



# Code of practice for external examining: taught programmes

Academic year 2018/19

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## Applicability

1. This *Code of practice* for external examining applies to all of the University's taught provision at both undergraduate and taught postgraduate level, including provision within its Associated and Accredited Institutions (AIs)<sup>1</sup> and other collaborative arrangements, leading to University of Surrey awards.

## Purpose of the Code

2. External examining is an essential part of the way in which the University of Surrey demonstrates that the standards of its awards and the quality of its taught programmes are secure.
3. The external examining system ensures that awards at the same level and in similar subjects are comparable with those in different higher education providers in the UK, though their content and structures may vary. It also ensures that the system of assessment is fair and is fairly operated in the determination of awards made to students.
4. This *Code of practice* aims to assist the University, its external examiners, and its staff and students by setting out how national and University expectations concerning external examining are met. It sets out the University's requirements of its external examiners and of the ways in which they are used across the University and their participation in its programmes and the awards process.

## The national context

5. UK universities offer their own awards under their degree awarding powers. Each university is responsible for the standards it sets for its awards and the quality of the programmes of study it provides leading to those awards, wherever and however provided. Universities are expected to be able to demonstrate that they have undertaken rigorous quality assurance that ensures that the standards of achievement of graduating students meet national and, increasingly, international expectations and also that the quality of the learning opportunities provided give students a fair and reasonable opportunity to complete their programme of study successfully.
6. The [Quality Assurance Agency \(QAA\)](#) is the independent body with responsibility for safeguarding the quality and standards of UK awards. It does this via the provision of a series of reference points that help to define clear and explicit standards against which higher education provision is evaluated. These reference points are set out in the [UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#)<sup>2</sup> expressed as Expectations for standards and Expectations for quality which are both underpinned by Core practices and Common practices supported by advice and guidance. .

## Academic judgement

7. The academic judgement of its staff is an essential basis for the University of Surrey's quality culture. The University expects its staff to exercise their academic judgement in ways that are evidence based, fair and reasonable, and pertinent to the expectations of their academic discipline/field of professional study. The University's

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<sup>1</sup> Reference to Faculty/School/Department should also be taken to include the relevant unit within the AIs.

<sup>2</sup> The UK Quality Code for Higher Education is currently undergoing substantial revision; a set of revised Expectations and Practices were published in March 2018. The full Code, including the advice and guidance that underpins the Expectations and Practices, is due to be published in November 2018.

external examining system is designed and intended to demonstrate and support the proper exercise of academic judgement.

8. The University expects its staff and external examiners to apply their academic judgement in ways that demonstrate broad comparability of standards and quality with the national norms associated with their specific fields of study and/or practice. Further, it expects its staff and external examiners to be able to act consistently in meeting the University's requirements concerning the exercise of academic judgement and its management.
9. External examiners work within the context of their discipline and the particular programme and modules that they are asked to consider. They are expected to do this in two regards:
  - the academic context – in which they consider and comment on the exercise of academic judgement concerned with the delivery and assessment of the programme or its components. Here external examiners are looking for comparability against national standards<sup>3</sup> and against other similar institutions/programmes, and consistency within and between those University programme(s) and/or components they are acting as an external for;
  - the administrative/management context – here external examiners are required to comment on (and confirm where appropriate) the consistency of procedural aspects and, additionally, that procedures are appropriate for the outcomes they are intended to cover/deliver.
10. Comparability focuses on standards and student achievement in one or more of the following ways (according to the specific role of each external examiner):
  - across the modules within a single programme;
  - across programmes within a single subject area within the University;
  - across programmes within a single subject area in other similar institutions of which the external examiner has experience;
  - any of the above, across cohorts during the examiner's period of appointment.
11. *Consistency* applies to the management by the University of student assessment and external examining, and the ways in which the outcomes of student achievements are dealt with.

### **Eligibility criteria, nomination and approval process**

12. The nomination process for a new external examiner starts with the Directorate of Quality Enhancement and Standards (QES) where a check is made each May on the distribution of external examiners required for new programmes and to replace those whose term of office is due to expire at the end of the academic year.
13. The University has adopted the person specification for an external examiner which was set out in Chapter B7 of the previous QAA Quality Code and which is as follows:
  - (i) knowledge and understanding of UK sector agreed reference points for the maintenance of academic standards and assurance and enhancement of quality;

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<sup>3</sup> National standards are to be found within the [Framework for Higher Education Qualifications \(FHEQ\)](#) and [Subject Benchmark Statements](#) of the QAA *Quality Code*:

- (ii) competence and experience in the fields covered by the programme of study, or parts thereof;
  - (iii) relevant academic and/or professional qualifications to at least the level of the qualification being externally examined, and/or extensive practitioner experience where appropriate;
  - (iv) competence and experience relating to designing and operating a variety of assessment tasks appropriate to the subject and operating assessment procedures;
  - (v) sufficient standing, credibility and breadth of experience within the discipline to be able to command the respect of academic peers and, where appropriate, professional peers;
  - (vi) familiarity with the standard to be expected of students to achieve the award that is to be assessed;
  - (vii) fluency in English, and where programmes are delivered and assessed in languages other than English, fluency in the relevant language(s) (unless other secure arrangements are in place to ensure that external examiners are provided with the information to make their judgements);
  - (viii) meeting applicable criteria set by professional, statutory or regulatory bodies;
  - (ix) awareness of current developments in the design and delivery of relevant curricula;
  - (x) competence and experience relating to the enhancement of the student learning experience.
14. The previous QAA *Quality Code* also required that institutions do not appoint as external examiners anyone in the following categories or circumstances<sup>4</sup>:
- (i) a member of a governing body or committee of the appointing institution or one of its collaborative partners, or a current employee of the appointing institution or one of its collaborative partners;
  - (ii) anyone with a close professional, contractual or personal relationship with a member of staff or student involved with the programme of study;
  - (iii) anyone required to assess colleagues who are recruited as students to the programme of study;
  - (iv) anyone who is, or knows they will be, in a position to influence significantly the future of students on the programme of study;
  - (v) anyone significantly involved in recent or current substantive collaborative research activities with a member of staff closely involved in the delivery, management or assessment of the programme(s) or modules in question;
  - (vi) former staff or students of the institution unless a period of five years has elapsed and all students taught by or with the external examiner have completed their programme(s);
  - (vii) a reciprocal arrangement involving cognate programmes at another institution;
  - (viii) the succession of an external examiner by a colleague from the examiner's home department and institution;

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<sup>4</sup> Advice and guidance from the QAA in this area is expected to be published in November 2018.

- (ix) the appointment of more than one external examiner from the same department of the same institution;
  - (x) anyone who has previously served as external examiner for the same programme at any time within the previous five years;
  - (xi) anyone who already holds two or more concurrent appointments as external examiner at first degree and/or higher degree levels
15. Where the Directorate of Quality Enhancement and Standards has identified a need for a new external examiner, the relevant Programme Leader should identify suitable candidates. Nomination forms for external examiners and other related documentation are available on the [QES web pages](#). All submitted forms should be checked and approved by the Associate Dean (Learning & Teaching) and, once approved, sent to the nominated officer in QES.
16. Nominations are then approved, if they meet the criteria in paragraphs 13 and 14 above, by the Director of Quality Enhancement and Standards on behalf of the Vice-Provost (Education).

### **Appointment**

17. External examiners are appointed for a period of four academic years. Rarely, and only with the approval of the Vice-Provost (Education), can an extension of one year be granted.
18. An external examiner may be reappointed in exceptional circumstances but only after a period of five years or more has elapsed since their last appointment. External examiners are not normally appointed to programmes where they have sat on the validation or periodic review panel in the role of external assessor.
19. External examiners are appointed for modules or clusters of modules or for an individual programme or for a cluster of closely related programmes leading to an award of the University. Where more than two external examiner are appointed to a programme/award, or cluster of closely related awards, a lead external examiner is identified by the Faculty from the pool of existing external examiners. The Faculty informs QES of those identified as lead external examiners and QES then issues the letter of appointment. Where external examiners are appointed to modules or clusters of modules they are also expected to report on the ways in which such module(s) integrate within the programme as a whole.
20. The University provides each external examiner with a formal letter of appointment which details their specific roles and responsibilities and directs them to the [QES web pages](#) where regulatory and other relevant information such as the report form and information about payments and expenses can be found.
21. In addition, the appropriate Faculty office provides its external examiners with local information including:
- details of the handbook for the programme, including the programme specification and modules the external examiner is appointed to consider
  - the arrangements for submitting schemes of assessment and draft assessment papers for approval
  - advice on the schedule of assessments for the academic year (if not already included in the above) and the likely timing of examinations, and other forms of assessment that will be subject to external moderation
  - arrangements for sampling assessed work

- dates for meetings of the Board of Examiners and, in particular, for the final meeting

Once appointed, external examiners can also expect to receive minutes of Boards of Studies.

### **Publication of external examiners' names**

22. External examiners are identified by their name, position and institution(s) in module or programme information provided to students, normally in the relevant handbook. Programme Leaders are responsible for ensuring that this information is correct and up-to-date. Such details are also published on the [QES web pages](#).

### **Termination of an external examiner's appointment**

23. If an external examiner fails to submit a written report without any good reason after receiving three reminders from the Directorate of Quality Enhancement and Standards, or fails to fulfil any of his/her other duties, including attendance at specific Boards of Examiners, the appointment will be terminated by the Vice-Provost (Education). Identification of any conflict of interests that are identified or arise subsequent to an external examiner's appointment will also result in the appointment being terminated.

### **Induction**

24. Following an individual's appointment, the University and the appropriate Faculty are responsible for the induction of the external examiner and for communicating with them throughout the academic year. It is the expectation that all external examiners participate in a briefing which can be in person or delivered electronically. The briefings are arranged by the Directorate of Quality Enhancement and Standards who provide information about the University's organisational procedures, practices, policies and *Regulations*, and the process for receipt and consideration of external examiners' reports. External examiners are also introduced to the information available to them on the VLE, SurreyLearn (see Appendix 2). Faculties are responsible for providing information on discipline/programme/module specific aspects of provision.

### **Roles and responsibilities**

25. The following are the primary roles and responsibilities of its external examiners who certify that:
- academic standards (and professional standards if relevant) are set at the correct level for the programme and award
  - student performance is assessed against these standards
  - assessment, in all of its aspects, is conducted fairly
  - the quality of the programme provided is, as a minimum, appropriate to meet national and international expectations
  - there is consistency with and reference to University *Regulations* and this *Code of practice*.
26. In meeting their primary roles and responsibilities external examiners are expected to:
- (i) engage directly with assessment in various ways so as to offer informed judgements;
  - (ii) comment on draft examination papers for *Framework for Higher Education Qualifications* (FHEQ) Level 5 and above;

- (iii) receive representative samples of student work across the full ability range;
  - (iv) observe students (as appropriate, for example in OSCEs or dance/drama productions);
  - (v) review the level and range of marks, within and between modules;
  - (vi) check for consistency of marking;
  - (vii) consider the relationship between learning outcomes and assessment methods;
  - (viii) confirm that the University grade descriptors and marking schemes have been applied correctly;
  - (ix) moderate marks;
  - (x) attend Boards of Examiners;
  - (xi) submit reports.
27. Generally the University will require its external examiners to be involved in all of the above. In addition to the external examining duties listed in paragraphs 25 and 26 above, the lead external examiner should also:
- receive the reports of all the external examiners who review work which contributes to the programme/award in order for them to take an informed view of the programme as a whole;
  - confirm that a consistent and acceptable standard is being maintained across the programme;
  - where relevant act as a mentor for new or inexperienced external examiners;
  - attend all of the Board of Examiners meetings where an external examiner is required.
28. External examiners may, in the case of MRes programmes, and Practitioner Doctorates be requested by the Faculty to participate in *viva voce* examinations. In such cases external examiners can take on the role of an assessor only with regard to assessment of the dissertation and only where their appointment, as agreed by Senate, is formally recorded as an external examiner/assessor.

***Comment on draft assessment***

29. External examiners will receive, for information only, draft FHEQ Level 4 assessments, except where the programme is wholly at FHEQ Level 4, in which case the draft assessments will be for consideration, comment and approval.
30. External examiners will receive all relevant draft FHEQ Level 5, FHEQ Level 6 and FHEQ Level 7 assessments for consideration, comment and approval. External examiners do not need to approve the assessment for units of assessment that are worth less than 25% of the overall assessment for the module. Approved assessments should be returned within the timeframe specified by the Faculty.

***Receiving mark sheets and representative samples of student work across the full ability range***

31. Faculties will provide external examiners with the relevant University grade descriptors and associated marking schemes/criteria for individual assessments and composite lists of:



- all marks contributing to a module mark;
  - all module marks;
  - basic statistics on each module, ie maximum, minimum and mean (average) mark, and standard deviation;
  - a commentary where there is a discrepancy between marks.
32. Departments may request an external examiner to attend the University to review assessed work prior to the meeting of the Board of Examiners.
33. External examiners have the right to see all assessed work at FHEQ Level 5 and above, (and at FHEQ level 4 for standalone CertHE awards) including coursework, performances and presentations, where the unit of assessment contributes 25% or more to the overall module mark.
34. An external examiner may wish to receive only a selection of assessed work. Where only a sample is provided by the Faculty it must consist of at least 10% of the total or 20 pieces of work, whichever is the lesser provided that such a sample is of sufficient size to be proportionately representative of assessed work across the whole ability range demonstrated by the students.
35. External examiners may be asked to observe individual or groups of students undertaking assessed practical work, which may include performance activities within the University and off-site work in clinical settings. It is good practice for external examiners to be given the opportunity to meet a group of graduating students for discussions about their programme of study. It should be made clear to all that such discussions do not involve any (re)assessment of any individual students.

***Reviewing the level and range of marks, within and between modules***

36. External examiners are required to:
- review the congruence between module outcomes and related method(s) of assessment and the appropriateness and range of marks in the components of each module examined;
  - compare the level and range of final marks of all modules in the relevant subject contributing to the programme award;
  - check for consistency of marking;
  - examine the relationship between learning outcomes and assessment types;
37. External examiners must not be used as second markers.

***Moderating internally-marked work***

38. The process of external examination is one of moderation, which is a verification process and not one of re-marking. Since moderation is usually conducted on the basis of a sample of work, the adjustment of an individual's marks based on that sample alone is not appropriate.
39. If an external examiner deems that marks are inconsistent across the sample they may request a re-marking of all the assessed work in that module. The external examiner may also propose an adjustment of all marks if, in his/her view, the assessment is consistently over- or under-marked.

### **Attendance at Boards of Examiners**

40. External examiners are full members of Board of Examiners and are entitled to be present at all meetings of the Board of Examiners, or its sub-groups. External examiners are normally expected to attend meetings of the Board at which final examination results are to be considered and are required to attend meetings at which recommendations for awards are determined. Attendance is normally by physical presence at the meeting. Exceptionally, where this is impractical or impossible, external examiners are expected to be available for any communication and /or discussion whilst the meeting is in progress.
41. The final responsibility for the approval of module marks rests with the Board of Examiners, the membership and terms of reference for which are set out in the *Code of practice for academic governance*. The Board of Examiners receives a schedule of module marks for each student and, after any necessary discussion and decision(s), confirms the marks and determines progression/award classification, as appropriate, for each student. This provides the evidence for recommendations to the Student Progression and Awards Board (SPAB).
42. External examiners are asked in meetings of the Board of Examiners for their views on any matter pertinent to their remit. Such views are given serious consideration. The University expects a Board of Examiners to make every effort to reach decisions and recommendations by consensus, but should a vote be necessary on any issue it is determined by a simple majority with each member having one vote. The Chair has an additional casting vote if required but no member has a veto.
43. The sheets of agreed marks are signed by the Chair of the Board of Examiners and all of the external examiners associated with that programme who are present. They similarly sign any recommendations for the award of degrees and other qualifications. The lists of recommended awards are forwarded to the Assessments and Awards Office within the Student Services and Administration Directorate for approval by SPAB.
44. An external examiner has the right not to sign the mark sheet(s) and, in such circumstances, informs the Director of Student Services and Administration or delegated nominee, in writing and at the earliest possible opportunity, of the reasons; the Director will then notify the Vice-Provost (Education) and the Director of Quality Enhancement and Standards. The Director of Student Services and Administration ensures that the external examiner's remarks are submitted, along with all other recommendations, to SPAB and that full consideration is given to them in reaching any decision.

### **External examiners' reports**

45. External examiners are required to provide timely reports to the President and Vice-Chancellor or delegated nominee as required at least annually during their term of office. It is a condition of contract that external examiner's reports must be submitted before fees can be paid. Reports are expected to be sent to the University within three weeks of the meeting of the Board of Examiners at which final award recommendations are made. There is no requirement for external examiners to provide a report following attendance at a resit Board of Examiners unless there are substantial changes that have occurred since the previous Board.
46. The University expects its external examiners to take their reporting responsibilities very seriously and it, in turn, makes careful use of those reports. External examiners are required to include informative comment and recommendations in their report as follows:

- (i) whether issues raised in the previous report(s) have been, or are being, addressed to their satisfaction;
  - (ii) whether the University is maintaining the threshold academic standards set for its awards in accordance with the frameworks for higher education qualifications and applicable subject benchmark statements;
  - (iii) the programme of study itself (clarity of programme aims and learning outcomes; the structure and content of the programme in relation to the general aims and learning outcomes);
  - (iv) whether the assessment process measures student achievement rigorously and fairly against the intended outcomes of the programme(s) and is conducted in line with the institution's policies and *Regulations*;
  - (v) that the academic standards and the achievements of students are comparable with those in other UK higher education institutions of which the external examiners have experience;
  - (vi) the appropriateness of the marking criteria used, of marks awarded and the overall range of marks in relation to the marking criteria;
  - (vii) the consistency of marking within and between the modules/ programmes moderated;
  - (viii) the quality and consistency of feedback to students;
  - (ix) the organisation and administration of assessment procedures and the Faculty's adherence to procedures, *Regulations* and rules for the classification of awards;
  - (x) that any issues are addressed as specifically required by any relevant professional body;
  - (xi) confirmation that sufficient evidence was received to enable the role to be fulfilled (where evidence was insufficient, they give details);
  - (xii) areas of strength.
47. Additionally external examiners are required to provide an overview in their report to when their term of office is concluded.
48. The procedure for dealing with external examiners' reports is shown in Figure 1.

***Responsibilities for external examiners' reports within the University***

49. External examiners' reports are received, on behalf of the President and Vice-Chancellor, by QES, who distribute copies to the appropriate Executive Dean, Associate Dean (Learning and Teaching) and nominated contact in the AIs (see Appendix 1). Where external examiners have raised matters of serious concern a copy of their report is also passed to the Vice-Provost (Education). In such cases a response is requested from the Faculty or AI within four weeks for consideration and approval by the Vice-Provost before returning to the external examiner.
50. The Executive Dean or their nominee ensures that the reports are considered by the relevant Staff/Student Liaison Committee and Board of Studies and, where appropriate, by the Board of Examiners. External examiners are asked not to name individual members of staff or students in their report. However where this might occur reports are considered under 'reserved business'. Actions arising from consideration of the external examiner's reports are recorded in the Minutes of the Board of Studies/Board of Examiners and are reported on in the annual programme

review.<sup>5</sup> The Executive Dean, or nominee(s), is responsible for ensuring that, after reports have been considered, any required actions are carried out.

51. Faculties produce an overview of annual programme review reports to summarise key issues and actions. Issues raised by external examiners also feed into the periodic review of a programme of study, together with any School/Departmental actions taken in response. QES produces a report of issues raised by external examiners, one for undergraduate provision and one for taught postgraduate provision, for consideration by the Quality and Standards Sub-committee with a summary of key issues and actions required then submitted to the University Learning and Teaching Committee (ULTC). This summary highlights any issues requiring institutional action. ULTC reports to Senate on consideration of the summary of key issues raised by external examiners and actions and confirms to Senate that external examiners are satisfied that academic standards are secure.
52. External examiners are advised of the outcome of consideration of their reports and of specific actions that the Board of Studies has agreed to take using the relevant sections of the report form. The response is copied to QES. Responses to reports on undergraduate programmes should be submitted to external examiners by the middle of semester one after the first Board of Studies has taken place and for taught postgraduate programmes by the end of January.
53. Student representatives have the opportunity to consider external examiners' reports and related action plans at Staff/Student Liaison Committees and Boards of Studies. Once School/Department responses to external examiner's reports have been received, the report with response is uploaded to the relevant programme area on SurreyLearn so that it is available to all students on the programme.

#### ***External examiners and improvement and enhancement***

54. External examiners are expected to contribute to the improvement/enhancement of the programmes that they scrutinise for the University by providing informative comment and recommendations on:
  - good practice and innovation relating to learning, teaching and assessment observed by the external examiners;
  - opportunities to enhance the quality of the learning opportunities provided to students.

#### **Raising serious concerns**

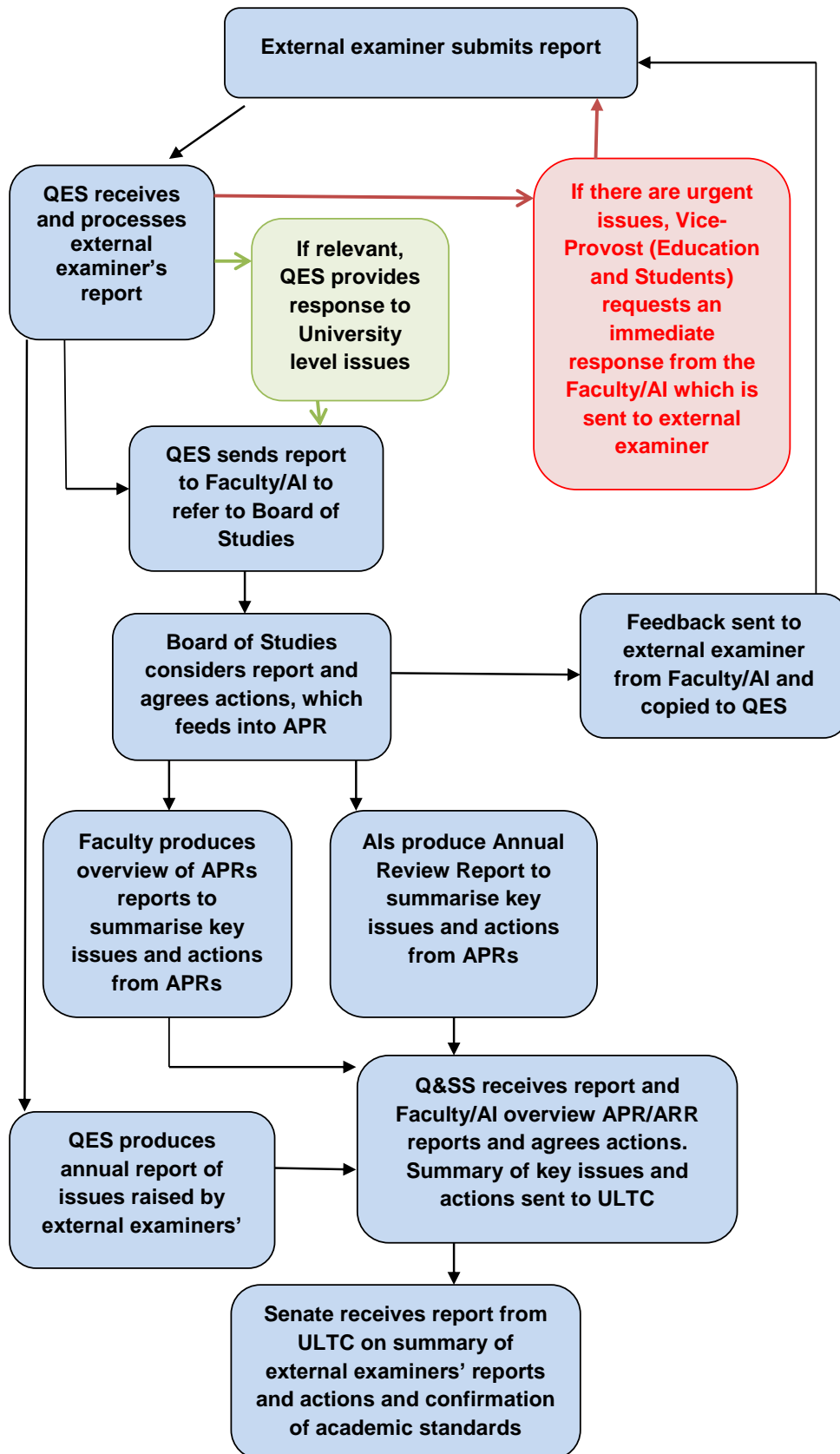
55. Through its *Regulations*, *Codes of practice* and normal procedures the University has sought to reduce the potential for problems relating to external examining. The University, however, expects its external examiners to raise any concerns they have in a serious and proper manner. In the first instance this is done through the programme and it is the responsibility of the Programme Leader to both seek to deal with the problem and to inform the Student Services and Administration Directorate about the nature and resolution of any problems. Outstanding problems are addressed at Faculty level, initially through Student Services and Administration Directorate staff and Associate Dean (Learning and Teaching) but culminating with the Executive Dean. Such matters should be brought to the attention of the Vice-Provost (Education) who may assist in problem resolution. Where an external examiner considers that problems have not been dealt with satisfactorily s/he may write a confidential report to the President and Vice Chancellor.

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<sup>5</sup> A revised version of the annual programme review is in operation for reporting on 2017/18 which consists of a review of student performance data. This will be considered alongside a pilot Subject level TEF process.

56. Should an external examiner have a serious concern relating to systemic failings with the academic standards of a programme or programmes and has exhausted all published applicable internal procedures, including the submission of a confidential report to the President and Vice-Chancellor, they may raise concerns with the [Office for Students](#) and/or inform the relevant professional, statutory or regulatory body.

**Appendix 1 – Process for the consideration of external examiners’ reports**



## Appendix 2 – Information for external examiners on SurreyLearn

Module tutors use SurreyLearn in a variety of ways, providing learning activities (eg discussions, online tests) and resources (eg lecture slides, handouts) to support students' studies and their academic and professional development. In addition to being a learning, teaching and support resource for students, SurreyLearn also allows them to personalise their online learning experience and customise their communications.

SurreyLearn is also available to external examiners to facilitate their engagement with assessment processes and to help them to carry out their primary roles and responsibilities, as defined by this *Code of practice*, more efficiently. External examiners use this secure online learning environment to view relevant assessment materials, module and programme information and online assignments (only those student coursework assignments that are electronically submitted to SurreyLearn are available here). External examiners have access to two types of area in SurreyLearn: module areas and a departmental external examiner's area.

The content of the external examiner's area in SurreyLearn should include the following information:

- Programme handbook(s);
- Links to the University regulations and the *Code of practice for assessment and feedback* and the *Code of practice for external examining: taught programmes*;
- Separate units for each external examiner where they can access:
  - Module descriptor/other module information eg handbook
  - Assignment brief/exam question papers as appropriate
  - Marking schemes/marking criteria/indicative answers
  - Complete mark spreadsheet (with summary statistics)
  - Moderation/assessment monitoring form
  - Module report form
  - Student assignments, including Turnitin score, tutors' marks and feedback (online submissions only)

External examiners also have access to module areas that are used by students to submit their online assignments. External examiners can view these online coursework submissions along with the allocated feedback and grades.

External examiners may also find further relevant information on SurreyLearn, for example dates of Boards of Examiners meetings, Induction Day for new external examiners and a link to the external examiners web pages on the Quality Enhancement and Standards (QES) website.