

Title: Acting as external examiners in the UK: going beyond quality assurance

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Abstract

Traditionally the role of the external examiners in UK universities or more formally Higher Education Institutions is that of quality assurance. Typically, an experienced academic who is not affiliated with the Higher Education Institution (i.e. someone from another university) is invited to act as an external examiner for a particular course or a module. The external examiner's primary role is to provide impartial and independent advice to ensure academic standards are upheld for a degree programme; and that the degree is comparable with similar programmes across the country and that the achievements of students are also comparable with students on courses at other universities. This primary role makes external examiners highly valued people in UK universities, and as a result, their views are nearly always taken seriously. Over and above this recognised primary role of quality assurance, external examiners can also be engaged by the host university in other ways. These additional roles or tasks of the external examiner can help enhance teaching and learning in higher education. This chapter will reflect on the range of roles, including the ones that go beyond quality assurance.

Background to external examining in the UK

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the UK often have a large number of external examiners on their books. We realize that having external examiners for undergraduate and postgraduate courses is not universal. For example, having an external examiner in the United States is uncommon; Columbia University's 21st century Public Health Master's programme does not mention external examiner at all (Begg et al., 2014).

In 2018, the UK Quality Code for Higher Education published by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), a national quality body for higher education, states that the role of the external examiner is to *“provide each degree-awarding body with impartial and independent advice, as well as informative comment on the degree-awarding body's standards and on student achievement in relation to those standards”* (QAA, 2018). External examiners are hence perceived as crucial for maintaining the academic standards within higher education settings. Careful and well-balanced advice provided by experienced external examiners reflects their experience and awareness of many higher education providers in the UK and sometimes overseas experience. They are then able to compare the standards of assessment process and students’ assessed work between the institutions and provide independent feedback in an annual written report. These external examiners’ reports are often seen by senior personnel in the university. For example, the University of Aberdeen states this clearly on its ‘External Examiners Annual Report’ form that: *“Your comments are central to the university’s quality assurance mechanisms. Your report will be considered by the relevant School and College and by the Quality Assurance Committee and may be made available to other appropriate university committees”* (University of Aberdeen, 2017). This is an indication that the examiner’s assessment is taken seriously and comments or observations are being used by Higher Education Institutions to take actions to improve quality. In the instance of systematic serious breach of quality standards, the external examiners can write to the head of the school or faculty in confidence and, in extreme cases has the remit to ask the Quality Assurance Agency to investigate any serious concerns or failings. All universities in the UK have clearly defined the roles for external examiners. We list in Table 1 the roles and responsibilities of external examiners at a typical UK university:

Table 1: Roles and Responsibilities of External Examiners at a typical UK university

- to ensure that the standard of any award is comparable to the standard of similar awards conferred by universities in the UK;
- to evaluate all forms of assessment which contribute to students' degree results;
- to evaluate, and help ensure fairness and consistency in, the assessment process;
- to moderate summatively assessed work at module and programme level;
- to comment on draft examination papers and assessment tasks as appropriate;
- to report on the structure, content, academic standards and teaching of programmes;
- to comment, if invited to do so, on any alleged cases of assessment irregularities;
- to produce an annual report for consideration by the appropriate board and the relevant department of academic quality.

Usually, each degree programme has at least one external examiner, while the larger programmes may have several external examiners. External examiners can be selected for specific modules or sub-disciplines in a programme or to individual years in an undergraduate degree (Durham University, n.d.). External examiners are typically appointed for three or four years, to ensure some consistency over a longer period (QAA, 2018). External examiners often receive a small annual honorarium fee. The quantum of which could depend on the number of students on the course (University of Reading, n.d.) or a standard rate set by the university per programme (University of Bristol, n.d.). External examiners are expected to attend the university at least once a year usually to attend the exam board meeting at the end of the academic year. Some Higher Education Institutions expect external examiners to attend twice a year, either once a term or for the final exam board meeting and the resit exam board meeting (Advance HE, 2019).

While the primary role of external examiners is quality assurance, the role of external examiners may go beyond this with a call to improve the standards of teaching and assessments and improve student experiences. In this chapter the following external examiners' roles will be addressed: (a) transforming student experience; (b) being a strategic sounding board; (c) becoming mentors or role models to less experienced staff; (d) acting as a referee; and (e) being a supportive but critical friend. Last but not least, we will highlight the advantage for the external examiner's home institution. The latter benefits through examples of good practice and ideas for innovation brought home by the external examiners.

Transforming student experience: Universities, first and foremost, will normally use external examiners only for Quality Assurance (QA), whom they see primarily as the person doing the overall quality control of the course. For example, the policy and guidelines for external examiners published by the University of Oxford in 2018 regard external examiners as 'arbiters of standards': "Individuals may be nominated to serve as external examiner in one of two categories: either (1) as an external arbiter of standards; or (2) to provide academic expertise not otherwise obtainable within the university" (University of Oxford, 2018).

Medland (2015) noted two areas of expertise to underpin the external examiners' role: "subject and assessment expertise (or assessment literacy)". With subject expertise and level of experience of assessing university assignments and examinations, external examiners assure quality by making sure the subject-specific content of the individual courses/modules fits with the overall programme. They also make sure that assessments are appropriately designed and organised, marking adheres to the standard criteria set using a marking rubric. They ratify this by looking at standards across the sector and ensure adherence to faculty

and/or university policies (University of Oxford, 2018). External examiners accomplish these tasks through the pedagogical knowledge, confidence and the teaching experience, both in understanding the quality assurance approaches relevant for the country and understanding the academic standards for a given course or a module. This quality assurance monitoring involves checking and approving the questions for a sample of continuous assessments and all examination papers. This same monitoring usually involves commenting and editing questions prior to exams as well as assessing model answers drafted by academics on the course. External examiners also check a sample of work by the students to ensure consistency in marking and making sure a fair assessment process was followed. Typically, external examiners sample a few of the top, middle and bottom marks to assess the accuracy and fairness of the marking.

Some universities deploy the external examiners as an independent referee either to give a third (or second) opinion on students' work or for course-related issues such as discrepancies between the internal markers of a thesis or dissertation. Higher Education Institutions can also invite the external examiners as a moderator where the internal exam board could not arrive on an agreement. All of these approaches used and activities carried out by the external examiners can either be hands-on or be very much hands-off (Newcastle University, 2009). For example, external examiners might never meet any students on the course in person nor many of the lecturers on the course. On some occasions, however, Higher Education Institutions may introduce the external examiners to all or selected number of students, perhaps at a semi-informal meeting, such as poster presentations or oral presentations. Our experience is that meeting of students, tutors and lecturers on the course helps the external examiner to make a more holistic assessment of the course. External examiners will sometimes ask to directly examine the student performance in the form of a viva, to endorse

the level of degree classification to be awarded to the student (e.g. pass/fail or distinction/commendation categories) (University of Oxford, 2018).

The role of an external examiner, in its absolute, can be done without meeting any students or other lecturers on the course/module. The reliable judgements on the academic side can be desk-based, i.e. made with no interaction with the students at all. However, in these varied processes of external examining, in addition to bringing in the independent evaluation of the courses or modules and their standards of achievement, the external examiner can improve the learning process and experience of the students. For example, the interaction with the independent evaluator in the form of an external examiner does provide the students with richer experience extending the learning process beyond the end of the exams. From the authors' experiences, interactions with students ranged from examining every student for a 10 to 15-minute viva in order to determine the level of award to examining every borderline category (fail/pass; normal pass/commendation; commendation to distinction) to have the assurance that the right classification was awarded. It is a matter of striking a balance between the strict process of quality assurance by making the external examiner meet all the students in the exam setting and not meet any students at all.

At one Higher Education Institution where one of the authors acted as external examiner in Medicine, the external examiner first assessed the written portfolios for the year and after that quality assessment observed a number of students during an OSCE (Objective Structured Clinical Examination). In this Higher Education Institution, the medical students would have, for example, three-minute clinical examination OSCE with a patient partner playing a patient with specific symptoms, followed by a communication skills assessment, differential diagnosis assessment or injecting a mannequin. Observing the students gave the external

examiner an insight into the examination processes and allowed for informal discussions with the students afterwards about their experience of undergoing an OSCE.

In a second example, the normal practice was that the external examiner conducted a viva for all the students who were in the borderline classification. These viva exams took up a lot of time, which left the external examiner with little time to meet the other students to gain a more general impression of the course. So instead of the external examiner conducting a viva with all the students with borderline classification, the following year this particular Higher Education Institution only examined those students for whom the internal exam board could not come to a decision. This freed up the time and gave the external examiner an opportunity to attend a poster presentation by all the students. This interaction helped motivate the students to meet the external examiner and also met the objective to enhance the learning through conference style presentations. Interestingly the way external examiners are being used in different Higher Education Institutions is hardly ever studied. For example, there appeared to be no published evidence on the student satisfaction or the general student experience in relation to external examiners' roles and/or involvement.

Strategic sounding board: Some of the Higher Education Institutions are a little more strategic in their approach in using the external examiners for advice on curriculum development and the future directions of a programme, or the way forward regarding ways of marking or specific course content (University of Aberdeen, 2017). Nearly all external examiners come with experience of coordinating their own programmes, have experiences of reviewing programmes to improve the quality of the courses and ways of attracting more and better students. Often, they also have past experience from acting as external examiners in other Higher Education Institutions or from teaching elsewhere, including teaching abroad.

This makes them experts in understanding the national and international level thresholds of the quality of teaching and learning. With this wider experience, external examiners can bring in the ‘outsider’ and ‘unbiased’ perspective to the strategic development of courses. They can become a critical friend by casting a fresh eye over the course content, not constrained by the internal politics of the institution. Course coordinators may ask the advice from their external examiners on developing a new module on an existing programme or coordinators may seek advice on changing assessment methods for a particular module or the balance of various assessment methods across all modules of a programme. External examiners can provide honest and sincere feedback, be encouraging and supportive but speak truthfully and constructively. They can also bring their experience from the university where they are employed and from other Higher Education Institutions where they have acted as external examiners.

Simple suggestions, based on what works elsewhere can help programme coordinators a lot, for example, offering statements like; “Are you aware that the University of XXX does this slightly differently, namely they”; or “When I was an external examiner at the University of YYY, the programme team decided that it would be better to change the assignment to oral exams from written exams on a similar module to what you are discussing today. Initially, this did not work, but it went much better and was much better appreciated by the students after they also did”. Some of the critical comments that external examiners provide might be uncomfortable for teaching staff, programme coordinators, or heads of department to hear, however such reliable judgements based on experience, advice on good practices and impartial advice can help the institutions to enhance the quality of the programmes/modules.

Mentors or role models to less experienced staff: Sometimes, the role of the external examiner goes beyond quality assurance in acting as a mentor for slightly less experienced teachers/coordinators. Experienced external examiners use their own experience of being lecturers, coordinators and external examiners to offer reassurance and support to less experienced staff. Unlike more traditional academic mentorship arrangements, the external examiner as a mentor is not part of the same Higher Education Institution making it easier for the junior mentee to express issues and concerns related to their work. Mentorship combines psychological and practical support, which unlike supervision or line management, is voluntary (Arnesson & Albinsson, 2017). It can be difficult for a junior member of staff and new coordinators to bring about a change in the way the courses are run, assessments are conducted and feedback are provided. The external examiners, with their experience, can provide sound advice in helping the new members assess the robustness of the proposed changes and to help negotiate the changes with the institution. In some circumstances, the external examiners can vocalise the support for the changes proposed by the junior member of staff. An agreement from the external examiner will be respected by the Higher Education Institution and will carry a great deal of weight to bring about changes, which otherwise the department or faculty or Higher Education Institution might be resistant to (Benes et al., 2014).

Observing an experienced external examiner in action at the external exam boards is, in itself, a great learning experience for junior members of staff. When junior members are first appointed as external examiners, they can believe that their appointment as external examiner is to be critical, that they have an obligation to highlight every shortcoming of the course and to provide a list for improvement. As mentors, external examiners can gently teach the junior members of staff to get the right balance into accomplishing the quality assurance role of

identifying any weaknesses and bringing it to the attention of the department at earliest opportunity, while stepping back from interfering with institutional policies. For example, while some universities follow the policy of terminating the student's study period immediately if they plagiarised their work, some have a policy of warning the students in the first instance or investigate the issue through a devolved committee with a penalty and only terminate the registration of students when it is repeated. In our experience, junior external examiners, either out of compassion to the students or feel a sense of injustice, can try to resist the university policies. Experienced external examiners are more likely to be skilled to have that balance and can provide mentorship to juniors in handling this sensitively and constructively (Manchester Metropolitan University, 2017).

Mentoring junior members of staff in the context of external examining can become a long-lasting and sustainable mentorship. Our experiences have shown that experienced external examiners continue to support the junior staff beyond the fixed term of exam board interactions, both in terms of developing their skills in educational context and also in furthering research collaborations if they have similar interests. The social interactions that happen over coffee and working lunches/dinners in the exam board context with coordinators and lecturers can lead to discussions and academic exchanges with colleagues, which later on can trigger collaborative research projects. For example, we have previously taken forward ideas that gradually developed into a funded international educational workshop, visiting new places and institutions. Such innovative collaborative projects, initiated during the informal conversations in the external exam board context, further the learning experience for all involved in teaching. It could help understanding the student views in international context, which can then be brought back to the UK to suggest possible improvements. This is a really

rewarding experience that can continue beyond the mentoring that happens during the external examining.

Acting as referee: Some Higher Education Institutions use external examiners as adjudicators in difficult situations. These can be tricky situations between colleagues teaching on a programme or situations dealing with difficult students. Since the external examiner is not a stakeholder in the situation and therefore not advantaged or disadvantaged by the decisions made, he or she can act more independently than other decision-makers. For example, a conflict between colleagues about the relative weight of a module in a programme or an assignment in a module can affect the status of the module or the workload of certain members of staff. In our experience, such education management decisions are assigned to a dean or a director of education, and occasionally the outcomes might affect the dean's workload or the director of education's module. In these circumstances, the Higher Education Institutions might consider it safer to seek advice or arbitration from the external examiner, for the same reason that companies hire external consultants to help take the difficult decisions. For example, one of the situations encountered by the external examiners was where there was an on-going conflict between pragmatists and purists in a particular discipline. The purists found that their module (i.e. their specific discipline) was not valued enough within the overall programme, whilst the pragmatists argued that this one module should not dominate the overall postgraduate programme. This had been a long-running issue for years, and when the internal efforts were not effective to address the issue, it was brought to the attention of the newly appointed external examiner by a senior staff in the school. This examiner, as an independent referee, was able to look at it objectively without being influenced by the internal conflicts. The external examiner's adjudication brought an

end to this long-running conflict by effective mediation, while ensuring the university rules are adhered to, which the Higher Education Institution internally had not managed to solve.

One of the common situations where the external examiner will be asked to be a referee is when there are wide discrepancies between two internal markers. Normally within the institutions, the solution would be that both the markers will discuss the students' work to reconcile the marks. However, in a situation when this is not achieved, the next line of action will be to bring in another internal independent marker with the subject and/or methodological expertise to give it a mark. If the issue is still not resolved, either due to personality clash or deeper conviction of either of the markers that they have judged it rightly, then the external examiner will be called in to referee and assess this piece of work. In one of these situations, the refereeing was more difficult for the external examiner as there was no documentation of the marking process for the external examiner to comprehend the whole situation. Then it falls to the external examiner to read through the whole thesis with no insight into the process or issues identified by the individual markers. This issue would have been solved much more easily and smoothly if time and space were provided to the markers to have a good discussion and to document the reasons. In this situation, the external examiner provided a suggestion to the markers to use an individual mark sheet with scores and comments given by each marker; and then a clear documentation of overall mark sheet, logged in a consistent format, explaining how differing marks were reconciled by staff generating a definitive score. This improved the process and transparency of the marking. With the clear documentation, it also became easier for the external examiner, coming in as a referee, to evidence the quality and consistency of the marking while improving the clarity and saving time.

Growing emphasis of students as ‘education customers’ among UK universities, makes the students more demanding (Tomlinson, 2016), which perhaps makes dealing with poor and/or difficult students more problematic. One of the tricky situations experienced by the external examiners related to a student with issues. This particular student was seen by the external examiner as one of the pass/fail students in an oral exam. The student performed poorly (not just in the oral exam) and as a result, failed the final year. However, the student appealed arguing that the university had not followed the correct procedures. In most UK universities, students cannot appeal against the academic judgment linked to their marks, but can appeal only against the incorrect use of procedures that led to the poor performance by the student. To prove that the correct procedures had been followed, the Higher Education Institution asked the external examiner to give evidence to help defend the university. At about the same time, the student also contacted the external examiner directly. This is something that is highly unusual in the UK, especially as the student demanded access to notes taken at the oral exam under the freedom of information act. On this occasion the external examiner emailed the student in reply stating that (a) the concerned Higher Education Institution had followed its own procedures; (b) that the external examiner’s report does not include students’ names; and (c) that the Higher Education Institution has agreed to make the external examiners’ report publicly available. The external examiner’s diplomatic approach to both helped solve the issue for the university concerned.

Being a supportive but critical friend: Where external examiners go into Higher Education Institutions as an outsider and as a referee, it is quite easy to display a hawk-like (threatening) behaviour towards the members of staff. This could come from a keen sense to be objective, uphold high standards of excellence and an elevated sense of privilege. In addition, given the time pressures for marking and strict turnaround times for the institutions, sometimes the

external examiners do not receive the samples of work or the final exam spreadsheet in time to review properly. External examiners sometimes are required to return the feedback within the frame of a few days. If external examiners are required to conduct oral examinations for borderline fail/pass candidates, a short period of time to read several theses can put a strain on the examiners. In those situations, it is easy to display impolite behaviour with the academic and administrative staff. This could create an uncomfortable and tense atmosphere at exam boards where the constructive and supportive element can become lost. In these situations, it is recommended that the external examiners gently encourage the admin team to provide adequate time for commenting on students' work in the future. This gentle behaviour can inculcate a supportive atmosphere while being a critical friend.

While some universities provide exam board dates well in advance (provide all the dates for the whole year), some universities are not well organised. If several external examiners are involved per programme, getting dates for exam boards that will suit all examiners can be complicated. Negotiating the dates for exam board attendance is quite important as the presence of external examiner at the exam board can be quite constructive, to facilitate an improved service to students. Sometimes while sending the external examiner report to the institutions, it is important that an appropriate language that is supportive is used, while being transparent to highlight any weaknesses identified, retaining the critical element. It is also very important to highlight the positive elements of the programme, and appreciate the admin and the support staff. Sometimes, if in doubt, it is helpful to send a draft report to staff to ensure that the external examiner has not penned anything factually incorrect, before submitting the formal report. Recognising that it is not just a one-way transfer of ideas from a visiting expert to the host institution but a two-way process encourages staff to share issues and opportunities with their external examiner and to exchange ideas. This notion of being a

critical friend is not without its own problems as Bloxham and Price (2015) note, since there are concerns about clarity in the external examiners' role in assuring standards when they are more a critical friend than an arbiter of standards.

There are other times when external examiners have to be critical, while being supportive. For example, situations around support systems for staff, such as when the virtual learning environments (VLEs) are clunky, unwieldy or incompatible with the external examiners institutions. They also might still be based on hard copies or only partly electronic, all of which can pose problems for the external examiner. In these situations, external examiners will be confronted with delays in accessing the relevant information before the exam board or faced with piles of papers on arrival to check things over in a restricted time period. In these scenarios, the external examiner has to be supportive of the teaching and admin staff accepting the issues that electronic platforms can cause, however, highlighting the issues. For some external examiners, this can be a burden. For example, one of the authors is an external examiner at a UK university where they use a fairly similar VLE as the one at the home Higher Education Institution. As in all good bureaucracies, fairly similar means in practice that there are subtly incomprehensible differences. Being used to one operating system at home, and as an external examiner, navigating the visiting Higher Education Institution's system only occasionally can be frustrating, difficult and time consuming.

Lessons for home: Our experience is that over the years, we as external examiners have brought back evidence of good practice from the places we visited as external examiner to our home Higher Education Institution. Thus, being an external examiner may help the academic, who might be coordinating their own programme or leading other teaching staff in their institutions to adopt some of the lessons learnt in their own practice. We have brought

back to our respective institutions, many innovations related to improving assessment, or ideas for new modules. We have also returned home with insights that are wider than just the course or module we acted as an external examiner for, such as novel ideas about the marketing of our own courses and/or ways of academic working. For example, one of us came across a good working example of academic writing weeks which was discussed at an external examiners' meeting at one of the reputable universities in the UK. Listening to both the staff's enthusiasm and the evidence they provided, one of us used this to draft a one-page proposal for their own university. After presenting this to our dean, it resulted in the introduction of a similar scheme at the home Higher Education Institution. A second example of learning as an external examiner, relates to funded postgraduate places. Gaining insight into the kind of funding that another Higher Education Institution has gained for its MSc students, motivated one of us to discuss studentships with their Higher Education Institution's director of education and to apply for similar funding the following year.

Final thoughts

Being an external examiner can be a demanding and definitely underpaid role. However, in the UK, external examiners volunteer to do it to enhance their career (i.e. something to add to one's CV), for motivation to learn from the other institutions and out of a sense of duty to academia (France & Fletcher, 2004). From our experience, it is unlikely that external examiners do it for the financial gain. As we have summarised, external examiners go beyond the primary role of quality control to become referees, mentors and strategic sounding boards. In the process, they develop friendships and help support each other. However, not all Higher Education Institutions make best use of the external examiners. A recent study of staff and students on the Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT) programme at Riphah International University in Islamabad, Pakistan identified "use of external examiners, reliability and

validity of assessment tools, scrutiny of assessments by external examiners” as the programme’s key weaknesses (Shakil-Ur-Rehman et al., 2018). Having external examiners elsewhere can also be beneficial for the external examiner’s own university, not just in status of the academic who is involved, but also in gaining insight into elements of good practice at similar Higher Education Institutions. In spite of the valuable role the external examiners play in upholding the standards of academia with Higher Education Institutions and safeguarding student interests, there are no standard protocols across the UK to identify and recruit external examiners. Some of the time, these are informal invitations or personal contacts (France & Fletcher, 2004). There is a lack of strategies to provide professional development and support for the academic staff to take on the role of examining externally. In conclusion, external examiners do go beyond the role of assisting with maintaining the function of the academic system and quality assurance; and there is a need to provide opportunities for professional development for aspiring and serving external examiners to support them in enhancing their roles.

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