"I'm an assessment illiterate": Investigating the assessment literacy of external examiners

Introduction

External scrutiny of Higher Education (HE) courses is evident worldwide, but the use of an external examiner has been a distinguishing feature of UK HE since the 1830s, and one that is internationally recognised as best practice (Finch Review, 2011). External examiner guidelines and reviews focus on ensuring comparability, reliability and transparency of procedures (e.g. appointment and reporting), rather than scrutinising the quality of the underlying practices (Bloxham, 2009). Of the limited research available that does focus on the quality of the underlying practices, findings do not inspire confidence (Cuthbert, 2003; Sadler, 2014) and mounting criticism of the external examiner system has led to a *'tentative downgrading'* of the role (Bloxham & Price, 2015).

Subject and assessment expertise (i.e. assessment literacy) arguably underpin the role of the external examiner (Cuthbert, 2003), although national criteria for appointment (see Finch Review, 2011) focus on the former. Whilst the development of assessment literacy should be an *'obligation'* for external examiners (Bloxham & Boyd, 2012), this is one of a number of unchallenged assumptions underpinning the system (Bloxham & Price, 2015) and, as such, warrants further investigation.

As a concept in its infancy in higher education, a pilot study conducted by the author identified six constituent elements of the concept of assessment literacy - drawing on Price et al.'s (2012) work as a theoretical framework - and evaluated the extent of the assessment literacy demonstrated within a sample of external examiner written reports. The findings highlighted variable levels of assessment literacy, and a need to investigate further how the concept is conceived and enacted. This paper will outline how the pilot study has been built upon through empirical research towards achieving the following aims:

Research Aims:
1. Validate and extend the pilot study through cross-institutional analysis of written reports;
2. Engage in dialogue with external examiners surrounding how they conceive and enact assessment literacy within their roles.

Methodology

The research is a naturalistic inquiry that has generated two sources of qualitative data. It is exploratory in nature, adopting Stake's (2000) Intrinsic Case Study approach, and bounded in the sense that it focuses on a particular phenomenon - how assessment literacy is conceived and enacted by external examiners. Open thematic analysis is used to analyse data to allow for situations and events to speak for themselves.

The research project is undertaken in two sequentially developmental stages, using the following data collection methods:

i) Analysis of a sample of cross-institutional external examiner written reports to extend and validate the pilot study findings and identify any additional subtopics/themes;

ii) Semi-structured interviews with external examiners associated with stage one, aimed at illuminating how assessment literacy is conceived and enacted, and identifying the most influential factors impacting practice.

Initial Findings and Implications

The majority of external examiners interviewed were unfamiliar with the concept of assessment literacy. In relation to the constituent elements of the concept identified within the pilot study, 'dialogue' was viewed as fundamental to accessing the often implicit 'standards' that had been socially constructed by the programme team, as well as supporting access to the programme 'community', although this was not always encouraged by institutions and tended to take place outside of the formal structures in place (i.e. exam boards, external examiner reports). The least discussed element of assessment literacy was 'self-regulation', attention falling largely on safeguarding quality assurance and supporting quality enhancement (i.e. 'standards') of the programme rather than personally. However, personal development through observation and the sharing of practice led to the mutually beneficial development of both the programme under scrutiny and the external examiner. Furthermore, espoused conceptions of assessment literacy generally centred on the theory-practice nexus (i.e. 'knowledge and understanding') particularly in relation to quality assurance (e.g. the concept of constructive alignment underpinned much of this discussion), although this was largely implicit in nature. However, opinion regarding the interplay, or otherwise, between quality assurance and quality enhancement was divergent, and the majority of examiners felt that they did not acquire a 'programme-wide' overview, describing their experiences as akin to *"a royal visit"*.

In addition to the findings related to the constituent elements of assessment literacy, open thematic analysis of the interview transcripts also identified a number of themes including 'divergence' and 'apprenticeship'. 'Divergence' is characterised by the idiosyncratic nature of the external examining system including means of recruitment, perceptions of the purpose of the role, and what influence the external examiner has on the programme under scrutiny. This theme interlinked with 'apprenticeship' that focused on expectations around the role of the examiner and how these expectations emerged and evolved. Without exception, perceptions of the role were informed by observation of other external examiners and learning *"on the job"*, which inevitably led to divergence in both espoused and enacted practice.

The research highlighted a largely positive view of the external examining system, identifying the mutually beneficial potential of the interaction for both the programme team and the external examiner. The findings raise questions regarding the purpose of the external examiner and whether quality enhancement should be a central aim of the role, or not. In view of the idiosyncrasy inherent within the themes described above, future research might usefully investigate how external examiner's home institution might support the development of assessment literacy within their staff (including those who act as external examiners, programme teams, and those involved in developing the exam board pro-formas), and how recognition and reward of the role might better align with the value bestowed upon it. Through this research, it might also be possible to investigate what influence the external examiner has in either compounding or addressing the assessment-related theory-practice gap, and how to support external examiners to access the contextual and tacit qualities of the standards (Hudson et al., 2017) of the programme team.

References

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