

## **Title**

### **Examining the Assessment Literacy of External Examiners**

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#### **Abstract**

The use of external examiners has been a distinguishing aspect of UK HE since the 1830s, and one that is still highly valued. Whilst guidelines ensure comparability of procedures, the quality of the underlying practice does not inspire confidence. Subject expertise and assessment literacy underpin the examiner role. But if assessment practices are co-constructed and embedded within local institutional cultures and examiners are external to these, this will limit the extent to which co-constructed subject expertise can be utilised. As a result, the assessment literacy of examiners becomes increasingly pertinent, and yet there is little evidence to support the assumption of their assessment literacy. This paper addresses this gap by analysing the assessment literacy demonstrated within examiner reports using Price et al.'s (2012) characteristics of assessment literacy as a conceptual framework. An intrinsic case study approach is adopted, and an open thematic qualitative analysis is used to analyse the reports.

#### **Introduction**

External scrutiny of Higher Education (HE) courses is evident worldwide, but the use of an external examiner (referred to herein as examiner) from another HE Institution for each course has been a distinguishing aspect of UK HE since the 1830s. Whilst significant changes took place in UK HE during the 1990s, examiners continue to be viewed as highly valued and useful, their primary role focusing on maintaining appropriate and comparable standards. The guidelines produced for examiners by universities and organisations tasked with safeguarding and enhancing quality and standards across UK HE, tend to focus on ensuring comparability and reliability of procedures (e.g. appointment, reporting) rather than scrutinising the quality of the underlying practice (Bloxham, 2009). Of the research that has focused on the underlying practices of examiners, the findings do not inspire confidence. But this is by no means a new concern.

The UK Council for National Academic Awards concluded that, *'The judgment and action of examiners are largely informed by experience and knowledge of their subject and very little informed by an equally pertinent body of knowledge about examinations and the measurement of human performance'* (Cuthbert, 2003). Here Cuthbert draws attention to two areas of expertise that underpin the role of the examiner: a) subject expertise, and; b) assessment expertise, or assessment literacy. This introduces two potential challenges. Firstly, from a poststructuralist perspective, assessment is argued to be *'...co-constructed in communities of practice and standards are socially constructed, relative, provisional and contested'* (Orr, 2007). If assessment practices are co-constructed and embedded in local cultures, and examiners are external to these, this will surely limit the extent to which they can effectively draw upon and apply their co-constructed subject expertise to another institution.

For the purpose of this paper, Price et al.'s (2012) characterisation of assessment literacy shall be utilised. Fundamental to this understanding of assessment literacy is a strong relationship between assessment theory and practice. However, there is an abundance of evidence that serves to highlight how weak alignment is between the two across HE. This gives rise to the second potential challenge for examiners. Surely, a key responsibility should lie not only in being assessment literate themselves, but in supporting the development of greater levels of literacy within the courses being scrutinised. But *'what confidence can we have that the average external examiner has the "assessment literacy" to be aware of the complex influences on their standards and judgement processes?'* (Bloxham & Price, 2013: 12). This question bridges the two areas of expertise highlighted by Cuthbert (2003), and identifies a

gap in the literature relating to the assumption of assessment literacy in examiners. This paper, therefore, aims to address this gap by analysing examiner reports as a means of illuminating the level of assessment literacy demonstrated.

### **Research Method and Design**

The research is a naturalistic inquiry that is exploratory in nature and uses Stake's (2000) Intrinsic Case Study approach within the interpretive paradigm. The case under study is bounded in the sense that it will focus on a particular phenomenon, the evidence of assessment literacy conveyed through external examiner reports submitted across an entire institution.

The institution is research-led and based in the South East of England, with more than 15,000 students enrolled. During the 2012-13 academic year, 135 examiner reports were submitted, examining the whole range of courses (undergraduate and postgraduate) offered across the four faculties of the institution. These reports support and summarise the interaction between the examiner and the course under scrutiny. Cohen et al. (2007: 254) note that '*it is important in case studies for events and situations to be allowed to speak for themselves*'. With this in mind an open thematic qualitative analysis is used to analyse the data. Price et al.'s (2012) characteristics of assessment literacy will then be used as a conceptual framework against which to evaluate the assessment literacy demonstrated within the reports.

### **Preliminary Result, Discussion and Conclusions**

To date, a sample of external examiner reports from each of the institution's four faculties have been subjected to the first stages of analysis. The initial findings suggest that, despite the existence of guidance, the quality of reports submitted is variable. It is acknowledged that external examining can instigate a 'critical dialogue' and lead to the enhancement of what we do in HE (Barnett, 1998). Indeed, there are a number of good examples of this, and disciplinary expertise is also apparent in the feedback comments. But, there are also examples where alignment between what the assessment literature calls for and what the examiner is recommending, do not align. In other words, the assessment literacy demonstrated in the reports of some external examiners is limited in nature, thereby providing a demonstrable example of the assessment theory-practice gap and a flaw in the external examining system that needs to be addressed if this gap is ever to be bridged.

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