Thank you for choosing to be an external examiner for us here at The Open University (OU).

You are part of a group of around 250 external examiners whose role is critical to the confidence we place in the quality and standards of the University’s validated provision.

Essentially, your role is to ensure that justice is done to all students in the assessment of their academic performance and that the standards of OU-validated awards are maintained and have parity with the sector.

The aim of this guide is to outline your rights and responsibilities, to explain the OU reporting requirements and to give you some practical tips and information which you may find useful.

The guide complements other key policy and guidance that you may wish to familiarise yourself with. In particular, the Handbook for Validated Awards contains a detailed section on ‘Assessment and external examiners’. Other publications include the Regulations for validated awards of The Open University and the Student’s guide to studying on a programme validated by The Open University. All of these are available on our website open.ac.uk/ouvp.

With thanks and best wishes, Phil Berry
Director, Open University Validation Partnerships
ABOUT OPEN UNIVERSITY VALIDATION

Through its Royal Charter, The OU is able to validate programmes offered by institutions that do not have their own degree-awarding powers or that wish to offer OU awards.

Open University Validation Partnerships (OUVP) is the unit in the University that manages its validation activity.

WHAT IS A PARTNER INSTITUTION?
It is an institution that, following a rigorous process, has been approved by the OU as an appropriate organisation to offer programmes leading to OU validated awards. Institutions are reviewed regularly to ensure that they continue to meet our strict approval criteria in terms of procedures and resources for teaching, learning and assessment, staffing and staff development, academic organisation and internal quality assurance systems.

WHAT IS AN OU VALIDATED PROGRAMME OR AWARD?
An institution has to be approved before it can offer programmes of study leading to OU validated awards - these can be at Undergraduate/Postgraduate level. Each programme has been designed and developed by the institution before being submitted to the OU for validation. OU validation responds to stringent quality assurance processes such as external examiners scrutiny and the systematic application of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) defined standards. The institution is responsible for the teaching, assessment and further development of the programme. Programmes are re-validated on a regular basis to ensure they continue to meet the required standards.

FACTS AND FIGURES
Over 35 partner institutions, in the UK and overseas
Over 45,000 students
Around 300 programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate level
Wide range of subject areas
5,260 Awards conferred in 2016-17
158,084 conferments since 1992 when activity started (figure at the end of 2016-17)
For the latest figures, please visit open.ac.uk/ouvp
WHAT ARE THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE OU, EXTERNAL EXAMINERS AND PARTNER INSTITUTIONS?

External examiners (EEs) are appointed by and report to the OU. The terms under which they engage with the partner institution and the programmes to which they are appointed are determined by the University, who sets and manages the regulations and processes related to external examining.

WHAT ARE THE MAIN RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE PARTNER INSTITUTIONS IN RELATION TO EES?

All partner institutions are responsible for:

- Nominating EEs.
- Providing them with briefing and induction in addition to the OU's own arrangements.
- Informing the EEs in writing at the beginning of their appointment that they have a right to raise matters of serious concern with the OU's Vice-Chancellor, if necessary by means of a confidential report which may be copied to the Head of Institution.
- Making the necessary arrangements for the setting and approval of examination questions and any other form of summative assessment.
- Making the necessary arrangements for moderating standards in advance of the board of examiners meetings.
- Making the necessary arrangements for the sampling of the students' work. Where there is no written work to sample, other arrangements must be agreed with the EEs.
- Managing boards of examiners.
- Ensuring that external examiners' reports are formally considered and that appropriate action is taken where necessary.
- Sending EEs a response setting out the action taken following the receipt of reports.
- Providing the OU with an account of the responses made to the issues raised by EEs in an annual evaluation report.
- Making external examiners' reports available in full to students, with the sole exception of any confidential reports made directly to the Head of Institution.
- Including the name, position and institution of their external examiners in module or programme information provided to students/informing the EEs that they must refer any direct correspondence from students back to the institution.

The OU requires that its partner institutions give a high priority to responding to EE advice and feedback. Where an examiner’s report raises serious issues that call into question the quality of the programme or the standard of the award, the University will investigate upon receipt of the report.

As an EE, the partner institution must provide you with: assessment regulations, both generic and specific where applicable; programme specifications for the programme you are assigned to; student handbook(s); dates when your input is required, including board dates at the start of each academic year – Make sure you receive all these.

It is recommended that EEs are invited to visit the institution as soon as possible after their appointment to meet staff and students.
WHAT ARE THE MAIN RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE EES?

- To approve the form and content of all assessments contributing to an award, so as to ensure that the aims and learning outcomes of the programme are being tested fairly and to the standards required. A timeline should be agreed with you as to when you will receive questions and marking scheme for comments and approval.
- To monitor any amendments to assessment tasks to accommodate any disabilities to ensure they are fair and that there is parity in the level of assessment.
- To sample students’ work (usually anonymously) in order to ensure that assessment criteria have been interpreted correctly and that there is parity of assessment across the cohort. Where cohorts are very small and mark distributions may seem unusual, you can ask to see all the work. For larger cohorts, it is usual for EEs to look at a cross section of work, including fails and all borderline cases.
- To attend board of examiners meetings. Please reserve the dates as soon as they are communicated by the partner institution. If you cannot attend a meeting, it may have to be reconvened.
- To ensure that all recommendations for awards are made in accordance with the approved programme regulations - sent to you by the partner institution at the time of your induction - and any other relevant institutional or OU requirements.
- To inform The OU if the standards of its awards are judged to be at risk. Your insight into the programme is critical to the ongoing quality assurance of its academic standards. If you notice anything that might be impacting on the quality of the programme or the experience of those studying on it, you should raise this with the partner institution at the first opportunity. If the issue cannot be resolved in a timely and satisfactory manner, please contact OUVP immediately (contact details found at the end of the document).
- To sign pass lists and to write a timely report on outcomes in the required format. For chief external examiners this may include a summary report. Final external examiners’ reports should be received no later than two months after the final meeting of the board of examiners at which awards are decided. The University has a specimen format for the submission of reports, which external examiners must use – see open.ac.uk/ouvp (external examiners pages). The OU reserves the right to terminate the appointment of an EE who fails to fulfil their obligations, e.g. where they fail to produce reports in a timely manner or to an appropriate standard or fail to attend an exam board without justifiable reason.
- To advise on any proposed changes to the validated programme, particularly where these affect the assessment requirements. Where there is good cause for it, it is allowed to change an assessment format, or the weighting of assessment elements, but this must be on the recommendation or with the support of the EE. Such proposed changes are then put through a formal approval process by OUVP. Once approved, the EE should receive the amended module specifications and/or programme specification. EEs may also be consulted by the programme team on content or structure changes.

EE ATTENDANCE AT BOARDS OF EXAMINERS

All EEs must attend all meetings of the Board of Examiners and it must not be assumed a meeting can be held without the presence of all the EEs approved for that programme. Where unforeseen circumstances prevent attendance, the institution and the University should be informed so that a decision can be made regarding the postponement of the Board.

In the event of non-attendance, EEs must indicate this in their written report and confirm that they were fully involved in the moderation of assessment and the external examining process. The report should be submitted in advance of the Board of examiners so that the EE’s comments can be formally considered and recorded.

Non-attendance without good cause would usually constitute grounds for termination of the appointment of an EE.
WHAT CAN EXTERNAL EXAMINERS EXPECT FROM THE ROLE?

External examiners are appointed as independent scrutineers and they should have full insight into all aspects of the assessment process. This includes:

- To be briefed on all aspects of their role, programme regulations, learning outcomes, assessment criteria and marking schemes.
- To have access to all assessed work.
- To moderate the marks of internal examiners provided that it does not lead to any bias or cause unfairness to any candidate.
- To conduct ‘viva voce’ examinations of any students where necessary.
- To report any aspect of the assessment process to the partner institution and/or the OU.
- To provide impartial and independent advice as well as informative comments on standards and student achievements.
- To provide informative comment and recommendations on good practice and innovation relating to learning, teaching and assessment.

WHAT ARE UNREASONABLE EXPECTATIONS?

EEs should NOT be expected to do any of the following:

- Have any direct involvement in assessment: External examiners are NOT second markers.
- Arbitrate where the assessment process has failed to come to a decision: Academic assessment should be made well in advance of the board of examiners’ meetings. The role of the Board is to ratify grades and to assure itself that the right processes have been followed.
- Change marks for individual students, unless this is a one-off mistake in adding up points that was not spotted during the internal moderation. In such exceptional cases, questions should be asked as to why this mistake was not spotted before and whether the whole cohort’s work needs to be re-checked.
- EEs can suggest that the marking is consistently too high or too low and that therefore some adjustment of marks across the cohort is appropriate, but it is up to the Board to decide whether that should happen, i.e. if the Board has assured itself ‘that the right processes have been followed’, then the EE cannot override the marks.
- Respond to routine deference to the external examiner’s judgement. You are a member of the Board of Examiners, the Chair to the Board should guide the Board’s business.

External examiners are not expected to participate in or be present for institutions’ internal moderation activities, but the process should be transparent and clearly set out through the evidence that is made available to them.
For every programme of studies approved as leading to a validated award of the OU, there must be a Board of Examiners whose constitution (including a note of those members constituting a quorum) and terms of reference accord with the approved regulations for the programme and which includes external examiners approved under the OU regulations for validated programmes.

The Board of Examiners is appointed by the Academic Board (or equivalent) of the institution to which it is responsible for the fulfilment of its terms of reference. The Academic Board or equivalent body is required to agree the membership of the boards of examiners annually at the start of the academic year. The following essential characteristics are common to all boards of examiners:

- All programmes leading to an OU validated award must have a Board of Examiners.
- No other body has the authority to recommend the conferment of an award.
- External examiners must attend.
- The OU can cancel a Board meeting if any of the EEs approved for that programme is absent.
- An OU member of staff must be present at each board of examiners meeting where award and/or progression decisions are made.

- The composition should remain the same for each meeting, although membership may change.
- All tutors responsible for teaching or assessment would normally be expected to attend.
- The partner institution’s Academic Board or equivalent body shall appoint a person to chair the Board of Examiners.
- The Chair should be independent and not involved in the delivery of the programme or the assessment of the students in that programme or curriculum area.

Meeting dates should be agreed with external examiners at the earliest opportunity – usually at an annual meeting – for the coming year and not changed after that except by agreement of all parties involved.

The constitution of the Board of Examiners may include provision for the appointment of subsidiary boards of examiners and the same Board may be responsible for more than one programme of study. This will often be appropriate in modular or combined studies programmes where cognate groups of units or subjects may be assessed as discrete entities and/or as elements of more than one named award.

WHAT INFORMATION WILL BE PROVIDED BEFORE EXAM BOARDS?

You should have received all the relevant information and documentation by the time you attend your first Board meeting. Please note, the terms of reference and composition of the Board of Examiners are provided by the partner institution following OU approval.

WHAT DOCUMENTATION IS REQUIRED AT A BOARD OF EXAMINERS’ MEETING?

The OU requires that institutions have a system in place to accurately record and verify marks.

The partner institution is responsible for providing all the Board documentation. Typically, this will include: an agenda; minutes from previous meeting/s; mark sheet; statistical analyses of marks; the regulations of the programme, as approved by the University; institutional-level assessment policies, as approved by the University; and reports from subsidiary boards.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE BOARD OF EXAMINERS IN RELATION TO APPEALS AND COMPLAINTS?

It is imperative that the boards are conducted in accordance with their terms of reference and that all decisions are recorded clearly and accurately. While students do not have a right to appeal against academic judgement they can appeal on the grounds that the judgement may not have been reached in a fair manner.

It is essential that final decisions are clearly documented in board minutes, so that the partner institution can deal with any student complaint or appeal in a timely and transparent manner. Where students have exhausted the partner institution’s process and are not satisfied with the outcome/s, they can escalate their complaint/appeal to the OU.
FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT
THE OU AND OU VALIDATION

OU website: open.ac.uk
twitter.com/OpenUniversity
facebook.com/theopenuniversity
OUVP/Validation website: open.ac.uk/ouvp

The validation website includes the list of all the OU partner institutions, more information about approval and validation, the OU Handbook for Validated Awards and our appeals and complaints procedures.

GET IN TOUCH

Open University Validation Partnerships
The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA, UK.

Phone: +44 (0) 1908 332 840
Fax: +44 (0) 1908 332 841
Email: ouvp-info@open.ac.uk
Website: open.ac.uk/ouvp