

THE RHODES UNIVERSITY POLICY ON
EXTERNAL EXAMINING

1. POLICY PARTICULARS

DATE OF APPROVAL BY RELEVANT COMMITTEE STRUCTURE:

Academic Planning & Staffing Committee: 12 October 2005

DATE OF APPROVAL BY SENATE: 21 October 2005

DATE OF APPROVAL BY COUNCIL: 15 December 2005

COMMENCEMENT

DATE: January 2006

REVISION HISTORY: First version

REVIEW DATE: Every 3 years

POLICY LEVEL: All academic departments and institutes/centres offering Rhodes qualifications

RESPONSIBILITY

- IMPLEMENTATION & MONITORING: At undergraduate level, Deans -> Academic Planning & Staffing Committee. At honours and master's levels, Deans -> Faculties - Senate. At doctoral level, Deans -> Vice Chancellor -> Senate.
- REVIEW AND REVISION: Academic Planning and Staffing Committee, Senate, Council

REPORTING STRUCTURE: Registrar, AP&SC, Senate, Council

2. POLICY STATEMENT

2.1 POLICY DECLARATION:

Rhodes University views the use of external examiners as a valuable form of structured peer review, providing expert comment on curriculum design and its mode of presentation as well as on the assessment of student learning. As such, external examining is perceived to be central to the assurance of quality in that it validates the judgments concerning course design and its mode of presentation at departmental level, as well as the judgments of academic staff in their capacity as assessors.

This policy needs to be read in conjunction with the Rhodes University Higher Degrees Guide, which provides more detailed guidance about examination procedures at postgraduate level, with the Rhodes Policy on the Assessment of Student Learning and the Rhodes Policy on Curriculum Development and Review.

2.2 POLICY OBJECTIVES:

Given that peer review systems have the potential to reproduce poor practice, the main objective of this policy is to guide the University in the development of an external examining system which is rigorous, explicit, systematic and professional by:

- Identifying a number of roles to be played by external examiners. These are the roles of **expert advisor on curriculum design and mode of presentation, moderator of assessments and examiner of postgraduate theses**;
- Specifying the requirements of each of these roles;
- Specifying how external examiners need to be supported by members of the University staff in their performance of these roles.

2.3 DEFINITIONS:

Assessment of student learning is an inclusive term involving the design and development of an overall assessment strategy for a course or module, the design and development of assessment tasks (whether used for formative or summative purposes) within that strategy, the development of criteria against which student performance is judged, the judging of student performance against the criteria and

the provision of feedback against these same criteria on tasks set for formative purposes.

Moderation is understood to mean the process of providing comment on the extent to which the overall assessment strategy does indeed allow performance against learning outcomes to be judged, the validity of assessment criteria (in the sense that they are aligned with learning outcomes), the validity of assessment tasks in terms of their potential to elicit evidence of students' performance against the learning outcomes,

External examiner is a person not in the employ of Rhodes University who has the qualifications and experience to be able to act as an expert advisor on curriculum design and its mode of presentation, and/or as a moderator of the assessment of student learning and/or as the examiner of postgraduate theses.

Postgraduate refers to any qualification or any learning programme leading to a qualification at the appropriate level on the National Qualifications Framework.

3. POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

3.1 THE ACTIONS AND PROCESSES BY WHICH THE OBJECTIVES OF THE POLICY CAN BE ACHIEVED:

Usually, independent experts will need to be qualified at least to master's level in order to be appointed, except as external examiners at Ph.D. level, where a doctorate is normally required. In the case of undergraduate courses and the coursework components of postgraduate degrees, external examiners should not normally be appointed for a term of more than three consecutive years. The appointment of external examiners must be approved by Faculties and, ultimately, external examiners are responsible to Senate. Faculties and Senate may delegate this power to Deans, however, since they will, in any event, have to act on behalf of Faculty in most instances.

Actions and processes are described in terms of each of the roles of the external examiner identified in the policy statement above.

Expert advisor on curriculum design and mode of presentation

At the level of curriculum development and its mode of presentation, the opinion of a peer/peers external to the University should be sought regarding the appropriateness of course outcomes as well as the extent to which teaching, materials design and other forms of learning provision have been developed to allow students to meet those outcomes. *This opinion should be sought whenever a new course is developed or whenever an existing course is substantially*

redesigned. In examining course outcomes for their appropriateness, consideration should be given to the level at which the course is pegged on the NQF and the descriptors associated with that level. The way course outcomes contribute to those developed for the ‘whole’ qualification for which students are registered should also be considered.

The opinion of external examiners on curriculum design and its mode of presentation should also be sought in relation to their roles as moderators of student learning since student learning needs to be assessed in the context of teaching. External examiners therefore should normally be provided with details of the curriculum of the course they are moderating and of any learning materials provided to students¹ and may be asked to comment upon them when they moderate.

Moderators of the assessment of student learning

Undergraduate degrees: In their capacity as moderators of the assessment of student learning conducted by members of the academic staff of the University, external examiners are required to moderate, *as a minimum*, the assessment of all exit level courses. At undergraduate level, this means that they will, in principle, be required to moderate some 120 of the 360 credits required for the three year undergraduate bachelor’s degree and 120 of the 480 credits required for a four year undergraduate bachelor’s degree. Circumstances may arise in which fewer than 120 credits are moderated (as for example when an oral examination is held at which the moderator cannot be present). Departments wishing to exceed the minimum requirement that only 120 credits required for the bachelor’s degree should be moderated will be allowed to do so with the Senate’s permission.

Postgraduate degrees: External examiners will be required to moderate all assessment of the coursework components of postgraduate degrees and honours research projects.

Rhodes University will provide external examiners with details of the overall assessment strategy of the course relating to the weighting of the written examination and coursework components. Individual course presenters are encouraged to make available to external examiners the assessment tasks which make up that strategy, the assessment criteria developed for each task, a sample of student responses to these tasks across the entire spectrum of performance and examples of feedback provided to students. This means that external examiners may be requested to comment upon all assessment and not only the final examination. In particular, they will normally comment upon examination questions before the examination is written.

¹ Curriculum information *could* be provided by completing the template which has been developed to assist departments in documenting their courses.

Although external examiners have the right to recommend adjustments to marks, the final decision regarding whether or not this recommendation will be accepted will rest with the Head of Department in consultation with the lecturers responsible for the course.

Upon completion of the moderation, external examiners are required to write a report². Where the moderation relates to the assessment of undergraduate courses or to the coursework components of postgraduate programmes, this report will be returned to the HoD. The HoD will then discuss the report with the lecturer(s) responsible for the course and will be responsible for ensuring that any issues identified by the external examiner are addressed before the course is next offered. At the end of each examination cycle, HoDs will be required to report to the Dean of the Faculty in which their department is located on the comments made by external examiners and any responses made by lecturers to those comments and detail the plans which have been made to address issues raised. Deans, in turn, are required to report to the Academic Planning and Staffing Committee.

In summary, external examiners may be requested to:

- Comment on the extent to which the overall assessment strategy provides ‘coverage’ of all the learning outcomes specified for a course
- Comment on the extent to which assessment criteria are aligned with learning outcomes
- Comment on the validity of assessment tasks
- Comment on the quality of feedback provided to students on continuous assessment tasks

and, in particular,

- Comment on written examination questions before they are seen by the candidates
- Review a sample of assessed work (which might include work submitted as part of continuous assessment)³ and comment on the reliability of the assessment

² Departments may choose to design a template or form for external examiners to complete.

³ The following serves as a guide:

| Number of students in class | Number of scripts to be reviewed |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|
| > 15 | All scripts |
| 16 – 100 | A minimum of 15 scripts |
| 101 - 200 | A minimum of 15% |
| 201 + | The greater of 30 scripts or 10% |

- Make recommendations that marks be adjusted where appropriate and sign the mark sheet provided
- Complete a report on the overall assessment of the course which s/he has been appointed to moderate.

Heads of Departments are required to:

- Ensure that external examiners are provided with documentation relevant to the assessment of a course before the assessment takes place. This may include details of learning outcomes, assessment criteria and assessment tasks as well as draft examination questions.
- Ensure that any comments made by external examiners on the, assessment strategy, assessment criteria and assessment tasks (in particular, draft examination questions) are considered by the lecturer(s) responsible for the assessment.
- Ensure that any issues raised by the external examiner are acted upon.
- Review external examiners' recommendations regarding marks with the lecturers responsible for teaching a course and make a final decision on those marks.
- Report to Deans on the moderation conducted in their departments. Such reports should note any issues raised by external examiners and detail the actions which will be taken within the department to address them.

Deans are required to:

- Provide a report to the Academic Planning and Staffing Committee at the start of each year summarizing the moderation which has taken place in their respective Faculties in the previous year.

The use of external examiners as *assessors* (i.e. 'second markers') of students' coursework at postgraduate level and of honours projects will be left to the discretion of departments.

Examiner of theses

At Master's Level

Two examiners, at least one of whom is external, at least one of whom should be a member of academic or research staff at a University, and neither of whom is the supervisor will be appointed to examine full or partial theses submitted in fulfillment of a master's degree.

The final decision in the overall assessment of Master's candidates rests with the Dean, who will be normally guided in this regard by the Head of Department after the latter has reviewed the examination reports.

At Doctoral Level

In the case of doctoral degrees, at least three external examiners, at least two of whom should be members of academic or research staff at a University, will be appointed. Supervisors and examiners internal to the University are excluded from examining at doctoral level except under exceptional circumstances approved by the Senate.

The final decision in the overall assessment of Doctoral candidates rests with the Vice Chancellor, who will be normally guided in this regard by the chair of a Committee of Assessors after the latter have reviewed the examination reports.

Both Levels

Previous members of staff of the University should not be appointed as examiners unless at least three years have lapsed since they were last employed by the University. External examiners should not have had any ongoing interaction with the candidate. Where ongoing interaction is known to have occurred, the supervisor must report this to the Registrar. The names of external examiners should not be disclosed to the candidate until the examination is complete. It is normal practice for the examiner's reports and the identity of the examiner to be made known to the candidate at the end of the examination process. If the external examiner or the Dean has reason for not complying with this practice, this must specifically be requested of the Vice-Chancellor to act on behalf of Senate.

The University undertakes to provide examiners with a set of criteria for the level and kind of thesis they are examining. External examiners are required to use these criteria in their examination and provide feedback against them. At the end of the examination process, the external examiner is required to write a report which will be sent to the Head of Academic Administration in the Registrar's Division.

External examiners are requested to:

- Judge the extent to which the thesis meets the assessment criteria provided (these will differ according to whether the thesis is at master's or doctoral level and whether the thesis is submitted in full or partial requirement of the degree concerned)
- Write a report detailing where the thesis meets or does not meet the criteria
- Communicate with the Academic Administration Office within the time period specified for examination of the thesis upon appointment.

Heads of Departments are required to:

- Ensure that the names of suitable external examiners are submitted to Faculty and to Senate before the thesis is submitted. In practice, approval

of such nomination is usually given by the Dean, acting on behalf of Faculty.

- Ensure that candidates are informed of the role of external examiners in the examination process.

3.2 REVIEW PROCEDURE:

The policy should be reviewed by the Academic Planning & Staffing Committee at the first meeting of every third year. Any proposed revisions should then be considered by faculties before serving before Senate so that any policy changes are in place before the beginning of the next academic year. The first review of this External Examining Policy will therefore be due at the first meeting of the Academic Planning & Staffing Committee in 2008.