



# **ACADEMIC PROCEDURES HANDBOOK**

for

## **Sri Lankan Universities**

### **PART III**

## **CODE OF PRACTICE ON EXTERNAL ASSESSORS**

Committee of Vice-Chancellors & Directors  
and  
University Grants Commission

Edited & Printed

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# PURPOSE OF THE HANDBOOK

This handbook is complementary to the Quality Assurance Handbook published by the CVCD and UGC in July 2002. Both handbooks are the result of collaborative work undertaken between the CVCD/UGC, universities and professional bodies in 2002 and 2003. This work builds on the successful project begun in 2001 to develop and implement a comprehensive quality assurance system for Sri Lankan higher education.

The Academic Procedures Handbook is made up of following six parts:

- Part I: Code of Practice on Assessment of Students;
- Part II: Code of Practice on Career Guidance;
- Part III: Code of Practice on External Assessors;
- Part IV: Code of Practice on Postgraduate Research Programmes;
- Part V: Code of Practice on Programme Approval, Monitoring and Review;
- Part VI: Code of Practice on Student Support and Guidance

The purpose of the Academic Procedures Handbook is to provide a reference point for all universities, covering the main aspects of academic standards and the quality of education. The six Codes reflect consensus amongst universities and other groups on the key elements of good practice, which support the student learning experience.

The Codes may be added to over time, to reflect developments in Universities and Nationally.

The existence of an Academic Procedures Handbook providing guidance on good practice at National level greatly facilitates the implementation of Quality Assurance mechanisms and the sustenance and enhancement of quality in the Universities within the overarching quality framework described at the end of the book. Individual universities will be expected to use the Academic Procedures Handbook to guide their own developing practice and to supplement it with local handbooks that reflect particular context and requirements of individual institutions.

# **PART III: CODE OF PRACTICE ON EXTERNAL ASSESSORS**

## **Foreword**

As part of its programme of work, the CVCD/UGC Quality Assurance Committee has developed Codes of Practice covering key aspects of quality assurance in higher education.

This is one of six Codes, all of which have been developed in consultation with university staff through workshops and seminars during 2002 and 2003.

## ***Purpose***

The Codes are intended to be used:

- to guide and inform institutional activity;
- to promote and disseminate good practice;
- to encourage a commitment to continuous improvement.

## ***Structure***

Each Code is divided into three sections, covering general principles, institutional by-laws and regulations and specific guidance. Some have additional appendices, where more detail is required.

## ***Development***

The Codes are intended to be dynamic documents, which continue to develop over time. This will enable them to take account of national developments and to capture changing university practice.

Feedback is therefore, invited on any aspect of the Codes.

## **Introduction**

Assessment is a key function of higher education. Through the assessment of students' work, universities set and maintain their academic standards and safeguard their awards and qualifications. External assessors enable universities to compare their own standards and expectations of student achievement with university and professional practice elsewhere,



nationally and internationally. One of the aims of this code of practice is to identify where and how external assessors can strengthen a university's internal assessment procedures by drawing upon subject knowledge and experience of assessment elsewhere in higher education to promote good practice and contribute to sound quality assurance across the university sector.

The code of practice recognizes that not all universities may yet use external assessors in the ways described, or that some may have limited experience in certain subject areas. It seeks to provide a framework to help universities define and develop external assessors' roles, to clarify their function, powers and responsibilities in relation to internal marking and examining arrangements and to suggest how their involvement, including through written reports and feedback direct to university staff, might help to maintain common standards and ensure fair and equitable treatment for students.

External assessors are essentially a part of, not separate from, a university's own quality assurance procedures. They are appointed by universities to assist and support them in their role as assessing and awarding bodies.

## **External Assessors Definition**

External assessors are appointed by universities to assist with the maintenance and comparability of academic standards and student achievement across all universities in Sri Lanka. They provide an expert, independent view of subject standards and of the fairness and rigour of the assessment process. Their role is not to be a first or second marker of examinations, but to act as an external moderator of a university's assessment processes and outcomes. Their primary role is to evaluate marking standards and student achievement with reference to comparable programmes in other universities and to national standards and subject benchmarks.

The guidance this Code contains is outlined in three sections:

- A. General Principles
- B. Institutional By-Laws and Regulations
- C. Specific Guidance

The Code sets out a framework within which institutions are expected to develop their own procedures and practice, consistent with the overall guidance in the Code. It provides guidance on the role of external assessors and their contribution to the safeguarding of standards of student assessment.

## **A. General Principles**

1. Universities appoint external assessors to contribute their expert judgment by reporting on:
  - The appropriateness of the academic standards set by a university for its awards, by reference to published national guidance.

- The standard of student progression, performance and achievement and how these compare with standards achieved on similar programmes in other Sri Lankan universities.
  - Whether assessment and examination processes are operated in accordance with stipulated criteria and marking schemes.
2. External assessors complement, but they do not substitute for, a university's internal examiners and markers. Universities may appoint internal staff as second markers in order to maintain consistency and objectivity in their marking systems. In addition, or alternatively, they may designate a group of senior staff to be responsible for ensuring that all internal examination marking is accurate and fair. External assessors can support and strengthen internal marking systems. The appointment of at least one external examiner for each subject/discipline is strongly recommended as this would greatly facilitate the maintenance of common standards within and across universities.

## **B. Institutional By-Laws and Regulations**

3. It is suggested that the following be covered in institutional regulations and by-laws, as appropriate:
- roles, powers and responsibilities of external assessors;
  - differences between external assessors and internal (first or second) markers;
  - policies and regulations for the nomination and appointment of external assessors, and the conditions under which their contracts may be terminated.

## **C. Specific Guidance**

### **Nomination and Appointment**

4. External assessors should be appointed by the Senate of the university for a defined period, ideally for not less than one year and not more than three years. The selection of individuals for appointment should take account of recommendations from the faculty and/or department.
5. Universities should ensure that their external assessors are competent to undertake the responsibilities defined in their contract, including having relevant and current subject expertise and recent experience as an examiner at university level. To be nominated as an external assessor, an academic staff member will normally be required to be at least Senior Lecturer Grade I and to have had at least five years experience of university teaching after completing a postgraduate qualification.
6. Universities should require full information (normally a CV) to be submitted by



proposed external assessors as part of their consideration for appointment.

7. Where a university wishes to appoint an individual other than a practicing academic as an external assessor (for example, a member of a professional body) it should ensure that the person is not the sole external assessor.
8. University procedures should ensure that any potential conflict(s) of interest (for example, arising from an external assessor's recent or current contact with the university, its staff or the programme) are identified and resolved prior to the appointment of external assessors.

### **Role, Powers and Responsibilities of External Assessors**

9. Universities should clearly define the role, powers and responsibilities of external assessors and communicate these in writing to assessors, to internal markers and members of examining boards. It is recommended that information on the role of external assessors, how they work with internal markers and their role in examining boards is included in a university's written procedures for quality assurance.
10. The key role of external assessors is to provide expert and objective comment on the standard of assessment, the standards actually achieved by students and the fairness and rigour of the assessment process and the award decisions that flow from it. External assessors will therefore be responsible for some or all of the following:
  - commenting on proposed assessment arrangements and forms of assessments (including examination papers, proposed assignments, essays, laboratory and other similar assessed work) before these are finalized;
  - confirming that such arrangements and forms of assessment are fair, are of a standard that matches the level of award and that meets the learning objectives of the course, and are comparable with similar courses and qualifications with which the external assessor is familiar in other universities;
    - moderating marks and assessment outcomes given by internal markers to students' work, on a sample or full set as agreed with the faculty/department, to ensure that marks and assessed outcomes are fair, consistent, and that they accord with the faculty/department's declared marking criteria;
  - resolving disputed or conflicting marks on assessed work given by internal markers;
    - confirming, if possible by attendance at examining boards, that decisions on the outcome of assessment are fair and rigorous.
11. Universities may also invite external assessors to bring their expert judgment to bear on

course design and modification where such involvement does not conflict with their judgment on how such courses are assessed. They may invite external assessors to reflect annually and at the end of their period of appointment more generally on the standards set in subjects and the quality of courses from evidence of assessment and the actual achievement of students.

### **Powers of External Assessors**

12. External assessors are appointed to assist universities to maintain standards through the application of their expert knowledge and by drawing on their experience of assessment elsewhere in higher education. It is important that the powers of external examiners are carefully and precisely defined in relation to:
  - adjusting marks awarded by internal markers for individual students and for groups of students, on the basis of external assessor scrutiny of all or a sample of assessed work;
  - access to all assessed work, including work undertaken outside the university which is assessed as part of a course;
  - overruling decisions made by internal markers;
  - agreeing or being required to confirm by co-signature decisions of examining boards; selecting students for and involvement in oral examinations to determine borderline performance;
  - involvement in inquiries and decision-making arising from suspected cases of cheating, plagiarism and other assessment offences.

### **Preparation of External Assessors**

13. Universities should ensure that nominated external assessors are provided with sufficient information to enable them to identify whether they can carry out their responsibilities effectively.
14. Universities should seek to prepare their external assessors fully for their role by providing them with documented information on the university's policies for assessment and external examining and with relevant programme documentation.

### **External Assessment Arrangements**

15. At least one external assessor should be appointed for each programme or (as appropriate) for each part of a programme that contributes to an award. Universities will need to consider the programme structure and frequency of examinations (in particular in semester and credit-based awards) in determining the number and extent of involvement of external assessors in examining board activity.



16. Universities should discuss with their external assessors the sample of student work the assessor will be asked to moderate in order to evaluate marking standards and student achievement, and other arrangements necessary to enable them to fulfill their responsibilities.
17. Where programmes are offered in partnership with other institutions, external assessor arrangements should be the same as those used by the awarding institution for its own programmes. The procedures should be clearly specified and documented, and rigorously and consistently applied.

### **External Assessors' Reports**

18. Universities should require external assessors to prepare regular, written reports, normally annually. Reports should comment on the assessment process and the standards of student attainment.
19. Universities should provide guidance to external assessors on the format, coverage and deadlines for receipt of their reports. Such guidance might include request for comment on:
  - stated intended learning outcomes;
  - rigour and coverage of examination papers according to the stated curriculum;
  - clarity and consistency of marking criteria;
  - standards actually achieved by students;
  - quality of teaching and learning support with reference to students' actual achievement;
  - appropriateness of assessment strategies with reference to intended learning outcomes;
  - balance and coherence of curriculum with reference to students' actual achievement;
  - rigour, fairness and efficiency of examining board procedures and their consistency with stipulated rules and procedures.
20. Universities should request external assessors to send their reports to the head of the institution. External assessors' reports should be circulated to designated staff for consideration and response.
21. Universities should require a written response to external assessors' reports to be forwarded to external assessors, including actions taken to follow up recommendations, taking account of the views of staff at the subject level.
22. There should be a central mechanism (e.g. consideration by a committee of Senate), to provide an overview of all external assessors' reports and responses to them. This should provide opportunities to monitor trends, and to take remedial action where necessary and disseminate good practice..



## **Feedback to External Assessors on their Reports**

23. Universities should ensure that external assessors are given within a reasonable time a response to their comments and recommendations, including information on any actions taken.

## **APPENDIX TO CODE OF PRACTICE ON EXTERNAL ASSESSORS**

### **Further Guidance on the Respective Roles of External Assessors and Subject Reviewers**

External Assessors and Subject Reviewers perform different roles:

- External Assessors moderate university student assessment processes: subject review has no part to play in the assessment of individual students;
- External Assessors undertake their moderation normally on a semester basis, following the student assessment cycle; Subject Reviewers scrutinize the quality and standards of subject provision approximately every 3-5 years;
- External Assessors are expected to sample the outcome of assessed work, to advise on assessment procedures and to offer their expert judgment on marks or grades where internal markers are unable to agree. Subject Reviewers will expect to see evidence of the general effectiveness of assessment procedures, including with reference to assessed student work. They do not change any marks. They also seek evidence of how external assessor procedures are managed in respect of the guidance in this Code.