

## 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.

The external points out areas of good practice, as well as expressing a concern at the lack of diversity in assessment practice. The examiner does, however, make it clear that s/he recognises a potential pedagogic rationale for not exposing students to too many unfamiliar forms of assessment during their studies. The tone is understanding while, at the same time, making some suggestions for improvement based on his/her experience of working and examining at other institutions.

### **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

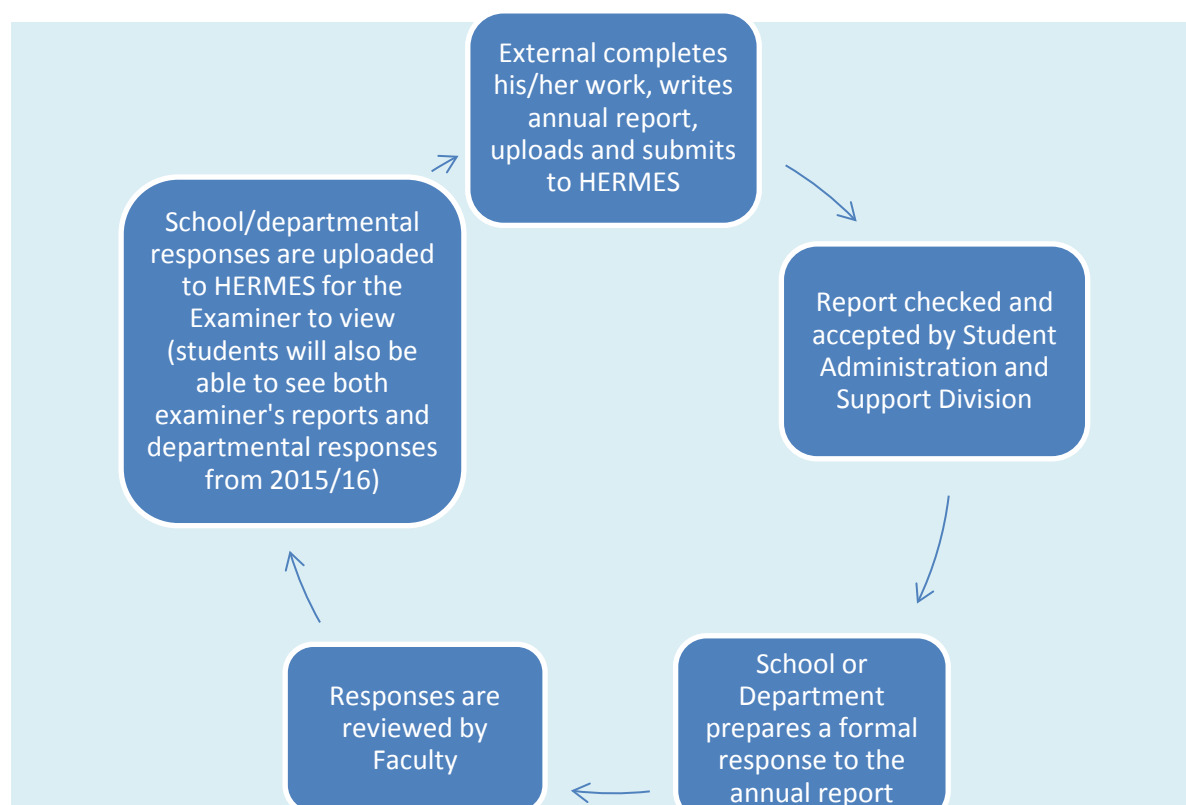
#### What happens to the report?

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 and submit** 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



- 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](mailto: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.