Examining the Examiner

Investigating the assessment literacy of external examiners

Final Report

SRHE Newer Researcher Award (2015/16[1])

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Emma Medland *(University of Surrey)*

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Project Title:
Examining the Examiner: Investigating the assessment literacy of external examiners.

Executive Summary
This project was funded by the SRHE Newer Researcher Award between May 2016 and August 2017. The project investigated the assessment literacy demonstrated by external examiners in UK Higher Education with the aims of: 1) Validating and extending the findings of the pilot study through a cross-institutional analysis of written reports (stage one), and; 2) Engaging in dialogue with external examiners surrounding how they perceive and enact assessment literacy within their roles, and identifying the influential factors impacting their practice (stage two). These aims represent a shift in the original proposal to accommodate the challenges associated with institutional access to data. Dissemination of the findings of the project will include several conference presentations, two journal publications and identification of future research pathways. The project was a naturalistic inquiry that was exploratory in nature, adopting Stake's (2000) Intrinsic Case Study approach, and generated two sources of qualitative data (external examiner reports and semi-structured interviews). As a concept in its infancy in higher education, stage one of the project aimed to validate the six key characteristics of assessment literacy identified during the pilot study (see Medland, 2015) through framework analysis of a cross-institutional sample of external examiner reports (n = 36) obtained from three institutions. The interviews of stage two aimed to investigate external examiners perceptions of their role and understanding of the concept of assessment literacy. Findings served to both validate the six characteristics of the concept of assessment literacy, as well as to highlight low levels of understanding of what the concept involves. Two master themes were also identified via open thematic analysis of the interview transcripts in relation to perceptions of the role of the external examiner: i. Divergence (of practice), and; ii. a Broken apprenticeship model. The outcomes of the project are both professionally meaningful in relation to my own development, and will be disseminated within my institution and more broadly via the methods outlined above and my research mentor who is currently involved in a national review of the external examining system.

Summary of the Project Aims and Objectives
External scrutiny of Higher Education (HE) courses is evident worldwide, but the use of an impartial examiner, external to a host institution for the purpose of quality assurance, has been a distinguishing feature of UK HE since the 1830s, and one that is internationally recognised as an example of best practice (Finch Review, 2011). Whilst the development of assessment literacy should be an *'obligation'* for examiners (Bloxham & Boyd, 2012), this is one of a number of unchallenged assumptions underpinning the system (Bloxham & Price, 2015) charged with safeguarding standards in UK HE and, as such, warranted further investigation.

A pilot study conducted by the author in 2014 identified the constituent elements of the concept of assessment literacy, drawing upon Price at al. (2012) as a theoretical framework. Findings highlighted variable levels of assessment literacy, and a need to investigate further how the concept is conceived and enacted, and how it might be further developed. This research therefore originally aimed to:

1. Validate and extend the findings of 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;

3. Facilitate the establishment of a Community of Practice (Lave & Wenger, 1995) of external examiners whose aim is to advise on how assessment literacy might best be supported and developed more broadly.

Due to challenges associated with access to data for stage one, which has led to an additional article (Medland, Hosein and Lygo-Baker, in prep), the wealth of data generated from the first two aims, and the restrictions associated with resource restraints in the development of a Community of Practice, the decision was taken to focus on aims one and two.

Outline of methodology and project timetable

The study was a naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to generate two sources of qualitative data, one for each aim outlined above. The research was exploratory in nature, adopting Stake's (2000) Intrinsic Case Study approach. The case under study was bounded in the sense that it focused on a particular phenomenon, how assessment literacy is conceived and enacted, and what are the major influences on practice. The research was undertaken in two sequentially developmental stages:

i)   Analyse a sample of external examiner written reports (n=36) from three additional institutions, aimed at extending and validating the pilot study findings and identifying any additional subtopics/themes;

ii)   Conduct semi-structured interviews (n=20[2]) with a sample of external examiners associated with stage one, aimed at illuminating how assessment literacy is conceived and enacted, and identifying the influential factors impacting practice.

Framework analysis[3], based on the findings emerging from the pilot study[4], was used to analyse the 36 external examiner reports collected for stage one. A combination of open thematic analysis and framework analysis was used to analyse the interview data collected for stage two, to allow for situations and events to *'speak for themselves'* (Cohen et al., 2007), as well as to provide further insight into the six constituent elements of assessment literacy identified within the pilot study. It was felt that by combining these two forms of qualitative analysis that both a broader overview (via open thematic analysis) of the perceived role of the external examiner, as well as a more detailed insight into how assessment literacy is conceived (via framework analysis) would be achieved.

Timetable

Notification of the award was received in June 2015 and the project commenced after a period of maternity leave in May 2016. The timeline for completing the project was as follows:

Period 1 (May – August 2016): Develop literature review; Gain ethical approval; Complete training; Collect stage one data[5]; Develop and pilot interview schedule.

Period 2 (September – December 2016): Analyse sample of external examiner reports; Conduct stage two interviews; Initial analysis of interviews; Presented paper on initial findings at PGNR Conference.

Period 3 (January – April 2017): Complete analysis of stage two interviews; Presented findings at Excellence in Teaching Symposium at University of Surrey; Concluded data collection[6] and analysis phase of project.

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[2] All 36 respondents associated with stage 1 were contacted, of which 13 were available to interview.
[3] A technique developed by Ritchie and Spencer in the 1980s and described in Ritchie et al. (2006).
[4] See Medland (2015) in appendix 1, for a fuller description of the procedure.
[5] A total of 22 institutions were contacted in order to locate three willing to share a sample of their external examiner reports.

Period 4 (May – August 2017): Presented findings to Assessment in Higher Education Conference[7]; Submitted abstract to SRHE Annual Conference[8]; Submitted final report to SRHE.

Post-Project Period (September 2017– August 2018): Prepare research paper for Studies in Higher Education; Complete Medland, Hosein & Lygo-Baker article relating to difficulty in accessing data for stage one of project; Present findings at SRHE Annual Conference; Discuss future of research with project mentor.

Analysis of results

Stage 1 (external examiner reports):

Framework analysis of the 36 cross-institutional external examiner reports served largely to validate the findings of the pilot study (Medland, 2015). In essence, evidence was found for each of the six constituent elements that characterised the concept of assessment literacy:

1. Community[9];
2. Dialogue[10];
3. Knowledge and Understanding[11];
4. Programme-Wide Approach[12];
5. Self-Regulation[13], and;
6. Standards[14].

Stage 2 (semi-structured interviews):

The key findings of the framework analysis relating to the concept of assessment literacy, and the open thematic analysis relating to how the role of the external examiner is perceived, will be presented separately below, accompanied by the questions emerging for each:

Framework Analysis:

Community:

The disciplinary community was far more influential than the external examiner community in shaping practice. Respondents pointed out that those responsible for identifying external examiners were likely to find colleagues with similar views and how influential this could be on the identification of challenges and issues with programme practice. For instance, one interview noted that *"a close working relationship with the programme team is likely to colour my views of the university and programme"*. This raises questions regarding whether there is a tension between external examiners as quality assurers versus supportive colleagues whose role is to champion a programme, especially if there is a pre-existing relationship with the programme director?

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[6] Two alternatives to originally proposed stage three of project were investigated in collaboration with mentor prior to concluding data collection stage.

[7] Convened by project mentor, Professor Sue Bloxham.

[8] Accepted for individual presentation, August 2017.

[9] This comprises the programme stakeholders and focused on whether local assessment practice, standards and criteria are shared i.e. the 'collective consciousness'

[10] The emphasis here is on the interaction between staff and students, students and students etc., and the role of feedback in developing assessment literacy;

[11] This involves an understanding of the basic principles of assessment and feedback, familiarity with the pertinent assessment and feedback skills, and an ability to apply these appropriately to practice.

[12] A broad overview of an entire programme is required for this subtopic to evaluate how well aligned the overall curriculum is, and to take into account the slowly learnt literacies and complexity of the learning process;

[13] This focuses primarily on the ability to make judgements about the quality of work without access to others' perspectives through post-assessment feedback, for instance;

[14] These represent the standards underpinning professional judgement (i.e. institutional, disciplinary and national standards / benchmarks) and focus on the development of shared understanding.

Dialogue:
Dialogue was identified as central to the development of assessment literacy as it supports integration into a programme community, and provides insight into the co-constructed standards of a programme. One respondent noted that discussion with a programme team served as a means of *"getting into the head of the assessor"*. It was highlighted that greater contact with programme staff led to greater impact on practice, and allowed the external to *"do a better job"*.

A further distinction related to the differences between the formal external examiner report and the informal discussions taking place around the exam board with the programme team. The report was seen as a mouthpiece to advance or add weight to programme team requirements and more influential at the institutional level. It was described largely as university level data focusing on quality assurance, or *"rubber stamping"* as one participant noted. However, the comments written in the report were also described as containing *"creative sort of editing"*, *"word crafting"* and *"truthful but slanted"* comments so as not to have a negative impact on the programme. The informal discussions taking place around the formal exam board were invariably described as being more detailed, with a greater focus on quality enhancement, and more influential on an individual level, which was most likely lost at the institutional level. Most interestingly, if challenges were identified during these informal discussions, they were less likely to be included within the report if the programme team seemed to be addressing it. This raised the question of whether there should be a greater alignment between the informal discussions surrounding the exam board and the formal written report, or whether this would serve to restrict such developmentally focused discussions?

Knowledge & Understanding:
Knowledge and understanding of the assessment-related literature and research generally remained implicit within descriptions of the role of the external examiner except, interestingly, during responses to the questions relating to what assessment literacy is and how it is manifested in practice. Knowledge (or lack of) of the literature could potentially serve to bridge (or compound) the gap between theory and practice. A number of respondents noted the entrenched attitudes relating to assessment practices that some programme teams exhibited, and the general lack of space within exam boards for discussions relating to broader development. This led to questions concerning whether external examiners should play a role in reducing the gap between assessment theory and practice?

Programme-Wide Approach:
In general, respondents felt that they did not obtain a programme-wide view from the documents and materials that they were granted access to, describing the experience as akin to a *"snapshot"* or *"royal visit"*. It was also noted that there was a lot of mystery shrouding the role, as internal examiners were often not clear of the remit, one respondent describing the internal examiners as being *"terrified"* of external examiners. This led to questions surrounding whether students, as one of the few stakeholders with experience of the entire programme (i.e. the programme-wide approach) who are therefore able to provide further insight into the programme beyond that which is provided by the documentation, should be more involved in the external examining process?

Self-Regulation:
The role of external examiner was described as mutually beneficial to both the programme team and the external examiner themselves, and the respondents were largely positive about the usefulness and benefits of the role to their professional development. There was little mention of any feedback from programme teams to the external examiners in relation to their practice, with the focus very much on the development of the programme at hand rather than the external examiners. As with the point raised under Community, the low level of recognition and reward by both the host institution at which the external worked and their home institution was identified as not being

conducive to self-development. This raises questions around how professional development might be built into the role of the external examiner, and whether the home institutions of the external examiner should take some responsibility for this?

Standards:
The primary focus of this element of assessment literacy lay in quality assurance and quality enhancement.   Quality assurance was identified as the primary institutional focus, which was indicated within the inductions that many examiners attended, referred to by one examiner as *"high level hand waving by the deputy VC"*. Quality enhancement was much more likely to be discussed in relation to programme teams and individual members of staff.   There was also discussion that focused on the internal standards, or *"local practices"* of a programme team and the difficulty in establishing what these are as the documentation does not provide insight into this aspect of practice. Acting as an external examiner, however, was described as providing insight into one's personal internal standards (*"opened my eyes to what I consider normal"*), but a number of externals also noted that they did not apply their own internal standards but adapted these to the context of the programme i.e. *"different rules of the game"*. This led to questions concerning where the balance of focus should lie, on quality assurance or quality enhancement, and whether quality enhancement should be a consistent part of the external examiner role?

Open Thematic Analysis:
The master themes emerging from the open thematic analysis of the interviews concerning how the role of the external examiner is perceived were: i. Divergence, and; ii. Broken Apprenticeship Model.

Divergence:
Above all else, divergence in practice was the most significant finding to emerge from the open thematic analysis of the interview transcripts. It pervaded the descriptions of the entire role of the external examiner, from induction through to who responded to the final written report. There was divergence in terms of whether quality assurance or quality enhancement was cited as the primary role of the external examiner, the sample of student work received, how the exam board is conducted, through to the amount of contact allowed with staff and students, and the expectations on the external examiner. This master theme, therefore, offers evidence that directly challenges one of the assumptions that Bloxham and Price (2015) identified as underpinning the external examining system, that there is a common understanding of the role of the external examiner. This led to questions concerning whether this diversity of practice should be celebrated as reflecting the diversity of disciplinary / institutional / individual practices, or whether there should be a greater consistency of practice across the system? At the national level, the latter would seem to be the focus in view of the enthusiasm for becoming an early adopter of the external examiner training that is currently being implemented by the HEFCE funded review of the external examining system[15].

Broken Apprenticeship Model:
Within the interviews, external examiners unanimously described the process of integrating into and learning about their role as *"learning by example"* or *"learning on the job"*, through observing other external examiners. Whilst the university inductions and informal discussions with programme leaders etc. were also cited as informing their understanding of the role, it was observation and informal mentorship of more experienced external examiners that was key to the development of their understanding of what the role entails. Whilst some programmes built this external examiner mentorship into the system, this was not always present, and the respondents often did not exploit the opportunity in view of the restrictions on the amount of time and resources they could dedicate to the role.

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[15]See HEA website for further details of the project: https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/hefce-degree-standards

This integration into the system and development of understanding surrounding the role was very idiosyncratic in nature and had echoes of an apprenticeship model of learning. However, as Falchikov (2007) notes, in a traditional apprenticeship model there are four stages (i.e. modelling, scaffolding, fading and coaching), involving observation of an expert, followed by practice of the role with gradually declining support from the expert until the role can be carried out independently. With regard to external examining, observation of an expert and hands on experience would appear prevalent, but there are seemingly few opportunities for feedback on and development of the role and the expectation is generally for autonomy from the outset. In this respect, it is arguable that the system is based on a broken apprenticeship model, and that the quality of the external examiners practice is rather reliant on the 'expert' being observed, which is undoubtedly central to the divergence of practices identified in the master theme above. This leads to questions surrounding whether home institutions should take some responsibility for training their staff who become external examiners, and whether both home and host institutions should provide enhanced rewards and recognition of the role?

Project conclusions

As identified in the pilot study, stage one of this research project indicated that assessment literacy is a concept in its infancy and one that external examiners are largely unfamiliar with. However, the six constituent elements of assessment literacy are apparent in the written reports and perceptions of the role, as follows: *Standards* are generally described as being embedded within the local cultures (Medland, 2010; Orr, 2007; Ecclestone, 2001) and immersion within this *community* is a key attraction of the role. However, integration within the target *community* is evidently very difficult to achieve, primarily in view of the restrictions in terms of time and resources that each external examiner can dedicate to the role, which in turn is informed by the low level of reward and recognition of the role across the sector. In addition, a *programme-wide overview*, whilst being central to the development of assessment literacy (Medland, 2015) is generally not achieved, and sometimes actively discouraged by institutions. However, the informal *dialogue* that external examiners engage in with the programme team, and sometimes the students too, supported the integration of external examiners into the *community* (Bloxham, 2009) and provided insight into the co-constructed nature of *standards* (Shay, 2008; 2005), although this aspect of practice was generally not shared at the institution-level. It also became evident that the assessment *knowledge and understanding*, manifested in the practice-theory relationship, needs to be brought out more explicitly if the external examiner system is to avoid compounding the gap present in higher education (Hudson et al., 2017) and that continuing professional development via *self-regulation* (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006) is a currently overlooked aspect of the role. As such, of the six constituent elements of the concept of assessment literacy identified and validated by the pilot student and this research project, *standards* and *dialogue* are the most fully developed and understood elements, although central questions still remain unanswered that are generally grounded in the master themes of divergence and a broken apprenticeship model.

The remaining elements of *community, knowledge and understanding, programme-wide approach* and *self-regulation* require attention in order for the assessment literacy of the external examiners involved in this research to develop in a more explicit manner. This might be achieved through greater consistency relating to how the role is perceived and enacted, and greater support from both home and host institutions so that the apprenticeship model might be fixed, or replaced with an alternative means of embracing the diversity of practices. If the external examining system is to avoid further downgrading (Medland, 2015; Bloxham & Price, 2015), then it must acknowledge the role of assessment literacy as equally important to disciplinary expertise, as well as subjecting itself to critique and development. The starting point of this process and perhaps avenues for future research might relate to the questions raised above:

- Is there a tension between the role of the examiner as a quality assurer versus a supportive colleague whose role is to champion a programme?
- Should there be a greater alignment between the informal discussions surrounding the exam board and the formal written report?
- Should the external examiner play a role in reducing the gap between assessment theory and practice?
- Should students be more involved in the external examining process?
- How might Continuing Professional Development be built into the role of the external examiner and should the home institutions take some responsibility for this?
- Should quality enhancement be a consistent part of the role of the external examiner?
- Should the diversity of external examiner practices be celebrated or should there be greater consistency across the system?
- Should the sector recognize and reward the role of external examiner more highly?

Project Outcomes

The findings of this research will be shared both internally with the University of Surrey's Quality Enhancement and Standards central department, as well as via taught sessions in two cross-institutional programmes (MA in HE, and Graduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching) and Continuing Professional Development workshops managed by the author. In investigating assessment literacy, the project has illuminated an important aspect of the underlying practices of the external examining system, thereby addressing a gap in the literature (Bloxham, 2009) and offering evidence to challenge at least two of the assumptions that Bloxham and Price (2015) as underpinning the external examining system. The findings will, therefore, also be shared nationally with the respondents of this research project and via publication in several peer reviewed journals[16], conferences[17], and through the project's mentor[18] who is playing a leading role in the HEFCE funded 'Degree Standards Project' run by the Higher Education Academy and designed to enhance the professional development of all external examiners with particular reference to safeguarding academic standards. The findings of this project provide both additional reasons for this project rationale and evidence to be used in developing the programme.

Acknowledgements

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[16] i. The pilot study findings are already available in Medland (2015); ii. an article outlining the findings of this research project, aimed at Studies in Higher Education, and; the Medland, Hosein and Lygo-Baker co-authored article reflecting upon the difficulties encountered in accessing data.

[17] PGNR Conference 2016, Surrey's Excellence in Teaching Symposium 2017, Assessment in Higher Education Conference 2017, SRHE Annual Conference 2017.

[18] Professor Sue Bloxham

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