

External Examining

Survey of LTSN Subject Centres activities and plans August/September 2003

1) The following mail was sent to the LTSN Managers jiscmail list on 12/08/2003

External Examiners within the Academy

The recent TQEC Report (HEFCE 02/15) called for an enhanced role for External Examiners, and the HEFCE Strategic Plan (March 2003/12, Consultation) speaks of improved arrangements for the development, induction and training of External Examiners within institutions, and a national development programme from 2004-2005. There is a QAA Code of Practice on External Examining (Section 4, January 2000: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/public/cop/codesofpractice.htm>).

A small project group, and an External Examiner Working Group, have been established and have met to discuss the way forward. Part of the discussion is about how the LTSN/ILTHE and the future Higher Education Academy might engage with this project, and how External Examining and External Examiners might be supported.

We are aware that some Subject Centres have already given some thought to their response to these changes in External Examiner practice. Thus, it would be most helpful if you would complete the following brief questionnaire to give the Working Group some idea of where the Subject Centres stand on this issue at present.

(1) What plans/activities* have you made/delivered concerning External Examining?

*This might involve

- (a) Discussion with your subject community
- (b) Discussion within your advisory group
- (c) Events on this topic
- (d) Developing a section of your website
- (e) Developing expertise within your Subject Centre
- (f) Interaction with professional bodies
- (g) Surveying subject community's views

(2) Please summarise your subject community's views concerning the new proposals.

(3) Any other comments that you would like to make that might be of interest to the Working Group?

Please reply to Heather Sears (h.j.sears@leeds.ac.uk) by 31 August.

2) A follow up request was sent on 02/09/03

Dear SC Managers,

Carol Dixon recently circulated a short questionnaire (copied below) on behalf of the External Examining Working Group.

Many thanks to Helen, Liz, Pam, Tracey, Ailsa, Nina and Simon for responding on behalf of their subject centre.

It would be greatly appreciated if the rest of the subject centres could respond to Heather Sears (h.j.sears@leeds.ac.uk) by Friday 12th September.

Responses

Received from: GEES, LLAS, MSOR, Law, HSLT, BEST, PRS, English, CEBE, Psychology, Physical Sciences, Engineering, Materials, Bioscience.

(1) What plans/activities* have you made/delivered concerning External Examining?

GEES	Discussions with our Steering Group. We feel that it is crucial that there is a subject element to the training. A joint workshop with the RGS-IBG (Royal Geographical Society) was proposed but we have put our plans on hold until we have seen the generic proposals.
LLAS	We have discussed at our Advisory Board the idea of doing activities to help with the training of External Examiners. The feeling from the board was that they wanted to wait till the details were clearer before we put in a lot of energy into this.
MSOR	<p>(a) Plan to discuss with Heads of Departments at their conference next April</p> <p>(b) Plan to discuss at November meeting of our advisory group – this includes representatives from the professional bodies in our disciplines</p> <p>It would be good to get existing examiners to share their experiences and how they address challenges in this role, but currently this is not in our operational plan for 03/04.</p>
Law	<p>We have had on-going discussions with our Advisory Board and the Committee of Heads of University Law Schools regarding services that UKCLE may provide to assist the EE process. In particular, we have had much to-ing and fro-ing about a db of EEs - but this was held up due to concerns about data protection (that's what happens when you deal with lawyers!). At a recent event on EEs - held on 6 June - it was agreed that UKCLE and partner organisations would provide:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a register of external examiners in law • provision of opportunities for the exchange of current practice (for example through further workshops for external examiners) • provision of opportunities for professional development for external examiners in law • a bank of examples of effective practice on the UKCLE website, to include subject-based information on assessment practice • support for the development of research evidence of what works and what does not in particular subject-based contexts guidance on the policy framework
Hospitality , Sports, Leisure and Tourism	<p>We have started a register of external examiners (this is partly to try and encourage new people into examining).</p> <p>External examining and a planned workshop is on the agenda for a meeting with our subject associations this September. Any activities that we undertake are likely to be in conjunction with the associations.</p> <p>John Buswell, one of our liaison officers has interest and expertise in this area.</p>

BEST	See Appendix 1
PRS	We haven't really done anything much here yet. We would be interested in any working group but feel that the suggestions are not yet clear enough to begin to consult.
English	<p>(1) Our work on External Examining centres around a consultation group meeting we ran in July 2002 . The Group included 10 experienced external examiners in English from around the country, and was chaired by our then Director, Philip Martin. The purpose of the meeting was to establish how the English subject community would like to see the requirements of the discipline provided for in the future, to canvass information about how examiners saw their current roles and whether or not they felt they were being used to best effect. The meeting was set in the context of the national review of audit arrangements (Information on Quality and Standards in HE, HEFCE 02/15).</p> <p>The viewpoints which emerged and the issues which were raised formed the basis of a report which we published in April 2003. (External Examining in English, Philip Martin, English Subject Centre Report Series no. 7, April 2003, ISBN 0902194933). (Please let me know if you would like a copy; otherwise it is available from our website: http://www.english.ltsn.ac.uk/resources/topic/external.htm). The report has been circulated to all English departments, and to other interested parties.</p> <p>The consultation group expressed support for the idea of an annual forum for External Examiners in English which would enable examiners to share experience and discuss issues of concern. We hope to run such a forum in the 03/04 academic year, though have not yet scheduled it. There is a short section on the website devoted to external examining. We have considerable expertise within the Centre: both our former and current Director have extensive and current experience of external examining. Both our Advisory Board and CCUE (the relevant subject organisation) have expressed support for our work in this area.</p>
CEBE	WE CURRENTLY HAVE A SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP REPRESENTING MOST OF THE DISCIPLINES OF CEBE. THIS HAS BEEN RUNNING FOR ABOUT 9 MONTHS WITH THE AIM OF REVIEWING CURRENT PRACTICES AND TO PRODUCE A GUIDE ABOUT THE PRACTICALITIES OF EXTERNAL EXAMINING. ITS FOCUS IS ON WHAT EXTERNALS SHOULD DO RATHER THAN DEBATE. WE INTEND TO RUN SOME WORKSHOPS ON ITS COMPLETION. THE FOCUS IS THE PRACTICAL GUIDE. WHAT DOES AN EXTERNAL DO? CAN IT BE DONE IN THE TIME AVAILABLE? WHAT ABOUT PROPOSED CHANGES RESULTING FROM COOKE? ETC. A NUMBER OF PROFESSIONAL BODY SECRETARIES ARE REPRESENTED, AND THE GROUP HAVE A WIDE EXPERIENCE OF EXTERNAL EXAMINING. WE ARE INTERESTED IN HOW OTHERS DO IT AND THE RELEVANCE OF PRACTITIONERS TO THE PROCESS. EVENTUALLY WE WILL PUBLISH THE REPORT ON THE CEBE WEBSITE.
Psychology	LTSN Psychology held a workshop for the Association of Heads of Psychology Departments on the role of external examiners last year and

	<p>subsequently published a short briefing note for Heads of Psychology Departments. Partly as a response to the workshop, the British Psychological Society is in the process of revising its handbook for external examiners. There is a section on our website relating to external examining, and we have plans to set up a database to help departments appoint external examiners.</p> <p>Nick Hammond, director of LTSN Psychology has experience of acting as external examiner.</p>
Physical Sciences	-
Engineering	<p>We have not done any work in this area to date. We intend any future plans to be informed by the working group.</p> <p>We held initial discussions with our Steering Group (June 03) before joining the working group. They confirmed that external examining is a topic of interest to our community and that they wished us to be involved in the ongoing discussions – approaching the topic with caution.</p> <p>A couple of our events to date have touched on issues related to external examiners - eg our Output Standards and Assessment Workshops run with the Engineering Professors' Council (held twice in 2002/2003).</p> <p>As we work on this topic, we will also need to liaise closely with our professional institutions. The IEE have a register of external examiners and co- ordinate training. The IMechE see external examiners' reports as an important part of the accreditation process. The ICE have limited involvement with external examining at present.</p>
Materials	<p>Identifying all EEs in materials science - we guess there are less than 20.</p> <p>Making telephone contact with each to briefly discuss the proposed changes in practice</p> <p>Establishing an EE database for open access through our web site</p> <p>Establishing a special EE area on our web site to contain support resources (as and when they are available)</p> <p>Hosting an EE seminar (Feb 04) to discuss policy, identify support requirements and specify projects to develop relevant resources.</p>
Bioscience	<p>We realise that External Examining is set to become a hot topic in the future and we will need to support our community around this issue. We have discussed this in Team Strategy meetings and decided to wait until the details were clearer before we put a lot of time and energy into this. We decided at this stage the best way forward is to prepare a short briefing for Heads of department and Bioscience Representatives at the start of the 03/04 academic year to raise awareness of this upcoming issue.</p>

(2) Please summarise your subject community's views concerning the new proposals.

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GEES	<p>Mixed. In principle the proposals are welcomed. The geography and environmental sciences communities each hold databases of External Examiners and so already have records of the networks. It is felt that the training will be of particular importance to new external examiners. Feelings within the Earth Sciences community are that it is extremely difficult to identify external examiners as it is, mainly due to the poor levels of pay, and that the addition of training (without additional funding) would put people off even more.</p>
LLAS	<p>We sense that there is considerable nervousness about the proposals. They may undermine the existing strengths of the EE's role. If additional burdens are put on EEs, it may be even more difficult to recruit them than it is currently. It is generally agreed that more training is probably needed for EEs. However, this needs to be set against the time that senior academics can commit to such things.</p>
MSOR	<p>We have not surveyed the subject community's views, but our perception is that the requirement for external examiners to undertake training will reduce the pool of those coming forward to serve in this manner.</p>
Law	<p>The view at the event held in June was that the new proposals on enhancing the role of the external examiner are all very well and good but the practicalities of the situation are that without additional resources, discipline specific training and institutional recognition of the role it was going to be difficult to institute an effective system. As ever the importance of working within the context of the discipline was seen as key - hence the enthusiasm for the UKCLE to take the lead on any 'training' rather than it coming from outside the discipline. There was a feeling that it would be better if an understanding of enhancement could be developed from the grassroots up (within the discipline) rather than being imposed from outside in a top-down fashion. Again the role of the SC in disseminating examples, ideas advice etc. about enhancement was seen as valuable.</p>
English	<p>Based on the consultation group discussion (which we hope to be representative of the subject community but cannot claim that it is so), we make the following points regarding the issues:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - There is concern that the proposed new duties of the external examiner, combined with diminution of the role of 'critical friend', may make the task less interesting and rewarding thereby exacerbating recruitment difficulties. - The experience of the external examiner is a highly valued aspect of the system, and there is concern that whatever training provision is made this should not diminish the academic qualifications required for the role. Moreover, the view is that examiners should be involved at the level of academic practice, not merely process. - At the same time, it is recognised that examiners need to be aware of the institutional and national contexts of their work, and the legal requirements. Perhaps this is the area in which training initiatives might be developed? - Sharing and discussion between examiners of different assessment experience, systems and modes is valued.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - There is a concern that adequate time for reviewing work is allocated. English is a discipline which requires copious amounts of writing for assessment purposes, and time to review this thoroughly is therefore essential. - There is strong support for more time to be spent with the host department, discussing teaching, learning and assessment practices in more detail and with more frankness than the current formalisation of meetings currently allows. To quote from our report "Externals should be a source of encouragement and advice, and not simply instruments of policing". Currently the opportunity for this kind of exchange varies widely across institutions. - There is concern that examiners should have the opportunity to read horizontal runs of work in order to develop a summative evaluation of the degree as a whole beyond the formal pronouncements of validation documents and programme specifications. - There is a wish for a more established means by which 'new blood' can be brought into the system and good practice shared. - The contribution which an examiner's experience might make to practice in their own department is insufficiently recognised.
CEBE	<p>I DON'T THINK THAT WE HAVE A COMMUNITY VIEW, BUT LOTS OF DIFFERENT OPINIONS ACROSS THE DIFFERENT DISCIPLINES. APPOINTMENTS, TRAINING, TENURE, STATUS ALL DIFFER ACROSS THE DIFFERENT PROFESSIONAL BODIES. SOME OF THESE NEED TO APPROVE EXTERNALS AFTER THEY HAVE BEEN THROUGH THE UNIVERSITY PROCESS. SOME ARE REJECTED IN PRACTICE, PERHAPS 5-10% EVEN AFTER UNIVERSITY APPROVAL. WE PROBABLY FEEL THAT MORE TIME FOR THEIR WORK IS REQUIRED AND A CHANGE (INCREASE) IN THE FEE STRUCTURE. SOME SUBJECTS ARE ALREADY FINDING IT DIFFICULT TO APPOINT EXTERNALS, ANY INCREASED BURDEN WILL PUT OFF THE REMAINING ONES. EXTERNALS OFFER THEIR SERVICES BECAUSE THEY IN TURN NEED EXTERNALS. OTHERWISE THERE IS LITTLE TO BE GAINED AFTER A COUPLE OF APPOINTMENTS. IT IS DIFFICULT IN THE TIME AVAILABLE TO DO THE WORK PROPERLY. HENCE THE NEED FOR OUR GUIDE TO HELP THEM FOCUS ON THE MAIN POINTS.</p>
Psychology	<p>While it is acknowledged within the community that there is wide variability in external examining practice between departments and institutions, there is some skepticism that the new proposals will benefit departments. For example, the reports from external examiners may be less frank, and perhaps therefore less useful, if they are to be made public. Since the payment for external examining is so low, there is likely to be a reluctance to become involved in lengthy training or quality control procedures unless there is a fundamental change to the funding model -- although the indication from our workshop is that training would be welcome in principle.</p>

Physical Sciences	We have had no discussion with our community about external examining. The issue hasn't been raised with us by anyone in the community and it doesn't come up in conversations at meetings etc so I strongly suspect its not high on people's agendas at the moment. We'll look forward to hearing about the summary results to compare attitudes, any outcomes and potential implications for the external examining community.
Engineering	We have not surveyed our community's views concerning the new proposals, although we have discussed it with our Steering Group who confirmed our opinions. We believe that the topic is of great interest to our community and that they will have worries and concerns about the new proposals and would like us to get involved where possible and keep them updated and informed as there our developments. Therefore, our approach has been to join the working group.
Bioscience	Agreement that there needs to be some standardisation and perhaps regulation but concern that over-bureaucratisation might inhibit new External Examiners taking on the job. Poor pay vs. likely requirement for more time and commitment.

(3) Any other comments that you would like to make that might be of interest to the Working Group?

GEES	We are really keen to get involved and see this as an important area of work for us in 2003-2004. However, we are concerned about jumping the gun and want to make sure that any subject-specific materials / events we produce are directly relevant / complementary to the generic proposals. It would be interesting to know who will be developing / running the generic training - will it be done through EDUs for example. Whoever it is, we need to make sure we liaise with them right from the start.
MSOR	Existing and potential examiners – who are mainly Professors – are unlikely to consider that staff development activity will be useful to them in carrying out their external role, particularly if it is generic rather than subject-specific. Once they are convinced that it is needed, they may welcome an event as in (c) above. This would develop expertise within our Network that could be disseminated further through further events, our website and other publications.
Law	In law as in other professional disciplines there is always the influence, concern and interest of the professional bodies (the Bar Council and the Law Society in this case) to take into account. They have already put forward proposals that they should be more intimately involved in the EE process - to date fended off by the academics. Nevertheless the SC needs to take account of the legitimate interest of these bodies while supporting the academics to ensure the process is both rigorous and

	professional but also informed by an understanding of the EE's role in ensuring that law schools are encouraged (and recognised) for taking a developmental, reflective and pedagogically informed approach to enhancing quality.
PRS	We are concerned, however, that while the idea of Externals doing some form of PDP might be basically a good one it might dissuade academics from carrying out this important role - and those willing to do it are already in short supply.
English	<p>There is strong support for establishing a subject-based External Examiners' Forum in which matters might be discussed without breaching confidences between examiners and host institutions. As well as providing a forum for the discussion of good practice, this might also be a place at which discussion on student literacy, assessment diversification, grade inflation/deflation or treatment of special cases might be inaugurated. It may also be a place where examiners could meet policy-makers in quality and standards.</p> <p>As a Subject Centre, we are concerned that the revision of external examiner roles and the 'national development programme' should be conducted in a spirit which respects the specific needs and practices of individual discipline areas.</p>
Psychology	Although we only have anecdotal evidence to support this view, we believe that the induction and training would be welcomed by new external examiners.
Engineering	We will express our views directly since we are a member!
Bioscience	We are members of the working group.

Prof. Ed Wood and Dr Heather Sears
LTSN Bioscience
19th September 2003

Appendix 1

Heather,

I attach the response that we sent to the TQEC on our communities view of the proposals. This includes the source of these views and the meetings held.

Hope this is useful

Ailsa Nicholson

Changes to the External Examining System

Feedback from the Business Management & Accountancy community

The following comments are collated from feedback at three meetings where this subject was addressed.

- 16 December 2002 – A one day seminar to discuss the proposed changes attended by 18 experienced external examiners from Business Schools
- 17 January 2003– a meeting of BEST Key contacts for the north of England
- 14 February 2003 – a workshop within the annual conference of the Committee of Heads of Accounting (CHA)

The issues and concerns expressed at these meetings are reported under the titles for the themes used to focus discussion at the one-day seminar:

1. QAA & external examining
2. Public Face of External Examining
3. Strengthening the existing system
4. Future practice and enhancement

1. QAA & external examining

1. There was concern that the new institutional review process loses a subject focus.
One of the advantages of the QAA subject review was the overview of the subject that resulted. This will be lost in the new process as will any opportunity to appreciate the diversity of practice in the external examining system within Business Management & Accountancy.
2. Who is the external examining system for? This question was raised in some groups. Is it for:
 - the student – to ensure fair treatment?
 - the department/school - monitoring of administrative systems and procedures?

the QAA?

This needs to be clarified to focus the discussions. The current proposals seem to be prescriptive and therefore serve the needs of the QAA. The general feeling at the meetings was that the system should primarily serve the students and the departments or schools.

3. There was also concern that the proposed system will lead to standardisation and loss of the diversity needed to serve the interests of diverse departments and subjects.
4. A strongly held concern was that the reports will be used for comparative purposes with all the problems and disadvantages that league tables bring.

The community recognises that in many ways the current system needs changing but the belief is held that the changes should be for the benefit of the students and should lead to improvement within the schools or departments. There is little support for a changed system which is prescriptive and may lead to league tables.

2. Public Face of External Examining

Concerns expressed focused on:

1. the loss of the genuine critical friend whose concern is enhancement of the process for the benefit of the students.
2. that the role is being compromised by the new political dimension being introduced.
3. the format of the proposed examiners report was not thought acceptable
4. who should produce the summary and who will monitor the quality and validity of this?
5. the need to consider whether external examining is a public service and if so, the rewards need to reflect this.
6. the current level of reward to external examiners. This is risibly low but academics believe in the system of mutual support and therefore buy in to the system.
7. the difficulty in securing new examiners at present which will be exacerbated by the proposed new system. A register would be useful, though who should manage this is debateable. AMBA and EQUIS currently have a policing role and are therefore not seen as suitable.

The publication of the external examiners reports was undoubtedly the single most controversial and unpopular issue in the proposed new system. Academics felt that they would be exposed to possible litigation or alternatively the reports would be so bland as to be worthless. The issue of rewards for external examining ran this a close second. A significant amount of work is required of examiners in addition to their existing workloads. The financial reward is pitifully small. If public accountability is to be included in the task then both financial reward and some time allowance would be needed to make it worth while cooperating in the new system. Without cooperation of academics the system could not operate.

Although the loss of the 'critical friend' might be mourned by some, there were others who would be happy to see the demise of 'the old boy network' which is seen to operate in some cases.

3. Strengthening the existing system

1. Need to ensure the system is fit for its purpose.
2. The proposed changes may result in a diminishing of the developmental role of the current system.
3. Some change may be necessary to ensure that assessment criteria match the intended learning outcomes. This may require a greater knowledge of pedagogical techniques that many research focused examiners possess.
4. There are problems ensuring that external examiners have a suitably broad knowledge of the topics covered. This is especially difficult with multidisciplinary programmes such as Business Information Technology which requires both business & management expertise and IT knowledge.
5. Consideration should be given to linking the external examiner role with the periodic module or course reviews.
6. External examiners need to be reassured that their recommendations are taken seriously and acted upon.
7. Currently recruiting new examiners is difficult. A register would help. New examiners need to be encouraged with induction and training. A system of 'chief' examiners might help to support newcomers. Other suggestions for support were mentoring or pairing of examiners. The role needs to be made more attractive with better rewards for the significant amount of work involved. There should be some encouragement in terms of recognition and time allocation for academics involved in external examining.
8. Who should carry out the training is not obvious. There was a strong feeling that this should not be the QAA, ILT nor the LTSNs.
9. There was a strong feeling that the system only works because academics feel it is valuable. Existing examiners must make their views and expectations known as they are well placed to influence the future of the system. It cannot work without their cooperation.

The suggestion that the external examining role be linked to periodic review is a sensible one which would streamline the system and reduce some of the existing overload. It would also ensure a developmental and enhancement role for the system.

4. Future practice and enhancement

Any change on the system should be based on research. An analysis of the skills required by an EE should be carried out. In addition to subject knowledge, what pedagogical skills and knowledge are required and what experience and knowledge of transferable skills? Many EEs are respected researchers in their field with a relatively narrow area of expertise. Are they sufficiently aware of learning & teaching and skills issues?

An evaluation of the existing system should take place with an accompanying revision of Annex C.

The issue of resourcing needs to be given high priority. Reward needs to be commensurate with the work involved and the accountability proposed. Who should pay for this - the Government, the institutions or the schools/departments?

The training issue also has to be resolved, - by whom, how long, the format and funding.

A register was thought to be a good idea but held by whom? One suggestion for Business Management and Accountancy was the Royal Society of Arts, Manufacturing and Commerce as an independent body.

There was strong resistance to the current proposals as they seem to concentrate on policing rather than enhancement. The academics would like to see this reversed.

A networking role for LTSN BEST was proposed bringing together examiners to share good practice and discuss possible developments. It was suggested that there might be things to learn from examiners from other subjects. BEST could include others in the networking activities.

In summary

It is hoped that the TQEC will consider the issues and concerns raised here by the very people who currently make the system work and who are concerned to improve on the existing system without losing the many benefits of the current system. LTSN BEST accepts that the existing system needs to be improved and will continue to liaise with its large constituency on any proposed amendments to the changes proposed. This we see as an important part of our stated role as honest brokers between the academics and the regulatory systems in place.

If there has been research on the effect of the existing system of external examining on the development and enhancement of courses, then this should be widely publicised and discussed and used as a basis for change.