



The Royal Academy  
of Engineering

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29 September 2010

Dear Mr Wade

**Re: Review of External Examining Arrangements in the UK**

The Royal Academy of Engineering welcomes the fact that UniversitiesUK, GuildHE and the QAA are reviewing arrangements for external examining across the breadth of higher education provision in the UK. There are nearly 300 departments of engineering in UK Higher Education and these span all of the mission groups. Therefore, the engineering profession is a significant stakeholder in the external examining process.

The Academy's Standing Committee for Education and Training, comprising Academy Fellows drawn from a range of universities and from industry, has reviewed the discussion document issued on the 22 July 2010 and offers a number of comments.

*Firstly, opportunities to forge stronger links between the overlapping roles of external examining, professional accreditation and internal institution review have not been sufficiently emphasised in the discussion document. Whilst there are some differences in objectives and methodologies, the processes themselves, the workloads 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. Any published response to the discussion document would be enhanced by a mapping of the intersections between these. The problem is not confined to engineering. All professions that accredit degree programmes will be able to make a contribution to the mapping. The Gateways to the Professions Collaborative Forum, hosted by BIS, might provide one vehicle for drawing professions together around this topic.*

*Secondly, considerations of compatibility of standards are couched solely in terms of the necessarily general subject benchmark standards. Accepting that legitimate differences will exist in organisations spanning the full set of mission groups in the UK Higher Education 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.*

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*Furthermore, aspects of the document did not chime fully with the experience of members of the Committee. One obvious example is the stated view on external examining and academic promotions. Within engineering, only in particular circumstances, for example a specialised MSc course with a particularly small academic community, will an external examiner expect to be other than a senior academic or a Professor. Therefore those most likely to be undertaking the task would have little opportunity for promotion within the current UK system. In addition, the Committee note that external examiners should be selected on the basis of their ability to do the work and not on the basis that they may benefit or learn something from the process.*

*Finally, the Committee wishes to emphasise that 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 be conducted in far less than the actual time required. Of course some recognition of the obligation on individuals and institutions to the functioning of the exam system is required but we cannot expect to attract the best people to do an important job without a realistic rate of pay.*

Yours sincerely



Matthew Harrison  
Director, Education  
Standing Committee for Education and Training Secretariat  
cc: Helen Bowles – Policy Adviser and Deputy CEO – GuildHE