

External Examining – A Review of its Current Status

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In the UK, Universities and other degree-awarding institutions have legal autonomy to set their own standards for their awards and for deciding whether their students have met those standards. While at present there is no national curriculum for higher education as such, a number of QAA guidelines and the requirements of various Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRB) do set overall frameworks for subject content though these are very broadly cast. There are a variety of mechanisms in place to assure the maintenance of standards but a particular feature of UK higher education is the existence of the external examiner system whose aim is to provide an independent check upon processes for assessing students. In 1963 the Robbins Report placed external examining at the heart of the process for assuring standards in UK higher education. The Dearing report (1998) re-emphasised the importance of external examining in assurance of standards but at the same time recommended that changes were made to the system to strengthen its effectiveness. In response to the Dearing Report the Quality Assurance Agency developed an extensive *Code of Practice for Assurance of Academic Quality and Standards in Higher Education*. This Code also places external examining at the heart of quality assurance of standards with one section of the Code dealing specifically with external examining. Higher Education institutions have been felt, by the QAA largely to have implemented the Code of Practice in relation to external examining and the belief is widespread in UK higher education that the system of external examining works well. Further evidence in support of this view comes from the conclusions in the QAA *Institutional Outcomes 2nd Series Report*.

However, in the last 2-3 years this assumption has come under challenge from several sources. A number of media reports relating to aspects of quality including external examining prompted the QAA to publish, in 2008, its *Thematic Enquiries Report*, which again found little cause for concern over the effectiveness of the external examining system. Nevertheless concerns continued to be raised in publicly in Parliament (*House of Commons Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Select Committee 11th Report, 2009*) and by the NUS (*NUS Quality Matters, Annex D*). These concerns focus largely, though not exclusively, upon the consistency and transparency of the system. In 2009 a report from the HEFCE sub-committee for Teaching, Learning and the Student Experience considered that the system remained robust but recommended a full review be undertaken. In response Universities UK and GuildHE set up an External Examining Review Group which is due to report sometime towards the end of 2010.

This talk reviewed the QAA Code of Practice relating to external examining and discussed the two subsequent reports from the QAA that largely expressed confidence in the system. It then outlined the key concerns raised by the Select Committee and identified some key questions relating to external examining about which the Anatomical Society should be concerned. These are: what the Society response should be if a national register of external examiners is established; how can we define standards in anatomy and its assessment especially in integrated professional

syllabuses and how can we ensure the provision of suitably trained and competent external examiners in anatomy. The talk concluded by stating that while external examining remains a flagship within the UK HE sector some reform of the system is likely and the Society needs to be prepared to respond to those reforms.

Note added after the talk

Since my talk was delivered in Portsmouth in July 2010, the QAA have published a consultation paper on behalf of UUK and Guild HE requesting responses from the sector to a series of questions. The External Examining Review Group has stated its aim to be to “strengthen the system of external examining by creating greater consistency in external examining processes throughout the UK”. It has though indicated that it is not in favour of a national register of external examiners.

The consultation paper can be viewed at

<http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/PolicyAndResearch/PolicyAreas/QualityAssurance/HowTheSystemWorks/Pages/ExternalExaminers.aspx>
(accessed 8th September 2010)