

Southampton Solent University Guide for External Examiners

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Introduction

1. This Guide is intended for use by External Examiners who are examining Southampton Solent University validated courses. This includes courses delivered by the University's partners. It sets out information to enable External Examiners to fulfil their role.
2. In addition to the Guide, External Examiners can access the University's regulations and policies, as set out in the Academic Handbook. For access and further information please go to the University's External Examiner website (www.solent.ac.uk/externalexaminers).

The Responsibilities of the University

3. The University is responsible for:
 - appointing External Examiners;
 - providing External Examiners with appropriate briefing on policies, regulations and courses/units;
 - managing its assessment boards;
 - ensuring that External Examiners' reports are received, formally considered, and, where necessary, appropriate action is taken;
 - ensuring that a response to External Examiners' reports are made in a timely manner, detailing all actions that have been taken as a result of any concerns or issues raised.

The University's External Examiner and Assessment Board Arrangements

4. The University operates a two tier assessment board model. Unit Assessment Boards (UAB) consider student performance on individual units for a designated school/service. Decisions regarding progression and awards are made at the subsequent and separate Progression and Award Boards (PAB).
5. The University has five academic schools:
 - The School of Art, Design and Fashion
 - The School of Business, Law and Communications
 - The School of Maritime Science and Engineering
 - The School of Media Arts and Technology
 - The School of Sport, Health and Social Sciences
6. The following professional services departments are also able to design and deliver courses:
 - Solent Learning and Teaching Institute
 - Research and Innovation Office
7. The University appoints qualified individuals to act as either a Unit External Examiner or an Award External Examiner. Unit External Examiners are allocated units that are in their subject area which may be offered across different schools/services.

External Examiner Appointments

Appointing an External Examiner

8. Unit and Award External Examiners are appointed using strict criteria which are detailed in the Academic Handbook. Nominations are submitted by schools/services to the Academic Registrar who will confirm the appointment under delegated authority from the University's Academic Board. Appointments are reported to the University's Academic Board.
9. Once a nomination has been approved on behalf of the University, the External Examiner is sent an appointment letter. The letter includes:
 - the terms of the appointment and its start and end dates;
 - for Unit External Examiners, an indicative list of the units assigned to the examiner; and
 - details of the fees and expenses.
10. External Examiners must sign and return an agreement to the terms of the appointment and to the duties and responsibilities of the role as set out in this Guide and in the University's Academic Handbook.

Terms of an Appointment

11. Appointments usually begin on the 1st of August of an academic session and runs until the end of business of the fourth academic session of their appointment. The University normally appoints External Examiners for a maximum of 4 consecutive years. However, in exceptional circumstances an appointment may be extended by up to 12 months.
12. The University's External Examiners are employed as independent contractors; the agreement signed by an External Examiner does not constitute a contract of employment. The University pays tax and national insurance contributions at source.
13. In line with the UK Visa and Immigration guidelines, all externals are required to provide evidence of their right to work in the UK; the appointment is subject to the University's receipt of such satisfactory evidence.
14. External Examiners should keep the University informed of any changes to their details or circumstances.
15. External Examiners must not undertake any other work for the University that will affect their ability to be independent and impartial. Where an External Examiner is offered additional work by the University they must consult with the External Examiner Officer to establish whether any conflicts of interest.

Briefing and Support

16. Following an External Examiner's appointment, in addition to the documents and information provided, they will be invited to the University's annual briefing event held at the University's main campus in Southampton. This is to ensure that externals:

- understand the duties and responsibilities of their role;
- are fully informed about external examining, assessment and award processes and associated administrative procedures at the University;
- have some knowledge and understanding of the University's assessment regulations;
- meet staff within the school/service and University to enable effective working relationships.

17. External Examiners who do not have any previous external examining experience will be contacted by the Head of Subject to agree any additional support.

External Examiner Fees and Expenses

18. External Examiners receive an annual fee as stated in the appointment letter. The fee is paid automatically on receipt of a completed report (for each academic year this is the annual report for a Unit External Examiner, the final report for an Award External Examiner) although external examiner duties continue until the end of business for the academic session. Fees may be reviewed periodically and external examiners will be informed of any changes.

19. Where a Unit External Examiner has attended a UAB at the request of the University, an additional fee will be paid per board attended.

20. All fees will be subject to current legislation for taxation. External Examiners are paid through the University's payroll system by electronic transfer into their nominated bank accounts.

21. External Examiners will be reimbursed for reasonable travel expenses for attendance at boards, and for any additional interim visits. Travel and subsistence expenses have to be claimed for and will be payable at the University's standard rate. Claims must be submitted using University templates and be accompanied with original receipts of purchases.

22. Where an appointment has ended early the fee payable for that academic year will be calculated pro-rata based on the work completed.

Terminating an Appointment

23. The External Examiner or the University can terminate the appointment early by giving at least 3 months' written notice indicating reasons. The University will consider early termination for:

- i. Failing to meet the requirements of independence and impartiality as stipulated by the University (section 21 of the University's Academic Handbook);
- ii. Non-EEA citizens whose right to work visa expires during the term of their agreement fails to provide evidence of their continuing right to work in the UK;
- iii. A period of absence that results in external examining duties and responsibilities not being fulfilled;
- iv. Not engaging in the moderation and assessment board processes as directed by the University (Unit External Examiner);

- v. Not attending an assessment board without due notice, at which attendance was expected;
- vi. Not attending two consecutive assessment boards, at which they were expected, regardless of whether due notice was provided;
- vii. Not submitting a report 6 weeks after it is expected without the University's agreement:
 - Unit External Examiners - after completion of moderation or, if requested to attend, after attendance of final UAB
 - Award External Examiners - after attendance at a PAB

The Role of the Unit External Examiner at Southampton Solent University

- 24. Unit External Examiners are appointed to all units at FHEQ level 5 and above. External Examiners may be appointed to units at FHEQ level 4 where required under the circumstances detailed in section 21 of the University's Academic Handbook.
- 25. A Unit External Examiner's duties and responsibilities include:
 - i. Providing advice and feedback on the form and content of all proposed assessments for their allocated units before they are given to students to help inform the University's practice as it occurs and to ensure that assessment methods are appropriate and effective;
 - ii. Confirming academic standards at unit level as directed by the University, by moderating student work online or on-site before the relevant UAB;
 - iii. Confirming unit assessment marks by providing a written statement to the UAB following moderation;
 - iv. Submitting an annual written report, with informative comments, on the template provided;
 - v. Advising on proposed unit modifications and new units as they arise.
- 26. Unit External Examiners have the right to request the moderation of marks awarded by the internal examiners but cannot suggest changes to individual marks.
- 27. Two Unit External Examiners will be nominated by Academic Services to attend UABs. Their role is to endorse the UAB's outcomes and confirm that decisions were reached in accordance with University policy and any professional, statutory and regulatory body requirements.
- 28. Where attendance is expected but unforeseen circumstances prevent attendance, the Unit External Examiner should inform the University so that a substitute external examiner can be invited to the board.
- 29. In order to effectively carry out the role, a Unit External Examiner must be able to:
 - i. judge students impartially on the basis of the work submitted for assessment;
 - ii. compare the performance of students with that of their peers undertaking comparable courses of higher education in the UK and in light of subject benchmarks and qualification descriptors where provided;
 - iii. assess the form and content of proposed assessments that count towards the award in such a way as to judge whether students have fulfilled the learning aims and outcomes of the unit and reached the required standard. This should

- include alternative assessments and adjustments made for students with declared disabilities or impairments, in order to ensure that all students will be assessed fairly;
- iv. scrutinise and feedback on proposed changes to their assigned units;
 - v. sample students' work from each category of award and failures, in order to ensure that the assessment criteria have been interpreted correctly and that there is a parity of assessment across the cohort;
 - vi. judge whether assessments are conducted in accordance with the Academic Handbook and the unit descriptor;
 - vii. report back to the University using University templates on student performance and academic standards as well as on the effectiveness of the assessments and any lessons to be drawn from them;
 - viii. report to the University on any matter of serious concern.

The Role of the Award External Examiner at Southampton Solent University

30. An Award External Examiner's duties and responsibilities include:
 - i. confirming academic standards at award level;
 - ii. attending Progression and Award Assessment Board meetings at which decisions on student progression and awards are confirmed;
 - iii. endorsing the outcomes of the Progression and Award Board and confirming that decisions were reached in accordance with University policy and any applicable professional, statutory and regulatory body requirements;
 - iv. submitting a written report after every board attended, with informative comments on the areas specified in the template provided.

Moderation and Board Arrangements

31. The University's Assessments Team will be the main point of contact for Unit External Examiners regarding the moderation process.
32. The Assessments Team will provide Unit External Examiners with information on how to access course and assessment documentation via the University's virtual learning environment, Solent Online Learning (SOL).
33. At the start of the academic year, the Assessments Team will make assessment briefs available to the Unit External Examiners for comment and feedback prior to their release to students. They will also make available samples of student work for moderation by the Unit External Examiners.
34. The Assessments Team will be the main point of contact regarding assessment board arrangements and they will be able to organise any travel and accommodation for Unit and Award External Examiners visiting the University.
35. For any queries relating to moderation or assessment boards the Assessments Team can be contacted on:

Email: Assessments@solent.ac.uk
Telephone: 02382 015023

The Academic Year and Implications for Unit External Examiners

36. From the 2015-16 academic year the University moved to a 30 week continuous teaching calendar for traditional undergraduate courses. The calendar follows a 30 weeks of continuous scheduled learning and assessment activities model and enables students to retake failed assessments during the academic year and/or immediately following the release of results in June, rather than August and September. The calendar with assessment board and referral submission dates can be found on our website here: <https://www.solent.ac.uk/about/our-policies-and-legal-information/external-examiners>.
37. Key dates for External Examiners, such as moderation and marking weeks, assessment boards, referral dates and so on, will be provided by the Assessments Team towards the start of the academic year.
38. Due to the very short turnaround period between marking/moderation and the assessment boards, Unit External Examiners may be required to moderate assessments within 48-72 hours of receipt. External Examiners will be informed well in advance of when assessments will be available for moderation and it is imperative that they are available during those weeks. The University will support and guide External Examiners through the process to enable them to carry out their moderation duties effectively.
39. Moderation of assessment is primarily conducted online, where this is not possible External Examiners will be requested to attend a moderation day at the University's premises before the relevant assessment boards. To ensure we have all the moderation completed on time assessments are not sent via post.
40. If an External Examiner would be unable to moderate work online or on-site in the weeks designated for marking and moderation they must inform the Assessment Team as soon as possible. This will enable the University to source a suitable replacement External Examiner to complete the moderation.

External Examiner Annual Reports

41. External Examiners' annual reports are a key indicator for the University in assessing the quality and standards of our awards, and they play a vital role in the quality assurance processes of the University, including course and periodic review. The report should cover the conduct of the assessments over the academic year and the standards being set and achieved by the University.
42. The following is intended as a guide for areas that may be useful to consider in completing a report; it is not intended to be prescriptive:
 - i. whether the academic standards set for the University's awards are appropriate and have been met;
 - ii. the extent to which assessment processes are rigorous, ensure equity of treatment for students and have been fairly conducted within the University's regulations and guidance;
 - iii. the standards of student performance for each unit assigned to a Unit External Examiner;
 - iv. the comparability of the standards and student achievements with those in other higher education institutions;
 - v. school/service, course or University issues which should be brought to the attention of the University;
 - vi. good practice that should be noted and disseminated more widely as appropriate.
43. Unit External Examiners annual reports should be provided after completion of moderation for the academic year, or, if requested to attend, after attendance at the final UAB for the academic year.
44. Award External Examiners should complete and submit a report following attendance at a PAB.
45. Annual fees will be paid upon submission of the Unit External Examiners annual report or for Award External Examiners the final board report.

Responses to External Examiner Reports

46. External Examiner reports enable the University to judge whether its units and awards are meeting their stated objectives and to make any necessary improvements.
47. The University will give full and proper consideration to comments and recommendations contained in External Examiner reports. Appropriate staff within the University will provide detailed written feedback confirming any actions taken or planned in response to the report within 6 weeks of receiving it.
48. Each report is received and reviewed by the External Examiner Officer in Academic Services. The Officer identifies the areas which should be addressed as a minimum by the school/service and also assigns a RAG (red, amber, green) code to the report. The codes indicates the severity of the issues raised by the External.
49. Reports coded Red indicates serious concerns raised that potentially puts the University's standards and/or the quality of the student learning experience at risk.

Normally indicating that there are serious and systematic issues with the practice and processes which need addressing immediately.

50. Reports coded Amber indicates concerns highlighted which could negatively affect the quality of the student learning experience or standards of the awards. Normally indicating consistent and systematic failures in practice and processes.
51. Reports coded Green are positive overall. No areas of concerns are highlighted that puts the University's standards or the quality of the student learning experience at risk.
52. Issues raised by External Examiners are carefully considered and addressed in the response provided. The University has overall responsibility for the standards of its awards and the quality of its provision and therefore may, after careful consideration, decide not to implement a particular recommendation. In the event of this happening a clear explanation will be provided to the External Examiner.

Raising Serious Concerns

53. If an External Examiner has concerns regarding the academic standards of units or courses which cannot be resolved with the course team then they are advised to raise this with the External Examiner Officer. The Officer will investigate the issue in order to resolve the matter to the satisfaction of all parties.
54. Should the issue remain unresolved the External Examiner may submit a confidential report directly to the Vice-Chancellor.
55. Where an External Examiner has a serious concern relating to systemic failings with the academic standards of a course or courses and has exhausted all published applicable internal procedures, including the submission of a confidential report to the Vice-Chancellor, they may invoke the 'QAA's concerns scheme' or inform the relevant professional, statutory or regulatory body.
56. The scheme is designed for systemic failings in the University's management of standards or quality and should not be used for one-off cases of ineffective standards or quality, or to raise a personal grievance or issues relating to an appointment.

Availability of Reports and Information

57. Any person may request the disclosure of the full text of a report under the Freedom of Information Act 2000. Reports are made available to students by the University, reflecting the general principles of engaging students in quality management processes and aligning to the QAA UK Quality Code for Higher Education.
58. Reports will be redacted where an individual has been identified, or in very exceptional cases, where text may cause harm to the institution or bring it into disrepute.
59. During an External Examiner's appointment they will have access to confidential information relating to the University, its employees and its students. External Examiners must not, either during or after their appointment, use or disclose such information to anyone (other than in the proper exercise of their role as external examiner to the University).

Contact with Students

60. Students will be made aware of the identity and current position of the external examiners appointed to their units and awards. It is inappropriate for students to make direct contact with external examiners, in particular regarding their individual performance in assessments; other appropriate mechanisms are available to students, such as appeals and complaints, and the University will advise students accordingly. A student contacting an external examiner directly should be referred to the External Examiner Officer.

Contacting the University

61. Queries relating to the role or responsibilities of an External Examiner should be referred to:

External Examiner Officer
Southampton Solent University
RM101
East Park Terrace
Southampton
Hampshire
SO14 0YN

Email: AS.ExternalExaminers@Solent.ac.uk
Tel: 02382 016351

Website: www.solent.ac.uk/externalexaminers.