



UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM

# **Working with External Examiners (Taught Provision)**

## **Guidance for University staff**



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#### Introduction

This guidance document supplements the [University's Code of Practice on External Examining](#). It is designed to signpost University staff to clauses in the Code of Practice and to provide practical support for working with external examiners. It should be noted this document only covers external examiners appointed to taught provision.

The external examiner system forms a key part of the University's quality assurance processes. The University places great value on developing good working relationships with our external examiners and we are grateful for the role University staff, both academic and administrative, contribute to this partnership.

If you have any queries about the external examiner system for taught provision these should be directed to the Policy & Quality Assurance sub-division of the Registry in the first instance, using the contact details below.

Best wishes

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jonathan Green".

Professor Jonathan Green  
Deputy Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education)

#### **Registry (Policy) Contact Details**

Tel: 0121 440 4049

Email: [externalexaminers@contacts.bham.ac.uk](mailto:externalexaminers@contacts.bham.ac.uk)

External examiner homepage: [www.birmingham.ac.uk/external](http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/external)



## **Using this document**

*This guidance is designed to supplement the [University Code of Practice on External Examining \(Taught Provision\)](#). Where a section refers to a part of the Code of Practice the relevant clause is listed in brackets.*

*The term 'School' is used throughout this document with reference to the various role and responsibilities but it is acknowledged that this might be at Programme, Department or College level.*

*In a number of sections the guidance advises you to contact us should any queries arise. Please use the contact details on p2 for this purpose.*

## **1. External examiner appointments**

### **a) Nominating an external examiner (2.1-2.7)**

All nominations for an external examiner must be completed using the University's standard template. This can be found on the website at [www.intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/externalexaminers](http://www.intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/externalexaminers).

Each nomination form receives three levels of scrutiny to ensure it adheres to the nomination criteria as laid out in Appendix A of the Code of Practice on External Examining (Taught Provision):

- i. at School-level where every nomination is signed off by the Head of School or Head of Education;
- ii. at College-level by the Director of Education, and then finally;
- iii. approval at University level following scrutiny by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education) or their Deputy, in conjunction with the University Registry.

When appointing external examiners who will scrutinise Degree Apprenticeships, Schools will need to ensure that nominees have suitable academic and industry experience of the subject area. It may be appropriate to assign two external examiners to a Degree Apprenticeship (an academic appointment and an industry-based appointment) in order to ensure that appropriate expertise is in place.

Schools should also ensure that, when appointing external examiners to a programme with an equivalent being delivered on the University's Dubai campus, external examiners are notified that scrutiny of the Dubai-based programme will be included in their remit.

### **b) Length of appointment / extension of appointment (2.9, 2.11)**

The University appoints all external examiners to a standard term of 4 years. However, should an external examiner fail to fulfil their roles and responsibilities appropriately (e.g. through non-submission of the annual report) then their appointment can be terminated at any point during the 4 years. If a situation of this nature does arise the School should contact the University Registry to discuss how to proceed. All termination of appointment letters will be sent through the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education) or their Deputy. An



external examiner appointment can also end early if the programme(s) they have been assigned to are withdrawn.

At the end of an external examiner's 4-year term there is the option, in exceptional circumstances, for the School to submit a request for a 1-year extension of appointment. Again, the relevant form is available on the [external examiner homepage](#). Schools are required to explain in detail the reason for the extension request, and to confirm the plans in place to replace the external examiner at the end of the additional year.

The approval process for extensions mirrors that of the nomination process, through the College Director of Education with final approval given by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education) or their Deputy.

### **c) Adding to a current external examiner's duties**

It is possible to add further duties to an external examiner's appointment, without the need to go through the full approval process again. For instance a School may wish to add a PGT programme to the duties of a UG external examiner. Please ensure you have discussed the proposed additional workload with the external examiner (including any revised fee level). Once this has been agreed with the external examiner please email the Registry outlining the proposed changes, and the request will be considered by the Registry and, where felt necessary, the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education) or their Deputy.

Please note adding a duty does not 'reset the clock' on an external examiner's appointment. If you add another duty in Year 3 of an appointment then the external is still only eligible to complete one further year on all programmes to which they are assigned.

### **d) Resignation (2.12)**

During an external examiner's 4-year tenure there may come a point where they feel that, because of a change in their circumstances, they are unable to continue their duties as external examiner. If this should occur the University requires the external examiner to notify us in writing, giving a three-month notice period. Letters of resignation should be sent to the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education) and the Head of School. If a School is informed of an external examiner's intention to resign they should contact Registry (Policy & Quality Assurance) as soon as possible in order to agree plans for the appointment of their replacement.

### **e) Avoiding reciprocal arrangements (2.10)**

It is important to ensure that the University avoids any potential conflicts of interest with its external examiners, such as reciprocal arrangements. Therefore Schools are required to keep information as to where University of Birmingham staff hold external examiner appointments. This information should be consulted when a new nomination is being proposed.



Schools should keep this information up-to-date and submit the lists indicating where University staff hold external examiner appointments to the University Registry. This will be done on an annual basis.

Schools are also strongly advised to ensure that there is a simple mechanism in place to enable staff to consult the Schools list of external examiners before accepting an external examiner appointment elsewhere. This will act as a further safeguard against reciprocal arrangements.

**f) Fee level (2.8)**

The fee level should be agreed between the School and the external examiner during the nomination process. Schools should ensure that the appropriate fee is included on the nomination form.

The University has a set of general fee level descriptors for external examiners assigned to undergraduate (UG) programmes. Where Schools/Departments feel that the external examiner's workload does not fit into one of the three fee bandings, this should be discussed with the College Academic Policy Partner in the first instance:

<https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/as/registry/policy/contact/capps.aspx>. Schools are free to set individual fee levels for external examiners assigned to postgraduate taught (PG) provision. If your external examiner will be examining both undergraduate and postgraduate taught programmes, Schools may choose to either pay a one-off fee in accordance with the UG fee level descriptors to cover all UG and PGT duties in any year OR to pay separate fees for each area: the undergraduate fee should be in line with the fee undergraduate fee level descriptors and be paid alongside an additional individually set postgraduate fee.

**g) Eligibility to work checks**

Schools are legally required to ensure that external examiners involved in undergraduate programmes are eligible to work in the UK in accordance with HR guidance. These checks must be carried out by the Schools immediately upon sending their external examiner nominations to Registry, as offer letters will only be sent out contingent on the checks having been carried out. Further details are available from your College HR contact or via HR intranet: <https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/hr/vacancies/eligibility-to-work-in-the-uk/index.aspx>.

**2. Induction & Training**

**a) University Information (3.1-3.3)**

On appointment, all external examiners receive a copy of the [University's Code of Practice on External Examining \(Taught Provision\)](#) and an accompanying guidance document. They are also informed of the University's external examiner homepage



([www.birmingham.ac.uk/external](http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/external)) which contains additional information pertinent to their appointment, e.g. annual report form, claim form for fees and expenses.

The University does not re-issue the Code of Practice or guidance document to continuing external examiners year-on-year and Schools should ensure they inform their external examiners of any changes to legislation or procedure.

#### **b) School Information (3.4, 3.5)**

Schools should ensure they supply their external examiners with sufficient information to enable them to carry out their role effectively. Clause 3.4 of the Code of Practice lists key information which should be shared with the external examiner at the earliest opportunity following their appointment. Schools may hold some of this information on Canvas and it may be useful to provide your external examiners with access to the appropriate sections of your Canvas<sup>1</sup> area. This has the advantage of giving the external examiner first-hand experience of how students access the School's information (e.g. handbooks or programme/module guides).

Schools should also ensure that, where applicable, external examiners are briefed regarding the requirements of any Degree Apprenticeships and/or programmes based on the University's Dubai campus. Specifically for Degree Apprenticeships this should include:

- specifying whether the apprenticeship involves integrated or separate end-point assessment (EPA);
- the relationship between Apprenticeship knowledge skills and behaviours (KSBs) and programme/modules learning outcomes;
- the way in which EPA is conducted and any implications for their role;
- how the learning opportunities provided by the higher education programme are delivered in the context of on-the-job and off-the-job learning.

It is also important to give a new external examiner some context as to the programme(s) to which they have been appointed. One key piece of information in this respect is access to the previous external examiner's report and the School's response and/or actions arising from the report. It is suggested that you check with the external examiner early in their appointment to see if they are content with the level of information which they have been provided with.

Schools should also advise external examiners of a School-level contact, who they are able to approach with queries during their appointment.

#### **c) Timescales (3.7, 3.8)**

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<sup>1</sup> Support and guidance for Canvas is provided by Birmingham Digital Education <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/university/hefi/birmingham-digital/index.aspx>



Perhaps the most important information your external examiners need is the timescales for their various duties. These should be set and communicated to the external well in advance (e.g. 6-9 months ahead for dates they are expected on campus). A significant proportion of their duties, particularly at undergraduate level, is during the busy time of April – June and external examiners need to be aware of the expected turnaround times in this period (e.g. for scrutiny of work samples), and how this fits in with the overall schedule for the confirmation of marks and awards at Board of Examiners meetings.

Dates and deadlines should be clearly communicated for:

- Scrutiny and return of draft assessments/examination papers;
- Scrutiny and return of student work samples;
- Board of Examiners meetings;
- Any additional visits to campus (e.g. to meet with students).

#### **d) Support/mentoring (3.6)**

External examiners are often appointed in teams with individuals assigned to modules within their subject specialism. In such teams it is not unusual to have external examiners with varying degrees of experience and Schools may find it useful to set up mentoring arrangements between external examiners. The University does not formally designate a role of Chief or Lead external examiner but this is something you may feel to be appropriate in certain circumstances.

It is also suggested that you monitor which year of appointment your external examiners are in so there is not a high turnover of experienced externals in any one year.

#### **e) Induction Event (3.2)**

All newly-appointed external examiners are invited to the University's annual Induction Event. The event, usually held in March/April, is split into two parts.

In the morning the external examiners receive presentations from the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education) and/or their Deputy on the role of external examiners at Birmingham and the relevant pieces of assessment legislation. They also receive briefings from the University Registry on areas such as extenuating circumstances and the Code of Practice on External Examining (Taught Provision).

The afternoon session is spent with Schools and we ask that a person is nominated as 'host' by the School to co-ordinate this part of the day. The content of the afternoon session is left entirely up to Schools but it is suggested that it may revolve around the information in clauses 3.4 and 3.5 of the Code of Practice and generally becoming familiar with the programme and staff the external will be working with.



### **3. Sending work to external examiners**

#### **a) Draft Assessments (5.6)**

External examiners should be provided with the draft examination papers and other major pieces of assessment for the modules to which they have been assigned. It should be ensured that this information is sent in good time to allow for comments or suggested corrections to be considered and acted upon. With respect to examinations, Schools should factor this stage into their schedules for the submission of papers to the University Examinations Office. When scrutinising draft assessments, external examiners should include a focus on issues relating to academic content, for example, ensuring that questions are solvable, logical and appropriate for the level of study.

For programmes with an equivalent being delivered on the University's Dubai campus, external examiners should scrutinise draft assessments for the Dubai-based programme if the assessment differs to the Birmingham-based version of the programme.

#### **b) Samples of student work (5.9)**

There are two mechanisms by which work samples are normally scrutinised by external examiners:

- i. The sample of work is sent through the post to the external examiner;
- ii. The external examiner is invited on to campus to view the sample of work.

Schools should check with the external examiner to agree the preferred mechanism. Whichever method is used there are some key points to remember:

- i. If work is sent off campus please ensure that the external examiner is aware of the timeframe for the receipt and return of work samples well in advance, and make sure a copy of the work is retained at the University;
- ii. If work is sent through the post please ensure it is able to be tracked (e.g. Royal Mail services or equivalent) and confirm where the work is to be sent (i.e. external examiner's work address or home address);
- iii. If the external is viewing work on campus make sure an appropriate space is set aside with work samples clearly laid out.
- iv. If the external is viewing work on campus make sure a contact person (e.g. module lead or equivalent) is available for any queries which may arise.
- v. If the external is viewing work online via Canvas make sure appropriate access is arranged and provide instructions on how to access the areas you wish the external to view.
- vi. For both methods, ensure the external examiner is aware of their role in scrutinising the work sample, has received all relevant documentation (marking criteria, etc) and that provision can be made to access the full set of student work if deemed necessary.





Where external examiners are responsible for programmes delivered on the University's Dubai campus, a sample of assessed work produced by Dubai-based students should be provided to the external examiner for scrutiny.

It should also be noted that samples of assessed work from Degree Apprenticeship programmes are provided to the relevant external examiner for scrutiny.

**c) Sample size (5.10)**

The University does not stipulate sample sizes quantitatively but each sample should give the external examiner evidence of the full mark range.

The University's guidance on internal moderation (part of the Code of Practice on the Assessment of Taught Programmes and Modules) does contain information on sampling and Schools may consider this methodology when putting together samples for external examiners. It is recommended that once you have determined the various sample sizes to be scrutinised this should be communicated to the external examiner, to obtain their agreement in advance.

**4. Role in Marking/Moderation procedures**

**a) Approach (5.1, 5.4)**

One of the main roles of the external examiner is to scrutinise the marking and moderation procedures of the University, in order to ensure high academic standards, which are comparable with other universities in the sector.

We do not ask our external examiners to determine marks for individual students but to consider, and provide feedback on, the consistency and accuracy of marking across a cohort. This is achieved through reviewing the marking within each module, and between modules of the same level.

As a general rule, external examiners are required to focus their attention on the following areas:

- i. The work sample should be from across the full mark range;
- ii. There should be a clear indication of how a mark has been arrived at;
- iii. There should be evidence of the moderation process (e.g. markers' comments);
- iv. Markers' comments should map on to the relevant marking criteria and reflect the mark awarded.

We ask our external examiners to look at work which contributes to the final degree classification. That means there is not, under normal circumstances, a requirement for external examiners to scrutinise first year undergraduate work. However, Schools may ask external examiners to look at first year work for example if it is a requirement of a PSRB or if a problem has been encountered with the assessment of a first year module.



## **b) Resolving Disagreements (5.11 - 5.14)**

There may be occasions where an external examiner disagrees with the marks awarded by the internal markers within a mark sample. If this occurs then they can request that the School undertakes an additional level of moderation or re-marking. However, this must apply to all students who have completed the assessment in question, not just those within the work sample.

The University does not permit external examiners to alter the mark of an individual student's work from the sample, as this would be inequitable for those whose work has not received this additional level of scrutiny.

The University would expect disagreements between internal markers to have been resolved before the work is seen by an external examiner (e.g. through the use of additional internal markers). However, in exceptional circumstances, where a mark has not been agreed internally, the views of the external examiner can be taken into account when agreeing the final mark.

## **5. Board of Examiners**

### **a) Attendance (6.1-6.5)**

The University considers all external examiners to be full members of the relevant Board of Examiners (BoE). On appointment, the School should inform the external examiner of the dates of the BoE meetings.

The University expects all external examiners to attend BoE meetings as part of their duties. Please ensure you confirm the attendance requirements (including, where appropriate, supplementary Board of Examiners duties) with your external examiners as early as possible in each academic session.

If an external examiner is unable to attend a BoE meeting this should be agreed well in advance with the School, so that an alternative mechanism can be put in place to obtain their agreement on the results and decisions made. In such cases technology is being increasingly utilised by Schools (e.g. Skype, video conferencing). Please note Schools and the external examiner should ensure that, if video conferencing is used, the privacy of the information being discussed is maintained. Schools must be confident that the external examiner is linking up from a suitably private location.

Please note that external examiners responsible for programmes delivered on the University's Dubai campus will not be expected to travel to Dubai. All marks and progress/award decisions for Dubai based programmes will be managed through the existing Birmingham-based exam board meetings. It is likely that external examiners will have some discussions with the relevant Dubai-based programme lead via teleconferencing.



**b) Endorsement of Results/Awards (6.6-6.8)**

A key role for the external examiner at the BoE meeting is their endorsement of the results and awards made and they should sign a mark/award list or similar to evidence their endorsement.

If an external examiner does not endorse a decision taken at the BoE meeting this should be recorded and referred to the University Progress and Awards Board (PAB). In such cases the School will subsequently inform the external examiner of the final decision of the PAB meeting.

**6. Reporting procedures**

**a) Reporting template (7.1-7.7)**

The University requires all external examiners to submit an annual report using the template provided. This is in line with the QAA's guidance and the University's report template has been developed to map on to QAA requirements.

The template can be found at our external examiner homepage and we ask for all report forms to be completed electronically and sent via e-mail to [externalexaminers@contacts.bham.ac.uk](mailto:externalexaminers@contacts.bham.ac.uk).

The deadlines for the submission of reports is as follows:

- **Undergraduate programmes 10<sup>th</sup> July**
- **Postgraduate taught programmes 9<sup>th</sup> November**

Where programmes have a non-standard start date the deadline for the report should be agreed between the School and the external examiner on appointment, and then communicated to Registry (Policy). If an external examiner wishes to submit any further comments (e.g. following the supplementary examination period for UG programmes) they are free to do so, again using the report template.

If an external examiner's report is not received by the specified deadline, the University Registry will contact the external to request submission of the report. Schools can assist in this respect by notifying the Registry of any problems or circumstances which may have prevented the external from submitting their report by the deadlines stated.

If an external examiner has been appointed to programmes at both undergraduate and postgraduate level we require them to complete separate report forms for the academic session.



All external examiner reports are read by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education) or their nominee and the University reserves the right to request additional information from an external examiner if it is felt there is insufficient detail in the original report.

**b) Responding to an external examiner's report (8.1-8.8)**

On receipt of an external examiner's report, the University Registry sends an acknowledgement email to the external. It is important to note that where the external examiner has raised issues, a further letter should be sent by the School, setting out the substantive response to those issues.

After the report has been read by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education) or their nominee, the issues raised in the report are summarised by Registry (Policy & Quality Assurance). The report is then passed on to the School, with a summary sheet which identifies the main quality assurance or developmental issues raised by the external examiner. Schools should respond to the external examiner within 6-8 weeks of receipt of the report in the School. All responses should take the form of a letter to the external examiner (signed by either the Head of School or Head of Education) and all the issues raised in the report should be considered and responded to.

There may be instances where an issue requires discussion, for example at committee-level, or in-depth work by the School (e.g. if a change in curriculum content was suggested). In these cases the School should, periodically, keep the external examiner updated on the progress made against their recommendation.

In some cases the School may disagree with a suggestion made by an external examiner. If so, it is perfectly acceptable to respond to the external clearly stating why their suggestions are not to be implemented. There may also be instances where an external examiner makes an incorrect statement in their report, which may be due to a misunderstanding between the School and the external. In such cases the School should ensure that their response is clear in correcting any inaccuracies made by the external.

Please ensure that a copy of the School response (both the letter and the completed summary sheet) is sent to the Registry as these are scrutinised to ensure Schools are responding appropriately to the issues raised by external examiners.

If a report raises issues regarding University regulations or procedures the University Registry will, in conjunction with the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education) or their Deputy, respond to the external examiner directly. The time it will take to respond will depend on the complexity of the issue raised but again, as with School responses, we aim to reply to external examiners within 6-8 weeks. Schools will be copied in to any University response.

In isolated cases an external examiner may raise a serious concern about an aspect of a programme. If such a case occurs the School may be required to respond to the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education) or their Deputy in the first instance, so the response can be agreed / sanctioned before it is sent. The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education) or their Deputy



may also instruct the College Director of Education, or their nominee, to investigate the comments made if this is felt appropriate.

Feedback from external examiner reports is considered by Quality Assurance committees at both College and University-level. Should any serious concerns be noted in relation to a particular School these will be investigated by the College Director of Education, or their nominee. The comments made in external examiner reports are also considered as part of the University's Annual Review process and in our mechanism of periodic review, the Vice-Chancellor's Integrated Review.

If any common issues or themes arise across the University information will be communicated back to all external examiners and Schools, detailing the University's response to the issue and any subsequent changes to legislation or processes.

### **c) Payment of fees upon receipt of reports**

The responsibility for payment of fees to external examiners lies with the School. Payment should only be made upon receipt of the annual external examiner report/s. For undergraduate (UG) programmes, external examiner fees are payable via the Eploy system. For postgraduate (PG) programmes, external examiner fee are payable via a Payment Voucher ([FIN105](#)) form available from the Finance Office. For external examiners who will be examining both undergraduate and postgraduate taught programmes, Schools may choose to either pay a one-off fee in accordance with the UG fee level descriptors to cover all UG and PGT duties in any year which should be paid via Eploy OR pay separate fees for each area: the undergraduate fee should be in line with the undergraduate fee level descriptors and paid via Eploy and the postgraduate fee should be paid using a Payment Voucher ([FIN105](#)) form.

## **7. Working with Students**

### **a) Programme Information (9.1, 9.4-9.5)**

In line with the QAA's guidance on external examining ([the External Expertise theme in the Advice and Guidance that supports the UK Quality Code for HE](#)) the University is required to include the name, position and home institution of all external examiners in the programme information which is made available to students. In most cases this will be the programme handbook, but in some instances Schools may put this information separately on the University Intranet or on Canvas, which may be password protected.

Schools should ensure that all students registered on taught programmes receive the dedicated student guidance document available from Registry to promote the role of external examiners. The guidance document should be made easily accessible, for example by placing on Canvas. In this document the University will explain the 'do's and don'ts' of their interactions with external examiners, including an explicit instruction not to contact external examiners directly under any circumstances. External examiners have been instructed to inform the University if they are approached at any point during their appointment either by a student or by a third party on behalf of a student. The University's



Code of Practice states that a student may be subject to disciplinary procedures if they are found to have contacted an external examiner.

**b) Meeting with Students (9.2-9.3)**

The University does encourage external examiners to meet with representative groups of students in order to discuss their experiences of the programme of study, which in turn can provide useful feedback to the School. The School should offer its external examiners this opportunity and externals have been informed they can request such a meeting if one is not offered.

The meetings are usually held in relatively informal circumstances such as over lunch. Schools should ensure students are aware of the purpose of these meetings, and the limitations (e.g. not being able to discuss individual assessment outcomes). If the external examiner is unable to attend a meeting in person at the University, alternative arrangements, via Skype for example, are permitted.

Where it proves difficult to provide a representative group of students after the examination period (e.g. mid-June for most UG programmes) Schools are encouraged to consult with the external examiner to offer a meeting with students at a more convenient time (e.g. during the teaching year).

Please note that external examiners responsible for programmes delivered on the University's Dubai campus will not be expected to travel to Dubai to meet with students. It is likely that external examiners will have some discussions with the relevant Dubai-based students via teleconferencing.

**c) Student Access to Reports (9.7-9.9)**

External examiners' reports, and subsequent action taken by the School in response to any issues raised, should be made available in full to Student Representatives as part of the regular business of Staff Student Committee meetings. However, any student may request to see an external examiner's report (and actions resulting) and Schools are required to have a mechanism in place to allow for this to occur. This should be communicated to students (e.g. through a statement in the student handbook or equivalent).

It is suggested that, if a request is made, a designated staff member would meet with the student in order to talk through the report (and actions) in order to provide additional context and commentary to the documents. The University Registry will also have a mechanism for making reports available.

In addition, College-level Student Representatives are present at College-level Quality Assurance Committees and Guild Sabbatical Officers are present at both College and University-level Quality Assurance committee meetings where discussion of the issues raised by external examiners takes place.

**8. Causes for concern (7.7, 11.1-11.3)**



If at any time during their appointment an external examiner feels the need to raise confidential concerns, for example where it is necessary to identify an individual within the University, they may submit a separate confidential report (either by letter or email) to the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education).

Section 11 of the Code of Practice details the steps the external examiner can take if they feel a concern has not been fully addressed by the University.

## **9. Programme changes**

Where a programme undergoes a significant change, such as a change in School, it is the responsibility of the programme team to communicate the change to the external examiners.

**END**