English
Subject Centre

External Examining in English
Philip Martin

Report Series

A Report to the Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN)
English Subject Centre

External Examining in English

Professor Philip Martin

English Subject Centre, Royal Holloway, University of London

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Foreword

The English Subject Centre Report Series aims to provide contextual information about the condition of the subject, its relation to national HE policies, and the practical and academic concerns shared by English Departments at the present time. Thereby, the series intends to assist departments in their planning, and in their understanding of their own positions.

This seventh report in the series is on the subject of External Examining in English, and is, in part, a response to the current discussions and initiatives that are circulating nationally. The new audit system, and the concerns about the publication of information on quality and standards led to the Higher Education Funding Council for England's report of March 2002, *Information on Quality and Standards in Higher Education*, which has many implications for the future role of the External Examiner.[1] Those implications now seem to be hardening in the recent government White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education* (January 2003, Cm 5735). The English Subject Centre Report, while continuously mindful of these initiatives, attempts to address the wider and continuing issues attached to External Examining, and also takes the opportunity to indicate how the subject may be best served in the future. The author of the report is the Subject Centre Director, and its content derives from an intensive day-long consultation with a group of External Examiners in English.

It is, of course, questionable how far the range of issues encountered here are subject-specific, and it may well be the case that substantial parts of this report have a wider relevance, at least across some of the Arts and Humanities disciplines. Yet we began this work from a strong sense of the validity of regarding the examining of English as a highly specific task, partly because of the large amounts of student writing involved, but also because of the nature of that writing, and the need to understand its assessment within the context of disciplinary procedure. Audit systems, both internal and external, have yet to demonstrate a systemic flexibility that is fully accommodating of disciplinary difference; indeed, it might be argued that it is not the purpose of such generic procedures to make this accommodation, and the corollary of such an argument is to give that responsibility to the subjects themselves. This report may be the start of such a process.

One of the recommendations in this report is for a voluntary annual forum for External Examiners in English. The recommendation is made tentatively, with the awareness that the forum would need to be well attended to be of significance, and would need to separate itself from any notion of a formal college of examiners. Nevertheless, the idea received some strong support at the consultation held by the Subject Centre, and the consultation itself offered a clear indication of just how rich in ideas such a gathering could be. The Subject Centre will consult further, and would like to hear from English Departments about this and the other recommendations contained here.

I am most grateful to those colleagues who attended the consultation, and provided feedback on the draft version of this report (see Appendix A).

Copies of the report will be distributed to Departments, and an electronic version can be downloaded from the English Subject Centre website at **www.english.ltsn.ac.uk**

Professor Philip Martin
Director, English Subject Centre
Royal Holloway, University of London
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[1] For a summary of these developments, see Appendix B2

1. Introduction and background

This document is produced for the following purposes:

- It responds to the current national reviewing of the role of the External Examiner from a discipline-specific viewpoint.[2] The discussions informing this document were conducted, in part, to discover the extent to which discipline-specific interests are recognised in the process of External Examining

- It provides a summary of current concerns shared by External Examiners in English in their recent and continuing work, and in anticipation of changes mooted in the current review and beyond

- It provides, therefore, a discussion document, with recommendations, that English Departments and others might choose to draw on in Departmental, Faculty and Institutional reviews of the External Examiner's role

The report is a summary of a day's intensive discussion held with a group of English colleagues (see Appendix A) with extensive experience in External Examining, and a continuing interest in the process. The group had collectively held numerous External Examining roles in a wide spectrum of Higher Education institutions, and across the full range of awards. The English Subject Centre advertised this consultation as an open session, and also made invitations. The group was supplied with background documentation (see Appendix B) and records of the discussions were made, from which the author has compiled this report. As with any summary of open discussion, not all participants will be in full or equal agreement with the commentary and recommendations here. The group was therefore asked to approve the report as a broad and representative summary of the discussion and recommendations, and has done so.

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[2] The current national review of the role of the External Examiner has been set in play by the new audit arrangements. See *Information on Quality and Standards in Higher Education*, HEFCE 02/15. This report is in part a response to the HEFCE report, but also has a wider application in the context of the continuing discussions, both institutional and national, about the role of the External Examiner.

2. The nature of assessment in English

The nature of the range of tasks required of an External Examiner is primarily determined by the nature of the assessments produced by the students. In order to place the report on a foundation of practice therefore, it begins with a concise description of English assessment (including Literature, Language and Creative Writing).[3] The following elements are considered to be specific, although not unique, to English.

2.1 Volume of assessment

English is a subject with high numbers of students producing a large amount of written work for the purposes of assessment. Much of this written work is produced in the form of essays (although other diversified forms of assessment are also used) and a common assessment criterion, essential to the subject, is the standard of the writing produced. Student work therefore requires intensive and careful scrutiny by internals and externals alike, since the grading of this work depends upon judgements of writing quality (including accuracy of expression, literacy, persuasive arguments, use of texts and references, and content dependent on the quality of the student's reading). Students taking the whole of their programme in English commonly produce between 30,000–50,000 words each per annum to be assessed,[4] and it is this mass of material, allied to an understanding of the processes of its internal marking, that needs to be acknowledged in external examining, which, in turn, has to be highly attuned to the scale of such demands if it is to be effective.

2.2 Diversity of assessment

The diversity of English programmes and their assessment is also an essential quality to be acknowledged here. The most widely used and trusted of assessment devices in Literature programmes is the discursive essay (in coursework assignments and in examinations) although in recent years there has been considerable diversification alongside this predominant form of assessment. It is also the case that those students studying (for example) Anglo-Saxon or Middle English may be required to undertake translations and develop very specific kinds of linguistic expertise. In Language programmes, the knowledge base of the student may be very rigorously defined and assessed in a variety of ways; equally, it is not unusual for there to be a requirement for project work of a social science kind, in which interviews or other forms of data-gathering inform a summary report. In Creative Writing students may be required to submit extensive portfolios of work including pieces of original writing such as poems, autobiographical writings, scripts, or sections of novels. It is not the purpose of this document to list comprehensively the kinds of knowledge and scholarship assessed in English, but to acknowledge the range and diversity of assessments, which, in the main, are not brief, nor commonly in the mode of tests, nor readily amenable to easily measurable outcomes.

2.3 Range of examining expertise

The wide range of English programmes therefore produces a diverse diet of assessment requiring a close acquaintance with specific sets of criteria. A prime example here is the spread of Creative Writing as a programme in its own right, as one supplementary to English, and also as a form of pedagogic practice within English; in all instances the criteria governing the assessments are likely to be distinct from those more commonly used in Language or Literature programmes. Some English Departments with innovatory assessment practices use peer and group assessments, oral assessments, and reading logs. In each and every case these assessment modes are tightly integrated with the disciplinary requirements, and with the specific kinds of subject knowledge being assessed. It is not sufficient, therefore, to regard a familiarity with different assessment modes in isolation, or at a generic level, as sufficient qualification or 'training' for an External Examiner: she or he needs to be precisely attuned to the specific needs of the component parts which make up the discipline as a whole. The current system of External Examining, wherein Departments make approaches to Examiners who meet the institutional threshold requirement, is predicated on Departments being trusted to find examiners with the right kinds of expertise to adjudge their work, a tuning of a kind that needs to be preserved.

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[3] The presence of Creative Writing within and alongside work in English is acknowledged rather than developed her, since the nature of assessment in Creative Writing is of sufficient magnitude and complexity to require a separate discussion and report.

[4] Calculated as an average of eight modules per year, each producing 5,000 words. It might be deduced from this that English tutors mark around one million words of undergraduate work every year (assuming a student-staff ratio of 25:1). To put this in perspective, *The Great Gatsby* is around 60,000 words. Calculating the time spent on internal marking is difficult. It might be reasonable to assume around 30 minutes per piece of work or examination script, yielding 200 hours of marking per annum, to which needs to be added administrative processing and of course, the external examination procedure.

3. Marking, grading and classification

3.1 Systems

Over the last two decades most institutions, and English Departments with them, have moved from a literal grading system to a numerical one. These conventions are now entrenched, and almost all Departments work with the same categories of banding which translate numerical marks into degree classifications, although there are some variations at the pass and third class level, where Departments differ in their interpretation of marks in the 35-45% range. Modular systems, with their accompanying convention of credit accumulation, have also steadily eroded the notion of the degree classification as a holistic evaluation in which strengths and weaknesses are put in the balance. Credit accumulation systems work largely (but not exclusively) towards a grade point average as the key criterion, and the 'accumulation' of the degree is primarily mathematical, and therefore, more predictable. The arguments about the relative merits of these systems often revolve around the case to be made for and against clearer assessment criteria, and the accusation or denial of a past practice defined by impressionistic marking. There is no need to repeat these arguments here, as they are well-known and largely historic. The consequence of this shift however, and the further changes it has engendered, have implications for the assessment and examination process; there is a sense in which the transformations in the system have not been accompanied by a clear and articulated rationale for the changing role of the External Examiner. Such changes, by and large, have been of an ad hoc nature.

3.2 Profiling

Since credit accumulation operates through a systematic division of assessments into equal, or consistently weighted, elements, there is a subsequent reduction in the profiling of students' work. Indeed, in many institutions, profiling does not operate at all, and the total assessment of the student achievement may be witnessed only by the system itself, and not by any individual, since complete runs of assessments are never read (by internals or externals) and classification processes are automated or nearly so. In such cases, the primary role of the External Examiner – to ensure that the standards achieved by the students are equivalent to those achieved elsewhere – can only therefore be accomplished at the level of the module, and in

consequence, is subject to the variation of module requirements (learning outcomes, specific criteria, etc.). This atomisation means that the External's guarantee of equivalence in standards is somewhat perilously poised in some cases, and it can restrict the role to the ratification of standards within highly localised norms. However, it is important to note that such atomisation is not an inevitable consequence of credit accumulation or a move away from profiling. There are other ways in which the summative experience of the students can be reviewed by internals and externals alike, and many institutions have seen fit to address this.

3.3 Range of marks and banding

External Examiners in English also testify to a recent and increasing trend coming from institutions eager to use the whole range of marks (0-100%), and this is a controversial issue. The gravitation towards the mean that is a feature of mathematical systems places an increased stress on discovering ways of moving students beyond the borderlines, and hence this liberality has some attractions. Conversely, using the whole range of marks exposes the burden of bogus precision in numerical systems (what is the difference between 94% and 95%, or 11% and 12%?), and also induces inflated penalties or rewards for students in the first class or failure category which extend to three or fourfold the capacity of the other classifications. In English, the disconcerting effects are amplified because of the nature of the assessed work itself, which being discursive in nature, offers students many ways of excelling, or indeed, of failing.

As a subject, English is more amenable to banding than grading, and those universities implementing grading policies which permit only a limited number of numerical scores to be used (e.g. 52%, 56%, 58% in the 2.2 category) might seem to point the way forward. However, this matter is compounded by the perceived stress now being placed on the 2.1 category. Institutions recruiting selectively are finding that the 2.1 category is increasingly accommodating the majority of their graduating students, and some colleagues are reporting a need to produce finer discriminations within this category, particularly where 2.1 students have ambitions to go on to further study.[5] The move towards grade point average results accompanied by full transcripts of results may indeed be one means of

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[5] See Martin Coyle, 'Using the full range' in *English Subject Centre Newsletter*, 4 (September, 2002), pp.11-12.

addressing the compression within the 2.1 category reported by some English Departments, and such a record has the potential to represent more fully the range of accomplishments, strengths and weaknesses, of a given candidate. The transcript and grade point average (GPA) does not, however, have the capacity to make a fully summative statement about student ability in the way that classification does: it can only denote the sum of parts, and, as noted above, those parts are frequently locally determined by way of module descriptors, or more generally, through level descriptors or broad programme specifications. Classification systems also commonly incorporate weightings founded on an educational principle of rewarding progression, and this may be more difficult to sustain in averages based on transcripts.

3.4 Ratification and changing of marks

Moving to the Transcript/GPA system entirely will make more evident the changes that have, in effect, already taken place in the External Examiner's role, raising questions about the authority of the External Examiner, her or his license to change marks, and the extent to which the External's role in ratifying standards is relative or otherwise. External Examiners in English report a trend against the changing of marks, on the grounds that changing marks via sampling may reward or penalise unfairly those candidates in the sample. Clearly such practice is not defensible, and while the logic of this reform is fully recognised, its effects are problematic. Externals can only report over-rewarding or undue harshness with a view to securing subsequent changes of a post hoc nature; alternatively they may insist that the whole cohort of marks are shifted up or down against the pressure of tight time-scales and the considerable momentum of computer systems generating classifications. The weight of this deterrence may be such as to diminish the External's role in the important task of verifying standards and comparability. Although some Externals report a diminishing requirement for them to resolve disputed internal marks or borderline cases, this function can still be an important part of the External's duties, and a means by which standards and comparability are maintained.

4. English and the institutional context

Within English there is a continuous and developing debate about appropriate modes of assessment, and this debate is now commonly compounded by the discussions inaugurated at institutional level in the development of Teaching, Learning and Assessment Strategies. In some instances, these discussions are resolved by the production of strategies and policies with harmonious relations at institutional, faculty and department levels. In others, it may prove difficult to harmonise the educational and academic needs of the students with the regulatory concerns of the institution. Other institutional policies, regulations and schedules are affecting the examining of English programmes in specific ways. These are itemised under sub-headings below.

4.1 Assessment regulations, standard loadings and plagiarism

Some institutions are now requiring that a certain proportion of assessment should be undertaken in examination conditions or their equivalent, in order to facilitate an even standard in the student experience, and to provide a threshold guarantee that the work is the student's own. This may militate against the production of coursework, seen as valuable by many Departments, particularly those with high numbers of mature candidates, who, it is reported, achieve less highly in examinations. Others are making recommendations to limit the total assessment loading, and while this may be welcomed in the appropriate context, it is resisted in others where the judgement prevails that students need more, not less, writing practice to refine their skills. These needs vary of course, and the wide range of student abilities found in English cannot be simply summarised in a 'standard' package.

The common assessment rubric requiring students not to repeat material – generally approved by many English Departments – can sometimes find itself operating awkwardly in the context of the subject, wherein synoptic thinking and synthesis are often recognised as strengths. The ability to draw on a range of reading experience for different purposes may not be encouraged by such a rubric. On the other hand, it is also the case that common marking procedures in Departments often mean that the External is the first person to sample work horizontally across the student profile; thus the External is frequently the only real guardian against unmitigated repetitions, and even then, only on the basis of seeing samples.

English is a subject producing a mass of critical and secondary sources world-wide, and the ready availability of such sources (in hard and virtual formats) makes vigilance for plagiarism essential. However, it is important to recognise that while plagiarism from the internet has a new currency in Higher Education (HE), such plagiarism is relatively easy to detect, while sources for other forms of plagiarism are more elusive.[6] There is considerable variation of practice on the penalties applied for plagiarism.

4.2 Teaching, Learning and Assessment Strategies

English may also find itself inhibited by the systemisation of assessment in some Teaching, Learning and Assessment strategies operating at faculty or institutional levels. At their worst, such strategies may encourage a broad brush approach that can constrain student learning, particularly in schemes where the assessment of all submitted work is required, and formative work and experimentation are thereby discouraged. Such requirements as anonymous marking may directly militate against tutorial work designed to be sensitive to continuous, formative needs; oral assessments may also be discouraged in such systems. While it is important not to exaggerate the extent of potential conflict between the educational aims of academic programmes and the institutional aims for ensuring consistency and quality (in many instances they are not at variance), there is a clear need to ensure that some reasonable balance and accommodation is made between the two.

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[6] See **http://www.english.ltsn.ac.uk/resources/topic/plagiarism/index.htm**

4.3 Schedules

Some colleagues report increasing compression of the time to review work. While External Examining has always been subject to such pressures, they have been increased through semesterisation, and conceivably, by the additional time required to load and run large centralised computer systems. Alongside this, and as a consequence of the modular schemes that now prevail, work at the Examination Board is in some instances restricted by process to approval of marks, leaving less time for discussion of academic qualities. If this formal procedure is to prevail, then it is important that some further thought is given to formalised methods for the views and recommendations of External Examiners to be considered within the examining process.

4.4 Learning outcomes

In a subject like English, where outcomes cannot be defined in the vocabulary appropriate to accumulative knowledge, the stated outcomes can be unwittingly inflated, or alternatively, somewhat bland. Externals can therefore find themselves being asked to vouch for over-ambitious outcomes, whose purpose might be better rendered as general aims. In addition to this, the formal documentation of programmes frequently requires that all nominated outcomes be assessed.

This is a fundamental difficulty for English, where the educational aims are often broader and more accommodating of individual response than such an exacting and standardising approach allows. While the disciplinary framework requires students to work with proper regard for methodological awareness, and the established bodies of knowledge, the responses and ideas themselves may rightly be less specific or outside of the stated paradigms. Like many other disciplines, and possibly more so, English is concerned with the nurturing of original thinking, intellectual problematising, and the acknowledgement of a whole range of differences: it is therefore legitimately unresponsive to systems of accountability which are aggressively summative, or reductive, or governed by notions of standardisation. On two counts therefore, it is often difficult for Externals to underwrite or guarantee learning outcomes and related specifications. First, they may be over ambitious; second, they may not be capable of embracing the various educational benefits and developments that a good education in English will provide. While it is inconvenient for the purposes of documentation and monitoring, the English student may frequently discover educationally beneficial ways of dealing with primary materials (usually texts) that have not been predicted.

5. External examining and professionalisation

The current system of External Examining is under review partly because of the multiple changes in Higher Education in recent years, which have placed the system under some strain. These include the greatly increased numbers of students, the increased regulation and standardisation of programme documentation with which Externals may be directly or indirectly involved, and the move towards fully computerised systems for the recording of marks and calculation of classifications. The increasing student numbers not only enlarge the volume of the task, but in many cases also place further pressure on the External Examiner: some departments cope with larger numbers by abandoning universal double-marking in favour of sampling, and thus Externals can find themselves effectively acting as second markers. Given such factors as these, there is a need for a review that takes into account the demands on Externals, the needs of institutions, and the entitlements of students. In the context of the increased legislation governing access and disability, and the likely requirement that the reports of External Examiners, or some part thereof, will be published, there is also a need for External Examiners to be better supported by processes of induction, training, and the provision of information. There are a number of concerns, however, about the nature of this training, and the need to conserve the academic qualities of the External Examiner within it.

5.1 Academic qualities

An enhancement of the External Examiner's role will inevitably have resource implications. Time to train or accredit External Examiners is likely to be taken from the range of other academic duties, and there may be a liability that the rounded academic would be replaced by the quality specialist. English as a subject area has a long-standing and generally well-regarded tradition of appointing Examiners recognised as fully rounded academics with an established profile in most aspects of academic life. This means, necessarily, that they allocate their time across the range of teaching, research, and administrative duties, and they are able to bring the benefit of this broad experience to the task. The 'professionalisation' of the role might put such broad experience at risk, or alternatively, deny its relevance in favour of more specialised training. External examining is not merely a matter of monitoring: it requires intellectual judgement, a broad understanding of, coupled with a specialism in, particular curriculum areas, experience of organisational and administrative matters, an understanding of student support systems, curriculum design and structure, wide experience of assessments and assessment design, a sensitivity to institutional and faculty contexts, and so on. Such an understanding cannot be replaced by a training programme, and it is important that the subject expertise underwriting the external examining process is not diminished, or supplanted by bureaucratic regulation. There is suspicion that the institution of more training days, and induction procedures will present a gloss of increased expertise, but in fact, may produce only a superficial list of 'competences', and will also be an expensive and counterproductive use of time.

5.2 External examining and audit

Similarly, the mooted changes suggest that the work of Externals is going to be articulated with the audit system, a connection that will need to be carefully controlled to prevent the External's role from transforming into that of quality checker.[7] Indeed, current guidelines are not specific on the inter-relations between External Examining and Academic Audit, and this is an area that will need to be carefully addressed. An enhancement model, in which an External would be expected to work in a collaborative way with colleagues on such issues as assessment changes and curriculum design is preferable. Such a model would also diminish the tendency in current plans to render the External an 'expert', a different animal whose familiarity with a rule-book might de-professionalise internal colleagues in some way (many of whom may well be Externals themselves), and this tendency needs to be countered by other measures or procedures.

5.3 Induction and training

At the same time, there are a number of factors affecting the role of the External Examiner that require externals to be well-informed and up to date, including, for example, regulations, legislation on disability and related matters, QAA guidelines, and the benchmarking statements, developments in validation and review processes, UK and European credit transfer systems, etc. These factors will require Externals to be well-informed, and such information should be provided via a training, or induction, function of some kind.

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[7] The QAA guide on external examining (Code of Practice, Section 4, January 2000) is at pains to point out the disaggregation of the two functions, and includes an Appendix (3, p.19) to mark out the differences. However, the Code notes that academic reviewers will see samples of student work, and are also concerned with 'the match between the intended learning outcomes and the actual achievement of students' (p.19). In Appendix 1 (summarising the precepts for External Examiners) the Code notes that 'institutions should require external examiners to endorse the outcomes of the assessment(s) they have been appointed to scrutinise' (p.15), and indeed, pro formae issued to External Examiners commonly ask them to ratify whether the assessments are appropriate for the stated learning outcomes.

6. Feedback, reporting and public information

There are two main aspects to the reporting on assessed work: indirect feedback to the students through the Department or its equivalent, and feedback to the institution. The recommendation that External Examiners' reports should be published will, to some extent, break down this divide.

6.1 Feedback to students

Conventionally, the internal assessment of student work in English has been accompanied by feedback to the student that can take many forms. Indeed, most academics in English would argue that this is essential to the subject: English is concerned with the continuous revision of fields of knowledge, and dialogue is therefore fundamental to its practice. Feedback may take the form of essay tutorials (in which the dialogue is oral) and/or written commentary on the work itself (marginal and summary), thus reinforcing the sense that the student's navigation through the degree programme is guided by formative stages marked out by assessments, in a developmental way. Summative assessments (for example, examinations and dissertations) have not traditionally been accompanied by feedback, although recently, this practice has changed in a number of institutions, and colleagues in English report, overall, an increase in the amount of feedback being supplied to students. Some Departments, for example, use a pro forma as a means of providing feedback information for students on their examination performance, and some Departments now also provide feedback information on final year dissertation performance, whereas previously, this may have been regarded as an examination element for which feedback was not provided. Practice on this has varied.

Data Protection legislation gives an entitlement for all students to review commentary recorded on their scripts, and therefore, the nature of the communications between examiners will also change. In a sense, all commentary will be feedback of a kind, and will need to be constructed therefore, in a way that allows it to be directly relayed to the student.

External Examiners in English are not usually employed as first markers (although some Masters programmes use Externals in this way) and are therefore not normally involved in the tutor-student dialogue that feedback supports. They are, however, commonly asked to comment on the evidence of the quality of feedback supplied to students, and this practice is part of the changing role of External Examiners, and their increased involvement in the quality of the student experience.

6.2 Feedback to the institution: the publication of External Examiners' Reports

The revised system proposed for External Examiners will involve them in a new kind of feedback: whereas previously their reports have been used solely as means of internal quality ratification and improvement, the publication of such reports, in whole or in part, means that Externals will be producing a discourse partaking in the broad arena of student feedback. Continuing or prospective students will have access to these reports, and may consult them for a range of purposes.

It is clear that the assessment of students, and the changes to the different but connected forms of feedback that accompany this assessment (feedback from tutors to students, from Externals to tutors and Departments, from Externals to students in the newly-proposed published reports) are all largely impelled by the proper principles of accountability, fairness and open information, rather than any particular educational principle. The effects of the publication of Externals' reports however, will be complex and difficult to manage, since institutions will be concerned to protect their reputations by governing the kinds of commentary produced in published reports, and External Examiners, working in the grim shadow of the culture of litigation, will be concerned to protect themselves. Given these limitations, there are questions to be asked therefore, about just how useful this newly-proposed system will be, and there are dangers too, in the possible constraints that will be placed on the dialogue between External Examiners, Department tutors, and students.

The publication of information about degree courses is clearly a desirable objective, in so far as it provides students with a fuller context in which to make their choice. The publication of External Examiners' reports, or versions thereof, will nevertheless split the role and the function, causing External Examiners to address different audiences in their different reporting modes. The possibility that institutions will use External Examiners' reports as a marketing ploy, overtly, or by more subtle means, will need to be guarded against, since the

External's role will be deeply compromised by such practice. If Externals are to play a role in quality enhancement, they need to be able to speak freely to Departments, and to produce their reports in the spirit of a critical friend. Further complications attend the process of publication where departments have more than one External Examiner, and this is commonly the case in English Departments.

For the most part, these concerns are not specific to English. They may have resounding impact in the subject however because of the status of dialogue itself within the English degree, and within the scholarly culture which sustains it. If it no longer becomes possible, or easy, for an External to question the inclinations of the work towards a particular school of thought or range of texts, and – indeed – receive a perfectly legitimate reply, then the subject will be the poorer for it. The issue is this: English has always been a subject which has questioned its own practice, and vigorously pursued such debates. Its External Examining should not be constrained in a manner detrimental to such discussion; there is a need to resist a possible reduction to procedural, rather than academic, monitoring.

7. Variations in current practice

There is undoubtedly a range of quite different assessment practices embedded in University regulations that produce large variations in the task of the External Examiner. To some, it is questionable whether this variety is a good thing; to others, it denotes a perfectly acceptable range of practice that is another feature of diverse programmes and heterogeneous student bodies.

7.1 Firsts and fails

In some institutions External Examiners are required to see all first class and failing papers, the latter category almost certainly as a consequence of the growing culture of appeal.[8] This practice is approved as a means of providing increased guardianship of the boundaries, but it also, arguably, militates against (or in some instances favours) students working at other levels, whose work does not receive such intensity of scrutiny. In some institutions viva voce examinations are used as a verification of the first class category; in others this practice is eschewed on the grounds that it might introduce, at a belated stage, an assessment mode in which students have had little practice, or one which is not attuned to the outcomes of any particular module or programme. Again the practice might be regarded as privileging a particular group to the detriment of others, although in its defence, the viva for the award of a first class honours degree might be said to perform an important role in maintaining standards, ensuring that first class students exhibit the excellence described so fully in the grade or classification descriptors. Overall however, there is a general strength of feeling that vivas as such are undesirable, for the reasons stated above, which may be further compounded by the difficulties of vivas for students on joint awards.

7.2 Compensation, condonement and failure

There are large variations of practice on compensation, condonement, and failure. In some degree courses, an inflexible interpretation of credit accumulation prevails, demanding passes in all modules; in others, compensation and/or condonement are allowed, although these are sometimes coupled with the rather clumsy device of moving the failure mark to a pass (without reassessment) to comply with computer systems, appease literal-minded administrators, or simply protect students whose transcripts might otherwise appear anomalous. Similarly there are large variations on re-sits and resubmissions, and indeed, on the numbers of re-assessments allowed, both within modules, and within awards. Currently, practice on these matters is being pressurised by institutions' anxiety about the collection of fees on the one hand, and retention statistics on the other.

7.3 Reporting on teaching and learning

External Examiners are frequently required to give testimony to the quality of teaching and learning enjoyed by the students, on the evidence of seeing the assessed work. While it may be possible to offer some tentative commentary on this, most examiners find that this is a difficult, if not an unreasonable, requirement to make of them, given the relatively narrow compass of evidence available in the written work.

7.4 Extent of duties

There are also considerable variations in the amounts of work Externals are asked to do, and in the remuneration paid. Some Externals are required to work extensively on monitoring at two points in the academic year; others only at the year end. The amount of written work reviewed by External Examiners varies considerably. This variety of practice, of course, is not a subject-specific matter, but spreads across all disciplines, or at least, those not regulated by Professional Accreditation requirements.

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[8] In some cases, this referring of all fails and firsts to the External Examiner may not include coursework grades, an inconsistency that is symptomatic perhaps of an anachronistic exaggerated regard for the status of the examination.

8. Summary, recommendations and future practice

While the current system of External Examining incorporates a number of strengths, the evolving nature of the role, its relation to changing systems of classification, grading and credit accumulation, and the increased demands likely to be placed upon External Examiners in the future, make a review of the system timely. It is important that this review, and the implementation of the changes proposed, takes realistic stock of the nature of the work to be done, and the value, and the costs, to be attributed to the External Examining process. Indeed, the potential difficulty of the new duties of the External Examiner, added to the threat of the diminution of the role of critical friend, may render the task less interesting, less rewarding, and therefore unattractive. It might therefore be difficult to recruit experienced academics to the task, particularly in the current research-intensive context, in which there are no real career incentives in using time that might otherwise be spent on research on activities such as this. An additional strength of the current system – the benefit of experience that Externals bring back to their home institutions – should also be recognised and its value preserved. This requires that they be involved at the level of academic practice, not merely at the level of process.

There is considerable concern that whatever training provision is made for External Examiners should not diminish the academic qualifications required for the role. The relative values, and worth, of academic credibility on the one hand, and understanding of process on the other, should not be confused; neither should they be weighed within the same currency. At the same time, it is recognised fully that External Examiners need to be aware of the context of their work provided by institutional and national regulations, and legal requirements. This is an important area in which some provision needs to be made.

The discipline of English would be well-served by an External Examiner system which permits:

8.1 Diversity

A recognition of the diversity of academic programmes and the different kinds of scholarly expertise required for their examination.

8.2 Dialogue

The sharing and discussion of different assessment experience, systems and modes, in which the benefits of dialogue and interchange remained paramount.

8.3 Adequate time

Adequate time to be spent reviewing the work. This report opened with a reminder that English is specific, but not unique in the Humanities, in requiring copious amounts of writing for assessment purposes. Time to review the work thoroughly is therefore essential.

8.4 Examiners' Forum

The setting up of an informal and voluntary Annual Forum for English External Examiners in which matters pertaining to practice, standards and quality could be properly discussed without breaching the confidences established between institutions and examiners. Such a forum would promote interchange, prevent parochialism and idiosyncrasies, and present an arena for the discussion of good practice, while guarding against the standardisation of knowledge itself. It might also be a place at which some important national level discussions could be inaugurated, on such matters, for example, as student literacy, assessment diversification, grade inflation/deflation, the treatment of special cases, and so on. Further, a forum of this kind could also be a valuable source of knowledge about current practice, as well as an opportunity to meet policy-makers in quality and standards (from Funding Councils, the QAA, and so on). Since most departments have colleagues working as Externals in other institutions, this forum would be broadly representative.

8.5 Informal interchange

The opportunity to spend more time with the host Department, discussing teaching, learning and assessment practices in more detail and with more frank exchange than the current formalisation of meetings currently allows. 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.

8.6 Summative readings

The opportunity to read horizontal runs of work that are representative of the summary benefits of the whole degree course, or that part of it dedicated to English. Externals who do not have this opportunity may not be able to develop a real grasp of what the degree adds up to beyond the formal pronouncements of validation documents and programme specifications. If they are to perform a role within the new structures of programme specifications, benchmarking, and the national qualifications framework, then they should be given this opportunity, and not simply for the purpose of monitoring, but also to give academic context to the judgements concurrently made about individual pieces of work. However, it is important to stress that the purpose of such horizontal readings is to establish a summative sense of the degree programme as a whole, and not to encourage regression to the former (patently unfair and inconsistent) practice of discretely changing marks.

8.7 New blood

A more established means by which 'new blood' can be brought into the system and good practice shared.

Appendix A:

Participants in the English Subject Centre Consultation on External Examining, July 2002

Professor Linda Anderson	University of Newcastle upon Tyne
Professor Kelvin Everest	University of Liverpool
Dr Kate Fullbrook	University of the West of England
Jane Gawthrope	Manager, English Subject Centre
Dr Elspeth Graham	Liverpool John Moores University
Dr Vivien Jones	University of Leeds
Daniel Lamont	University of Central Lancashire
Professor Philip Martin	Director, English Subject Centre
Professor Ann Thompson	King's College London
Professor Katie Wales	University of Leeds
Dr John Whale	University of Leeds

Appendix B:

Briefing documents

The participants in the English Subject Centre Consultation held in July 2002 were referred to the following documents. The first and second are reproduced in this report as Appendix B1 and Appendix B2.

- English Subject Centre Introduction
- External Examining: Recent Developments
- Briefing Paper 2: HEFCE 02/15, *Information on Quality and Standards in Higher Education* (not included), available at: **http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2002**
- '*QAA Code of Practice, Section 4: External Examining*', (not included) available at: **http://www.qaa.ac.uk/public/COP/codesofpractice.htm**

Appendix B1

External Examining Futures in English: An Introduction from the English Subject Centre

The current system of external examining in Universities, which has a very long pedigree, has been pressurised by a range of factors over the last ten years or so. From the Silver Report of the mid–nineties, through the various ways in which modularisation has wrought significant changes in the assessment and examination system, to the recent calls for strengthened external verification procedures in the wake of the collapse of the QAA's subject review scheme, a consistent questioning of the system's capacity and effectiveness has been in play.

A decade ago, the External Examiner's role was largely taken up with the verification of grading and marks, and with the classification of individual student results through profiling. In recent years, those elements of scrutiny have been displaced by moderation of scripts (sometimes, indeed often, under the instruction that marks cannot be changed), the checking of formal procedures, and advice on how to avoid appeals or deal with problem students. Some Examiners have felt that their roles have been reduced – in a system where the computer averaging of marks prevails – to rubber-stamping. Ironically, this has taken place at a time when there have been calls for an emphatic strengthening of the External Examiner function, and greater professionalisation, from the suggestion that all Examiners should be accredited through training, to the idea of a national 'college' of External Examiners. While these initiatives have, for the most part been confined to realms of speculation, it is clear that policy will change, and that the demands placed on External Examiners are likely to increase.

This consultation will seek to establish how the English subject community would like to see the requirements of its discipline adequately provided for in the future. It will canvas existing External Examiners in English to elicit information about how they see their current roles, and whether or not they feel they are being used to the best effects. It will ask a sample of departments to outline models for the best use of External Examiners in the future, and it will seek to establish how the diversification of assessment modes will construct a wider brief for External Examiners. The outcome will be a report: a document recommending models of good practice that are sensitive to the needs of the discipline.

While it is indubitably the case that the features of English examining are not exclusive to the subject, a study founded in the discipline is essential in the first instance, since both the range of assessment kinds, the rapid change within the discipline, and the precedence therein of a very particular kind of discursive activity, mark out a distinctive arena of practice for English. This consultation is an opportunity for the subject community to state its concerns and needs, and the English Subject Centre is therefore keen to receive a good, representative response. If you would like to be involved in this consultation, please contact Carol Eckersley, the Administrator, at: c.eckersley@rhul.ac.uk or 01784-443221.

Appendix B2

External examining: recent developments

(Note: This paper summarises current practice and recent developments in External Examining in the context of HE policy. Its author is Norman Jackson and it has been edited by Philip Martin. A full version may be obtained by contacting the Generic Centre at LTSN Generic Centre, Innovation Close, York Science Park, Heslington, York YO10 5ZF.)

1. Context

The external examining system is a distinctive and much valued feature of UK HE. Numerous consultations, reviews and research studies conducted over two decades have highlighted the importance placed on external examining by subject communities and HE institutions. A major but little celebrated achievement is the fact that external examining, which was invented for a small, autonomous, low participation HE system, has changed and adapted to the very different needs and expectations of a diverse, flexible and publicly accountable mass system.

We have a 'system' of external examining in so far as it is universally accepted as an important element of institutional QA and it is underpinned by Guidelines and most recently a Code of Practice. While these documents codify expectations, practice is not systematised. Furthermore, external examiners are not seen as a networked and supported Community of Practitioners engaged in sharing and developing their own practice and contributing to pedagogic debates in their disciplines. There is also considerable diversity in the extent to which external examiners are prepared for their important role.

In 1997 the National Committee of Inquiry in Higher Education (Dearing Review) recommended that external examining become a formal part of the UK's QA processes (see NCIHE 1997 at Annex 4). The model proposed was, however, unworkable and universally rejected.

Following the Dearing recommendations a comprehensive set of codes and policies have been developed by QAA in collaboration with HE communities (Annex 1). These codify QA practice for assuring academic standards. This policy framework enables HE to move towards a model of institutional self-regulation enacted within an explicit set of expectations and requirements. External examiners are key participants in the new model of institutional self-regulation.

HEIs are required to adopt the QAA policy framework for assuring academic standards. Many HEIs have already referenced their awards to the Qualifications Framework and are introducing programme specifications. Many are now requiring course teams to produce programme specifications and reference programme learning outcomes to subject benchmark statements.

Underpinning the UK's approach to assuring standards in a diverse mass system is the belief that it is neither desirable nor possible to achieve uniform standards across the whole HE system. Instead, the onus is placed on those responsible for creating standards to be more explicit about the nature of the learning and attainment embedded in the standards.

Underlying this approach are two simple ideas (Annex 3). The first is that in order to develop a better understanding of what underlies academic standards, those designing programmes and creating standards need to be more explicit about what it is that students are expected to learn. The policies of programme specification and subject benchmarking are intended to encourage teaching teams and subject communities to set out what they believe are the key educational and learning outcomes from HE programmes.

The second idea is that institutions should relate what they are doing to appropriate institutional and external reference points so as to demonstrate that the basis for academic standards has validity beyond an individual teaching team. A range of internal and external reference points are suggested in Annex 2. Programme specifications are intended to make explicit the institution's learning intentions and to relate these to the national qualifications frameworks and to other reference points including, where appropriate, subject benchmark information.

2. The current model of learning: 'outcomes'

Academic standards are complex mixtures of knowledge, understanding, skills and capability applied in particular subject and programme contexts. They may also embody values, attitudes and behaviours that are difficult to assess directly but which are integral to a student's academic performance.

The QAA policies of programme specification and subject benchmarking are promoting the system-wide adoption of an outcomes approach in which the results of learning are expressed in a form that permits their achievement to be demonstrated and measured.

- An outcome is simply a result or consequence of an action or process.

- The outcome from a learning process is a learning outcome.

- Learning outcomes are statements that predict what learners will have gained as a result of learning.

Reduced to its simplest form an outcomes approach to learning has three components:

- an explicit statement of learning intent expressed as outcomes which reflect educational aims, purposes and values;

- the process to enable the outcomes to be achieved and demonstrated (curriculum, teaching, learning, assessment process and methods and support and guidance methods);

- the criteria for assessing whether the intended outcomes have been achieved and evaluating the level of attainment.

3. Information on quality and standards in HE

In order to move to a model of institutional self-regulation HEIs have agreed to provide more information about the quality of the learning in their programmes and their academic standards. A Task Group chaired by Sir Ron Cooke produced a consultation paper in November 2001 on the nature of this information. The Final Report of the Task Group (HEFCE 02/15 March 2002) advocates a formal role for external examiners in providing public information on an institution's outcome standards and the operation of its assessment process. This would be in the form of a summary report, the recommended structure of which is given in Annex 3.

Publication of a summary report will raise the issue of whether external examiners will feel compromised in their ability to provide institutions with a critical commentary. If this were to happen it would weaken rather than strengthen external examining. The idea of researching the impact of the proposed change in a controlled experiment is currently on the table.

4. Implications for external examining

Section 4 of the Code of Practice for Academic Quality and Standards in HE deals with External Examining. It explains that the main purposes of external examining are:

- to verify that standards are appropriate for the award or award elements

- to assist institutions in the comparison of academic standards across HE awards and award elements

- to ensure that assessment processes are fair and are fairly operated and in line with the institution's regulations.

The Cooke Report (HEFCE 02/15) and Universities UK papers (102/46a and b) *recommend* and imply that External Examiners will play a more overt role in national quality assurance. Para 66 of the Cooke Report argues that because of this new role in providing public information the external examiner system should be strengthened:

Induction training given to external examiners, the content and nature of the reports they are asked to provide, and the form of follow-up by the HEI all vary between HEIs. Practice also varies in respect of the appointment of external examiners. Given the new demands being placed on the external examining system in providing public information, and the central importance of the system in safeguarding standards, greater consistency is needed. Work is now in hand by Universities UK, SCOP and QAA to pursue these issues.

The ways in which the external examining system is to be strengthened is currently under review in the meetings now being facilitated by QAA for UUK/SCOP and the Funding Council. Possible ways in which external examining might be strengthened include:

- consistent forms of preparation and induction within institutions

- consistency in the type of information that is provided to external examiners

- voluntary registration of existing external examiners and people wishing to become an external examiner

- some form of accreditation

- an expanded pool of people who might be willing to participate in external examining and other forms of peer review

- the recognition that external examiners represent a significant Community of Practice which should be supported as a network

- the provision of subject-based opportunities for professional development of external examining skills

- the possibility of shadowing and mentoring schemes for people wishing to become external examiners

- the provision of subject based information about assessment practice

- opportunities for external examiners to meet to discuss topics of interest and to share their perceptions and practice

- the provision of customised information on how to engage with the QAA policy framework

- the facilitation of on-line discussion fora for sharing issues and problems

These ideas have to be seen in the context of a broader issue, namely, how the knowledge and skills of academic staff are to be developed for the complex process of assessing student learning.

All these things require UK HE to recognise and value the contribution made by external examiners to maintaining quality and standards and developing assessment through a reward system that acknowledges this contribution. There is a general issue about how external examining is located within the career and work profile of busy academics.

5. The QAA Policy Framework and the Cooke Report

HEIs are being required to work within the Code of Practice for assuring academic quality and standards and the policy framework which seeks to make standards explicit and provide reference points against which the basis for standards can be compared and judged. External examining will be conducted within this framework.

The Code of Practice has as its first precept that External examiners should report on: whether the standards set are appropriate for the award(s) by reference to published national subject benchmarks, the national qualification frameworks, institutional programme specifications and other relevant information;

This intention is reinforced by the new QAA Handbook for Institutional Audit (QAA 2002b) and the Cooke Report (HEFCE 02/15 and Universities UK 1/02/46b) through the recommendation that institutions should publish summaries of external examiner reports which include a statement on the extent to which the standards set are appropriate for the awards, or awards elements, by reference to published national subject benchmarks, the national qualifications framework and institutional programme specifications (Appendix 3).

The implications for external examining are:

- external examiners will need to be familiar with the way the policy framework works and how it influences the design of programmes and modules

- external examiners will need to be familiar with their subject benchmark statements and how they might be interpreted and used in different programme contexts (programme design and assessment).

- institutions will need to provide external examiners with information that will help them understand how benchmark statements and the national qualification framework have been used. They will also need to provide information to help External Examiners understand how the intended programme learning outcomes are demonstrated and evaluated through the assessment process.

- external examiners might be expected to discuss with teaching teams the thinking and curriculum design that underpins the programme specification.

All these developments suggest that external examiners will need to be more involved with the educational design features of programmes. There subject knowledge and expertise will need to be complemented by knowledge of educational design.

The QAA Policy and Code

The QAA Policy framework contains:

- **qualification frameworks** (for Scotland and the rest of the UK) on which institutional awards, credit for achievement and programmes/modules can be positioned: this framework will be underpinned by qualification and level descriptors

- **programme specifications** that will enable HEIs to describe the main learning outcomes for a programme and the means by which these are achieved and demonstrated: the Programme specifications will also show how programmes, modules and awards are positioned on the national qualifications framework

- **progress file (transcript)** that will enable institutions to present the results of learning in a more consistent format and a process (personal development planning) to help students understand better what and how they are learning and to plan for their academic, personal and career development

- **subject benchmark information** produced by 42 subject benchmarking groups: this information is intended to provide reference points for curriculum design and assessment in the subject

The QAA *Code of Practice for the Assurance of Quality and Standards* comprises a series of booklets under the following titles:
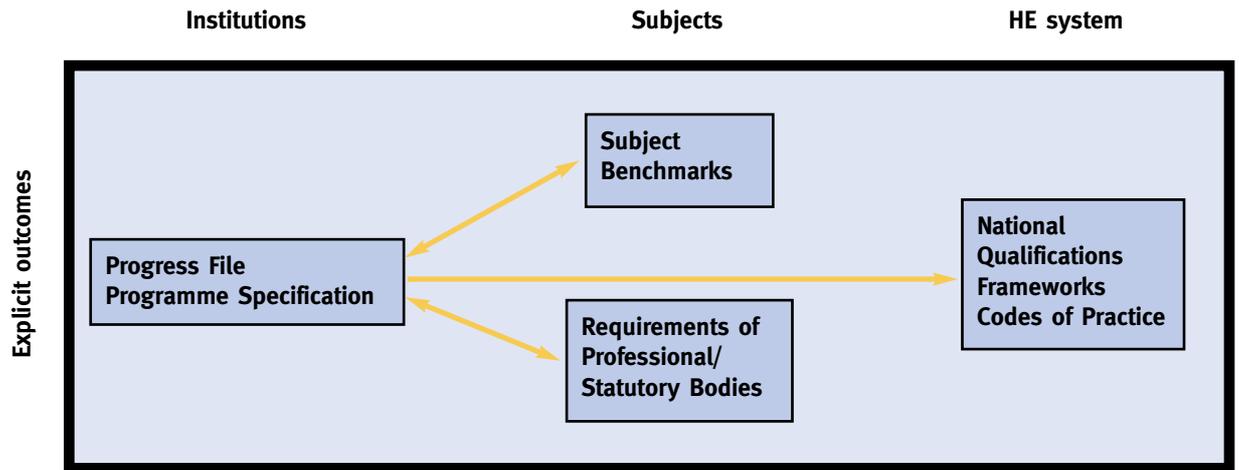
- Postgraduate Research Programmes
- Collaborative provision
- Students with disabilities
- External Examining
- Academic appeals and student complaints on academic matters
- Assessment of students
- Programme approval, monitoring and review
- Career education, information and guidance
- Careers advice and guidance
- Placement learning
- Recruitment and admissions
- Guidelines for Distance Learning

They are available at:

www.qaa.ac.uk/public/COP/codesofpractice.htm

Annex 2 to Appendix B2

The two ideas that underpin the new QA framework: explicit learning outcomes and referencing against appropriate reference points.

| Institutions | Subjects | HE system |

Explicit outcomes

- Progress File Programme Specification
- Subject Benchmarks
- Requirements of Professional/ Statutory Bodies
- National Qualifications Frameworks Codes of Practice

Institutional and external points of reference for learning outcomes and standards:

Institutional

may include:

- Level Descriptors
- Key skills policies
- Staff Research

External reference points

may include:

- National key skill standards
- Occupational standards
- Credit Consortia Level Descriptors

Proposed template for published summaries of external examiners' reports

(HEFCE 02/15 and Universities UK 1/02/46a)

1. Name of university/college

2. Award/award elements examined and UCAS reference

3. Name of external examiner

4. External examiner's home university/college or other professional/institutional affiliation

5. Year in which the external examiner was appointed

6. Extent to which the institution's processes for assessment, examination and the determination of awards are sound and fairly conducted. (*This would be a confirmatory statement, or if not, a statement of the ways they fall short.*)

7. Extent to which the standards set are appropriate for the awards, or awards elements, by reference to published national subject benchmarks, the national qualifications framework and institutional programme specifications. (*This would be a confirmatory statement that, from the evidence available to the examiner, the standards set are appropriate, or if not, a statement of the ways they fall short.*)

8. Extent to which the standards of student performance in programmes or parts of programmes examined are comparable with the standards of similar programmes or parts of programmes in other UK HEIs with which the examiner is familiar. (*This would be a confirmatory statement that, from the evidence available to the examiner, the standards set are comparable with those applying at other HEIs with which he or she is familiar, or if not, a statement of the ways they fall short.*)

9. Overview and comments/recommendations

   (*Paragraph of 200-300 words giving the examiner's view of key characteristics of the programme which he/she considers sufficiently significant in relation to present or future standards to be worth drawing to the attention of external audiences. The examiner would identify distinctive or innovative programme elements and notable strengths, and aspects which should be strengthened or risks which should be addressed in order to maintain confidence in standards on that programme.*)

Emergent idea

At the first QAA Discussion Group meeting it was suggested that published (on-line) programme specifications provided a useful context for the public information recommended by the Cooke Report. This would include external examiner reports, present and past student feedback, and perhaps information on how the teaching team was planning to develop the programme in response to such feedback.

Annex 4 to Appendix B2

Sources of information

HEQC (1996) Higher Education Quality Council *Strengthening external examining*

HEQC (1996) Higher Education Quality Council, *Guidelines for quality assurance*, Section 8 External Examiners

HEFCE (2001) Higher Education Funding Council England, *Quality assurance in higher education*, Consultation paper HEFCE 01/45, July 2001

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NCIHE (1997) *Higher Education in the Learning Society. Report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education* (also known as the Dearing Report), HMSO, 1997

QAA (2000) Quality Assurance Agency, *Code of Practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*, Section 4: external examining, January 2000

QAA (2002a) Quality Assurance Agency, *External review process for higher education in England: Operational description*, QAA 019 03/02, March 2002. **http://www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/newmethod/fod.htm**

QAA (2002b) Quality Assurance Agency, *Handbook for Institutional Audit: England*, QAA 020 5/2002. **http://www.qaa.ac.uk/public/inst_audit_hbook/handbook_textonly.htm#top**

QSC (1995) Quality Support Centre, *The external examiner system: possible futures. Report of the project commissioned by the Higher Education Quality Council* by Harold Silver, Anne Stennett and Ruth Williams

HESDA (1993) John Partington et al. *TLTP Project Alter*: *A Handbook for external examiners in higher education*, Higher Education Staff Development Agency, 1993

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Universities UK (2002b) *External Examining* 1/02/4

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