



Maynooth University External Examiners for Taught Programmes

Role of the External Examiner

External examiners are appointed by the University to oversee taught programmes leading to University degrees and other awards. They have an important role in assuring and enhancing the academic standards of programmes. While primarily involved in the review of assessment instruments, processes and standards, external examiners also fulfil an important consultative and advisory function in supporting the enhancement of programmes and of teaching, learning and assessment practices. External examiners contribute in three major areas:

- **Quality:** The fundamental role of the external examiner is to assure academic standards and the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. The external examiner confirms that the academic standards are consistent with the academic outcomes specified by the University, and are comparable to those achieved in the subject area in equivalent universities nationally and internationally.
- **Equity:** The external examiner helps to assure the fairness, validity and rigour of assessment at the University.
- **Enhancement:** The external examiner provides feedback on the quality of courses and modules and the overall learning experience in the subject area, and on how teaching, learning and assessment in the subject area may be enhanced.

Courses which require an external examiner

All programmes leading to a University award at level 7 or higher are required to have an external examiner. In large multi-disciplinary programmes (such as the BA and BSc degrees) an external examiner should be appointed for individual subjects.

Nomination and approval process

The external examiner for a programme or subject should be proposed by the relevant Head of Department and approved by the Faculty.

In exceptional circumstances, when a decision is required before the next meeting of the Faculty, the Registrar, with the support of the Dean of the Faculty, may approve the appointment. Such appointments will be brought to the next meeting of the Faculty for note.

Eligibility

An external examiner's academic and professional qualifications should be appropriate to the discipline, programme or subject to be examined and, at a minimum, should not be below the level of qualification to be awarded.

An external examiner should have appropriate academic standing and expertise, and have sufficient experience from their university or professional role to adjudicate on comparability of standards.

An external examiner should be sufficiently distant to allow an objective assessment of the programme based on the materials provided, and to avoid any actual or perceived conflict of interest. In general this means that:

- a) Relatives of, or others with a close **personal** relationship with, academics or students involved in the programme should not be appointed as external examiners.
- b) Former students of the University should not be appointed unless a period of at least 5 years has elapsed since graduation, and the person has significant experience in another institution post-graduation.
- c) Reciprocal contemporaneous examining arrangements should not be approved.
- d) Heads of Department should exercise some judgement in appointing academics with a close **professional** relationship with the Department or individual academics within it. If the Head of Department believes that the relationship is too close to allow an objective perspective and feedback, the person should not be proposed as an external examiner.

As far as possible, external examiners should be experienced academics from institutions of comparable standing. Ideally, external examiners should have experience of quality assurance in national and international contexts. In selecting external examiners, a Department should seek to ensure a diversity of perspectives over time. A Department should consider the profile of the previous external examiners and consider factors such as the gender balance of external examiners, and the balance of national and international external examiners.

Term of Appointment

An external examiner appointment will normally be renewed automatically for a term of three years. However the University may discontinue the appointment in any year at its discretion.

Where appropriate, external examiner may be re-appointed for a further term of up to three years. No external examiner should be called on to serve for more than six consecutive years.

External examiners who have acted previously for a term of up to three years should not normally be re-appointed until at least three years have elapsed since their previous appointment. Where an external examiner has served for a term longer than three years, at least five years should elapse before the examiner is considered for appointment for a further term.

The external examining process

The external examiner will be provided with comprehensive information by the School/ Department on:

- a) The programme or subject, the content, teaching approach and learning outcomes.
- b) The assessment strategies and instruments of assessment, the guidelines given to students, and the marking guidelines and marking schemes used and feedback provided to students.
- c) Student results, including the results in all assessments, and information on how individual results are aggregated to produce an overall result.
- d) External accreditation requirements and status, where relevant.

As far as is practicable, all student work that contributes to the overall final assessment and the feedback on it should be available, on request, to the external examiner. In cases where the assessment is a performance or verbal presentation, the external examiner should have access to a recording (if one is made) or to the contemporaneous notes of the assessors.

The external examiner should normally visit the University at least once during each year of their term of appointment, at a time when end of year results are available, and should have the opportunity to discuss the results with the School/Department. Where necessary the visit may be conducted remotely through teleconferencing.

The external examiner is expected to:

1. Review a sample of student work to confirm standards and distribution of grades and to make any relevant recommendations on learning outcomes, assessment and grading practices. An external examiner may also observe practical, clinical or oral assessments.
2. Consider the content and structure of the programme (or subject) and provide advice or recommendations with a view to enhancing its quality.
3. Provide a written report annually to the University.

A Head of Department may ask that the external examiner review examination papers in advance of examinations.

The final decision in relation to the award of marks or grades rests with the University Examination Board, a Board of the Academic Council of the University. The external examiner is not expected to routinely determine the grades of individual students. However:

- An external examiner may be asked to offer an opinion on the appropriate grades for specific students. This may arise where the internal examiners would wish to be informed by an independent opinion, or where an external opinion is considered particularly beneficial, for example when conducting a viva voce examination of students with final year grades on the borders of award bands. External examiners may also be consulted in relation to matters arising from examination appeals or from issues of quality assurance.
- In exceptional cases, an external examiner may recommend the re-scaling or adjustment of grades for individual students, a group of students or entire cohorts of students. Where the external examiner recommends adjustments to the results of a subset of students, it is important to ensure that consistent standards are applied to other students in the programme. In the event that the external and internal examiners disagree on such a matter, the University Examination Board shall determine the marks awarded, and its decision shall be final.

Where a programme is semesterised, or has re-sit examinations, there may be multiple occasions in the year when results are released. It is not required that the external examiner visits in advance of release of results on each occasion. In situations when the external examiner cannot be present, the external examiner and Department/ School should agree in advance the information required to assure standards, fairness and validity of grades awarded.

Policy adapted from NUI Policy on External Examiners for Primary Degree and Taught Postgraduate Courses (April 2014).

Approved by Academic Council, 6 November 2017