

EXTERNAL EXAMINING

1 Introduction

- 1.1 Externality is a well-established and integral component of UK Higher Education quality assurance. External stakeholders provide valuable feedback on institutional processes, and collectively their input helps institutions guarantee comparability of standards.
- 1.2 The External Examining system is one of the key sources of such external feedback. It offers important assistance in ensuring that the standards of degrees and other awards can be calibrated across institutions, as well as providing an external mechanism for monitoring fair practice in the assessment of students' performance.
- 1.3 External Examiners provide Queen Margaret University with independent, objective and impartial judgements on academic standards. They offer professional advice and expertise in the form of findings and reports, which are given serious consideration. In this way, External Examiners contribute significantly to the enhancement of quality in learning, teaching and assessment.
- 1.4 Within this context the External Examining system has three main purposes:
- Verifying that threshold standards¹ are maintained for the award or part thereof for which the External Examiner takes responsibility with due regard to the SCQF and other external benchmarks;
 - Ensuring that the assessment process is sound and fairly operated in the marking, grading and classification of student performance in line with the institution's published policies and regulations;
 - Assisting Queen Margaret University in the comparison of academic standards and student achievement with those of other UK institutions with which the Examiner is familiar.

The External Examiner system also fulfils the following important functions:

- Supporting the enhancement of the quality of taught programmes through identification of good practice and innovation, as well as advice on the award or part thereof for which the External Examiner has responsibility;
 - Contributing to information that is publicly available to students and external audiences on the quality of provision at the University.
- 1.5 Each taught programme that leads to an award of the University must have one or more External Examiner(s). Where there are several Examiners for a Programme, one Examiner (the Chief Examiner) is identified as having overall responsibility. A Chief Examiner will also be appointed to compare academic standards and achievement for a Programme that runs at a number of sites (most obviously this applies to University programmes which are franchised to partner institutions).
- 1.6 External Examiners appointed to four year Honours degrees are responsible for level three and four work only. No External Examiner is appointed to levels one and two, except in the case of programmes which have as the final award either a Higher Education Certificate (HECert) or Higher Education Diploma (HEDip).
- 1.7 Stand-alone modules or Short Programmes leading to the award of credit from the University also require an Examiner.

¹ Threshold academic standards are the level of achievement that a student has to reach to gain an academic award. For equivalent awards, the threshold level of achievement should be the same across the UK

- 1.8 All Examiners must fulfil the criteria set out under paragraph 2 below and must be approved through the University's nomination process set out under paragraph 3 below. This includes Examiners with responsibility for the taught component of Professional Doctorate degrees and Examiners with responsibility for collaborative programmes in the UK and overseas.
- 1.9 Further detail on the involvement of collaborative partners in nominating and approving Examiners is contained in the Collaborative Agreement for the partnership, where appropriate. Separate guidance on the appointment of Examiners for PhD and Professional Doctorate viva examinations is available from <https://www.qmu.ac.uk/study-here/postgraduate-research-study/graduate-school-and-doctoral-research/current-students/>

2 Criteria for External Examiners

- 2.1 The following criteria are intended to ensure that only those with appropriate experience and expertise are appointed to act as External Examiners. The criteria are to be met for each programme through appointment of one or more Examiner(s). Circumstances under which it may be appropriate or necessary to appoint more than one Examiner to a single Programme include: fulfilment of professional body requirements; number of students; volume of work to be considered; and range of programme outcomes.
- 2.2 External Examiners should normally demonstrate appropriate evidence of the following:
- i) knowledge and understanding of UK sector agreed reference points for the maintenance of academic standards and assurance and enhancement of quality;
 - 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) (this applies 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.
- 2.3 To prevent conflict of interest, the University will normally ensure that no-one in the following position or circumstances is appointed as an External Examiner:
- i) a member of a the University Court or equivalent body at one of the University's collaborative partners;
 - ii) a current University employee or employee of or one of the University's collaborative partners;
 - iii) anyone with a close professional, contractual or personal relationship with a member of staff or student involved with the programme of study;
 - iv) anyone required to assess colleagues who are recruited as students to the programme of study;

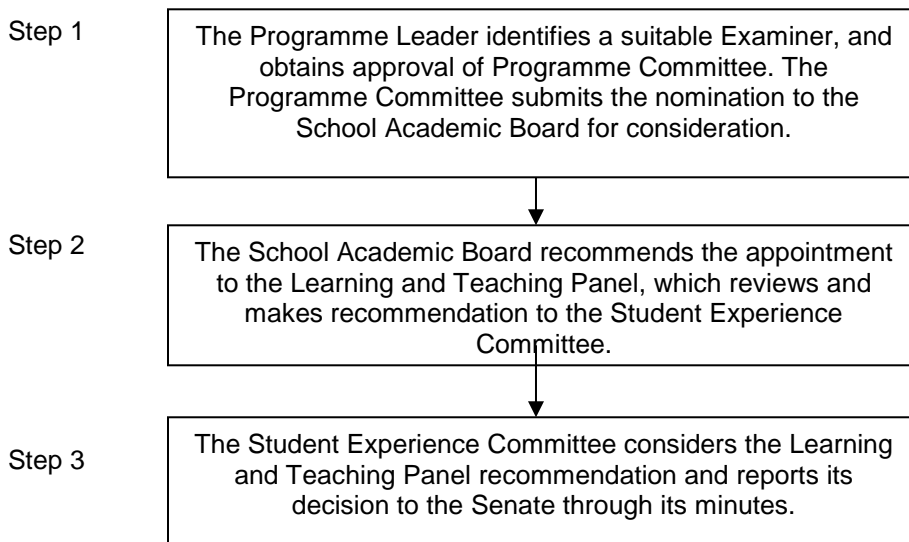
- v) anyone who is, or knows they will be, in a position to influence significantly the future of students on the programme of study;
 - vi) anyone significantly involved in recent or current substantive collaborative research activities with a member of staff closely involved in the delivery, management or assessment of the programme(s) or modules in question;
 - vii) anyone who has been involved as a validation or review panel member for the programme to be examined;
 - viii) a former staff member or students of the University, unless a period of five years has elapsed and all students taught by or with the proposed External Examiner have completed their programme(s);
 - ix) a reciprocal arrangement involving cognate programmes at another institution;
 - x) the succession of an External Examiner by a colleague from the Examiner's home institution;
 - xi) the appointment of more than one External Examiner from the same department of the same institution.
- 2.4 Examiners should not normally hold more than the equivalent of two External Examining appointments (including the QMU appointment) at any time.
- 2.5 Exceptionally, Examiners who do not meet all of the criteria set out under paragraphs 2.3 and 2.4 above may be appointed. This applies most usually to disciplines where there is only a small pool of potential Examiners who would meet the full set of criteria. In such cases, a clear rationale must be provided and approved by the University Senate or relevant Standing Committee thereof. Applications for such Examiners are more likely to be successful where the Examiner is not the sole Examiner for the programme, provided there is an appropriate balance of expertise across the Examining team.
- 2.6 It is recognised that first time Examiners and Examiners appointed from a professional background, including professional researchers, are less likely to fulfil all of the criteria set out under paragraph 2.3 above. As part of the nomination process for Examiners in this category, proposed arrangements for local induction and training must be presented.
- 2.7 Staff of the Division of Governance and Quality Enhancement can advise on completion of nomination forms for Examiners and the provision of evidence that demonstrates fulfilment of the criteria for appointment.
- 2.8 Normally appointed for four years and three months, exceptionally extended to a maximum of five to ensure continuity, an Examiner cannot be re-appointed unless at least five years have elapsed since the end of his/her last term of office. A re-appointment follows the same procedures as those for a first appointment.
- 2.9 A full register of Examiners is maintained by the Division of Governance and Quality Enhancement and available from the Assistant Secretary, Governance and Quality Enhancement. The register is used to maintain oversight of responsibilities, periods of tenure and Examiners' home institutions.

3 Appointment of an External Examiner

Figure 1 summarises the three steps of appointing an External Examiner. The process provides for local consideration by the Programme Committee and School Academic Board. Subsequent scrutiny by the Student Experience Committee, on behalf of the Senate, ensures consistency of decision making and enables the University to monitor trends across all programmes.

FIGURE 1

The three steps in appointing an External Examiner



Step 1 – Nominations

- 3.1 The Programme Committee submits the External Examiner nomination form to the appropriate School Academic Board.
- 3.2 The School Academic Board considers the nomination. This should occur at least eight months prior to the start of the academic year in which the tenure is to begin. Typically, this means that nominations should be submitted to the School Academic Board no later than January for a September start.
- 3.3 The School Academic Board may seek further information on the nomination. Therefore, Programme Committees are advised to submit proposals within this time-scale, in case this should occur, or in case the application is denied.

Step 2 – Recommendation to the Learning and Teaching Panel

- 3.4 The School Academic Board recommends the appointment to the Learning and Teaching Panel, which reports directly to the Student Experience Committee. The Learning and Teaching Panel may recommend approval to the Student Experience Committee, reject the appointment outright, or request further information.

Step 3 – Appointment

- 3.5 Acting on recommendation from the Learning and Teaching Panel, the Student Experience Committee approves the appointment on behalf of the Senate. Appointments are reported to the Senate through the minutes of the Student Experience Committee. Typically, Examiners are appointed at least five months prior to the start of the academic year in which the appointment is to take place. This means that nominations should normally be submitted to the Learning and Teaching Panel no later than April for a September start.

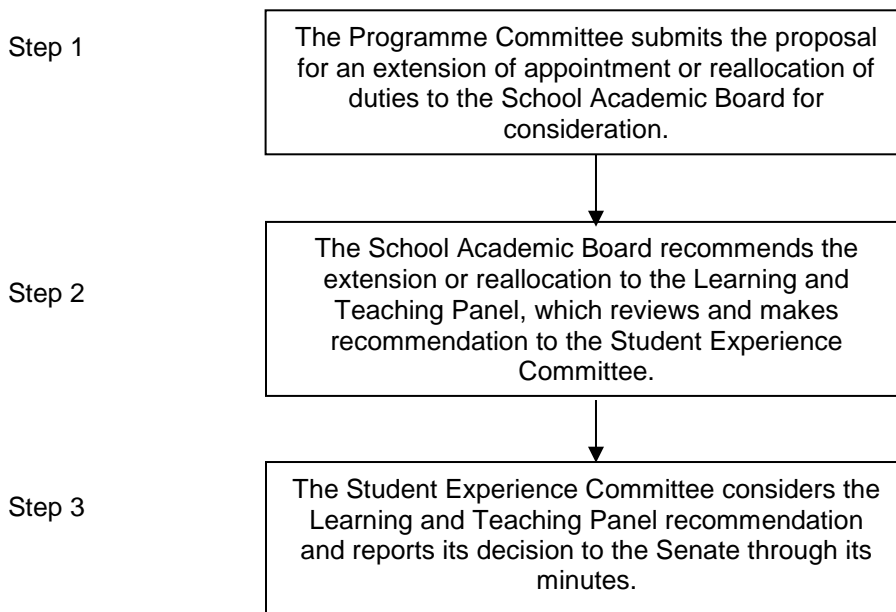
- 3.6 For programmes following the standard QMU academic year, appointments will normally be made for a period of four years and three months, from September to December of the final year to allow a three month overlap on appointments. The initial period may be shorter and may be extended to a maximum of five years. External Examiners' period of tenure should normally allow the Examiner to assess four successive cohorts of students.
- 3.7 For a new programme, the period of appointment will normally be such as to allow the External Examiner to follow the first cohort of students to graduation.
- 3.8 Where more than one External Examiner is appointed, the periods of appointment should overlap to facilitate continuity.
- 3.9 Once an appointment has been approved by the Student Experience Committee, on behalf of the Senate, staff of the Division of Governance and Quality Enhancement will issue a formal letter of appointment, together with the necessary forms and the link to the Handbook for External Examiners. Further information for External Examiners and training materials are published on the QMU website.

4 Extension of an External Examiner appointment/reallocation of duties

Figure 2 summarises the three steps in extending an External Examiner's period of tenure or reallocating duties.

FIGURE 2

The three steps of extending an External Examiner appointment or reallocating duties



Step 1 – Application for extension or reallocation

- 4.1 The Programme Committee submits the extension of appointment or reallocation of duties form to the appropriate School Academic Board.

Step 2 – Recommendation to the Learning and Teaching Panel

- 4.2 The School Academic Board considers the application for extension to tenure or reallocation of duties and makes a recommendation to the Learning and Teaching Panel. This should occur at least eight months prior to the expiry of the current contract. Typically, this means that proposals for extension or reallocation of duties should be submitted to the School Academic Board no later than January for a September start.
- 4.3 School Academic Boards may seek further information about the recommendation and Programme Committees are therefore advised submit the form as early as possible to allow for extra time, in case this should occur, or in case the application is denied.

Step 3 – Appointment

- 4.4 The School Academic Board recommends the extension or reallocation of duties to the Learning and Teaching Panel, which reports directly to the Student Experience Committee. The Learning and Teaching Panel may recommend approval to the Student Experience Committee, reject the extension to tenure or reallocation of duties outright, or request further information. Typically, extensions and reallocations are agreed at least five months prior to the conclusion of the original contract. This means that proposals for extension or reallocation of duties should normally be submitted to the Learning and Teaching Panel no later than April for a September start.
- 4.5 Appointments, including extensions, may be for a maximum of five years. The maximum length of the extension, therefore, depends on the length of the original contract of appointment.
- 4.6 Once an extension to tenure or reallocation of duties has been approved by the Student Experience Committee, on behalf of the Senate, staff of the Quality Enhancement Unit will notify the External Examiner.

5 Duties of an External Examiner

- 5.1 External Examiners employed by the University are expected to undertake all the duties and responsibilities required of them to the best of their abilities. In particular, Examiners are expected to:
- Attend all Boards of Examiners meetings at which their attendance is required²;
 - Respect the confidentiality of Board of Examiners meetings and of materials that they assess in particular, of projects and dissertation work, details of which shall not be disclosed to any third party without prior permission;
 - Submit, no later than 30 September, and preferably within three weeks of the semester two meeting of the Board of Examiners, an annual report to the Principal of the University that addresses, substantively and appropriately, the headings identified within the External Examiner's Report.
- 5.2 To this end, the duties of an External Examiner are:
- To be a member of the Board of Examiners and participate fully in the decision making process;
 - To endorse the outcomes of the Board of Examiners through agreement at the meeting or separately in writing (if the Examiner does not attend the Board), or to follow the procedure outlined in the External Examiners Handbook, if not in a position to offer endorsement;

² The Boards which the Examiner is required to attend will be confirmed through the nomination and appointment process and included in the letter of appointment, which forms the basis of the contract between the Examiner and the University.

- To ensure that the recommendations of the Board are consistent with the aims and curriculum of the programme, with Queen Margaret University requirements, and with good practice in Higher Education;
- To review the work of all students recommended for failure or for the highest available category of the award, and to sample student work from each category of award;
- To assess and comment on draft assessments, examination papers and guide marking schemes (where applicable);
- To provide feedback on aspects of good practice and innovation that have a positive impact on the student learning experience;
- To submit an annual report for each programme or stand-alone module(s) examined;
- To moderate the work of the internal examiners ensuring that the relative placing of students is fair and impartial.

5.3 Examiners may also have particular responsibilities for work-based learning and practice-based assessment. Where this applies, details will be confirmed through the nomination and appointment process.

5.4 Examiners are not involved in the assessment of individual students, nor are they entitled to change student marks. Instead, where an Examiner has concerns about marks awarded, a recommendation should be made to the full Examination Board, members of which will collectively come to a decision. Similarly Examiners are not involved in consideration of extenuating circumstances.

5.5 Occasionally, Examiners may be invited to participate in reviews of institutional regulations and practices. The involvement of Examiners in such activity is at the discretion of the Student Experience Committee, which oversees the development of the University's quality assurance and enhancement framework. Whilst there is no formal requirement for Examiners to participate in such activity, QMU welcomes and encourages contribution from key stakeholders.

6 The External Examiner's report

Submission and receipt of reports

6.1 External Examiners are required to report annually to the Principal of the University (c/o the Assistant Secretary, Governance and Quality Enhancement) on the conduct of assessment and student performance.

6.2 It is critical that External Examiners submit their reports no later than 30 September and preferably within three weeks of the semester two meeting of the Board of Examiners each year. External Examiners give important feedback on the operation of programmes and timely receipt of reports allows the University to take early action to address any issues raised.

6.3 The Division of Governance and Quality Enhancement is responsible for acknowledging receipt of reports from the External Examiner, and for circulating copies of the report to the Principal, the University Secretary, the relevant Programme Leader, Head of Division, Dean of School and School Manager.

Consideration and response to reports

6.4 External Examiners' reports are considered by the Programme Committees at the start of the academic session. Programme Leaders are responsible for responding annually to the External Examiner's report and should take appropriate action in response to any issues identified. If the matters raised by the External Examiner are serious, they will need to be addressed immediately. Otherwise, they can be dealt with as part of the Annual Monitoring process. In either case, the Programme Leader should reply to the External Examiner indicating how recommendations and comments will be addressed and citing appropriate timescales for action to be taken.

- 6.5 It is important that student representatives are involved in consideration of responses to Examiners. This is normally achieved through student input at the Programme Committee.
- 6.6 Exceptionally, a Programme Team may decide not to implement the Examiner's recommendation(s). Any decision not to implement the recommendations contained in the Examiner's report must be justified and requires consultation with the Dean of School (or the Dean's nominee). A full explanation for not implementing the recommendation(s) must be provided in the response to the Examiner.
- 6.7 Responses to External Examiners should be forwarded to the Division of Governance and Quality Enhancement within eight weeks of receipt of reports. A copy of each response will be sent, by a member of staff from the Division of Governance and Quality Enhancement, to the Dean of School, or the Head of Division where delegated, for approval. Following approval, the Division of Governance and Quality Enhancement will forward the response to the Examiner.
- 6.8 Deans of School are ultimately responsible for ensuring that External Examiners' reports are properly considered and, where appropriate, acted upon, and for ensuring the External Examiner is informed of any action to be taken as a result of the report. Where relevant, the Dean of School will also ensure that the External Examiner is advised of the reason that recommendations have not been acted upon.
- 6.9 Recommendations relating to institutional policies and procedures, which are outside the Programme Team's remit, are identified by the Division of Governance and Quality Enhancement on receipt of the report. It is the responsibility of the Division of Governance and Quality Enhancement to determine, in consultation with the Programme Team and Dean, how best to respond to the particular recommendation.

Institutional reporting

- 6.10 The Division of Governance and Quality Enhancement is responsible for co-ordinating the preparation of an annual report on issues raised within, and responses to External Examiner reports. This report is considered by the Student Experience Committee, which has responsibility for ensuring that issues with institutional implications are addressed or remitted to other committees as appropriate. Issues with implications on a School level are dealt with separately through the Annual Monitoring process.
- 6.11 The annual report includes a summary of examples of good practice in learning, teaching, and assessment identified by Examiners. This allows for institutional consideration of identified examples with the potential to impact on the student experience.
- 6.12 The annual report, or sections thereof, is disseminated by the Division of Governance and Quality Enhancement to the following by email: QMU staff; QMU students; and External Examiners. The report is also published on the Quality website as part of the University's commitment to providing public information on quality.

7 Information for External Examiners

- 7.1 The effectiveness of the External Examining system is dependent on a number of things, not the least being that the University makes explicit:
- The aims of its system of External Examining;
 - The roles and duties of the External Examiner;
 - The particular outcomes expected as a result of the External Examining process.

- 7.2 Following approval of an External Examiner's nomination, the Division of Governance and Quality Enhancement will provide key institutional information, including details of University induction mechanisms. Programme specific information, including details of any local induction activities, will be supplied by the relevant Division.
- 7.3 The information provided to all new External Examiners by the Division of Governance and Quality Enhancement consists of:
- Formal notification of appointment, including: period of tenure; modules to be examined; Exam Boards that the Examiner is expected to attend; any entitlement to meet individual students and the purpose thereof;
 - The Queen Margaret University External Examiners' Handbook, which is updated annually;
 - A link to the regulations governing assessment and the conduct of Boards of Examiners;
 - Information on the right to submit a confidential report to the Principal of the University, in the event of serious concern, and the QAA Serious Concerns Scheme;
 - A copy of the outgoing Examiner's report;
 - A blank copy of the current report template;
 - Information about the University induction process.
- 7.4 The External Examiners' Handbook provides information to Examiners on the following:
- The University: background, mission, campus and structure;
 - The appointment process: criteria for appointment, period of office, resignation, resolving disagreements, termination and payment of fees and expenses;
 - External Examiner duties, including: consultation on draft assessment instruments and examinations, moderation (sample size and how to deal with instances where the Examiner perceives marking is unfair) and authority and role in relation to the Board of Examiners;
 - Reporting arrangements, including the expected format and content of the report, arrangements for receiving feedback on the report, information on how the University uses reports to inform practice;
 - The role of the External Examiner in identifying good practice and innovation and making related recommendations;
 - Institutional procedures, practices and regulations, and the extent to which Examiners are expected to be familiar with the detail contained therein;
 - Information on the operation of Boards of Examiners, including how Examiners record endorsement or absence thereof;
 - How the University makes students and other stakeholders aware of External Examiner responsibilities and how reports are shared;
 - The current fees and expenses structure.
- 7.5 Programme specific materials will vary depending on the discipline. As a minimum, the Definitive Document, Student Handbook and Programme Specification will be provided, including information on:
- The place of the programme to be examined in the University's overall portfolio, and its main elements and awards;
 - Educational intent, learning outcomes, marking schemes, assessment strategies and descriptors of grade/classification criteria;
 - Any requirements of professional, regulatory or statutory bodies, for example Fitness to Practise;
 - Regulations governing the programme being examined, including grading criteria and marking schemes, marking practices, arrangements for the sampling of scripts and other assessable work contributing to the final award, including student presentations;

- Assessment structures, assignments and examination papers in relation to agreed learning objectives/outcomes;
 - Arrangements for the access to any work contributing to the final award so as to have evidence that the internal marking has been carried out according to the marking schemes and that the classifications are of an appropriate standard;
 - Arrangements for communicating with internal markers, including arrangements for communicating with placement providers and others external to the University involved in assessment.
- 7.6 Examiners will also receive information, where appropriate, on the expectations for comparing work across modules and/or programmes. This might include comparison of work for home and overseas iterations of the same Programme, where the Examiner is responsible for both.
- 7.7 Examiners established in their post will receive updated briefing material on an annual basis, prior to the final assessment diet each year. This will, as a minimum, include:
- Board of Examiners' schedule (provided by the School Office);
 - External Examiners' report form (provided by the Division of Governance and Quality Enhancement);
 - External Examiners' expenses/fee claim forms (provided by the Division of Governance and Quality Enhancement);
 - Any changes to the Governance and Regulations since the previous assessment diet (provided by the Division of Governance and Quality Enhancement).
- 7.8 Materials to support External Examiners in their role are available on QMU's Quality website

8 Induction

- 8.1 University level induction to the External Examiner role is provided in two ways: through the Quality website online materials (for all Examiners) and through a standard face to face induction programme (normally only available for Examiners undertaking their first role as an External or where there are other exceptional circumstances).
- 8.2 The format of the induction will be determined at the point of nomination and appointment. Where a face to face induction is agreed, the induction will be designed and delivered by the Programme Leader with input from the staff of the Division of Governance and Quality Enhancement and the Centre for Academic Practice and School Office, where appropriate.
- 8.3 Additional to the University induction, all new Examiners regardless of their prior experience will be offered a local induction to be delivered by the host Division for the programme, either face to face on campus, or via an alternative appropriate mechanism.
- 8.4 For Programmes with more than one Examiner, it is expected that the Examiners' tenures will overlap. This will allow the continuing Examiner(s) to support the Division in the induction of new appointees.

9 Resolving disagreements

- 9.1 Should an External Examiner or the Programme Committee feel that, despite reasonable and timely requests, the other is failing, for no good reason, to comply with the letter or spirit of these regulations, concerns can be referred to the Dean of School. This can be done separately from the normal annual report. The Dean will enquire into the matter(s) raised and report back to the External Examiner and Programme Committee as soon as possible. A report will also go to the Senate should any action be required.

- 9.2 In the unlikely event that an External Examiner should have serious concerns about quality and standards that cannot be resolved through referral to the Dean, a confidential report may be submitted directly to the Principal who will investigate the matter and report back to the Examiner.
- 9.3 If the Examiner is dissatisfied with the response to a confidential report to the Principal, as a last resort he or she may ask QAA to investigate using its Concerns Scheme. The Scheme should only be used to highlight systemic institutional failure and not for one-off cases of ineffective practice. All Examiners will be briefed on the operation of the Scheme through their letter of appointment.

10 Payment of External Examiners

- 10.1 Fees and expenses claim forms are obtained from the Division of Governance and Quality Enhancement or the Quality website.
- 10.2 All correspondence relating to fees and expenses should be addressed to the Quality Enhancement Unit at the generic email address: ExternalExamining@gmu.ac.uk
- 10.3 No claims in respect of Examining fees will be processed unless there is evidence of a satisfactory External Examiner's report having been forwarded to the University.

11 Resignation of an External Examiner

An External Examiner may choose to resign prior to the completion of their contract. A minimum of six months' notice is required, and the Examiner must complete the academic year in order to maintain continuity of assessment. Exceptions to this are possible, with good reason, but require the approval of the Senate. Letters of resignation should be addressed to the Principal of Queen Margaret University.

12 Termination of an External Examiner's Contract

- 12.1 The University reserves the right to terminate the contract for service of any External Examiner if, in the opinion of the Senate, there has been any breach of confidentiality on the part of the Examiner.
- 12.2 Contracts may also be terminated where External Examiners are deemed to be performing at a significantly inadequate standard in the context of these regulations. Grounds for termination of contract might include: failure to submit an annual report; submission of an inadequate or incomplete report; or failure to attend a Board of Examiners, at which attendance is a requirement, without good reason.
- 12.3 The emergence of a conflict of interest during an Examiner's period of tenure may also be a reason for termination, although it would be more usual for an Examiner to resign under these circumstances.
- 12.4 Contracts can be terminated at any time of year subject to proper consideration of the evidence,
- 12.5 Recommendations for the termination of an Examiner's contract must not be made lightly. Concerns should be brought to the attention of the Dean of School initially and will be referred to the Senate for the final decision.

13 Stakeholder information on External Examining

- 13.1 Students and other stakeholders may request details of the name, position, institution and remit of External Examiners from the Division of Governance and Quality Enhancement, and such information may also be included in programme materials. Contact details for Examiners will **not**

be provided to students or other stakeholders under any circumstances. Students or other stakeholders requesting information on Examiners will be advised that they must **not** attempt to make contact with individual Examiners.

- 13.2 External Examiner reports (with the exception of confidential reports to the Principal) will be made available to Class Representatives through the Student-Staff Consultative Committee and Programme Committee. Other students and stakeholders may request reports from the Division of Governance and Quality Enhancement. In all cases, student recipients of reports will receive guidance on the purpose of reports and how these are used.