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Purpose of the policy

The PTFI is responsible for the quality and standards of all academic awards made in its name. The UK Quality Code for Higher Education places considerable emphasis upon externality and Union Theological College is committed to making use of external expertise

in the development, delivery and review of all programmes. This will involve ongoing consultation, both formal and informal, with a variety of key external stakeholders: colleagues from other educational institutions; relevant regulatory bodies; and the main employers of its students.

Guiding Principles

These principles draw on published guidance on best practice in assessment in higher education and reflect the Guiding Principles of the UK Quality Code Advice and Guidance for External Expertise (2018).¹

1) Union uses external experts as advisers to provide impartial and independent scrutiny on the approval and review of all provision that leads to the award of credit or a qualification.

Expectations for engagement with external stakeholders is laid out in the College's Externality Policy.

A range of external expertise contributes to the design, development, delivery, review, and enhancement of programmes:

- External Examiners (EEs)
- Higher Education Advisory Panel (HEAP)
- Management Committee's Teaching and Learning Panel (TLP)
- Academic and Student Affairs Panel (ASAP)
- Quality Action Panel (QAP)
- Employers
- External reference points such as the FHEQ framework, QAA Quality Code and Benchmark Statement
- Faculty members acting as external experts for other institutions.

2) Union engages independent external examiners to comment impartially and informatively on academic standards, student achievement and assessment processes for all provision that leads to the award of credit or a qualification

The role of EEs is set out in the Externality Policy. EEs participate in the assessment process and provide independent advice on:

- curricula, teaching and assessment within the programme;

¹ <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/quality-code/advice-and-guidance/external-expertise>

- the degree to which the programme enables students to achieve the designed learning outcomes;
- how the programme is maintaining threshold academic standards set for its awards in accordance with UK Higher Education agreed reference points and for the maintenance of academic standards (including subject benchmarks) within the UK Quality Code for Higher Education; and
- the extent to which the standard of final award is comparable to similar programmes of which the EE has experience.

EEs are also integral to the assessment processes for doctoral degrees.

3) Union has processes for the nomination, approval and engagement of external examiners and other independent external experts

The College has in place robust processes for the appointment of EEs – the selection and approval mechanism is set out in the Externality Policy.

4) Union ensures that the roles of those providing external expertise are clear to students, staff and other stakeholders

Roles and responsibilities for course and programme EEs of taught programmes are set out in the Externality Policy and also in the Assessment Policy. The names, position(s) and institution(s) of the EE are included in the relevant programme handbook and students are given opportunity to interact with EE reports.

5. Union ensures that external experts are given sufficient and timely evidence and training to enable them to carry out their responsibilities

The Principal is responsible for ensuring that EEs are briefed and provided with appropriate information to enable them to carry out their responsibilities at appropriate times as set out in the Externality Policy. Evidence provided to EEs is timely and sufficient so as to allow them to undertake their duties.

6. Union has effective mechanisms in place to provide a response to input from external examiners and external advisers

These mechanisms are set out in the Externality Policy. This process is monitored by the QAP. The mechanism for the role of external advisors in periodic review is still to be drafted.

1. External Expertise in Governance

The Teaching and Learning Panel

The Teaching and Learning Panel (TLP) considers Faculty nominations for external examiners and makes recommendations to the Management Committee for their appointment. The TLP's membership includes a number of people external to the College with appropriate experience in higher education.

The Higher Education Advisory Panel

The Higher Education Advisory Panel (HEAP) is appointed by the Union Theological College Faculty. The Panel includes up to eight external representatives with expertise in higher education who have been nominated by the Faculty. The HEAP provides external advice and guidance on all matters relating to academic standards, quality assurance and enhancement and the student experience.

- (i) Discusses and pronounces an opinion on any matter referred to it by the Faculty.
- (ii) Acts as a validation panel for new programmes and major changes to programmes making recommendations to the Faculty.

2. External Examiners in PGT Programmes

The role of the external examiner is one of the principal means for ensuring externality as part of the College's process for maintaining academic standards and ensuring quality assurance and enhancement.

This policy sets out the role and responsibilities of external examiners (EEs) appointed to postgraduate taught (PGT) programmes and the role of Union Theological College in the EE Processes. It has been developed to be in alignment with the UK Quality Code for Higher Education.

The role of an External Examiner

EEs participate in the assessment process by providing comment and independent advice on:

- curricula, teaching and assessment within the programme;
- the degree to which the programme enables students to achieve the designed learning outcomes;
- how the programme is maintaining threshold academic standards set for its awards in accordance with UK Higher Education agreed reference points and for the

maintenance of academic standards (including subject benchmarks) within the UK Quality Code for Higher Education;² and

- the extent to which the standard of final award is comparable to similar programmes of which the EE has experience.

An EE is a full member of the PTFI Exam Board and has the right to attend all relevant meetings. The EE is normally expected to attend the final Exam Board meeting in May. The EE will have access to any material relevant to any aspect of the assessment of the programme and will scrutinise a representative sample of all assessed work. This sample must provide enough evidence to determine that the internal marking and classifications are of an appropriate standard.

An EE may, if so desired, ask to meet with students as part of their oversight.

The EE is not permitted, and shall not be asked, to undertake any of the following:

- setting assessment tasks;
- first or second marking of student assessment; and
- revising the marks awarded for the work of an individual student.

The EE can expect to receive annually from the programme:³

- the programme specification;
- module outlines with learning outcomes and assessment methods and the marking criteria adopted for assessment;
- specific module assessment information for approval via a return form;
- a selection of assessed student work (all assessed work is available to the EE upon request);
- a module moderator report (and, if appropriate, an appended moderation file note);
- full details of the marks within the modules for which they receive samples for approval via a moderated assessment return form;
- A programme review report and details of the response to the previous EE annual report; and
- information concerning the dates and times of Exam Board meetings.

The Faculty is responsible for formally receiving and acting upon external examiner reports. The EE shall submit a module-level report for every sample of moderated work which is received prior to the meeting of any Exam Board. The EE shall also submit an annual programme-level report within four weeks of the May Exam Board's meeting. These reports

² 'Threshold standards' are the minimum level of achievement necessary to be awarded the qualification and 'academic standards' include the standards of performance that a student must demonstrate to achieve a particular classification of qualification.

³ Templates for all relevant forms are available to Faculty in the PTFI Externality folder.

are sent to the relevant Head of Department and directed, as appropriate, to the Programme Coordinator. Formal external examiner module and programme reports must not contain any identifiable references to individual staff or students.

The EE is also encouraged to provide informal feedback to the College. Furthermore, the EE may submit a separate, confidential, report to the Principal to raise any matters of serious concern, should s/he feel this to be appropriate.

All formal EE reports are responded to in two ways:

1. Within three weeks of receipt of any report (module-level or annual programme-level), the programme coordinator will produce a draft response which the Faculty will modify as necessary before approval and return. Once approved, the relevant Head of Department is responsible for sending the response to the EE. Formal EE reports and the associated College responses will be made available to the students on the VLE.

2. The Programme coordinator will use all EE reports from the past twelve months in drafting the annual programme review to present to Faculty (as per the Annual Review Process).⁴ The Faculty will modify as necessary the draft programme review before finalising the document and its consequence action points. This annual programme review is to be reported to the EE as one of the relevant external stakeholders.

The process will be reviewed by the Quality Assurance Panel.

Selection of External Examiners

EEs will be selected from suitably qualified people and potential conflicts of interest must be considered. In order to be nominated, an individual must show appropriate evidence of:

- knowledge and understanding of the UK Higher Education agreed reference points for the maintenance of academic standards (including subject benchmarks) and the UK Quality Code for Higher Education;
- sufficient academic standing and experience to command authority and respect;
- competency and experience in the design and delivery of relevant curricula and operating relevant assessment;
- fluency in any relevant languages that the programme may assess; and
- awareness of trends in training for ministry nationally and internationally and willingness to be a critical friend to innovation.

⁴ Section three of the Programme Design and Module/Programme Review Policy.

In line with QAA best practice, the PTFI seeks, where possible, to appoint EEs from outside the Northern Ireland Higher Education sector.

A programme coordinator should consult with colleagues teaching on the programme and, having ascertained that the proposed individual would be willing to accept the nomination, would propose the name to Faculty. If in agreement, the Faculty present the nomination to the Management Committee through its Teaching and Learning Advisory Panel. The Management Committee are responsible for making the appointment.

Appointment and Induction

Once a nomination has been approved the Principal will send a formal letter of appointment communicating the EE's oversight duties and details of the fee and any expenses that will be paid on receipt of the annual report. An EE will normally be appointed for a four-year term.

Fees are payable on a scale related to the amount of external examination requested. Currently the minimum fee is £225 for modules which account for no more than 200 CATS.

The names, position(s) and institution(s) of the EE will be included in the relevant programme handbook with a note that students must not make direct contact with the EE since other routes exist for raising queries about the assessment and standards. If such contacts are attempted the EE should report these immediately to Union College.

Termination of Appointment

Union College may terminate an appointment if the EE is deemed to have not fulfilled their obligations or if a conflict of interest arises which cannot be satisfactorily resolved.

3. External Examiners in PGR Programmes

Details of the role of EEs within PGR programmes is contained with the PGR Programme Code of Practice.