

Quality Assurance or Quality Lapses?: The Case of the UK External Examining System

Presented by:

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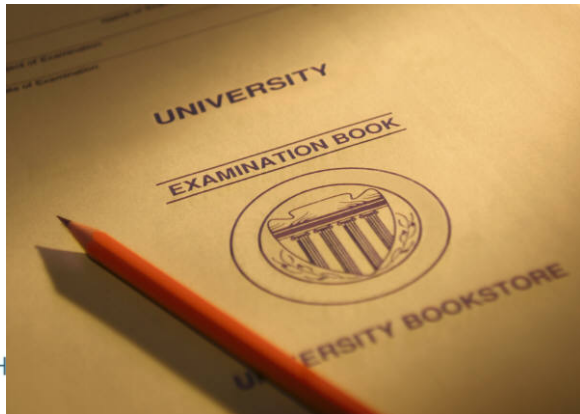
Description of the System



Quality Assurance Agency Expectations

- ❑ *to verify that academic standards are appropriate for the award or part thereof which the external examiner has been appointed to examine;*
- ❑ *to help institutions to assure and maintain academic standards across higher education awards;*
- ❑ *to help institutions to ensure that their assessment processes are sound, fairly operated and in line with the institution's policies and regulations.*

(QAA Code of Practice for the assurance of Academic quality and standards in higher education: Section 4 External examining-August, 2004, p. 3)



Review of the Published Literature

□ Roles (Sheehan, 1994):

- outsider/migrant
- Subject expert/ experienced
- Impartial judge/ custodian of standards
- Interpreter of regulations
- Rapid reader/ interviewer
- Board member/ decision maker
- Power source/conflict copier
- Signatory/reporter

□ Why become one (Hannan & Silver 2006):

- Reciprocity
- Intelligence gathering
- Professional development

□ Concept of quality

“Quality is relative to the user of the term and the circumstances in which it is involved. It means different things to different people, indeed the same person may adopt different conceptualizations at different moments. This raises the issue of whose quality?” (Harvey & Green, 1993, p.10)

Quality ... or... Who's Quality?



- To academics: produce flow of intelligent people
- To government: produce trained scientists/professionals
- To industrialists: produce flexible wide ranging minds

(Reynolds, 1990)

“Quality assurance is a system based on the premise that everyone in an organization has the responsibility of maintaining and enhancing the quality of the product or service” (Tam, 2001, p.49)

Central Research Aims and Methodology



- **AIM:** exploration of external examiners' views of their role in quality assurance of higher education taught programs
- **Context:** taught programs at undergraduate and graduate level
- **Method & Design:** personal in depth interviews in UK (Carson et al., 2001) with on line follow ups & document analysis. Research Paradigm of Realism
- **Analysis of interview data:** Text analysis, thematic coding (Flick, 2002) / a) central topics mentioned-categories from open coding; b) cross check categories for all subjects within and across cases => conceptually thematic matrices
- **Analysis of document data:** content analysis (Sayre, 1992; Krippendorff, 1980)

Findings: Advantages of the S

For institutions:

1. Quality control: of class assessments and grades (accuracy, fairness, consistency), institutional standards

[2a]“If you have a national system you must have the mechanisms to assure that an A is an A” (HM4m)

[2b]“Peer review of teaching practice allows institutional self regulation to continue within appropriate checks and balances” (MJ9m)

2. Quality assurance: advice from experienced professionals; curriculum development; recommendations; peer review; benchmarking
3. Quality audit: check types of assessments used; check feedback to students

For external examiners:

1. Know what to examine (important)
2. To become an external examiner

[1]“Because some Unis can develop very good techniques & bringing an ex-ex from another Uni is a way of first of all getting that information from that other Uni in your own Uni especially when you go to

[1]“Students recognize there is thorough marking process...students appreciate this level of objectivity” (SE6f)

For students:

Security of fair treatment and objectivity

2. Student experiences are filtered in the system



Issues of the System

[2]“the system as it stands focuses exclusively on the exam aspect of a module and ignores other equally important aspects such as delivery, teaching innovation etc” (NN10m)

...it is about
...and what it turns out
...assessment of
...else” (CK2 m)

[3]“sometimes boards make decision without the input of an ex-ex” (CK2 m)

For i

1. Non...
2. Emphasis
3. Number of ex... best practice
4. Public disagreements in
5. Non standardized quality
6. Costs a lot of money
7. Consistency to national standards is not assured
8. Ex-ex reco... adopted o
9. Faculty res... for ex-ex
10. Content qu... (assignments
11. Systemic flaws

[5]“Unis do differ in terms of the financial resources they have... the courses they offer, the students th... sometimes you do see differences in the v... (HM4m)

[8]Pressure on ex-ex not to offer much negative comments in the forms: “because the Uni doesn’t want anything negative on their website because otherwise students will not chose it.” (HG5f)

5. Burea
6. Work
7. Variab
- ex-ex
8. Politics

[11]“Given that the Institutions select the external examiners rather than being appointed there is a possibility of conflicts of interest & a lack of rigour” (MJ9m)

**For students:
No comments**

Quality Issues

1. Where is the quality?
2. External examiners
3. Transfer of knowledge
 - scope
 - culture
 - knowledge (tutors, their supervisors)
 - instructional

[1] "You have got to be in a physical presence at the business takes place and all the bureaucratic work like you correspond with them and how much affect that"

[2] "the ex-ex is left in the awkward position between a formal response which the principal is going to see and someone is going to follow up... you know someone is going to get their

[3a] "... in my whether the

[3b] "One of franchised programs market and the higher." (HG5f)

[3c] "It (knowledge generation and transfer in franchised degrees) is idiosyncratic. It very much depends on the faculty of the franchised programs. From my experience when the academics working for the franchisees have some experience from the UK educational system, the results are better than when they don't have. This seems to happen because of their knowledge on the systems employed in the UK and the required level of achievement." (VC11f)

(tutors, their supervisors) they are marked down. That raises the problem that you see a lot in dissertations, meaning do you mark the process or the outcome? What happens I think with the external examiners is that they look at the outcome, they cannot look at the process... if they (local teachers and markers) do not control the quality of the teaching, then the examiner sees a lot of discrepancies. The ex-ex only sees the outcomes and they don't look at how things are taught and that can be a problem." (HG5f)

The ex-ex system in exported degrees



- *“QAA does conduct rolling reviews of provisioned external examining to the UK ... where UK universities are involved in franchising their provision areas or engaging in collaborative provision overseas...so they have conducted a series of overseas reviews... rolling reviews would not be in terms of the content of the programs, it would be (in the level of) procedures. That is the level of the audit” (QAA Scottish Office, April 2007)*
- *In terms of local agents thoroughness in following the ex-ex procedures: “...that has always been a big concern because of the geographical distance and you know that is one of the main reasons why QAA is concerned to conduct overseas reviews in those countries” (QAA Scottish Office, April 2007)*

Recommendations

[2] "the externals should be given more time ... they do not have time to perform the tasks appropriately, since external examining has a high workload exactly when examiners have to mark (exams) in their own

□ In terms of

1. group
2. redess
3. nation
4. ex-ex
5. ex-ex appointments by third parties

[4] "I think before ex-exs ...are approved by the Uni they should have undergone some training to show some evidence!, ... **to show they can do it** ...in my first ex-ex job I used to repeat phrases that the ex-ex was using when I was being reviewed...I wasn't really sure what I was doing there...and when you get various members of staff to disagree with you, then you have to have certain amount of authority behind you to say no I don't agree with you". (HG5f)

- ## □ In terms of scope: (student reports, ex-exs as consultants; redefinition of scope; account for student expectations; ex-exs contribution in various uni activities during a calendar year)

Thank you

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