

# Specialist Paper 1

## Assessment Boards: Guide for External Examiners and Centres

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### Introduction

These guidelines cover Edexcel requirements for attending and reporting on Assessment Boards and give an overview of how Edexcel sees the purpose and operation of such boards.

### Reporting and attendance

External Examiners are asked to 'engage with' Assessment Boards at centres and to complete **section 4 ASSESSMENT MEETINGS** of the External Examiner report form, commenting particularly on:

- The fairness and consistency of decisions
- The decision making process
- Administrative support for the Assessment Board
- The organisation and conduct of Assessment Board

If an External Examiner does not attend an Assessment Board, section 4 should still be completed, firstly to say that the Assessment Board was not attended, secondly to confirm that Assessment Boards do take place at the centre, and that there are appropriate regulations and rules of operation covering their conduct, and thirdly to comment where possible on the four bullet points above. Mention should also be made of the mode of engagement with the Assessment Board, such as receiving minutes or discussing recommendations with the Programme Leader or Chair of the Assessment Board.

### Assessment Boards

The advice in this section is intended to conform with QAA's *Code of Practice Section 6: Assessment of Students: Precepts 3 and 4 (revised 2006)*. External Examiners are expected to be familiar with the contents of this document, which is available on QAA's website.

Specifically the QAA's Code of Practice (section 6, precept 4) states that:

*"Institutions publicise and implement effective, clear and consistent policies for the membership, procedures, powers and accountability of assessment panels and boards of examiners."*

Centres will not necessarily use the term Assessment Board; they may use titles such as Assessment Meeting, Examination Board or Board of Studies. (The QAA Code uses *Assessment Panels and Examination Boards*)

Each centre is expected by Edexcel to hold Assessment Boards for all of its BTEC Higher National programmes. The main boards are normally held at the end of the session, although if centres operate on a semester system there may be (intermediate) boards at the end of the first semester. There may also be separate boards to deal with referrals. Where a centre does not currently have such a process then the External Examiner should discuss this with the Quality Nominee and Programme Leader, stressing the requirement for Assessment Boards by both Edexcel and QAA and that Assessment Board reports and minutes provide valuable evidence for the QAA's *Integrated Quality Evaluation and Review (IQER)* process.

The main purpose of an Assessment Board is to make recommendations on:

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- The grades achieved by students on the individual modules or units
- Extenuating circumstances
- Cases of cheating and plagiarism
- Progression of students onto the next stage of the programme
- The awards to be made to students
- Referrals and deferrals

Assessment Boards may also monitor academic standards.

It is the responsibility of the Assessment Board to ensure it operates within the assessment regulations laid down by the centre, which should incorporate relevant Edexcel guidelines.

There is some variation from centre to centre, not only over terminology, but over practice. In general, the external examiner should not seek to change an established system unless there are serious flaws in it. Even then, matters need to be handled with some delicacy, and it is advisable to contact the Senior Subject Examiner for advice prior to taking action.

### Regulations and operation of Assessment Boards

Each centre should have a published set of regulations for its Assessment Boards. These should cover matters such as the scheduling of boards, membership, terms of reference, operation and administration, appeals, assessment of students with disabilities and anonymity of students in assessment. Regulations may include a standard agenda for all Assessment Boards. Some relevant aspects from the QAA's Code (section 6, precept 4), contextualised for Higher National provision, are given below:

- Assessment boards need to be aware of the extent of their powers and authority, including to whom they are accountable. Through access to relevant centre guidance, they can also be assured that their decisions are in alignment with centre and other relevant policies, procedures and processes. Assessment Boards should refer appropriately to centre regulations that apply to Higher National awards.
- It is normally a requirement that external<sup>1</sup>, as well as internal, assessors and/or examiners attend assessment meetings that consider the results of students they have assessed. It is in everyone's interests for these requirements to be made clear to and understood by all involved: assessors, examiners, chairs of panels/boards, departments, etc. It is normally considered important for any exceptional circumstances in which a requirement to attend a board would be waived in respect of either external or internal assessors/examiners to be clearly stated and made known to all concerned before a meeting. It is also important to have in place contingency arrangements that enable assessors'/examiners' views to be taken into account in their absence.
- If it is also a centre policy that one or more internal members of the institution independent of the academic unit operating the assessment) attends Assessment Board, s/he is likely to find it helpful to have clear guidance on his/her role and contribution. For example, the independent person might be present as an 'expert' on centre policies and regulations.

Precept 4 also lists other points on which centres may wish to consider giving guidance in respect of Assessment Boards. For example:

- The minimum number of internal and external members who must be present for valid decisions to be taken, and what should happen if a panel or board is not quorate
- Whether or not the fairness of assessment decisions would be improved by student anonymity
- What, if any, student work should be available for the Assessment Board
- The circumstances in which the Assessment Board may legitimately exercise discretion, and the extent of that discretion. Guidance at centre level about the circumstances in which it is

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<sup>1</sup> *Edexcel's guidance is that it is not a requirement for External Examiners to attend Assessment Boards but that they should engage with the process in order to provide effective comment in section 4 of the visit report form.*

appropriate to exercise academic discretion is likely to contribute to assuring the consistent operation of discretion in, for example, dealing with borderline cases, or taking into account variations in student performance during a programme. Guidance can helpfully include advice on the treatment of evidence provided about students whose assessment performance might have been adversely affected by extenuating circumstances.

- The importance of keeping clear and appropriate records of the procedures and decisions of each Assessment Board. There are several reasons why it is considered good practice to keep minutes of panels and boards, including the need for an centre to be able to assure itself that it is operating consistently within centre policies and guidelines and taking account of programme regulations; and the value of being able to track details of decision-making, including the circumstances in which academic or other discretion is exercised, as mentioned above; the importance of complete and accurate records to inform the consideration of complaints and appeals.

## Membership

It is advisable that the Chair and the Secretary of an Assessment Board are, as far as possible, independent of the programme under consideration. Larger centres often use the head of a different department, or a Faculty Dean, or even a Head of Quality Assurance to ensure this. Likewise, the Secretary can be from another department or from the Quality Assurance department. It is more difficult for small centres to arrange for this requirement. The main point is that the Programme Leader should not chair Assessment Meetings.

Centres **cannot insist that Edexcel External Examiners attend Assessment Meetings**, although it is essential that they have the right to attend. If there is a centre regulation stating that the Edexcel External Examiner should attend the Assessment Board, external examiners should explain that they cannot be bound by this.

All members of the programme team should attend the Assessment Board. Clearly, absences are sometimes unavoidable, but it would become a quality issue if certain members were regularly absent, or if attendance were to be persistently poor.

## Operation and administration

- Agenda

In larger centres the agenda is normally determined centrally, so that all Assessment Boards operate in the same way. In smaller centres this may be left to the department. The style of agenda will vary from centre to centre, but should cover the main purpose of Assessment Boards set out on page 1.

Centres with little experience in operating HE programmes may request advice from the External Examiner in developing good practice for Assessment Boards. If in doubt about making recommendations, the external examiner should contact the Senior Subject Examiner for guidance.

- Pre-meetings

It can save time if the programme team has discussed results prior to the Assessment Board meeting, although these discussions must remain strictly confidential.

- Decisions

Decisions on grades, referrals, deferrals, progressions and recommendations for awards are the responsibility of the Assessment Board (in centres that have an Academic Board, the Assessment Boards may have to receive ratification of these decisions by the Academic Board). If an Edexcel external examiner attends an Assessment Board it is in the capacity of an adviser, s/he has no power of veto at the Board. If an External Examiner feels that a wrong decision is being made, s/he can only register disagreement with the decision. It is rare for an Assessment Board not to take the advice of an external examiner, but if this does happen the External Examiner should report this on the External Examiner report form.

It is important to stress here that refusal of certification should occur with the agreement of the centre. There should be a mutually agreed action plan for the certification to be made. Lack of agreement with the centre about Assessment Board decisions or about certification represents a breakdown in the relationship with the centre. If such a disagreement occurs, the external examiner should contact the Senior subject examiner for advice.

- Confidentiality

Centres should be extremely careful about what happens to the documentation used in the meeting. Practice varies, with some centres insisting that only the Chair and Secretary keeping the documentation, while others allow the programme leader and external examiners to keep them, too. The centre must have clear regulations on how students are informed of their results. No discussion of individual results or counselling of students should take place until after the centre has formally ratified the results and published results lists. It is good practice for only certain people, authorised by the Assessment Board to do so, to discuss results with students.

### In summary

It is an expectation that:

Centres will convene Assessment Boards for all of its BTEC Higher National programmes and that the structure and operation of the assessment Boards will embrace Edexcel requirements and the *QAA Code of Practice* (Section 6, Precepts 3 and 4).

External examiners will engage with the centre's Assessment Board processes and procedures and report on this using section 4 of the External Examiners report form.