



**QQI**

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Quality and Qualifications Ireland  
Dearbhú Cáilíochta agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann

# Effective Practice Guidelines for External Examining

## Revised February 2015

*QQI has adopted policies, criteria and guidelines established by its predecessor bodies and saved under section 84 of the 2012 Act. These are adopted and adapted as necessary, to support new policies issued by QQI and the establishment of QQI services in accordance with the 2012 Act. Over time these policies will be replaced with new QQI policies under the QQI Comprehensive Policy Development Programme. All references in this policy document to the predecessor bodies and the associated structures should be read as referring to QQI and its structures.*

*In the event that there is any conflict between the adopted and adapted legacy policy, criteria and guidelines and QQI policy, the QQI policy will prevail.*

## **1. The External Examining Process**

### **1.1 External examining is a quality assurance mechanism employed by providers that supports public confidence in academic qualifications.**

This precept summarises external examining and distinguishes it from the external assessment of learners. It stresses the provider's ownership of the external examining mechanism.

Ultimately, public confidence rests on its belief that graduates have been objectively judged to have reached the standard that is certified by their qualification (award) in the context of the National Framework of Qualifications.

The clear implication is that external examining is particularly concerned with actual programme learning outcomes, their compliance with national standards and, by extension, anything that affects those outcomes.

### **1.2 The external examining process offers an objective interface: a principal outcome of external examining is the introduction of an independent element into the procedures for the assessment of learners.**

### **1.3 An external examiner is an independent expert who is a member of the broader community of practice within the programme's field of learning and whose accomplishments attest to his/her likelihood of having the authority necessary to fulfil the responsibilities of the role.**

The external examiner's functions can be discharged by an individual or by a team of external examiners. A team approach might be useful, for example, where the needs of the programme demand a range of specialisations that are difficult to find in any individual. The constitution of an external examining team is determined by the needs of the programme. External examiners are often drawn from the higher education community. They can be drawn from other communities of practice provided they have the necessary competences (or acquire them prior to engagement).

It is particularly important to recognise that the role of external assessor<sup>1</sup> (where employed) is fundamentally different from that of the external examiner (individual or team).

### **1.4 The main functions of the external examiner (or external examiner team) are these:**

- (a) Review the appropriateness of the minimum intended programme learning outcomes<sup>2</sup> (i.e. the programme's basic educational goal), and other programme objectives.
- (b) Probe the actual attainment of learners (actual programme learning outcomes) using information agreed with and supplied by the provider.
- (c) Compare and contrast both the minimum intended programme learning outcomes and the actual attainment of learners with the relevant awards standards, with the National Framework of Qualifications, and with corresponding data from other programmes in the same discipline in other higher education institutions in

- Ireland and beyond.
- (d) Determine whether or not the applied procedures for assessment are valid, reliable, fair and consistent<sup>3</sup>.
  - (e) Review the appropriateness of the programme assessment strategy and the assessment procedures and, flowing from this, consider subsidiary module assessment strategies.
  - (f) Review key assessment tasks prior to their assignment in light of the programme and module assessment strategies and learners' prerequisite (prior) learning. Where key tasks include key continuous assessment tasks, it might not be feasible to review them prior to assignment, but they should still be reviewed by the external examiner.
  - (g) Report findings and recommendations to the provider.

The external examiner should be satisfied that the minimum intended programme learning outcomes accord with the relevant awards standards (and any other standards that the programme is designed to satisfy, e.g. professional standards). He or she should also be satisfied that the summative assessment of learners is valid and reliable for the purpose of determining whether or not the standards have been achieved by learners and for classifying the qualifications in accordance with the requirements of the awarding body.

Particular attention should be focused on the (complete) award stage of the programme. In this regard, the programme assessment strategy is especially significant. Reliance on piecemeal external examining of constituent modules should be avoided.

It is essential that the external examiner has the information required for the performance of his or her functions.

With respect to function (c), note that all programmes should be validated prior to enrolling learners. Validation checks the appropriateness of minimum intended programme learning outcomes, among other things. However, even shortly after validation, a programme may need to be adapted based on the experience of teaching it for the first time. Moreover, all programmes will eventually need modification to adapt to changing needs and circumstances.

Assessment tasks presented to the external examiner for perusal should be linked to the module and programme assessment strategy. They should also be accompanied by marking schemes/rubrics.

- 1 The term 'external assessor' is defined in the Interpretation section at the end of this document.
- 2 The terms 'minimum intended learning outcomes' and 'programme assessment strategy' (which occurs below) are defined in Assessment and Standards 2009.
- 3 The terms 'valid, reliable, fair, and consistent' are defined in Assessment and Standards 2009.

Assessment tasks cannot be properly reviewed out of context. Therefore, it is essential for the external examiner to know this context. For example, the importance of taking prior learning into account is stressed in Assessment and Standards 2009. Here, 'prior' means prior to attempting the assessment task. If prior learning is unspecified, it may be impossible to determine the reliability or validity of the application of a given assessment procedure.

Note the 'key assessment tasks' qualifier in (f). The external examiner should not be involved in the review of routine continuous assessment tasks. If continuous assessment is a key part of assessment for an award (e.g. the major thesis or any element which is assessed only through continuous assessment), then it should be reviewed by the external examiner.

- 1.5 The purview, or scope of operation, of the external examiner is agreed with the provider from the outset. It may be extended, for example, to provide advice and guidance to the programme team. An external examiner may be invited to comment on the design, structure and content of a programme and its constituent components.**

This precept is consistent with external examining being a quality assurance process that is owned by the provider, as distinct from an external evaluation process that is owned by a different entity.

This wider purview should support and never distract from the external examiner's main functions as set down in Precept 1.4.

- 1.6 An external examiner's term of appointment is sufficiently long to allow him or her to assess trends, and sufficiently short to provide diversity and maintain the required level of independence.**

Traditionally, the normal period of appointment has been three years.

## **2. Higher Education and Training Providers and External Examining**

- 2.1 The provider is responsible for the assessment of learners and the maintenance of programme standards (intended and actual) that accord with the relevant award standards.**

The term programme standards has two meanings here: (i) the minimum intended programme learning outcomes established for the programme; and (ii) the minimum actual programme learning outcomes attained by graduates.

This precept is consistent with the practice where an external awarding body may, during an initial probationary period, elect to nominate the external examiners to be engaged by a provider with which it has a newly established relationship.

## **2.2 The provider's external examining policy addresses the following:**

- (a) Integration of the external examining policy with other relevant institutional policies (especially those relating to its quality assurance system).
- (b) Competences required of external examiners recognising that these can be met by a team of external examiners.
- (c) Nomination of external examiners, taking into account the requirements of the programme, the need for independence, and the need to avoid conflicts of interest.
- (d) Ratification of the external examiner nomination by academic committee (or equivalent); and formal appointment.
- (e) Role and responsibilities of the external examiner.
- (f) Extent of the external examiner's authority.
- (g) Formal agreement between the provider and the external examiner.
- (h) Support for external examiners.
- (i) Reporting processes and time-frames.
- (j) Follow-up of external examiner recommendations (including the process for notifying the external examiner of any actions taken).
- (k) The process and criteria for the removal or replacement of an external examiner.

This precept is a summary of the main issues that might be addressed by a provider's external examining policy. The other precepts in this guideline address relevant issues in more detail.

The credibility of the external examining process will be enhanced when it is managed professionally by the provider in a spirit of openness and transparency.

Integration of the external examining policy with the provider's internal quality assurance processes is important. This not only provides for the quality assurance of the external examining process itself but also provides for the external examiners' findings to be systematically addressed by the provider's quality assurance system. External examiner reports are important inputs into the programme's quality assurance cycle and related processes.

Being clear about the competences required of external examiners, and being open to using teams of external examiners, can both help a provider when identifying and selecting external examiners who meet the programme's current needs. The use of teams also helps facilitate inclusion of a wider perspective, e.g. from the world of work, including professional practice.

The independence of the external examiner is essential to the successful operation of external examining as a quality assurance process and as a public-confidence-building process. In a small country like Ireland, it will often be necessary to recruit external examiners from abroad. That such examiners may not be familiar with practices in Ireland may be a distinct advantage (because they can look at things anew). It is not an impediment, provided they are appropriately briefed and supported.

The external examiners' functions are of such critical importance to the provider's reputation that their approval and formal nomination require the confidence of the provider's whole academic community as represented by its academic committee (or equivalent).

The role and responsibility of the external examiner need to be stated explicitly. Otherwise, there is a risk that some issues will not be adequately addressed by either the provider or the external examiner because each assumes that the other is responsible. The same applies to the extent of an external examiner's authority. In all of this, the provider must allow for the fact that the external examiner's time is limited. Therefore, the burden of gathering, analysing and presenting necessary evidence will need to be borne by the provider. The external examiner's report should describe the evidence considered and note any deficiencies for future reference.

The policy should make provisions for dealing with disputes that might arise. The provider's policy should, for example, address the possibility that there may sometimes be disagreement between internal assessors and external examiners.

The formal agreement with the external examiner is a useful place to summarise the expectations of both the provider and the examiner. Providers will have their own practices for drawing up such contracts and dealing with any breaches, including the possibility that an external examiner may not be able to complete his or her full term of appointment.

In addition to the supports already mentioned, there is also a need to make provisions for supporting external examiners who find themselves frustrated or overwhelmed by their role or who are having difficulties in establishing an effective working relationship with the programme team.

The external examiner should be briefed about who will have access to his or her (full) reports and to whom they should be addressed.

When conducting self-assessment for the purpose of Institutional Review, providers should survey and/or interview their external examiners. External examiners should also be interviewed as part of the five-yearly programmatic review process.

### **2.3 The provider communicates to stakeholders the name and primary occupation of the external examiner(s) for each of its higher education and training programmes.**

Given that external examining is such an important part of the internal quality assurance of programmes, it is fitting that a provider would, from time to time, publish the names and affiliations of the external examiners for each of its programmes. This might, for example, be done in an annual report.

### **3. Determining Scope and Fulfilling the Role of the External Examiner**

#### **3.1 The provider and the external examiner will agree the following:**

- (a) The information required to enable the external examiner to carry out his/her functions effectively.
- (b) A schedule of outputs and meetings, including meetings with learners where appropriate.

The primary role of the external examiner is to verify that standards are achieved. Therefore, the reliability and validity of the programme's (and provider's) assessment procedures will be of particular importance.

Traditionally, external examiners review sets of draft examination papers and their associated marking schemes as well as major dissertations/project reports (and any other key continuous assessment tasks). They may also meet with individual learners.

The previous paragraph sets out just part of the information that is likely to be required. It is also necessary that external examiners understand the programme, including its minimum intended learning outcomes and its programme assessment strategy. These concepts are elaborated in Assessment and Standards, Revised 2013.

The external examiner should be familiar with the programme's validation report or most recent programme (programmatic) review report. S/he should also be informed about how the programme has been modified to address any recommendations and conditions in these reports.

In considering and reporting on the appropriateness of programme objectives and graduates' actual attainments, external examiners should make appropriate national and international comparisons. Such comparisons need to be based on valid and reliable evidence. The provider should prepare necessary benchmarking data for the external examiner to consider.

The provider and the external examiners might initially have differing views concerning precise information needs. The process of reaching agreement on these needs can be informative for both and can contribute to laying a foundation for an effective working relationship.

The operation of external examining extends naturally to modular systems. With such systems, it is particularly important to ensure that the minimum intended programme learning outcomes (as distinct from the summation of module learning outcomes) are specified, appropriate and assessed. Piecemeal external examining of modules is not a substitute for external examining applied to the complete award stage of a programme.

Finally, it may be useful for the external examiner to visit the provider more than once per cycle to facilitate meetings with staff and learners.

### **3.2 The provider requires each external examiner to take part in an induction process shortly after his/her appointment.**

Following induction, the external examiner should:

- (a) Know the provider's policy on external examining, including the reporting requirements.
- (b) Understand the mission of the provider and its context (e.g. the Irish higher education system).
- (c) Be able to articulate (where the programme is a professional one) the relevant professional infrastructure (regulation, associations etc.) in Ireland (and beyond where appropriate), the educational requirements for entry into this profession, and how the programme prepares learners for entry into the relevant profession.
- (d) Be able to distinguish how the minimum intended programme learning outcomes and actual learning outcomes attained by graduates compare and contrast with similar programmes with which they are already familiar and with programmes in the same discipline for which suitable benchmarking data has been gathered by the provider.
- (e) Know the overall structure of the programme.
- (f) Be able to evaluate and critique the programme assessment strategy.
- (g) Understand how the minimum intended programme learning outcomes relate to the award standard, and how the award standard relates to the National Framework of Qualifications (and, if the examiner is from outside Ireland, how the NFQ relates to the other HE Qualifications Frameworks with which s/he may be familiar).
- (h) Understand the programme assessment strategy and procedures, the grading system and how awards are classified.
- (i) Understand the principles of learning-outcome-based criterion-referenced assessment.

Failure to attend induction would not formally invalidate an external examiner's appointment. However, if the external examiner were to lack due knowledge about the provider and the programme, this would compromise the external examining process and public confidence in it.

The nature of the induction process should be appropriate to the external examiner's learning needs.

Providing the newly appointed external examiners with copies of the programme's recent external examiner reports helps demonstrate past trends, baseline issues, and the responsiveness of the provider to past recommendations.

Considering the time available to an external examiner, if s/he is to be able to make a valid comparison of learners' attainments on the programme with that of similar programmes, it will be necessary for the provider to collect, analyse and present the necessary evidence (see comments under Precept 3.1).

During induction, the external examiner will have an opportunity to satisfy herself/himself that s/he is comfortable about being able to perform the necessary functions. If s/he is not satisfied, s/he should discuss this with the provider. If, following this, s/he continues to be uncomfortable, s/he should withdraw.

It may be useful for the external examiner to meet with the programme's staff (including internal assessors) during the induction process.

## **4. The Report of the External Examiner**

### **4.1 The provider facilitates the external examiner's provision of feedback, both verbal and written, informal and formal. Formal feedback in the format of a written report constitutes the official record.**

External examining involves much more than receiving an external imprimatur for the examination results. There is much to be gained from the interaction between the provider and the external examiner. Having informal as well as formal communication channels helps the external examiner to address sensitive areas with the necessary delicacy. Nevertheless, it is useful for the external examiner to have a principal point of contact with the provider. Such a contact person will need to be thoroughly familiar with the programme and with the provider's policies.

### **4.2 The external examiner issues a written report each time an individual or a cohort of learners is assessed. Typically, the report addresses the following:**

- (a) The evidence considered — including meetings and interviews with learners and academic staff and others.
- (b) The appropriateness of the provider's minimum intended programme learning outcomes in light of the external examiner's experience, and having regard to the relevant awards standards and the National Framework of Qualifications.
- (c) The external examiner's perception of the actual attainment of learners.
- (d) The external examiner's opinion of the quality of the programme (its teaching and learning environment and its processes, as distinct from the intended programme learning outcomes addressed under [b]), citing strengths and areas for improvement.
- (e) The quality of the assessment instruments (strategy, examination papers, dissertation guidelines etc.) and grading rubrics/schemes etc.
- (f) The fairness, consistency and fitness for purpose (valid, reliable, authentic, robust) of assessment procedures.
- (g) The reliability of the provider's benchmarking of its assessment procedures.
- (h) Appropriate national and international comparisons.
- (i) Any substantial concerns (even if they have already been communicated verbally) so that these may be addressed and followed up by the provider's

- quality assurance procedures.
- (j) Evidence concerning the extent to which teaching, learning and assessment arrangements have changed in response to the feedback provided by previous external examiners' reports.
  - (k) Progress on recommendations in recent external examiner and other relevant reports on the programme.

It is appropriate that each provider would develop its own template for the external examiner's report. Headings (a – k) are intended to be useful in this regard. External examiners should be encouraged to report their findings, conclusions and recommendations succinctly. A tick-the-box approach, however, is ineffective.

Including the evidence considered in the report will help readers understand the solidity of the basis for the conclusions. The report should describe any benchmarking data provided and note any deficiencies in this regard (see comments under Precept 3.1).

The programme's intended learning outcomes are the educational goals that a provider sets for its learners. Many programmes are designed for the purpose of preparing a person to enter a particular profession, such as engineering or law, for example. The intended learning outcomes should also be consistent with any such purpose. In some cases, professional accreditation will address this, but it is always important for the external examiner to do so.

The quality of the provider's assessment procedures is at the heart of the external examiner's work.

An external examiner who has met the students and the staff involved in teaching is far more likely to have a deep understanding of the programme and the attainment of learners than one who focuses exclusively on the paper trail. Brief meetings with individual learners (for even as little as ten minutes) may help give the external examiner a more complete insight into the broad attainment of learners than will looking at samples of their assessment responses alone.

The quality of the programme as an educational process can benefit from the periodic (normally annual) commentary by the external examiner. This can be seen as part of a fine-tuning quality assurance cycle beneath the programme (programmatic) review cycle.

Monitoring, analysing and reporting on grade distributions and trends can provide insights, help identify the impact of variations in the programme, and assist in detecting any assessment anomalies. In doing this, it should be remembered that assessment must be criterion-referenced.

**4.3 External examiners' reports are securely retained by the provider (in accordance with its records retention policy) and contribute to both quality assurance/enhancement and institutional research activities.**

**4.4 The provider considers external examiners' reports at appropriate organisational levels. Actions arising from the reports are recorded and communicated as appropriate.**

The key information to be disseminated widely (i.e. published) includes the identity of the external examiner, his/her reported conclusions and recommendations, and the provider's actions arising from the report.

**4.5 The external examiner is provided with a timely, considered response to his/her comments and recommendations, including information on any actions taken by the provider.**

## **5. Interpretation**

For more extensive information on the interpretation of technical terms, please refer to Assessment and Standards, Revised 2013. For convenience, the meanings of External Assessor and External Examiner are reproduced here.

Assessor: A person who assesses a learner.

(External) Assessor: An external assessor is an assessor who is external to the provider.

An independent external assessor of a research thesis is traditionally called an external examiner. His/her role is different from the external examiner for a taught programme.

External examiner: An external examiner is an independent expert who is a member of the broader community of practice within the programme's field of learning and whose accomplishments attest to his/her likelihood of having the authority necessary to fulfil the responsibilities of the role. In research degree programmes, the term 'external examiner' is used to refer to an 'external assessor'. The functions of the research degree external examiner are different from those of the external examiner for other types of programmes.



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## External Examiner's Report 2014-15

[Name Of Registered Provider:]

Date						
<b>Programme Details</b>	Programme Reference <sup>1</sup>					
	Award Title:					
	Area Of Specialisation (ISCED CODE):					
	Main Modes of Delivery Offered:					
	Stage (1,2,3,4,..., or Award Stage):					
	Semester (if applicable indicate whether first or Second):					
<b>Classification Distribution and Trend</b>		Current Year	Previous Year	Previous Year	Previous Year	Previous Year
	% H1/D					
	% H21/M1					
	% H22/M2					
	% P					
<b>Completion Rate Data</b>	Number who started the programme					
	Number who started the stage					
	Number who completed the stage (i.e. attempted final stage examinations)					
<b>External Examiner Details</b>	Name					
	Main Employment					
	Email address					
	Other contact details					
<p>Please consult <a href="#">Effective Practice Guideline for External Examining Revised 2015</a> and <a href="#">Assessment and Standards Revised 2013</a> for more detailed information concerning expectations.</p>						

<sup>1</sup> The provider should complete the factual parts of the cover sheet before forwarding the template to the external examiner.

**In presenting opinions under the following headings the external examiner should make national and international comparisons.**

*The text in red italics is explanatory material and may be deleted by the external examiner when completing the report.*

## **1 The Evidence Considered**

*The purpose of this section is to indicate how well informed the external examiner is about the provider, the programme and its context. Summarise the documentary evidence considered (see Effective Practice Guideline for External Examining Revised 2015) and any visits, meetings and interviews with learners and academic staff and others.*

## **2 Minimum Intended Programme Learning Outcomes**

*The purpose of this section is to comment on the educational objectives including their explicitness, appropriateness and consistency standards with the relevant awards standards and the National Framework of Qualifications. If there are gaps these should be identified. If the standard is too low this must be stated explicitly so that it can be addressed.*

## **3 Actual Attainment of Learners**

*This section should present external examiner's informed perception of the actual attainment of learners (knowledge, skill and competence). This is the most important finding of the external examining process. This should be based on consideration of:*

- The provider's assessment instruments (e.g. assessment strategies, examination papers, marking schemes), procedures and findings*
- Representative samples of learner responses to assessment tasks (e.g. examination scripts, dissertations, etc.)*
- Interviews with learners*
- Benchmarking data prepared by the provider*
- Any other appropriate evidence*

*In presenting those perceptions the external examiner should make national and international comparisons. Opinions (e.g. satisfaction with the actual attainment) should be explained (e.g. by outlining the rationale and criteria).*

## **4 The Programme**

*Often external examiners' experience of the programme might lead to suggestions about particular aspects of the programme. This might involve the curriculum or the approach to teaching and learning. This section should identify some notable strengths and areas for improvement. It is not intended that the external examiner would attempt to systematically review the programme.*

## **5 Assessment Procedures**

*The external examiner plays a vital role in the ongoing quality assurance and enhancement of assessment. This section should address:*

- *The quality of the assessment instruments (programme and module strategies, examination papers, dissertation guidelines, etc.) and scoring rubrics/schemes etc.*
- *The fairness, consistency and fitness for purpose (valid, reliable, authentic, robust) of assessment procedures.*
- *The reliability of the provider's benchmarking of its assessment procedures.*

## **6 Trends**

*Evidence concerning the extent to which teaching, learning and assessment arrangements have changed in response to the feedback provided by previous external examiner reports; and*

*Progress on recommendations in recent external examiner and other relevant reports on the programme.*

## **7 Conclusions and Recommendations**

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**External examiners' signature, date**