

## The External Examiners at Medical Schools: their Criteria, Duties and Roles

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### Abstract:

External examiners are experienced academics in higher education. The external examiner shall provide an independent overall judgement on student performance and the quality and standard of the programme, ensuring to be fair and equitable to the regulatory bodies. The external examiner also provides feedback to the programme team and institution on the overall strengths and weaknesses through a formal report.

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**Introduction:** Almost all universities have their own academic mandates which include examination regulations and guidelines, available at their websites. External examining provides one of the principal means for maintaining threshold academic standards within the autonomous higher education institutions (1). The process is seen as a key tool in assuring that assessment standards are consistent with the academic outcomes specified, and are comparable to those achieved in the subject area in equivalent universities nationally and hopefully internationally.

It is an important, valued, skilled and useful peer review process. It enables complex information about students' learning and their standards of achievement independently evaluated. It includes variables as the curriculum, learners, teachers, and assessment practices, all of which must be addressed, to provide an impartial and independent advice.

The external examiner system in the United Kingdom (U.K.) higher education has a long history beginning in the early nineteenth century (2). In 2018, the U.K. Quality code for Higher Education published by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), states that the role of the external examiner is to "provide each degree awarding body with impartial and independent advice, as well as informative comment on the degree-awarding body's standards and on student achievement in relation to those standards" (3).

The external examiners are experienced academics in higher education who offer an independent assessment of the academic standards and the quality of assessment to the appointing institution (4). In U.K. the external examiners are appointed to fulfill their duties for a term of 3-5 years, to ensure some consistency over a longer period (QAA, 2018) (5). While this system is popular in some European, African and Asian universities, some modifications exit in its practice from one area to another. However, having an external examiner in the United States is un-common and the American universities do not have external examiners for the undergraduates (6).

In the Sudanese medical schools, the external examiner is appointed by the mother University for a specific examination in a specific date for a particular batch of students and the task ends with the end of that examination; and submission of the external examiner's report. Notification of the appointment is sent to the regulatory bodies in the Ministry of Higher Education and the Sudan Medical Council about 4-6 weeks prior to the addressed examination, both having the right to approve or not approve that nomination and/or nominate different external examiners for the same task.

The objective of this paper is to summarize the available local experiences and outline the duties and roles of the external examiner to medical schools in Sudan with special reference to the practice in the

U.K. and Ireland; which may be useful for the novice and future examiners.

Selection and appointment: (5, 7-18)

- Only persons of sufficient seniority and experience to be able to command authority and offer the expertise required should be appointed.
- Nominations from departmental boards should be accompanied by an outline of the proposed external examiner's credentials.
- The external examiner should be an academic professor or senior lecturer or practicing professional at the rank of consultant or the equivalent, and who has;
  1. Not participated in teaching the course being examined and is not an employee of the host university.
  2. Experience in medical education, ideally both in curriculum design and in assessment.
  3. Experience as a member of an examination board and of working in teams of assessors.
  4. Experience in assessment item writing, banking, blueprinting and in standard setting.
  5. Familiarity with common exam statistics (e.g. mean, median, mode and range, standard deviations, standard errors of measurement and reliability measures like Cronbach's alpha, generalisability coefficients, z scores, compensation methods).
- An external examiner should not normally be appointed from a department or university or institution where a member of the inviting department is serving as an examiner.
- A former member of the teaching staff of the University will not be eligible for appointment until a period of 3-5 years has elapsed.
- Nominations should be made only after the chairperson of the department has secured the agreement of the proposed external examiner.
- Institutions should include the name, position and institution of the external examiner in the examination material provided to students.

- Normally, there shall only be one visiting external examiner for a department.
- The above functions must be carried out with regard to the General Academic Regulations of the nominating University.

Notification of appointment:

The external examiner shall receive formal notification of the appointment accompanied by the;

- Handbook (or equivalent) for the programme of study.
- Scheme of assessment.
- Academic regulations for the programme of study.
- Dates of examination and board meetings.

External examiners will be asked to check that they have been appointed for the correct examination(s), confirm without delay that they accept the appointment and accept the terms and conditions that apply to the proposed appointment. External Examiners should then be invited to visit the department, if possible prior to the examination process in order to meet staff, discuss the teaching and learning strategies and see previous examples of students' work.

The following conflicts of interest would preclude an appointment: • 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.

- Anyone with a close professional, contractual or personal relationship with a member of staff or student involved with the programme of study.
- Anyone required assessing colleagues who are recruited as students to the programme of study.
- Anyone who is in a position to influence significantly the future of students on the programme of study.
- 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.

The main duties of an external examiner are to; (5, 7-18)

- Report on the structure, content, academic standards and teaching of the programme.
- Evaluate and scrutinize all forms of assessment which contribute to the students' degree results.
- Evaluate, and to ensure fairness and consistency in the assessment process.
- Comment on draft examination papers and assessment tasks including examination statistics and results.
- Advice on the performance of individual candidates if required.
- Comment on any alleged cases of assessment irregularities if any.

Review of question papers:

- The external examiner shall be asked to review the draft questions to check if they are appropriate for the examinations and truly reflect the aims and objectives of the course for which they are prepared.
- The draft question papers should be accompanied by model answers and a marking scheme for each paper.
- The external examiner may propose amendments to any examination questions and return his comments to the chairperson of the department under strict confidential cover.
- The department concerned shall make proposed amendments in the question papers before they are printed, packaged and sealed.
- The conduct of assessment and the determination of marks, grades and awards is a matter for the internal examiners acting with the support of and advice of the External Examiner.
- In the corrections to examination question papers; typically, the external examiner may sample a few of the top, middle and bottom marks to assess the accuracy and fairness of the marking. He should review, moderate and approve the marking of internal examiners. The decision of the external examiner should normally be accepted in case of disagreement. In all cases, where discretion is applied, it must be recorded clearly in the minutes of the meeting.

Roles of the External Examiner (4,5, 7-18):

The role of the external examiners is for quality assurance (QA). It is essentially that of a moderator, to verify that the assessment process is properly designed and applied, and is carried out in a manner that is fair and equitable to all students concerned as well as supportive of achieving the intended outcomes<sup>4</sup>.

The role of the external examiner can go beyond this to improve the standards of teaching and assessments. This can be summarized in the following points:

- Have access to and get the informed about the curriculum and the assessed methods of the programme.
- To verify that the process of assessment is well operated, and in line with the University Regulations.
- To verify that standards are appropriate and student's achievements are consistent with benchmark statements set by the regulatory bodies.
- The external examiner is required to participate in oral and clinical examinations. Where only a proportion of students are subjected to oral examination, the criteria for selection of those students should be agreed upon with the external examiner in advance.
- The external examiner should attend the main Examiners' Board meetings at which final results are reviewed and approved before they are published. External examiners may give advice on curriculum development and the future directions of a programme. They may give lectures on current methods of assessment, exchanging their experiences with the host university staff.

Meetings with students:

External examiners are encouraged to meet with students to know their opinions about the programme, the learning experience and assessment practices. Meetings with students also raise awareness of the external examiner system amongst students. If meetings are held, it must be made clear to all participants that discussions with external examiners will not influence assessment decisions and outcomes taken by Boards of Examiners.

Report of the External Examiner (7, 16-20):

The external examiner is required to provide a confidential written report at the end of his examining duties to the Dean and the Head/the Chairperson of department as appropriate. An advice or recommendation of the external examiner carry a great deal of weight to the key personnel's in the host university to bring about changes, and the reports are part of the University's annual quality assurance audit system.

The External Examiner's report shall include answers to the following questions:

1. How satisfactory was the administration of the examination process?
2. Was the programme structure, content and objectives well defined and appropriate to the subject matter and the level at which it was taught?
3. Were the structure, content, quality and validity of assessment methods used appropriate?
4. Was the assessment process appropriate; and competencies of interest set out in subject benchmark statements?
5. Was the examination sufficiently comprehensive with regard to the programme or course being examined?
6. Were the materials and facilities used for practical and clinical exams appropriate and adequate?
7. Was the External Examiner given adequate access to examination scripts and course work of all borderline candidates for forming a reasonable opinion?
8. Was the internal marking appropriate, fair and consistent?
9. Was the general standard of performance of the students satisfactory and comparable to similar institutions?
10. Was the failure rate acceptable or too high?
11. Was the distribution of honours comparable to other institutions?
12. Was the Examiners' Board meeting conducted in an impartial and fair manner?

External examiners are encouraged to make any comments they wish, including observations on teaching, course structure and course content, as well as the examinations themselves. The reports will usually be submitted shortly after the final board of examiners' meeting. In some universities, the external examiner may receive an external examiner report form.

However, an important principle in writing the report is that it is consistent with the comments and judgements given to examination boards or through contact with internal staff, such as the programme leader. It would be unfair if serious new issues and criticisms were raised in the report that had not been raised with staff during the external examiner's visit. It is important that reports are robust and strongly evidence-based.

The wording of reports must be carefully chosen in the light of the multiple audiences: staff, students, senior staff at the institution and external bodies, such as professional regulators. The External Examiner has the right to make a confidential report to the Vice Chancellor of the university at any time. If the report has identified serious problems or issues, then the external examiner should expect to receive feedback from the institution on how it will respond.

### Conclusions:

The External Examiner is a person who, through training and experience, can make expert and reliable judgements in his field of specialty. The major duty of the external examiner is to advice on the curriculum, the learning environment and the learner's achievements to safeguard the quality and comparability of degrees. The External Examiner's assessment needs be taken seriously and his comments or observations are used to take actions to improve the quality.

External examiners perform the role of someone who is truthfully, supportive and offers reassurance, but who also provides honest and often candid constructive feedback about weaknesses, and issues that may be uncomfortable or difficult to hear.

It may be useful for the national regulatory bodies to re-update the previously performed flexible and transparent pool of Accredited External Examiners at the Sudan Medical Council, to assure that, the system can consistently apply the desired academic standards.

Conflict of Interest: None.

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