

## Quality Assurance Review for Higher Education

### **The Shift from Institutional to Programme Evaluation: the Potential of External Examining**

**Cathal de Paor**

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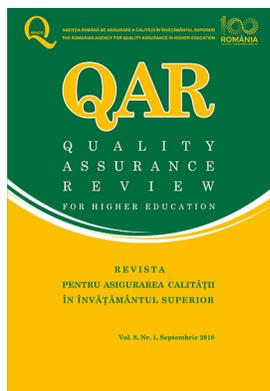
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# The Shift from Institutional to Programme Evaluation: the Potential of External Examining

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**Abstract:** *There is a decisive move within quality assurance (QA) agencies across Europe to using a greater combination of institutional and programme review, as opposed to exclusively one or the other. This suggests that while HEIs may already have a well-developed system of internal programme review in place, this will become even more important in the future. HEIs already draw on a range of sources for their own internal programme review, including feedback from students and other stakeholders. This article explores the potential of external examining as a means of supporting HEIs in programme review and internal QA. This practice is found in certain higher education systems throughout the world, particularly those that have been influenced by the British system. While often understood primarily as a means of monitoring academic standards, the paper shows how it can extend more broadly to focus on other programme issues and can therefore make a valuable contribution to programme review and internal quality assurance.*

**Keywords:** *programme evaluation, external examining*

## **Introduction**

Policy and practice in the external quality assurance (QA) of higher education programmes, including Master and PhD, continue to evolve. A recent report on the implementation of the European Higher Education Area shows that quality assurance systems are becoming more complex, and dealing with more information at different levels, i.e., programme and institutional:

Only three systems – Belgium (French Community), the Czech Republic and Sweden – focus now more exclusively on programmes (although in the French Community of Belgium there are also elements of institutional evaluation) and another three countries – Bosnia and Herzegovina, Finland and the United Kingdom – focus on institutions (EC/EACEA/Eurydice 2015, p. 91).

In other words, a key trend in external QA is the move from using an institutional or programme approach only to one involving some combination of both. For

example, in the Netherlands, NVAO's approach includes both vertical and horizontal review trails to ascertain whether an institution's quality assurance system works at a programme level (NVAO 2015). In a vertical trail, the panel focuses on two or more programmes to examine to what extent the institutional quality standards are put into practice. Horizontal trails focus on the realisation of a single theme in the institutional policy across programmes.

The importance of HEIs conducting their own regular programmatic review is already encapsulated in ESG Standard 1.9: On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes:

Institutions should monitor and periodically review their programmes to ensure that they achieve the objectives set for them and respond to the needs of students and society. These reviews should lead to continuous improvement of the programme. Any action planned or taken as a result should be communicated to all those concerned.

Ongoing monitoring by HEIs of their programmes also features in the standard on the provision of public information, ESG 1.8: "Institutions should publish information about their activities, including programmes, which is clear, accurate, objective, up-to date and readily accessible" (ESG 2015, p. 15).

This trend suggests that HEIs will have an even greater responsibility in the future for assuring the quality of their programmes. It also reflects the reality that the quality of education rests with the teachers and students in the programmes of study. However, this transition may not be without challenges. Access to specific feedback will be important for individual programmes. Such feedback for individual programmes has been available in various forms, including from external programme review panels from the QA agencies. But if QA agencies are now shifting away from an exclusive use of programme review, and instead using some combination of institutional and programme review, then an important issue is how internal QA can be bolstered so that programme quality can continue to be the focus of attention.

This article argues that the practice of external examining is one way in which such external expertise could become available to HEIs at an individual programme level. While external examining is not a recent evolution in QA, the article suggests that it may have much to offer in the future shape of the evaluation landscape.

This is an issue for all of higher education provision, but is especially pertinent for Master studies - the theme for this particular edition of *Quality Assurance Review for Higher Education*, along with doctoral studies. While the design and delivery of higher education programmes have evolved in many ways in recent years (for example, individual learning pathways using electives, technology, student placement component), it is reasonable to suggest that the changes have been more pronounced at postgraduate level. For example, writing about higher

education in central Europe, Zádori notes that, at postgraduate level (as opposed to undergraduate), HEIs have been led to using:

“more flexible educational programs (less contact hours, consultations at weekends, e-learning and distance learning methods, blended learning, validation, adult education programs, experimental learning etc.)” (Zádori 2017, p. 19).

Changes such as these are therefore rendering the task of quality assurance at Master’s level more complicated. In such a context, there is a need to ensure that going forward, internal and external quality assurance systems complement each other in a comprehensive and effective way.

The article focuses on the use of external examining for programmes having a taught component. Of course this is relevant, not just for Master programmes, but also for doctoral level, given the growth in cohort doctoral programmes offering taught as well as research components. The article draws on an example of a reporting template from an Irish HEI where this author has worked as external examiner on a Master’s level programme in teacher education. The analysis illustrates the potential of external examining and how it may be tailored to focus, not just on checking academic standards and compliance with assessment procedures, but also to support quality assurance and enhancement more generally.

## **External Examining**

External examining is generally associated with countries where higher education systems were influenced by UK practice. The introduction of external examining in the UK can be traced back to the establishment of the University of Durham in 1832, before spreading later to countries such as India, New Zealand, and Ireland (Lewis 2005, p. 5). However, it would appear as if the UK system may not have been the first. In Denmark, for example, the historical creation of the system can be traced back to a law enacted in 1788 requiring two external referees during examinations (Nilsson and Näslund 1997, cited in Stensaker et al. 2008).

The practice of external examining has evolved a lot since then and today there can be significant variation in how the system operates in individual countries (Ross 2009). For example, in a short explanation on the Danish system (for the field of physics), Knudsen (2017) shows that, in line with the Ministerial order, one third of all ECTS for courses in a given subject area must involve an external examiner. This contrasts with national policy elsewhere where all courses within a programme are expected to be included – even though it may not be possible to examine all courses to the same extent.

Another particularity in the Danish system is that external examiners must be appointed by HEIs from a list of nationally approved candidates. On the other hand, in Ireland, for example, HEIs are free to select from the wider academic

community but must have the appointment ratified by the Academic Council. As the Irish guideline notes: “The external examiners’ functions are of such critical importance to the provider’s reputation that their approval and formal nomination require the confidence of the provider’s whole academic community as represented by its academic committee (or equivalent).” (QQI 2015, p. 5).<sup>1</sup>

External examining can also vary within the same country whereby certain decisions about the process are left to the discretion of the HEI, including the extent to which external examiners scrutinise student work. In the UK, the recently revised UK Quality Code for Higher Education (QAA 2018) shows various possibilities for local modifications. For example, while external examiners are generally academics from other HEIs working in the relevant discipline, practitioners from industry may also be invited to serve (QAA 2018, p. 15). Of course, while such examiners may possess considerable professional experience, they may not have sufficient experience in the area of assessment. HEIs have the authority to consider such cases as exceptions to the usual criteria and may also appoint more than one examiner, thereby ensuring the required complementarity. In fact, in the context of the current debate on the importance of the interface between higher education and industry, Gaunt (2010) suggests that expanding the representation of practitioners in the external examining system would be a step in the right direction (Gaunt, 2010).

However, regardless of certain differences, in all cases, external examiners are expected to help HEIs ensure that standards are maintained at the appropriate level, and that student attainment is properly judged against this. Generally speaking, an external examiner is unlikely to be able to view all the assessed work, but will instead view samples (essays, examination scripts, student performances etc.) in order to judge the extent to which student performance has been duly assessed against the appropriate standards.

## **External Examining and Quality Assurance**

The policies and procedures around external examining clearly point to the key role it can play in quality assurance. This can be illustrated in the UK context where external examining is clearly situated within the context of QA:

External examining provides one of the principal means for maintaining UK academic standards within autonomous higher education providers. External examining is therefore an integral and essential part of institutional quality assurance. Higher education providers are therefore expected to “make scrupulous use of external examiners” (QAA 2018, p. 6).

The potential for quality enhancement – as opposed to quality control – is also obvious because apart from monitoring standards, external examiners provide

<sup>1</sup> In the UK, vacancies for external examiners can be found advertised on JiscMail, an online discussion forum, <https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/about/whatisjiscmail.html> hosted by JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee), a not-for-profit company whose role is to support post-16 and higher education, and research.

informative comments and recommendations on: “good practice and innovation relating to learning, teaching and assessment observed by the external examiners opportunities to enhance the quality of the learning opportunities provided to students” (QAA 2018, p. 12).

It is readily apparent therefore that external examining could play a useful role in supporting the kind of internal QA as envisaged in the ESG. For example, within Standard 1.3 of the ESG, student-centred learning, teaching and assessment, HEIs are expected to have quality assurance processes for assessment as follows: “The assessment allows students to demonstrate the extent to which the intended learning outcomes have been achieved. Students are given feedback, which, if necessary, is linked to advice on the learning process” (ESG 2015, p. 12).

The next section takes a closer look at the practice of external examining in Ireland and draws on a sample reporting template in order to illustrate the potential of external examining for internal quality assurance at a programme level.

### **An Example from an Irish Context**

In Ireland, external examining is defined by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) as a “quality assurance mechanism employed by providers that supports public confidence in academic qualifications” (QQI 2015, p. 1). The examiner focuses on the appropriateness of the learning outcomes in line with standards established nationally and/or within the relevant discipline, and considers the extent to which the programme successfully examines these. External examiners give an oral report during their site visit(s) having viewed the assessment results, and submit a written report subsequently.

The guidelines also emphasise the provider’s ownership of the external examining process, as a means of safeguarding public confidence that graduates have been objectively judged to have reached the standard that is certified by the qualification. Great emphasis is placed on the independence and recognised expertise of the examiner:

An external examiner is an independent expert who is a member of the broader community of practice within the programme’s field of learning and whose accomplishments attest to his/her likelihood of having the authority necessary to fulfil the responsibilities of the role (QQI 2015, p. 1).

But if there is an emphasis on compliance checking (as implied in the title itself – “external examiner”), even a cursory glance at the kind of reporting template used shows that it can also support internal quality assurance. The following questions are taken from an External Examiners Report Template used by an Irish HEI where this author has served as an External Examiner for a teacher education programme at Master’s level (EQF Level 7). The report items are re-arranged here for the purposes of the presentation.

As can be seen from the template items, the examiner is expected to do more than simply moderate the assessment results. The areas addressed in the template relate to documentation, assessment evidence, curriculum, standard of the assessment, standard of student work, relative standard of student work, fairness and consistency, learning environment, general overview, feedback and recommendations. It is also noteworthy that the last item asks the examiner to comment on how feedback provided in previous external examiner reports has been used in the intervening period.

1. Did you receive appropriate programme(s) documentation such as approved programme(s) schedule, module descriptors etc.?
2. Did you receive:
  - draft examination papers, marking schemes and worked solutions, prior to the examinations and in reasonable time to enable your work to be carried out?
  - a representative sample of examination scripts presented for assessment in each module?
  - a representative sample of continuous assessment/coursework presented for assessment in each module?
3. Are the curriculum and outcomes set out appropriate in light of relevant award standards and the national Framework of Qualifications?
4. Do you consider the assessment methods used appropriate to test the stated minimum learning outcomes, including range and depth of assessment methods used, including practical work assessment?
5. In your professional view, how did the students perform in the assessment?
6. How would you describe the standards of student performance in the programmes or modules examined in comparison with standards of similar programmes or modules in other institutions with which you have experience?
7. Would you describe the assessment processes for the programme and determination of awards fair, consistent and fit for purpose?
8. Please comment on the quality of the learning environment provided for the programme and processes provided to support it.
9. Examiner's general comment and overview on the programmes, modules being examined including:
  - a general comment on the programme and module assessment;
  - any recommendations arising from this report;
  - commendations of good practice and/or any areas that should be strengthened or risks which should be addressed in order to maintain confidence in standards on the programme;
  - curriculum design;
  - learning, teaching and assessment Methodologies.
10. Please include any feedback on developments in response to feedback provided in previous external examiner reports.

Therefore, while the external examination examines the appropriateness of the assessment and academic standards, the template shows how the role involves much more. This reflects the national guidelines which stipulate that the external examiner may be invited to comment on the design, structure and content of a programme and its constituent components (QQI 2015, p. 3). It is also in line with ESG Standard 1.2, design and approval of programmes, and with ESG Standard 1.3, student-centred learning, teaching and assessment.

Elsewhere, item 8 from the sample template clearly links to Standard 1.6 of the ESG, learning resources and student support: “Institutions should have appropriate funding for learning and teaching activities and ensure that adequate and readily accessible learning resources and student support are provided” (ESG 2015, p. 14).

Also noteworthy is the fact that the external examination is more than a once-off event. Item 2 above refers to the fact that the external examiner may be sent proposed assessment questions for comment before they are finally used in the student assessment. Other items relate more to the site visit at the end of the year when examiners may attend Exam Board meetings. However, collectively all of the items link with ESG Standard 1.9, ongoing monitoring and periodic review of programmes:

“Institutions should monitor and periodically review their programmes to ensure that they achieve the objectives set for them and respond to the needs of students and society. These reviews should lead to continuous improvement of the programme. Any action planned or taken as a result should be communicated to all those concerned” (ESG 2015, p. 15).

The comprehensive nature of the reporting template (and the oral feedback and discussion that will have precede it during the site visit) suggests that it can make a valuable contribution to internal programme review and QA. The reporting templates from other HEIs (usually accessible on the site pages of the Vice-President, Academic Affairs) cover similar ground with regard to the examination process. In fact, a recent study by Drudy et al. (2017) which reports on the introduction of a standardised programme review process in one particular university, draws on external examiner reports, as well as other sources such as student opinion, and statistical data.

## **Challenges with External Examining**

However, while external examining can constitute a valuable component in QA, it is worth considering certain challenges.

A key challenge relates to standards. Even within the same higher education system, examiners may have contrasting understandings with regard to the standards they should use when examining a programme. They could be, for example, standards derived from their own work in the relevant field, standards such as

national benchmarks, qualification framework or professional body requirements, or the standards as stated in the programme documentation. This points to the need for external examiners to be aware of the provenance of their standards and how these may influence their work.

There may also be varied opinion on what the focus of the examination should be, i.e., checking standards or broader programme issues related to teaching and learning. A recent study in the UK (QAA and HEA 2018) found varying views among examiners as to whether they should focus on academic standards or on broader issues related to teaching, learning and assessment and the student experience. While academic standards refer to judgements made on levels of student achievement based on consensus within a particular discipline or profession, the quality of learning opportunities refer to the means provided to students to assist them in reaching the specified academic standards. This distinction between academic standards and programme quality standards is not always so clear even in the literature as Sharp (2017) has shown. The latter may include “formal teaching, the provision of learning resources such as libraries and information technology laboratories, students support and guidance as well as classrooms, leisure facilities and extra-curricular activities” (2017, p. 142). It is therefore conceivable that a programme might set and maintain robust academic standards while offering poor learning opportunities with a weak QA system in place. Safeguarding academic standards cannot be achieved by process monitoring alone, while the corollary is also true. This can lead to a variability in examining practices.

There have also been anxieties about the potential for “cosy” relationships between examiners and HEI departments (QAA 2010), and concerns about clarity and authority in the examiners’ role in assuring standards depending on their positioning between being the arbiter of standards and being a “critical friend”. In the UK the recently-revised QAA code is part of the ongoing attempt to provide greater clarity, while also enabling HEIs to make the best use of the examining system according to their local context and the needs of the programme(s) in question. There is obviously a balance to be struck between prescription at a centralised or national level, and contextualisation by individual HEIs to reflect the local needs of the programme.

## **Conclusion**

The shift by QA agencies across Europe (EC/EACEA/Eurydice 2015) to an external evaluation approach involving some combination of both institutional and programme review will increase the importance of the HEI’s capacity for its own internal QA and regular programme review. This is a point that QA agencies are anxious to impress upon institutions.

The development of robust internal QA raises the issue of quality culture - currently a key issue in policy throughout Europe, for example, the EUA project,

Examining Quality Culture in Higher Education Institutions - EQC (Sursock 2010, 2011; Vettori 2012). That project defines culture as comprising: “shared values, beliefs, expectations and commitments toward quality (that are supported by structural and managerial elements and processes that enhance quality)” (Sursock 2012, p. 6).

The analysis here suggests that external examining could constitute one such process, especially where it is used not just for monitoring assessment but also as a platform for discussing broader issues relating to programme quality. Essentially, it provides the opportunity for staff across an entire programme to engage with each other and with an external expert on issues relating to quality in teaching, learning and assessment. This constitutes an important opportunity for professional development for both programme staff and examiners alike.

Recognition of the importance of culture can also be found in the discourse within individual countries. For example, in the Romania context, Pavel (2013) explains:

Quality assurance is the responsibility of each Romanian higher education institution and the foundation for the development of quality culture and creativity in higher education. Quality culture, as a matter of internal institutional quality, is regarded as a priority for the development of Romanian higher education institutions and represents a key for continuous improvement, sustainable competitive advantage and excellence in the context of the knowledge-based society. (Pavel 2013, p.3805)

Overall, the article has shown how external examining can constitute an important resource for HEIs when conducting internal programme review and ultimately in the creation of a quality culture. Future worthwhile lines of enquiry should focus on the format and experience of conducting such reviews, and how this interacts with quality culture. This has been identified as a deficiency in what we currently know about internal QA (French et al., 2014), and will become all the more important according as external QA adopts a more blended approach, using some combination of institutional and programme review, as opposed to being exclusively one or the other.

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