

Guide for External Examiners of Open University Validated Awards

Open University Validation Partnerships

2025 – 2027

The Open University



Introduction and Thanks

Thank you for choosing to be an External Examiner for us here at The Open University (OU). You are part of a group of approximately 250 External Examiners, whose role is critical to the confidence we place in the quality and standards of the University's validated provision.

Essentially, your role is to make sure that justice is done to all students in the assessment of their academic performance, and that the standards of OU-validated awards are maintained and have parity with the sector.

The aim of this guide is to outline your rights and responsibilities, to explain the OU reporting requirements, and to give you some practical tips and information which you may find useful.

The guide complements other key policies and guidance that you may wish to familiarise yourself with, including your appointment letter and the OUVP

Handbook for Validated Awards which contains a detailed section on 'Assessment and External Examiners'.

Other publications include *the Regulations for Validated Awards of The Open University* and the *Student's Guide to Studying on a Programme Validated by The Open University*. Both of these documents are available on our website **https://www5.open.ac.uk/validation-partnerships/about-ou-validation.**

The August 2022 Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) publication - External Examining Principles - should also be read alongside the above. The publication is available at: External Examining Principles

With thanks and best wishes,

The Open University Validation Partnerships Team

About Open University Validation

The Open University was established by Royal Charter in 1969 and its Validation Partnerships remit has, since 1992, enabled the OU to validate programmes for partners that do not have their own degree awarding powers or that want to offer OU validated awards in addition to their own. We also work with international partners.

What is a Partner Institution?

It is a partner that, following a rigorous process, has been approved by the OU as an appropriate organisation to offer programmes leading to OU validated awards. A partner has to be approved before it can offer programmes of study leading to OU validated awards – these can be at undergraduate or postgraduate level.

Facts and Figures

- **About 40** partner , in the UK and overseas
- **Over 58,000** students
- Around **410** validated programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate level
- Wide range of subject areas
- **8,289** Awards conferred in 2024/25
- **226,732** conferments since 1992 when validation activity started

For the latest figures, please visit: https://www5.open.ac.uk/validation-partnerships

Partners are reviewed regularly to make sure they continue to meet our strict approval criteria in terms of:

- procedures and resources for teaching, learning and assessment,

- staffing and staff development,
- academic organisation, and
- internal quality assurance systems.

What is an OU Validated Programme or Award?

Each programme is designed and developed by the partner before being submitted to the OU for validation. OU validation responds to stringent quality assurance processes such as external examiner scrutiny and the systematic application of the QAA defined standards. The partner is responsible for the resourcing, teaching, assessment, and further development of the programme. Programmes are re-validated on a regular basis to make sure they continue to meet the required standards



The Relationships Between the OU, External Examiners, and OU Partner

External Examiners are appointed by and report to the OU. The terms under which they engage with the partner and the programmes they are appointed to, are determined by the OU. The OU sets and manages the regulations and processes related to external examining.

What are the Main Responsibilities of an OU Partner in Relation to External Examiners?

A Partner is responsible for:

- Nominating External Examiners.
- Providing External Examiners with briefing and induction (in addition to an OU briefing).
- Seeking approval from the External Examiners for the assessment briefs at the start of each academic year.
- Ensuring that External Examiners are sent samples of student work in a timely manner (at least five working days) in advance of the board of examiners.
- Managing boards of examiners.
- Ensuring that reports of External Examiners are formally considered and, where necessary, that appropriate action is taken.
- Sending External Examiners a response setting out the action taken following receipt of reports.
- Providing the OU with an account of the responses made to the issues raised by External Examiners in the Annual Review process.

- Making External Examiners' reports available in full to students, with the sole exception of any confidential reports made directly to the head of partner institution.
- Including the name, position, and partner of their External Examiners in module or programme information provided to students. External Examiners must refer any direct correspondence from students back to the institution; institutions should include this advice in their guidance to External Examiners.

The OU requires its partner to give a high priority to responding to External Examiner advice and feedback. Where an External Examiner's report raises serious issues that call into question the quality of the programme or the standard of the award, the University will investigate the matter on receipt of the report.

As an External Examiner, the partner must provide you with:

- assessment regulations, both generic and specific where applicable
- programme specifications for the programme you are assigned to
- student handbook(s)
- dates when your input is required, including board dates, at the start of each academic year.

Please make sure that you receive these documents. It is recommended that External Examiners visit the partner as soon as possible after their appointment to meet staff and students.

The Main Responsibilities of an External Examiner

- To approve the form and content of all assessments contributing to an award, to make sure that the aims and learning outcomes of the programme are being tested fairly and to the standards required. A timeline should be agreed with you as to when you will receive assessment questions and the marking scheme for comments and approval.
- To monitor any amendments to assessment tasks to accommodate disabilities so that they are fair and there is parity in the level of assessment.
- To sample students' work (usually anonymously) to make sure the assessment criteria have been interpreted correctly and that there is uniformity of assessment across the cohort. It is expected that External Examiners will be sent samples of work across all modules. Where cohorts are very small and mark distributions may seem unusual, you can ask to see all the work. For larger cohorts, it is usual for External Examiners to look at a cross section of work, including all fails and all borderline cases.
- To attend all board of examiners meetings. Please reserve the dates as soon as they are communicated by the partner. If you cannot attend a meeting, it may have to be reconvened.
- To ensure all recommendations for awards are made in accordance with the approved programme regulations sent to you by the partner at the time of your induction, and any other relevant institutional, PSRB, or OU requirements.

- To inform the OU if the standards of its awards are judged to be at risk. Your insight into the programme is critical to the ongoing quality assurance of its academic standards. If you notice anything that might impact on the quality of the programme or the experience of those studying on it, you should raise this with the partner at the first opportunity. If the issue cannot be resolved in a timely and satisfactory manner, please contact OUVP immediately (our contact details are on the back page).
- To sign pass lists and to write a timely report on outcomes in the required format. For chief external examiners this may include a summary report. Final External Examiners' reports should be received no later than four weeks after the final meeting of the board of examiners at which awards are decided. Reports **must** be received within the relevant academic year. The University has a specimen format for the submission of reports, which you must use, available at: **https://www5.open.ac.uk/validation-partnerships/supporting-information/external-examiners**.
- To advise on any proposed changes to the validated programme, particularly where these affect the assessment requirements. Where there is good cause for it, the partner is allowed to change an assessment format, or the weighting of assessment elements, but this must be on the recommendation or with the support of the External Examiner. Proposed changes are subject to a formal approval process by OUVP. Once approved, the External Examiner should receive the amended module specifications and/or programme specification. External Examiners may also be consulted by the programme team on content or proposed changes to the programme structure.

The OU reserves the right to terminate the appointment of an External Examiner who fails to fulfil their obligations, e.g. where they fail to produce reports in a timely manner or to an appropriate standard or fail to attend an exam board without justifiable reason.

External Examiner Attendance at the Board of Examiners

All External Examiners are required to attend relevant board of examiners meetings including any resit boards, and it must not be assumed that a board can be held without the presence of the External Examiner. Where unforeseen circumstances prevent attendance and an External Examiner is the sole examiner, the partner and the University should be informed so that a decision can be made regarding the postponement of the board. Where an External Examiner is a member of a pair or team of examiners, he/she should also inform fellow examiners of his/her absence.

In the event of non-attendance, External Examiners must indicate this in their written report at paragraph 9, 'The administration of the assessments, operation of examination boards…' and confirm that they were fully involved in the moderation of assessment and the external examining process. The written report should be submitted in advance of the meeting of the board of examiners so that the External Examiner's comments can be formally considered and recorded.

Non-attendance by an External Examiner without good cause would usually constitute grounds for the termination of appointment.



What Can External Examiners Expect from the Role?

External Examiners are appointed as independent scrutineers and should have full insight into all aspects of the assessment process. This includes:

- Being briefed on all aspects of their role, programme regulations, learning outcomes, assessment criteria and marking schemes.
- Having access to all assessed work.
- Moderating the marks of internal Examiners, provided it does not lead to any bias or cause unfairness to any student.
- Conducting 'viva voce' examinations of any students where necessary.
- Reporting any aspect of the assessment process to the partner and/or the OU.
- Offering impartial and independent advice as well as informative comments on standards and student achievements.

- Sharing constructive feedback and recommendations on good practice and innovation relating to learning, teaching, and assessment.
- Providing informative comment and advice on ways to enhance the quality of the learning opportunities provided to students.

What Are Unreasonable Expectations?

External Examiners should **NOT** be expected to do any of the following:

- Have any direct involvement in Assessment; External Examiners are NOT second markers.
- Arbitrate where the assessment process has failed to come to a decision; academic assessment should be made well in advance of the board of examiners meeting. The role of the board is to ratify grades and to assure itself that the right processes have been followed.
- Change marks for individual students, unless this is a one-off mistake in adding up points that were not spotted during the internal moderation process. In such exceptional cases, questions should be asked as to why this mistake was not spotted before and whether the whole cohort's work needs to be re-checked.
- External Examiners can suggest that the marking is consistently too high or too low and that therefore some adjustment of marks across the cohort is appropriate, but it is up to the board to decide whether that should happen, i.e. if the board has assured itself 'that the right processes have been followed', then the External Examiner cannot override the marks.

- Respond to routine deference to the External Examiner's judgement. You are a member of the board of examiners and the Chair to the board should guide the board's business.

External Examiners are not expected to participate in or be present for partners' internal moderation activities, but the process should be transparent and clearly set out through the evidence that is made available to them.

Board of Examiners

For every programme of studies approved as leading to a validated award of the OU, there must be a board of examiners whose constitution (including a note of those members constituting a quorum) and terms of reference accord with the approved regulations for the programme and which includes External Examiners approved under the OU regulations for validated programmes.

The board of examiners is appointed by the academic board (or equivalent) of the partner to which it is responsible for the fulfilment of its terms of reference. The academic board or equivalent body is required to agree the membership of the board of examiners annually at the start of the academic year. The following essential characteristics are common to all boards of examiners:

- All programmes leading to an OU validated award must have a board of examiners.
- No other body has the authority to recommend the conferment of an award.
- External Examiners must attend.
- The OU can cancel a board meeting if any of the External Examiners approved for that programme is absent.
- An OU member of staff must be present at each board of examiners meeting, where award and/or progression decisions are made.
- The composition should remain the same for each meeting, although membership may change.
- All tutors responsible for teaching or assessment would normally be expected to attend.

- The academic board or equivalent body at the partner shall appoint a person to chair the board of examiners.
- The Chair should be independent and not involved in the delivery of the programme or the assessment of the students in that programme or curriculum area.

Meeting dates should be agreed with External Examiners at the earliest opportunity – usually at an annual meeting – for the coming year and not changed after that, except by agreement of all parties involved.

The constitution of the board of examiners may include provision for the appointment of subsidiary boards of examiners and the same board may be responsible for more than one programme of study. This will often be appropriate in modular or combined studies programmes where cognate groups of units or subjects may be assessed as discrete entities and/or as elements of more than one named award.

What Information Will Be Provided Before the Board of Examiners Meetings?

You should have received all the relevant information and documentation by the time you attend your first board meeting. Please note, the terms of reference and composition of the board of examiners are provided by the partner following OU approval.

What Documentation is Required at a Board of Examiners Meeting?

The OU requires that partners have a system in place to accurately record and verify marks. The partner is responsible for providing all the board documentation. Typically, this will include:

- **An agenda** that is circulated to all board members in advance of the meeting and includes a reminder to members of the need to maintain appropriate confidentiality.
- **Minutes of previous meeting(s)**
    - these are confidential, and members should be reminded to take appropriate care in their use and storage of them.
- **Mark sheets** that contain all assessment components completed by students, together with information about pass marks for each component.
- **Statistical analyses of marks** sufficient to allow the identification of any trends in student performance or marking practice which warrant the board's attention.
- **If applicable, quantitative data on progression and completion** detailed on The Open University template, 'Exam Board Data', for each programme being examined:
    - For each stage of the programme, the total number of students being considered at the exam board.
    - The number of students awarded a degree.
    - The number of students awarded a degree at each classification (as appropriate).
    - If any aegrotat awards have been made these should be included in the totals and details of the award appended separately.

- **The regulations for the programme** as approved by the University.
- **The University's regulations** on issues such as the treatment of borderline cases, rounding of results, extenuating circumstances, and academic misconduct.
- **Reports from any subsidiary boards,** including any reports on extenuating circumstances or student misconduct.

What is the Role of the Board of Examiners in Relation to Appeals and Complaints?

It is imperative that the boards are conducted in accordance with their terms of reference and that all decisions are recorded clearly and accurately.

While students do not have a right to appeal against academic judgement, they can appeal on the grounds that the judgement may not have been reached in a fair manner. It is essential that final decisions are clearly documented in board minutes, so that the partner can deal with any student complaint or appeal in a timely and transparent manner. Where students have exhausted the partner's process and are not satisfied with the outcome/s, they can escalate their complaint/appeal to the OU.

Conflicts of Interest

In line with QAA guidance, and the OUVP Handbook for Validated Awards, the following points are classed as a conflict of interest. If the External Examiner:

- is a member of a governing body or committee of The Open University or one of its collaborative partners, or a current employee of The Open University or its collaborative partners
- is a member of a governing body or committee of the partner or one of its collaborative partners, or a current employee of the partner institution or its collaborative partners
- has a close professional, contractual or personal relationship with a member of staff or student involved with the programme of study
- is required to assess colleagues who are recruited as students to the programme of study
- is, or knows they will be, in a position to influence significantly the future of students on the programme of study
- is currently, or has recently been, involved in substantive collaborative research activities with a member of staff closely involved in the delivery, management or assessment of the programme or module(s) in question
- is a former member of staff or student of The Open University unless a period of five years has elapsed, and all students taught by or with the External Examiner have completed their programme(s)

- is a former member of staff or student of The Open University unless a period of five years has elapsed, and all students taught by or with the External Examiner have completed their programme(s)
- is a former member of staff or student of the partner unless a period of five years has elapsed, and all students taught by or with the External Examiner have completed their programme(s)
- would replace an External Examiner from the same department in the same institution
- is required to assess colleagues who are recruited to the programme of study
- is from the same department of the same institution as another member of that team of External Examiners
- is a consultant to the Module/ Programme team, or if they contributed to writing the teaching materials. (In exceptional circumstances, the University may approve the appointment of a person who contributed to the module/programme as External Examiner, provided that this is not when the module is first presented, and that there is no other eligible person available to serve)
- has had further engagement with the partner beyond their External Examiner responsibilities (unless approved by The Open University).



Get In Touch

For More Information About The Open University and Open University Validation

The validation website includes the list of all the OU partner institutions, more information about approval and validation, the OU Handbook for Validated Awards and our appeals and complaints procedures.

- Visit **open.ac.uk/validation-partnerships/**
- Email **ouvp-info@open.ac.uk**
- Twitter **@OpenUniversity**

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