Union Theological College

Externality Policy

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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. This applies to all postgraduate programmes. For the BA Hons Theology programme, St. Mary's University Twickenham shall have ultimate responsibility for the academic standards of the programme.

This policy aligns with the expectations of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, particularly Advice and Guidance on External Expertise and External Examining, ensuring that independent external scrutiny is integral to maintaining academic standards and enhancing the student learning experience.

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
- Education Committee (EC)
- Employers
- External reference points such as the FHEQ framework, UK Quality Code and Benchmark Statement for Theology and Religious Studies
- 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

[1] https://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/quality-code/advice-and-guidance/external-expertise
See also the External Examining principles https://www.qaa.ac.uk/the-quality-code/external-examining-principles

The role of EEs is set out in the Externality Policy. EEs participate in the assessment process and provide an 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; 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) For the BA Hons Theology, External Examiners are appointed by St. Mary's University Twickenham, on recommendation of the Faculty.

6) 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 UTC 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.

7) 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.

8) 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 EC. The role of external expertise in periodic review is set out in the Periodic Procedures Document

1. External Expertise in Governance

The Education Committee

The Education Committee considers nominations for external examiners for PTFI programmes and makes recommendations to the Faculty for their appointment. The EC'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 to serve on an ad hoc basis. The Panel may include up to eight external representatives with expertise in higher education who have been nominated by the Faculty. The HEAP may be asked to provide 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 UTC Programmes

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

All newly appointed External Examiners will receive an induction handbook and participate in an online or in-person briefing session covering assessment regulations, classification frameworks, moderation procedures and reporting expectations.

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.

The EE is asked to comment and advise on all assessments and is required to formally approve them.

The role of the External Examiner in PTFI programmes

An EE on a PTFI programme is a full member of the PTFI Exam Board is normally expected to attend all relevant meetings. 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.

Normally an EE is supplied with a first sample which includes:

- A sample of work from each grade band

[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.

- Borderline and fail cases
- The highest and lowest marks

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 return for moderated assessment for every sample of moderated work which is received at the time of the Exam Board. The EE shall also submit an annual programme-level report within one week of the Summer Exam Board meetings. For PTFI programmes, these reports are sent to the relevant Head of Department and directed, as appropriate, to the Programme Coordinator. For the BA Hons in Theology, the EE report is sent 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.

Response to EE Feedback

Module-Level Return for Moderated Assessment

The EE shall submit a module-level return for moderated assessment for every sample of moderated work. This is submitted at the time of the Exam Board. No formal Faculty response is made to these returns. Module-level returns for moderated assessment are taken into consideration during the module review process.

Programme-level Report

The EE shall also submit an annual programme-level report within one week of the Summer Exam Board meetings.

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

Within three weeks of receipt of the programme-level report 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 for PTFI programmes. The Programme Coordinator for the BA Hons Theology will liaise directly with St. Mary's University and the EE in response to the report. Formal EE reports and the associated College responses will be made available to the students on the VLE.



The Programme coordinator will use 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 consequent action points. This annual programme review is to be reported to the EE as one of the relevant external stakeholders.

Selection of UTC 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.

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

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

For PTFI programmes, 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 Panel. The Management Committee are responsible for making the appointment.

Appointment and Induction of PTFI External Examiners

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 of PTFI External Examiners

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 are contained within the Code of Practice for PhD.