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Our Ref AR/AC/

21 May 1985

From the Academic Registrar

Dear Chairman,

CVCP CODE OF PRACTICE ON THE EXTERNAL EXAMINER SYSTEM

As you will be aware the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals in April 1984 issued a Code of Practice regarding the External Examiner System for first degree and taught master's courses which had been prepared by the Working Group under the Chairmanship of Professor Reynolds set up to study universities' methods and procedures for maintaining and monitoring academic quality and standards. The Code raised many important issues for universities which included in particular recommendations with regard to the reporting by External Examiners on aspects of the examination and making observations on teaching, course structure and course content. In the light of this recommendation, it has been necessary at a federal level to examine carefully how such reporting should be incorporated into existing practice. The Academic Council has given detailed consideration to this and to whether there are other areas identified in the Code which are at variance with existing University practice.

Having considered the detailed provisions of the Code and its possible application within the University in the light of advice from the Academic Council Faculty Standing Sub-Committees, an initial response has been made to the CVCP that there is general support for the Code of Practice within the University, that in general terms its provisions are in line with current University practice, and that there is a willingness to consider sympathetically revisions in current practice in those areas where it is not in line with the Code.

The Council now wishes to proceed to consider in detail necessary changes to the Instructions for Appointment of Examiners and Conduct of Examinations and has asked me to ascertain whether the requirements of the subjects with which your body or School is concerned would experience any difficulties in complying with the code. The faculty of Medicine already has well established procedures embodied in the Special Instructions for undergraduate degrees in the faculty of Medicine which reflect the University's responsibilities to the licensing bodies to ensure that holders of registrable qualifications are fit to practise. In areas where changes are necessary in the light of the Code the Faculty Standing Sub-Committee has proposed measures which the Academic Council has endorsed for implementation. The Faculty Officer for Medicine is consulting relevant University bodies direct on these matters. This letter therefore does not relate to examinations for undergraduate degrees in the faculty of Medicine.

With regard to the remaining faculties and in particular to the procedure for the consideration of the reports of External Examiners, the Academic Council recognises that a common procedure will not be appropriate for implementation across all subject areas. In order to take its consideration of this matter further forward, however, the Council wishes to invite the assistance of the Boards of Studies, Schools and the Committee for External Students in establishing suitable procedures for the areas with which they are concerned. As background to this exercise, the Faculty Standing Sub-Committees have given thought to possible patterns for reporting mechanisms in the light of their knowledge of how examinations are conducted in the faculties with which they are concerned. It is envisaged that it will be possible to design Report forms which could be easily and quickly completed by Visiting Examiners but which would provide space for the Examiner to write more fully on any aspect that he wished to bring to the attention of the University.

The Faculty Standing Sub-Committee in Science and Engineering considers that the distillation of reports will involve the Chairman of the Panel of Visiting Examiners. This seems appropriate bearing in mind the large numbers of College Boards of Examiners involved in degrees in these faculties and the Course Unit structure which is normal for such degrees. The Faculty Standing Sub-Committee in Theology, Arts and Music on the other hand sees the routine involvement of the Faculty Standing Sub-Committee and of Boards of Studies to be appropriate because of the nature of degrees in their areas. The Faculty Standing Sub-Committee in Laws, Economics and Education has found itself unable to reach a conclusion at this stage because of the range of degrees and degree structures involved, and wishes to obtain the advice of Boards of Studies, Schools and the Committee for External Students before reaching even tentative conclusions. A special note on this from the Chairman of the Faculty Standing Sub-Committee to relevant Boards of Studies is enclosed with this letter.

The Academic Council has asked that in writing to Boards of Studies, Schools and the Committee for External Students clarification is provided on two specific provisions of the Code with regard to their interpretation in the context of the federal University. The first of these arises in Paragraph 3 of the Code, which requires that no university degree should be awarded without participation in the examining process by at least one Examiner external to the University Institution who should be a full member of the relevant Board of Examiners and subsequent paragraphs define the duties of "External Examiners." In the London context, the term "External Examiner" should be read as "Visiting Examiner" ie an external examiner, (who is from outside the University) or an Intercollegiate Examiner who is a member of staff of a School, students from which are not being examined. Consideration of the CVCP Code has, however, caused the Council to discuss whether it should be a formal requirement that an examiner external to the University be a member of every Board or Committee of Examiners. It would welcome your views on this particular point so that these can be taken into account in its further discussions which would of course include the financial implications of a change in policy.

Secondly, Paragraph 5 (b) of the Code recommends that no individual should simultaneously hold more than two external examinerships at first

degree level, in order to have sufficient time for the proper performance of his functions. In the London context the appointment of the Visiting Examiner to the College Board of Examiners at several Schools in any one year has been encouraged as an important means of ensuring parity of standard across the University. The Council considers that this practice can be continued while complying with the Code if, for this purpose, the Visiting Examiners are regarded as Visiting Examiners for the University of London rather than for a particular School.

In addition the Council wished to draw attention to the following points:

- (i) Although the role of the Visiting Examiner was envisaged in the Code as that of moderator, the Code did not forbid their use as second markers nor prevent them fulfilling other duties
- (iii) It was recognised that there would be instances when a Visiting Examiner did not attend a meeting of a Board of Examiners. The University should, however, make clear that Visiting Examiners are expected to attend Boards of Examiners and should ensure that they were invited to attend the final meeting of the Board of Examiners and informed of the date of that meeting well in advance. If this was done the University could be considered to have complied with the Code insofar as it was within its competence to do so.
- (iv) It was understood that there was no intention in the Code to give the External Examiner the power of veto. Since the Master's degree Regulations and Instructions to Examiners were revised in 1978 Visiting Examiners have been asked to sign a statement to the effect that the examination was conducted in accordance with the general and course regulations and that the standard of the examination was appropriate for a one year full-time course of study beyond the Bachelor's degree level. It was envisaged that Visiting Examiners for the First Degrees would be asked to sign a statement on the same lines.

In the light of the advice it receives in response to this letter, the Academic Council will consider the changes which need to be made to the Instructions for the Appointment of Examiners and the Conduct of Examinations for First Degrees, Diplomas and Master's Degrees in order to reflect the requirements of the CVCP Code of Practice. I should be most grateful for your response as soon as possible but no later than mid November 1985.

Yours sincerely

G F Roberts (Mrs)
Academic Registrar

To: Registrars of Schools, Courtauld
Institute, Institutes of Archaeology
and Education and SSEES

Committee for External Students

Chairmen of Boards of Studies, Special
Advisory Committees and Academic
Advisory Boards
cc Secretaries

COMMITTEE OF VICE-CHANCELLORS AND PRINCIPALS

THE EXTERNAL EXAMINER
SYSTEM for FIRST DEGREE and
TAUGHT MASTER'S COURSES

April 1984

The Vice-Chancellors' Committee agreed in September 1983 to set up a group to study universities' methods and procedures for maintaining and monitoring academic quality and standards in the context of the letter from the Secretary of State to the Chairman of the UGC. The remit of the group includes teaching and research at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Membership of the group is set out below.

The Committee believes that the wide international recognition accorded to British university degrees is evidence of their quality and standards. It is however desirable that universities should from time to time review their practices and procedures in order to ensure that the procedures continue to be appropriate and effective in changing circumstances. Universities of course also recognise that the community as a whole has a legitimate interest in the maintenance of proper standards. Nonetheless the universities must themselves undertake the scrutiny, not only because this duty is inherent in their Charters and Statutes from which their status as autonomous bodies derives, but because the task of monitoring must be so conducted as to stimulate and not to inhibit development and innovation. It is difficult for this task to be performed in this way by any except university teachers, themselves engaged in research, who are in touch with the movement and advance of knowledge in their fields.

The following code of practice on the external examiner system for first degree and taught master's courses in universities has been prepared as the first stage of the work of the group established by the Vice-Chancellors' Committee. The external examiner system was selected for study in the first stage of the group's work because of the critical role played by the system in ensuring that degrees awarded in similar subjects are comparable in standard in different universities and that the assessment and classification of students operates fairly. The code put forward by the group and endorsed by the Committee is based on and exemplifies widely-followed good practice.

It is neither possible nor desirable to establish a uniform system across all institutions and applicable to all subjects. Some of the points given in the code will not be applicable to some universities or to some subjects. But exceptions and reservations have deliberately been omitted in the interests of a clear statement of widely applicable guidelines. The paper is issued by the Committee for consideration within universities, by those responsible for and those concerned with external examining, as a contribution to institutions' own review of the methods and procedures appropriate to their own purposes and circumstances.

The Committee would welcome any comments universities may wish to make on the code of practice.

Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals
29 Tavistock Square
London WC1H 9EZ

April 1984

MEMBERSHIP OF THE GROUP

Professor P A Reynolds, Vice-Chancellor, University of Lancaster (chairman)
Professor R J Blin-Stoyle, FRS, Department of Theoretical Physics, University of Sussex
Mr H H Burchnall, Registrar, University of Liverpool
Professor D C Freshwater, Department of Chemical Engineering, University of Technology, Loughborough
Dr J H Horlock, FRS, Vice-Chancellor, Open University
Dr D J E Ingram, Vice-Chancellor, University of Kent
Sir James Lighthill, FRS, Provost, University College London
Professor G P McNicol, Principal, University of Aberdeen
Professor R Quirk, FBA, Vice-Chancellor, University of London
Professor W V H Rogers, Department of Law, University of Leeds
Professor G D Sims, Vice-Chancellor, University of Sheffield
Mr K V Thomas, FBA, Reader in Modern History, St John's College, University of Oxford

CODE OF PRACTICE

PURPOSES AND FUNCTIONS

1. The purposes of the external examiner system are to ensure, first and most important, that degrees awarded in similar subjects are comparable in standard in all universities in the United Kingdom, though their content does of course vary; and secondly that the assessment system is fair and is fairly operated in the classification of students.
2. In order to achieve these purposes external examiners need to be able:
 - (a) to participate in assessment processes for the award of degrees;
 - (b) to arbitrate or adjudicate on problem cases;
 - (c) to comment and give advice on course content, balance and structure, on degree schemes, and on assessment processes.

FORMAL REQUIREMENTS

3. No university degree should be awarded without participation in the examining process by at least one examiner external to the university institution who should be a full member of the relevant board of examiners.
4. Each external examiner on appointment should be sent a written statement about the place of the relevant degree examination in the university's system of education in that subject, and on the organisation and phasing of the relevant curriculum, together with information about the role and functions of external examiners as seen by the university and by the particular faculty and department.

SELECTION, APPOINTMENT AND PERIOD OF SERVICE

5. Departments are natural sources of recommendations for the appointment of particular persons as external examiners but scrutiny by the appointing body should have regard to the following:
 - (a) only persons of sufficient seniority and experience to be able to command authority should be appointed, normally but not exclusively at professorial level;
 - (b) in order to have sufficient time for the proper performance of functions, no individual should simultaneously hold more than two external examinerships at first degree level;
 - (c) an external examiner should not be appointed from a department in a university where a member of the inviting university department is serving as an examiner;
 - (d) former members of staff should not be invited to become external examiners before a lapse of at least three years or sufficient time for students taught by that member of staff to have passed through the system, whichever is the longer.
6. The number of external examiners for any particular course should be sufficient to cover the range of studies in the degree programme. More than one external examiner may be needed where there is a large number of students or where the degree programme covers a wide range.
7. There should be a formal limit to the period of service. This might be three or four years, sometimes with the possibility of limited extension.
8. External examiners from outside the university system, for example from industry, are appropriate in certain circumstances.

PARTICIPATION IN ASSESSMENT PROCEDURES

9. An external examiner as a full member of the relevant board of examiners should be present at all examiners' meetings at which significant decisions are taken in regard to the specialisms with which he has been concerned (including where possible the setting of papers), and he should have the right to be present at all examiners' meetings in the subject(s) in which he has been involved.
10. All draft degree examination papers should be sent to an external examiner for approval. In some cases external examiners may set some questions or complete papers. In some subjects it may be essential for model answers to be prepared and scrutinised.
11. An external examiner has the right to see all degree examination scripts. In those cases where it is agreed that the inviting department should make a selection of scripts to be sent to an external examiner, the principles for such selection should be agreed in advance.
12. Where a selection is made, external examiners should normally be sent all scripts of borderline candidates. They may also wish to see all scripts assessed internally as first class or as failures. Many examiners wish to see scripts from the top, the middle and the bottom of the range. The guiding principle is that external examiners should have enough evidence to determine that internal marking and classifications are of an appropriate standard and are consistent.
13. Where a *viva voce* examination is held for a proportion, but only a proportion, of the candidates, the principles for the selection of candidates should be agreed with an external examiner. Such an examination should normally be conducted by an external examiner who may be assisted by one or more internal examiners.
14. An external examiner should have the right of access to any work that contributes to the assessment and the degree classification.
15. The views of an external examiner must be particularly influential in the case of disagreement on the mark to be awarded for a particular unit of assessment, or on the final classification to be derived from the array of marks of a particular candidate at the examiners' meeting. The signature of an external examiner must be appended to the final list of degree results as evidence that he accepts the classification.
16. External examiners should be encouraged to comment on the assessment process and the schemes for marking and classification. In some subjects participation in the devising of such schemes is essential. External examiners may often be able to give valuable advice to internal examiners, especially the inexperienced, either direct or through the head of department.

DISCUSSION OF COURSE STRUCTURE AND DEGREE SCHEMES

17. Departments should use the opportunity afforded by the visits of external examiners to discuss with them the structure of the course and the curriculum, and the assessment procedures. Any comments or suggestions made by the external examiners should be discussed by the department and an explicit decision made about whether or not to introduce changes.

REPORTS

18. External examiners should be encouraged to make annual reports and should always provide a written report at the end of their period of office. They should be free to make any comments they wish, including observations on teaching, course structure and course content. Reports at the conclusion of a period of office might be copied to an incoming external examiner.
19. Reports should be sent to the Vice-Chancellor, whose responsibility it is to see that they are considered and action taken by the Senate or other appropriate body.