

The London Mathematical Society

Comments on *Review of the UK Professional Framework for Higher Education*

The **London Mathematical Society** is the major UK learned society for mathematics with an international membership. The Society's main activities include publishing journals and books, providing grants to support mathematics and organising scientific meetings and lectures. The Society is also involved in policy and strategic work to support mathematics and the mathematics research community. This work includes engaging with government and policy-makers on mathematics education and research, participating in international mathematical initiatives and promoting the discipline.

This documents contains the LMS' comments on two important issues arising from the Review of the UK Professional Framework for Higher Education (PSF) as proposed by the Higher Education Academy in its Consultation Document, http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/rewardandrecog/UKPSF_Consultation_document_Nov10.pdf .

1. Training of new lecturers

The LMS endorses the view that the training of new teaching staff is extremely important, and should be taken with the utmost seriousness, and in particular strongly supports the call, in Section C, "Disciplinary Expertise", for significant disciplinary input in this training. It believes that the absence of such a disciplinary component in the training of new staff is the primary cause of the low esteem in which this training is currently held. The LMS reiterates its long held view, widely attested and supported by independent research, that there are significant cognitive differences between learning in mathematics and in most other subjects, and that these differences render essential a significant mathematically-based component in the training process. This view is strongly supported by the results of a survey of UK mathematics departments, carried out by the LMS, which reported widespread and consistent dissatisfaction with generic training. The LMS is concerned that the taught part of most generic training courses is seen by most mathematics departments as irrelevant to their needs.

The LMS supports the MSOR Induction Course which provides training relevant to mathematicians and encourages lecturers to become part of the broader mathematics teaching community. It is concerned that it may be under threat. The LMS also supports in house mathematics based training including the mentoring of new lecturers by experienced colleagues. Where possible mathematics departments should be the primary locus for the training of their new staff. Unless departments are involved in training, the science of teaching will not gain the recognition which is needed for teaching to be properly appraised and rewarded.

2. External Examining

The LMS welcomes the recognition of the importance of the careful and time-consuming work done by external examiners.

However the LMS is concerned by the proposals on "External Examiner Training and Development" contained in the Review. In particular they have the potential to undermine the independence of external examiners and so compromise the standards of degrees awarded by British Universities.

According to the Consultation Document, it is desirable that

"those undertaking external examiner duties demonstrate effective academic practice in relation to this aspect of their work (and, where appropriate, may wish to use it as contributing evidence of teaching related effectiveness within, for example, submissions for promotion)."

External examining is a form of peer review. As such it is similar to acting as a referee or an editor, to reviewing a department and to providing references for jobs or promotions. Such activities are informed by a strong academic ethos. The quality of peer reviewing is naturally of concern to those involved in the relevant process, but other parties are not generally in a position to assess it. The proposal that external examiners 'demonstrate effective academic practice' appears to compromise their independence.

The LMS wishes to encourage and support those of its members engaging in external examining duties. The LMS shares the view that the fact of acting as an external examiner is important evidence of an academic's high professional standing and should of course be taken into consideration in promotion decisions. Such recognition is a mark of standing within the wider professional community. However making decisions on promotion in one university dependent on the manner in which a candidate has acted as external examiner in another undermines the process of external examining.

Restricting the independence of external examiners might have serious consequences for universities. External examiners should use their expertise and judgement in an impartial way; they are privy to confidential and sensitive information. Their independence is an important safeguard for universities in case of legal challenges to degree decisions. In the HEA's own words, the system of external examining is "overall, robust and effective". The LMS would also like to point to the sum of evidence submitted in 2008-09 to the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Select Committee (see www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmduis/memo/170/170memo0902.pdf) which supports its opinion that the system of external examining needs reinforcement of the authority and independent standing of external examiners.

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