

What is the role of the external examiner?

Various roles of the external examiner

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 [Student Administration and Support Division website](#). There is also a nice post from an experienced external on The Guardian's [Higher Education Network Blog](#) 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.

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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” ([The Glossary of Educational Reform](#)). 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, academics 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