



SURVEY OF THE EXTERNAL EXAMINERS' SYSTEM CONDUCTED BY HISTORY UK (HE)

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In June 2010 History UK (HE) conducted a survey of the external examiners' system in History undergraduate programmes in UK HEIs. Responses were received on behalf of 47 departments about their use of external examiners and from 31 current individual examiners about their experiences of the system. Departments used between 1 and 5 externals depending on the size of the student body, except for the OU, which appoints externals to individual modules. The survey indicated that externals are normally chosen for specific period or geographical specialisms, except in smaller departments, which employ only one external. Welsh language was required in two departments.

There was a general consensus amongst all respondents that the purpose of the system was to ensure comparability of standards both within departments and across institutions. The survey revealed strong support for the current system with 41 departments and 18 examiners saying that the system was effective. 20 Departments said they had no problems in using the system. 37 Departments said they had no problems with supplying externals to other departments, although some pointed out that this would be an arrangement made by an individual rather than the department. 4 added that they were encouraged to act as externals, that it provided valuable experience for colleagues and that they were 'happy to help'.

6 departments and 13 examiners felt the system was not effective, but there was no consensus among them about possible alternative systems. 2 respondents suggested abolishing the system altogether and some pointed out that there was no system of external examining in the USA (2) or Europe (1). 1 respondent suggested making the current system more robust and another 1 suggested a lighter touch audit function for external examiners. 1 examiner suggested retaining the current system, but using it once every 3 years. 1 suggested a statistical review of module marks and 2 suggested that the review of portfolios of individual students' work would be more effective as a check on the comparability of marking standards within a department. 3 respondents suggested a national pool or register of external examiners, while 2 pointed out that this would require adequate training and payment.

17 departments said they have encountered problems with recruiting externals. This problem was compounded by poor remuneration, lack of time for a 'burdensome task' and the need for externals to take part in exam marking in their own institutions at the same time. 2 respondents were concerned that they had to rely on 'friends' to take on the role of external and 1 respondent was concerned that the rate of pay was so 'risible' that externals could only be recruited by 'begging' for their help. 2 departments said they would like more than 1 external, but that finances were restricted.

Induction/Training

Externals generally received documentation from the department and/or institution as well as explanations of exam protocols from staff in the department. 21 departments specifically mentioned that an induction event was provided for externals, organised either centrally or within the department. 9 externals mentioned attending an induction event, which was generally found very useful. 11 externals mentioned that they had no training, although 7 of them received documentation. 6 said that their induction/training was inadequate.

Role of Examiners in Setting Questions

Externals were generally asked to check exam questions before exam papers were finalised. 23 departments said that they asked externals to approve exam papers. 8 departments said that they asked externals to approve coursework and exam questions. 12 departments specifically said that they provided externals with the coursework questions so that they could check with overlap on the exam papers. 3 departments said that the externals played no role in setting coursework or exam questions.

1 external mentioned being invited to the departmental meeting at which papers were discussed. 28 externals said that they saw the exam questions in advance of finalisation. 3 said that they played no role in setting exam questions or coursework questions. 2 externals played a role in setting coursework and exam questions. 4 externals specifically mentioned checking for overlap between exam and coursework questions.

Marking

There was general agreement that externals could ask internal markers to reconsider marks, even if they could not change marks themselves. 14 departments said that externals could not alter marks, but were expected to comment on the general standard of marking. 19 departments said that externals could only ask for a change of marks to a cohort of students. 14 departments said that externals could alter marks. 8 specifically mentioned

asking externals to adjudicate on borderline marks or when the internal examiners had failed to reach agreement.

14 externals said that they could alter marks, although 3 said they would do it very rarely. Of the 17 who could not alter marks, 2 said they were only asked to adjudicate on borderline marks. 5 specifically said that they could only alter the marks of a cohort of students. 1 external was concerned about 'the new practice of not allowing externals to change marks' and 2 said dissertation marks should be adjudicated by externals.

Externals' Reports

Departments relied on a variety of routes in order to respond to externals' reports. All departments had a formal method of responding either through the Department or at institutional level. Externals also mentioned receiving Informal responses via e-mails or from individual members of departments. 9 externals specifically said that they had received a positive, constructive response to their reports. Only 2 externals felt that their reports had not been acted upon. 1 external mentioned that there had been issues concerning a lack of response at one institution in the past.

Conclusions

Although the survey revealed strong support for the effectiveness of the current system, a minority of respondents expressed concerns about how it functioned in practice. These concerns were, however, largely seen as localised issues rather than systemic problems. There was absolutely no clear consensus about how the current system might be improved or replaced. Nearly half of departments provided induction events for externals and the majority of externals felt that their induction had been adequate. The survey revealed some disparity in the role of externals at different institutions. While some institutions involved externals in the process of setting coursework questions and exam papers, a small minority did not. A greater disparity was revealed in the extent to which externals could alter marks at different institutions with a minority of departments allowing externals to change marks freely. All institutions had formal mechanisms in place for responding to externals' reports and the majority of externals were satisfied with the responses which they received.

It is clear from the survey that the external examiners' system functions well because of the involvement of senior academics, who believe in the benefits of a collegiate system and who are prepared to undertake an extra burden of work during the busy exam period. While there might be some scope for streamlining the system to reduce local disparities, the survey does not suggest that any wider changes would have the confidence of the academic community of historians.

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