



Kingston University

Report on a special review of the circumstances surrounding the amendments to an
External Examiner's Report
October 2008
[Revised February 2009]

1. Introduction
2. QAA's causes for concern procedures
3. The Preliminary Enquiry process
4. Circumstances surrounding the case
5. Review of external examining, July 2008
6. Enquiry findings
7. Recommendations

1. Introduction

1.1 This is the report of a Preliminary Enquiry carried out by me, Dr Stephen Jackson, Director of Reviews, QAA, between July and October 2008, into events at Kingston University described in paragraph 1.3 below.

1.2 The QAA's responsibilities for the public assurance of higher education awards include a process for handling perceived or reported causes for concern. A cause for concern is any policy, procedure or action implemented, or omitted, by a higher or further education institution in England, which appears likely to jeopardise the institution's capacity to assure the academic standards and quality of its HE programmes and/or awards.

1.3 In July 2008, QAA received a communication from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) raising a concern about the alleged manipulation of the external examiner system 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.'

1.4 The story had originally been reported by BBC News Channel on the internet on 25 June 2008; under the heading 'Examiner dropped course criticism'. It was also reported on a number of other websites.

2. QAA's Causes for Concern procedures

2.1 QAA's Causes for Concern process may be used in circumstances where it appears that there may be a threat to the maintenance of academic standards or the quality of HE learning provision. The process is triggered by a request from a recognised organisation detailing the nature of the concern. The process may also be initiated by QAA itself, if it receives sufficient and credible information from other sources to warrant further investigation. Details of the process are available on the QAA website at: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/policy/concern.asp>.

2.2 The review of causes for concern involves two stages: a Preliminary Enquiry (PE) carried out by a senior member of QAA to establish whether or not there is a significant issue requiring further investigation, and a Full Investigation (FI) carried out by a team of reviewers appointed by QAA.

2.3 The outcome of the PE is a report that is sent to the institution concerned, the source of the request for an investigation and the Chief Executive of QAA. If the PE report does not confirm a cause for concern the report is not normally published. If the outcome of a PE is a recommendation for a Full Investigation, a review team is appointed and carries out any necessary activities to complete its task. The team reports to the QAA Chief Executive and the report is published on the QAA website.

3. The Preliminary Enquiry process

3.1 The review process was initiated by a letter sent from QAA to the Vice Chancellor of Kingston University requesting a meeting to discuss the issues raised in the public interest disclosure reported in confidence to HEFCE. That meeting took place on 24 September 2008 at the University. Those present from the University included the Vice Chancellor, Sir Peter Scott; the Deputy Vice Chancellor, Mary Stuart; and the Academic Registrar, Allison Stokes. QAA was represented by Dr Stephen Jackson assisted by Ms Virginia Fife, who kept a record of the discussions. The University provided additional documentation about the case at the time of the meeting and as an attachment to a subsequent email.

3.2 QAA also wrote to the external examiner involved and had a telephone conversation with her on 2 October 2008. The external examiner provided a copy of an email exchange with a BBC journalist in June 2008.

4. Circumstances surrounding the case

4.1 The case concerns an external examiner's report for the BMus (Hons) programme, in the School of Music at Kingston University, in 2003 -04. The report was produced following discussion of the students' performance at a Module Assessment Board on 29 June 2004 at which members of the course team and the external examiner were present.

4.2 The original report was completed on a form provided by the University. The form invited examiners to answer a number of questions about the quality and standards of the programme under review. It included a section which asked examiners to provide summary judgements for the purposes of publication on the national Teaching Quality Information (TQI) website. This was the first year that HEIs were required to provide this public information. Following a review of TQI by the Quality Assurance Framework Review Group in 2006 the requirement was withdrawn.

4.3 The relevant external examiner's report on the BMus (Hons) programme made reference to a number of features of good practice and complimented the achievements of the more able students. However, it also included comments about the relatively poor performance of some students and questioned the security of the standards applied by the course team. Some work, the examiner considered, had been marked over-generously.

4.4 In the public information summary, one of the questions on the form asked examiners to confirm that '...the standards of student performance are comparable with similar programmes or subjects in other UK institutions with which you are familiar.' To this question the examiner had answered 'no' and had offered the following explanation:

'Kingston Music School recruits broadly and often gives students who have shown promise but not high attainment the opportunity to engage in Higher Education. In this regard it fulfils an important role in Higher Education, especially given the current emphasis on Widening Participation. However, since no provision has been made for a foundation year, which would prepare those struggling at the lower end for Degree-standard work, it is scarcely possible in only 3 years for such students to attain a true Degree standard.'

The Music School does, rightly, reward improvement with better marks, but in doing so, has too often over-rewarded by national standards.'

4.5 The implications of a statement of this kind being published on the TQI website clearly concerned members of the School. In an email sent to BMus tutors, the director of the School's MA course commented:

'I feel that [the examiner's] report is both unfair and very damaging – especially the part which is to be published publicly. Can we ask her to amend that so it is less damning? It could really hit our recruitment badly and probably mean the quality of students coming would sink further. I think her comments are out of step with other examiners we have had – probably because of her background. We must avoid externals with these attitudes in future – we cannot afford this type of bad publicity.'

4.6 Subsequently the acting Head of School contacted the external examiner and alerted her to their concerns about the 'extremely negative effect' of her report. It was made clear, in terms that the examiner found persuasive, that there would be dire consequences for the School of Music if the report were not amended. The examiner indicated to QAA that she was well aware of the difficulties that the School had had in recruiting students and that she did not want her report to have a serious impact on the reputation of the School. In her response to the Acting Head of School she stated that, after reflection and consultation with colleagues at her University, she had concluded that the ticking of boxes for the TQI website was not helpful and that she recognised that the adverse publicity might undermine the valuable education service performed by the School. She also conceded that she did not have extensive familiarity with programmes in other post '92 universities. She agreed to submit a report with the critical answer changed from 'no' to 'yes' for the public information summary. However, her principal concerns about the capabilities of some students and the over-generous marking of work remained within the text of the main report and were not altered.

4.7 This report marked the end of the four year term of the external examiner and included valedictory comments which reflected her view of the School based on the full term of her engagement with the University. She had also had the opportunity to see the reports of her predecessor. She reported that, similar issues had been raised in these about the quality of students and the standards of marking. Her decision to record a 'no' answer on the form had been influenced by her perception that the University had not fully addressed these matters.

4.8 The University considered the issues raised by the external examiner in her report as part of its established procedures for the annual monitoring of programmes. The Board of Studies took the view that the recommendation for a foundation year for 'weaker students' was not feasible and recorded the course team's concerns that the external examiner was 'relatively inexperienced'. In particular, there were some doubts as to:

'...the extent of her familiarity with programmes which are genuine KU Music comparators, which have a distinctive balance with respect to practical and vocational content on the one hand and more text-orientated content on the other.'

4.9 The BMus (Hons) programme involved two external examiners. The second external, who was also present at the Module Assessment Board, confirmed that in his view the standards set for the programme '...are entirely consistent with those of

other institutions with which I am familiar and are in accordance with national expectations.' He also commented that, overall, the students were '...achieving the appropriate level of attainment against the relevant assessment standards'. However, he did raise concerns about over-generous marking in individual modules:

'I sampled work from two final year modules Scoring and Arranging, and Jazz History where I estimated that the marking was over-generous by anything up to a classification band (e.g. an agreed mark of 65 by the internal markers was, in my view worth a mark of around 55).'

In his oral report to the Programme Assessment Board, in July 2004, he commented that a number of awards had been made at honours level that may have been below the indicative level to meet the requirements.

4.10 The University provided me with a copy of an Assessment Report for 2004-5 that was presented to its Academic Standards and Quality Group. This summarised issues raised by external examiners and identified the action that had been taken. It is not clear if the specific issues raised by the externals on the BMus (Hons) programme had been incorporated into this report. There is one comment about an external who had raised concerns about over-generous marking in his specialist area at level 3. The report states that '...this was discussed by the Board of Studies who felt that it was incorrect to criticise the standards of the degree on this basis.'

4.11 The issue of the University's handling of the external examiner's report and the subsequent comments about the need to appoint 'more sympathetic' externals came to light as a result of information being passed to the BBC in June 2008. The 'story' was leaked to the press by a former member of staff in the School of Music who was in dispute with the University.

5. Review of external examining, July 2008

5.1 Following the publication of allegations in the press the Vice Chancellor took the step of commissioning an external review of the handling of external examiners' reports at Kingston. The review was carried out by the Registrar and Secretary at Goldsmiths, University of London, acting in a personal capacity. It addressed two questions:

'Whether the University's current procedures for addressing serious issues in external examiners' reports are adequate and/or conform to the best practice in the sector; and

Whether in recent cases when external examiners, either initially or in their final reports, declined formally to confirm that the standards on the course were equivalent to standards in other universities, the action taken by the University was adequate/ appropriate – and, in particular, whether there is any evidence that pressure was brought to bear on them to modify their stated views.'

5.2 The review was commissioned in early July 2008 and concluded by 24 July 2008, when a draft report was presented to the University. A slightly amended version of the report was formally submitted on 14 August 2008. The review was based solely on documentary sources provided by the University including policy documents, the QAA Institutional Audit Report (2005) and all external examiners' reports for the period 2003-06 where the external had ticked the 'no' box on

standards in the public information section (10 in total). Other than the report from the external examiner in Music and one where the University required separate reports for each collaborative partner in a group of programmes, no other reports had been changed and so no discussion with the external examiners was considered necessary by the University for this particular exercise. The Deputy Vice-Chancellor discussed the process for the review, as outlined by the Vice Chancellor, and the Academic Registrar provided additional clarification of the documentation submitted as requested.

5.3 The review concluded that:

‘Kingston University has clear and robust procedures for external examining which have been endorsed by the QAA and which meet the precepts set out in the QAA’s Code of Practice

Kingston University has adopted a role for external examiners which is explicit and consistent; it is also different from the traditional role, and this difference accounts for some of the instances in which external examiners appear to report concerns about standards.’

5.4 No evidence was found of pressure being placed by the University on external examiners to change critical comments in their reports. There was one recommendation: that the University should review the mechanisms by which reports are scrutinised centrally and that it should adopt clear and consistent rules about which reports are seen by whom.

6. Enquiry findings

6.1 This enquiry has focused specifically on the circumstances surrounding one external examiner’s report. It has not considered wider matters to do with the University’s management of external examiners. This was an issue covered by the Institutional Audit in 2005 which reported that:

‘On the evidence seen by the audit team the external examiner system works effectively. Emerging themes and issues are compiled and robustly reviewed at school and faculty level. A final overarching consideration of matters raised in the reports is made in an annual assessment report which is considered by ASQG. This system is thorough and ensures that concerns which are raised are dealt with at the appropriate level.’

6.2 There is, however, little dispute about what happened in the reported case. On the simple facts, an external examiner was asked by an acting Head of School to make changes to her report to prevent information being published on a public website that might have an adverse impact on the reputation of the School. The report was subsequently changed and the amended version published. Also there is clear evidence that staff in the School were asked by one of the course leaders, to identify potential external examiners who would be sympathetic to the type of students recruited to the BMus (Hons) programme.

6.3 The allegations reported to HEFCE in the initial public interest disclosure made reference to ‘pressure’ being exerted on the external examiner to change her report. This was an issue that the BBC also highlighted in its report. The University denied that any pressure had been applied. The external examiner told the BBC that ‘the kind of pressure that was applied was that it would have dire consequences for

the music school if I didn't change the report'. This was confirmed in the discussions between Dr Jackson and the external examiner. Although she indicated that she was persuaded by the arguments put to her by the acting Head of School, she also felt that she was left in no doubt that she was expected to change her report.

6.4 The other allegation that staff in the School were encouraged to nominate candidates for a new BMus external examiner who would be sensitive to the challenges faced by the School, is supported by the redacted emails provided as supporting evidence to the public interest disclosure. In one email the acting Head of School suggested '...it is important that the Examiner is sympathetic to and familiar with the challenges we face with regard to WP, Retention etc. and would be constructive in their feedback.' The external examiner subsequently appointed was from a university with a strong tradition of widening participation. This does not, in itself, represent inappropriate action by the School or the University. The QAA Code of Practice states that '...It is important that external examiners are chosen who have an understanding of the types of programmes or parts of programmes they are asked to consider. This means that it can be most appropriate for institutions to recruit external examiners from other institutions similar to themselves.' However, the implication in this case is that the School set out to find an external, that they could recommend for appointment, who would be less critical of their practices.

6.5 Another concern identified by the enquiry is the extent to which staff in the School were prepared to accept and act on the criticisms identified by the external examiner in her report. From discussions with the external examiner it is clear that the concerns about the abilities of some students and the practice of over-marking were matters she had reported on throughout her four year term. She also stated that the same issues had been identified by her predecessor – whose reports had been made available to her. She argued that the School had failed to provide an adequate response to these concerns believing that they were a reflection of the type of student recruited to the School. They also believed that the external examiner came from a background and tradition that was different to the experience at Kingston and she may have had some difficulty in appreciating the nature and context of the programme.

6.6 When asked about these matters the University's response was that they treated external examiners' reports seriously, but that there might not always be agreement between the views of the external examiner and those of the subject team or the University. Questions at issue were identified and discussed at Boards of Study and by the Faculty. If the University were unable to accept the advice of an external examiner, it would normally write to the external and provide an explanation. With reference to the specific issue of over-marking, there had been no evidence from externals on other programmes in the Faculty to suggest that this was a commonly held view and consequently it had not been discussed further at the Faculty or at the Academic Standards and Quality Group. In the meeting held at the University between the Vice Chancellor, the Deputy Vice Chancellor and the Academic Registrar, it was pointed out that the School of Music had moved into the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences where it was incorporated into a larger School of Performance which was providing a broader discipline support and a stronger oversight. The issue of a proposed foundation year raised by the Music external examiner in 2004 was considered together with other issues raised by all the recent external examiners reports at Internal Subject Review of Music in 2006.

6.7 QAA also discussed with the University the review of external examining commissioned in July 2008. This had been set up soon after the story appeared in the press, to provide a report for the Academic Board on the nature and extent of the

concerns identified. The review concluded that there was no evidence of failure in the external examining system at Kingston. However, the reviewer had not been asked by the University to contact any of the external examiners who had identified concerns regarding academic standards. The statements in the review report that there was no evidence that any pressure had been brought to bear on the examiners to change their reports were based solely on the narrative in the reports and central data. As a consequence it is our view that on this issue only limited reliance can be placed on the findings of the review.

6.8 There can be little doubt that the circumstances of this case were strongly influenced by the requirements at the time for universities to publish summaries of their external examiners' reports on the TQI website. It was the external examiner's public statement of lack of confidence in academic standards which prompted the acting Head of School to contact her and ask her to change the judgement in her report. Now that this requirement has been removed it is highly unlikely that the circumstances of this case will be repeated. Nevertheless, the question must remain whether the University's policies and practices are specific and robust enough to ensure that, in different circumstances, no comparable event could recur.

7. Recommendations

7.1 The preliminary enquiry has examined the circumstances surrounding the reported case of amendments to an external examiner's report at Kingston University in 2004 and considered the questions associated with it. The facts of the matter are not in dispute and are well supported by documentary evidence. There may be differences of view about how the discussions between the School and the external examiner were conducted, but it is clear that the external was asked to change a judgement in her report and that this change was made and recorded. We do not believe there is a great deal more that can be learnt about this specific case. As a consequence we consider there is little justification for recommending a further full inspection of the circumstances of the case. Having said that, however, the preliminary enquiry has raised questions about how the University oversees the selection and appointment of its external examiners and how it responds to the issues identified in their reports.

7.2 This particular case refers to one external examiner's report amongst the several hundred that are received and reviewed by the University each year. No other evidence has been forthcoming to cause us to believe that it is representative of more widespread problems across the University. Nevertheless, it does call into question certain aspects of the systems at Kingston. The arrangements did not appear to work effectively in this case. Concerns raised by the external examiner over the four years of her tenure were not, in her view, addressed or explained to her satisfaction and did not appear to progress through the committee structure for consideration at a higher level within the University. The approach to the external examiner, asking her to change her report was made at school level, without apparent authorisation from senior staff in the University. In addition staff in the school were asked to nominate a potential replacement external examiner who would be more sympathetic to the nature and character of the school. These actions may imply a lack of regard for the role of external examiners in the assurance of academic standards. It is important that the University takes the necessary steps to dispel any consequent suggestion that it does not ascribe sufficient importance to the views of individual external examiners.

7.3 To address these concerns we recommend that:

- a public statement is 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 independence of external examiners
- the outcomes of the above recommendations and the more general effectiveness of external examining arrangements are subject to specific scrutiny by the audit team at the time of the next QAA Institutional Audit in summer 2010.

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The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
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