

Policy for External Examination of Taught Programmes

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V1.0	New Policy to replace previous version. Approved by Academic Board subject to review by AQSC.	Becky Taylor – Consultant Caro Khamkhami – Assistant Registrar, QA&E	23 November 2018

This Policy summarises the University's expectations for the conduct of external examining of taught programmes. This Policy can be found on Gateway and on the RAU website.

The University follows its own internal quality assurance processes with respect to the processing and consideration of marks. Within this significant importance is placed on external scrutiny and review and external examining forms an important part of this process.

This Policy has been developed with reference to Chapter B7: External Examining of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Quality Code and should be read in conjunction with the University Academic Regulations for Taught Programmes.

External Examiners act as independent and impartial advisors who provide informed comment on both academic standards set, including those associated with Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies where relevant, and student achievement in response to those standards. Their duties will therefore be set accordingly.

The purpose of the external examiner system is to help to ensure that:

- the University is maintaining the threshold academics standards set for its awards according to the framework for higher education qualifications and applicable subject benchmark statements;
- standards of student performance are properly judged against the University academic standards for its awards;
- the assessment process is rigorous, fairly operated, in line with University Policies and Regulations and measures student achievement against the intended learning outcomes of both their programme of study and individual modules;
- the marking, grading, and classification of student performance process is fairly operated and that decisions are made in accordance with University regulations;
- the University is able to compare the standard of awards to those in other higher education institutions;
- good practice and innovation relating to teaching, learning and assessment is shared.

1. Appointment

The responsibility for External Examiner appointments

1.1 Academic Quality and Standards Committee recommends External Examiners for appointment by Academic Board.

1.2 It is normally the responsibility of Heads of School to monitor all nominees to ensure adherence to the appointment procedures for External Examiners. Heads of School,

under the supervision of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor, will use their academic judgement in undertaking this responsibility.

The requirement for external examiners

1.3 External Examiners provide impartial and independent advice on academic standards and on student achievement. At least one External Examiner must be appointed for each programme leading to an award of the University. In exceptional circumstances an External Examiner may be appointed to two programmes.

Criteria for the appointment of an External Examiner

1.4 An External Examiner should meet the following criteria;

- 1.4.1 Have knowledge and understanding of UK sector agreed reference points for academic standards and assurance and enhancement of quality;
- 1.4.2 Possess relevant academic qualifications or, where appropriate, professional qualifications and/or extensive practitioner experience;
- 1.4.3 Have proven breadth of knowledge and standing within the subject to demonstrate credibility to peers;
- 1.4.4 Competency and experience in the areas covered by the programme (or parts thereof) and of designing and operating a variety of assessment methods appropriate to the subject;
- 1.4.5 Competency and knowledge of the standards expected of students to achieve the award and of the enhancement of the student learning experience;
- 1.4.6 An awareness of current developments in curricula design and delivery;
- 1.4.7 Be fluent in English, and for programmes that are delivered and assessed in languages other than English, fluency in the relevant language(s); and
- 1.4.8 Have the right to legally work within the United Kingdom;
- 1.4.9 Where appropriate, any additional criteria set by Professional, Statutory and regulatory bodies.

1.5 Individuals who have retired may be appointed but they should provide sufficient evidence of continuing involvement in the academic area in question, and with current developments in higher education learning, teaching and assessment.

1.6 The School must check, prior to nominating the proposed External Examiner to AQSC, that the individual does not hold more than one further External Examiner appointment, except in exceptional circumstances when one further appointment would be allowed.

Avoiding reciprocal and long-standing arrangements

- 1.7 It is important for Schools to ensure that they do **not** put in place reciprocal arrangements between cognate programmes with another institution. Schools must refer to the list (see 1.8 below) detailing where their own staff act as External Examiners, to avoid this occurring.
- 1.8 Academic Registry is responsible for ensuring an accurate record is kept of the institutions where School members of staff are currently acting as External Examiners. This list should be available upon request.
- 1.9 Where there is more than one External Examiner covering a programme(s), the incoming External Examiner should not be from the same department in the same institution as any other External Examiner covering the programme(s).
- 1.10 The incoming External Examiner should not be from the same department in the same institution as the outgoing External Examiner.

Conflicts of interest

- 1.11 The nominated External Examiner and members of the University involved in the nomination should declare, using the Nomination Form, any conflicts of interests that should be given due consideration before the nominated External Examiner can be formally appointed; these include:
- 1.11.1 Significant involvement in recent or current, substantive, collaborative research or knowledge exchange activities with a member of staff closely involved in the delivery, management or assessment of the programme(s) or modules in question.
 - 1.11.2 Having a relative or partner as a student or member of staff at the University.
 - 1.11.3 Personal association with sponsorship of students in the School.
 - 1.11.4 Involvement in assessing colleagues who are recruited as students to the programme.
 - 1.11.5 Holding a position which may have significant influence on the future of students on the programme.
 - 1.11.6 Employment by one of the University's collaborative partners.
 - 1.11.7 Holding the position of Governor at the University.
 - 1.11.8 Being a current member of staff at the University.
- 1.12 The incoming External Examiner should not have been an External Examiner at the Royal Agricultural University for at least five years.
- 1.13 Former staff and students of the Royal Agricultural University can only be appointed as External Examiners after a lapse of at least five years.

Exceptions and special cases

- 1.14 Where there is a legitimate reason for making an appointment that does not fulfil all of the criteria in section 1.4, the details should be set out in the Nomination Form and approved by AQSC prior to Academic Board. This consideration may be assisted where there are other External Examiners on a programme, so that the proposed appointee's expertise is complemented by that of others. Where a proposed appointee does not fully fit the criteria, appropriate induction and support should be provided.
- 1.15 There may be exceptions when addressing nominations for External Examiners in small and specialist subjects where the pool of potential External Examiners is limited. This should be set out in the Nomination Form and approved by AQSC prior to Academic Board.
- 1.16 AQSC must give close consideration to any proposed exceptions and special cases before giving approval to the nomination. Academic Board maintains an overview at University level of all cases where approval of exceptions and special cases have been given.

Duration

- 1.17 The normal period of appointment of External Examiners for taught programmes is four years. This does not preclude appointing External Examiners for shorter periods of time if that is desirable for both parties.
- 1.18 The appointment may be exceptionally extended for a further one year period to ensure continuity, for example when a programme is coming to an end, with approval from AQSC.
- 1.19 If an existing External Examiner starts to examine another programme during his or her appointment, which must have Academic Board approval, the end date of the contract for both programmes will be after the initial four years.

Ensuring appropriate coverage

- 1.20 The Head of School must ensure that a sufficient number of External Examiners are appointed so that adequate expertise is available to cover all the major areas of the programme(s) being examined including the requirements of Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies.
- 1.21 The Head of School must ensure an appropriate match between the numbers of External Examiners and the quantity of material being examined.

1.22 Where there are multiple External Examiners who moderate different parts of the programme, it may be advisable to appoint a Senior External Examiner whose role it is to assure the quality of the assessment and academic standards across the whole programme.

2. Induction and support

2.1 Academic Registry has a primary responsibility for ensuring that External Examiners receive appropriate induction and support. The External Examiners must be provided with opportunities to familiarise themselves with the University, its assessment procedures, University policy on moderation, as well as the extent and nature of their appointment as External Examiners. External Examiners will receive appropriate information as part of the appointment process.

2.2 Where the External Examiner has not acted in this role before for any institution, Academic Registry will ensure that the External Examiner is provided with the appropriate support to carry out the role. Support might involve assigning a more experienced External Examiner as mentor, or using a team of externals, if practicable. Where it is not practicable to have more than one examiner acting at any one time, Academic Registry may consider supporting the new appointment through training and mentoring by an experienced examiner in a different field.

2.3 Where more than one examiner is appointed to a programme, the School is encouraged to phase new appointments to enable the mentoring of new examiners. Where only one examiner is appointed, or the phasing of new appointments has not been possible, a handover or shadowing of the outgoing examiner is encouraged.

2.4 An External Examiner will normally be an academic from another UK higher education institution; but there are cases where someone from a Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body or from industry is also appropriate. In these cases, the School will need to provide additional appropriate support to enable these examiners to carry out the role. In certain cases it may be necessary for two External Examiners to be appointed, one from academia and one representing a Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body. In these instances a case should be presented to AQSC by the Head of School.

2.5 Schools must provide External Examiners with sufficient evidence to undertake the role effectively. Information must be made available to the External Examiner within a reasonable timeframe in relation to projected workload and turnaround time expected. Academic Registry will ensure that External Examiners are aware of all the relevant processes, including in relation to moderation.

3. Duties of the External Examiner

Quality Assurance role

- 3.1 External Examiners should check that the programme and modules are coherent, that they satisfy the University's credit framework and that the outcomes are aligned with the relevant qualification descriptor set out in the applicable qualification framework, with reference to the subject benchmarks where applicable.
- 3.2 External Examiners should quality assure the decisions in relation to the University's policy and procedures, ensuring that the types of assessment are appropriate for the subject, the students, the respective level of study and the expected outcomes, and suggest appropriate amendments where necessary.
- 3.3 External Examiners should assure themselves that University procedures and regulations have been applied fairly and equitably.
- 3.4 External Examiners should review and approve draft examination papers that contribute to a final award and ensure that the assessment criteria, marking schemes and arrangements for classification are set at an appropriate level.
- 3.5 Where applicable External Examiners should ensure that any additional Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body requirements are reflected in, and satisfied by, the programme.
- 3.6 External Examiners will be provided with sufficient evidence to enable them to discharge their responsibilities.

External Examiner feedback

- 3.7 External Examiners are asked to comment and provide advice on matters of curriculum content, balance and structure, in so far as they affect the programme academic structure.
- 3.8 Academic Registry should ensure that External Examiners are made aware of the outcomes of their comments, advice and recommendations.

Reviewing assessed work

- 3.9 In the review of assessed work Schools should follow the processes as outlined in the University Academic Regulations for Taught Programmes

Detection of improper practice by students

- 3.10 If an External Examiner considers that a candidate has engaged in an improper assessment practice or other academic misconduct, the examiner should, as soon

as possible, report the circumstances to the Chair of the appropriate Board of Examiners¹, who should follow the appropriate rules and regulations pertaining at that time.

Initial reflections at the Board of Examiners

3.11 External Examiners are asked to provide initial reflections at designated Examination Board meetings. The reflections will be made either verbally or in written form (such as an email or short note) if the External Examiner is not at the meeting. This is an opportunity for the External Examiner, acting as a critical friend, to highlight key strengths and weaknesses, including any initial recommendations for action. Comments should cover, as considered necessary by the External Examiner: academic standards, curriculum design and delivery, assessment, and any other relevant area. External Examiner comments will be formally recorded in the minutes of the Examination Board along with the initial response from staff. Any concerns or recommendations will be actively considered by the School before the start of the next academic year.

3.12 For undergraduate programmes, External Examiners should provide initial reflections at the final Examination Board.

External Examiner Reports

3.13 The External Examiner must submit an annual report, providing commentary and recommendations as appropriate on the conduct of the assessment processes, academic standards, assessment, and the curriculum design and delivery. Additionally, the External Examiner is asked to highlight and comment on examples of good practice, innovation and enhancement opportunities provided to students. The report will include and expand on the initial reflections that were presented to the Board of Examiners as well as raising any further points.

3.14 External Examiners should satisfy themselves that the School has given due consideration to any recommendations given in the previous year's Report, with any actions or rationale for the status quo noted. If a University level response is required on policy or regulation AQSC will respond. The response will be formal and will use the agreed process.

3.15 When the External Examiner is submitting a report for the final year of his/her period of appointment it is the opportunity for the examiner to write an overview of their experience at the University. It should include commentary on the University's academic standards in the relevant subject and in particular any significant changes in standards and quality over the appointment period.

¹ Board of Examiners is the collective name for the University's various Examination Boards

- 3.16 The Report should be completed in English on the External Examiners' Report Form.
- 3.17 The completed External Examiner Report must not name or otherwise identify staff or students on the programme or module as the Report will be made available to students via the University's virtual learning environment.

Disclosure of External Examiner Reports

- 3.18 External Examiner Reports will be made available by the University to various internal committees and groups and appropriate statutory and professional bodies. The Report can also be made available to members of the public under the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act. By signing the External Examiner Acceptance Form, the External Examiner gives consent to such disclosure as the University considers appropriate.
- 3.19 The Report (and the Response Form) will also be made available to students via the relevant virtual learning environment. These will normally be uploaded within four weeks of the maximum deadline for the School Responses.
- 3.20 Students are made aware of the identity and current position of External Examiners appointed to their modules and programmes. Students are advised not to contact External Examiners directly, and if an external Examiner receives any direct contact from a student they should refer the matter to Academic Registry.

Raising serious concerns

- 3.21 Should External Examiners encounter particular problems during their term of office which they are unable to resolve with the appropriate academic staff and believe should be drawn to the attention of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor, they may submit a special report to the Deputy Vice-Chancellor's PA at any time.
- 3.22 The University shall provide a timely response to any confidential report received, which will describe the actions taken to address the concerns.

4. Boards of Examiners

See also the [University Academic Regulations for Taught Programmes](#) for information about the conduct of Examination Boards.

- 4.1 External Examiners are required to be notified of, and have the right to attend, the meetings of the Board of Examiners for all programmes which lead to a University award, and to which they have been appointed as External Examiner. The External Examiner should attend at least one meeting of the Board each academic year, as

specified by the School. The External Examiner should receive the minutes for meetings to which they do not attend.

- 4.2 External Examiners should be informed of their role and the extent of their authority in terms of the Board of Examiners. All of those involved in the Board should be clear on the role of the External Examiner.
- 4.3 Academic Registry should ensure they give as much notice as possible to External Examiners of the dates of Examination Boards and other occasions on which they may be present. In the event that an External Examiner cannot attend a specified meeting, Academic Registry should be informed as soon as possible in order to agree an alternative process:
 - 4.3.1 Telephone conference or another means of incorporating the External Examiner's views, and with the External Examiner receiving relevant paperwork;
 - 4.3.2 Where this is not possible, the Academic Registrar will consider appropriate actions.
- 4.4 The External Examiner should endorse the recommendations for award classification by signing the completed student degree classification list. It is the Deputy Vice-Chancellor's responsibility to ensure that the external examiner(s) sign the completed student degree classification list. The template of this document is provided by the Academic Registry.

5. External Examiner Procedures

Appointment procedures

- 5.1 The Academic Board approves the appointment of External Examiners.
- 5.2 The School must complete an External Examiner Nomination Form. This Policy and the Nomination Form provide guidance on the factors to consider when making the nomination.
- 5.3 The School must ensure the Nomination Form is signed. It must be signed by the Head of School (or nominee) and the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (or nominee) and submitted to the AQSC for consideration. Unsigned forms will result in an incomplete nomination.
- 5.4 If deemed appropriate by AQSC, the completed Nomination Form should be recommended for approval at the next Academic Board.

- 5.5 Once approved at Academic Board the Nomination Form must be sent electronically to the Academic Registry, who are responsible for sending out appointment letters and appointment packs to the External Examiner. The School will also be copied in to the appointment letter for information.
- 5.6 The Academic Registry maintains a list of the University's External Examiners, including an archive of nominations and appointments.

Information sent to the External Examiner

- 5.7 When an external examiner is appointed, the Academic Registry will send them:
- 5.7.1 a letter of appointment (including information on fees);
 - 5.7.2 a link to the electronic template of the External Examiner Report form;
 - 5.7.3 the name of the Programme Manager;
 - 5.7.4 a link to the Policy for External Examining of Taught Programmes;
 - 5.7.5 a link to the University Academic Regulations for Taught Programmes;
 - 5.7.6 information about where to find University strategies, policies and procedures and the framework for UK higher education including subject benchmark statements;
 - 5.7.7 instruction on using the University's Virtual Learning Environment.
- 5.8 The relevant School will ensure the following information is made available to the External Examiner on the University Virtual Learning Environment;
- 5.8.1 details of the programme(s) and modules on which the students are being assessed (including content, structure, learning outcomes & assessment methods, for instance through the module handbook);
 - 5.8.2 draft examinations papers and assessments and the proposed marking scheme(s), including, if appropriate, model answers and marking criteria;
 - 5.8.3 any further information relevant to the discipline, e.g. fitness to practice guidelines.
- 5.9 If there is approval for an existing External Examiner to cover another programme during their appointment, or an extension to their tenure on the current programme, the Academic Registry will issue a new appointment letter confirming the extended coverage.

External Examiner Reports

- 5.10 All External Examiners must submit an annual External Examiner Report Form. These Reports provide essential independent feedback and any recommendations are considered carefully by the University. External Examiners who have only been involved for a partial part of the process, such as participation in an Examination Board as a replacement, should also complete a Report or provide appropriate

feedback on their participation by another written means. A suitable fee will be paid for any participation in the External Examiner process.

5.11 Reports must be submitted electronically in Microsoft Word format to quality@rau.ac.uk.

Reporting deadlines

5.12 It is recommended that the External Examiner Report is sent to the Academic Registry within **four weeks** of the final meeting of the Examination Board.

5.13 Programmes that have a non-standard structure, may apply to the Academic Registry for a separate maximum deadline.

5.14 If the School is subject to external scrutiny (for example for professional accreditation) which requires the External Examiner Report to be submitted earlier than the normal deadline, the School must ensure that the External Examiner is made aware of this earlier deadline.

Receipt and circulation of Reports

5.15 The Academic Registry logs receipt of the Reports and maintains a full record of reports received. External Examiners receive an email acknowledgement on receipt of their Report.

5.16 The Academic Registry will be responsible for forwarding Reports to:

5.16.1 Head(s) of School

5.16.2 Programme Managers

5.16.3 The AQSC.

5.17 It is the responsibility of the School to ensure that the External Examiner Report is circulated to all relevant staff including any Module Leaders.

5.18 The Academic Registry manages the upload of External Examiner Reports to the University's Virtual Learning Environment. Any part of a report where an individual has been identified, or in very exceptional cases where text has been included that could bring the University into disrepute, will be redacted from this version. The Response from the School, and where applicable from AQSC, will also be uploaded by the Academic Registry to demonstrate that any relevant action has been taken. Any text where an individual is identifiable in the Response will be redacted.

Overdue External Examiner Reports

5.19 The Academic Registry must receive the External Examiner Report by the relevant

maximum deadline.

5.20 If the Report is not received by the deadline, the Academic Registry will write to the External Examiner requesting receipt of the Report. It is a requirement for the External Examiner to return the Report. In addition, the fees of the External Examiner should not be paid until the requirement to submit a satisfactorily completed Report has been met.

5.21 The School must continue to remind the External Examiner regularly until the Report has been received. The Academic Registry will work with the School to assist in this process.

5.22 If the Report is not returned in a timely manner, the External Examiner's appointment will be automatically terminated five weeks after the maximum deadline has passed unless there is a valid reason for the delay. The Academic Registry will notify the External Examiner of the termination of the appointment. The Head of School, Chair of AQSC and Deputy Vice-Chancellor will be informed.

Receipt and circulation of Response Forms

5.23 When the External Examiner Report is forwarded to the School, a copy of the Form for the Response to an External Examiner's Report will be included.

5.24 Using the Response Form, the School must provide a short overall response to the External Examiner, followed by detailed individual responses to all recommendations and to any previous recommendations that the External Examiner considers to be unresolved. An update on the consideration given to the initial reflections from the External Examiner presented at the Examination Board must be included in the response. The formal response to the External Examiner is an important part of the feedback process, and must be completed in a timely manner.

5.25 The Response Form must be sent to quality@rau.ac.uk. The External Examiners Report and the Response Form will be considered by AQSC and if a University response is required to any of the comments made by the External Examiner AQSC will include this on the Response Form. Academic Registry will then send the Response to the External Examiner and will forward a copy to the Head of School and the Programme Manager. Academic Registry will also make the Response Form (and the External Examiner Report) available to students via the University's Virtual Learning Environment.

5.26 The Response Form is to be sent to Academic Registry by the School within four weeks of receipt of the External Examiners Report.

5.27 Postgraduate taught programmes that have a non-standard structure and have agreed a separate deadline for reports with the Academic Registry will also have a separate maximum deadline for the response.

5.28 Reports that are received late may receive a delayed response.

5.29 Once the Response Form has been completed and returned to the External Examiner the School should check with the External Examiner that they are satisfied with that response. The School should make an initial response to the External Examiner on the Response Form and then provide an update, via the Annual Programme Managers Report at a later date on any actions undertaken.

Overdue Response Forms

5.30 If the Academic Registry does not receive the Response Form within four weeks of sending the External Examiners Report to the School, the Head of School will be contacted with a request for the Form to be submitted within one week. If a response is still not made to the External Examiner, the matter will be further escalated to the Deputy Vice-Chancellor.

5.31 The External Examiner Report and the Response Form will be uploaded to the relevant Virtual Learning Environment at the same time so that a complete set of information is shared with students. This is normally uploaded four weeks after receipt of the Response.

5.32 Before uploading the Report and Form, the Academic Registry will verify that the points raised by External Examiners are addressed appropriately in the response. Any possible discrepancies will be brought to the attention of the Head of School in the first instance. If the possible discrepancies are not clarified / addressed and notified to the Academic Registry within one week, the matter will be referred to the Deputy Vice-Chancellor. If a University level recommendation has been referred to the AQSC, AQSC will coordinate a response.

Annual summary report

5.33 The Academic Registry will prepare an annual summary report highlighting themes arising from the University's External Examiner Reports. This summary report will be reviewed by the AQSC to highlight good practice examples and to take forward any actions at University level. The annual summary report is regarded as confidential but will be made available to various internal committees and groups, and to appropriate statutory and professional bodies.

6. Data protection and commercial confidentiality

- 6.1 Schools and External Examiners should be fully aware of information security when exchanging draft exam papers (see 3.4).
- 6.2 All personal data supplied by the External Examiner for the purpose of their appointment and subsequently their engagement as an External Examiner will be held securely and for no longer than necessary.
- 6.3 The University will use this data for communication about and payment of fees and expenses and for any other necessary communications. This data may be shared, if necessary, with Schools of the University. The University will not disclose External Examiners' contact details or any other personal details to third parties (i.e. outside the University) without the consent of External Examiners.
- 6.4 External Examiners should ensure that Reports do not name or otherwise identify individual students or members of staff on the programme or module.
- 6.5 It is the responsibility of the Head of School to ensure that any potential intellectual property issues that may require commercial confidentiality agreements (i.e. industrial placements) be resolved prior to the appointment being made.

7. Fees and Expenses

- 7.1 Payment of External Examiners' fees and expenses is the responsibility of the Academic Registry. There are University-level guidelines on setting fee levels. The level of fee paid to an External Examiner should be taken into account if a School is considering whether to ask them to take on additional tasks.
- 7.2 External Examiners will be provided with a fee/expense claim form once the report is submitted, which should be completed and returned to the Academic Registry. Any queries related to fees or expenses will be addressed by the Academic Registry.

8. Discontinuation of appointment

- 8.1 The appointment of an External Examiner may be discontinued by the University or the individual examiner before the completion of their period of appointment.
- 8.2 If an External Examiner wishes to resign from their appointment, this would normally be after the External Examiner Report has been satisfactorily completed at the end of the annual cycle, where there is a natural break in activity. In these cases, the External Examiner must inform the Head of School in writing before the end of the academic year (31 July).

- 8.3 If the External Examiner wishes to resign during the academic year they must do so in writing to the Head of School, giving a three month notice period.
- 8.4 Where an External Examiner resigns prior to the expiry of the appointed term the appropriate School is responsible for obtaining written confirmation of the resignation, advising the Academic Registry and nominating a replacement.
- 8.5 In the event of unsatisfactory performance, the University reserves the right to terminate the appointment at any time. Unsatisfactory performance could cover a range of issues, including the failure to attend appropriate examination boards without making alternative arrangements and the failure to submit completed reports. A termination of the appointment may also be necessary where a conflict of interest arises during the term of office.
- 8.6 The decision to discontinue shall be based on a statement (usually from the Head of School) detailing the proposed grounds for discontinuation and submitted to the Academic Registry. The final decision to discontinue will be made by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor. In cases of automatic termination due to the non-return of Reports, the statement and the final decision by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor are not required. The Academic Registry will inform the External Examiner in writing of the decision and it will be reported to the School, to AQSC and to the Deputy Vice-Chancellor.