large programme and/or at several institutions is likely to be a good addition to an academic CV. Most colleagues at a certain point in their academic career would be expected to have undertaken some external examining. It also allows input into decision-making at another institution, demonstrating influence and leadership.
- **Producing the next generation of professionals** – externals from non-academic backgrounds, in particular, may see external examining as a way to contribute to the profession by ensuring that the next generation are well prepared by their degree programme.
- **An opportunity to network** – Departments and Schools at Liverpool understand that the opportunity to socialise with colleagues is attractive and they therefore tend to ensure that externals have the chance to network and socialise, and that they enjoy their visit to the University

The reporting process

Meetings

External examiners would be expected to attend the relevant Exam Board meetings for the module(s) and/or programme(s) that they are examining. Externals examining at subject level would be expected to attend the Module Review Board of Examiners, and externals working at award level should attend Progression Boards of Examiners and Final Boards of Examiners (dates of meetings should be made available by departments relatively soon after external examiner appointments are confirmed). Ideally, attendance at these meetings would be in person, although it is possible in some circumstances for the examiner to attend remotely.

Externals may be given some time early in the Board of Examiners meeting to raise issues of concern or for consideration. During the exam board, an external examiner at

Subject Level will be expected to:
- ➢ "provide advice upon, and to endorse, the marks of components and/or modules to which they have been assigned". While externals are not permitted to change marks *per se*, students' marks may be adjusted in the light of comments and observations made by the external examiner (Code of Practice on Assessment, Appendix H)
- ➢ Review and endorse any exceptional Chair's actions which have been taken prior to the meeting (exceptional Chair's actions taken after the meeting also have to be endorsed by the external)
- ➢ Externals are not required to attend any Module Review Board held after the re-sit period, but marks have to be endorsed remotely by the external.

Programme Level will be expected to:
- ➢ "advise upon programme content, balance and structure, award schemes, assessment processes and learning outcomes, and to review the performance of students across the programme or programmes to which they have been assigned." (Code of Practice on Assessment, Appendix H)

Award Level will be expected to:
- ➢ "advise on and confirm the due process of assessment practices and the conduct of Boards of Examiners, including endorsement of final award lists, for the programmes to which they have been assigned." (Code of Practice on Assessment, Appendix H)
- ➢ Sign off the award list for the programme and thereby endorse the marks awarded. An external may withhold endorsement of the awards, in which case the appropriate Executive Pro-VC would intervene in an effort to resolve the situation.
- ➢ The external will also be expected to review decisions taken by Progression Boards, and to review and endorse recommendations reached by Mitigating Circumstances Committees which might impact on the final award.

In addition to these specific tasks, external examiners may also be asked to:

- ➢ Comment on the overall standard of quality of student performance and on the module/programme, and its assessment, in general.
- ➢ Act as arbiter where internal markers cannot agree on an assessment decision
- ➢ Contribute to discussions about any cases of 'exceptional circumstances', and confirm that any disabled students have received appropriate reasonable adjustments in the assessment process

➢ Comment on any cases of suspected academic misconduct

Exam Boards also give external examiners another opportunity to raise any concerns that they may have. Experienced externals suggest that this gives the department an opportunity to address any problems before the external submits his/her final report, and helps to maintain the collegial relationship between the external and the department.

> It would not be good practice for teaching teams to discover a major problem highlighted in the external examiner's report that had not been brought to their attention earlier when a resolution may have been found through discussion of the problem directly with staff. This is the opportunity for the external to act as a 'critical friend', highlighting strengths, weaknesses and good practice.
>
> **A Handbook for External Examining** (HEA, 2012)

Annual report

Reporting processes may vary from one institution to the next, so it is essential that newly appointed externals are clear about how (and when) annual reports should be submitted. The University of Liverpool uses an on-line system called HERMES for the submission of the annual report. More information about the system (including a User Guide) can be found on the Student Administration and Services Division website for externals.

The annual report takes the form of a pro-forma that externals must complete. Access to the HERMES system is established as soon as an examiner is appointed, and a unique username and password is provided to each examiner in his/her appointment e-mail (Student Administration and Support can help externals who lose their information or who have trouble logging onto the system). At this point externals are able to log into the system and see the annual report in order to get a sense of what s/he will be asked to comment on – this will vary a little by what level the examiner is working at (subject, programme or award), and out-going externals are also asked to offer some comment on their tenure as a whole.

Timescales for completion of the annual report can vary, so it is essential that externals check their deadline in HERMES and/or contact the Student Administration and Support Division if they are unsure when their report is required. A range of administrative processes rely on timely completion and submission of the annual report including:

➢ Payment of the external examiner's fees
➢ Re-appointment of the external examiner (where applicable)
➢ School or departmental board meetings and reporting mechanisms which utilise external examiners comments (for instance, Academic Quality and Practice Review Boards or Annual Subject Reports). Where meetings do go ahead without annual reports, external examiner comments cannot be considered and therefore do not feed into review and planning decisions. This clearly prohibits recommendations from being implemented.
➢ Accreditation visits by professional bodies.

What should the external include in the report?

As suggested above, the pro-forma provides a template and gives structure to what the external is expected to comment on. However, there is clearly scope to include unsolicited comments (i.e. not explicitly requested by the institution) if the examiner feels that they may be useful. More

specifically, there are some types of comment/information that departments at Liverpool report that they value, and these include:

- Highlighting of good practice as well as areas for improvement. Externals may use instances of good practice in one module as realistic examples of what could be achieved in other modules.
- Provide concrete recommendations for improvement (perhaps based on their own experience in other institutions) where possible. This increases the likelihood that the examiner's recommendations will be implemented.
- Support of the department in terms of highlighting where improvements might be made with the right resources, approaches and help. A key role of the external is to highlight examples of effective practice from outside of the institution for which s/he is an examiner. This may include giving examples of where greater resources, different approaches or more support has had a positive impact on student learning elsewhere and might, therefore, also benefit the current institution.
- External examiners are expected to comment on the comparability of the course or module with others that they are familiar with. Externals will often mention the range of their experience when judging comparability (for instance the number of other institutions where they have examined and/or whether they are familiar with international programmes).
- Externals may comment on the subject content and coverage, suggesting that more attention be paid to particular areas of the curriculum.
- Externals are explicitly invited to comment on assessment strategies and processes, and this might include: the range of assessment practices used; the moderation process; the level of detail provided in feedback; the questions used on exam papers and how marks vary from one cohort to the next (for instance, if marks improve, the external may comment on why this might have happened).
- Examiners are asked NOT to name individual students since reports are made available for other students to view. Reports that name individuals may initially be rejected and returned to the examiner so that names can be removed.

Some examples of good practice in report writing

Extract 1
Feedback to students remains variable. Some modules have detailed comments, including comments at a draft stage in [course code], which is a good idea. However, for others there is little/ no information to show the students, or the external examiner, why a particular mark was given.
The examiner highlights an area of concern, but also draws attention to good practice on another module. The examiner also highlights the implications of a lack of written feedback for both his/her role, and for the students on the module.

Extract 2
The essay and the exam remain the mainstay of assessment. I think this is generally appropriate and stds do get the chance to undertake some intelligent, alternative forms of assessment for the higher level language modules. I am a huge fan of the evaluative review that stds write for [course code], which I think comes at an ideal point in their studies. There could be more forms and more innovative forms of assessment used, to be sure, but I also appreciate that too much variation in assessment can unsettle stds (who need to learn to get good at one thing before they move on to another, I'm sure). There is little evidence of group work, for example, which seems to be a common staple elsewhere.

Extract 3

As noted in response to previous questions, there was only one module about which I had concerns. I spoke to both the module convenor and the Head of [Department] while in Liverpool for the review of papers and am satisfied that these concerns have been taken on board. To summarise, my concerns related to:

-       Comparability of requirements and standards with those of other Year 2 optional modules and with benchmarks across the sector, specifically with reference to: primary materials studied; assessments methods; theoretical and methodological frameworks for teaching and assessment; learning outcomes and marking criteria; processes for scrutiny of assessments and timely internal moderation of assessments.

My key recommendations for addressing these concerns regarding academic rigour are:

-       That a module booklet which includes clearly defined learning outcomes be created
-       That a full bibliography which will equip students with the conceptual and theoretical tools to engage critically with primary materials be provided
-       If non-standard assessment is retained, that there be clear guidance for students on what is expected and an explicit set of marking criteria devised
-       That the assessment (2 pieces of coursework) be reviewed in line with the demands of other L2 optional modules
-       That the assessments be moderated as soon as possible post first marking.

Here, the external has noted some key issues with a particular module, but, by the time of the annual report, has raised these with the School and is satisfied that action is being taken. The external is therefore able to report that the problem is being addressed, rather than using the report to raise the issue for the first time. Relations between the external and the department are clearly more likely to remain positive if concerns are flagged with the department - which then has a chance to respond – rather than appearing for the first time in the annual report. In addition to having raised concerns, the external gives a set of clear recommendations for improving the course. This format helps the course team to see exactly what changes the external has in mind, and is one of the most valued roles of the external – to bring an outside perspective and make useful recommendations.

Extract 4
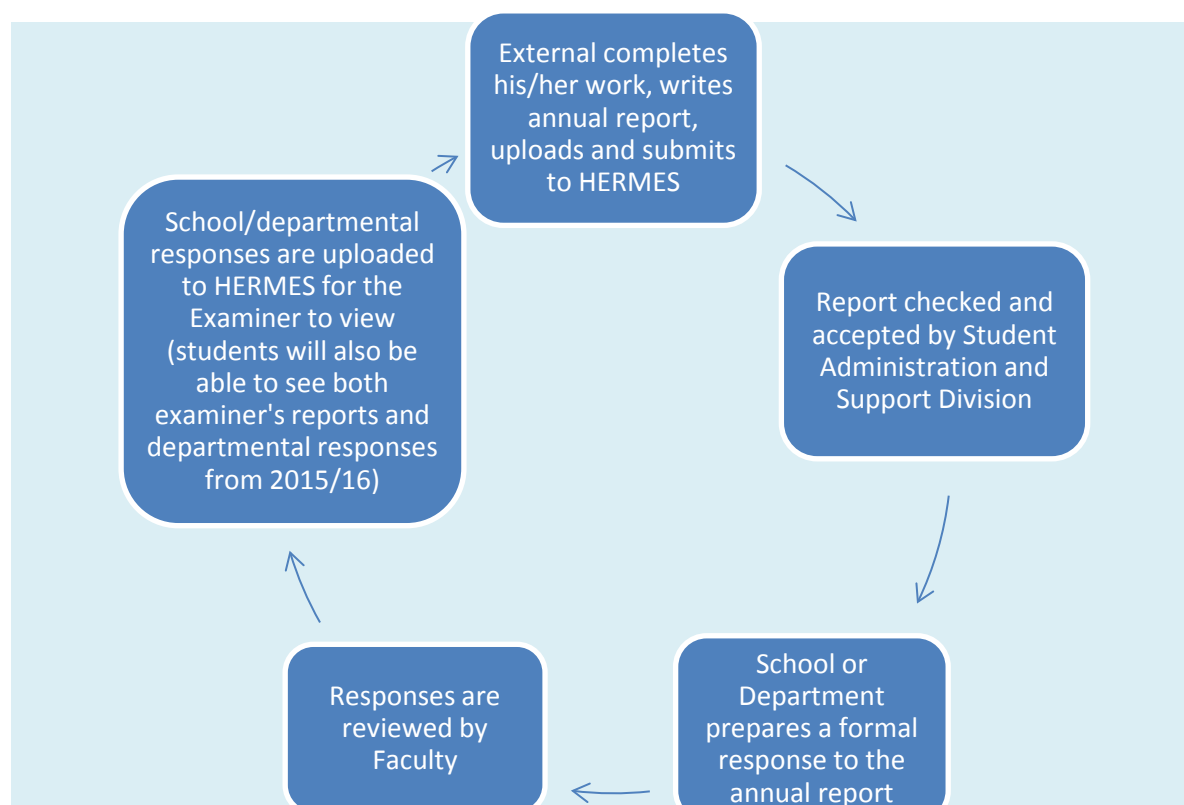
Permission not yet secured

What happens to the report?

Some external examiners can tend to see the annual report as a relatively minor part of the role, preferring to see their work with the department and scrutiny of the module or programme as the main part of their job. However, this view drastically undervalues the report which forms a key part of the annual monitoring of programmes. While externals will have had chance to have had discussion with Departmental staff, the report will often form the basis of the reports produced by more senior management and will contribute to institutional annual reports. The

external examiner reports will also contribute to the evidence base for institutional review, and can give some insight into how disciplines respond to external evaluation.

External examiners are expected to complete their annual report by a specific deadline (listed in HERMES), and it is completion and submission of the report which triggers payment of the fee (answers to FAQs about fees are available on the Student Administration and Support Division website). Examiners should note that they need to **upload <u>and submit</u>** the report to HERMES in order for it to be accepted. Failure to submit a report triggers a series of automated e-mails reminding examiners of the deadlines and offering guidance in case of lost HERMES log-in details.

Annual report feedback loop

External completes his/her work, writes annual report, uploads and submits to HERMES

Report checked and accepted by Student Administration and Support Division

School or Department prepares a formal response to the annual report

Responses are reviewed by Faculty

School/departmental responses are uploaded to HERMES for the Examiner to view (students will also be able to see both examiner's reports and departmental responses from 2015/16)

- ➢ Once the annual report is completed and submitted via the Hermes system it is checked and accepted by the Student Administration and Support Division. Once this has been done, external examiners are paid their fee. Examiners should note that payment of fees is subject to internal processing deadlines, and any queries about when fees are likely to have been processed can be directed to extexam@liv.ac.uk
- ➢ Claims for expenses can be submitted via the HERMES system at any time, in line with the External Examiner Expenses Claim Policy.
- ➢ From 2015/16 all external examiner reports will be routinely and easily accessible to students (students have been able to request reports in the past, but it will be much easier for them to have access in the future). The report therefore has multiple audiences, and must be written with those audiences in mind. For this reason, external examiners must not identify any individuals by name in the report - Student Administration and Support reserve the right to redact reports which identify specific individuals.

➢ Once the report is complete, the department or School must submit a formal response addressing points raised by the examiner. In general, departments take this as an opportunity to thank the external for his/her input, note any positive comments and offer responses to concerns or issues raised by the examiner. Departments will not necessarily commit to act on all of the examiner's recommendations but, where they do not intend to make changes, they generally outline the reasons for their decision.

➢ Departmental responses are reviewed by Faculty and then appear in HERMES for the Examiner to view. From 2015/16, the departmental responses will also be available to students.

If the external has serious concerns, s/he has the right to raise the matter with the Vice Chancellor via a separate confidential report. If the external still believes that his/her concerns are not being dealt with appropriately, and if the situation is of sufficient seriousness, then s/he has the right to raise the issue with the Quality Assurance Agency or inform the relevant professional, statutory or regulatory body. However, this should be seen as a last resort, and every effort should be taken to resolve any disagreements or concerns at local level.

Policies, Resources and Guidance

University of Liverpool Policies and Guidance

General information about the University of Liverpool

Student Administration and Support Division
➢ Support for External Examiners of Taught Provision
➢ Policies relating to examination and assessment of students
➢ Examination schedule (giving dates of exam periods, not specific exams)
➢ E-mail SAS with queries about HERMES, submission of the annual report or fees and expenses at extexam@liv.ac.uk

Teaching Quality Support Division
➢ Code of Practice on Assessment

External Examiner Expenses Claim Policy

Higher Education Academy resources

➢ Guide to the Process of Academic External Examining
➢ A Handbook for External Examining
➢ A review of external examining arrangements across the UK
➢ Enhancing Support for External Examining: Report and Action Plan
➢ Support for External Examiners not working in Higher Education
➢ Enquiry into the Nature of External Examining

Quality Assurance Agency

➢ Quality Code Part B (chapter 7): External Examining
➢ Concerns procedure

The Staff And Educational Development Association (SEDA) offers a professional development award in external examining, which is aimed at "colleagues who are new to the role of External Examiner for taught programmes in higher education, as well as colleagues presently undertaking this role who seek formal recognition of their professional practice in this area."