

## GUIDELINES 2

### GUIDELINES FOR TOURISM INDUSTRY PRACTITIONERS NEWLY APPOINTED AS EXTERNAL EXAMINERS TO TOURISM COURSES AT DEGREE LEVEL

Alison Roberts

October 1995

You will, no doubt, have considerable practical experience as a professional working in tourism. The world of academe may, however, appear arcane with its own ethos, systems and terminology.

This paper should help you, as a newly appointed external examiner, understand the role you are expected to perform, and explains briefly the academic environment in which you will have to work.

This paper is published by the National Liaison Group for Higher Education in Tourism (NLG). The NLG aims to ensure quality standards in tourism education, and to bridge the gaps between tourism practitioners in the industry and academics. Its membership mirrors this aim, being a forum of academic institutions, commercial and statutory organisations operating throughout the tourism industry.

The NLG invited Alison Roberts FTS, an experienced external examiner and tourism academic of some twenty years' experience, to produce this document.

The paper is set out in sections:

- How academic institutions manage degree and postgraduate course provision
- The duties expected of you
- Your time commitment and remuneration
- Tools for the task
- Your duties over an academic year
- What you can ask for
- What no one tells you
- Problems to be aware of
- The importance of judgement

Most universities and colleges in higher education have been granted the right to award, or confer, their own degrees and postgraduate qualifications by the Privy Council. This right brings with it the need to set and maintain quality standards throughout the academic work in both teaching and assessment. There is also a duty to take cognisance of national standards, however they may be defined.

Each university or college has a senior forum responsible for academic policy and standards, usually called the **academic board** made up of senior managers, plus elected representatives from the academic staff and student population. The academic board may set up a devolved structure to ensure that academic and quality issues are implemented throughout the whole establishment. The first level down from the academic board could be an **academic standards committee** which looks after admission criteria, assessment policies, external examiners' duties and appointments as well as course regulations.

## Introduction

## How academic institutions manage degree and postgraduate course provision

Each university or college is divided into **faculties** or **departments** or **schools**, (these terms are broadly synonymous) each one having responsibility for a discrete academic study area or topic. The faculty will have set up a **board of studies** that reports to the academic standards committee. Finally, each course within a faculty will have a **course committee** reporting to the faculty board of studies, creating a link through the system from an individual course up to the academic board.

Tourism courses often have no clear faculty home; many are found with business disciplines, others with geography, some with leisure studies, yet others in hotel and catering or hospitality faculties.

Irrespective of which faculty manages them, the tourism course teams will have had to follow a series of procedures in order to secure approval from the academic board to offer tourism courses. Typically this will have involved preparing all the course plans – including the course rationale, its aims, its target student profile, the employment opportunities for graduates, the topics to be studied laid out as syllabuses, the assessment structures and the level of final award (such as degree with/without honours/postgraduate qualification) for submission to a committee of the faculty board. Having been approved at this stage the plan goes on to a panel of procedural and subject experts for **validation** – the term used for final approval of a course. Once approval has been granted to a department, school or faculty to offer a tourism course the course team will be given the responsibility for recruiting students; developing the **syllabus** into a **curriculum** and **scheme of work**; devising assessments that tests students' development and progress; and, for teaching the course.

Traditionally students are tested, or assessed, by examination, often at the end of an academic year, although the end of a **semester** (1) or **module** (2) would also be appropriate times. Examination formats can be the traditional two or three hours of working through previously unseen questions, that theoretically span the whole syllabus. Alternatively examiners may ask unseen questions based on a specific case study the students have prepared in advance. In some instances questions may be based on the open book system where reference documents can be taken into the examination room for students to refer to throughout the examination.

More frequently, courses also involve assessments other than examinations, preferring to monitor students' progress throughout the programme in less artificial environments than exam rooms. Thus, course work assessments are made of the submitted work (usually written, possibly oral) that students have prepared and presented to a set brief.

All these assessment systems may operate across one course. In which case the course documentation will specify the relative importance and weighting of each. These different assessment systems may each have their protagonists and detractors within the teaching team.

A vital part of the course approval involves the appointment of external examiners who are usually invited to serve for a three year period.

The formal process usually involves the institution making the appointment on the recommendation of the faculty board. It is more usual, however, that your name will have been proposed by one of the course team. Rarely, however, will you be the only external examiner appointed to a course; normally two serve together although there may be more. On occasions one of the examiners may be nominated as chief external examiner.

You will have been selected for one or more of the following reasons:

- your standing in the tourism industry
- being personally known to one of the course team
- being an experienced examiner
- your reputation for integrity and commitment to high professional standards

You may find that some institutions will stipulate that you should not hold more than two external appointments at any one time.

Courses can be structured in linear, modular or interdisciplinary ways. These terms refer to the way the syllabus is subdivided into subjects.

**1 Linear courses** are the most traditional, having a series of subjects that are studied from the start to the end of the year, with all students following the identical programme.

**2 Modular courses** have a greater degree of flexibility for the students, often allowing them considerable choice in the selection of subjects they study. Modular courses may have module or topic changes every term or semester within the year.

Traditionally, UK education has been based on a three term year with each term typically lasting ten weeks. However, there is a move in many establishments towards having two extended semesters per year.

The course programme is organised in a series of fairly discrete subjects or modules (2) (each of which may be offered by a university or college more than once during the academic year.) Students normally have a considerable degree of choice in the timing and subject of the modules they select during their degree programme. Many modular schemes have a proportion of compulsory units which all students must complete.

**3 Multidisciplinary courses** are a particular form of modular scheme offering yet more flexibility by allowing students to select some of their units, or modules of study across faculties. In a tourism degree students will have to follow a predetermined number of modules or units with a tourism orientation and then they may be allowed to select others up to the required number to be awarded a degree. The tourism units will typically make up less than half of the degree.

Although expressed differently by each institution, there are two commonly accepted duties required of external examiners to ensure that the assessment of student work is conducted fairly and at a standard consistent with the award being offered and with perceived needs of industry. Specifically these are:

## The duties expected of you

- to ensure that students are treated fairly and justly in accordance with the institution's written academic regulations
- to ensure that awards made are of a broadly comparable standard to those offered by other institutions throughout the UK in all subject areas, not just tourism alone

(There may be additional duties laid down by individual institutions, such as playing an active role in quality monitoring. You should ask for clarification if such duties are not adequately explained).

Carrying out these duties will involve you in attendance at examination boards (usually two per year, maximum), reading and commenting on draft examination papers and reading some or all of the candidates' work on some or all of the examinations and course work assessments. Additionally you may be required to meet the course teaching team and students for each year of the scheme. You will be expected to complete a **formal examiners report** each year, and for this many institutions provide a proforma for you to complete. This ensures you deal with a range of issues that the establishment includes in its internal quality control mechanisms, and makes it easier for them to monitor the health of the course.

## **Your time commitment and remuneration**

You should expect to have to allocate four or five days' work over a year. For degree schemes with large group sizes and/or four year programmes this would more likely be the minimum time to set aside.

In exchange most institutions will repay your travel expenses in full (it is wise to check if mileage is payable, and at what rate. Check too the class of travel they will agree to paying). Additionally, you can expect an annual honorarium. **Be aware it is not intended to represent commercial rates of pay, being rather a gesture of appreciation.**

## **Tools for the task**

On appointment you should receive a full set of the course documentation. This should include:

- **the course submission document**  
with the structure, syllabus and assessment structures laid out in detail. Here will appear statements about the relative value attached to course work versus examinations, and the value of end of term or semester exams or assessments versus final exams or assessments. Here too would appear the weighting or relative value given to different subjects, units or modules. Not all of these need be of equal weighting or importance. For example, a degree scheme may include an Information Technology (IT) module that is given a value of only 50% of a major tourism one. This relative value should be reflected in the teaching and learning time as well as the weighting in the overall assessment.
- **a set of academic regulations**  
listing the performance requirements of students in order to be awarded pass, refer or fail grades by subject module, by year and overall. The criteria for proceeding to the next year of the scheme and for awarding the class of degree should also be listed. Expect to see the criteria that will be used to award the class of degree at the final exam board. The class distinctions are for first class honours, then an upper second (also called a 2:1), a lower second (2:2) and a third class. Below a third class some institutions award what is called a pass degree. Students may of course fail. Here too will be the criteria for hearing and interpreting appeals which students may make if they feel they have been treated unfairly.
- **a copy of the prospectus and course publicity**  
(used to inform prospective students)
- **a description of the duties of the post of external examiner**
- **copies of previous examination papers and course work assessments**
- **CVs of the teaching team**

## **Your duties over an academic year**

In carrying out your duties you could expect to go through the following sequence over a 12 month period.

1. Immediately following appointment you will receive the documentation listed above and be expected to have read it all!
2. You may then be invited or you may ask to visit the establishment to meet senior faculty members, the course team and perhaps the students. This allows you to

get the feel of the job, test the academic rigour being applied, review the tutors' schemes of work that show their plans for working through their syllabus, review students' work, investigate students' reactions and offer constructive comment and advice.

You may be offered (you have the right to see) planned schemes of work, assessment schedules, and the assessment briefings that will be given to students. Ideally the tutors will have all their plans in hard copy and will have distributed these to their students. Course work assessments may have accompanying marking schemes that show both you and the students how they will be assessed and how marks will be awarded. In some institutions this information is provided in a handbook which is given out to students.

Course work can take a variety of formats. The range extends from dissertations and theses through projects (group and individual), to practical work and essays.

3. Next, expect to receive examination question papers at the draft stage. They may be accompanied by the tutor's intended marking scheme. If there is no marking scheme you should expect to be provided with an indication of the issues which the internal examiner expects to be included in the answers.

You are expected to approve these or require alterations. You should expect the questions to range over the full syllabus. Expect there to be variations in question type but not in relative ease and that they test students' analytic and conceptualising abilities rather more than factual knowledge. Look for patterns emerging over successive years as some tutors have favourite topics that they always test, making predictability too important a factor in success. If you do not understand what the questions expect, it is highly probable that students will have the same problem.

4. Expect to have to work through students' completed work. Different establishments have different ways of conducting this process. They will all share the same characteristics – you should see a representative sample at least of student work, by module/subject and by separate piece of work. The sample should normally contain work that has been graded at the margins of pass/fail/credit/distinction or degree class grades, and it should have clear indications of how the tutor arrived at the mark awarded. In addition, you should see any work that is the subject of disagreement between internal markers. You have the right to ask to see any piece of work, rather than accept work, that was preselected for you. You would not normally expect to work through all students' work, although if you were concerned about the consistency of standards of marking you may decide you have to! Whether you review these on site or have them sent to you, make sure you have adequate time. You may want to regrade marks across a subject, adjust the marking across the whole scheme and confer with other external examiners as well as with subject tutors.

5. Attendance at the formal **examination board** is the next duty. Boards apply rules but also exercise judgements in their application. And their duty is to act as the sole authority for conferring (or withholding) the institution's award to individual students.

Most students are expected to succeed without comment. Some may have compensated passes where one poor mark or grade would spoil an otherwise exemplary pass – there will usually be clear rules about this in the written academic regulations!

Students not reaching the grade may be offered a second chance. This can take a variety of formats ranging from resit examinations, resubmission of course work, to repeating a year/semester/module. Others may be barred from continuing. In some instances students will ask for extenuating circumstances to be taken into account and again there will normally be clear rules to guide

decisions on this. Exceptionally external examiners may be required to conduct viva voce exams – interviews in effect – to determine results in borderline cases, or in the presentation of higher degree dissertations.

Results are normally accepted by an academic board if the external examiners have signed their approval of the results. Your signature is a vital part of the formal process.

6. The completion of your annual report comes next. You may be asked to complete a proforma, or be given a briefing. Whichever applies you will be expected to comment on your perceptions of:
  - the general quality of students' work
  - the standards students achieved
  - students' development over the year/programme
  - the comprehensiveness of the assessment scheme
  - the internal management of the marking, of the course, of the curriculum delivery
  - the conduct of the exam board

You may be asked to comment on other issues such as sustainability of the syllabuses and the teaching team as well as physical resources.

7. Resit and referral procedures echo this process in the main, if on a somewhat smaller scale, giving a repeat round of duties in the same year. Watch out for papers echoing the previous paper too closely.
8. Weeks later expect to receive modest payment! The whole process starts again for next year.

## **What you can ask for**

Have confidence to:

- Demand changes to exam questions and to examining approaches
- Demand detailed marking schemes for all assessed work
- Demand that examiners use the marking schemes you approved earlier
- Demand access to all student work
- Challenge course team decisions
- Ask for a clearer briefing on your role
- Say when you don't understand academic issues and terminology
- Adjust marks – widening the range from lowest to highest within one paper is a frequent need, as is ensuring parity of marking across the papers for one exam series.

## **What no one tells you**

The results achieved in year one and two assessments will usually affect the class of degree ultimately awarded in year three/four. What may appear a relatively poor exam mark to you may well be judged as part of an overall good performance after full allowance for the results of course and project work.

Experienced tutors often have a healthy disregard for external examiners!

Your annual report may end up identifying the same issues year after year!

## Problems to be aware of

- External examiners should not normally have personal involvement with the institution, its staff, its students (either personal or as a host for work experience), or its governing body.

This raises issues of academic cosiness. External examiners invited because they are personally known to someone on the teaching staff should not feel they owe unswerving allegiance to their contact thus agreeing to, or concurring with, internal academic ideas rather than bringing an independent integrity to the programme.
- The speed at which institutions are amending their academic standards and regulations can lead to confusion over which set of criteria is being applied to which group or **cohort** of students as they work through the various years of their study programme.
- Some institutions replace their externals at the end of a three year appointment while operating a four year scheme, and thus no one sees the one cohort of students through their degree.
- Modular and interdisciplinary degree courses may not have tourism external examiners and, thus, the right of the tourism subject external specialist to approve, demand alterations in question papers and results may disappear.
- A common complaint of external examiners on modular schemes is that while they may see work on the specialist options, they are kept removed from the main thrust of the course and thus have no feel for the students' overall profile and progression.
- A common problem for external examiners from industry is that they feel themselves to be judging and assessing on a different set of criteria from the academic ones. The confusion arises on the relative views of academic versus commercial/real world perspectives. While academics may score student work high on academic rigour, literature search and clear structure, the industry perspective may be that the factual and summative content appears inapplicable or irrelevant in the real world. Such issues need to be discussed and clarified by you and the course team.
- Most degree schemes, when coming to make final degree award, take into account the standard of work students achieved in the earlier years of the programme. Others do not. Allowing for increasing maturity and academic development can be difficult to assess.
- Look out for assessed course work overlapping with examination questions and for clear patterns of question topic and type to develop into predictable patterns over the years.
- Group work can artificially raise the performance of weaker candidates and adversely affect the performance of stronger ones.
- Standards across institutions are difficult to determine! You have to use your judgement.
- Academic staff may be working with industry-specific case material which you judge to be out of date.

- External examiners are often pressured to take sides in internal politics over resourcing and staffing issues and are expected to fire the loaded guns they have been handed by the internal academic staff.

## **The importance of judgement**

To summarise, external examiners have a vital role to play in the degree awarding system using their knowledge and expertise and bringing judgement developed by experience to the necessary academic procedures. The NLG wish you well in this very important task.

- 
1. A semester is the American terminology for a term, although semesters are typically of 14 to 15 weeks' duration (two a year) whilst terms are typically of 10 to 11 weeks' duration (three a year).
  2. A module is a subject or unit of study on a course, normally with a duration of one term or one semester. Modules are typically available to students reading for a wide range of different degrees; they are not restricted to one course only. A prescribed number (and type) of modules add up to a degree course as explained in the course prospectus.