

QAA Review of External Examining Arrangements in the UK

The Royal Academy of Engineering submission

The following comments are offered;

- 1 Aspects of the style and content of the document suggest that it has not been written from the perspective of much of the reality of the current situation within University Departments. Membership of the Review Group and the Expert Group suggest that this may well be a consequence of the lack of involvement of those with direct day to day experience of the workings of University Academic Departments in its preparation. One obvious example to support this is the stated view of External Examining and Academic Promotions. Within Engineering, only in exceptional circumstances e.g. a much specialised MSc Course with a particularly small academic community, will an External Examiner expect to be other than a Professor. Therefore those likely to be undertaking the task would have no opportunity for promotion within the current UK system.
- 2 Opportunities to forge stronger links between the overlapping roles of External Examining, Professional Accreditation and Institution Review have not been sufficiently emphasised. Whilst there are some differences in objectives and methodologies, the processes themselves, the burdens on key individuals and the demands on Academic Departments could be significantly reduced by a sensitive consideration of how each could take benefit from the existence of the others.
- 3 Considerations of compatibility of standards are couched in terms of the anodyne subject benchmark standards. Accepting that legitimate differences will exist in organisations spanning the ability range of the current UK University system, recognition that the Standards aimed for should relate to the particular features of the Department/course involved should feature in the brief for an External Examiner.
- 4 A major shortcoming of the present arrangements is the mismatch between the requirements of the role and the fee provided. Whilst it is not suggested that External Examiners take on a position for the financial rewards, by allocating sums far below those needed to provide adequate recompense for the amount of time required to properly conduct all the tasks normally listed in the appointment, the impression is often given that the job can actually be conducted in far less than the actual time required. Most Academics recognise that External Examining is part of their contribution to the overall wellbeing of the system so accept posts despite the financial aspects – but just as any underpriced professional service calls into question the ability of those offering it to do the job adequately, so the low fee levels create the wrong impression. Some recognition of the obligation on individuals/institutions to the functioning of the exam system and recognition that host institutions are effectively covering part of the academic's time might assist in correcting this; alternatively, pay the rate for the job and treat it as extra work.