

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

Presented by:

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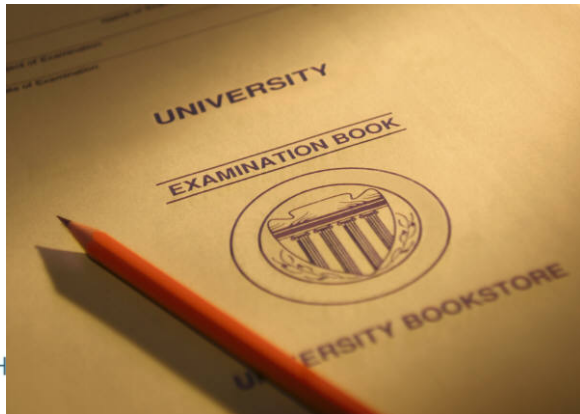
Description of the System



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 difference things to different people, indeed the same person may adopt difference conceptualizations at different moments. This raises the issue of whose quality?” (Harvey & Green, 1993, p.10)

Quality ... or... 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)

- Improvement of student experience rather than institutional aspects of quality (Barnett, 1992)

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
- **Analysis of document data:** content analysis (Sayre,1992; Krippendorff, 1980)

Findings: Advantages of the System



For institutions:

- Quality control: of class assessments and grades (accuracy, fairness, consistency); institutional standards are kept; national uniformity in quality standards; check student performance; student performance across institutions
- Quality assurance: advise from experienced professionals; curriculum development; recommendations; peer review; benchmarking
- Quality audit: check types of assessments used; check feedback to students

For external examiners:

- Knowledge transfer (learn how to examine, learn what is important)
- To become influencer

For students:

- Security of fair treatment and objectivity
- Student experiences are filtered in the system

Findings: Shortcomings of the System



For institutions:

1. Not integral to teaching delivery
2. Emphasis in audit not assurance
3. Number of ex-ex involved not analogous to best practice
4. Public disagreements in boards
5. Non standardized quality
6. Costs a lot of money
7. Consistency to national standards is not assured
8. Ex-ex recommendations are not always adopted or ignored
9. Faculty resistance to advice or to prepare for ex-ex
10. Content quality audit is not always assured (assignments vs exams)
11. Systemic flaws

For examiners:

1. Time pressures
2. Volume of work
3. Not always appreciated
4. Very low pay
5. Bureaucracy
6. Work by distance
7. Variability of perception of the role of ex-ex
8. Politics

For students:

No comments

Quality lapses identified



1. Where is the focus of quality
2. Externals may be compromised
3. Transferability of methods across contexts
 - ▣ scope;
 - ▣ culture and culture bias;
 - ▣ knowledge transfer;
 - ▣ instruction standards

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 of Ex-Exs



- In terms of process:
 1. groups of ex-exs per single discipline programs
 2. redesign the bureaucracy/time relevance
 3. nationally and internationally approved lists of ex-exs
 4. ex-ex training against national standards
 5. ex-ex appointments by third parties

- 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;)