



Kingston University

Special review of the circumstances surrounding the amendments to an external examiner's report

1 In July 2008, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) received a communication from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) raising a concern about an alleged irregularity in external examining at Kingston University. HEFCE forwarded a redacted version of a public interest disclosure that they had received on 8 July 2008. This included an allegation that, following examinations in summer 2004, pressure had been placed on an external examiner in the School of Music to alter the conclusions to her report. The disclosure also alleged that suggestions had been made within the School of Music that, in future, external examiners should be selected who would be '...more sympathetic to the challenges faced by the School in terms of widening participation issues and who would be more understanding of the type of students that enrol on the course'.

2 QAA investigated the matter within the terms of its published Causes for Concern procedure. A preliminary enquiry was conducted by a senior member of staff from QAA. The investigation included: a review of documentation submitted with the public interest disclosure; interviews at the University with the Vice-Chancellor, the Deputy Vice-Chancellor and the Academic Registrar; a telephone interview with the external examiner concerned; and a review of documentation provided by the University.

3 The preliminary enquiry confirmed that the external examiner had been asked to change a judgement in her report and that a revised version of the report had been submitted to the University. A summary of the revised report had subsequently been placed on the national Teaching Quality Information website (now Unistats). In addition, the external examiner had commented on a number of other matters in her report, including examples of over-generous marking and the need for more support for less experienced students. The enquiry also looked at the way these matters had been considered and dealt with by the University.

4 Following its preliminary enquiry, QAA considered that sufficient evidence had been forthcoming to permit an assessment of the circumstances of the case to be made without the need for a full inspection, and that there was therefore little justification for conducting such an inspection.

5 The case refers to one external examiner's report among the several hundred that are received and reviewed by the University each year. No other evidence has been forthcoming to suggest a more widespread problem. The QAA Institutional audit of the university in 2005 found that the external examiner system at Kingston was working effectively. Nevertheless, the case has raised some questions about the University's practices and procedures. To address these concerns QAA has recommended that:

- a public statement be made available on the QAA website to show that the alleged incident has been investigated and an appropriate course of action has been identified

- if it has not already done so, the University reviews the assessment procedures in the School of Music to assure itself that its current external examining arrangements are working effectively
- the issues identified by the external examiner, regarding the capabilities of students and the perceived over-generous award of marks for students' work, are discussed at the appropriate levels within the University to provide assurance that the standards of awards are not being compromised
- the University reviews and, if necessary, amends its academic regulations in respect of the required independence of external examiners
- the outcomes of the above recommendations and the more general effectiveness of external examining arrangements be subject to specific scrutiny by the audit team at the time of the next QAA Institutional audit in autumn 2010.

6 The University has responded to the preliminary enquiry report, informing QAA that the School of Music was restructured in 2004 and is now part of a larger School of Performance, located within a different faculty structure. The faculty has looked closely at the issues raised by this case and are confident that external examiner processes are now working effectively and in accordance with normal good practice. In addition, the University has introduced stronger oversight of external examiner arrangements by senior management and the central University quality and standards team. A procedure of early alerts at senior level, in respect of concerns raised by external examiners in their reports, has been introduced. The University will also consider the issue of over-generous marking at the appropriate university-level board in the context of feedback on this matter from all external examiners.

7 QAA believes that the University has taken all reasonable measures to address the concerns raised, but will review progress at the next scheduled Institutional audit, in 2010. The University remains in good standing with QAA.

QAA
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