

Margaret Price<sup>1</sup>, Sue Bloxham<sup>2</sup>, Birgit den Outer<sup>1</sup>, Jane Hudson<sup>1</sup>  
<sup>1</sup>Oxford Brookes University, UK, <sup>2</sup>University of Cumbria, UK

External Examiners' Standards Examined: The practice of external examining in the contemporary quality assurance context of higher education (0139)

Programme number: Q11

Research Domain: Management, Leadership, Governance and Quality

*The practice of external examining in the contemporary quality assurance context of higher education*

Introduction of new subjects and types of programmes, increasing collaborations, decreasing resources per capita and internationalisation have dramatically altered the global higher education landscape. These changes have led to calls for greater comparability and public accountability with regard to academic standards. In the UK, external examining, first established in 1832, has been repeatedly called into question; in each instance, however, it has been maintained and external examining is still relied upon as the key accountability process which directly addresses the quality of student performance.

Despite reliance on the external examining system, understanding of how academic standards are constructed and applied by external examiners is extremely limited. Significant 'calibration' of individuals' assessment standards in general is lacking (Sadler 2011) yet this calibration is seen as necessary to meet demands of the quality assurance processes in the higher education 'target culture' (e.g. Teelken 2012). Research on tutors' academic standards emphasises the individualised, tacit, interpretive nature of standards, learnt informally through active participation in relevant communities and practices (Shay 2005; Orr 2010). Yet, successive reports on external examining have skirted around the issue of what standards mean, how they are set and maintained, how they are influenced, and how they are applied by examiners. They therefore do not problematise how examiners apply academic standards even though evidence suggests that examiners rely heavily on personal experience (QAA 2005) and experience of their own institutions, with less significance given to institutional information or national reference points (Colley & Silver 2005).

The general aim of the QAA and HEA-sponsored research project on which the conference paper reports is to investigate how academic standards are conceived, constructed, and applied before, and in the process of, external examining. Twenty four experienced examiners in chemistry, history, psychology and nursing were recruited from twenty diverse UK universities through open advertisement. The six examiners in each subject area were provided with five B/C grade borderline examples of student work and general assessment criteria (with the exception of the chemists). Researchers worked with examiners individually, using a Repertory Grid (Kelly 1963) exercise to facilitate the examiners in articulating the nuanced constructs they use in distinguishing between students. The generated constructs emerged from an in-the-

moment evaluation based on actual student work, rather than on idealised notions or official marking documents on what student work *should* look like. Examiners were asked to rank each assignment against these self-generated constructs and to provide an overall grade for each piece within the UK grade scale of A-E (1<sup>st</sup>; 2.i; 2.ii, 3<sup>rd</sup>, fail). Completing the grid exercise and discussing the constructs provided a 'way in' to the interview on standards External Examiners hold and where they originate by providing concrete examples.

The interview led to construction of a modified *social world map* (Clarke 2005), the purpose of which was to discover the provenance of the identified constructs by inquiring into the social worlds in which they were created, and the commitment of the external examiner to these worlds. The benefit of the map-making exercise was to visualise the research questions and talk about standards differently. In addition, it was designed to make visible the diversity of standards examiners feel are of influence and get an insight into the extent to which the examiners are aware of them. The maps were constructed in conversation with the researcher, and conversations were audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed using a thematic qualitative analysis. Initial codes were developed through close reading of the data and agreement between different members of the research team was obtained via coding a few interviews together. Emergent themes were identified from this initial coding framework.

With the data collection phase completed, initial analysis reveals that the different social worlds in which examiners acquire and embody standards and expertise compete with, and sometime contradict the various due diligence processes that make up the modern external examining system. During the grid exercise, external examiners each proposed between three and ten qualities that they noticed in the examples of student work. They then prioritised them in terms of their importance in evaluating student work. Because this exercise more closely resembled first marking than external examining, participants were asked during the mapping exercise whether this list represented the standards they would use in external examining. At times examiners felt the list was similar to the qualities they would apply in the context of external examining and also saw their role as first time marker and external examining as interchangeable. At other times, examiners felt that their own standards had no place in the context of external examining, either because they believed that applying one's own standards was inappropriate or because the modern external examining system via the introduction of more stringent standardisation processes had taken out the opportunities in which examiner-specific expertise could be expressed. In describing a process-oriented interpretation or an internalised standards interpretation of the positions in the external examining system, examiners often expressed commitment to both positions simultaneously, resulting in tension to align the two.

In a time when higher education institutions are increasingly compelled to adhere to principles of transparency and accountability, this paper aims to step back and consider the bearing of quality assurance processes on the everyday practice of academics in an external examining context. By unpicking what external examiners do, and the tensions that they navigate, the study aims to reconsider the role of the external examiner and locate the place the external examining system is able to occupy as custodian of academic standards.

## References

Bloxham, S., Boyd, P. and Orr, S. 2011. Mark my words: the role of assessment criteria in UK higher education grading practices. *Studies in Higher Education* 36: 655-670.

Clarke, A.E. 2005. *Situational analysis: Grounded theory after the postmodern turn*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Colley & Silver. 2005. "External examiners and the benchmarking of standards." HEA. [http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/externalexamining/External\\_examiners\\_and\\_the\\_benchmarking\\_of\\_standards](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/externalexamining/External_examiners_and_the_benchmarking_of_standards).

Kelly, G. 1963. *A theory of personality. The psychology of personal constructs*. New York, Norton.

Orr, S. (2010). ['We kind of try to merge our own experience with the objectivity of the criteria': The role of connoisseurship and tacit practice in undergraduate fine art assessment](#). *Art, Design and Communication in Higher Education* 9: 5-19.

Quality Assurance Agency. 2005. Outcomes from institutional audit: External examiners and their reports. Gloucester, UK. <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Documents/Outcomes1.pdf>.

Sadler, D.R. 2011. "Academic freedom, achievement standards and professional identity." [Quality in Higher Education](#) 17: 85-100.

Shay, S. 2005. The assessment of complex tasks: A double reading. *Studies in Higher Education* 30: 663–79.

Teelken, C. 2012. "Compliance or pragmatism: how do academics deal with managerialism in higher education? A comparative study in three countries." [Studies in Higher Education](#) 37: 271-290.