

Specialist Paper 3

Evidence Sources and Gathering Information: Guide for External Examiners and Centres

All visit reports should be based on sound justifiable evidence. The aim of this paper is to identify primary and secondary evidence sources and associated evidence available to an External Examiner during a visit. The evidence sources are structured around each of the seven Higher National reporting aspects. For each evidence source the associated bullet points are included to provide focused coverage both for the visit and subsequent report writing.

The paper is intended as an aide-memoire that can be used:

By the External Examiner:

- to plan areas/topics of coverage before a visit
- to guide evidence gathering during a visit
- to construct an action plan at the end of the visit
- for consultation during report writing.

By the Centre Course Team as an information/awareness guide of the:

- type and sources of evidence used by External Examiners
- way in which evidence sources are used in report writing.

The aide-memoire is not prescriptive. The intention is that, having developed a visit plan that may or may not include a resources tour, meeting with students, attendance at Assessment Board etc, the aide-memoire should assist an External Examiner to identify multiple evidence sources that would confirm good practice and/or identify weaknesses.

Please note that secondary sources of evidence are indicated in this report by the use of italic script.

Evidence sources for the seven reporting aspects

1 Academic standards and assessment

The main source of evidence here is sampling with particular emphasis on the nature and design of assignment briefs. Points to look out for include the following:

- are the assignment outcomes and related assessment criteria clearly stated?
- are the assessment tasks matched to the outcomes/assessment criteria and to the level?
- is there a variety of assessment tasks?

- do the tasks relate fully to the unit content?
- is there clear guidance to students on tasks, content/scope, and grading?
- are assessments appropriate to the student profile, level and mode of study?
- do assessments allow students to develop skills as opposed to rote learning/accumulation of facts?(ie do assessments promote learning?)
- are there formative as well as summative assessments?
- are there opportunities for students to take responsibility for their own learning and have some freedom of choice for completion?
- is there a unit assessment plan detailing coverage of all assessment criteria and grading opportunities?
- are there sufficient/excessive assessments for each unit?
- is the workload realistic and not excessive?
- is there equality of opportunity for all students, including those with particular requirements, to achieve the stated outcomes and associated grading criteria?

Secondary Sources of Information relating to Aspect 1

Meetings with students

- *student comments on the above bullet points*

Previous External Examiner Reports

- *have all comments, in the action plan, relating to this aspect been addressed?*

2 Academic Standards and Student Performance

Again, the main evidence source is sampling student work, but, this time, the emphasis is on student performance and achievement. Points to be aware of include the following: (in all cases you should ensure that the correct level is being achieved).

- are students achieving the stated outcomes/assessment criteria/grading criteria with adequate unit content coverage?
- in satisfying the above are students displaying knowledge and understanding, key (transferable) skills, higher level cognitive skills such as evaluation, analysis, literature searching etc. and subject specific skills including practical/professional skills?
- is there a range of achievement in terms of P, M and D grades?
- is there a variety of responses/topics/literature sources in student answers? If not do any similarities suggest evidence of excessive staff guidance or plagiarism?
- is there progression of higher-level skills/subject specific skills/employment skills between assessed work for year 1 and year 2 students?

Secondary Sources of Information relating to Aspect 2

Meeting with students

- *student comments on bullet points 1 and 5 above*

Overall unit results as presented to Assessment Board

- *is there a range of achievement in terms of P, M and D grades?*
- *is there an acceptable explanation for any units that do not have a reasonable spread of P, M and D grades?*

Physical resources

- *is there an overall strategy for provision of learning resources consistent with learning strategies and the student profile?*
- *is Library/Learning resource stock adequate and up to date? Are opening hours appropriate to the student profile and the learning regime?*
- *are computing facilities sufficient and is there adequate access? Is specialist software sufficient/readily accessible?*
- *are there open access learning/IT facilities?*

Previous External Examiner reports

- *have all comments, in the action plan, relating to this aspect been addressed?*

3 Assessment process

A variety of evidence sources need to be considered in order to address the 5 issues listed as bullet points under this aspect on the report form.

(i) Sampling student assessed work

- is there consistency of grading for a given assessor across a range of P, M and D grades within a unit?
- for a given assessor, are the contextualised grading criteria for each grade being applied correctly?
- is there written feedback indicating errors or omissions? Does the feedback indicate why a grade has been awarded and how grade improvement can be achieved? Is the feedback sufficient to enable students to correct errors and develop learning skills in future assignments?
- is there any indication that the grade for the student work has been verified by a second assessor or internal verifier? Has the second assessor included any written feedback/comments?

(ii) Sampling assignment briefs

- is there any evidence of internal quality assurance of assignment briefs including feedback to authors?
- are all assessment criteria associated with an outcome being assessed and is there sufficient coverage in terms of unit content?

- are the grading criteria appropriate in level/clarity?
- (iii) **Course documentation relating to assessment**
- is there a documented assessment strategy giving details of internal verification/internal quality assurance expectations? Is this being followed?
 - are there completed IV/internal quality assurance records? Do these show the names of IVs and students? Are there sufficient written feedback comments from the IV to the assessor?
 - Is there a formal procedure for reaching agreement where IVs and assessors disagree about a grade?
- (iv) **Meetings with students**
- student comments on feedback and clarity and use of contextualised grading criteria.
- (v) **Quality management documentation and/or meetings with staff.**
- are there systems for supporting new/inexperienced staff?
- (vi) **Previous External Examiner reports**
- have all comments, in the action plan, relating to this aspect been addressed?

4 Assessment meetings

If there is not a formal Assessment Meeting/Examination Board consult Specialist Paper 1 *Assessment Boards* and draw the attention of the Academic Manager to this paper and to the expectations of the *OAA Code of Practice Section 6*. Record this action in your report.

Attendance at an Assessment Meeting

This is the primary source for obtaining information regarding this aspect. Points to note include:

- are there Institutional documented regulations for the operation of Assessment Boards? Are they being followed?
- is there a suitable membership for the Board including Chair, Secretary/Minute Taker and adequate representation from teaching staff and franchised centres if applicable?
- is there an agenda for the Board and has this been circulated in advance?
- are all the results to be considered, including unit grading information and minutes of previous meetings, available to all members of the Board? Are they published in an acceptable/legible form?
- are all members of the Board, including the External Examiner, able to make contributions to any discussion of student achievement/grading?
- does the Board make decisions on reassessment and referral packages?
- are decisions relating to referrals/resits fair and realistic? Are there set deadlines for referrals/resits?

- are the decisions of the Board clearly summarised?
- is the overall decision making process fair and consistent? Is due consideration given to students with mitigating circumstances?
- is there an opportunity for the External Examiner to make comments on the process at the end of the meeting?

Secondary sources of information relating to Aspect 4

If attendance at Assessment Board is not possible the following should provide some detailed information on Board operation.

Documented procedures relating to Assessment Meetings

- *college/departmental documentation regarding the expected organisation and operation of the Board together with its composition.*

Minutes of previous Assessment Board Meetings

- *insight into the conduct of the meeting including Board structure and attendance, record keeping and decision-making.*

Discussions with staff

- *details of Board structure, attendance, advance notification of Board dates and the decision making processes.*

Previous External Examiners reports

- *have all comments, in the action plan, relating to this aspect been addressed?*

5 Physical Resources

The main evidence source here is a tour of the respective section of the College/Department. Points to consider include:

- is there an overall up to date strategy for provision of learning resources consistent with learning strategies and the student profile?
- do labs/studios etc. cover the full range of curriculum and teaching activities? Is the equipment modern and sufficient?
- is there adequate technical support?
- is Library/Learning Resource stock adequate and up to date? Are opening hours appropriate to the student profile and the learning regime?
- is there a Library induction course?
- are computing facilities sufficient and is there adequate access? Is specialist software sufficient/readily accessible?
- are rooms (for tutorials, teaching etc) adequately heated/ventilated/furnished?
- are there open access learning/IT facilities?

Secondary sources of information relating to Aspect 5

Meeting with students

- *use this to check your observations or obtain information relating to opening hours, availability and adequacy of resources of all types.*

Meetings with staff

- *use this to check your observations or obtain information relating to procedures for ordering, restocking, refurbishing resources of all types.*

Previous External Examiner reports

- *have all comments, in the action plan, relating to this aspect been addressed?*

6 Comments of Students

The major evidence source here is to meet with students and seek their opinions on matters relating to the 5 bullet points listed on the visit report. Specialist Paper 2, 'Meeting with Students' deals with this aspect in detail and suggests a range of questions that might be covered. Student comments offer an opportunity to corroborate opinions formed from observations on other aspects. Points to cover include:

- all areas relating to the assessment process including assessment quality, quantity, variety, outcome coverage, skills development, feedback quality and promptness, academic support and clarity of task descriptions and grading criteria.
- quality of teaching. Effective teaching should be systematic, stimulating and caring. It should provide opportunities for learning and be supported by good feedback. Types of teaching include lectures, workshops, seminars, case studies, practical work, problem solving, fieldwork and both literature and practical based products. No one method is better than another in isolation. Expect to find a variety of teaching methods and make judgments on teaching effectiveness in the context of achieving the intended outcomes in relation to the student profile.
- are physical resources appropriate in terms of type, quantity and currency in relation to supporting the teaching/learning regime?
- is there an effective tutorial system in operation covering both academic and pastoral care?
- are there effective methods for students to express their opinions regarding their learning experiences and are there concerns documented and acted upon?

Secondary sources of information relating to Aspect 6

Documented reports of student comments/opinions

- *many institutions have minuted meetings of staff/student liaison (or similar) committees where students can raise issues and concerns directly with academic staff. Alternatively, and in some cases additionally, colleges and/or departments offer students opportunities to express their opinions through questionnaires. These are valuable sources of student opinion. A check should be made to confirm that there is a procedure for ensuring that student issues are effectively dealt with and that there is feedback to students on any actions taken.*

Previous External Examiner reports

- *have all comments, in the action plan, relating to this aspect been addressed?*

7 Meetings with staff

This is a key part of the visit procedure and provides an opportunity to feedback observations to staff. In addition to highlighting areas of good practice this aspect represents an opportunity to cover the following:

- any corroborated problem areas relating to the previous 6 reporting aspects. Any staff comments/development plans relating to these should be included in the action plan section of your report.
- any concerns that could not be corroborated from another evidence source. Usually these would not be included in a written report unless staff confirmed them at this meeting.
- how are staff kept informed about developments in Edexcel HE programmes, including changes in assessment practices?
- is there an active (and documented) staff development policy that supports the programme? List current examples of its application.
- how often do programme staff meet as a team?
- what are the opportunities for students to undertake independent learning and how are these integrated into the programme?
- what are the concerns of staff relating to the current and future operation of the programmes?