

A review of external examining arrangements across the UK

Report to the UK higher
education funding bodies by
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Academy

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Executive summary

Introduction

1. This report sets out the findings of a review of external examining arrangements across the UK higher education sector carried out by the Higher Education Academy (HEA). The inquiry was commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and supported by the higher education funding bodies for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The sector comprises all degree-awarding bodies and alternative providers of higher education in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. It encompasses the awards made by UK degree-awarding bodies which are delivered by other providers both within and outside the UK.
2. A House of Commons Select Committee inquiry in 2009 made recommendations in respect of external examining which prompted an appraisal of the system. The subsequent Finch Report (UUK 2011) led to proposals in respect of external examining which were largely incorporated into the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, Chapter B7: External examining (henceforth to be referred to as Chapter B7).
3. It is now timely to consider how those reforms have been implemented in the context of the funding bodies' wider review of approaches to external quality assessment. It is also important to revisit the concerns expressed by the Select Committee in 2009.
4. The objectives of the review are:
 - To assess whether the recommendations of the Finch Report have been implemented universally across the sector;
 - To assess the effectiveness of the external examining system in safeguarding standards and maintaining the confidence of stakeholders;
 - To consider whether in this changing higher education environment – looking to 2025 – what, if any, further changes might be required to the external examining system if significantly more reliance were placed on it in revised future quality assessment arrangements; and
 - To make recommendations for actions and their implementation where a need is identified.

Method

5. The intention was to explore external examining of both undergraduate and postgraduate taught provision, but not of research degrees. A mixed method approach was deployed in order to capture both the breadth and depth of information, experience and opinion. This included: desk-based research, surveys, and direct engagement with stakeholders through interviews and fora.
6. The desk-based research included a detailed review of recent reports and research on external examining and related literature. Topics included the use of external examining in other countries and alternative methods of peer-based external review of academic standards being piloted in the USA and Australia. The desk-based element also explored the extent to which providers had implemented the key recommendations of the Finch Report through an analysis of recent Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) institutional review reports of higher education providers and of a sample of providers' websites.
7. Separate online surveys of external examiners and senior 'quality' officers were carried out in order to obtain their views on the current state of external examining and possible enhancements that might be considered for the future. The profile of external examiner responses (n=602) represented a good range of both subject disciplines and external examining experience as well as examiners from all parts of the sector (as determined by the seven HEFCE Peer Groups for Transparent Approach to Costing (TRAC) purposes) and all countries of the UK. Responses were received from quality officers employed at 98 of the 159 institutions with degree-awarding powers (62%). Twelve external examiners and seven quality officers were selected for follow-up telephone interviews which enabled more detailed exploration of the issues. Participants were chosen randomly from survey respondents who volunteered, controlling for representation from countries of the UK and the seven Peer Groups. Student opinion was sampled through a survey of 869 students conducted by the National Union of Students (NUS) and 'vox pop' surveys with 27 students at two universities. Student survey respondents included a good mix of ages, subjects of study and home/international status.
8. Four regional fora (in London, Cardiff, Glasgow and Manchester) and a stakeholder event in London provided the opportunity to explore sector views on the research questions directly.
9. The term 'academic standards' is used in this report to refer to standards of student attainment and 'quality standards' to refer to standards in the assessment cycle such as task setting, marking, feedback, moderation, and examination board procedures. This is a crucial distinction in understanding the findings of this report. Chapter B7 expects external examiners to provide comment on both academic and quality

standards, although recent academic research has pointed to a drift towards the latter as the main focus of the external examiner role.

Review of previous research and sector reports

10. There have been numerous sector reports on external examining since 1994 which have consistently maintained the value of external examining whilst recognising the need for some enhancement and regularisation in order to improve consistency and quality. These interventions have led to changes to guidance about recruitment, induction and operation. Sector reports have revealed a developing view that comparability of standards across subjects and institutions can only be assured at the level of the subject and, most recently, across similar awards with which the examiner is familiar.
11. Broader empirical research provides clear evidence of the inconsistency and unreliability of higher education assessors as well as observing that a shared knowledge of academic standards cannot be presumed from written standards as they are open to diverse interpretation. Studies also report that academics may have little knowledge of the difficulties and complexities of reliable marking and tend to consider that they share academic standards with their colleagues when empirical studies indicate variability. These findings, which are outlined in detail in the main report, have been replicated in the small number of studies of external examiners. Examiners draw on their personal experience and make limited use of formal reference points in making their judgements. They may also lack experience of providers across the sector and receive limited support for the task from their own institutions. These research findings cast significant doubt on the presumption that external examiners hold shared academic standards that accord with the frameworks for higher education qualifications and applicable Subject Benchmark Statements, although knowledge of such standards is fundamental to judgements regarding threshold academic standards. Prior academic research has found that a key cause of variability in examiners' academic standards is inadequate opportunities for 'calibration' in relation to others in their disciplinary community and taking into account agreed reference points.

Implementation of the Finch Report recommendations

12. The findings of this review consistently confirm high levels of implementation of the Finch Report recommendations leading to improvements in the consistency of external examiner arrangements across the sector. These improvements include reform to the appointment process, clarity regarding the areas about which examiners should provide informed comment, provision of information to examiners on their role and responsibilities, and guidance on how providers should respond to external examiner reports. Consistent information from all data sources indicates that further implementation is required in three areas:

- Institutions recognising the involvement of their own staff in external examining and agreeing time for the work. Evidence from the surveys and regional fora indicated that a substantial minority of external examiners have not found this recommendation to be implemented. This finding may have implications when considering potential enhancement or developments to external examining;
 - Guidance related to transparency and engagement of students with external examining. Getting students interested in engaging with the external examiner system is seen as a challenge;
 - Providing examiners with guidance that they can take matters of serious concern to the head of institution. Senior quality officers largely considered that this information was provided but this was not confirmed by a substantial minority of examiners.
13. The Finch reforms were introduced in 2012 and it is recognised that the first two of these low implementation areas were likely to take longer to embed given the breadth of staff and student involvement required across each provider. The institutions with the lowest evidence of implementation were private providers and further education colleges. This lack of evidence, however, may be a feature of differences in the nature of the QAA reports rather than an indication of lower implementation levels.
14. It should be noted that, in general, senior quality officers express more confidence in levels of implementation than external examiners. Discrepancies exist in relation to: comment on threshold academic standards; effective response to annual reports; comment on enhancement opportunities; home institutions valuing external examiner work and allocating time for it; the extent of a risk of unsuitably cosy relationships between external examiners and departments.

The external examiner role

15. The literature reveals that the external examiner role is open to debate and interpretation and this lack of clarity was reflected in the project findings: 43% of examiners but only 13% of quality officers perceive the role as largely a 'process checker', that is having a focus on quality standards rather than academic standards. This finding indicates not only a contrast in experience but also that 13% of those responsible for quality assurance in institutions consider the role to have become more a guardian of assessment processes rather than of assessment outcomes.
16. There is limited evidence (19%) that external examiners see their role as demonstrating accountability to those beyond the immediate students and staff of the institution to include wider stakeholders such as the QAA, professional bodies and employers. A third of respondents to both surveys reported too much variability in the role in terms of demands, the report, the fee and the ability to

safeguard academic standards. Examiners had varied views regarding how programme staff view the external examiner role, with the highest average ranking going to 'critical friend' and the lowest to 'authority in quality assurance'. Examiners gave many, largely positive, reasons for undertaking the role.

Fitness for purpose

17. Variability in the role may be a consequence of lack of agreement over the purpose of external examining. The review of literature and the data collected for this report suggest that the external examiner system does appear fit for purpose if that purpose is to provide a level of externality in the form of additional moderators, a check on fair and effective assessment processes, a 'critical friend' to programmes and a mechanism for sharing good practice and developing academic staff. Few voices, either in the literature or amongst our research participants have expressed doubt in these domains.
18. On the other hand, if a key purpose is to safeguard academic standards, there is a discrepancy between the evidence of research and the views of many working in the sector. External examiners (88%) and quality officers (97%) largely consider that the system is fit for purpose and can be relied on to provide assurance that standards are right. Few examiners (13%) had experienced pressure 'not to rock the boat' and only a minority of the survey respondents (15% and 16%) lacked confidence in the system's ability to meaningfully compare academic standards across programmes. The evidence of research, however, indicates that the effectiveness of the system in safeguarding standards and their comparability across providers is considerably less clear cut. It is recognised that external examiners are only one tool in providers' toolkits for quality assurance, yet they have a unique role as the only external check on academic standards for many programmes.
19. There are likely to be multiple reasons for the increase in first and upper second class degrees in the UK in recent years including higher entry qualifications, improvements in teaching, enhanced guidance to students, outcome-based curricula and greater proportions of coursework. However, 40% of quality officers report that their institutions have changed their award algorithm(s) in the last five years to ensure that it does not disadvantage students in comparison with those in similar institutions, compared with 43% who report that they have not made such changes¹. The majority indicate that these were changes that could improve student outcomes. Such patterns of institutional behaviour are likely, over time, to create an upward movement in award outcomes (such as that noted in recent Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) reports) that is irrespective of changes in student

¹ Seventeen percent report that they did not know this information.

performance and largely outside the scope of external examiners' deliberations on academic standards.

20. There was support from senior quality officers for the view that QAA institutional reviews provide sufficient assurance of both academic standards and the operation of the external examiner system, although forum delegates and the open comments noted that the former was more difficult to assure than the latter. Respondents also noted the importance of institutions' own robust processes for checking their procedures and academic standards.

Comparability of standards

21. There is a similar disjunction between the views of the sector and research data regarding comparability of standards. Eighty percent of examiners and quality officers view 'comparability' of academic standards across institutions, programmes and subjects as a meaningful concept with a noticeable measure of dissension in the comments. Consistency and comparability of academic standards are considered to be stronger at the level of 'threshold standards' and in subjects regulated by a professional body. Diversity of provision, limited individual experience as an external examiner and the absence of appropriate fora for examiners to share and debate matters are reasons offered for the difficulty in assuring comparability. Survey data on 602 external examiner appointments substantiates conjecture that providers are apt to recruit their external examiners from similar types of institution. This pattern is likely to create limitations on assuring comparability across different parts of the sector, although the limited pool of examiners in some small or niche subject areas, particularly at Masters level and those in the Welsh language, may necessarily limit cross-sector engagement. There was limited enthusiasm (55%) amongst quality officers for external examining across international boundaries (with the exception of assuring collaborative provision) or its potential contribution to calibrating academic standards internationally - practical difficulties being the main hurdle.

Stakeholder confidence

22. It is important to note that the confidence of stakeholders in UK academic standards is likely to be the result of many factors, only one of which is the soundness of those standards. Other factors are likely to include personal experience, knowledge of the sector, the reputation of UK higher education and communications in the media.
23. The evidence of the NUS student survey carried out for this review indicates that a majority of students (64%) are aware of external examiners and have some knowledge of the role although most have not seen an examiner's report (9% yes, 81% no, 9 % don't know). In addition, only 36% of the respondents understand how standards are assured by their provider with a minority (40%) also agreeing that the standards are similar between their programme and similar courses elsewhere. On

this basis, it is difficult to claim that external examining currently makes a strong contribution to students' confidence in academic standards.

24. In relation to stakeholders other than students, external examiners (79%) and senior quality officers (90%) hold strongly positive views about the contribution of external examining to stakeholder confidence in UK higher education. However, a number also think that most stakeholders outside the sector do not understand the system or know it exists. External stakeholders, based on a very small sample, are also likely to express broad confidence in UK higher education standards, although the role of examiners is perceived to contribute more to enhancement than assurance of standards and to be only one element of a matrix of quality processes designed to assure standards. Overall, the limited engagement of external stakeholders in our data collection means that we have limited scope to make conclusions about their level of confidence in higher education standards. However, we have no evidence to suggest that such confidence is lacking.

Changes in the higher education environment

25. The higher education sector is operating in a highly dynamic environment with significant potential to impact on academic standards, albeit with some variation in the different nations of the UK. Whilst most of those consulted consider that many factors such as increasing diversity and competition in the sector, growth in student numbers, raised fees and collaborative provision will have an influence on external examining, they do not think these factors affect the examiner role in relation to assurance of standards. However, there is less confidence amongst external examiners (59%) of their capacity to assure standards in the face of the pressures created by league tables and potential 'grade inflation' because of the limitations on their remit. This matter is complex and constitutes a further aspect of this review which identifies tensions between institutional autonomy and achieving comparability of standards.
26. Survey respondents and delegates to the regional fora also noted practical problems with the current system which may be exacerbated by expansion in the sector. These problems include the flow of sufficient, suitably experienced and qualified examiners who meet the Chapter B7 criteria for appointment, a shortage of time to carry out the duties, poor recognition and reward for the role and lack of opportunity to focus on standards rather than processes. On the specific impact of changing technology, some respondents recognise that advances in technology could make the examiner role easier and broader (for example, by facilitating access to all student work on-line).

Enhancements and alternatives

27. Overall, the evidence suggests that although many wish to maintain the external examiner system, there is also considerable agreement about a number of ways by which it should be strengthened. All respondents are convinced of the positive contribution made by examiners to the quality of provision and would prefer any strengthening of the system to be made at the subject level rather than by replacing the system with an inspectorate or a common curriculum and assessment.
28. Suggestions for improving the system made by examiners and quality officers, supplemented by discussion of various options at the regional fora, showed considerable consistency in the main themes. These were:
- Professionalising examining, comprising proper recognition and reward including higher and equitable pay;
 - Better and more standardised (possibly centralised) training and induction, possibly including accreditation of the role;
 - The creation of a national body and/or qualification;
 - Standardisation of the remit, duties and pay;
 - Support in finding external examiners and a more rigorous (independent) appointment process;
 - A firmer process for tackling examiners who fail to fulfil their contracts;
 - More time and recognition from the home institutions for external examining, and a higher profile for the role, making use of the expertise gained in the home institution;
 - The creation of a conference or forum of external examiners; possibly subject-based 'colleges of peers' 'owning' their own academic standards and undertaking their calibration nationally.
29. There is also substantial global interest currently in aligning and guaranteeing higher education learning standards, and a number of education systems are experimenting with, and evaluating, forms of external peer review. Key features of interest in the different international approaches are:
- The use of peer review of student work, including blind peer review;
 - The use of on-line software to manage the review of student work across institutions and to enable (blind) peer review;
 - The focus on validity of assessment tasks in relation to explicit national learning standards for the subject area (as per UK subject benchmark statements), as well as local learning outcomes and a focus on student achievements;

- The calibration of examiners' academic standards involving social moderation²;
- Cross-examiner engagement, or fora at the subject level to debate issues and experiences emerging in examining in the discipline.

Conclusions

30. The UK external examining system has a long history and is clearly well-respected by the sector and admired internationally. It was originally established to secure comparability of standards between universities and the sector continues to place considerable faith in its ability to assure the quality of students' achievements as part of a matrix of quality assurance measures. Indeed, it does offer a degree of externality to higher education assessment and is beneficial in: providing a 'critical friend' role, providing a check on assessment processes, the sharing of good practice and the development of academic staff.
31. In relation to the objectives of this review, we have concluded that the majority of the Finch recommendations have been implemented by providers with further work required particularly in relation to student engagement and recognition of the role by examiners' home institutions. We note that the Finch Report reforms have taken an important step towards professionalising the external examiner role and achieving more consistent arrangements across the sector. The recommendations of this review are designed to take further a number of the achievements of the Finch group.
32. In relation to the second objective regarding the safeguarding of standards, we have concluded, as did the Finch Report, that there is both a formal requirement and a public expectation of comparability of UK awards at least at the level of threshold academic standards. In this regard, the positive standpoint on external examining, found in previous reviews, has been strongly echoed in our engagement with the sector. Indeed, we cannot overestimate the symbolic and reputational power of the system in relation to assurance of standards. Our findings indicate, however, that this reputation has a fragile foundation; external examining risks losing its symbolic power if changes in higher education apply greater pressure to the system and expose its shortcomings in relation to its espoused purposes.
33. Therefore, whilst it is recognised that external examiners are part of a wide range of quality assurance measures designed to safeguard academic and quality standards, they are typically the only external quality assurance activity which is designated to consider actual student achievement. In common with repeated reports and studies

² This is a social process to reach a common understanding of standards and how they are applied within a subject or professional community.

cautioning against the system's capacity to ensure comparability of standards we found little evidence to support the view that external examiners are an effective means to safeguard academic standards. The key data informing this view are evidence of poor reliability in applying standards, variation in the meaning accorded to written standards and criteria, limited use of external reference points for standards, patterns of examiner appointment by Peer Group, limited assessment literacy, changes to award algorithms and the shift to a 'process checker' role for some examiner appointments. This evidence of the challenges to safeguarding standards by external examiners is relevant to the third objective. It has informed our recommendations regarding the changes that are needed in order to address increasing pressure from the growing and competitive higher education environment.

34. In relation to stakeholder confidence in UK higher education standards, we find that stakeholders within the sector generally hold the system in great esteem and consider it is fit for purpose in safeguarding standards. We are less confident that external examining makes a noticeable contribution to students' confidence in academic standards and we lack evidence to claim how external examining impacts on external stakeholders' confidence in standards. Our recommendations are aimed at strengthening the role as a prerequisite to maintaining and improving stakeholder confidence in UK academic standards.

Recommendations

35. The findings of this research suggest that there are a number of issues that need to be addressed in order to establish external examiners as key contributors to assuring academic standards and offering justifiable confidence in those standards to relevant stakeholders. These issues are professionalisation, support from their home institutions, calibration of examiners' academic standards, clarity in the role, and the impact of award algorithms and regulations. The overwhelming support in the sector for external examining and a system of peer review indicates that greatest progress will be made by adapting and developing the present arrangements rather than creating an alternative method. On this basis, we recommend that the sector:
- Retains an external examiner system, albeit in an enhanced form;
 - Develops a standardised and clarified role and remit for external examiners that rebalances academic and quality standards and is agreed across the UK sector;
 - Accelerates the professionalisation of the external examiner built on:
 - external examiners taking part in regular calibration of their standards, organised by their disciplinary communities and drawing on existing UK and international methods for calibration;
 - more systematic training to develop further knowledge and more consistent perspectives on the role, standards, assessment literacy and professional judgement;

- Organises an appointment process, managed by the sector but independent of individual providers;
- Adopts equitable and appropriate remuneration;
- Undertakes to support and recognise external examiners in their home institutions including development of staff for the role, clear reward and recognition for the role, appropriate resourcing including time, and effective use of examiner knowledge and experience;
- Reviews the impact of differential award algorithms and regulations amongst degree-awarding bodies on outcomes for students and academic standards.

Part I: Introduction

- 1.1 This report sets out the findings of a review of external examining³ arrangements across the UK carried out by the Higher Education Academy (HEA). The inquiry was commissioned by HEFCE and supported by the higher education funding bodies for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. It will contribute to a wider review of the future of quality assessment in higher education⁴ currently being undertaken by the funding councils in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.
- 1.2 This review includes consideration of recent literature on external examining, reference to examining practices in institutional web pages and in recent Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) institutional review reports, surveys of external examiners, students and those who manage quality assurance arrangements in institutions, and direct engagement with the sector and relevant stakeholders through a series of meetings and interviews. These UK data were supplemented by a brief review of external examiner arrangements and alternative approaches to peer review of quality employed in other higher education systems. This comprehensive range of data sources was designed to ensure a robust review of the topic which can fully inform the sector debate on the future of quality assessment arrangements. It takes into account the place of external examining in the changing and more competitive environment in which higher education institutions operate.

Purpose

- 1.3 This research was established to assess how recommendations from previous reviews have been implemented (in particular, that chaired by Dame Janet Finch in 2011⁵), and whether any further reforms or strengthening of the system would be desirable in light of future requirements. As such the overall purpose is to assess whether current arrangements remain fit for purpose in the changing higher education environment; and looking ahead to the longer-term future what, if any, changes would be required to these arrangements if more reliance were to be placed on external examiners to provide assurance to stakeholders about the academic standards of awards.

³ We recognise that there are a range of external examiner appointments including lead examiners, award examiners and research degree examiners. However, this report focuses on the vast majority of external examiners appointed to specific taught modules and programmes.

⁴ <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/news/newsarchive/2015/name,100748,en.html>

⁵ *Review of external examining arrangements in universities and colleges in the UK*

<http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/highereducation/Documents/2011/ReviewOfExternalExaminingArrangements.pdf>

Specific objectives

- I.4 The general purpose of the review is undertaken through meeting the following objectives:
- To assess whether the recommendations of the Finch Report have been implemented universally across the sector;
 - To assess the effectiveness of the external examining system in safeguarding standards and maintaining the confidence of stakeholders;
 - To consider whether in the changing higher education environment – looking to 2025 – what, if any, further changes might be required to the external examining system if significantly more reliance were placed on it in revised future quality assessment arrangements; and
 - To make recommendations for actions and their implementation where a need is identified.

Background

- I.6 A House of Commons Select Committee inquiry in 2009 considered, among other issues, the role and value of the external examiner system. The Committee expressed concerns that the evidence that the sector provides about the maintenance of academic standards over time, and the comparability of standards between providers and between subject areas, is not always persuasive for all stakeholders.
- I.7 The Select Committee made a number of recommendations in respect of external examining. In response, a report by HEFCE's Teaching, Quality and the Student Experience Committee in 2009, on the quality of English higher education, chaired by Professor Colin Riordan, called for a review of the external examiner system. This review, commissioned by Universities UK and GuildHE, subsequently took place in 2011 and resulted in the Finch Report on the 'Review of external examining arrangements in universities and colleges in the UK' (UUK 2011).
- I.8 The Finch Report concluded that the external examining system worked well and did not require a major overhaul; however it made a number of recommendations with regard to improving the consistency of practice across the sector and increasing transparency for students. Further, more detailed, recommendations concerned the selection, recruitment and induction of examiners. The QAA reflected the outcomes of the Finch Report in revisions to the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, in particular in Part B: Assuring and enhancing academic quality, Chapter B7: External examining. Henceforth to be referred to as Chapter B7.
- I.9 Three years on from publication of the Finch Report, it is appropriate to

consider how those reforms to the external examining system have been implemented across the sector. In the context of the funding bodies' wider review of approaches to external quality assessment, it is also important to revisit the concerns expressed by the Select Committee in 2009.

Part 2: Methods

- 2.1 The complexity of the review objectives required a mixed-methods research design in order to capture both the breadth and depth of information, experience, institutional data and opinion. The intention has been to reflect external examining of both undergraduate and postgraduate taught provision but not of research degrees. The methods selected were also designed to engage a wide group of stakeholders in the data gathering in order to capture views about the current system and potential enhancements for the future. The methods used are detailed in this chapter.

Desk-based research

- 2.2 The research team conducted an analysis of QAA institutional review reports published between July 2013 and February 2015. This date range was chosen in light of the fact that Chapter B7 was published in December 2011 and therefore took into account the time that providers could reasonably expect to embed the new guidance into their policies and procedures. We also included the further education sector and private providers.
- 2.3 As there were so few reviews of universities during the period in question, we included all such reports (n=11) and a sample of reports on further education providers (n=5) and private providers (n=3). The reports from five Scottish universities were also analysed but, as there was no specific content in these related to external examining, they are not included in the analysis⁶. The reports were reviewed not just in relation to comment on Chapter B7 but for other references to external examiners and standards. We checked specifically on 15 key recommendations from the Finch Report which have been incorporated into Chapter B7. We did not check on all other requirements of Chapter B7.
- 2.4 This scrutiny of reports has provided an independent evaluation of the degree to which higher education providers have implemented Chapter B7.
- 2.5 In addition, we also conducted analysis of a sample (21) of providers' arrangements for external examining as published through their websites, such as handbooks or guides for external examiners or policies on external examining. These excluded providers whose QAA review report was analysed for this project. Some institutions have not made their documents available on-line. In those cases, we

⁶ The Scottish Enhancement-Led Institutional Review (ELIR) results in an Outcome Report and a more detailed Technical Report. The Technical Reports make specific reference to academic standards, including external examining. The ELIR method requires the provision of Advance Information Sets, which include a mapping of the institution's policies and procedures against all of the indicators in the Quality code, and an overview of the external examiners' reports.

selected another institution in the same Peer Group. A range of search terms were used in order to check for evidence of implementation of the 15 Finch recommendations listed above. The benefit of information from QAA reports as opposed to that from web pages is that the latter only outline policy and do not provide evidence that the policy is enacted. However, the published information outlines institutional intention in this area and therefore contributes to our overall judgement of the extent to which providers have implemented the guidance in Chapter B7.

- 2.6 A review of recent literature, reports and research on external examining was also conducted. This has included key relevant reviews and policy documents as well as educational research in the UK and internationally with regard to external examining and related matters of quality assurance and assessment. This documentary analysis has also considered the changing higher education environment specifically in relation to standards and quality, to identify the challenges to assurance of standards and external examining arrangements as they currently operate. It has included consideration of alternative approaches to external examining and other external peer-based models for the review of standards by drawing on examples being used or piloted in other countries.

Survey data

- 2.7 An online survey was carried out of external examiners across a wide range of subject disciplines. External examiners were contacted using the JISC discussion list for external examining (1,327) and through a special edition of the HEA's Academy Update (circulation: 48,000) in order to obtain responses across a good range of subject disciplines and those both new to examining and who have extensive experience. The profile of those responding (n=602) fulfilled this aim. Tables 1 and 2 demonstrate the wide range of examining experience present in the sample.

Table 1: Number of years of external examining experience

<3	3-5	6-10	11-20	21-30	>30
123	141	188	111	31	1
20.7%	23.7%	31.6%	18.7%	5.2	0.2

Table 2: Number of external examining appointments

1-2 appointments	3-5 appointments	6-9 appointments	10-19 appointments	20+ appointments	30+ appointments	Not declared
257	207	77	33	6	4	18

2.8 All subject clusters were strongly represented in the sample with appropriately high response rates in the fields with particularly large student numbers such as Allied Health Professions, Dentistry, Nursing and Pharmacy, Business and Management Studies, and Education. The full list of subject representation can be found in Appendix 1. The survey also included respondents from all countries of the UK (England 488, Scotland 25, Wales 22, Northern Ireland 7, not declared 62). Table 3 sets out the sample in terms of the different Peer Groups listed by HEFCE for annual Transparent Approach to Costing (TRAC) benchmarking – listed below demonstrating a good representation of the different parts of the sector with the exception of the specialist music/arts providers.

Peer groups

- A: Russell Group (all have medical schools) excluding the London School of Economics (LSE) plus specialist medical schools
- B: All other institutions with research income of 22% or more of total income
- C: Institutions with a research income of 8%-21% of total income
- D: Institutions with a research income of between 5% and 8% of total income and those with a total income below £120m
- E: Teaching institutions with a turnover of between £40m and £119m
- F: Smaller teaching institutions
- G: Specialist music/arts teaching institutions

Table 3: The number of external examiners in each Peer Group

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	Not declared
89	105	82	119	99	36	10	62

- 2.9 We are satisfied that the number of responses, and breadth of experience and institutions of the respondents has ensured that the results are a good representation of views of external examiners in the sector. We are aware that there is some potential for bias in the group; for example, those responding may have a particular interest or concern for external examining and there is limited representation of examiners who are not employed outside the higher education sector.
- 2.10 A second survey was directed at senior quality staff responsible for external examiner arrangements in their institutions. The purpose of this survey was to collect self-report data on the extent to which each provider has been able to meet the requirements outlined in Chapter B7. Questions also sought the opinion of these staff in relation to other aspects of external examiner arrangements and academic standards matters as well as their opinion on the research areas set out in 1.4 above. Respondents were contacted via the JISC external examiners' mailing list (1,327), those with the appropriate designation on the HEA's Customer Relationship Management mailing lists (853), via the Quality Strategy Network and the Academic Registrar's Council. The ambitious aim was to obtain a survey response from each UK institution with degree-awarding powers (159) and we managed to achieve responses from 98 institutions (62%). In addition, there were eight from those working for private providers and non-degree-awarding institutions such as further education colleges which deliver higher education. There were also 20 responses where the institution was not declared. In total we had 126 usable responses from senior quality officers. These responses included a representative spread across the Peer Groups with the exception of Group G, specialist music/arts teaching institutions. Quality officers responded from 91 English, nine Scottish, four Welsh and two Northern Irish institutions. In the case of duplicate responses by a provider, we set aside all additional responses, retaining those that were most clearly from respondents in a senior quality officer role rather than in, for example, an academic quality role. The vast majority of respondents described themselves as senior quality officers; for example, Head of Academic Quality, Director of Quality and Standards, and Academic Registrar. A small number described themselves as a senior academic such as Dean. In order to have representation from as many degree-awarding bodies as possible, we have included academic roles in the sample if no senior quality officer had submitted a response for the same provider. See Table 4 for the distribution of responses by Peer Group.

Table 4: Number of degree-awarding bodies represented in the senior quality officer responses by Peer Group

A	B	C	D	E	F	G
18	18	12	18	17	7	8

- 2.11 The surveys involved a range of question styles including some 'Likert' type statements. For the purpose of presenting the findings concisely, for the most part we have grouped 'definitely agree' and 'agree', and 'definitely disagree' and 'disagree' as 'agree' and 'disagree' respectively. All figures are rounded to the nearest whole percentage number.
- 2.12 A third survey was conducted on-line with 1,114 students as part of a larger National Union of Students (NUS) Group Student Opinion Survey and we are grateful for NUS support in managing this survey. The Student Opinion Survey is a regular survey emailed to a sample of students from the 'NUS extra card' database. This is a database of students who have purchased a discount card and agreed to be contacted for research purposes. This short survey gives easy access to student opinion for research and insight purposes. The sample comprised a reasonable balance of male and female students (41% male, 59% female), a wide range of different age groups with 56% aged between 18 and 23 and a good spread of subject disciplines. Eighty-eight percent were UK citizens and 12% were international students studying in the UK. The questions were designed to elicit student knowledge and understanding of the external examiner role, their experience of meeting examiners or reading external examiner reports. They were also asked several questions about academic standards in relation to their programme. Not all survey respondents answered the questions about external examiners, with the number for each question in the range 867 to 869.

Engagement with stakeholders and information gathering

- 2.13 Telephone interviews were conducted with 12 external examiners from 12 different institutions, two each from Peer Groups A-F. The seven women and five men interviewed examine in a range of disciplines and are based in Scottish, Welsh and English institutions. A further seven telephone interviews were conducted with a quality assurance officer from one institution from each of the seven Peer Groups. Interviewees were selected from survey respondents who expressed a willingness to be interviewed. Interviewees were selected to include all Peer Groups and constituent nations of the UK. Within those parameters, they were selected on a random basis. Interviewees were contacted by email and filled out an online consent form before being called for scheduled telephone interviews lasting approximately 30 minutes each.
- 2.14 The interviews provided further insight into the information and opinions offered in the surveys. The questions used in the interviews were generated by reviewing the areas of least agreement between different respondents in the survey as well as addressing those areas of Chapter B7 where there was less evidence of implementation. The semi-structured nature of the interview questions allowed them to be tailored to the specific comments made in the survey by the interviewees.

- 2.15 Researchers took notes and transcribed representative quotations from the interview recordings. They then analysed the notes thematically and summarised them under the headings: implementation of Chapter B7; the external examiner role; the capacity of external examiners to safeguard standards; the higher education landscape; and recommendations.
- 2.16 Four regional fora were held in London, Cardiff, Glasgow and Manchester to gather the views of senior academics and those responsible for quality assurance and external examining from a range of higher education providers across the four nations; 74 people attended these events (London 26, Cardiff 15, Manchester 23, Glasgow 10). These regional meetings were an opportunity to obtain sector views on the research questions and discuss some of the conflicting findings that had emerged from the desk-based research and surveys. They were also an opportunity to debate possible options for the future.
- 2.17 A similar forum also took place to engage, by invitation, a wide range of stakeholders including employer organisations; subject discipline groups; professional, statutory and regulatory bodies; and student bodies. In practice, whilst there was representation from most of these groups, there was a strong presence from those working within the sector which may influence the nature of their knowledge and views regarding external examining in comparison with other stakeholders. This meeting concentrated on issues of stakeholder confidence in standards and the external examining system. This included suggestions for future enhancement and the potential to learn from Professional Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs) in relation to the assurance of standards.
- 2.18 All those attending the fora were provided in advance with a consultation document, which set out the aim and scope of this review and its relationship with the wider Quality Assessment Review.
- 2.19 The team conducted ‘vox pop’ surveys aimed at gauging student understanding of the role of the external examiner and knowledge of examiners’ reports. These were short, on the spot interviews on external examiners. Twenty-seven students, both undergraduate and postgraduate, participated, 15 from a HEFCE Peer Group A institution, and 12 from a HEFCE Peer Group D institution.

Part 3: Review of previous research and inquiries related to external examining

- 3.1 The following review draws on the literature on academic standards, assessment judgement and external examining as well as giving a brief overview of the formal enquiries and commentaries on external examining in the UK published since the mid-1980s. The latter, whilst not necessarily research literature, are important for contextualising this review in the wider landscape of discussions and decisions regarding the external examiner system in the last 30 years. The review considers three key areas: the existence of shared view of standards; the effectiveness of the external examining system; and lessons from other approaches to assuring academic standards.

The existence of a shared view of standards

Meaning of standards

- 3.2 A review of the literature related to external examining needs to clarify the meaning of standards as a prerequisite for further discussion of the evidence, both in this chapter and in the following chapters. Researchers note that academic standards are conceptually complex (Coates, 2010; Woolf and Cooper, 1999) and difficult to define (Coates, 2010). Middlehurst (1996) has described the term as ‘composite’, including input, process and output elements. A number of researchers distinguish academic standards that are related to student attainment as demonstrated in exams, assignments and other performances from standards of competence, service standards and organisational standards (Harvey, 2002; Alderman, 2009). In the Australian context, Krause et al. (2013) distinguish ‘learning standards’ as relating to student output and ‘teaching standards’ to refer to inputs and processes. A pre-eminent, international authority on standards in higher education, Sadler (2013) defines academic ‘learning standards’ as a ‘definite degree of academic achievement established by authority, custom, or consensus and used as a fixed reference point for reporting a student’s level of attainment’ (p. 9).
- 3.3 This output approach is also evident in the definition used by other higher education quality agencies, for example in Australia (Coates, 2010). It underlies the QAA’s definition of threshold academic standards which is ‘The minimum acceptable level of achievement that a student has to demonstrate to be eligible for an academic award’ (QAA, 2014). Therefore, following this consensus and for the purposes of this review, we are using the term ‘academic standards’ to refer to standards of student attainment, and ‘quality standards’ to refer to standards in the assessment cycle such as task setting, marking, feedback, moderation, and examination board procedures. We note that both types of standards are clearly indicated in Chapter B7 (as quoted

below) but that issues of achieving threshold standards and comparability of standards refer only to 'academic' standards:

'Degree-awarding bodies expect their external examiners to provide informative comment and recommendations upon whether or not:

- the degree-awarding body is maintaining the threshold academic standards set for its awards in accordance with the frameworks for higher education qualifications and applicable Subject Benchmark Statements
- the assessment process measures student achievement rigorously and fairly against the intended outcomes of the programme(s) and is conducted in line with the degree awarding body's policies and regulations
- the academic standards and the achievements of students are comparable with those in other UK degree-awarding bodies of which the external examiners have experience.' (QAA, 2015, p.9)

Nature of standards

- 3.4 Alderman (2009) argues that, historically, academic standards were sustained over time by an oral tradition through contact between universities and subject communities, a view supported by Ecclestone (2001) and O'Donovan et al., (2008). This oral tradition is referred to by O'Donovan et al. (2008) as the 'laissez-faire' model of sharing assessment standards. Academics, as 'connoisseurs', are considered able to make expert and reliable judgements because of their education and socialisation into the standards of the discipline (Ecclestone, 2001). Therefore, although statements of standards were rarely articulated in the past, there was an assumption that before the massification of higher education (Silver and Williams, 1996) a 'gold standard' existed, that is, fixed benchmarks that enshrined the standards of the ancient universities.
- 3.5 Such a perspective sees standards as fixed, that is, independent of individuals as their creators or custodians, and relies on engagement and interaction by academics in order to communicate and promulgate shared knowledge of standards:
'Arguably over time, within the context of assessment, engagement with the routines, language and symbols of practice evolve into an enhanced shared understanding of standards. Such understandings are largely tacit in nature, existing locally within a community, their tacit nature making explication difficult if not impossible to those not of the community or on its periphery.'
(O'Donovan et al., 2008, p. 210)
- 3.6 However, researchers are increasingly recognising that standards are not 'immutable' (Sadler, 2010, 2014; Kreber, 2009; Trowler, 2009; Shay, 2005) or independent of individuals (Shay, 2005), and their tacit nature means that it is difficult to detect drifts

in standards (Sadler, 1987). Such an analysis significantly challenges the notion that we can hold knowledge of standards in a way which is consistent among people and over time as presumed by the notion of external examiners assuring comparability of standards (Bloxham and Price, 2013). For this reason, Price (2005) points out that the notion of agreed standards maintained by a small and close knit community of scholars is probably a myth. Indeed, the study of external examiners carried out by Warren Piper (1994) and his review of prior research, indicate that we have little or no basis for the presumption of agreed standards. Barnett (1998) also questions whether we have ever had comparability of standards.

- 3.7 A fundamental assumption underlying the external examiner system is the existence of a shared view of standards among examiners and, indeed, among a majority of assessors in higher education. This concerns three levels: first, looking across the entire sector e.g. what qualities are required at a particular level of study; second, looking within subjects at requirements of the discipline; and third, looking at the detailed level of the standards of particular student work.

Shared view of standards

- 3.8 In order to support a shared view, UK higher education was one of the first systems to introduce explicit statements of standards, for example the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) and subject benchmark statements. Such quality assurance frameworks have emerged from concern about the massification of higher education (Coates, 2010) and have provided greater information about the stated course content, aims, assessment methods and criteria of programmes of study. In relation to standards of student achievement, benchmarking statements for subject disciplines developed under the auspices of the QAA and the threshold standards of professional, statutory or regulatory bodies (e.g. teaching standards) have been established in order to make learning achievements more explicit. At the local level, learning outcomes, level descriptors and assessment criteria have been used to clarify academic standards within programmes.
- 3.9 These efforts to make academic standards more explicit have met with two critiques. Firstly, it is recognised that what may have been referred to as oral, private and implicit knowledge may not just reflect the nature of laissez-faire accountability in the past but also the problematic nature of communicating standards. The nature of what is being assessed makes objective, explicit judgement difficult because such judgement draws on 'tacit' knowledge which is difficult to express (O'Donovan et al., 2008). Secondly, Price and Rust (1999) and Brown (2010) reinforce this in pointing to the failure of documentary statements of standards to guide marking in a reliable way. Indeed, O'Donovan et al. (2004) and Sadler (2014) stress the futility of trying to define standards precisely.
- 3.10 It is pertinent to note that, originally, 'subject benchmark statements' were termed 'benchmark standards', however by the time the benchmarks were first published, in

May 2000, they had been relabelled ‘benchmark statements’, a move which prompted comment that this ‘change recognised the failure of the process to clearly define explicit standards for all subjects’ (Rust et al., 2003, p. 148). In a similar vein, Coates (2010, p. 10) argues that, whilst the stated curriculum and learning outcomes for programmes are now in the public domain, the judgement of student achievement remains largely unchanged: ‘the private preserve of teaching staff’. In his analysis of summative assessment practices in higher education, and drawing together Eisner’s (1985) conceptions of connoisseurship with learning theory and psychometrics, Knight (2002, p. 280) asserted that ‘benchmarks, specifications, criteria and learning outcomes do not and cannot make summative assessment reliable, may limit its validity and certainly compound its costs.’

- 3.11 Within the development of explicit academic standards, there is an assumption that variation between academics can be tempered by the provision of common external reference points such as disciplinary threshold learning outcomes, such that they ‘boost ... the objectivity or trustworthiness of external reviewer judgements’ (Barrie et al., 2014, p. 24) a viewpoint shared by Smith et al. (1999) in relation to subject benchmarking.
- 3.12 Unfortunately, empirical evidence challenges such an assumption and reinforces the critiques. The literature provides considerable evidence and complex analysis of the reasons for the inconsistency and unreliability of academic standards used across the sector, that is, between disciplines (Yorke, 2008) and within individual disciplines (Bloxham et al., 2015; O’Hagan and Wigglesworth, 2014; Hunter and Docherty, 2011; Price et al., 2011; Hugh-Jones et al., 2009; Grainger et al., 2008; Orrell, 2008; Orr, 2007; Smith and Coombe, 2006; Delaney, 2005; Price, 2005; Read et al., 2005; Shay, 2004, 2005; Baume et al., 2004; Norton, 2004; Broad, 2003; Elander and Hardman, 2002; Newstead, 2002; Ecclestone, 2001; Leach et al., 2001; Moss and Schutz, 2001; Greatorex, 2000; Hand and Clewes, 2000; Webster et al., 2000; Wolf, 1995; Sadler, 1987).
- 3.13 It could be argued that it is the exactly the role of an external examiner to moderate those inconsistencies within the sector, however studies focused on external examiners reveal similar inconsistencies. Newstead and Dennis (1994), found that in the field of psychology the inter-rater reliability of grades awarded by external examiners was shown to be poor, even where learning standards were specified. This finding was borne out recently in an experimental study of examiners in four contrasting subject areas (QAA/HEA, 2013) and indicates, not surprisingly, that examiners’ consistency mirrors that of higher education assessors in general. The methodology comprised a Kelly’s Repertory Grid exercise (Kelly, 1991) where participants were asked to identify constructs with which they assessed the quality of five different student scripts of the same assignment. The QAA/HEA study notes that whilst reference points direct examiners towards what they should focus on, the project’s findings indicate that listing criteria is an insufficient basis for examiners to be able to deliver consistent judgement. Shared language does not ensure shared

interpretation of common criteria in judging complex academic work (Bloxham et al., 2015). Indeed, both Warren Piper (1994) and Bloxham and Price (2013) note the disjunction between their evidence and the basic assumption that external examiners can apply consistent standards.

- 3.14 Ross (2009) maintains that examiners are still bounded by their social and cultural environment, bringing their beliefs, values and assumptions to the task and even at the subject level. Colley and Silver's (2005) research identifies the importance of personal experience of both standards and quality assurance processes in providing examiners' reference points. Warren Piper (1994), who carried out an extensive questionnaire and interview study of external examiners, noted that the 'normative' nature of external examining (working within the norms of their own subject discipline) 'rules out them making any contribution to the notion of a universal standard and being in a position to correct the seemingly arbitrary differences in the distribution of classes between subjects' (p. 200).
- 3.15 Dobson (2008b) shows that norm referencing remains prevalent in examiners' decisions. However it might be argued that commenting on how grading conforms to disciplinary grading norms should indeed be fundamental to the external examiner role. In this sense there is a tension between norm referencing between institutions and criterion referencing of assessment.
- 3.16 Colley and Silver (2005) also found that examiners take limited account of formal reference points. They found that elements of the Academic Infrastructure such as Subject Benchmark Statements have probably had more of an impact in course approval than in informing judgements on student attainment. They also found that programme specifications were seen as too vague and previous external examiners' reports were not seen as helpful in relation to standards. Examination papers were seen by some examiners as useful. The most important information, from the point of view of examiners was the assessment guidance and criteria for individual tasks. Module and departmental information was seen as more important than institutional information and, in many cases, professional body standards were not used by external examiners as they were seen as only loosely related to academic standards. The failure by some examiners to use formal reference points was also found by the QAA (2005) and the QAA/HEA study (2013) although such information is considered important in guaranteeing consistency of standards (UUK, 2010).
- 3.17 Dobson (2008a) claims that validity may be threatened by examiners using the wrong constructs; using Messick's (1989, p. 34) terms such as 'construct under-representation' (where the markers are not using constructs where they should be) and 'construct irrelevance' (where they are using constructs they should not be, such as knowledge of the person, their effort, enthusiasm, problems, etc.). Where there is a face-to-face encounter, examiners cannot avoid taking into account aspects of individuals, suggesting that contextual factors are more likely to influence examiners

in a viva although they will have impact in other judgements, too. Overall, Shay (2005) challenges the notion of the examiner as the independent objective voice.

Assessment literacy

- 3.18 A key finding in successive research is the importance of the assessment literacy of external examiners, for example, how aware they are of the complex influences on their standards and judgement processes, how well they understand the provenance of their own standards and the influence of their background and experience; how strong is the temptation to draw largely on their experience as an indicator of what standards should be rather than recognising the potential bias in that approach, and how aware are examiners of the influence of a particular context, student body, or professional experience?
- 3.19 Warren Piper (1994) noted the lack of professionalism in external examining. For example, he found that examiners believe that there is a widespread agreement about standards although they also think they are a matter of personal judgement. He argued that examiners ignore research on the unreliability of marking and knowledge of this should be part of examiner expertise. However, in the period since Warren Piper's study, the staff development of academics in the educational component of their role has become widespread amongst UK providers. This is likely to influence the knowledge of assessment matters amongst external examiners as this 'trained' cohort moves into senior roles.
- 3.20 Nevertheless, Medland's (2014) more recent study of external examiner reports indicates variable levels of assessment literacy. As with higher education assessors in general, external examiners are frequently unaware of variation in standards and see no problem in explicit information such as assessment criteria (QAA/HEA, 2013). Colley and Silver's (2005) findings led them to argue for the need for external examiners to accept other assessment cultures and not to carry too much 'baggage'. Indeed Biggs (2002) notes the potential of examiners to counteract enhancement in assessment practice because of their lack of knowledge of assessment and tendency to draw on their own experience and knowledge, however limited. Hays and Bashford (2009) call for examiners to be assessment literate and Cuthbert (2003) points out that whilst those who undertake assessment or verification of NVQs need to be qualified in techniques of assessment, those examining degrees or PhDs do not.
- 3.21 In relation to learning about or acquiring standards to apply to the examining task, the QAA/HEA study (2013) found that external examiners perceive the standards with which they assess the quality of student work as mostly residing in either documents such as marking criteria, or as internalised through professional experience, but without recognising the personal interpretation they bring to them. They conceive of 'community processes', that is, where standards are negotiated as part of continuous processes in academic communities, merely as a tool to check internalised standards or help in the interpretation of documented standards.

Overall, examiners did not seem to be particularly reflective about the nature of academic standards.

- 3.22 Interestingly, the Finch Report, in its list of ‘National Criteria for the appointment of external examiners’ includes ‘awareness of modern developments in the design and delivery of the flexible curriculum’ but does not include awareness of developments in assessment and only ‘experience of setting examinations and running assessment procedures’ (p. 14).

The effectiveness of the external examining system in safeguarding standards

- 3.23 The external examiner system is seen as a key element in achieving comparability of academic standards, albeit now defined as at the level of programmes ‘of which the external examiners have experience’. (QAA, 2015, p. 9). Indeed, Gaunt (1999) suggests that external examining is the only external quality assurance mechanism that directly addresses the quality of student output.

Reviews of the external examining system

- 3.24 The UK external examining system has been reviewed or debated in a large number of reports and enquiries over the last 30 years. These successive reports have shared some recurrent themes as well as strong support for the system, claiming that it brings reassurance to students and institutions that awards are acceptable and standards comparable (Silver et al., 1995). The critical themes include variation in practice and impact (HEQC, 1994; QAA, 2005); lack of clarity in the role (Lindop Report, 1985; HEQC, 1994; HEFCE, 2009); examiners requiring greater knowledge about assessment (CNA, 1989; QAA, 1998); criticisms of the appointment process and the potential for ‘cosy’ relationship between examiners and departments (HEQC, 1994; UUK, 2010); the need for recognition in the home institution (Silver and Williams, 1996; Hannan and Silver, 2006; UUK, 2011); critiques of too much reliance on the system (Silver et al., 1995; HEQC, 1996); the need for a register of examiners (NCIHE, 1997); training and induction (NCIHE, 1997; UUK, 2011); a professional approach and a more consistent remit (NCIHE, 1997); and concerns about authority (BIS, 2009).
- 3.25 A key feature emerging in these documents is the issue of external examiners and academic standards. The Silver et al. report (Silver et al., 1995) concluded that external examiners can only calibrate standards at the level they have been appointed to, usually the subject level, and their appointment from similar types of institutions, or with similar programmes and assessment methods means that ‘comparability of standards can only be achieved within fairly narrow and clearly defined parameters’ (para 24:2). Following that report, Silver and Williams (1996) noted that a combination of factors such as the expansion in student numbers, student and programme diversity, focus on employability, modularisation,

semesterisation, new learning, teaching and assessment methods, and the use of technology combined to raise questions about the capacity of the external examining system to warrant comparable standards. The authors discussed the idea that a 'more attainable goal' is a broad view of external examining with 'vague and indefinable' standards where external examiners do not focus on direct comparability but use the standards as an external reference point. They also argued that there was little acceptance of the idea of national standards and concluded that principal support for external examining as a means of comparing standards remained at the level of the subject.

- 3.26 These sentiments were echoed in the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) report (1996) which stated that '[the] external examiner system can no longer be plausibly described as effective in calibrating standards across higher education'. A decade later, a QAA report (2007) asked 'whether external examiners are in a position to warrant the comparability of students' achievements across more than the few institutions with which they are in close touch' (p. 1) although it still asserted that the system was important in maintaining and improving quality. HEFCE (2009) also noted a concern about the examiners' role in assuring standards and an NUS (2009) report on external examining argued that the then QAA Code of Practice does not say how examiners are informed about national standards although they consider that there is a need for them to be comparable (p. 1).
- 3.27 The Finch Report (UUK, 2011) is also circumspect about the notion of assuring comparability of standards. It recommends that external examiners should be expected to comment on 'whether courses at the same levels within the programme are set at a comparable standard; whether the level is consistent with the level set in the relevant national qualifications framework; whether standards of student performance are comparable with similar programmes with which the examiner is familiar' (p. 10). This is a reduced conception of comparability of standards in comparison with the previous Code of Practice (QAA, 2004), the rationale for which is the diversity in UK higher education:

'In a sector as large as that of the UK, with thousands of subjects taught at a variety of institutions with different cultures, priorities and approaches as well as many different ways of teaching and assessing students, there will always be variety in the student experience, standards of achievement and degree outcomes. We believe that it is right to expect all programmes to meet a minimum standard, which increasingly has come to be seen as a threshold standard, which should be achieved by every programme, wherever it is taught. Those thresholds are defined at a subject level as part of the Academic Infrastructure overseen by the QAA. Beyond that threshold, different institutions will offer degrees with similar subject titles which provide very different experiences for students, with different emphases and demands to meet the needs of a very diverse student body and the needs of

industry and the professions. This is the context in which external examiners have to operate.’ (UUK, 2011, p. 7)

- 3.28 Finally, the HEA, in its handbook for external examiners, asserts that ‘The idea that a single external examiner could make a comparative judgement on the national, and indeed international, standard of a programme has always been flawed’ (p. 29). However, it could be argued that the idea of agreed threshold standards as defined in the Academic Infrastructure does necessarily imply a level of comparability of standards across the sector. Overall, the conflict between the overwhelming support for the system as crucial to quality and the difficulties perceived in examiners assuring comparability of standards is referred to by Cuthbert (2003) as its ‘Jekyll and Hyde persona’.

Changes introduced

- 3.29 The various reports on external examining recommended improvements to the mechanics of the system. For example, recommendations made in the Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997) included creating subject benchmarks, a pool of accredited examiners, consistent training for external examiners and archiving scripts to help maintain standards over time. More recently, the QAA (2009) recommended that the external examiner system should be more transparent and better explained; there should be improved procedures to identify and support external examiners; and a set of minimum expectations of those holding the role. The Finch Report (UUK, 2011) recommended greater transparency, minimum expectations and criteria for the appointment, and enhanced training and induction of examiners. In addition, it recommended core content in examiners’ reports and a right of access to those reports by students on the programme.
- 3.30 The relatively new Chapter B7 in the UK Quality Code for Higher Education adopted the vast majority of the Finch recommendations and ‘is designed to ensure that external examining can operate in a way which is transparent, rigorous, and as consistent as possible across all UK higher education providers, taking into account their autonomy and differences in their mission, size, organisational structures and range of provision.’ (QAA, 2015, Chapter B7 p. 4)
- 3.31 It should be noted that the autonomy of the institution and a desire for comparable national standards do not sit easily together. The Finch Report explains the dilemma clearly:
‘Setting and maintaining standards in the UK system ... exhibits a tension which must be resolved: over 140 universities and colleges separately set and maintain their own standards, but at the same time there is a public expectation that qualifications awarded by one institution are broadly comparable with those awarded by all others.’ (UUK, 2011)
- 3.32 While changes to procedures, recruitment, training and induction have been introduced, these have largely been enacted within individual institutions. From data

collected in focus groups with 124 examiners, Colley and Silver (2005) concluded that the impact of personal experience on examiners' work is likely to be compounded by the fact that examiners, by and large, only examine in a limited range of universities. Reports on external examining (Silver et al., 1995; QAA, 2007) confirm these concerns regarding the power of examiners to secure standards; examiners are working within a bounded sector of higher education institutions and thus may not have enough experience of different providers.

- 3.33 One important point to note is that there is a consensus in these reports that is reinforced by the literature and reports on other approaches to external peer review of assessment; that is, the contribution that external examining can bring to promoting discussion about good practice in teaching and learning (Krause et al., 2013; University of Sydney, 2014; Watty et al., 2014). External examiners/reviewers have the opportunity to see standards and methods of practice outside their own institution and internal staff can gain feedback on their standards from an external viewpoint.

The role of external examiners

- 3.34 Views on the external examiner role have proven to be varied. The potential conflict between the general academic advisory role and the ability to take an objective stance in relation to student performance was considered and dismissed as no 'real danger' by the Lindop Report (CNAAB, 1989) although the CNAAB advised at the time that external examining should remain a separate role from that of course design, course approval and course review (Warren Piper, 1994). An HEQC (1996) study found four conceptions of the external examiner's role: additional examiner, moderator, calibrator and consultant. In recent times, as Yorke (2008, p. 103) notes, examiners have become 'more remote' from students' actual work as programmes of study have become modularised and their role has shifted away from looking at samples of students' work and towards assuring the integrity of the processes for assessment and award'.
- 3.35 The most recent study of external examiners, undertaken for the QAA and HEA (QAA/HEA, 2013), found that examiners from four contrasting subject disciplines had divergent views about the role of the examiner with regard to standards: at one extreme, examiners import their own personal standards that may or may not be aligned with national standards, and use these alone to judge the quality of a programme's assessment; at the other extreme, examiners defer to the awarding institution's standards and focus only on process measures. In the latter conception the examiners do not see guaranteeing standards as part of their role. However, even if examiners do believe that applying standards is part of their role, this project demonstrated that there is still considerable potential for different judgements about quality. Some examiners were troubled by the implications of the role they believed they are expected to take. The authors report that their anxiety may not be relieved

by turning to official guidance, which, in attempting to accommodate discipline and institutional diversity, is open to interpretation.

- 3.36 Colley and Silver (2005) found that a principal way in which examiners claim to learn how to carry out the role is from observing other externals at work, although some learned about the role from learning and teaching networks. Induction was only mentioned by one of the eight groups of examiners researched in their study.
- 3.37 Hannan and Silver (2006) concluded that examiners 'value the role for reasons of reciprocity and information or intelligence gathering, that they are resistant to attempts to make it more formal in function, and that they generally oppose attempts to impose a national system of training' (p. 57).

Awards and classifications

- 3.38 A further relevant area for review of the current literature is that of grading changes as they pertain to standards. There is firm evidence of a significant rise in the number of good degrees (firsts and upper seconds) awarded by UK institutions. In a systematic study of UK and international grading practices, Yorke (2008) notes that the modal class of honours degree shifted from 2:2 to 2:1 between 1973 and 1993. Working with data from a decade ago Yorke (2008) found rising trends in almost all subject areas and this was most strongly marked in pre-1992 universities. More recent UK data reveals a continuing pattern of grade changes with the rise in the proportion of first and upper second class degrees rising from 62% in 2008/09 to 70% in 2013/14⁷ with a 14% and 6% increase in firsts and upper second class awards respectively between 2012/13 and 2013/14⁸.
- 3.39 Yorke (2008) warns against simplistic assumptions of unwarranted 'grade inflation' as there are key difficulties with the measurement of grading changes. He notes that grade outcomes are complex and affected by various factors (for example, excluding non-graded modules). Improvements in student achievement may have several causes, including better entry qualifications, increased pressure to do well, modularisation creating high stakes assessment from early on in programmes and providing students with ongoing information on performance, better guidance on what is required to obtain good grades, outcome-based curricula, greater proportions of coursework, and concentration of some subject areas (e.g. STEM disciplines) in the most elite universities. Overall, he concludes that there is no simple explanation for the rise in the proportion of good honours degrees.

⁷http://www.hesa.ac.uk/dox/pressOffice/sfr197/280607_student_sfr197_1213_table_9.xlsx and <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/sfr210>

⁸ <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/sfr210>

- 3.40 For example, participants in the regional fora for this project explained that standards have been too high: for instance, achieving a first class degree in some social sciences and humanities has been too difficult in relation to other subject disciplines, and therefore grading changes are a legitimate response to this inequality. This may be the case but it is important to recognise that we lack research data to show that such a change in standards has been formally acknowledged or planned. Anecdotally, external examiners are often reported to have requested more use of the top end of the marking scale (marks above 80 are not often awarded in many disciplines) but, again, a planned move by the sector, or sections of it, to change standards has not been formally agreed or recognised, nor is it clear how such changes align with the UK higher education qualification frameworks. In some ways, this situation reinforces the view that, whatever the documented standards, their use in practice is socially constructed.
- 3.41 Bachan (2015) notes that there is relatively little UK literature on the issue of 'grade inflation'. Bachan uses a definition of 'grade inflation', following Rosovsky and Hartley (2002) as an increase in 'the award of a 'good' degree classification over an extended period of time without a corresponding increase in student achievement or ability' (p. 1). Johnes and McNabb (2002) examined 'grade inflation' in UK higher education between 1973 and 1993 and between 1995 and 2000. The authors report no evidence of 'grade inflation' in the later period but found a 14% rise in the achievement of 'good' degrees between 1984-1993 which could not be attributed to changes in university efficiency. A more up-to-date study by Johnes and Soo (2013) found some evidence of 'grade inflation'. In a recently published statistical study using university-wide data, Bachan (2015) found evidence of 'grade inflation' in UK higher education from 2009 onwards after controlling for changes in university efficiency in improving degree outcomes and factors associated with degree performance. Bachan recognises that other unknown factors may be involved and recommends further research.

Algorithms and league tables

- 3.42 Rising classifications do not necessarily mean that work has been judged by lower standards. An important aspect of the UK context is the autonomy of UK institutions to control the algorithms used to calculate the final honours degree classification. As Yorke (2008) points out, institutions benchmark their classification practices against comparable institutions and make changes if they think their algorithm or algorithms disadvantage their students. This may have led to changed regulations or algorithms, for example, in approaches to condonement or the proportion of marks required to fall into the grade boundary to achieve a particular classification.
- 3.43 Studies and reports have been critical of the variation in UK award algorithms and regulations. A study by the Student Assessment and Classification Working Group (SACWG) (Yorke et al., 2008) of the assessment regulations in 35 varied higher

education institutions found considerable variation in the way in which honours degree classifications are determined, and also in the handling of weak performances by students. They concluded that such variability raises questions about equitable treatment of students. It was also reported by the QAA (2006) that the degree classification system does not assure that students achieving the same standards will obtain the same result within or across universities and it was accepted by the Burgess Group that the degree classification system is no longer fit for purpose (UUK, 2007). A very recent study by Stowell et al. (2015) investigated the situation for first year students. They found 'key variations in regulatory policy and practice that challenge assumptions about comparability of academic standards between higher education institutions. These findings imply that student success and progression may not be a simple reflection of academic attainment' (p. 1).

- 3.44 UK league tables report outcomes such as student satisfaction, degree classifications, and completion rates. Given the potential consequences attached to a poor result, institutions are inevitably sensitive to such metrics: for example, increasing the proportion of good degrees has been a key performance indicator in some institutions. The SACWG study (Yorke, 2008) contends that league tables that publish the proportion of good degrees awarded by individual providers will have an influence on institutional decision-making on this matter, noting that some institutions have adjusted their assessment regulations because they considered that their award profiles were out of alignment with comparator institutions as outlined above. Yorke (2008) points out that this benchmarking of the proportion of good degrees is likely to move grades upwards.
- 3.45 This discussion of award regulations and algorithms in the light of grade rises is relevant to the external examiner role. As Yorke (2008) notes, external examiners, 'charged with ensuring that standards are upheld' (p. 103), should be in a position to influence students' award classifications. However, this may be restricted by changes in their role towards assuring the integrity of assessment processes.
- 3.46 The notion that academic standards are potentially under threat from varied institutional practices related to treatment of failed or repeated assessments has been found in other national sectors. In Australia, Fisher (2009) pointed out how academic penalties for late work or misconduct might affect standards, and the 'fidelity' of assessment practices was discussed by Sadler (2010) who identified a number of 'contaminants' in assessment decisions which represented a challenge to academic standards.

Lessons from other approaches to assuring academic standards

International climate

- 3.47 Higher education is operating in a climate of concern about academic standards. Universities and public bodies need to regulate standards (Sadler, 2011) in order to maintain institutional reputations, to protect the value of academic qualifications, and more generally to be accountable to society at large. This emphasis on assuring standards is increasingly becoming a global phenomenon (Barrie et al., 2014) in both well-established and newer university systems. International competition has placed pressure on universities to be more accountable (Dill and Beerkens, 2012) and improve the protection for interested parties in higher education such as students and employers.
- 3.48 International competition has led to a drive to assure the standards of graduate outcomes and the achievement of comparability across universities and countries (Barrie et al., 2014). Developments are reflected in a range of policies and projects in the USA, the AHELO⁹ study and the cross-national Tuning project involving Europe, South and North America, Africa, and Russia (Krause et al., 2013). For the most part, these projects focus on defining (or ‘tuning’) standards through their explicit articulation, for example, by aligning qualification frameworks and disciplinary standards as in the UK Quality Code for Higher Education and the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). Within this movement, there is a growing interest in assuring and comparing student outcomes (Bradley et al., 2008) because, Coates and Mahat (2014) maintain, as entering higher education becomes easier, ‘more energy must be invested in ensuring that sufficient learning has been achieved to warrant the award of a qualification’ (p. 15).

Calibration and alternative models

- 3.49 Colley and Silver (2005) found that external examiners valued the chance to get together that was created by their research project. They also valued external examiner development in their home institutions including meeting other examiners. In this vein the NUS (2009) recommended bringing examiners together face-to-face or virtually to help maintain standards across all types of institution. This recommendation regarding examiner communities is supported by the work of Yorke (2008). He draws on a range of studies and reports to emphasise the potential of promoting dialogue amongst academics regarding standards. In his view, written replacements such as subject benchmarks ‘do not in themselves contain the depth of information needed for shared understanding’ (p. 204).

⁹ Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes

- 3.50 This recommendation also accords with that of O'Donovan et al. (2004) and Rust et al. (2005) who stress the need for meaningful understanding and application of assessment criteria within an interpretive community or 'community of practice'. This emphasis on participatory processes which enable the co-construction and application of meaningful criteria is supported by a range of research (Shay, 2008; Sadler, 1987; Handley et al., 2013; Orr, 2010; Crisp, 2008). Sadler (2011) concludes that securing standards needs both peer review and consensus-seeking activity. Interestingly, the need for both emerged in relation to assessment of research quality in the 2013 Research Excellence Framework. The Times Higher Education report how 'a series of 'calibration exercises' early in the process helped to identify 'hawks and doves' in scoring terms and establish a consensus on the standards to be applied' (Jump, 2015).
- 3.51 The view that written standards alone are insufficient has been reiterated in relation to external examiners. Warren Piper (1994) showed that learning standards and gaining agreement on them takes place:
'..not by seeking to capture it in words, but by the empirical experience of sharing judgement of specific instances. In this way, experience is put before formal training and the mysteries are passed from generation to generation without calling on technical experts to dissect the process of judgement. In this way the examiners' skills are honed and their judgements standardised, in this way the profession is defined and embraces its members' (p. 181).
- 3.52 As Sadler (2011) points out, calibration of individuals' assessment standards in general is lacking. This may be particularly the case for senior academics who no longer have sizeable teaching and marking loads and therefore little local interaction and opportunities for calibrating their standards through judging and discussing students' performance. Indeed, Sadler (2011) suggests that faculty do not generally debate academic standards and there is a lack of collegiality on this. He argues that isolationist practices resulting from concerns about assessors exposing their marking standards restricts a 'guild culture' (p. 9).
- 3.53 The importance of academics 'calibrating' their standards is made elsewhere. An Australian Office of Learning and Teaching report (Hancock et al., 2014) recommends that:
'...universities and other higher education providers commit to external calibration as well as external peer review. To ensure discipline learning standards are applied consistently across higher education providers, effective implementation requires buy-in from multiple levels within universities and other higher education providers, which must commit to: support and fund participation in national calibration workshops; arrange external reviews; continuously improve assessment design and practice via feedback.'
- 3.54 Various external examining and moderation projects in the UK and Australia include novel 'calibration' methods concerned with professional learning as well as more

traditional, UK-type, external examiner processes (Deane and Krause, 2012). An example of ‘consensus-seeking activity’, described by Woolf and Cooper (1999), is an Assessment Benchmarking Club involving several university history departments. They argue that it proved a powerful tool for developing agreement and checking on assessment principles and strategies. Similarly, a Subject Centre of the HEA (HSLT, 2009) set up a ‘college of peers’ where colleagues across several universities reviewed exemplars of student work graded at the borderlines of different grades in an effort to help the subject community establish and maintain standards.

- 3.55 An Australian report on good practice in assuring standards reports that ‘[a] realistic assessment at this time is that while the literature does not offer any clear formulae for assuring comparability of standards there is a considerable degree of convergence among researchers across education systems internationally. Peer engagement in the process through consultation and some form of calibration of peer judgements around exemplar assessments is generally agreed to be desirable. However, the traditional system of external examiners or visitors has many problems for assuring learning outcomes and standards particularly because they lack any process to ensure calibration or consensus. Trade-offs between evidence-based ‘best practice’ and feasibility, time and money are inevitable and not yet resolved’ (Freeman and Ewan, 2014, p. 6). Coates and Mahat (2014) are more sceptical of new initiatives in assuring standards. They point out that many outcome initiatives are ‘new and necessarily being sold on promise and potential’ (p. 1).

Common assessment tools

- 3.56 The discussion of relevant literature so far has focused on standards as demonstrated through providers’ own assessment regimes for individual programmes. However, some are advocating the use of ‘validated assessment tasks’ for use across different universities and the use of ‘objective’ tests of student achievement such as the Graduate Skills Assessment Test (Coates, 2010). Such an approach already exists in some systems, notably the US, in the form of well established graduate tests but these normally assess general achievement rather than subject specific learning. There are some initiatives taking place where comparability of standards is considered via common assessment tools at the disciplinary or professional level. For example, preliminary work is being undertaken by UK medical schools to embed shared questions on core outcomes in providers’ own assessments so that the passing standards can be compared across schools. This project has been running in its current form since 2012/13 and is set to continue until 2015/16, although participation is voluntary. Initial results highlight the importance of interpretation of results across more than one year. A second example is the Midwifery Pan-London Practice Assessment project which has developed a shared assessment document across eight higher education providers to enhance the reliability of practice assessment. Assessors in this scheme are required to have annual updates which include discussion about standards. AHELO feasibility

studies have involved the use of cross-nation on-line assessment, for example, civil engineering (Australian Council for Education Research, 2013). In Australia this includes the professional disciplines of health and engineering where they have begun developing nationally comparable or common assessment tools (Freeman and Ewan, 2014). The OECD is currently (in May 2015) consulting with member nations on whether they wish to take part in a full main study of this approach (Times Higher Education, 2015). However, Freeman and Ewan (2014) note that 'the process of collecting, maintaining, validating and benchmarking performance data to ensure comparability of standards between institutions is in its infancy. Development of such systems is labour intensive in terms of ensuring alignment of data and information systems and staff training and is likely to be undertaken only in response to a felt need within the institution' (p. 6).

Political and symbolic considerations

- 3.57 The academic research on external examining tends to belie the enduring faith that the sector has in the power of external examiners to contribute to the assurance of academic standards. This faith may be related to the symbolic nature of the role as recognised by Silver and Williams in 1996 when they posited that the external examiner has become 'a symbol of accepted academic standards across higher education' (p. 29). On a similar theme, Ross (2009, p. 479) points out that the 'symbolic tools' of examiners, the tasks they carry out, give credence to the system. Therefore, any developments will need to recognise the symbolic significance of examiners in providing the perception of an effective assessment system.
- 3.58 In a similar vein, Moss and Schultz (2001) suggest that the notion of a consensus that underpins explicit standards, whilst weak, serves to give a credibility to the system which we cannot afford to dismiss in favour of an approach which acknowledges how that consensus masks the diversity of assessors' interpretation. As they point out, people have faith in written standards and this gives students' results a level of credibility. They suggest that there is a fear in the assessment community that giving up the idea of consensus on standards will make it impossible to engage in any 'ethical' assessment at all: 'no process is ever fully transparent or fully fair and inclusive. Are we better off acting as if we have achieved consensus even if we have not? It is possible that we are.' (Moss and Schultz, 2001, p. 64). Likewise, Newstead (2002) notes that even if we recognise weaknesses in external examining, it is not possible to abandon the system for political reasons. He suggests that 'we need to keep up the pretence that they ensure equality of standards' (p. 74) even if it cannot be demonstrated. On this theme, researchers have also considered whose interests the external examiner system serves. Warren Piper (1994) considered it to be an example of a profession policing its standards of professional conduct. He draws on the work of Mintzberg (1979) to explore professional resistance to external regulation. From this perspective, external examining provides a measure of accountability but retains autonomy for academics.

- 3.59 Taken together, the literature suggests that external examining is not currently effective in guaranteeing comparable academic standards nationally, largely due to the difficulty of achieving a shared view of standards without support and opportunities for examiners to calibrate their academic standards within their disciplinary communities. There are interesting models that address some of the problems with the system, but any reforms should take into account the powerful political and symbolic value of external examining.

Part 4: Findings – Implementation of the Finch Report

- 4.1 The Finch Report concluded that the external examining system worked well and did not require a major overhaul; however it made a number of recommendations with regard to improving the consistency of practice across the sector and increasing transparency for students. The QAA reflected the outcomes of the Finch Report in revisions to the Quality Code for Higher Education, particularly Chapter B7: External examining.
- 4.2 The Finch recommendations that have been embedded in Chapter B7 are:
- External examiners should provide comment on threshold standards and the comparability of standards; on rigorous and fair assessment procedures; on good practice and on enhancement opportunities;
 - There should be explicit policies and regulations for the nomination, appointment and termination of external examiners and providers should apply the UK-wide criteria for appointment of external examiners;
 - Providers should supply external examiners with relevant information on procedures, practices and regulations and communicate the modules and programmes to which they are appointed and the nature of their role and authority;
 - External examiners' name, position and institution should be included in module or programme information for students and reports should be made available in full to students;
 - Institutions should recognise involvement of their own staff in external examining work and agree time for them to carry out this work;
 - General themes from external examiner reports should be considered at institutional level and student representatives should be fully involved in how institutions consider and respond to external examiners reports and recommendations;
 - Institutions should inform external examiners that they can report serious concerns to the head of the institution.
- 4.3 We tested the implementation of these requirements drawing on the responses of providers' quality officers, information published by providers on their websites, QAA reviews and external examiners' and students' reported experience. Detailed evidence is set out below. Details of the methods employed can be found in Part 2 of this report.

QAA institutional review reports and information published on university webpages

- 4.4 A number of QAA reports commented explicitly about compliance with Chapter B7. Reviewers wrote that nine of the eleven universities were compliant with Chapter B7, and implied so in a tenth. The section on external examining in the eleventh university report was very brief, and may have been based on previous regulations. Evidence of implementation was less widespread in further education institutions, with three of the five reviews declaring compliance. Chapter B7 was not referenced in the QAA reviews of private providers.
- 4.5 Chart 1 sets out the area of most and least implementation of different elements of Chapter B7 as evidence in QAA reports (green) and 'webdocs' (orange). (We refer to all information available on provider webpages, whether individual pages, links, handbooks or other resources as 'webdocs'.) No evidence of 'home institution recognition for its own staff appointed as, or seeking to become, external examiners elsewhere' was found in either data set. On the other hand, there was a lot of evidence that examiners are asked to comment on assessment procedures. Likewise, there were many comments about making external examiner reports more available to students. It is important to note that evidence or lack of evidence does not necessarily indicate implementation or non-implementation.
- 4.6 As Chart 2 shows, one university (Peer Group F) had institutional documents on-line which suggested that it was almost fully compliant with Chapter B7. In fact, 16 of the 21 institutional on-line documents reviewed had evidence of ten or more of the 15 items sought. The institutions with the lowest evidence of implementation were private providers and further education colleges. However this may be a feature of differences in the nature of the reports rather than evidence of lower implementation levels.
- 4.7 As can be seen from Charts 1 and 2, evidence of the 15 Chapter B7 items was found much more frequently in institutional webdocs than in QAA reports. In fact, over half of the items appeared in more than 80% of webdocs while the most frequently appearing item appeared in 63% of QAA reports. As they are guidance documents rather than evaluation reports, it makes sense that the institutional webdocs are more comprehensive – and so provide more evidence of implementation – than the reviews. It is likely that providers were compliant in more ways than those that were explicitly mentioned in the QAA reports. Inclusion in the report is likely to be related to how important a QAA review team considered that item to be in determining whether a provider makes 'scrupulous' use of external examiners.
- 4.8 There are also limits to the evidence derived from institutional webpages. Firstly, they outline policy and guidance but it is not possible to know from this data how this policy is implemented. Secondly, while many universities had everything in one

comprehensive guide or handbook, a few universities had their policy distributed across several documents and we may not have captured every aspect of their procedures in our search. For example, institutions may provide web information in support of external examiners amongst their own staff but this is unlikely to appear in their resources for the external examiners they appoint. Thirdly, we are not privy to internal documents or oral presentations at inductions.

Chart 1: How often the Chapter B7 items are confirmed in the sample QAA reports and webdocs.

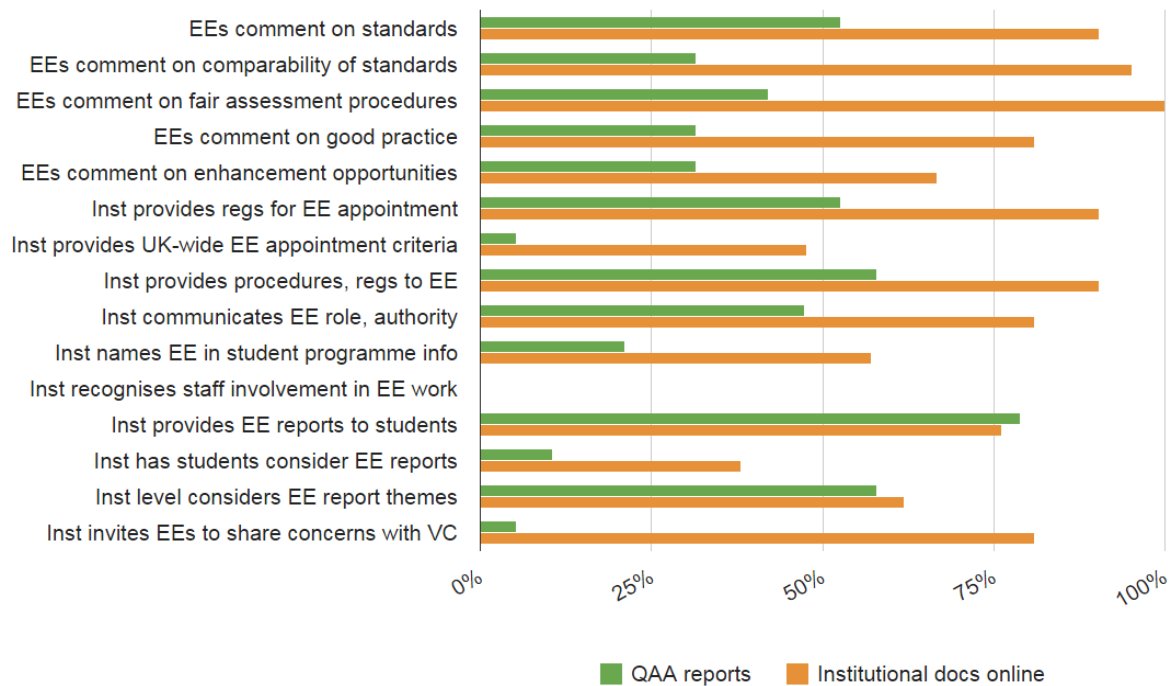
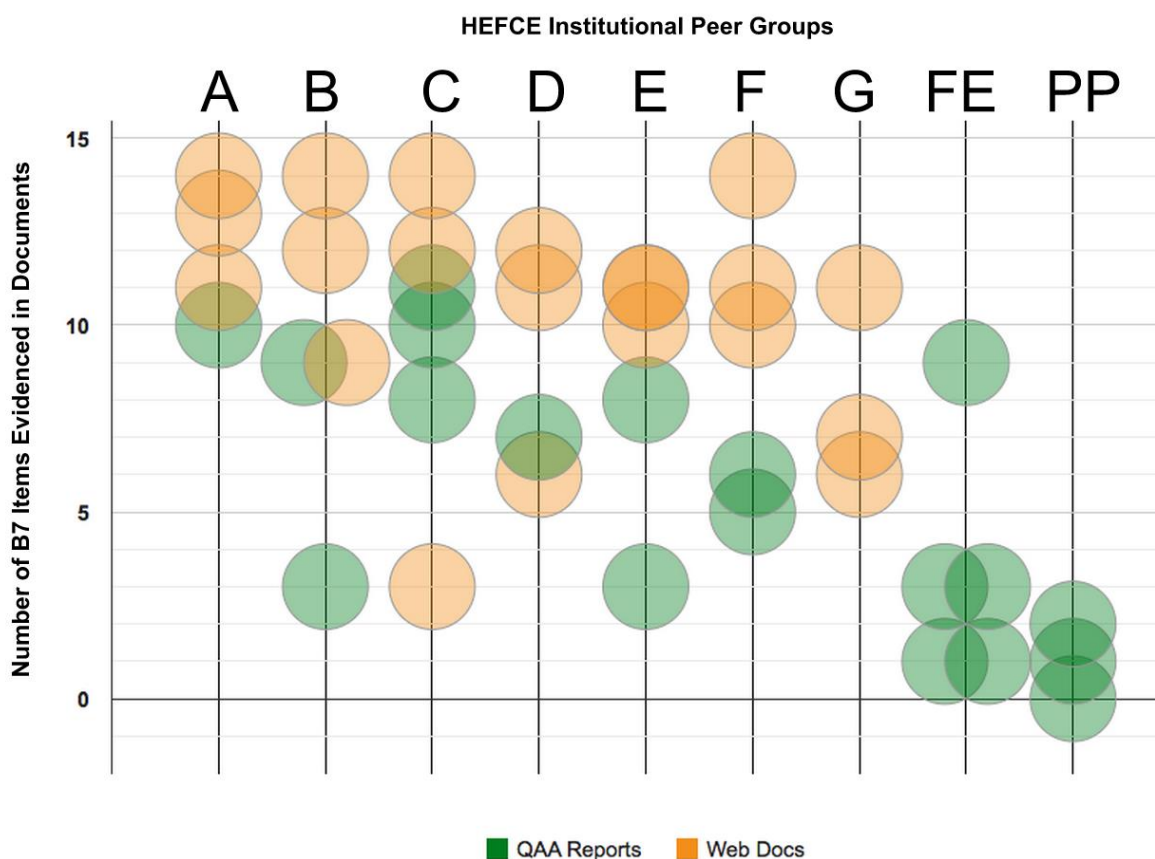


Chart 2: Evidence in QAA reports and web material of institutional implementation of Chapter B7



Survey of senior quality officers

4.9 We have made a presumption that senior quality officers with responsibility for quality assurance arrangements are best placed to report providers’ policies in relation to implementation of the Finch recommendations. The information elicited from them via the on-line survey has the additional benefit that we were able to inquire about all elements whereas published information and, to a certain extent, QAA review reports did not always provide information on whether a requirement had or had not been implemented. However, the results show the same trends.

4.10 Ten of the 15 recommendations were stated to be in place by at least 95% of respondents. There were lower rates of implementation stated for the following recommendations:

- Informing external examiners at the beginning of their term of office that they can raise matters of serious concern confidentially with the head of institution (94%);

- External examiners' reports are made available, in full, to students (86%);
 - Institutions include the name, position and institution of their external examiners in module or programme information provided to students (73%);
 - Institutions ensure that student representatives are given the opportunity to be fully involved in considering the comments and recommendations in external examiner reports, enabling them to understand all the issues raised and the institution's response (70% plus 3% planned); and
 - Institutions should recognise the involvement of their own staff in external examining (48% plus 7% planned).
- 4.11 Open comments on these matters throw some light on the issues. For example, one provider reported that the timing was wrong for involving students in developing responses to examiners' reports as this usually takes place in August and September when students are not on site and another reported that students have an opportunity to discuss the report in committee but not to construct the response. Others emphasised that this involvement is normally through student representation on course committees or equivalent.
- 4.12 The survey requested examples of institutional recognition and about a third of those providing comments referred to formal and informal allowance of time. Approximately a quarter indicated that external examining is accepted as evidence of external reputation or standing in their field when seeking promotion, particularly in 'education inflected' roles and 'senior positions for Student Educational Experience and Academic Quality Assurance'.
- 4.13 The university's generic role profile for Senior Lecturer/Reader includes, in the category 'Liaising and networking', acting as external examiner to other institutions. The university's CPD Policy and Scheme for academic staff encourages fellowship of HEA and the university has particular goals in this regard. Among the criteria for Senior Fellowship, external examining is cited as an example.
- 4.14 A small number noted that their institution collects and reports the numbers of examiners as evidence of quality. In the follow-up interviews, several quality officers indicated that their institution was beginning to identify home external examiners and intend to use them internally in course development and other quality procedures. Several respondents noted that they provide support for current or future external examiners through training or mentorship, for example, a forum of external examiners in the institution 'where issues and good practice can be shared':
- 'The Dean of Teaching and Learning Development and I, supported by staff with experience of external examining, host an annual staff development session for aspiring external examiners.'

- 'There is a guidance document for becoming an external examiner in the university learning and development resources site.'
- 'The university has recently held an awareness-raising session for staff interested in becoming an external examiner at another HEI. The session was very well received and has been recorded. The recording is available to all staff through our internal website.'
- 'They are able to act as mentors to institutional staff new to external examining and have been consulted on changes to institutional practice.'
- A few quality officers said recognition of examiners amongst their own workforce was an area that needed improvement in their institution and one respondent reported that it was 'difficult to get staff engagement alongside other current and urgent issues'.

Survey of external examiners

- 4.15 Some similar trends in implementation were also apparent in the responses from serving external examiners. The survey framed the recommendations from the perspective of the examiner rather than from that of the institution and some recommendations were not relevant, for example, whether an institution involves student representatives in the consideration of examiners' reports. The survey also took into account that examiners may not always be sure of or remember arrangements.
- 4.16 Over 90% of examiners reported six Finch recommendations to be in place in their current examining appointment. There were lower figures for the following recommendations:
- You were asked to comment on threshold standards (69% agree, 13.6% don't know/not applicable (DN/NA));
 - The institution responded effectively to your annual report (67% agree, 24% DN/NA);
 - You were asked to comment on enhancement opportunities (62% agree, 19% Not sure/can't remember (NS/CR));
 - You were informed that you could report matters of serious concern in confidence to the head of the institution (54% agree, 23% NS/CR);
 - Your home institution values your work as an external examiner (65% agree, 11.6% DN/NA);
 - Your home institution allocates time for you to do your external examining duties (36 % definitely disagree and 15% mostly disagree (total disagreeing with the statement 51%) 7.9% DN/NA).

Examiners' views on the time provided to carry out the role as indicated in this last bullet point is important. It is raised by them in response to other questions, particularly to do with the need to recognise, reward and professionalise the role.

Survey of students

- 4.17 The NUS survey found that about two thirds of higher education students (64%) are aware of external examiners in the context of their course or institution. Second year students and upwards are more likely than first year students to be aware of external examiners. The vast majority of respondents (92%) have an idea of what external examiners do. The largest proportion (59%) think external examiners judge whether academics are marking work in a comparable way to other courses. Marginally fewer (56%) think they mark the work of a few students on each course. A third of respondents also think that examiners advise academics on what the assessment should be for a course and make a judgement about who is right when two academics cannot agree on what mark a student should be given on assessed work. Smaller numbers think that external examiners are more directly involved in marking all students' work and giving feedback (15% and 13%).
- 4.18 The majority of students surveyed (77%) have not met an external examiner before or seen an external examiner report (81%). Of those 13% of students who reported that they have met an examiner, postgraduates studying for a doctorate and those studying creative arts subjects are strongly represented. Postgraduates studying for a doctorate are also significantly more likely to have seen an external examiner report.
- 4.19 The findings from the student survey were echoed in the 'vox pop' survey. Eighteen (66%) of the students had heard of external examiners at the university level. None of those 18 recalled being given an external examiner report to read, and meeting external examiners appeared to be rare. Responses to the question 'What do you know about what external examiners do?' included marking, moderation of assessment including checking alignment with standards elsewhere in the country, standardising and setting exam papers, checking for fairness and giving feedback.
- 4.20 These findings regarding transparency of the external examining system and students' engagement with examiner reports tends to confirm the other sources of data. A good proportion of students are aware of the existence of external examiners although clear knowledge of the role is limited. Whilst students do not say that examiner reports are not available to them, they are clearly not taking up the opportunity to read them where they are available and we found no evidence of student involvement in consideration of reports.

‘Cosy relationships’

- 4.21 In addition to the questions aimed specifically at investigating implementation of the Finch recommendations, we also investigated quality officers’ and external examiners’ views regarding conflicts of interest and the potential for an unsuitably ‘cosy’ relationship between an examiner and the programme staff. The Finch Report rejected proposals for a national register of external examiners, and instead proposed shared national criteria for the appointment of examiners in order to reduce the risk of ‘cosiness’. Thirty-eight percent of quality officers indicated that they think there is a risk of cosiness. However, those who chose to provide commentary on this risk were generally optimistic. A small number noted the difficulty in subject areas where there is a limited pool of examiners to draw on, but generally there was a strong reliance on examiners’ professionalism. There was also confidence that the required turnover of examiners, the use of more than one examiner on a programme and not allowing anyone from the same department to take their place when they end their term of office ‘ensure that relationships grow neither cosy nor stale’.
- 4.22 External examiners were slightly more likely than quality officers to agree that there is a risk of too ‘cosy’ a relationship between an external examiner and the staff whose courses they are examining (34% to 30%). However, in the open comments on this question, only a few external examiners believe the danger of too cosy a relationship is real (for example, ‘in specific disciplines where numbers of courses are limited and academic staff are known to each other’). A much larger number of respondents specifically reject the idea, several actually claiming to feel insulted by the suggestion, and arguing that the relationship is a professional one and that external examiners behave professionally. Limited tenure is also cited as preventing too cosy a relationship developing.

Follow-up interviews

- 4.23 The external examiners interviewed were not particularly concerned about ‘cosy’ relationships. Some of the examiners were satisfied with their home institutions’ recognition of examining, through allowances such as hours on their timetables and consideration in advancement decisions. Some examiners interviewed make a point of meeting with students on the courses they examine.
- 4.24 Interviews with quality assurance officers suggested that there is no formal recognition for external examiners, but that external examining is generally an expectation and is included in generic role specifications and looked for when it comes to promotion. Only some institutions have records on which of their staff are external examiners. Such staff seem to be an under-utilised resource in their own institutions – although some respondents reported plans to make more of them. Getting students interested in engaging with the external examiner system is a

challenge and most institutions have not gone beyond providing access and information, with possibly some involvement of student representatives. Some respondents also encourage external examiners to meet with students – but nowhere is this made a formal requirement. Some respondents reported that recruiting is getting more difficult, especially in small specialist subjects, and where a lot of collaborative research is undertaken. They consider that ever increasing pressures on academics and increasing class/cohort sizes may mean that without professionalisation and greater incentives in the future, recruitment will be more difficult and/or the job will be done more perfunctorily and inevitably become more of just a ‘box-ticking’ exercise. However, the most common current reason cited for recruitment problems by quality officers is course teams leaving the process of appointment too late. The JISC list has been found to be very useful. Respondents are generally happy with the quality of the majority of examiners.

Regional fora

4.25 In line with the survey and interviews the fora reflected the sector’s considerable regard for the external examiner system. They did raise some operational issues related to the Finch Report recommendations. These include concern with the inconsistency in training, either its availability or type. Linked to this was a view that the ‘qualification’ required to be an examiner lacked clarity. Participants also commented on the clear focus by institutions on visiting external examiners but this did not extend to external examiners among their own staff who, they felt, were largely ignored. They mentioned that institutions are not using home-based examiners as a resource.

Conclusion

4.26 There is considerable consistency in the findings from these different sources of evidence which provides confidence in the robustness of the results. Overall, there appear to be high levels of implementation of all of the Finch recommendations with the exception of the following areas:

- Institutions recognising the importance, and mutual benefit, of the work undertaken by many of their staff as external examiners for other providers and agreeing with staff the time they need to fulfil these duties;
- Guidance related to transparency and engagement of students with external examining; and
- Providing examiners with guidance that they can take matters of serious concern to the head of institution.

Part 5: Findings – The external examiner role

- 5.1. The review of literature identified that the external examiner role is open to debate and interpretation. This is important because variety in expectations of the role is likely to lead to varying consequences in terms of safeguarding standards. We tested the current understanding and expectations regarding the external examiner role by a variety of methods: surveys and interviews with external examiners and senior quality officers, an NUS survey and a ‘vox pop’ survey of students, and engagement with the sector and wider stakeholders via a series of meetings.

Survey data

- 5.2. External examiners and quality officers were invited to comment on the nature of the current examiner role. There proved to be considerable disagreement between the groups regarding the extent to which they consider that the examiners’ role has been reduced to that of a ‘process checker’, that is, concerned with quality standards rather than academic standards. Forty-three percent of examiners considered this to be the case compared with 54% who disagreed. Senior quality officers were less likely to perceive the role as largely ‘process checker’ with 86% disagreeing and only 13% agreeing. Quality officers also largely rejected the idea that it was more important for examiners to report on the quality of assessment procedures than it is to report on the comparability of academic standards (82% disagreed, 13% agreed).
- 5.3. There was limited open comment from senior quality officers on the topic of the external examiner role. It was pointed out that those appointed as award examiners are specifically tasked with confirming rigorous and fair assessment procedures. In general, the comments stressed the importance and, in some cases, interdependence of concerns for both processes and standards. The difficulty of judging comparability if examiners have limited experience of other institutions was mentioned and three indicated that their external examiners experience frustration as decisions are largely made before the assessment board, or the regulations do not permit them to determine a student’s degree classification. It was noted by several respondents that the more prescriptive approach to expectations for external examining in Chapter B7 of the UK Quality Code has reduced variability although others commented that over-standardisation of the role would be inappropriate.

‘I consider the main role of the examiner within the Quality Code to be to report on comparability of academic standards. That is the minimum they must do; we expect them to do all of the other items mentioned in the second statement above and to provide ideas for enhancement. The regulatory role is important but we feel the enhancement role is much more important in improving the quality of our provision.’

5.4. Having said that, even 13% represents a considerable number of institutions where a senior quality officer judges that the role has become more a guardian of assessment processes rather than assessment outcomes and this is important for the capacity of external examiners to safeguard academic, as opposed to quality, standards. In addition, it may be the case that, whilst institutions continue to see a broad role for their external examiners, the examiners themselves are not all convinced that they are offered responsibilities beyond that of confirming rigorous and fair assessment procedures.

5.5. Approximately a third of examiners (35%) also agree that there is too much variability in what different institutions expect their external examiners to do, with 48% disagreeing with this statement. Amongst quality officers the number judging that there is too much variability is lower with 23% agreeing and 52% disagreeing. We investigated how external examiners think the staff on programmes they examine perceive the role by asking them to rank a range of options with 1 as most important and 5 as least important. The highest average ranking went to 'critical friend' (1.89) followed by 'authority in the subject' (2.48), 'peer' (2.77), 'authority in quality assurance' (3.01), and finally 'other' (4.21) which attracted a wide range of alternative perspectives on the role. However, it is important to say that these mean scores mask considerable variation in how examiners feel their role is perceived.

'It depends upon the university. At the outset I ask what role they wish me to perform. At best it is peer and friend, at minimum it is to confirm academic standards.'

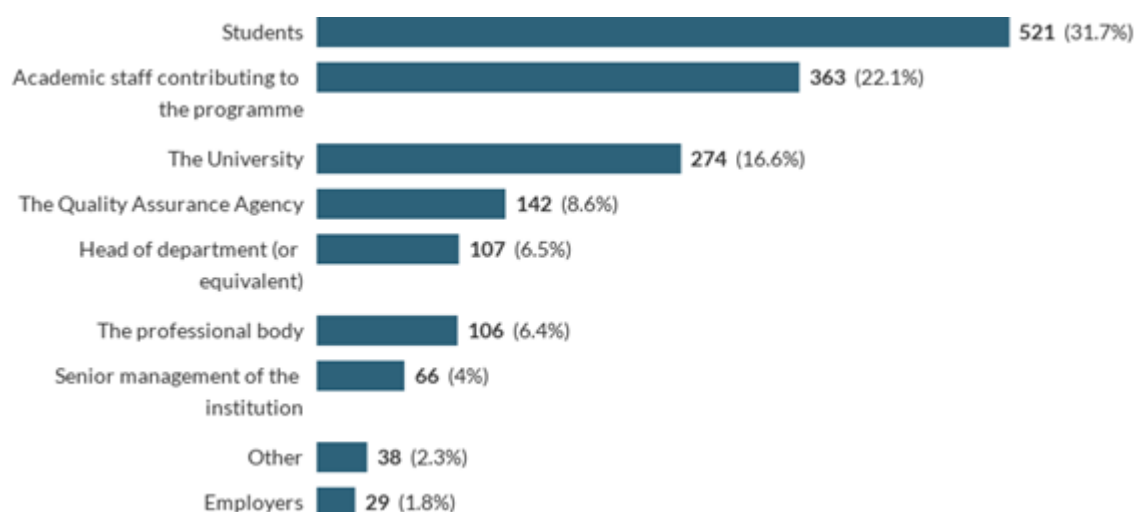
5.6. In open comments, many examiners remarked that they feel they are perceived as a 'pain' or 'necessary evil' that programmes endure to be able to 'tick a box'. Others believe they are perceived to be advisors or advocates who help programme staff solve problems. Externality/objectivity and expertise in a range of areas were highlighted by other respondents as the defining factors in how they are perceived.

5.7. On the other hand, external examiners were very positive about the contribution that they make to the programmes that they are appointed to (80% consider that they 'make a difference' with 9% disagreeing) and this may be closely related to their conception of the role. For example, when asked 'To whom is your primary duty?' over 50% considered that it is either students (32%) or academic staff contributing to the programme (22%). See Table 5 for detail. There is limited evidence in this table that external examiners see their role as demonstrating accountability to those beyond the immediate students and staff of the institution to wider stakeholders such as the QAA, professional bodies and employers although one might argue that the latter two groups in particular are important users and consumers of the awards that external examiners confirm. Amongst those who select 'other', three groups

were mentioned by at least five examiners: the discipline; higher education in general/the sector; and taxpayers/the public/society.

- 5.8. Likewise, quality officers, whilst not always agreeing on the conception of the role, are overwhelmingly convinced that external examiners make a positive difference to the quality of provision (96% agreement)

Table 5: External examiners: to whom is your primary duty?



- 5.9. Finally, 95% of external examiners responded to a request to state their main reason for being an external examiner. The most frequent reason, offered by over half the examiners, was interest in how other programmes operate and the desire to learn about good practices that they could bring back to their own institutions. Many examiners cited the wish to disseminate good practice or share their expertise and skills. Other common reasons were a collegial desire to give back or a sense of duty or obligation to contribute as an academic to the system. Personal professional concerns ranked highly; including professional development, external profile/prestige, building the CV and networking. Further groups mentioned guarding discipline standards and wishing to keep up their own standards. Smaller groups of examiners cited various commitments such as to the subject discipline, pedagogy, and quality assurance processes. A few examiners mentioned students, either a desire to ensure standards were fair for them or improve their experience generally. Personal reasons included individual development, enjoyment, money, interest in the subject and the excitement of travelling and getting out of their institution. A small group answered plainly ‘because I was asked’ (n=22).

Follow-up interviews

- 5.10. A few of the external examiners interviewed emphasised the value and importance of the ‘cross-pollination’ of external examining. Others talked about its importance for their own development. Another theme is the vast variety in the role, in terms of demands, the report, the fee, and/or the ability to safeguard standards. Many interviewees commented on how much power external examiners have; some felt this varied from examinership to examinership and many experienced a decreasing power to do vivas, change marks, and make comments at a meaningful stage. Some examiners felt it was too easy for departments to override their comments.
- 5.11. Quality assurance officers expressed overwhelmingly positive support for the external examining system and a belief that it should guarantee both the quality of student work and the assessment processes. In other words, they see the role as both ‘to compare and to assure’. Some believe that it has become more of a box-ticking exercise but that role may be adequate if the systems in place are sufficiently rigorous and robust. As to suggestions of strengthening the external examiner system, quality assurance officers shared a general concern that an inspectorate would not be desirable, and worried about possible loss of the peer/critical friend aspects of the system. A number of quality assurance officers did suggest that the system could be strengthened by creating subject communities where external examiners could meet to share experiences, discuss and compare standards, and possibly calibrate between institutions.

Regional fora

- 5.12. The ‘critical friend’ element of the external examiner role was seen by those attending the regional fora as very valuable in supporting and enhancing provision. However the variability in how the role is performed was an area of concern. Delegates expressed a need for greater clarification of the role of the examiner in relation to their prime responsibility (‘process checker’ or ‘standards checker’) and the need for more guidance or transparency to address the relative importance of public endorsement and private critical friend. They seek clarity regarding what should be disclosed in public documents and what can be dealt with informally.

Part 6: Findings – Fitness for purpose: capacity to safeguard standards

- 6.1. The review of literature suggests a contrast between, on the one hand, formal reviews of external examining which essentially view it as an effective system for safeguarding standards and, on the other hand, empirical and theoretical studies which present a much greater challenge to its underlying assumptions and capacity to deliver its aims. We tested this notion of ‘fitness for purpose’ by a variety of methods in addition to the review of literature: surveys and interviews with external examiners and senior quality officers, analysis of data provided by senior quality officers and engagement with the sector and wider stakeholders via a series of meetings.

Survey data

- 6.2. External examiners and senior quality officers in our survey overwhelmingly consider that the external examining system is fit for purpose (88% and 97% respectively). Similar proportions also agree that the external examining system can be relied upon to provide assurance that standards are right (87% and 94%). To a certain extent this is borne out by external examiners’ generally negative (85%) response to a question asking whether they have experienced any pressure not to ‘rock the boat’ in relation to academic standards where a figure of 13% claim to have experienced such pressure. Similarly 89% of examiners and 94% of quality officers agree that a peer evaluation process is appropriate for an external examining system. These results indicate considerable confidence in the dependability of the system from the perspective of those most closely involved and echo previous reviews of external examining in the UK outlined in Part 3, above.
- 6.3. Examiners’ open comments throw more light on their views. While few explicitly claim the system is fit for purpose (possibly due to lack of clarity/agreement as to what the purpose is) these respondents regard the system positively, citing a range of benefits – most often summarised as being a ‘critical friend’ and that it is an established and widely respected system. A small minority, however, report that they do not believe the system works, and an additional group explicitly suggest that the system is getting worse (e.g. ‘In the last five years or so, we have seen a number of external examiners’ powers removed, and in some cases the role has been reduced to a tick-box exercise.’). A very small number of respondents (under 1%) report having had significant concerns over the standards at particular institutions and in two cases they had resigned because they thought the standards so low and that they were being ignored.
- 6.4. The greatest criticism is focused on those institutions who either ignore external examiners’ recommendations or whose systems make it slow and/or difficult for

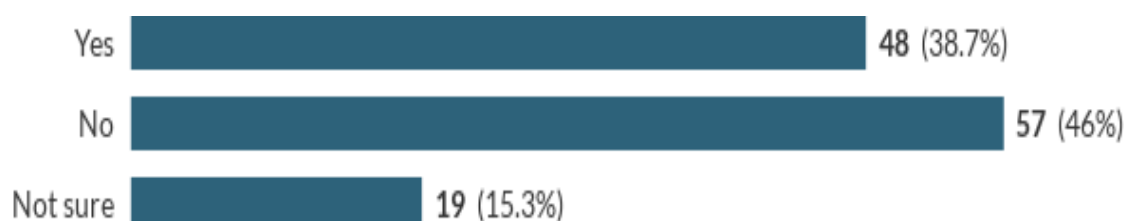
departments to accept and implement them. A significant number of responses note that in their experience different institutions respond very differently to external examiners' reports, ranging from comments being 'taken very seriously in some places and ignored in others'. However 67% of external examiners report that the institution responded effectively to their annual reports.

- 6.5. A further element of the survey data impinges on the safeguarding of standards, that is, the pressure experienced by degree-awarding bodies to change their honours degree classification regulations and algorithms as a result of factors such as university league tables. Approximately half of the senior quality officers who had this information report that their institution has changed their award algorithm/s in the last five years in order to ensure that they do not disadvantage students in comparison with those in similar institutions (see Table 6). The majority of further detail provided in response to this question indicated measures that would improve student outcomes although other reasons were given for changes. For example:

'We have made changes to the calculation of degree classification (introduction of the Level 4 contribution), but this was driven principally by our strategy to encourage deeper student engagement at L4. As part of determining an alternative means of classification calculation, we did, of course, bear in mind that we would not wish to introduce any system which would disadvantage our students compared to those in other institutions, but this was not the primary reason for adopting the changes we have done.'
(Senior quality officer)

- 6.6. Whilst the autonomy of providers in this matter necessarily creates questions regarding inter-institutional comparability of awards, there is also the issue of safeguarding standards when systematic changes are being made to award algorithms to improve outcomes for students. A logical conclusion is that, if providers are continuously benchmarking their awards against others in the sector (a consequence of league tables) and others are changing their algorithms, there is bound to be an upward movement in award outcomes irrespective of changes in student performance. See the discussion of wider evidence on this point in para 3.42, above.

Table 6: Has your institution made changes to its award regulations over the last five years to ensure that the degree classification algorithm does not disadvantage students in comparison with students in similar institutions?



- 6.7. Examiners and senior quality officers were also asked for their views on the meaningfulness of ‘comparability’ of award standards. Eighty percent of quality officers and 81% of external examiners stated that ‘comparability’ was still a meaningful concept in relation to **institutions** with 15% and 16% respectively disagreeing. There was slightly less confidence in the meaningfulness of comparable awards across **subjects** for external examiners (Examiners: 71% agree, 22% disagree; quality officers: 82% agree 11% disagree). Seventy-three percent of examiners agree that there is a shared view of standards amongst the external examiners within a discipline (16% disagree).
- 6.8. The evidence below (para 6.11) regards the strong likelihood that examiners working within a limited range of institutions might suggest that their knowledge of standards across the sector is limited. A substantial number of the external examiners’ open comments report that they do not believe there is comparability of standards, especially between different disciplines, with a smaller proportion believing that there are definitely different standards in different institutions. Their comments indicated greater agreement that, to a greater or lesser extent, there is some consistency and comparability of standards within disciplines, particularly if the discipline is also answerable to a professional body. Another group point out that given limited individual experience as an external examiner, in the absence of appropriate fora or opportunities to meet and discuss with other examiners, it is impossible to know, and therefore impossible to answer the question:
- ‘How would we know? What we need is the opportunity to really compare similar work from different institutions.’
- 6.9. A further group of examiners point out that while the concept of comparability across programmes, institutions and subjects may be meaningful, that does not mean that comparability exists, or is necessarily achievable. One in fact claims that, while not believing it exists, ‘comparability is an illusion that needs to be maintained’ and another makes the interesting distinction between ‘threshold standards [which] are comparable across institutions and programmes... [and] classification standards [which are] less comparable’. However, one suggests, ‘Comparability is what external examining is designed to achieve/maintain; we wouldn’t do it if we didn’t feel this was both achievable and demonstrable’.
- 6.10. Open comments by quality officers confirm this general view although a number indicate that comparability can only be assured at the threshold level with comparability beyond that limited by diversity of provision and institution and differences in degree classification regulations. A small number suggest that the system needs strengthening, possibly by ‘intelligent use of data’, and that external examiners have limited impact on standards. Similarly, a few mentioned the value of the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in facilitating comparison of standards.

- 6.11. This is interesting given the challenges to comparability and consistency in standards found in the research literature. One reason offered in the literature is the lack of exchange of examiners between mission groups and this was largely confirmed in this study. The external examiners' survey provides a picture of the appointment practices of providers in the different Peer Groups (see Table 7). The table tends to reinforce the frequently expressed view that providers are apt to recruit from similar institutions¹⁰. For example, the survey data indicates that Russell Group universities recruit 80% of their examiners from other research-intensive providers whereas 'teaching' institutions with less than 9% research income recruit, on average, 62% of their examiners from the same type of institution as themselves and only 8% from Russell Group universities. The only Peer Group, from this large sample, who recruited examiners from across the range of institutions is the relatively small group of institutions with 8-21% research income (C). We have not included the appointment practices of specialist music/art teaching institutions in this analysis because the number of examiners from that group was too few. However they are visible in Table 7.

¹⁰ It is recognised that the clustering of examiners by Peer Group is inevitable in the small number of subjects that are taught predominantly in either research-intensive or teaching-intensive institutions.

Table 7: Where providers appoint their external examiners from

Home institution of examiner in Peer Groups									
Appointing institution in Peer Groups for TRAC	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	Other	Total examiner appointments
A: Russell Group	30.6 % 34	37.8 % 42	10.8 % 12	10.8 % 12	7.2% 8	2.7% 3	0.0% 0	0.0% 0	111
B: All other inst. with >22% RI	26.0 % 19	30.1 22%	13.7 % 10	13.7 % 10	8.2% 6	5.5% 4	1.4% 1	1.4% 1	73
C Inst. with 8-21% RI	18.0 % 9	14.0 % 7	14.0 % 7	26.0 % 13	16.0 % 8	4.0% 2	6.0% 3	2.0% 1	50
D Inst. with 5-8% RI	8.0% 10	13.6 % 17	16.0 % 20	25.6 % 32	24.0 % 30	10.4 % 13	2.4% 3	0.0% 0	125
E Teaching inst. £40-119m T.	8.9% 10	6.3% 7	20.5 % 23	25.0 % 28	27.7 % 31	9.8% 11	0.9% 1	0.9% 1	112
F Smaller teaching inst.	6.3% 2	21.9 % 7	9.4% 3	18.8 % 6	28.1 % 9	15.6 % 5	0.0% 0	0.0% 0	32
G Music/arts teaching inst.	6.7% 1	6.7% 1	13.3 % 2	33.3 % 5	33.3 % 5	6.7% 1	0.0% 0		15
Other	0.0% 0	0.0% 0	0.0% 0	50.0 % 1	50.0 % 1	0.0% 0	0.0% 0	0.0% 0	2

RI = research income, T = turnover. Sample of 602 examiners, excludes 12 who gave neither institution, 50 who gave no home institution and 20 who gave no examined institution. 'Other' contains alternative providers with degree awarding powers.

	Over 25%		10.1-15%
	20.1- 25%		5.1-10%
	15.1- 20%		0-5%

- 6.12. However, such a partition between institutional groups may not be easily apparent to individual examiners carrying out their duties. The confidence demonstrated by the survey respondents in the shared nature of standards – a pre-requisite for

assuring comparability – is possibly misplaced. But how would examiners necessarily be aware of differences in standards as there are few opportunities to meet with other examiners or formally calibrate their standards against others in the discipline? (We have noted some examples of calibration in Part 3).

Cross-national examining and calibration

- 6.13. We asked quality officers in the survey whether they thought external examining should take place across international boundaries: 55% agreed, 36% disagreed. More specifically, 64% of quality officers agreed that external examining can contribute to the calibration of academic standards across international boundaries, with 24% disagreeing.
- 6.14. The comments from quality officers regarding an international context for external examining explain these views. A number are very clear that external examining is particularly important for collaborative provision abroad including monitoring the consistency of standards across different campuses. A small number have a positive view of an international dimension as it would contribute to European integration of qualifications, assist calibration of UK standards with other systems, and enable an institution to select the most appropriate external examiner. A small number note that they already make effective use of international examiners. However, the vast majority of comments were less enthusiastic because of the practical difficulties and cultural differences even if they considered the idea to be good in principle. These barriers included different grading systems, the need to be conversant with UK standards and frameworks and the use of outcome-based, criterion assessment rather than standardised grade distributions in the UK:

‘It is difficult to envisage how external examining across international boundaries could operate effectively and productively and the calibration of standards can be achieved more usefully by direct comparisons of curricula and grading by partnering institutions.’

Follow-up interviews

- 6.15. Two of the external examiners interviewed were confident in the ability of examiners to safeguard standards. Many others felt there were significant problems not only with being able to influence standards, but also with being able to meaningfully compare them across programmes. Some examiners feel standards are determined internally by institutions’ internal processes. Based on the interviews, it is clear that some examiners themselves have trouble separating out standards and process checking, that is, in answer to a probing question regarding the checking of the standard of student work, they would refer to process.

- 6.16. Some quality assurance officers expressed concern that it is not possible to accurately ensure comparability because of the lack of experience across a sufficient number of institutions (except in small specialist subject areas, perhaps). They felt comparisons might be more possible when it comes to what is a pass than distinguishing between upper second and lower second class degrees. In addition there were some comments that the ‘accumulative effect’ of other quality assurance measures – FHEQ, QAA, internal quality assurance procedures, PSRBs (which are generally felt to complement the external examiner system) – between them assure comparable standards.

Regional fora

- 6.17. In line with the surveys and interviews, the fora reflected the sector’s considerable regard for the external examiner system. The peer-based system was seen as very valuable in supporting and enhancing provision. However there was almost consistent identification of issues that need to be resolved in order to make the system fit for purpose, especially in relation to assuring consistency and comparability of standards. Where there was disagreement among participants it often seemed to stem from whether their perspective was more focused on the autonomy of institutions or national standards. Competition between institutions was identified by some as a problem in developing a collegiate and sector-wide system of review. A further issue raised was the lack of a holistic view of student performance and concern that the unit of quality is the programme but generally examiners only see a group of modules. There was also comment regarding external examiners’ lack of influence over the award algorithms of degree-awarding bodies. A very small number of delegates reported the successful use of external examiners from other nations.

Conclusion

- 6.18. The review data reinforce the conclusions of many previous inquiries into external examiners in finding that the sector largely considers that the system is fit for purpose and can be relied on to provide assurance that standards are right. However, analysis of the detailed evidence, including prior research, indicates that we have little independent evidence of the system meeting its aims, particularly if one of its main purposes is considered to be a contribution to assuring threshold and comparable standards. The autonomy of institutions in setting their award algorithms is a key factor in considering the scope of influence of external examiners and the limited exposure of examiners to different parts of the sector may reduce their knowledge of comparable standards. We found limited enthusiasm for external examining across international boundaries (with the exception of assuring collaborative provision) – or its potential contribution to calibrating academic standards internationally – practical difficulties being the main hurdle.

Part 7: Findings – Confidence of stakeholders

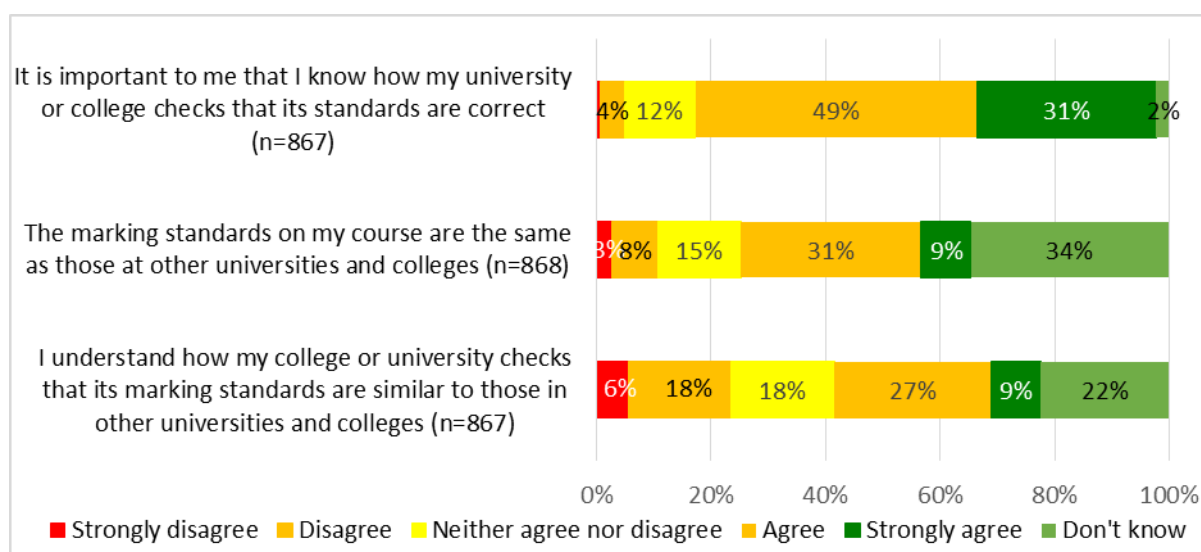
7.1 The UK has a longstanding reputation for high quality universities¹¹ and confidence in their standards is a key part of maintaining that brand both at home and internationally. A range of changes in the local and global environment for higher education is likely to put pressure on the maintenance of standards and these are discussed in more depth in Part 8. This part examines the current situation with regard to the confidence of stakeholders in academic standards, their assurance and the role that external examiners play in maintaining that confidence. It also reports our findings in relation to views about the role of QAA review in providing assurance of both standards and the operation of external examining. We investigated the confidence of students through an NUS conducted a Student Opinion Survey of 1,114 students supported by a number of ‘vox pop’ interviews with students at two universities. We investigated the views of other stakeholders principally through five meetings with representatives of the sector and a range of PBRBs and disciplinary groups as listed in Appendix 2. In addition, we collected data regarding the sector’s view of stakeholder confidence through surveys with external examiners and senior quality officers and a number of interviews with these two groups.

Students

- 7.2 The NUS survey found that a relatively small proportion of students (36%) understand how their provider checks that its standards are similar to those in other universities and colleges although this information is important to them (see Chart 3). This suggests that the majority of students may not be linking the external examiner role with the assurance of, and confidence in, standards. Forty percent of students think that the marking standards on their course are the same as those at other universities or colleges although almost as many (34%) did not know the answer to this question.
- 7.3 These results discussed in Part 4 indicate that a majority of students are aware of external examiners and many have an understanding of their role although it is confused for some. In terms of their confidence in academic standards and the contribution that external examiners bring to that confidence, the results are more equivocal. The findings do not indicate that students generally understand how standards are assured by their provider nor are a majority convinced that the standards are similar between their programme and similar courses elsewhere.

¹¹ <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/highereducation/Documents/2015/QualityEquitySustainability.pdf>

Chart 3: Students' agreement with statements about marking standards



7.4 The survey data from external examiners and quality officers tends to support the view that student knowledge of the external examining system is limited. Thirty-six percent of external examiners consider that students understand the role of external examiners with a majority taking the opposing view (52%) and a large group responding that they are not sure. Quality officers are generally more positive about students' understanding of the role (46%) although almost an equal proportion think the opposite (44%). Conversely (and rather surprisingly, considering the proportion of examiners and quality officers who don't think students understand the role), 68% of examiners and 75% of quality officers state that external examining contributes to student confidence that assessment is fair with only 18% and 17% respectively disagreeing. This view that external examiners provide students with confidence of consistency and fairness across the courses within their programme was also expressed by an NUS representative at the stakeholder meeting. The recent UK Quality Code guidance to make external examiners' reports available to students is seen as valuable in helping students understand the role by 66% of senior quality officers with only 18% disagreeing. A slightly smaller proportion, although still a firm majority (63%), consider that access to reports helps students understand the impact of external examiners; 21% disagree with this view but a large number either do not know or consider it not applicable (17%).

7.5 External examiners' qualitative comments on this topic referred to the confidence gained from external examining by both students and other stakeholders. The vast majority of these comments stated that most students and stakeholders do not understand the system and, in many cases, do not even know it exists. Many specified that they need not understand it, while others believed a better

understanding would contribute to greater confidence. Interestingly, 11 examiners mentioned that if there is confidence that the system ensures standards, that confidence is misplaced.

- 7.6 The qualitative comments by senior quality officers rather belie the confidence exhibited in the responses described above. In general, these comments suggest that agreement with the statements is hedged by a range of provisos and limitations:

‘Whilst I have agreed with all the statements above, I think it is only to a very limited extent. The external examiner process is explained to students but I think that the number who fully engage with the report itself and any actions arising is a very small percentage.’ (Senior quality officer)

- 7.7 These statements include students only having a very basic understanding, a point reinforced in the stakeholder forum, and lack of interest in external examiners unless they are unhappy with their grades. An ‘outdated’ understanding of the role is where they see external examiners as having an impact on individual examining rather than as moderators. Yet others comment that students understand less well the quality assurance and enhancement side of the role.

- 7.8 Some respondents felt that the character of external examiners’ reports makes them inaccessible for a student audience and that making them available did not mean that students took the trouble to read them. Some ponder whether the value in having external examiners is more of a symbolic nature rather than that students understand what an external examiner does. There was greater confidence that student representatives who engage in the process of considering and responding to external examiner reports do fully understand the role and impact and have a wider understanding of the mechanisms in place to secure standards although this view wasn’t universal. Several quality officers stressed the importance of providers placing greater effort on helping students understand the role more clearly with several mentioning that the stress should be on reassuring them that the institution has adequate quality standards and procedures in place rather than the details of the external examiner system in particular.

‘There is more to do in helping students understand the role of the whole assessment cycle not just external examiners. This simply needs to be explained better and relevant information shared with them in an appropriate format.’

- 7.9 Overall, the data provides limited evidence that the external examiner system contributes to student confidence in the standards of their programmes. This appears to be as much to do with their limited understanding of how the role contributes to assuring standards rather than aspects of the role itself.

Other stakeholders

- 7.10 In relation to other stakeholders, over three quarters of external examiners (79%) and virtually all quality officers (90%) consider that the external examining system contributes to stakeholder confidence in UK higher education standards with only 7% and 5% respectively disagreeing. Likewise, the vast majority of external examiners and quality officers view the system as contributing to confidence that standards are comparable across different providers (75% and 86% respectively agree, 11% and 10% respectively disagree).
- 7.11 As discussed above, external examiners qualitative comments reflect a strong view that most stakeholders do not understand the system or know it exists. Likewise, the 30 comments from quality officers are somewhat at odds with the quantitative findings. In recognition of diversity and widening participation agendas, comparability of standards is only considered to be meaningful in the case of 'threshold standards' and between programmes at similar institutions.

'A key strength of the sector is the heterogeneity of its constituent institutions. Each has different academic missions, priorities, subject focus, research interests and infrastructure. This enables the sector as a whole to meet the various needs of different types of students and other stakeholders and to offer the range of disciplines and subjects required. It is appropriate that institutions tailor their provision to the abilities and circumstances of their particular student body.'

Poor understanding of this from stakeholders outside the academy, such as parents and the media, has led to tension and expectations that cannot be met.

- 7.12 Overall, the survey data suggest that those holding quality roles in institutions are more likely than external examiners to hold strongly positive views about the contribution of external examining to stakeholder confidence in UK higher education standards. However, both groups are generally optimistic about external examining's contribution to confidence although also indicating that knowledge of the system is limited.
- 7.13 Confidence in UK higher education standards was a key topic at the stakeholder forum. We gathered the views of delegates representing a range of stakeholder groups on the issue of confidence in standards in advance of open discussion. Two thirds of the delegates said their organisation was broadly or very confident in the standards of UK higher education, a point reaffirmed in the open discussion. A few specified that their confidence in consistency was lower than their confidence in standards generally. Three representatives were not very confident, one stating that while the UK still has a good reputation, that reputation is in jeopardy. Concern was expressed about low confidence in the standards of new providers. For the most

part, confidence in UK standards was seen to reside in a the wide range of quality assurance processes and indicators in use such as benchmarking, accreditation, formal standards and frameworks, assessment boards, student and employer feedback and research outcomes as well as external examiners.

- 7.14 When asked what they saw as the contribution of external examining arrangements to maintaining standards, those delegates who had expressed confidence in standards said external examiners contributed: sharing of good practice, peer review, externality, a critical friend, moderation, and oversight, recognising that it is one part of a wide range of mechanisms. Three representatives specified that the role could be more uniform. One asserted that ‘there is no shared understanding of standards or of the purpose of external examining’.
- 7.15 Open discussion raised a number of other matters in relation to stakeholder confidence in standards. These included: noting different missions and standards across disciplines; the increase in diverse and private providers; and the importance of robust quality assurance procedures, discipline meetings, and critical friendship. These last factors were seen to combine in providing a matrix of processes which support the external examiner role. The view was also expressed (disputed by others) that the sector needed a contribution from genuine externals – for example from within industry or professional practice – as the current system is rather ‘incestuous’. In addition, there should be an opportunity for examiners to meet with students in order to better determine standards. It was noted (but not by employers themselves) that despite our robust approaches to assuring standards, employers feel that higher education institutions are not delivering students with the correct skills for industry.
- 7.16 A number of sector group representatives discussed the issue of national standards at the stakeholder forum. They concluded that without a sense of national standards, it is hard to rule out sub-standard provision. They also recognised that standard setting is important in addition to assuring threshold standards of achievement and noted that the issue of national standards is not simple, for example differences between the nations of the UK and three- and four-year programmes.

QAA review

- 7.17 Senior quality officers are largely confident that QAA review provides sufficient quality assurance of the operation of external examining (87%) with only 6% disagreeing. Likewise, this confidence in QAA review extends to assurance not just of the system’s operation but also of standards (84% agree, 11% disagree).
- 7.18 This confidence was partially agreed with by the quality officers in the regional fora and their open comments in the survey. They indicate that an institutional review approach does indeed act to test the operation of external examining but is less

effective in testing whether external examining is safeguarding the academic standards of programmes. This is because QAA review is seen to focus on the operation of the system and not the actual standards applied, although one quality officer mentioned that reviewers may request evidence to test the 'alignment of assessment and feedback with validated grading criteria'. Other limitations to the oversight of external examining by institutional review were the limited time that a review team spends on the topic and the control that institutions have over what reviewers see. One respondent commented that it depends how much a review team 'drills down'. The question of assurance of standards was seen as more complex because, for example, it relies on a shared understanding of standards informed by the Quality Code. In relation to the latter, several respondents mentioned that examiners' knowledge of this was considered to vary or be 'extremely' subjective or to lack training in relation to its use:

'[QAA review] can provide reassurance that there is evidence that policies and processes are in place related to external examining and the assurance of standards, but it cannot assure those standards.'

- 7.19 Another three comments noted that institutions have their own robust quality assurance checks regarding the management of academic standards and they would not rely on institutional review to provide assurance of the operation of external examining: 'Primary responsibility for QA rests with the institution with degree-awarding powers'. In a similar vein, one said that sufficient autonomy is needed to apply the guidelines in a way that is suited to purpose. However, the usefulness of sector frameworks and reference points was acknowledged. Another considered that QAA review provides sufficient assurance of standards taken in combination with higher education institutions' use of external examiners which indicates the important reliance that is placed on the examining system for standards.

Conclusion

- 7.20 Those working in the sector and some stakeholder groups have reasonable faith that external examining contributes to stakeholder confidence. The evidence of the student survey indicates that whilst the majority of students have some understanding of the external examiner role, they do not generally understand how standards are assured by their provider nor are a majority convinced that the standards are similar between their programme and similar courses elsewhere. On this basis, it is difficult to claim that external examining makes a strong contribution to students' confidence in standards. Many of those in the sector suggest that student understanding is basic, although providing students with access to examiners' reports was considered to be helpful. On the other hand, information detailed in Part 4 of this report indicates that most students have not seen an examiner's report. Student representatives were considered more likely to understand the role and its impact. There is more confidence amongst examiners and quality officers that

external examining contributes to student confidence that assessment is fair although an emphasis on fairness within a programme is a key point raised by NUS.

- 7.21 In relation to stakeholders other than students, the surveys reveal strongly positive views about the contribution of external examining to stakeholder confidence in UK higher education and the comparability of standards. Stakeholders themselves, based on a small sample, are also likely to express broad confidence in UK higher education standards although the role of examiners is perceived to contribute more to enhancement than assurance of standards. The external examiner role is seen as one element of a matrix of quality processes. Those survey respondents who provided additional comment are less positive, with views that most stakeholders outside the sector do not understand the system or know it exists.

Part 8: Findings – Impact of the higher education environment on external examining (currently and looking forward)

- 8.1 This part considers the extent to which the sector considers that current changes and those anticipated in the future will impact on the role of the external examiner or require either changes to the role or an alternative approach.
- 8.2 The higher education sector is operating in a highly dynamic environment with significant potential to impact on academic standards, albeit with some variation in the different nations of the UK. Deregulation of student number controls, the growth in private providers and collaborative provision, diversity of institutions and increasing competition between providers have brought a level of uncertainty and anxieties about quality and governance. Students, including growing numbers of international students, are now the main funders of undergraduate provision which is likely to lead to rising demands and concomitant concerns to fully engage them in their educational experience and demonstrate value for money and high standards of education. A significantly more diverse student body in relation to prior achievement, disability, prior education and expectations of higher education will continue to put pressure on retention and standards. The claim is often made that students are becoming increasingly litigious (Simon and Pleschová, 2012; Poynter, 2002) with important implications for robust evidence regarding the standards applied in assessing their work.
- 8.3 There are changes in technology in all areas of academic life including both assessment methods and applications for marking, feedback, processing and communication of student assessment including engagement with external examiners. Perhaps most importantly for this review, the integrity of academic standards is at risk as web technologies can increasingly facilitate academic malpractice, whether intentionally or unintentionally (Underwood and Farrington-Flint, 2015).
- 8.4 We tested the views of the sector regarding the impact of these changes via on-line surveys, interviews and discussion in the regional meetings.

Survey data

- 8.5 As discussed in Part 6, whilst examiners perceive some limitations in the operation of the role, there is a general strong belief amongst examiners and senior quality officers that the external examining system is fit for purpose. However, this confidence is less evident when they are asked to consider the contribution of external examining to assuring standards in the face of pressures caused by 'grade inflation' and league tables. Fifty-nine percent of external examiners and 83% of quality officers consider that external examiners can effectively guard against 'grade

inflation' in higher education awards whereas 36% and 14% respectively disagree with this view. Similarly, 58% of external examiners also indicated that examiners can effectively safeguard standards despite the pressure on institutional decision-making created by the advance of league tables with 31% disagreeing. It is interesting to see that those managing external examiner arrangements have greater belief that they can guard against these challenges than examiners themselves. Eighty-one percent of quality officers agreed that external examining can safeguard standards in the face of league tables with only 13% disagreeing.

- 8.6 In their open comments, external examiners frequently viewed the wider context of the sector and pressure on institutions from league tables and other sources (described as 'student-centric finance' by one respondent) as significantly stronger influences than external examiners. Therefore a significant, minority view is that external examiners cannot resist possible 'grade inflation'. The fact that external examiners can no longer alter grades is pointed out several times. These views are possibly best summarised in the following comment:

'Individual courses can't fight institutional policies and individual institutions cannot fight national trends alone. It would be misguided to think that external examiners can single-handedly maintain standards...' (External examiner)

- 8.7 Senior quality officers, in their comments, expressed mixed views on this matter. Whilst a number considered that external examiners are able to support institutions in resisting the pressure created by league tables, particularly as part of a wider range of quality measures, others mentioned that these matters were 'bigger pictures' or outside the external examiner remit: 'The biggest contribution to league tables is classification systems – not standards' Several noted that examiners would need a broader role in order to contribute to safeguarding standards in this context.
- 8.8 We asked both external examiners and senior quality officers the extent to which they anticipated that a number of other factors in the higher education environment would impact on external examining. Table 8 sets out the extent to which they consider key factors have implications for the external examiner role in safeguarding standards:

Table 8: Factors that are perceived to impact on the external examiner role

Factors	External examiners		Senior quality officers	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Students now pay up to £9,000 a year for their higher education.	53%	34%	36%	53%
There is increasing student diversity in UK higher education.	67%	26%	40%	48%
There is increasing competition for students with relaxed student number allocations and private providers.	64%	25%	45%	40%
There is increasing use of technology in all aspects of higher education assessment and marking.	75%	18%	52%	36%
There is a growth in student numbers and risk of a shrinking unit of resource.	78%	14%	53%	36%

8.9 The figures in Table 8 indicate a diversity of views between both external examiners and quality officers. A proportion of both groups considered that all the listed factors had an impact on external examining with greater numbers placing emphasis on the increasing use of technology and the growth of student numbers.

8.10 The qualitative comments provide a greater insight into the views underpinning these responses. Over a third of external examiners made comments on this topic. A strong theme was the view that, whilst these factors might exist, they do not impact on the examiner role which is to uphold standards. Another significant argument was the view that such factors make the job more difficult but also more important. A further theme was the view that the examiner's role is to comment and advise on these matters for the good of the programme and students. A final topic was the view that these factors increase the external examiner workload. Other, slightly weaker, themes were the negative impact on quality, including feedback and assessment methods, the difficulties posed by increasing numbers of international students and the growing conception of student as consumer. Interestingly, three examiners commented that fees will mean students demand more consistent standards and a stronger examining system.

- 8.11 In relation to technology, the responses were of a different character with a focus on practical implications rather than standards. Many external examiners commented on practical technology problems or benefits of technology. Problems included the need to be familiar with and have access to so many on-line systems, and the fact that such on-line systems make it generally hard to monitor consistency and fairness of marking. The benefits respondents mentioned included transparency, distance examining, easier access to student work samples and the ability to view a wider range of work.
- 8.12 Quality officers' open comments, in common with external examiners', were strongly of the opinion that safeguarding of standards should be independent of all the factors listed in Table 8 with a number venturing that the presence of these challenges places a greater pressure and load on external examiners to uphold standards. It was recognised that pressure may come to bear on external examiners if the provider felt under pressure, for example, in relation to maintaining pass rates, declining entry qualifications and flexibility in relation to the language skills of overseas students. However, this situation was perceived by some as making the role ever more important and 'such developments indicate the need to strengthen' the external examiner system.
- 8.13 Quality officers noted other challenges to the examiner system created by current and future changes such as increasing collaborative provision; the growth of new and different modes and types of study; expansion of private provision and increased contact with alternative providers; the difficulty of finding good examiners in increasingly pressurised work environments; and more general requirements for public accountability and transparency.
- 8.14 Quality officers commented that the pressure on resources may impact on provision and standards may subsequently fall as a result. It was suggested that external examiners have a role to comment on resources if they impact on the quality of provision. In terms of diversity, quality officers noted that examiners need to make sure that assessment and curriculum design is accessible to the full range of students, and they should be prepared to encounter innovative approaches to completion of assessments by students. Quality officers also predicted that fee-paying students will take greater interest in how standards are set and maintained, and expect more from teaching and feedback.
- 8.15 In relation to technology, the responses also had a focus on practical implications rather than standards. Advances in technology were considered to have an impact on the role in terms of examiners requiring suitable IT skills, difficulty for examiners in accessing student work completed on-line and the negative impact of some applications in terms of developmental feedback to students. Alternatively there was the view that 'technology can make the external examiner role easier and broader', for example with access to all student work on-line.

Follow-up interviews

- 8.16 External examiners worried that increasing diversity will mean an increase in tailoring assessments to student capabilities, so there will be a wider range of assessments to comprehend. Many interviewees note pressures on institutions to maintain their statistics for recruitment and retention. Some mentioned (both criticising and endorsing) alternative ways to maintain positive institutional statistics beyond relaxing academic standards, such as giving students multiple attempts to pass, or tailoring assessments to student strengths.
- 8.17 Quality assurance officers generally recognise the growing pressures on institutions, and subsequently on course teams but have faith that the external examiner system is robust and resilient to pressure, with sufficient safeguards in place to resist and/or mitigate the negative effects of change. The main concern seemed to be a potential increase in workloads for external examiners, and insufficient time and resources. All respondents believed that, where there is international collaborative provision, external examiners should operate across international borders, despite the recognised challenges and increased logistical difficulties. Most though were strongly against any notion of having international external examiners (i.e. external examiners from other countries).

Conclusion

- 8.18 There is a range of factors in the higher education environment with the potential to impact on academic standards and external examining and examiners accept that the role might become more difficult but also more important. There are a number of specific developments in the higher education environment which are expected to create challenges for the external examiner system such as increasing collaborative provision, the growth of new and different modes and types of study, the difficulty of finding good examiners in increasingly pressurised work environments, and more general requirements for public accountability and transparency. Whilst most of those consulted for this review consider that many factors will have an influence on external examining, they are not seen to impact on the examiner role in relation to assurance of standards. However, there is less confidence amongst examiners and some quality officers in external examiners' capacity to assure standards in the face of the pressures created by league tables and potential 'grade inflation'. The difficulty of appointing appropriate examiners was a recurring theme in all the engagements with the sector for this review and threatens the continuation of any external examiner system going into the future.

Part 9: Findings – Enhancements and alternatives

9.1 The final stage of the data collection for this review involved gathering views from the sector and wider stakeholders about how the external examiner system could be strengthened particularly if greater reliance were to be placed upon it in the future of quality assessment. This included seeking views on whether there are potential alternative approaches to benchmarking standards and whether there is anything to be learned by higher education from the quality processes of the PSRBs.

External examiner survey

9.2 External examiners' suggestions for improving the external examiner system showed considerable consistency in the main themes. These were:

- Higher, more timely, explicit and equal pay;
- More time and recognition from their home institutions, and a higher profile for the role;
- Better and perhaps more standardised training and induction;
- The creation of a national body or qualification;
- The creation of a conference or forum of external examiners;
- More consistency in the role; and
- Third-party appointment of examiners.

9.3 Minor themes in the comments included creating a system to help examiners get their first post; a register of examiners; mandatory contact with students; stricter requirements for institutions to respond to their suggestions, and opportunities to participate in moderation, group examining, or reading of work from a range of institutions. A number also recommended consideration of matters such as examiners' loss of power through exam boards, algorithms, and regulations being outside of their remit, and the establishment of a system to monitor external examiners.

9.4 When asked if we can learn anything from the quality assurance procedures of PSRBs in respect of safeguarding standards, just over half the examiners provided a response. Just under a third of these said 'yes', we could learn something from PSRBs. However, many of them did not expand on this and there were no strong themes in the comments. Small numbers commented that external examining could learn from PSRBs' thoroughness and rigour and their use of defined criteria and discipline standards.

9.5 Approximately a quarter said 'no' citing reasons such as not wanting more bureaucracy or for the system to be reduced to box-ticking. These respondents tended to describe PSRBs negatively. Other reasons for answering 'no' were that

PSRBs are not concerned with academic standards and the view that an ongoing, trusting relationship that provides practical advice is a better model for external examining than the typical PSRB engagement.

- 9.6 Many respondents gave qualified and uncertain responses. A small number stated that the systems should be merged while a larger group simply commented that the two systems (PSRB processes and external examining) are complementary.

Senior quality officer survey

- 9.7 Ninety-nine percent of senior quality officers consider there is still a role for external examiners although over a third (37%) feel that the role should be strengthened, with only 36% disagreeing with this view and 26% not sure.
- 9.8 It could be argued that senior quality officers are in the front line in terms of managing the external examiner system so their views on enhancements and alternatives are important. Asked whether the role should be strengthened, there were conflicting responses. A minority of comments suggested that endowing the role with greater authority might lose the benefits for quality enhancement that derive from someone serving as a critical friend and that it was risky to place too great a responsibility on one individual; there were comments that a strengthened role could emphasise an 'inspector' or 'auditor' function at the expense of 'critical friend'. It was pointed out that external examining operates within an array of measures to protect standards. Another group of comments argued that the role remains pivotal and does not need strengthening. Indeed, a response was that external examiners are 'knowledgeable', but not 'authorities', and that expanding the role in this direction was undesirable.
- 9.9 Some argue that it is hard to envisage how it could be improved or whether we could find a credible alternative. A larger group commented that the role is basically sound but could benefit from improvements such as a standardised role description. Others argue that as the work is largely underpaid, it is hard to see how greater demands could feasibly be placed upon it and that a more demanding role would make it even more difficult to make appointments.
- 9.10 There was support expressed for better recruitment processes, that is, a process independent of the institution, recruiting from a national register of trained or accredited examiners appointed at nationally fixed fees.
- 9.11 A concrete suggestion for strengthening and improving the role, particularly required if more reliance were placed upon it, was better training, possibly a qualification or accreditation. Comments suggest the training should include:

- Understanding of quality assurance;
- Making use of national reference points;
- Expectations of the role;
- How to evidence assurance of threshold standards across institutions; and
- Understanding the requirements of PSRBs.

9.12 Other recommendations for strengthening the role included:

- Professionalising examining: this includes training but also proper recognition and reward, and support and encouragement from examiners' home institution: 'at the moment they get paid small sums to do a rushed job';
- Standardisation of the remit, duties and pay, including suggestions for an agreed report template and role descriptor. More oversight of the system by institutions and externally;
- Increasing the quality enhancement nature of the role with more engagement during the year and not just at the time of assessment boards including discussions about the review and development of programmes, and meeting students;
- A firmer process for tackling examiners who fail to fulfil their contracts, in particular the submission of an annual report; and
- Reducing examiners' isolation in the role, for example, through sharing good practice or establishing a forum where examiners could meet to 'compare and contrast their experience and collate any common themes which may be emerging nationally.'

9.13 Senior quality officers offered very little in terms of new ways or models for benchmarking degree standards:

'I think that is the \$64million question and if I had an answer I'd be worth a fortune as an academic consultant, but I haven't and I'm not.'

There were several forceful comments in favour of not tampering with the current system:

'No system is perfect, either in design or application, but the current system has evolved and been refined over time to be both robust and sufficiently flexible to fit the range of contexts and providers. It may well be the best to be had. To dismantle or radically change it would risk all manner of unintended consequences.'

Others said that the sector must be careful not to move toward a 'dirigiste' approach to standards and there was an emphasis on maintaining a subject- or discipline-based approach, including professional bodies where relevant.

9.14 Other themes, but not widely mentioned, were:

- The system could build on subject benchmarks and subject- rather than institutional-level review of standards. Introduce some form of calibration of standards using subject networks;
- Increase standardisation, for example, of regulations or some standardised assessments for core curriculum areas (but do not increase bureaucratic quality frameworks);
- Use data to query standards across subjects and institutions, including pass rates and distribution of degree classifications;
- Support examiners in their home institution to become examiners to increase the pool of examiners.

9.15 We also asked quality officers if we could learn anything from the quality processes of PSRBs. Some of our respondents were supportive of the idea, seeing PSRB processes as an additional means to safeguard standards, although this was hedged for some with the proviso that we should only learn from the ‘rigorous’ organisations. The specific approaches which might be adopted were publishing standards and more specific criteria to ease the judgement process, better moderation processes and institutions being required to inform external examiners about changes in a programme including changes in management. The view was expressed that there is greater potential for comparability across programmes under PSRB processes because standards are more defined and may involve standardised assessments. In particular quality officers recommended the professional accountancy bodies, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) and the British Medical Council. It was noted by a few commentators that PSRBs and external examiners already work closely together. Collaboration between the different quality processes of PSRBs, external examining and the QAA Higher Education Review is required to avoid duplication and waste of resources.

9.16 However, there was an equally strong theme in the comments that rejected the idea of modelling assurance of standards on PSRB approaches with particular mention of Ofsted. The reasons offered were:

- PSRBs are more concerned with fitness for practice and skills accreditation within specific disciplines and professions than with academic standards across the board;
- There is a risk of a negative backwash on curriculum design and the student experience from the high volume and over-specification of programme content. PSRBs were described as ‘prescriptive’ and ‘stifling’ freedom in curriculum design:
‘..many subjects do not have the same status of an agreed common body of practice-based knowledge or expertise, so parallel attempts at regulation of standards based on this premise would be inappropriate.’

- PSRBs' role was seen as more akin to the Quality Code for Higher Education whereas external examiners focus on student achievement; the processes are more about 'ticking boxes' and 'compliance' than examining quality and standards;
- PSRBs do not have the developmental role that external examiners have.

Follow-up interviews

- 9.17 The follow-up interviews elicited little additional material on the topic of strengthening the external examiner system. Examiners suggested guidance or training for new examiners, including best practice. One suggested training for institutions in how to respond to reports. Some reiterated requests in the survey for more time and resources (not just for themselves, but also to make recruitment easier). One examiner suggested shortening appointments so examiners could cross-pollinate more widely. Suggestions for standards included a nationally agreed distribution curve of award classifications and national benchmark standards.

Regional fora

- 9.18 There was some consistency, as well as some variation, in the extent of change that was deemed necessary by those attending the regional fora. The view that it was difficult to envisage how the system could be improved was raised although there was a positive response regarding a range of options when these were put forward for discussion. A majority of participants in all fora wanted to see greater professionalisation of the role of external examiners by adopting more formalised training, consistency in pay (set independently of providers), greater recognition of the external examiner role in home institutions, a link between senior fellowship of the HEA and undertaking the role of examiner; development of national database(s) of examiners; and clarity about the role (to address the problem of 'rubber stamping'). Concerns were expressed by some groups relating to the cost of any changes, time available and how centralised aspects of proposals such as a database or training would be organised. Beyond this consensus, the majority of participants in the fora were also in favour of processes to improve calibration of standards between examiners within disciplines although some felt that informal processes already take place. While there was discussion about the precise nature and operation of such calibration processes, and obvious concern about the logistical and organisational challenges, there was general support for the establishment of 'colleges of examiners/peers' to allow examiners to check their standards, and for disciplines to 'own their own standards', making subject benchmarks 'more dynamic'.

Stakeholder forum

- 9.19 Those attending the stakeholder forum offered little in terms of aspects of PSRB quality processes which could be adopted by the higher education sector. Delegates suggested that there is considerable variety amongst PSRBs in their practices as well as a difference between academic and professional standards. Many PSRBs already place considerable emphasis on external examiners in carrying out elements of quality assessment. Some PSRBs (for example, in medicine) already require more of the external examiner role, which may be something useful that other subjects could adopt. The importance of a good infrastructure for quality was stressed in order to develop shared expectations of standards from the beginning, and accreditation of programmes by professional/ disciplinary bodies was seen as a useful ‘enlargement’ of the QAA benchmark statements.
- 9.20 Further discussion at the stakeholder forum elicited additional views from stakeholders regarding the future of external examining and how, if needed, the system could be strengthened. In relation to the topic of assuring comparability of standards, delegates were asked to consider the value of ‘calibrating’ standards across programmes. ‘Calibrate’ as a term was not considered helpful, it would cost more and would not be welcomed by the higher education community. They were very much in favour of disciplines owning their own standards and the role of benchmarks in establishing those standards but were concerned about the possibility of a drive for too much precision implied by a term like calibration. Standards should be ‘inclusive, permissive, non-restrictive and protect the right to difference’. On the other hand, some delegates accepted that whilst a move to a calibrated system might be difficult, it would assist with any appeals against grading. They expressed the view that peer review by another academic does not necessarily make a mark correct and therefore may be increasingly open to challenge. Consequently, as we are now living in a litigious society, PSRB accreditation/calibration could help avoid litigation.
- 9.21 It is interesting to note that the term ‘calibration’ in educational literature is being used in a relatively loose way to mean developing a shared understanding of complex standards (see para 3.49). However, the term in everyday parlance may suggest much greater specification. Interestingly, the Medical Schools Council representative shared details of their ‘proof of concept’ project to test comparability of threshold standards across medical schools (see para 3.56 for further details) using shared questions in final written examinations. Other disciplinary groups reported that there was too much diversity in the curriculum for this approach to work universally.
- 9.22 Delegates expressed the view that the focus of external examining should be on providing fairness to students on the same programme, that is, assuring comparability of standards across a programme, rather than across programmes in different institutions. It is recognised that courses at different institutions vary in approach and it would be difficult to judge comparability of standards, for example, between

theoretical and applied programmes in the same subject area. In this vein, the NUS representative suggested that the key point is that prospective students know the approach taken at a given university and have confidence that the external examiner system ensures fairness and transparency at that university.

- 9.23 In terms of enhancements, disciplinary groups expressed the view that a ‘basic overview’ of standards needs to be owned by the subject communities and that there should be more centralisation or regularisation of external examiner training. However, they also noted that aspects of professionalisation would increase the demands on individuals and could make the task of recruiting them even more difficult.

Can we learn something from external examining and similar approaches in other nations?

- 9.24 At least ten other nations operate some form of external examiner system (Harvey, 2004-14) with others currently experimenting with various forms of external peer review (Booth et al., 2014 and MSC¹²). This section summarises key approaches in considering whether the UK system could learn from other nations’ experience.

AAC&U MSC project (USA)

- 9.25 In the USA, the Multi-State Collaboration to Advance Learning Outcomes Assessment (MSC) project, an assessment initiative of the Association of American College and Universities (AAC&U) is being developed against a background of proposals to link federal student aid to performance and student outcomes. It attempts to compare standards across universities.
- 9.26 The MSC project is currently piloting a nationally scalable process for assessing ‘authentic’ student work against rubrics in order to evaluate whether students are achieving learning outcomes. Working on 69 campuses, one of the deliverables of the project is an assessment data platform for uploading student work and conducting benchmarking. Providers submit work from students in the final stages of their programmes with supporting detail such as the intended learning outcomes and student demographics. Reviewers score de-identified work from institutions other than their own using 16 rubrics developed in the earlier phase of the project (VALUE). These are organised under three broad ‘learning outcomes’: intellectual and practical skills; personal and social responsibility; and integrative and applied learning.

¹² <http://www.sheeo.org/projects/msc-multi-state-collaborative-advance-learning-outcomes-assessment>

- 9.27 The MSC envisions that the results of the assessment exercise will help campuses compare their standards with the VALUE standards. Whilst currently used for information gathering or quality enhancement, the project indicates that ‘Participating states are working with their respective campuses to fold these results into state-level decision making and information about student achievement.’

Three Australian models

- 9.28 The proposed Higher Education Standards Framework in Australia requires higher education institutions to undertake regular external referencing against comparable courses of study (Booth et al., 2014). This has generated a range of approaches to external peer review which have been piloted. These are outlined here:

Group of Eight Quality Verification System

- 9.29 The Quality Verification System is an external peer-review process for the Australian Group of Eight Universities (Go8), which is similar to the Russell Group. Senior academics selected for their understanding of academic standards in comparable universities around the world (they may come from the Go8 or any similar national or international institution) review a sample of assessments from final year subjects in Go8 undergraduate programmes. They benchmark the samples to grades awarded in similar programmes at other Go8 universities and verify the awarding of grades within Go8 universities. The reviewers verify the appropriateness of already published grades; they do not have the power to influence grades. It is hoped that their work promotes discussion on best practice in teaching and learning across institutions and promotes public confidence in the ‘appropriateness of the standards of learning outcomes and grades awarded in Go8 universities’ and their comparability with standards of other ‘world-leading’ universities. This model has similarities to the UK external examiner system although work is not reviewed on an annual basis and only a limited number of modules are reviewed.

Learning and Teaching Standards Project

- 9.30 This ‘proof of concept’ project piloted inter-institutional peer review and moderation of assessment within eight universities. Subject conveners at each university selected final-year assessment samples, and provided them, along with inputs such as subject outlines, task descriptions and assessment criteria, to markers at two other participating universities. Peer review of the standard, accuracy, consistency and reliability of grading of the material submitted for review was based on blind grading of four anonymised assessment documents across four grade bands (Fail, Pass, Credit, Distinction) for each subject included in the review. The process found broad agreement among peer reviewers from a range of university types on the comparability and standards of the assessment inputs being used in common units of study and on the grading of the assessment outputs, particularly concerning

the assessment judgements made about 'threshold' grades. Full details can be found in the final report (Krause et al., 2013).

'Achievement Matters' social moderation 'calibration' model

- 9.31 This project focused on the discipline of accountancy. Academics from all types of higher education institutions took part in 'calibration' activities, independently rating both the validity of assessments and examples of final year student work and then meeting to discuss and agree the judgements. The standards employed for this process were the explicit discipline statements of learning standards previously developed and similar to UK benchmarking statements. In a second stage, these academics then participated in the review of assessments (briefs and student work) from other providers. Underpinning the project was the importance of developing a shared understanding of standards through the methodology of a 'cultivated community of practice', a proven approach for managing change in higher education (Wenger et al., 2002; O'Donovan et al., 2008). Of note for the purposes of this research was the fact that the external calibration of discipline standards resulted in a measurable decrease in variability in academics' judgements.

The Dutch model

- 9.32 The 14 universities in the Netherlands are all research-focused. The more professional and applied subjects are taught at institutions that belong to a different category of further education. Examining by external authorities is voluntary. Universities can either appoint their own auditing panel or call in the help of an independent quality assurance agency such as the Quality Assurance Netherlands Universities (QANU). QANU works with committees made up of peers and independent academics who have been selected on the basis of their expertise, reputation and authority in a specific academic domain. At the request of the association of universities (VSNU), external examining happens in so-called 'cluster assessments', i.e. the assessment of degree programmes within one discipline across universities. Reports tend to be of a 'state-of-the-art' character, aiming to identify best practices, current trends in research and teaching, and future developments, rather than to rank universities in order based on research achievement or standards of graduates.

The Danish model

- 9.33 In Denmark, traditionally, one third of all exams must also be assessed by external examiners, together with internal examiners. External examiners are drawn from a national pool of individuals appointed by the Ministry of Science, Innovation and Higher Education or the Ministry of Children and Education. They are required to be highly qualified with a combination of relevant educational or professional backgrounds. The intention is to guarantee standardised assessment of all student

examination performances in a specific field in this relatively small country. Examiners generally meet at least once a year to discuss programmes and performance standards and exchange knowledge about new forms of assessment and grading (Anderson and Cozart, 2014).

- 9.34 External examiners participate in assessments such as oral examinations which are popular in Denmark although their role is confined to ensuring that the exam complies with the formal rules and regulations, as well as guaranteeing that students are fairly treated and reliably assessed.
- 9.35 In 2009, in a country of four million people, there were 104 boards for different disciplines, and about 10,000 external examiners in the country. It is estimated that 3% of the university budget from government goes to external examining). However, Denmark is currently reviewing its higher education system and current proposals are likely to change the arrangements for external examiners. Proposals suggest that the current mandatory use of external examiners should be replaced by a voluntary system where educational institutions decide for themselves to what extent and in which exams they wish to use an external examiner. Examiners would continue to have a role but it would be more in terms of providing an external view as part of regular evaluations of programmes.

The Irish model

- 9.36 The system in Ireland is not dissimilar to that operating in the UK. The primary role of the external examiner is to verify that standards are achieved (HETAC, 2010, p. 8). This task includes verifying the appropriateness of the intended programme's learning outcomes, probing the actual attainment of learners, and commenting on both in relation to the National Framework of Qualifications and standards in other higher education institutions in Ireland and beyond. There is also a role in verifying whether assessment procedures are valid, reliable, fair and consistent. Examiners are expected to review key assessment tasks and assessment strategies and provide a report on their work in common with the UK system. External examiners are often recruited from abroad and induction is provided to develop understanding of the institution's assessment practices and the Irish qualifications framework.

Other countries

- 9.37 Other countries have also used an external examining system, including Hong Kong, Malaysia, Brunei, India, Malawi, South Africa and New Zealand. Many of these systems are or were broadly based on the UK system. In most cases, it has been difficult to find published information within the timeframe of this project.
- 9.38 In South Africa, since 2009, higher education audits and accreditation to monitor and maintain standards are the responsibility of the HEQC, which reports directly to the

Minister of Education. For each examination that is set by one university, an expert in the same field at a different university checks the question paper, as well as a sample of the students' scripts. External examiners also provide comments on the standard of the course which is taught. 'One of the features of a peer review system is that peers decide on what basis they will evaluate and judge each other's work. Experts within particular fields are seen as the best people to make decisions about quality' (Allais, 2009, p. 16). External examining – in place as a residual colonial practice – began to weaken in the 1980s and 1990s. This was due to a growing student population and the resulting difficulties for effective external examination, and the high costs because of travel and lodgings of the examiners (Materu, 2007).

- 9.39 It is difficult to get a clear picture of the current external examiner system in Hong Kong, but that operating in 1999 was broadly based on the UK system. Universities in Hong Kong did not go through an accreditation process, so external examining made an important contribution to checking and guaranteeing standards of Hong Kong institutions. External examiners were drawn from universities around the world (but mainly the UK). External examiners for undergraduate programmes visited for a week or so at least once every three years (though some professional programmes were visited every year and masters and postgraduate diploma programmes were not visited). Examiners reviewed both academic outputs and inputs. In years when examiners did not travel to Hong Kong, they reviewed draft exams, results, and dissertation reports sent to them.
- 9.40 Table 9 sets out key features of the different national models and pilot processes.
- 9.41 Can we learn anything from this brief review of external examining or similar approaches in other national higher education systems? It is clear from the developments taking place in the USA and Australia that other jurisdictions recognise the importance of assuring outcome standards across institutions. Key features of interest in the different approaches are:
- The use of blind peer review (noting that this normally takes place for the assessment of research outcomes on an international basis);
 - The use of on-line software to manage the review of student work across institutions and to enable blind peer review;
 - The focus on validity of assessment tasks in relation to explicit national learning standards for the subject area (as per UK benchmark statements) as well as local learning outcomes and a focus on student achievements;
 - The calibration of examiners' standards involving social moderation;
 - Cross-examiner engagement or forum at the subject level to debate issues and experiences that examiners have observed whilst examining in the discipline.

Conclusion

- 9.42 Overall, the evidence suggests that although many wish to maintain the external examiner system, there is also considerable agreement about a number of ways by which it should be strengthened. Suggestions for improving the system made by examiners and quality officers, supplemented by discussion of various options at the regional fora, showed considerable consistency in the main themes. These were:
- Professionalising examining comprising proper recognition and reward including higher pay;
 - Better and more standardised (possibly centralised) training and induction, possibly including accreditation of the role;
 - The creation of a national body and/or qualification;
 - Standardisation of the remit, duties and pay;
 - Support in finding external examiners, and a more rigorous (independent) appointment process;
 - A firmer process for tackling examiners who fail to fulfil their contracts;
 - More time and recognition from the home institutions for external examining, and a higher profile for the role, making use of the expertise gained;
 - The creation of a conference or forum of external examiners; possibly subject-based 'colleges of peers' 'owning' their own standards and undertaking their calibration nationally;
 - Increasing the quality enhancement nature of the role.
- 9.43 There is also substantial global interest currently in aligning and guaranteeing higher education learning standards, and a number of education systems are experimenting with, and evaluating, forms of external peer review. We also considered external examiner arrangements in several other countries which use them. Key features of interest in the different international approaches are: the use of, sometimes blind, peer review of student work facilitated by software; a focus on the validity of assessment tasks in relation to explicit national learning standards as well as a focus on student achievements; the calibration of examiners' standards; and cross-examiner engagement.

Table 9: Comparing External Peer Review Processes

	UK	Go8 (AUS)	Achievement Matters (AUS)	Learning and Teaching Standards (AUS)	Multi-state collaboration (USA)	Netherlands	Denmark	Ireland
Number of Participating Universities	all	8	10	8	69 (campuses)	14 (voluntary)	all	all
Voluntary/not linked to funding	-	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	-	-
National	✓	-	-	-	-	✓	✓	✓
Pilot Project	-		✓	✓	✓	-	-	-
Providers are anonymous to the reviewer (blind peer review)	-	-	✓	✓	✓	-	-	-
Face-to-face meetings between external examiners	-	-	✓	-	-	-	✓	-
Special database used to distribute student work	-	-	✓	<i>explored possibility</i>	✓	-	-	-
Final-year work only	-	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓ ¹³	-	-
Explicit tie to learning outcomes	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	-	-	✓
Some non-academic reviewers	✓	-	✓	-	-	-	✓	✓
Power to influence grades	<i>suggest remarking of whole cohort only</i>	-	-	-	-	✓	✓	<i>guidance suggests somewhat more than in UK</i>

¹³ Routinely. At other times on voluntary basis only.

Part 10: Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions

- 10.1 We must first recognise the considerable effort and goodwill directed at the execution of the external examining role by large numbers of academic staff. Most academics undertake the role for positive reasons and recognise the benefit to the programmes they examine, their professional development and their subject/professional discipline. Both this study and previous work note the commitment of many external examiners to doing a good job for students and programme staff, albeit often under pressure of time. We wish no part of this report to be perceived as a criticism of those currently undertaking the role. It is the system which is under scrutiny.
- 10.2 What can we conclude from this review of external examining in the UK? External examining has a long history and the sector has placed considerable faith in its ability to assure the quality of students' achievements despite repeated reports and studies cautioning against its capacity to ensure comparability of standards. This positive standpoint on external examining, found in previous reviews, has been strongly echoed in our engagement with the sector with some confidence that it is capable of standing up to the pressures likely to be placed on it in the future. Indeed, we cannot overestimate the symbolic and reputational power of the system. This reputation, however, has a fragile foundation; external examining risks losing its symbolic power if changes in higher education apply greater pressure to the system and expose its shortcomings in relation to its espoused purposes. The following paragraphs consider the conclusions in more detail.
- 10.3 The objectives of this research project are:
- To assess whether the recommendations of the Finch Report have been implemented universally across the sector;
 - To assess the effectiveness of the external examining system in safeguarding standards and maintaining the confidence of stakeholders;
 - To consider whether in this changing higher education environment – looking to 2025 – what, if any, further changes might be required to the external examining system if significantly more reliance were placed on it in revised future quality assessment arrangements;
 - To make recommendations for actions and their implementation where a need is identified.
- 10.4 This chapter will consider our conclusions regarding each of the first three objectives followed by recommendations for action.

Objective 1: To assess whether the recommendations of the Finch Review have been implemented universally across the sector

10.5 We have concluded that the majority of the Finch recommendations, as embedded in Chapter B7, have been implemented by providers. However, the data overall indicate limited implementation of the following three areas:

- Institutions recognising the importance, and mutual benefit, of the work undertaken by many of their staff as external examiners for other providers and agreeing with staff the time they need to fulfil these duties;
- Guidance related to transparency and engagement of students with external examining;
- Providing examiners with guidance that they can take matters of serious concern to the head of institution.

10.6 The Finch Report reforms have had a notably positive impact on external examining, particularly in relation to more consistent arrangements across the sector. They have taken an important step towards professionalising the role through establishing clear and consistent appointment criteria and developing indicators for increased transparency, reporting and responding to reports, and support for examiners in their home institution. It is important to recognise that the proposals were only introduced into the UK Quality Code in 2012 and it is not surprising that some proposals, involving wider engagement within institutions, are taking longer to embed than others. The recommendations outlined below are designed to take further some of the achievements of the Finch group.

Objective 2: To assess the effectiveness of the external examining system in safeguarding standards and maintaining the confidence of stakeholders

10.7 A key question in examining Objective two is the purpose of the external examining system. The system does appear fit for purpose if the purpose is to provide a level of externality in the form of additional moderators and a check on fair and effective assessment processes. In addition, the external examiner system is beneficial in providing a ‘critical friend’ to programmes, promoting the sharing of good practice and for the development of academic staff. Few voices, either in the literature or amongst our research participants have expressed doubt in these domains. However, if the purpose is to safeguard standards, the effectiveness of the system is considerably less clear cut.

10.8 The Finch Report (UUK, 2011) noted the tension that exists in the UK system between higher education institutions which set and maintain their own academic standards whilst ‘at the same time there is a public expectation that qualifications awarded by one institution are broadly comparable with those awarded by all others’ (p. 5). However, Chapter B7 substantially limits the expectations on external

examiners regarding the assurance of comparable standards in stating that examiners ‘offer an informed view of how standards compare with the same or similar awards at other higher education providers (primarily in the UK, and sometimes overseas as well) of which they have experience’. (QAA, 2015, p. 4) Nevertheless, they are also expected to provide informative comment on whether ‘the degree-awarding body is maintaining the threshold academic standards set for its awards in accordance with the frameworks for higher education qualifications and applicable Subject Benchmark Statements’ (QAA, 2015, p. 9), which includes a presumption of comparability in terms of knowledge of agreed standards, both nationally and within the subject or professional discipline. Therefore, it could be argued that there is both a formal requirement and a public expectation of comparability of UK awards at least at the level of threshold academic standards.

- 10.9 To this end, there is a wide range of quality assurance measures designed to safeguard academic standards and external examiners cannot be expected to carry the whole burden of assuring them. However, in many disciplinary areas, external examiners are currently the only external quality assurance practitioners who focus on actual student achievements (academic standards) as opposed to quality standards and the Finch Report considered that they ‘ensure that there is benchmarking against comparable programmes at the point when students are being awarded their qualifications’. By this means, the Finch Report argued that external examiners make an important contribution to resolving the tension between institutional autonomy and comparability of standards.
- 10.10 However, the evidence of this review suggests a much less confident stance in relation to the contribution of the external examining system to safeguarding standards. This conclusion is based on the evidence from prior research that shows:
- a. The assessment decisions of external examiners and others in the higher education setting exhibit very poor reliability in applying standards to student work although examiners are often unaware of this;
 - b. It is not possible to explicitly state most academic standards so they are interpreted similarly by all users although often examiners, other academics and those managing quality assurance may assume that explicit standards are genuinely shared;
 - c. (with the proviso of b) Some examiners do not make use of published reference points for standards.
- 10.11 The evidence from prior research is reinforced by the data gathered for this review, in particular:

- a. A strong tendency for providers to appoint examiners from similar types of institution, limiting examiners' experience of standards elsewhere and, thereby, their ability to judge whether programmes are widely comparable;
- b. Widespread changes to award regulations which may have had an upward effect on the proportion of high classifications in recent years which are outside the remit of external examiners who focus at the module or programme level. Therefore whilst examiners may be able to contribute to assuring the 'correct' marks for individual assignments, exams and performances, they have little power to safeguard programme level award standards. The situation is similar for 'award' examiners who typically focus at the award or programme level;
- c. The perception that examiners, in some contexts, are largely checking processes rather than standards.

10.12 A key conclusion from this evidence is that there must be reservations regarding the effectiveness of the external examining system in safeguarding academic standards and assuring the comparability of standards. On the other hand, the evidence indicates that external examiners can make an important contribution to assuring quality standards, in this case relating to assessment processes and fairness to students.

10.13 It is important to note that the confidence of stakeholders in UK academic standards is likely to be the result of many factors, only one of which is the soundness of those standards. Other factors are likely to include personal experience, knowledge of the sector, the reputation of UK higher education and communications in the media. The evidence of the student survey indicates that whilst the majority of students have some understanding of the external examiner role, they do not generally understand how standards are assured by their provider nor are a majority convinced that the standards are similar between their programme and similar courses elsewhere. On this basis, it is difficult to claim that external examining makes a strong contribution to students' confidence in standards.

10.14 In relation to stakeholders other than students, external examiners and senior quality officers hold strong positive views about the contribution of external examining to stakeholder confidence in UK higher education. However, a number also think that most stakeholders outside the sector do not understand the system or know it exists. External stakeholders, based on a very small sample, are also likely to express broad confidence in UK higher education standards although the role of examiners is perceived to contribute more to enhancement than assurance of standards. The delegates at the stakeholder forum also consider that the external examiner role is one element of a matrix of quality processes which support the examiner role. Overall, the disappointing engagement of external stakeholders in our

data collection means that we have limited scope to make conclusions about their level of confidence in higher education standards. However, we have no evidence to suggest that such confidence is lacking.

Objective 3: To consider whether in this changing higher education environment – looking to 2025 – what, if any, further changes might be required to the external examining system if significantly more reliance were placed on it in revised future quality assessment arrangements

- 10.15 The higher education sector is operating in a highly dynamic environment with significant potential to impact on academic standards. Whilst most of those consulted consider that many factors such as increasing diversity and competition in the sector, growth in student numbers, raised fees and collaborative provision will have an influence on external examining, they are not seen to impact on the examiner role in relation to assurance of standards. However, there is less confidence in external examiners' capacity to assure standards in the face of the pressures created by league tables and potential 'grade inflation' because of the limitations on their remit. This is a complex matter and a further aspect of this review which identifies tensions between institutional autonomy and achieving comparability of standards.
- 10.16 Survey respondents and delegates to the regional fora also noted practical problems with the current system which may be exacerbated by expansion in the sector. These include the flow of sufficient, suitably experienced and qualified examiners who meet the Chapter B7 criteria for appointment, a shortage of time to carry out the duties, poor recognition and reward for the role and lack of opportunity to focus on standards rather than processes.
- 10.17 The survey respondents recommend a range of enhancements to tackle these pressures in the higher education environment now and for a future context. However, it is not clear how many of the suggested changes would resolve the difficulties in terms of safeguarding academic standards. Undoubtedly, better training, an independent appointments process, greater professionalisation of the role and an agreed remit would contribute to greater consistency in the examiner system and could enhance the quality of advice on programme design, delivery and assessment (critical friend role), although at some financial cost to the sector. It is worth noting that similar suggestions have been made in the past. There is also no serious appetite for emulating the quality assessment approaches of PSRBs, with a few exceptions.
- 10.18 On the other hand, the project evidence and experience from elsewhere is instructive and points to potential principles for establishing and safeguarding standards:

- There is an urgent need to promote a shared understanding of what constitutes quality in student work and we cannot rely on written statements of standards to assure this consistency;
- Some form of regular calibration of external examiners' standards against this shared understanding is needed;
- Some form of expert peer review process involving social moderation is appropriate for determining and assuring standards of this nature (as with research);
- Calibration and review of standards need to take place in disciplinary communities across the range of institutions where programmes of a similar nature are studied.

10.19 In many ways, these principles repeat the conclusion of a HEQC report on external examining from almost 20 years ago:

‘Consistent assessment decisions among assessors are the product of interactions over time, the internalisation of exemplars, and of inclusive networks. Written instructions, mark schemes and criteria, even when used with scrupulous care, cannot substitute for these.’ (HEQC, 1997)

Recommendations

10.20 We have concluded that there is an urgent need to reform the external examiner system with regard to the assurance of academic standards in UK higher education. The weaknesses in external examining identified by this project have been recognised for many years and relate to both clarity of purpose and the challenges involved in carrying out the role in a meaningful way.

10.21 The description of external examining in Chapter B7 contains a range of roles including advising on quality enhancement and commenting on academic standards and their comparability with other programmes and whether the provider has observed fair and robust assessment procedures. The findings of this research, including the evidence of successive reports and academic studies, would suggest that we need to clarify the balance of these roles. In addition, if the sector expects its external examiners to play a key role in assuring academic standards and offering a justifiable confidence in those standards to relevant stakeholders, then certain key issues need to be addressed.

10.22 A range of different arrangements might be considered for achieving demonstrable assurance of standards and, as discussed in Part 3 and Part 9, there are interesting approaches and pilot studies taking place in the UK and elsewhere. However, the overwhelming feedback from the sector to this and previous reviews is that external examining is worthwhile and should be retained. Consequently, we have judged that

our recommendations should build on the existing concept of external examining in order to have any prospect of approval and adoption by the sector.

10.23 The recommended enhancements fall into a number of areas:

Calibration

10.24 In order for external examiners to reliably assure the threshold academic standards of their awards and their comparability with academic standards in similar programmes elsewhere, it is necessary for them to have checked and aligned their understanding of standards with other members of their profession/subject in accordance with agreed reference points. Therefore we recommend that external examiners are expected to take part in regular calibration of their academic standards within their disciplinary community.

10.25 We propose that relevant national disciplinary groups and, where appropriate, PSRBs, should take a lead in establishing approaches to calibrating academic standards drawing on existing UK and international examples. Care would be needed to distinguish between academic and professional standards in identifying lead groups. We also note, following the stakeholder forum, that the term ‘calibration’ may not be entirely helpful because of connotations with high levels of specification which is not what is being recommended here.

10.26 We also note that the topic of reliability and consistency of marking is a deep-seated issue in higher education assessment which cannot be resolved through strengthening the external examining system alone. However, an increase in assessment literacy and calibration activity by many thousands of external examiners will undoubtedly have important positive consequences for this thorny aspect of higher education practice.

Professionalisation

10.27 Calibration is one important element of a broader professionalisation of the role. Many of our respondents recommended strengthening the role through increasing its professionalism. Professional, here, is understood to mean achieving a trusted status in a role often established through a range of features such as: defined entry points usually involving some form of qualification, requirements for continuing professional development and a supporting code of practice or ethics. Learning and Teaching in higher education was described as a ‘cottage industry’ (Elton) in 1993. The intervening years have seen considerable efforts to professionalise that element of the academic role and, undoubtedly, many students have benefitted from an increasingly trained teaching workforce. We now consider that the time has come to professionalise external examining in the same way so that those conducting the role are skilled and knowledgeable about assessment and the assurance of academic

and quality standards. On the other hand, we are not suggesting the creation of an 'inspectorate' and strongly recommend retaining the 'peer' element so valued in external examining, albeit underpinned by appropriate initial and ongoing development for the role.

10.28 Professionalisation can be assisted by:

- Extending the appointment criteria to include demonstrable knowledge and skills in assessment literacy and professional judgement, understanding of the role and its responsibilities, and knowledge of UK sector agreed reference points as well as the traditional expectation of knowledge and competence in the relevant subject/professional field. We would anticipate that for most examiners this would involve some form of training and could be helpful in assisting academics in obtaining their first examining appointment;
- Equitable and appropriate remuneration;
- An independent appointments process to assist with the efficient appointment of examiners, their independence of judgement and cross-fertilisation of assessment knowledge and standards across the sector;
- Participation in on-going CPD activities including calibration processes (as above).

Home institution support

10.29 The professionalisation of external examining and the continuing ability to recruit qualified examiners is heavily dependent on improving the support for the role in examiners' home institutions. Institutions have a vested interest in demonstrating the assurance of both academic and quality standards and, therefore, in supporting a robust external examiner system. The Finch Report recommended greater recognition for examiners in their home institution and we strongly support greater efforts to embed their proposal including increased emphasis on this aspect of Chapter B7 in the QAA Higher Education Review. In particular, this involves:

- Development of academic staff for the role;
- Clear reward and recognition for the role;
- Appropriate resourcing for the role;
- Utilisation of examiner knowledge and experience in their home institution.

Standardisation of role

10.30 The evidence of this report suggests considerable variation in the perceptions of the external examiner role by individuals and institutions. Whilst this variety respects institutional autonomy, if we wish to re-establish external examining as one of the

principal means for maintaining UK academic standards, a level of agreement over the purpose of the role is required. Consequently, we recommend that there should be a standardised and clarified role and remit for external examiners which is agreed across the UK sector.

Award regulations and algorithms

- 10.31 This review, outwith any consideration of the external examiner system, has identified a clear concern with the role of award algorithms and regulations in relation to academic standards. These have been shown to impact differentially on the outcomes for students but are outside the scope of external examiner deliberations. We recommend that this aspect of UK higher education, resulting from our system of autonomous degree-awarding bodies which currently operate under intense pressure from league tables and competition, receives similar close review in relation to its impact on academic standards.
- 10.32 We recognise that the recommendations set out above have major resource implications and cannot be delivered by the current financial commitment to external examining. However, we consider that the assurance of academic and quality standards is too important to continue as an under-resourced ‘cottage industry’. Additional costs could be partially offset by lighter touch QAA review once providers have demonstrated the assurance of their standards via a more robust external examiner system. Furthermore, savings might be made by changes to the remit, for example, higher quality review of smaller proportions of student assessment, longer gaps between examiner engagements for programmes demonstrating good standards and better use of technology in the process.
- 10.33 Consequently we recommend that the sector:
- Retains an external examiner system, albeit in an enhanced form;
 - Develops a standardised and clarified role and remit for external examiners that rebalances academic and quality standards and is agreed across the UK sector;
 - Accelerates the professionalisation of the external examiner built on
 - a requirement to calibrate external examiners’ academic standards within and organised by their disciplinary communities drawing on existing UK and international methods for calibration;
 - more systematic training to develop further knowledge and more consistent perspectives on the role, standards, assessment literacy and professional judgement;
 - Organises an appointment process, managed by the sector but independent of individual providers;
 - Adopts equitable and appropriate remuneration;

- Undertakes to support and recognise external examiners in their home institutions including development of staff for the role, clear reward and recognition for the role, appropriate resourcing including time, and effective use of examiner knowledge and experience;
- Reviews the impact of differential award algorithms and regulations amongst degree-awarding bodies on outcomes for students and academic standards.

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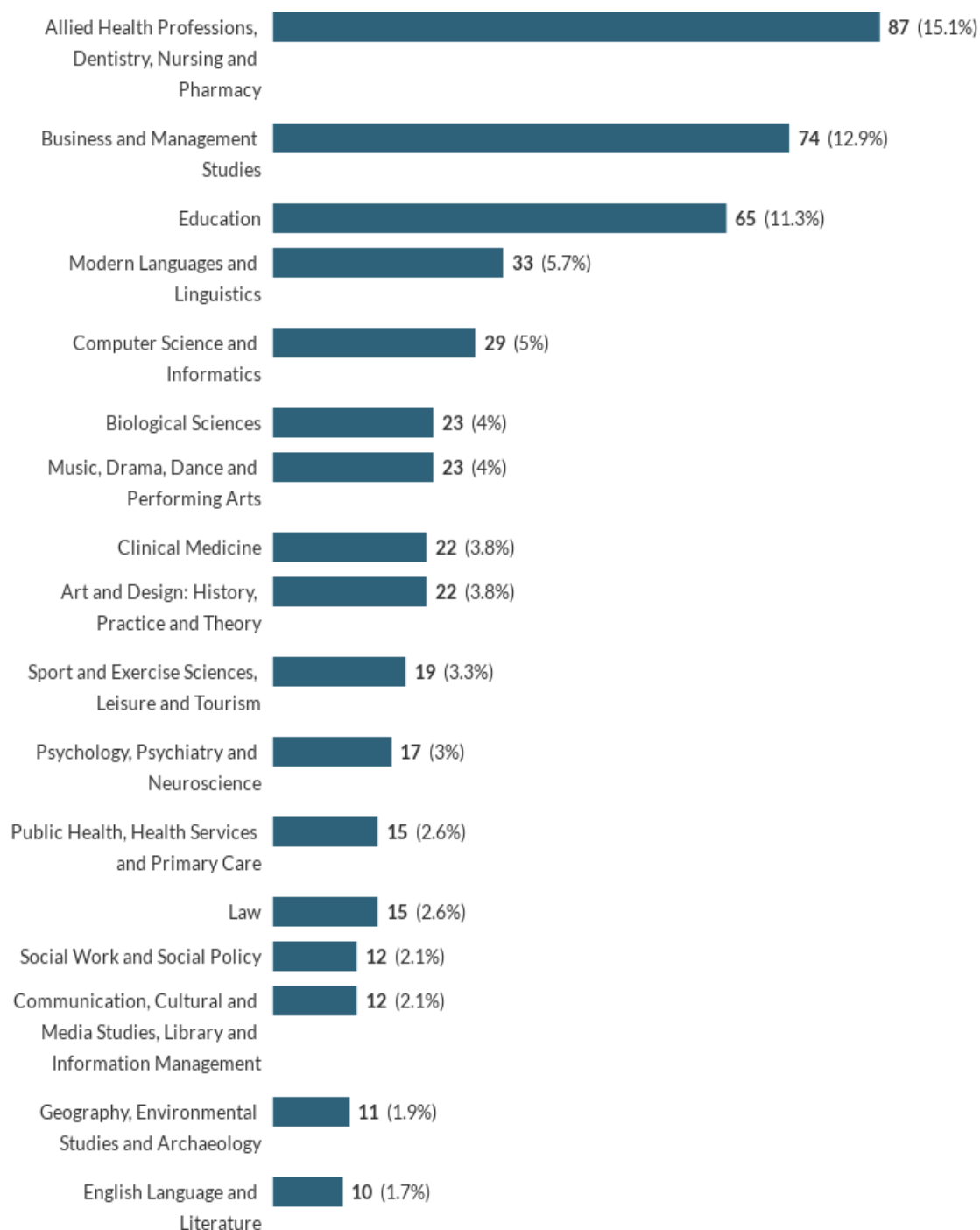
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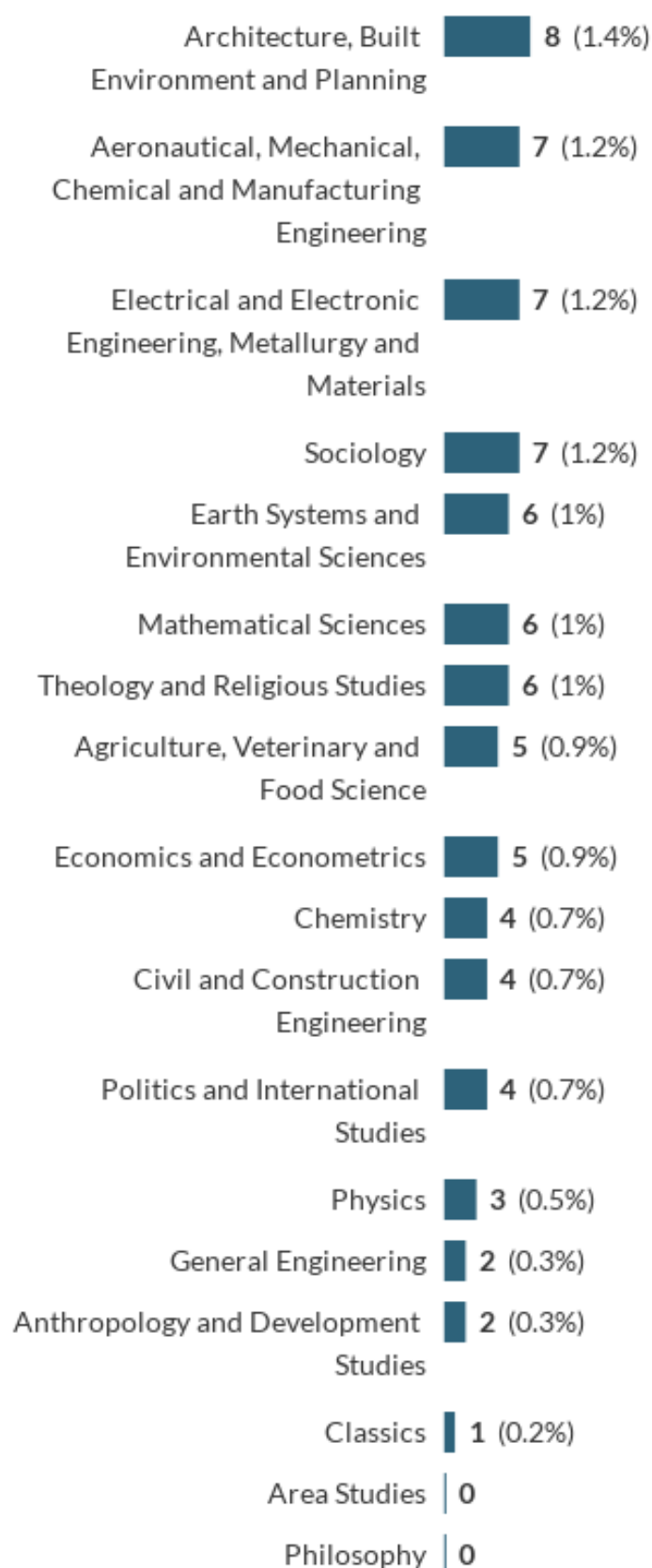
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Appendix I: External examiner survey – respondents’ declared subject or professional discipline



(Continued on next page)



Appendix 2: List of organisations represented at the stakeholders' forum

QAA Scotland

London Mathematical Society

Academic Registrars Council's Assessment Practitioners Group

NUS

The Forensic Science Society

National Association of Writers in Education

QAA

Student Assessment and Classification Working Group

National Association of Music in Higher Education

The Institute of Mathematics and its Applications

Society of Biology

UK Inter Professional Group

The British Psychological Society

Society of Biology

The Standing Conference of University Drama Departments

General Council of the Association of Teachers of Mathematics

Medical Schools Council

HEPI

The following organisations registered for the stakeholder forum but were unable to attend:

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS)

The Engineering Council

The Care Council for Wales

Universities UK

Appendix 3: Glossary and abbreviations

Academic Standards

The standards of student attainment set by degree-awarding bodies for their courses (programmes and modules) and expected for their awards.

AHELO

A feasibility study for the Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) carried out by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to see if it is practically and scientifically feasible to assess what students in higher education know and can do upon graduation across diverse cultures, languages and different types of institutions.

Award Algorithm

The sequence of calculations that determine a student's degree classification. It typically involves some element of weighting of marks from different levels of the programme and the averaging of marks. It may also involve rules regarding omission of some module marks (e.g. first year or lowest scoring module), condonement and compensation, and may involve elements of discretionary judgement at the boundaries of each classification.

Calibration

This is a social process to reach a common understanding of standards and how they are applied within a subject or professional community.

Finch Report

Review of external examining arrangements in universities and colleges in the UK: Final report and recommendations. This report was undertaken by UUK and GuildHE and chaired by Professor Dame Janet Finch, former Vice-Chancellor of Keele University.

The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ)

A published formal structure that identifies a hierarchy of national qualification levels and describes the general achievement expected of holders of the main qualification types at each level.

JISC Mail

The Joint Information System Committee (JISC) maintains email discussion lists for UK Education and Research communities. One of these is on External Examining.

Ofsted

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills inspects and regulates services for children and young people.

Peer Group for annual TRAC benchmarking

The seven categories of higher education institutions (largely based on income) used by HEFCE for the Annual Transparent Approach to Costing return (a requirement of all UK higher education institutions in receipt of grant funding from the UK higher education funding bodies).

Peer review

A process of review conducted by people with current or very recent experience of the activity being reviewed (in this case, providing or assessing higher education).

Professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs)

Organisations that set the standards for, and regulate entry into, particular profession(s) and are authorised to accredit, approve or recognise specific programmes leading to the relevant professional qualification(s) - for which they may have a statutory or regulatory responsibility.

Quality standards

Standards in the assessment cycle such as task setting, marking, feedback, moderation, and examination board procedures.

Subject benchmark statement

A published statement that sets out what knowledge, understanding, abilities and skills are expected of those graduating in each of the main subject areas (mostly applying to bachelor's degrees), and explains what gives that particular discipline its coherence and identity.

Threshold (academic) standard

The minimum acceptable level of achievement that a student has to demonstrate to be eligible for an academic award.

TRAC benchmarking

See 'Peer Group for annual TRAC benchmarking'

UK Quality Code for Higher Education

The Quality Code, which is owned, maintained and published by the Quality Assurance Agency, has been developed with the higher education community, and sets out the expectations that all providers of UK higher education are required to meet.

(The definitions above are based in part on the QAA glossary: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us/glossary> and on HEFCE's glossary <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/Glossary/>)

List of abbreviations

AACSB	Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business
AAC&U	Association of American College Universities
AHELO	Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes
AQF	Australian Qualifications Framework
CNAA	Council for National Academic Awards
ELIR	Enhancement-Led Institutional Review
FHEQ	Framework for Higher Education Qualifications
Go8	Group of Eight Universities (Australia)
HEA	Higher Education Academy
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEQC	Higher Education Quality Council
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
JISC	Joint Information System Committee
LSE	London School of Economics
MSC	Multi-state collaborative
NUS	National Union of Students
PSRB	Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
QANU	Quality Assurance Netherlands Universities
SACWG	Student Assessment and Classification Working Group
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
TRAC	Transparent Approach to Costing
VSNU	Dutch Association of Universities

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