



University of  
St Andrews

# Guidance for Heads on the training of External Examiners

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# UNIVERSITY OF ST ANDREWS

## GUIDANCE ON THE INDUCTION AND BRIEFING OF AND SUPPORT FOR EXTERNAL EXAMINERS FOR TAUGHT PROGRAMMES<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

External Examiners are full members of the relevant Board of Examiners. No University qualification (other than honorary degrees) should be awarded without participation in the examining process by at least one External Examiner.

All External Examiners must therefore be provided with sufficient information and support to enable them to carry out their duties effectively. External Examiners must become familiar with the programme structure, learning and teaching methods and assessment techniques in his/her/their assigned programmes and modules, provide advice and comment on such matters and recommend changes where appropriate. Schools/Departments should also ensure that examiners are aware of, and can find, the Senate Regulations ([Overarching](#), [Undergraduate](#) and [Postgraduate Taught](#)) and that they are aware of any School-specific policies, such as 'Fitness to Practice in the School of Medicine' when these apply.

Schools/Departments should ensure that all new External Examiners are provided with appropriate guidance and training with regards to, but not limited to, the areas outlined in this document. Training is ultimately the responsibility of the Head of School/Department but may be delegated to an appropriate official, such as the Director of Teaching, Director of Taught Postgraduates, or Examinations Officer. When a change in role-holder of the relevant post coincides with a changeover of external examiner, it is important that clear guidance is provided on which external examiners have and have not been trained already.

Schools/Departments are encouraged to remind External Examiners that the Associate Deans Education and Associate Provost Education host an optional one-hour online Q&A session for all examiners during semester-1 to support them in their roles. Information on this can be found in the External Examiners annual letter from the Vice-Principal Education (Proctor). Schools/Departments are also encouraged to draw attention to two external development opportunities that may be of interest to examiners, [Advance HE's External Examiners course](#) and QAA's advice on [Education for sustainable development. and to](#) our webpage information about [making our curriculum inclusive](#).

The crucial University policy is that on [External Examining \(UG & PGT\)](#). If there is any discrepancy between University policy and guidance or training, the University policy will apply.

### 1. Purpose and function of External Examining

The External Examining system is a crucial element of the University's quality assurance and enhancement structure, providing a means to ensure the quality and

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<sup>1</sup> External examiners of taught programmes may also be asked to moderate the outcomes of one-year research masters degrees, as per section 2.3 of the [Policy on Assessment of Postgraduate Research Students](#). All other research degree examinations are dealt with separately.

standards of awards, the standards of student performance and the validity of assessment processes.

Specifically, the primary purposes of the External Examining system are to ensure:

- that the standards set for the University's awards, or award elements, are appropriate by reference to relevant [national subject benchmark statements](#), [the national qualifications frameworks](#), [the UK Quality Code](#), and, where appropriate, the requirements of relevant Professional and Statutory Bodies.
- that the standards of student performance in a programme and its constituent modules are appropriate and comparable with those of similar programmes in other UK higher education institutions,
- that the processes for assessment, examination and the determination of awards are sound and have been conducted fairly.

The appointment process is set out in the policy on [External Examining \(UG & PGT\)](#).

## 2. Activities undertaken by the External Examiner

External Examiners are asked to contribute to the following areas of practice:

- a. Curriculum approval.
  - Scrutiny of and comment on new module and programme proposals.
  - Reviewing and providing written advice and approval on significant module and programme amendments.
- b. Approval of the final versions of all end-of-module examination question papers.
  - External Examiners should normally see and approve the final versions of all end-of- module examination question papers before they are submitted to Registry. Where an External Examiner makes suggestions for substantive change to examination questions, a written response should be provided by the appropriate School Officer.
- c. Monitoring and benchmarking of standards at the modular level. This is undertaken as part of the module boards.
  - Monitor the standard of assessment, marking and feedback procedures.
  - Feedback on the assessment outcomes.
  - Identify any anomalous marks and discuss these with the School.
  - Consider the distribution of grades in modules and any adjustment made to these.
  - Advise on particular problematic cases that cannot be resolved within the School.

The External's primary role is as a moderator of grades rather than proposing actual adjustments to grades. Externals should not be used as markers, and it is not appropriate to change grades of individual students simply on the basis of a sampling exercise. The Assessment policies provide guidance for what process to follow if an External raises concerns about marks awarded.

- d. Reflection on the distribution patterns of classification data.
  - External Examiners will be given the opportunity to review classification data and are welcome to discuss this data with the School. Examiners are not able to request changes to classifications.

- The Assistant Vice Principal (Dean of Learning and Teaching) and Provost writes an annual letter to UG externals in June and PGT externals in October with context and reflective comments on institution-wide classification data.

The dates for each activity for the year and the key dates and deadlines for staff are available via the [Semester dates](#). Schools should make externals aware of key contacts in the School, dates of module boards, and what process an external should follow in the event of an emergency (e.g. illness) that prevents them attending a module board.

### 3. 20-point scale and classification

The University [uses a 20-point common reporting scale for grades](#). A grade is attached to a module and provides a numeric value between 0 and 20 (to one decimal place) to express the final outcome of a module.

Schools/Departments should support External Examiners to familiarise themselves with the 20-point common reporting scale and its use, along with any School-specific marking and conversion scales.

It may also be helpful to explain how module grades are used to determine degree classification.

Degree classification itself is dependent on an algorithm taking account of all eligible module grades (expressed on the 20-point scale). Further information on degree classification may be found in the [Classification Policy](#).

### 4. Programme specifications and module details

The School/Department should ensure that the External Examiner is aware of the locations where information on programmes and modules is published to students. It is advised that they are shown how to access.

- [the module catalogue](#)
- [the programme requirements](#)

It is also recommended that Schools/Departments check that new examiners are familiar with the Scottish four-year degree structure and relevant progression terminology, including Sub/Pre Honours, Junior Honours, Senior Honours and Postgraduate Taught.

### 5. Moodle and MMS access

The School/Department should ensure that the External Examiner has access to relevant university systems, most notably [MMS](#) and [Moodle](#) and that Examiners are guided to the location where information supportive to their role is held within these systems. This will include but may not be limited to.

- Module handbooks
- Intended Learning Outcomes
- Samples of student work

- Samples of feedback
- Assessment and marking criteria
- Details of marking practices, for example, the use of blind double marking or moderation
- Details of grade conversion processes, e.g. percentage to 20-point scale.

Schools should provide clear guidance to externals about who in the School is the lead contact for any queries about these matters.

## 6. Academic Adjustments

Schools/Departments should encourage External Examiners to familiarise themselves with policy and guidance on extenuating circumstances, academic adjustments and S-coding. The following links may be useful.

- [Extenuating Circumstances Policy](#)
- [Assessment policies and procedures: Guidance for Staff](#)
- [S-coding](#)

Externals should be provided with links to the [Governance Zone](#) as the location to find University policies, and to the Senate Regulations ([Overarching](#), [Undergraduate](#) and [Postgraduate Taught](#)).

## 7. Annual report submission

All External Examiners are required to complete an annual report commenting on the appropriateness of the standards of the assessments that they have examined. The annual report form addresses the relevant sections of the 'External Expertise' section of the UK Quality Code. External Examiners submit their annual report using the University's online tool, [MySaint](#). Registry will email External Examiners one month before reports are due.

External Examiners should be encouraged to provide sufficient detail within their report to allow the School to act upon matters raised and to reflect on potential curriculum enhancements. Schools may wish to point to the wider institutional reflection that follows on these reports, through the summaries of them produced for Academic Monitoring Group and Learning and Teaching Committee each year.

Heads of Schools must respond to the matters raised by External Examiners within their reports. Any reports that raise concerns at institutional level will be reviewed by the Associate Deans (Education)/Associate Provost Education who will provide an institutional response.

## 8. Sharing Undergraduate and Postgraduate Taught External Examiner Reports

[External Examiners' reports are made available to all staff and students in each School/Department.](#) External Examiners should therefore not identify specific individuals in their reports, though reference to individual modules is acceptable where this is appropriate.

## 9. Contractual arrangements and GDPR

External Examiners for the University are considered External Contractors and consequently are required to sign an [agreement](#) for their term of office. The agreement, issued by Registry, confirms the services to be provided, as well as other arrangements including but not limited to fees and expenses, confidential information and university property, data protection and intellectual property rights. All External Examiners appointed from 2024/25 will be required to sign an agreement. External Examiners appointed prior to 2024/25 will work under the terms and conditions issued to them by Registry via their appointment letter.

External Examiners must only access and use personal data made available to them by the University via its network or cloud storage services such as Microsoft 365. The External Examiner is expressly prohibited from downloading Personal Data to any device not controlled by the University. The External Examiner must notify the University, in writing, within twelve hours of becoming aware of a Personal Data breach, which includes where the Personal Data that is subject to the Agreement, has become subject to: unauthorised or unlawful processing; accidental or unlawful destruction; loss; unlawful alteration.

It is recommended that Schools regularly remind External Examiners of their responsibilities under the agreement.

## 10. Student meetings with External Examiners

Schools/Departments should offer External Examiners a formal opportunity (in-person or online or hybrid) to meet with students. The meeting should help students understand the external examining system as well as allowing students to discuss their learning experiences with the external examiner. This may include suggestions for enhancement of the curriculum but should not include discussion of individual assessment outcomes. The School and the External Examiner can agree on the appropriate format and timing to facilitate these purposes.

## 11. Policies pertaining to the role of External Examiners

Schools/Departments should encourage their External Examiners to familiarise themselves with the University of St Andrews policies pertaining to External Examiners.

- [External Examining \(UG & PGT\)](#)
- [Assessment policies and procedures](#)

Updates to relevant policies will be alerted to External Examiners via Registry, or through the Vice-Principal Education's 'Annual Letter to External Examiners.'

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