EXTRACT FROM TEACHING AND LEARNING COMMITTEE MINUTES: 13.12.11

11.141 Report on UK Quality Code: Chapter B7: External Examining

In June 2011, the Committee had agreed to implement the UUK/GuildHE Review recommendations on appointment of external examiners and had made a number of adjustments to the University’s Code of Practice on External Examining with immediate effect (min 11.82 refers). The QAA had taken account of the UUK/GuildHE Review recommendations in its updated guidance on external examining published in October 2011. This had now been incorporated into the new ‘UK Quality Code for Higher Education’, which restructured the content of the ‘Academic Infrastructure’, at Chapter B7. The Quality Code had been launched in December 2011.

The Chair presented Paper No TLC/11/45 which reviewed the Chapter and its implications for the University’s arrangements including its own Code of Practice. These already reflected many of the principles in the 18 Indicators. It was noted that the QAA Chapter appeared to allow greater flexibility than had the UUK/GuildHE recommendations, for example in the employment of validation panels members and the appointment of the same external examiner to a cognate programme.

The Committee considered the seven recommendations for adjustments and other matters where further consideration was required. The Committee agreed to adopt the recommendations and to align the University’s Code of Practice to the QAA Chapter rather than the stricter UUK/GuildHE proposals. The Chair emphasised that Faculties should seek to adopt the spirit of the earlier proposals. Nominations which did not meet the appointment criteria and cases for extensions should be genuinely exceptional and limited in number.

The Chair suggested to Faculties that in nominating external examiners they should consider staff in the senior lecturer or reader grade rather than more senior staff, as they would be currently active in teaching, learning and assessment processes. Staff should also be encouraged to be more proactive in networking to assist in the identification of suitable external examiners.

**Indicator 2**

Maintaining Academic Standards

The Chapter indicated that the external examiner should provide feedback as to whether, inter alia, ‘the programme reflects PSRB requirements’ and whether assessment criteria, marking schemes and arrangements for classification were ‘set at the appropriate level’. It was noted that some professional and regulatory bodies had their own criteria for the appointment of external examiners and would receive copies of their reports. External examiners would be expected to be familiar with the professional standards. While this matter and the reference to assessment level were implicit in the University’s report form, they were not explicitly mentioned and it was proposed to revise the form accordingly.

Comparability of Standards and Student Performance

The Chapter stated that institutions should determine ‘whether, when and how it was appropriate to provide external examiners with quantitative data to support their evaluation of student performance’ and noted that boards might be provided with statistical analyses for each cohort at module and programme level. The Committee discussed the extent to which external examiners at the University were provided with quantitative data and noted that there appeared to be some variability in practice. Although reports on means and standard deviations were currently available by module within year within programme through Faculty/ School support staff from the Student Records System, they were not routinely provided to all Boards or external examiners.

Members considered it desirable that external examiners and Boards be better informed through the provision of quantitative data and agreed that this matter should be discussed further with Student Administration and Faculties.

**Indicator 4**

Termination of Contract

The Chapter expected institutions to have procedures for early termination of contract by either party. The University’s External Examiners’ Handbook did not currently advise external examiners how they might resign from the post. The Committee agreed that this should be done in writing, addressed at University level.

**Indicator 5**

Appointment Criteria

The Committee endorsed a number of revisions to the University’s Code of Practice to reflect the QAA criteria.

It was noted that the UUK/GuildHE review had prohibited the use of a nominee who had previously acted as a member of a validation panel and that the University’s Code of Practice had been adjusted accordingly. The QAA’s guidance now expected institutions to ensure that they balanced the benefits of engaging someone who was familiar with the programme with any risk to their ability to provide a fully independent perspective.

The QAA Chapter stated the occasions when exceptions and extensions might be allowed. These corresponded to the circumstances identified in the University’s previous Code of Practice but removed in June to reflect UUK/GuildHE guidance. These would be reinstated.

Exceptions and Special Cases

The Chapter emphasised that institutions should ensure that there was a rigorous and transparent process for effective oversight of decisions and monitoring of trends in the case of external examiners who did not meet all the appointment criteria. In order to assist the Committee in monitoring such occurrences it was proposed to extend the period of analysis in the annual report on appointments and to provide more detail on the nature of exceptions.

It was also noted that, while in practice the University permitted exceptions and a procedure for their consideration had been approved, the University’s Code of Practice itself did not allow for departures. Consequently, it was proposed to make explicit this possibility and to require a full supporting statement from the nominating Faculty on how the expectations for the role would be fulfilled.

**Indicator 7**

Responsibilities

The Chair reminded members that an outstanding matter from the QAA Institutional Audit (March 2010) related to whether the University should require external examiners to be involved in the moderation of Level 3/4 (Year 1) modules in Honours degrees. Although this was encouraged, it was currently not a University requirement, unless the modules contributed to another final award such as CertHE or it was expected by a PSRB.

The Committee noted that the involvement of external examiners in the first year could be valuable in supporting Faculties’ strategies to improve retention, for developmental purposes and also for Honours degrees validated in partner institutions. It was, however, suggested that an enforced increase in the external’s workload might deter some nominees, as the fee paid functioned more as an honorarium than recompense for the work involved. Nevertheless, as many courses had now introduced exit awards, moderation by the external examiner was required in these cases and had not presented difficulties.

The QAA guidance stated that there should be clarity about the circumstances in which externals were not used and noted that some institutions might state explicitly that any student achievement contributing to an award would be moderated by an external examiner. Alternatively, an institution might deem that, in confirming the standards of the final award, the external examiner confirmed that he/she had scrutinised the level and standard of all its component parts.

It was agreed that the University’s policy should remain as currently stated, viz in honours and non-honours degrees all Level 5 and 6 modules should be moderated by the external examiner as should all modules contributing to the classification of exit awards, and that, while external examiners may elect not to be involved in other Level 3/4 modules in the degree, their involvement was welcome and encouraged.

**Indicator 8**

Details of External Examiners

In order to ensure transparency in the process and to support student involvement in quality management processes, the Chapter expected students to be informed of the identity and current position of the external examiner associated with their course, in line with the earlier UUK/GuildHE recommendation. The Committee had agreed in June 2011 that this information should be included in the course handbook (min 11.85 refers). The UUK/GuildHE review and QAA guidance had emphasised that students should not contact the external examiner directly. It was proposed that external examiners be advised to refer any direct contact received from students to the University.

The Chair reported that the meeting of the Academic Development and Enhancement Committee earlier that day had agreed that every internal programme should use its course management area within the VLE, Blackboard Learn, to publish external examiner reports and responses and other course-related business for the information of students.

The Committee agreed that the site should include information on the external examiner but should also emphasise that it was inappropriate to contact external examiners directly and that the appeals and complaints processes were available.

**Indicator 7 and Indicator 9**

Examination Board Responsibilities; Endorsement of Decisions

The Committee noted that the QAA Chapter stated that as members of examination boards external examiners were rarely considered to be the final arbiter for the award of marks/grades either within a module or for the final award and that such decisions were the collective responsibility of the examination board. The Chapter expected that institutional procedures should make clear what would happen in the event that an external was unwilling to provide endorsement of the board’s decisions.

The Chair stressed that the University did not expect external examiners to have the role of third markers. The Committee noted that the current University regulation stated that, where there was disagreement in the board of examiners about results or classifications, the view of the external examiners would prevail (Regulation 14). The Committee agreed that this rule could be interpreted in a way which did not reflect the collective decision-making process of the board. Accordingly it proposed to remove the sentence from the Regulations.

**Indicator 11**

Recognition of the Work of External Examiners

The Chapter emphasised the importance of institutions supporting staff who wished to become external examiners, and noted that they might provide development opportunities. The Chapter also mentioned the possibility of maintaining an overview at institutional level of external examining undertaken by staff.

The Chair reported that the Academic Development and Enhancement Committee had agreed that Staff Development should consider opportunities to support staff in their understanding of the role of external examiners, which could also serve to encourage their engagement externally. It was considered that institutional oversight might be deemed intrusive and could be counter-productive.

**Indicator 18**

QAA Concerns Scheme

The Chapter referred to procedures for an external who had a serious concern and had exhausted internal institutional mechanisms by reference to the QAA’s ‘concerns scheme’ or the processes of the relevant professional, statutory or regulatory body. The University’s External Examiners’ Handbook referred to the availability of the QAA scheme but did not mention PSRB processes. It was proposed to add a reference that there may be occasions where a concern was properly a matter for the applicable professional body rather than for QAA.

AGREED that:

i) the following recommendations be endorsed:

Indicator 2: that references to ‘PSRB requirements’ as appropriate and the ‘level of assessment’ be added explicitly to the rubric of specific sections of the external examiner’s report form, as set out in the paper;

Indicator 4: that the External Examiners’ Handbook should inform external examiners that, should they wish to resign, formal communication should be made in writing and that this should be addressed to the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Teaching and Learning);

Indicator 5: that the University’s Code of Practice on External Examining be revised to:

* add explicitly an expectation that nominees were familiar with UK HE reference points;
* remove the prohibitions on the appointment of individuals who had served on a validation panel for the course and on appointment to a cognate course;
* reinstate the identification of circumstances where an extension might be permitted, viz continuity or where a course was being discontinued;
* remove the clause about the appointment of retired staff;
* reflect the exact wording of the Indicator in regard to appointment criteria;
* provide for exceptions and departures.

Indicator 8: that information on the identity of external examiners and the inappropriateness of direct contact by students be included in course management areas in the VLE and external examiners be advised in the External Examiners’ Handbook to refer any direct contact from students to the University;

Indicator 18: that the External Examiners’ Handbook include the option for external examiners to inform the relevant PSRB about a serious concern;

ii) the analysis in the annual report on external examiner appointments be extended to a three-year period and differentiate between exceptional appointments and extensions as permitted by the University’s revised Code of Practice and departures from the Code;

iii) it be recommended to Senate that Regulation 14 of the Regulations Governing Examinations in Programmes of Study be revised to remove the sentence ‘Where there is disagreement in the Board of Examiners about results or classifications the view of the external examiners shall prevail’;

iv) further consideration be given to the quantitative data provided to Boards of Examiners and external examiners to assist them in discharging their functions and to whether this information should be routinely provided;

v) the changes be implemented fully from the academic year 2012/13 but applied as far as possible during 2011/12;

vi) no change be made to the University’s position on external examiners’ involvement in moderation of Level 3/4 in Honours and non-Honours degrees.