

The motivations and professional development needs of aspiring and serving external examiners in the GEES disciplines

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose

The purpose of this research was to conduct small-scale scoping survey of serving and aspiring external examiners in the GEES disciplines with a view to identifying:

- motivations for becoming an external examiner;
- methods through which external examiners are currently identified and recruited;
- current sources of professional development for external examiners;
- barriers experienced by those aspiring to become external examiners;
- opportunities for LTSN-GEES to support aspiring and existing external examiners;
- research priorities related to the role of external examiners in the GEES discipline.

2. Methodology

The survey was administered through two self-completion questionnaires, one targeted at serving external examiners, the other targeted at aspiring external examiners. Respondents were encouraged to complete and return the questionnaires electronically, therefore the questionnaires were placed as downloadable documents on the LTSN-GEES website. Invitations to participate in the survey were distributed by email to academics on appropriate contact lists held by LTSN-GEES. Contained within the email, was a weblink to the questionnaires. Respondents simply had to click on the link to open the survey page. The correct questionnaire could then be completed and returned by email. The survey was also publicised at a Committee of Heads of University Geosciences Departments meeting. Before the survey deadline was reached, a reminder email was sent to all previous recipients. The response period for the questionnaires was between 14th May and 1st June 2004. In order to encourage the completion and return of questionnaires, LTSN-GEES offered two £50 prizes – to be allocated randomly to one respondent of the aspiring externals survey and one respondent of the existing externals survey. All responses were transcribed and placed in a spreadsheet in order to facilitate analysis.

The precise response rate of this survey is difficult to determine, as the total number of individuals on the discussion lists to which the invitation to participate was sent is unknown. Furthermore, it was likely that numerous individuals received the invitation who were neither existing nor aspiring external examiners and so were not specifically targeted to participate in the survey.

2.1 Respondent profile

A total of 26 completed questionnaires were returned, of which 23 were from existing external examiners and 3 were from aspiring external examiners. The 'home'¹ institutions of serving external examiners responding to the survey were divided almost equally between pre- and post-1992 institutions (Table 1). All three aspiring external examiners were employed in post-1992 institutions. There were no respondents from Higher Education (HE) or Further Education (FE) Colleges.

¹ The 'home' institution is the institution in which the external examiner is substantively employed. For example, if an external examiner was employed at institution A and was an external examiner in institution B, the home institution would be institution A.

Table 1. Employing institutions of survey respondents

Home Institution	Existing EEs	Aspiring EEs
Pre-1992 University	11	0
Post-1992 University	12	3
HE College	0	0
FE College	0	0
Other	0	0
Total	23	3

Collectively, the profile of respondents showed variation in both academic and external examining experience. The most experienced respondent had 37 years academic experience, whilst the minimum was 3 years. The mean academic experience of respondents was 23 years. The minimum experience as an external examiner was 2 years, with a maximum of 30 years, while the mean external examining experience was 9 years. Aspiring external examiners had, on average, less experience in academia, with a mean of 8 years.

Twelve serving external examiners held multiple examinerships, as presented in Table 2. A total of 36 external examinerships were held between the 23 serving external examiners. A breakdown showing the home institution of external examiners and the institutional type in which their examinership is held is presented in Table 3. This shows that for the respondent group, post-1992 respondents had the majority of the examinerships, spread evenly between pre- and post-1992 institutions, with an additional 4 HE college and one FE college examinerships. In contrast, pre-1992 respondents exhibited a focus of their examinerships in pre-1992 institutions.

Table 2. Examinerships held according to institutional type

Home institution	Number of examinerships held			Total
	1	2	3	
Pre-1992 University	7	2	1	14
Post-1992 University	3	8	1	22
HE College	0	0	0	0
FE college	0	0	0	0
Total	10	10	2	

Table 3. Home and Examinership institution of respondents

Home Institution	Examinership Institution				Total
	Pre-1992 Uni	Post-1992 Uni	HE College	FE college	
Pre-1992 University	9	4	1	0	14
Post-1992 University	9	8	4	1	22
HE College	0	0	0	0	0
FE college	0	0	0	0	0
Total	18	12	5	1	36

3. SURVEY RESULTS

3.1 Motivations to become an external examiner

A summary of the motivations of serving external examiners is presented in Table 4. Several respondents gave a combination of motivating factors. The most commonly cited motivation was the opportunity to observe and learn about practice in other institutions, particularly

related to learning, teaching and assessment. Specific motivations included: “a wish to learn how other institutions examined and their courses”, to “gain insight into assessment procedures at other institutions”, and “to expand my horizons”.

Table 4. Motivations to become an external examiner

Motivations cited	Frequency
To learn from other institutions	12
Academic duty	9
Career development and CPD	5
Develop personal network	3
Monitor and compare standards	3
See new research (PhD)	2
	34

There was a strong sense of academic duty evident in the answers from 9 respondents, most of whom indicated that undertaking the external examiner role was the duty of academics, in order to maintain the academic system. This was summed up by one respondent who commented that they took the role due to a “sense of duty” but went on to say “the system would break down if people were unwilling to take their turns”. Similarly, another respondent commented, “that’s how the system works - without this activity we would all struggle”. Within this group of responses, it was evident that examiners considered themselves to be ‘taking a turn’ at external examining for the benefit of the system in general.

Career development and continuing professional development were also motivating factors for a small number of serving external examiners. These respondents considered that the post of external examiner contributed to career progression, and in one case to be an honour conferred by peers. For example, one respondent described their motivation as resulting from the “need to bulk up the CV for promotion”, whilst another commented that it was part of a process to “build a good CV”. In another case, a respondent felt that becoming an external examiner would benefit their work at their home institution. Interestingly, only 3 respondents considered their main motivation for taking the role as an external examiner to be the monitoring and maintenance of academic standards. The least cited motivation related specifically to PhD external examiners, whose key motivation was to discuss new research work, and that “at PhD level it is the expected reciprocity for one’s own students being examined”.

The payment for external examining was not identified as a motivating factor, with several respondents specifically making comments to this effect. For example, one respondent comment their acceptance of an external examiner offer “certainly wasn’t motivated by the fee”, while another commented that their motivation was “not the money!!”. Despite these comments, no respondent indicated that they had declined the offer of an external examinership on the basis of the fee offered.

3.2 Initial invitation to be an external examiner

The appointment of external examiners does not take place through open competition for an advertised post; instead, the process has a reputation as being somewhat informal. In order to investigate the experience of serving external examiners, respondents were asked to identify how they had initially been invited to become an external examiner. A summary of the results is presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Method of invitation to be an External Examiner

Method of invitation	Frequency
Through existing contact	17
Through research record	2
Unspecified	4
	23

Seventeen respondents (74%) were invited to become an external examiner either directly by a personal contact or through the recommendation of a personal contact. Contacts cited by respondents included former students, research and curriculum development collaborators, colleagues from previous institutions, through involvement as an external member of a validation panel, and through the recommendation of an outgoing external examiner. Two respondents were invited to act as an external examiner as a result of their research record. One was *“approached by someone who had read an article I published in JGHE. We were working with similar students in similar institutions”*. The other respondent in this category commented that for PhD examining, invitations were *“sometimes out of the blue, related to one’s research record”*.

3.3 Perceived role of the external examiner

Existing and aspiring external examiners were asked to rank, in their view, the relative importance of different aspects of the role of external examiners, with a rank of 1 being most important, 2 next most important, and so on. Table 6 presents a summary of the results. In the table, the mean indicates the average of the ranks awarded by respondents and the count indicates the number of respondents who ranked that item (from a possible maximum of 26).

Table 6. Relative importance of aspects of the role of external examiner

Rank	Aspect of role	Mean	Count
1	Ensuring standards	1.28	26
2	Safeguarding students’ interests	2.09	23
3	Exchange practice	2.81	22
4	Curriculum development	3.55	23

Table 6 clearly shows that the primary role of external examiners is perceived to be to ensure standards at the institution in which the examinership is held. This aspect of the role of external examiner has the lowest mean rank (1.28) and was cited by all 26 respondents (21 of whom awarded it a rank of 1). Safeguarding students’ interests was perceived to be the second most important aspect of the role of external examiners, although exhibited much less agreement amongst the sample. Several respondents commented that ensuring standards and safeguarding students’ interests were rather difficult to differentiate between and that in practice they were different expressions of the same issue. However, the significant gap between the means, suggest that ensuring standards is genuinely perceived to be most important.

Exchanging practice was perceived to be the third most important aspect of the role of the external examiner. Comments associated with this answer stressed that one of the key benefits of being an external examiner was the opportunity it provided for incumbents to learn and gain ideas to enhance their own teaching practice. One respondent considered the exchange of practice to be the most important aspect of the role of an external examiner. The lowest ranked aspect of the role was curriculum development. This perhaps reflects an apparent uncertainty about role of external examiners resulting from greater emphasis being placed on the views of external examiners about a broad range of course-related issues. This is highlighted by comments from one respondent: *“I don’t think that curriculum development should be part of external’s remit. [The] QAA code has been a bit ambiguous about this, giving externals responsibilities for structural issues that should have been determined at validation and confirmed at review”*.

In addition to the answers presented in Table 6, eight respondents identified ‘other’ issues as important aspects of the external examiner role. The issues identified showed little pattern, but included a role in enhancing practice, providing a voice for staff concerns, and helping departments through periods of change.

3.4 Induction to External Examiner role

Serving external examiners were asked to comment upon any training or induction they received upon their appointment as an external examiner. Since many respondents held several examinerships, some answers included several methods of induction, reflecting practice at different institutions. Table 7 provides a summary of the different methods cited.

Table 8. Induction received by external examiners upon appointment

Induction received	Frequency
None	13
Formal induction process or event	9
Staff development at 'home' institution	3
Documents provided	3
Observation of conduct of other externals	3
Informal discussion with course leader	2
National workshop (voluntary attendance)	1
	33

The nature and formality of the induction received by external examiners upon appointment was found to be very variable. The most frequent answer, given by 13 respondents (38%), indicated that they received no formal induction to the role of external examiner or the institution in which the examinership was held. In contrast, 9 respondents (27%) commented that they did receive formal induction from the 'new' institution. This was generally either in the form of a specific induction event for new external examiners, or an annual meeting of an institution's external examiners, which served both as an induction to recently appointed external examiners and ongoing training for existing externals. Opinions surrounding the usefulness of formal induction or training events varied. For example, one respondent commented that such events were "*absolutely invaluable*". However, another respondent was more sceptical, commenting that; "*I'm not sure that the training was particularly valuable. It is more important to visit the actual Department where the degree is based and to meet the staff (and if possible students) before and during the period as external examiner*". Another respondent highlighted a difference in practice experienced between pre- and post-1992 institutions, commenting that "*a Post-92 [institutions provided] induction and extensive and helpful contacts and training in their systems, [in a] Pre-92 institution, none – bit of 'old boys' approach*".

A source of induction received by 3 respondents was from their home institution. Whilst this was not discipline or examinership-specific, it did provide a valuable opportunity to discuss generic issues concerning the role of external examiners and the general policy context. Three respondents also identified learning from other externals as a key induction process. This is typified by the comment that "*the most important aspect of training is to watch the conduct of external examiners that one has known and to compare and contrast how effectively they have performed their task*". Other externals said that they relied upon the documents their 'new' institution provided as induction (such as course specifications and quality assurance procedures). One respondent reported having voluntarily attended a national meeting on external examining in order to seek some form of induction to their new role.

An underlying theme apparent amongst the responses, albeit not explicitly mentioned as primary sources of induction, was the prior experience of contact with external examiners, typically through having been a course leader or through holding a relevant role within their home institution (such as chair of a teaching quality committee). There was also a strong feeling evident that learning 'on the job' was typical once appointed as an external examiner. Indeed, for those examiners for whom no induction was provided, there was no choice in this matter.

3.5 Continuing professional development provided

Once the initial induction of serving external examiners had been completed, it was important to consider what continuing professional developmental opportunities are provided for respondents by the institution employing them as an external examiner. A summary of the results is presented in Table 8.

Table 8. On-going opportunities for personal development

Opportunity for personal development	Frequency
None	13
Annual meeting of external examiners at institution of examinership	4
Direct and indirect experience	3
Observation of conduct of other externals	2
External examiner staff development at 'home' institution	1
	23

A majority of respondents (57%) received no further support or opportunities for personal development in their role as an external examiner from the institution in which their examinership was held. Where no opportunities were available, few respondents provided any additional comment, but one respondent described their experience as *"nothing formal, but usually something happens informally in a particular visit that I have found useful"*. This suggests that although formal opportunities do not exist for most respondents, there may be other events that informally provide an aspect of development.

Formal developmental activities for external examiners provided by the employing institution were reported by 4 respondents. These either took the form specific staff develop workshops (1 case) or an annual meeting to discuss relevant issues with other external examiners, often in different subject areas (3 cases). Such meetings were considered positively. For example, one respondent considered that they were invaluable *"since practice changes nearly every year"*; another attended an *"external examiners annual 'forum' for exchange of ideas, networking with staff & colleagues etc"*; whilst another described *"an annual meeting to which all its external examiners are invited, to discuss issues of common concern, and institutional aspirations That has provided an interesting opportunity for dialogue with a range of externals from other institutions to discuss common interests in Higher Education"*.

In contrast, another respondent considered that *"generic training courses for externals don't necessarily work because a lot of the beauty of externalling lies in the diversity of perfectly valid approaches in differing institutions and Departments"*. This highlighted a theme (noted by 3 respondents) that external examining is an idiosyncratic activity that can only be 'learned' through practice. For example, another respondent commented, *"the best personal development has come from gaining a wide experience of the actual practice of externalling and in seeing how different Departments work"*. Within this group, another respondent commented that experiences in other contexts also provided appropriate developmental opportunities relevant to external examining, citing developmental activities as a QAA Assessor directly contributing to the external examiner role. Two respondents considered observing and discussing issues with more experienced external examiners to be a form of personal development. Finally, one respondent identified that their home institution provided ongoing development opportunities for external examiners.

3.6 Continuing professional development needs

As presented in Table 10, a total of 10 serving external examiners considered that they did not require any further professional support for their role as an external examiner. This was largely due to the respondents in question having developed practice through learning 'on the job'. For example, one respondent commented that they would require *"none now as I have plenty of experience"*. However, several of these respondents did identify the need for support during the early stages of an appointment as an external examiner. One respondent commented that although they were uncertain of their present need for professional development, *"it would have been useful in early stages as a new external"*. In terms of the type of development required, another respondent commented, *"at this stage in my career –*

none. But if I was relatively inexperienced, and at an earlier stage, maybe a Learning & Teaching related course”.

Table 10. Continuing professional development required by external examiners

Support required	Frequency
None	10
Practice exchange	6
Policy, role and standards	4
Observation of existing externals	1
More formal induction	1
	22

The remaining 12 serving external examiners who answered this question each identified specific areas of professional development they would find useful. The most commonly cited need (6 respondents) was to have opportunities for “*exchange of practice aimed at enhancement*”. The format of such an event was described by a different respondent as a “*live forum / discussion group for peer examiners in the subject to share issues. Support regarding how to handle plagiarism cases. Support regarding vivas - nature, role and practice*”. A potential role for LTSN-GEES was specifically identified by one respondent as follows, “*in the realm of GEES, simply arranging training sessions within which prospective and experienced examiners can meet and exchange ideas would be excellent*”.

The second common area of development, identified by 4 serving externals, was in the area of policy, standards, and the role of external examiners. Specifically respondents required professional development regarding government and HEFCE policy towards external examiners. This suggests that some external examiners are aware that national policy towards external examiners changes over time, but do not receive specific training on the implications for them. An “*overall debate on standards and application of criteria*” was also identified as a developmental need. More specifically, one respondent required clarification on the role, power and authority of external examiners within a specific institution. Two further respondents stated that greater opportunities to simply observe more experienced externals would be welcome, as would more formal induction to the role.

3.7 Aspiring external examiners

3.7.1 Motivations to become an external examiner

The motivations of aspiring external examiners matched closely those of serving external examiners, with the exchange of practice, comparison and enhancement of standards, and personal career development all receiving at least one specific mention. However, there was no comment amongst the answers of aspiring external examiners regarding the contribution of the role to the overall operation of the academic system. Despite their interest in becoming an external examiner, all three aspirants indicated that they had not received any formal training or staff development from their home institution. One respondent commented that they had “*No training, but the tacit support of the university*”.

3.7.2 Barriers to appointment as an external examiner

Aspiring external examiners were asked to consider the barriers they faced to becoming appointed as an external examiner. Each respondent provided a different answer. One considered that “*there are few institutional barriers to becoming an external examiner, so the main barrier is probably just one of opportunity*”. Another felt that they were “*too young, too radical, too innovative, not connected in the hierarchical nepotism of auto-selection!*”; whilst another considered their personal “*time constraints*” and availability the key barrier. The first two answers relate to the notion evident in the responses of serving external examiners, that most receive an invitation to become an external examiner through existing contacts. The “*lack of opportunity*” cited by the first respondent could also be taken to mean lack of invitation. Certainly, there is no current mechanism for aspiring external examiners to advertise their availability, nor for aspiring external examiners to find out about suitable

vacancies outside their immediate network. The multiple examinerships held by some serving external examiners appear particularly incongruous in this light. The second respondent in particular, considered the current appointment system to be based on nepotism rather than merit, and implied that once suitably networked into the academic hierarchy, appointment as an external examiner is almost inevitable.

3.7.3 Professional development activities required upon appointment

In order to begin to explore the professional developmental needs of aspiring external examiners, respondents were asked to consider what immediate concerns they would have if appointed as an external examiner. The answers to this question again showed little pattern. One respondent indicated that they understood the process of external examining “as I have observed the practice for many years”, but commented that “in the absence of any formal training, I feel that I would have to seek guidance from my peers (i.e. informal training) to how some specific aspects of the role needed to be undertaken. Effectively asking for ‘hints and tips’ to help the process run most effectively”. The concern in this case is focused on how to undertake the role, rather than the substance of the role. The second respondent indicated that they would be concerned about each of the priorities they had identified as being important to the role of the external examiner: ensuring standards, safeguarding student interests, curriculum development, and exchanging practice. The final respondent commented that their immediate concern would be “my lack of understanding of the institutional procedures”.

3.7.4 Ongoing professional development activities required

The specific ongoing professional development activities each respondent would welcome reflected the concerns they expressed in the previous question. However, two respondents identified two similar developmental needs. These were: 1) that workshops are required to introduce institution-specific practices; and 2) that LTSN-GEES could provide opportunities to “link in with other external examiners to share experiences”. This response reflected comments made by serving external examiners. The final respondent was more sceptical of the role of professional development in this context, considering it to be “arguably pointless because appointments are made on the basis of nepotism rather than ability in teaching and learning”. This comment again reflects the view that networking rather than ability influences external examiner appointments.

4. CONCLUSION

The conclusions of this research report are somewhat tentative as they are based on a relatively small number of responses. For clarity, the conclusions are divided into specific sub-sections as presented below.

The role of external examiners in the GEES disciplines:

- There is an evident tendency amongst respondents to this survey for external examiners from pre-1992 universities to undertake the role of external examiner in pre-1992 universities. In contrast, external examiners from post-1992 universities undertake external examining at similar levels in both pre- and post-1992 universities.
- The main motivation to take a post as an external examiner is to learn from practice elsewhere, however, exchange of practice and curriculum development were identified as the least important aspects of the role of the external examiner in the minds of both aspiring and serving external examiners.
- The primary role of an external examiner is perceived to be ensuring standards, yet this was the least common reason for undertaking the role.

- Serving external examiners considered it their duty to undertake the role to assist function of the overall academic system in the UK. However, in doing so, they obtained specific personal benefits, including learning from practice elsewhere, network building, career development, and exposure to new research.

Appointment of external examiners in the GEES disciplines:

- External examiners are identified and appointed based on their standing within academic networks. As a result, informal invitations are made to the potential candidate to take the post.
- Aspiring external examiners highlighted that not being aware of external examinership opportunities was a significant barrier to their appointment. There was also some concern that the informal process of appointment served to disadvantage suitable candidates and favour those well established in the academic hierarchy.

Professional development in the GEES disciplines:

- Experienced external examiners would have welcomed training and induction at the start of their examinership.
- Annual meetings for external examiners, held by employing institutions, appear to be useful for both induction and continuing professional development of external examiners. They also provide a useful institution-specific opportunity to meet and discuss issues with other external examiners. However, it was also evident that not all external examiners in this survey have had such events offered to them.
- Observing and discussing issues with more experienced external examiners was considered to be a valuable form of professional development by both serving and aspiring external examiners.

4.1 Recommendations for LTSN-GEES

There are two main recommendations arising from this research for LTSN-GEES.

- First, is related to the provision of opportunities for aspiring and serving external examiners to meet on a subject-specific basis to discuss concerns and to support and the enhancement of their role. Specific recommended events are as follows, however, there is scope for delivery at a single event:
 - i. To provide opportunities for aspiring external examiners to discuss the role, expectations, and policy context of external examining.
 - ii. To provide opportunities for aspiring and serving external examiners to network and discuss current issues related to external examining, particularly enhancement opportunities.
 - iii. To provide opportunities for newly appointed external examiners to network and discuss current issues related to external examining with experienced external examiners (similar to the new lecturers workshops) in order to identify and share good practice. This could be presented as a 'Being an effective external examiner' workshop.
- Second, is for LTSN-GEES to maintain and promote a database of aspiring external examiners and to offer a communication service to institutions seeking external examiners.

4.2 Recommendations for further research

- Given the low response rate from aspiring external examiners, further research is required to investigate the barriers to appointment and the potential mechanisms to overcome those barriers. A revised methodology might be to undertake a series of personal interviews with appropriate individuals identified through a widely distributed questionnaire, either directly mailed to departments or through an insert or advertisement in Planet.
- Investigate the experience of course teams' engagement with external examiners in order to identify strategies to support and enhance their relationship. This would allow the role of external examiner to be considered holistically and within the context of institutional and course frameworks.
- To determine from Heads of Departments (and/or course leaders) the appointment method of external examiners. Specific areas of investigation would include: the characteristics they look for in external examiners, how they would go about identifying potential external examiners, how they invite the potential external examiner, whether or not they would be willing to have an external examiner without previous experience, and whether they would be willing to openly advertise their external examiner vacancies.