



# The boycott of assessment and marking activity

## A briefing note for external examiners

**E**xternal examiners are critical in assuring and maintaining the quality and standards of HE degree programmes. In addition to assessing whether the academic standards set for an institution's awards are appropriate, the external examiners' role is 'to provide assurance that the assessment process is properly designed and applied, and is carried out in a manner that is fair and equitable to all students concerned as well as supportive of achieving the intended outcomes' (QAA, UK Quality Code for Higher Education, Chapter B7: External Examining, p8).

However, a number of external examiners have contacted UCU expressing major concerns about previous HEI contingency plans that were introduced as a way round the marking boycott. Such plans included the rewarding of degrees with incomplete sets of marks, the use of non-experts to set and mark exams and the bypassing of proper scrutiny by exam boards with expertise in the areas assessed.

If you have concerns about the quality assurance processes at the institution in which you are an external examiner, then please write to the head of the institution

(as suggested by the QAA in the following UK Quality Code, Chapter B7: External Examining, p25):

*'In exceptional cases, external examiners may have serious concerns about the academic standards or quality of provision at the institutions on which they are reporting. There must be an opportunity for such concerns to be raised directly with the head of the institution. As a last resort, and where the concern is systemic and not a one-off case of ineffective practice, the matter can be raised externally (Indicator 18).*

*Indicator 18*

*Where an external examiner has a serious concern relating to systemic failings with the academic standards of a programme or programmes and has exhausted all published applicable internal procedures, including the submission of a confidential report to the head of the institution, he/she may invoke QAA's concerns scheme or inform the relevant professional, statutory or regulatory body.'*

We would also suggest that external examiners who are or who become concerned do any or all of the following:

- Contact the Branch/Local Association of the institution where you are an external examiner and ask them to send you details of local contingency arrangements.
- Contact the Branch/Local Association and ask them to put you in touch with a UCU rep in the department for which you are an external examiner.
- Contact the institution and state that you are not prepared to sign off marks that have not been derived according to normal quality assurance procedures.

We would ask external examiners to be as vigilant as possible. To assist you in this, UCU has also drawn up a possible checklist of key questions, which might include:

**1** Did the module leaders (or another other suitably qualified academic) set the exam paper?

**2** If not, was there a procedure in place to guarantee that assessment related to course content?

**3** If so, what was it?

**4** Were the exam questions checked before students sat the exam? If so, by whom?

**5** Did the assessor teach on, or deliver, the course?

**6** If not, was the assessor familiar with the specific course material? What mechanism was in place to ensure this?

**7** Were pieces of work second marked? If so, by whom?

**8** If pieces of work that were usually second marked were not, describe the mechanisms used to ensure fairness and neutrality.

**9** Who compiled and checked the marks?

**10** Were the examination boards properly constituted?

**11** Did all relevant members of staff attend?

**12** If not, how were decision relating to their courses reached?

**13** How do the results this year compare to previous years?

#### Absent marks

**1** Were there any missing marks? What were they?

**2** Where there were missing marks, how did the Examination Board reach the final mark?

**3** Is this acceptable?

**4** Where an oral exam is normally part of the assessment, and this did not take place, how were judgments made as to linguistic competence?

**5** Where a practical examination is normally part of the assessment, and did not take place, how were marks awarded?

Source: Quality Assurance Agency (2011) *UK Quality Code for Higher Education*.  
Part B: Assuring and enhancing academic quality. Chapter B7: External examining.

