



Ollscoil na hÉireann
National University of Ireland

NUI Policy and Guidelines on External Examiners for Taught Programmes in the Constituent Universities





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1 Introduction

In accordance with the Universities Act 1997, external examiners¹ are appointed by the Senate to the constituent universities, on the recommendation of the universities, and their functions are determined by the Senate with the concurrence of the universities. While continuing to appoint external examiners to the constituent universities, and to determine their functions, the Senate has devolved the administration of the external examining system to the constituent universities.

This document sets out general policy on external examiners appointed by the Senate to all NUI institutions, with particular reference to the appointment of external examiners in constituent universities. It is complementary to documentation prepared in each constituent university for the guidance of staff and examiners. It includes specific arrangements relevant to constituent universities.

External examiners are appointed on the basis of academic and/or professional expertise and experience in their field, which enables them to provide independent advice on the appropriateness and comparability of the standards of awards and the related teaching, learning and assessment practices.

2 Responsibilities of NUI

NUI is responsible for:

- i. Updating policy and guidelines on external examiners for taught programmes (undergraduate and postgraduate) on a cyclical basis.
- ii. Administering the external examiner appointment process:
 - Facilitating the approval of new external examiners by the NUI Senate.
 - Providing template report forms.
- iii. Publishing policy and guidelines and providing links to the constituent universities' published external examiner lists.
- iv. Analysing the reports of external examiners to identify issues with the process and trends regarding academic aspects of external examining (to be shared with NUI Senate and the member institutions).

1. Please note that NUI statutes refer to 'extern examiners'. This policy uses 'external examiner' in line with the language of the Universities Act, 1997. Some related NUI documentation may refer to 'extern examiners' but 'extern examiner' and 'external examiner' should be understood to refer to the same role.

3 Responsibilities of the Constituent Universities

3.1 Process-related and procedural responsibilities

The constituent universities – through programme leads, heads of schools/ departments, central administration and senior leadership, as appropriate – are responsible for the following:

- i. Implementing an internal process for the nomination and approval of external examiners to be recommended for appointment by the NUI Senate.
- ii. Giving due regard to the eligibility and other requirements for external examiners set out in this document.
- iii. Establishing appropriate guidance documents for external examiners of the institution in relation to academic, programme and practical matters (e.g. institutional academic regulations, marks and standards, programme/module outlines, handbook for using the virtual learning environment) – see also point vii below.
- iv. Providing induction/training for new external examiners.
- v. Providing NUI with a list of nominations by October in each academic year for approval by Senate in November (see Appendix 1).
- vi. Updating NUI if an existing external examiner informs the institution that they are resigning.
- vii. Providing contextual documentation to **new** external examiners necessary to support them in performing their role effectively. Such documentation might include:
 - a copy of institutional guidance for external examiners, where available
 - academic regulations applicable to the programme being examined
 - marks and standards documents
 - programme / module documents, as appropriate to the role
 - marking rubrics, where appropriate
 - the previous external examiner's final report
 - the most recent programme review report, where available
 - external accreditation status and requirements, where relevant.
- viii. Providing access to the online learning platform, where appropriate to the role.
- ix. Sharing draft assessments/examination questions with external examiners, as appropriate.

- x. Ensuring external examiners have a secure method of accessing programme documentation and coursework/assessment samples.
- xi. Providing the following to external examiners in advance of examination board (or equivalent) meetings:
 - a list of marks for the relevant cohort
 - module/programme statistics, where available
 - a representative sample of completed and marked assessments, to include assessments with failing grades
 - moderation information for all relevant cohorts.
- xii. Ensuring that the external examiner receives a response to their annual report from the relevant programme lead/head of school/department within an appropriate timeframe.

3.2 Valuing External Examining

External examining is an important measure of esteem and a valuable mechanism for building professional and disciplinary connections that can promote and enhance the quality and standards of Irish higher education (as well as NUI and its member institutions) on a regional and international level. NUI institutions will give due consideration to recognising this work by their own academic staff.

3.3 Workload Considerations

External examining should not be overly burdensome for the external examiner, who will often have internal examining responsibilities in their own institutions around the same time (or, if practitioners, obligations to their own organisations). A defined selection process should be used to determine a manageable but representative sample of assessments for the external examiner to consider alongside material that must be reviewed, e.g. samples of assessments with a failing mark.

3.4 Independent Point of Contact for Serious Concerns

The institution will have an identified point of contact for addressing exceptional serious concerns of external examiners who will be independent of the programme/school for which the external examiner is acting. This might be the registrar or other senior leader in the institution. It will be clearly communicated in local guidance documentation for external examiners.

3.5 Transparency

Each institution will publish on their website a list of current external examiners, which will be updated following NUI Senate approval of new nominees.² It may be useful to make clear that students and other stakeholders should not contact external examiners directly wherever this list or a link to the list is published.

3.6 Communication with NUI: Nominations and Reports

3.6.1 Nomination Lists

As mentioned in 3.1 above, the constituent universities must provide NUI with a list of nominations to NUI by October in each academic year for approval by Senate in November. In addition, they must notify NUI if an external examiner needs to be withdrawn and/or a new examiner appointed during the academic year (for approval by Senate at its next meeting).

3.6.2 External Examiner Reports

The constituent universities must also share a copy of all external examiners' reports with NUI (externs@nui.ie) by the end of January each year for the previous academic year. This facilitates the analysis of reports (in an overview report shared with Senate and the NUI member institutions).

To assist NUI in analysing the external examiner reports, it would be helpful if institutions could do the following:

- Emphasise the importance of using a report form (rather than free-form text documents) in local policy and guidance to newly appointed external examiners.
- Provide a single 'key commendations and recommendations' section in the institutional report form.

2. As this is a new practice, there will be a transition period as member institutions may need to update local policies to reflect this change. Publication of lists will be required from the date that local policies have been updated and previously appointed external examiners may not be included.

4 The Role and Responsibilities of the External Examiner

External examiners are appointed to oversee taught programmes leading to NUI degrees and other qualifications at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Externs play a vital role supporting the University in assuring and enhancing the academic standards of programmes, modules and awards. 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 development of modules and programmes as well as the enhancement of teaching, learning and assessment practices.

The role of external examiner may be fulfilled by an individual or by a team. The nature of the programme will determine whether an individual or a team is necessary, e.g. where a range of specialisations need to be covered. External examiners are often drawn from the higher education community. They can be drawn from other communities of practice provided they have the necessary competences (or acquire them prior to engagement).

4.1 Curriculum Content and Review

External examiners will provide independent advice and feedback on the structure and content of learning, on the basis of academic and/or professional expertise and experience.

External examiners will have an opportunity to comment on programme/module content in a separate or integrated annual programme review process (i.e. during the end-of-year examination board or in the annual report).

External examiners may be invited to comment on material pertaining to cyclical programmatic review or to assess proposed changes to the programme.

4.2 Academic Standards, Assessment and Student Attainment

External examiners will have responsibility for the following:

- i. assessing the standard of academic awards and student attainment with regard to learning outcomes, institutional marks and standards documents and academic regulations as well as external/sectoral standards
- ii. reviewing and advising on assessment methodologies and assessment questions
- iii. ensuring that the policies, procedures and rubrics of the institution have been applied fairly and consistently to all learners (and advising where practice requires improvement)
- iv. commenting on student learning and support experience, as appropriate
- v. attending programme/examination boards (in person or online)
- vi. identifying good practice in assessment
- vii. commenting on trends in assessment and attainment
- viii. submitting a report that captures the above areas (see ss.4.4 below).

External examiners may request further samples of assessments if they have any concerns about standards, assessment practice or individual/cohort learner attainment.

The external examiner will not be expected to mark/double mark assessments. In serious cases of disagreement between internal assessors, the external examiner may provide independent advice.

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 with reference to the programme learning outcomes, institutional marks and standards and/or NUI grade descriptors. 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 relevant institutional body shall determine the marks awarded, and its decision shall be final.

4.3 Engagement with the Institution

4.3.1 Campus Visits

External examiners will ordinarily visit the institution in-person at least once during a standard three- or four-year term of appointment. This visit would ideally take place during the first year of the appointment (to maximise the benefit to the external examiner) but where there are multiple external examiners, it may be more advantageous to alternate visits regardless of the year of appointment. Additional visits at the mutual convenience of the institution and external examiner are not precluded.

4.3.2 Examination Boards

External examiners should be invited to attend meetings on examination/assessment results, either virtually or in-person, at unit/department or faculty level, as appropriate.

The procedures governing examination board meetings should be provided to external examiners in advance by the institution.

4.3.3 Meetings with Staff and Students

External examiners may engage in discussions with key programme personnel within the institution at any time during their appointment. It is expected that a formal period for such discussions would be arranged during the external examiner's visit, as appropriate.

External examiners may also meet with a representative group of students to assess the student experience and student quality at the institution. This can be done either virtually or in-person, as appropriate.

4.4 Reporting

Reporting is an essential mechanism through which NUI sets quality standards for programme delivery and assessment for the federal university. These reports feed into internal and external quality reviews (at programme and unit level), programme monitoring and curriculum reviews in the relevant institution. These reports are forwarded to NUI by the constituent universities and are essential for NUI to identify trends over time and across the federation.

4.5 Transparency

External examiners will understand the commitment of NUI and its member institutions to transparency (see 3.5 above) and efforts to support public confidence in the quality assurance and academic standards of awards. Member institutions will publish a list of external examiners for each award with the primary occupation/affiliation of the relevant external examiners for each award.

4.6 Data Protection

External examiners accept, upon appointment, responsibility to store electronic student files securely while under review and to permanently delete the files upon completion of external examining duties.

4.7 Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

External examiners should be aware and supportive of the commitment across all NUI institutions to equality, diversity and inclusion. NUI member institutions provide a positive working, research and learning environment that is open to all regardless of age, disability, gender, marriage or civil partnership, race (including ethnic or national origin, nationality or colour), religion or belief, sexual orientation, family status, membership of the Traveller community, or socio-economic status.

External examiners should, where possible and applicable, ensure that this principle is upheld by the assessment processes within their purview.

4.8 Withdrawal

If, after appointment, an external examiner is no longer able to meet the responsibilities as outlined above, they should let the institution know at the earliest opportunity. Similarly, if the external examiner becomes aware of a conflict of interest, they should inform the institution.

4.9 Serious Concerns

If an external examiner has serious concerns, they may wish to provide a confidential report directly to the institution's independent point of contact who will liaise with the relevant programme/school leadership to resolve the matter satisfactorily.

5 Appointment Term and Eligibility

5.1 Criteria for Appointment

- i. **Qualifications and expertise:** 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(s) to be awarded on the basis of the examination(s)/assessment(s) in question. They should have up-to-date knowledge of international best practice in the design, development and assessment of relevant curricula.
- ii. **Academic standing:** An external examiner should have appropriate academic standing and expertise and have sufficient university experience to adjudicate on comparability of standards.
- iii. **Institutional independence:** An external examiner should not normally be appointed from a School where a member of staff in the host School is currently serving as an external examiner.
An external examiner should not normally be appointed from the same institution as their predecessor or another external examiner on the same programme. Exceptions may on occasion be permitted, for example, in the case of subjects taught only in a very small number of institutions or in specialised areas.
Former members of staff may not be appointed as external examiners to the same institution for a period of at least five years after they have left that institution.
Former students may not be appointed as external examiners to the same institution until a period of at least five years has elapsed and the graduate has obtained sufficient experience at another institution.
- iv. **Impartiality:** An external examiner should not have a close personal relationship to staff or students on the relevant programme. An individual should not be appointed as external examiner if their impartiality could be called into question because of a personal or professional relationship with a member of staff or a student in the NUI institution concerned. Care should be taken to ensure that no other possible conflict of interest may arise. Any potential conflicts of interest should be made known upon nomination or as may arise during the term of appointment.
- v. **Programme independence:** An external examiner may not be involved in the teaching of a subject/degree programme that they will be called on to externally moderate.

- vi. **Concurrent appointments:** An external examiner will not normally hold more than two external examiner appointments at once (it is acknowledged that some overlap in appointments may occur this refers only to fully concurrent appointments).
- vii. **Equality, diversity and inclusion:** In identifying potential external examiners, institutions should ensure that the pool of external examiners (on a programme over time or on a team of examiners) reflects the diversity of the higher education sector. Nominators should review the profile of previous and, where relevant, current external examiners and consider factors such as gender, race/ethnicity and disability in recruiting external examiners.
- viii. **Geographical location:** In identifying potential external examiners, institutions will have due regard for the environmental impact of appointing external examiners based in countries outside of Europe. Within an external examiner team for a large programme, it may be possible to appoint an international external examiner who is not expected to travel as long as there is sufficient capacity to travel amongst the team as a whole.

5.2 Terms of Appointment

- i. External examiners will normally be appointed for a term of up to three years, or four years in the case of four-year programmes. An external examiner may be re-appointed for a fourth year in the case of three-year appointments. Exceptionally, an external examiner may be re-appointed for a further term of up to two or three years, depending on the initial term. No external examiner should be called on to serve for more than **six** consecutive years.
- ii. 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. An exception would be made in the case of newly established extension programmes overseas, where experience of the local programme would benefit the establishment of the programme at an international campus.
- iii. An external examiner who retires during the period of appointment, may continue for the remainder of that appointment period but should not normally be re-appointed for a further period.

- iv. The appointment of an external examiner may be terminated if the external examiner fails to fulfil their responsibilities or if serious conflicts of interest arise.

5.3 Programmes Requiring an External Examiner

All programmes leading to an NUI qualification that is placed on the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) require an external examiner.

Broad multidisciplinary programmes (e.g. BA or medicine) may require an external examiner for each subject and programmes with large learner cohorts may require more than one extern to ensure reasonable cover and to avoid undue burden on individual external examiners.

5.4 Removal or Replacement of an External Examiner

If an external examiner fails to fulfil key elements of the role, particularly if they do not submit an annual report, their appointment may be terminated early.

If an external examiner's circumstances change such that a conflict of interest arises or if it becomes known that a pre-existing conflict of interest exists, their appointment may be terminated early.

6 Key Resources and References

AdvanceHE (2019) [Fundamentals of External Examining](#).

Maynooth University (2017) External Examiners for Taught Programmes.

NUI (2024) [National University of Ireland Quality Policy](#).

O'Sullivan, S, Uí Chonnachtaigh, S & Irfan, M (2025) [ExPeRA: A Reflection on External Examining Roles and Practices in Irish Universities](#).

QAA (2022) [External Examining Principles](#).

QQI (2015) [Effective Practice Guidelines for External Examining](#).

UCC (2024) [Guidelines for Extern Examiners: Primary Degree and Taught Postgraduate Courses](#).

UCD (2023) [Extern Examiners for Taught Programmes Policy](#).

[Universities Act](#), 1997

University of Galway (2022) [Role of External Examiners – Taught Programmes](#). QA005.

Appendix 1 – External Examiner Nomination: Required Information



To facilitate the timely approval of new external examiners, constituent universities should provide the following data in a format that is editable by NUI:

Personal details

Title
First name
Family name/surname
Email address

Professional Details

Affiliation (university, college or organisation)

Note: if not a typical appointment, some mention of requisite qualifications/experience should be provided

Term Details

School/unit
Programme/subject/module
Term of appointment (start date plus number of years or end date)
Nominator
Type of appointment*: academic/professional/practice
Confirmation they have not acted in the previous 3 years

Appendix 2 – Guidance on Induction of External Examiners

The induction of external examiners is a matter for each institution. It is recommended that inductions include the following:

- A brief introduction to the institution (history, mission, values and purpose).
- Guidance on the role of the external examiner and expectations of the institution.
- Guidance on what to do if there is a problem (e.g. unable to fulfil duties, concern regarding a programme or assessment standards).
- Emphasis on the importance of end-of-year reports and information on payments.
- Key contacts for the programme team and, if relevant, central administration in the institution.

Appendix 3 – Sample Report Form

Report of the External Examiner

Please complete reports within **[X weeks]** of the completion of work for the academic year and return to **[insert]**. Please ensure the report is signed and dated (end of report).

External Examiner Details

Title		Institution	
First name(s)		Email address	
Family name			

Academic year examined: 20__ - 20__

Programme(s) and/or subject(s)

(Insert additional rows if necessary)

Mode of visit: in-person Virtual

Time(s) of visit(s): Spring Summer

Autumn Winter

A. To be completed if you acted as external examiner last year:

	Questions	Yes	No	External Examiner's Comments
1	Were you provided with evidence that your recommendation(s) from previous years were considered and acted upon?			
2	Did you receive timely payment following your visit and submission of your report?			

B. To be completed by all external examiners

In respect of the programme(s)/subject(s)/modules for which you were appointed as external examiner, please report on the following:

	Questions	Yes	No	External Examiner's Comments
1	Information provided to External Examiners			
	Did you receive adequate information on the following: - learning outcomes - structure and content - learning strategy and assessment.			
2	Information provided to External Examiners			
2.1	Was the administration of the examination process satisfactory?			
2.2	Were the facilities and material for practical and/or clinical assessment adequate?			
2.3	Was there access to a sufficient number and range of examination papers to enable a view to be formed that internal marking was appropriate and consistent?			
2.4	Was there sufficient access to other assessment instruments (continuous assessments, practicals, clinical assessments, exhibitions etc), to enable the exercise of effective external judgement?			
2.5	Was there adequate opportunity to see scripts and/or other assessment material presented by borderline candidates?			

	Questions	Yes	No	External Examiner's Comments
3	Learning outcomes, structure & content			
3.1	Are learning outcomes sufficiently well-defined and appropriate to the subject matter and to the students?			
3.2	Is the structure satisfactory?			
3.3	Is the content current and appropriate to the level at which it is taught?			
4	Learning strategy & assessment			
4.1	Are you satisfied that the assessment strategy is aligned with the learning outcomes?			
4.2	Is the range and scope of the assessment instruments sufficiently comprehensive in relation to the expected learning outcomes?			
4.3	Do the assessments enable students to demonstrate achievement of the expected learning outcomes?			
4.4	Is the extent of the assessment requirements appropriate to the programme and level of award?			
4.5	Any general comments on learning strategy and assessment:			

	Questions	Yes	No	External Examiner's Comments
5	Standards and quality			
5.1	Is the general quality of candidates' work satisfactory?			
5.2	Is the failure rate a cause for concern?			
5.3	Is the distribution of final honours classes comparable with the distribution in other institutions?			
5.4	Were the standards achieved by students consistent with standards in your own university and/or elsewhere in other universities in which you have examined?			
5.5	Any general comments on standards and quality:			
6	General comments – key commendations and recommendations			
6.1	Key commendations (relating to the programme/module or assessment strategy and process):			
6.2	Key recommendations for development or enhancement to the programme/module:			
6.3	Any other general comments (particularly re causes for concern):			

Signed:

Date:



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