



Higher Education and  
Training Awards Council  
Comhairle na n'Ádúchtaí  
Ardoideachais agus Oiliúna

## Report on the HETAC Seminar on External Examining, held on 14 November 2006

### Tuairisc ar Sheimineár a reachtáil HETAC ar 14 Samhain 2006 faoi scrúdachán seachtarach

The purpose of the HETAC Seminar on External Examining was to share experiences, discover issues of common concern and help build consensus on the principles of good practice in this field. As this was the first seminar on this subject, there was a wide breadth of issues addressed.

The outcomes of the Seminar indicated that, while the practice of external examining can vary greatly, it is an inherently valuable process to ensure academic standards and fairness in assessment processes. Discussion around key themes demonstrated that agreement on key issues was achievable and desirable to ensure an effective external examining system.

HETAC has subsequently formed a Working Group on External Examining to progress work in this area. The proposal for an informative Code of Practice on External Examining was also raised as part of the consultation process on learner assessment issues. A Workshop is planned for April 2008 to build on the outcomes of the Seminar, including consideration of a draft Code of Practice.

The context for the Seminar on external examining was:

- HETAC outcome-based standards and the National Framework of Qualifications;
- Forthcoming HETAC institutional quality assurance reviews;
- Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area;
- The United Kingdom's Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education paper *Code of Practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education, Section 4: External examining*, (<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/>); and
- HETAC analysis of external examiner reports for 2004-05.

The Seminar's proceedings included:

- The Seminar Chairman, Mr. Diarmuid Hegarty welcomed the delegates and detailed the seminar objectives;
- The keynote address, entitled 'How to do away with External Examiners?', was conducted by Professor Noel Sheehy (School of Psychology, Liverpool John Moore's University);
- Dr. Peter Cullen presented the HETAC findings on the review of external examiner reports 2004-05; and
- During the afternoon session delegates were divided into eight breakout groups to discuss six themes regarding external examining – the roles and responsibilities of the external examiner, the nomination and appointment of external examiners, the process of external examining, external examiners' reports and quality assurance procedures. A comprehensive summary of these discussions is at [Attachment A](#).

## **Group Feedback Session**

The following describes the break out group discussions which occurred at the HETAC Seminar on External Examining. It does not represent an agreement by the Seminar as a whole or HETAC policy.

### **1. The roles and responsibilities of the external examiner**

**Rapporteur:**           **Dr. Maeve Connolly (Dún Laoghaire IADT)**

**Dr. Malachy Thompson (Galway-Mayo IT)**

#### **a) What are the general roles, responsibilities and functions of a programme external examiner?**

A series of general roles and responsibilities were agreed by the group as follows:

##### Roles

- The external examiner will act in an independent role and be responsible for ensuring that established academic standards are complied with.
- The role of the external examiner is distinct from that played by other bodies involved in the accreditation of the programmes.

##### Responsibilities

- The external examiner will ensure that the programme assessment procedures are as set out in course documents and that assessment processes are measured against the specified learning outcomes.
- The external examiner will review, and agree with the internal examiner(s), the marks allocated across individual programmes, including 'borderline' cases.
- The external examiner will independently select and examine a sample of continuous assessments and examination materials.
- The external examiner will ensure that the programme adheres to the standards set out in the National Framework of Qualifications.
- The external examiner will ideally have knowledge of comparable international standards in relevant subject areas.
- The external examiner will attend the relevant exam board meeting hosted by the provider once in each academic year.

##### Functions

- The external examiner contributes to an annual review of the assessment process by making recommendations to the relevant programme board so that any proposed amendments might be considered and implemented.
- The external examiner prepares an annual report for the provider, addressing the maintenance of academic standards, classification of awards and the comparability of standards with other relevant institutions.

#### **b) What is the extent of the authority of the external examiner?**

The extent of the authority of the external examiner might include the following:

- Providing advice on marginal cases (where students have a 'borderline' mark).
- Acting as an independent authority in appeal cases brought by the student.

- Commenting on draft examination papers and recommending amendments.
- Ensuring compliance of assessment policies and procedures.

**c) Does the role of the external examiner vary with discipline (art, humanities, science, technology, business, nursing?)**

It was agreed by the group that:

- While disciplines may employ diverse modes of assessment (e.g. panel assessments in the case of art and design programmes), the role of the external examiner is essentially generic. It is the responsibility of the external examiner to ensure that assessment procedures are adhered to and to ensure that the learning outcomes of each programme comply with the standards set out in the National Framework of Qualifications.
- The role of the external examiner may be specialised in some discipline areas. It was thought that the achievement of key skills within particular disciplines should be highlighted within the assessment process so that the external examiner can ensure that the relevant outcomes are being tested rigorously.

**d) How does the role of the module/subject external examiner differ from that of the programme external examiner?**

It was agreed by the group that:

- The key role of the programme external examiner is to ensure consistency of the assessment process through the evaluation of several components.
- Programme External Examiners also have responsibility for ensuring the programme standards comply with national and international standard benchmarks.
- The role of a module/subject external examiner was narrower and more directly focused on module learning outcomes.

**e) What are the qualifications/experience required for a person to be a suitable external examiner?**

It was agreed by the group that:

- External examiners should have an in-depth knowledge of the discipline being assessed and they should be able to demonstrate evidence of this knowledge through a combination of relevant academic qualifications and industry/professional experience.
- 5 years industry/professional experience would be necessary to act as external examiner
- The external examiner would ideally be research active (although this is not essential to the role).
- The minimum qualification necessary to act as an external examiner should be a level 8 award. However, the external examiner should hold a higher qualification than the level they are examining.

**f) Do ACCS awards (the accumulation of credit through the certification of subjects) present special problems? If so what are they?**

It was agreed by the group that:

- As learning outcomes for ACCS awards are consistent with those for standard awards they should not present significant problems for external examiners.
- There may be issues in relation to continuity where the awards are gained over an extended period of time.

**2. The nomination and appointment of external examiners**

**Rapporteur: Dr Mark Riordan (Dún Laoghaire IADT)**

**a) What principles ought to underpin the process for the nomination and appointment of external examiners?**

The group considered it important to:

- have a clear and strategic definition of the role of the external examiner that would be underpinned during the nomination and appointment process.
- focus primarily on the award stage of programmes.
- focus on the preservation of the independent status of the external examiner.
- ensure that external examiners are able to recognise and draw comparisons with equivalent international award level standards.

**b) What principles should inform processes to ensure independence of the external examiner and the avoidance of conflicts of interest?**

It was agreed by the group that in order to ensure principles of good practice:

- The external examiner should make a formal declaration of non-conflict of interest.
- The external examiner should be paid from an independent source (rather than from the institutions under review).
- The external examiner (rather than the institution) should be permitted to select student work at random for moderation.

**c) What are the main obstacles that arise in the recruitment of external examiners?**

The main obstacles include:

- The size of the pool from which suitable external examiners can be selected.
- The prevention of the external examiner attending exam board meetings owing to tight calendar scheduling.
- The recruitment of external examiners is impinged by a lack of clarity regarding their role and a lack of clarity regarding the associated time constraints that this can produce.

**d) What issues should be addressed in the contract between the external examiner and the institution?**

It was agreed by the group that:

- The contracts should clearly outline achievable duties of the external examiner.

- The proposed calendar for the academic year should be detailed in advance to allow for maximum attendance at exam board meetings and better organisation of the duties to be carried out.

**e) What is an appropriate duration for the term-of-appointment of an external examiner?**

It was agreed by the group that:

- An appropriate duration of three to five years was sufficient, which should not be renewed immediately following the period of appointment.

**f) How can the effectiveness of an external examiner's performance be determined?**

It was agreed by the group that:

- If the programme in question is running well it might only be necessary to undertake a monitoring role.
- It would be easier to identify potential problems where performance was poor.

**g) Are there any grounds upon which an external examiner's performance can objectively be judged to be unsatisfactory? What measures can be put in place to terminate the appointment of unsatisfactory examiners?**

It was agreed by the group that:

- There were practical concerns about dealing with poor performances from external examiners where the cost in relation to professional reputations could be very serious. In such circumstances where this might occur it was suggested that more pragmatic solutions might be adopted by appointing a shadow external examiner for example.

**h) Should institutions publish the names of external examiners annually?**

Yes, it was agreed that the names of external examiners appointed by institutions should be published each year.

**3. The orientation and formation of external examiners**

**Rapporteur: Mr. John O'Connor (Portobello College)**

**a) What kind of issues should be covered in the orientation of new external examiners and the programme, school/departmental, institutional, national and international levels?**

It was agreed by the group that the specific orientation process for an external examiner to be provided by the recruiting institution would be informed by the role and the responsibilities of an external examiner.

Some general suggestions on managing the orientation process included:

- Providing a clear statement of roles and responsibilities to ensure potential external examiners have a shared understanding of the expectation of the recruiting institution.
- Providing a contract or letter of appointment to formalise the agreement between the institution and the external examiner.

- Providing external examiners, upon appointment, with the relevant documentation to allow them to carry out their responsibilities. (Typical documentation should include copies of assessment regulations and procedures, programme documentation, recent mapping exercises that identify where specific knowledge, understanding and competencies are assessed within a programme, the student handbook, marking and classification criteria, relevant benchmark statements). In addition, an international external examiner may require information on the Irish higher education system and the Irish National Framework of Qualifications.
- Providing external examiners with institutional information such as teaching and learning strategies, details on student intakes and the needs of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies.
- Clarifying any issues surrounding confidentiality during orientation
- Highlighting the format of the external examiner report as part of the orientation process. There should be clarity concerning the timing and format of the report. The extent of distribution of the external examiner report should be known by the external examiners, as should any requirements for a 'periodic external examiner report' at the end of the term of office. Procedures for follow-up actions that may arise from external examiner reports and how the external examiner is kept informed about such developments should be known.
- Providing external examiners with a calendar of work that will outline key dates for receipt of draft examinations, sample of learner assessment and examination board meetings, are minimum requirements that should be communicated.
- Reviewing the orientation programme for external examiners in terms of its objectives as part of the institution's quality assurance processes.

**b) How can prospective external examiners build up experience? Should they serve as shadow external examiners for a year?**

It was agreed by the group that:

- The opportunity for inexperienced external examiners to shadow experienced examiners would be beneficial.

**c) What methods are best employed to prepare external examiners to carry out their functions?**

It was agreed by the group that:

- Ongoing support for external examiners was necessary upon completion of the orientation process to ensure that the responsibilities were carried out effectively.
- Providers should provide a network of support contacts for the examiner that would include administrative support and contact with the programme leader or course director. External examiners should be kept informed of any changes to assessment policy or regulations at the institution.
- National support mechanisms should be provided. HETAC could provide development opportunities and/or could host a secure network space on the HETAC website where external examiners could participate in a dialogue aimed at identifying good practice in carrying out their role.

**4. The process of external examining**

**Rapporteur: Mr. Hugh McBride (Galway-Mayo IT)**

It was agreed by the group that questions in relation to the process of external examining could only be addressed once the role and responsibilities of the examiner had been clearly defined. It was further highlighted that some of these processes may be inter-related and vary according to discipline.

**a) What are the principles that determine the evidence that is required by an external examiner to carry out his/her functions? Do any of those principles vary with discipline?**

The following principles were identified and include:

- Full access to relevant material
- The availability of all necessary material
- Completeness
- Timeliness
- Consultation with key staff within the institution

It was agreed by the group that these needed to be established within a culture of openness, transparency and accountability.

**b) Should the institution agree the evidence required by an external examiner to inform his/her judgements with the external examiner at the time of his/her appointment?**

It was agreed by the group that these should be agreed and set as an agenda item at the induction stage of the process. They should also be subject to ongoing review.

**c) Consider the usefulness or otherwise of the following evidence to be considered by the external examiner:**

1. *Overall programme learning outcomes*
2. *Module learning outcomes*
3. *Assessment instruments and metric (examinations, model solutions, assessment rationale in light of claimed outcomes, marking schemes, continual assessment processes)*
4. *HETAC standard (where established)*
5. *Relevant national and international benchmarks*
6. *Professional requirements where appropriate*
7. *Meetings with students*
8. *Student submissions: exam scripts, course work/performances/artefacts, dissertations/project reports*

It was agreed by the group that items 1 – 6 and 8 would all be useful as evidence to be considered by the external examiner. The implementation of item 7 would be more dependent on the nature of the role of an external examiner.

**d) What principles should inform the design of the process to be used to ensure that external examiners have endorsed results prior to publication?**

It was considered that the issue of endorsing results depended on the purpose and role of the external examiner.

- e) **What principles should inform the design of the process to be used to ensure that the external examiner has been informed of and has approved the assessment instruments?**

This was considered an internal matter for each institution.

## 5. External examiner's reports

Rapporteur: **Dr. Paula Gilligan (Dún Laoghaire IADT)**

**Dr. Thomas McGrath (Carlow College)**

- a) **Suggest a template (with guidelines) for an external examiner's report. Specifically should the following be addressed?**

1. *Appropriateness of standards set by the institution for the programme or module in light of the HETAC standard and other national and international benchmarks.*
2. *The rigour of the assessment process.*
3. *The fairness of the assessment process.*
4. *The consistency of the assessment process over variants (time, discipline, institution).*
5. *Compliance of the assessment process with institutional regulations.*
6. *Examiner's perception of the standard actually attained by the students.*
7. *Comparability of attained standards with those in comparable institutions inside and outside Ireland.*
8. *Record of any arrangements to meet with students to discuss their work/attainment.*
9. *Record of attendance at various meetings.*
10. *CV of external examiner demonstrating competence to act.*
11. *How long has the external examiner been serving on this programme*
12. *Strengths of the programme*
13. *Areas for improvement for the programme*
14. *Record of information and support provided to the external examiner*
15. *Record of specific evidence considered by the external examiner*

It was agreed by the group that the suggested areas above might be included in a template for external examiners reports. However, the group highlighted some of the following issues:

- The compliance of the assessment process was the responsibility of the institution and not the external examiner.
- Arrangements to meet students as part of the assessment process may pose some industrial relation issues for institutional staff. In addition, it might also be difficult to resource given the poor remuneration offered to examiners.
- Sections highlighting strengths or areas for improvement should not be mandatory as it is not the role of the external examiner to review the programme or assessment process in place.
- Recording the information and support given to the external examiner should be the responsibility of the institution unless it impedes his/her job.
- The appointment of external examiners should be for fixed periods.

**b) How should the external examiner's report be formally received and distributed?**

It was suggested by the group that:

- The external examiner's report should be received by the registrar and distributed to an agreed circulation list, which would include the teaching staff.
- Following receipt of the report the external examiner should be provided with feedback where recommendations have been proposed.
- The external examiner's report should provide a section that might provide feedback to students.
- This question presents an important issue and should be dealt with as a separate section.

**c) Should external examiners be required to provide an end-of-term report at the expiry of their term of appointment? What information would be included in such a report?**

It was suggested by the group that the external examiner's report at the conclusion of his/her term was usually laid out as an 'end-of-term' report although this process has never been formalised.

It was agreed by the group that this question would need to be dealt with as a separate section.

**6. Quality assurance procedures**

**Rapporteur: Dr. Joseph Ryan (Athlone IT)**

- a) **What principles should guide the design of the follow-up process for addressing issues raised by the external examiner in his/her report?**
- b) **How should any follow-up process be documented and recorded?**
- c) **Should the external examiner be made aware of follow-up activity?**
- d) **Who should have access to external examiner reports?**
- e) **What kind of quality assurance loop should be in place to ensure mistakes are corrected and quality is enhanced through the learning experience?**
- f) **How should reports be used at programme/course/module level?**
- g) **How should reports be used at school level?**
- h) **How should reports be used at institutional level?**

The members charged with consideration of the quality assurance feedback procedures arising from the external examining process agreed that:

- A shared orientation that recognized the distinction between generic and discipline specific induction would be of benefit.
- The core of the reaction concerned the role of the external examiner.
- A shared reporting template that can capture the essential information would be welcomed.

Attention was also given to the actions that might usefully follow on receipt of the external examiner report. This included:

- Wide internal distribution and consideration leading to a response including a reply to the external examiner.
- The appropriate fora should be established to consider points or recommendations proposed by the external examiner and should be either accepted or clear reason provided as to why election was made for an alternative course of action.

It was further agreed by the group that:

- The relationship between the external examiner and the institution should be seen over the course of the contract and some developmental element should be discernible.
- A review of the engagement on the part of the external examiner might usefully be part of the concluding phase of the relationship.

There was general support for the notion that the external examiner report be published. If such action were contemplated, it would have to be advised in advance to the external examiner and the group was aware that this could result in less critical reports. This would not be to the benefit of the process and would likely lead to the real transaction taking place in verbal, and thus unrecorded, format. As above, this is neither transparent nor desirable.