

Examining the assessment literacy of external examiners

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External scrutiny of higher education courses is evident globally, but the use of an external examiner from another institution for the purposes of quality assurance has been a distinguishing feature of UK higher education since the 1830s. However, the changing higher education context has led to mounting criticism of the system and the identification of a number of largely unchallenged assumptions underpinning it. One such assumption is that external examiners are assessment literate. This study evaluates levels of assessment literacy demonstrated within the written reports of external examiners. Findings indicate variable levels of assessment literacy and identify aspects of the concept that require attention. Wider questions concerning the conceptualization and future development of the external examining system are considered.

Keywords: external examiner; assessment literacy; higher education; community of practice

Introduction

External scrutiny of higher education (HE) courses is evident globally, including but not restricted to New Zealand, South Africa, Denmark, Malaysia, India, and the UK (Bloxham and Price, 2015). The use of an impartial peer reviewer, external to the host institution for the purpose of quality assurance (referred to henceforth as an external examiner), has been a distinguishing feature of UK HE since the 1830s (Silver, 1996). While significant changes took place in UK HE during the 1990s (e.g. increasing student numbers, the introduction of tuition fees, and the advent of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)), external examiners continue to be viewed as highly valued and useful (Jackson, 2004). They are also generally understood to be fundamental to maintaining 'appropriate standards' (Hannan and Silver, 2006) that are comparable across institutions, and are often a precondition of course accreditation in the UK (Gaunt, 1999). Indeed, the system has been 'recognised as a leading example of best practice around the world' (Finch Review, 2011: 5).

While organizations tasked with safeguarding and enhancing quality and standards (e.g. QAA, Higher Education Academy (HEA)) and UK HE institutions produce guidelines for their external examiners, these tend to focus on ensuring comparability and reliability of procedures (e.g. appointment, induction, reporting) rather than scrutinizing the quality of the underlying practice (Bloxham, 2009). This approach is argued to be grounded in the belief that standardized procedures will serve to uphold standards (Alderman, 2009), a view that appears to be propagated within the Finch Review (2011). This review was commissioned in response to mounting criticisms of the external examining system in public policy debates, which forms part of a broader sector-wide review of future quality assessment in UK HE. The Finch Review outlined recommendations for the development of the system, which focused largely on increasing consistency of practice across institutions (i.e. comparability and reliability of procedures and reporting), and increasing transparency for students. The review, therefore, arguably falls into the

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same trap as the aforementioned guidelines by failing to scrutinize the quality of the underlying practice of the external examining system.

With the massification of the HE system, the call for increasing accountability, requirement for external audit, and changes to course structures, the task of the external examining system has doubtless become more complex (Gaunt, 1999). As a result, the role of the external examiner has become increasingly multifaceted in nature, which is perhaps one of the reasons why scrutiny has been directed towards consistency of procedures rather than towards the quality of the underlying practices. Indeed, of the research that does exist, the findings do not inspire confidence (Silver *et al.*, 1995; Cuthbert, 2003; Orr, 2007). For example, issues relating to a range of aspects underpinning the role include the effectiveness (Silver *et al.*, 1995; Elton, 1982); impact (Murphy, 2006); reliability (Price, 2005); consistency (Brooks, 2012; Cooke, 2002); comparability and quality (Bloxham and Price, 2015; Bloxham, 2009); difficulty in codifying and assuring academic standards (Bloxham *et al.*, in press; Sadler, 2014); variation in interpretation of standards-related language and lack of inter-examiner agreement (Bloxham *et al.*, in press); as well as the restrictive impact on innovation of assessment practices (Biggs, 2003). In essence, the focus of external evaluations tends to overlook the substance of what is being evaluated in favour of the constituent processes (Harvey, 2002). This is perhaps why the new UK Quality Code for Higher Education (QAA, 2012) 'appears to signal a tentative downgrading of the external examiner as the prime guardian of standards and a subtle transformation in official views of the role' (Bloxham and Price, 2015: 196). But, as noted by Bloxham *et al.* (in press), such issues should not be used as the basis for criticizing individual external examiners, which is not an aim of this study, rather as a call for paying greater attention to understanding the conceptual underpinning of the role.

As increasing attention was being paid to the monitoring and recording of standards (Bloxham and Boyd, 2012) the UK Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA, 1989), which was established in the UK in 1964, 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)

In other words, there would seem to be two areas of expertise that underpin the role of the external examiner: (1) subject expertise; and (2) assessment expertise, or assessment literacy as it will be referred to henceforth. However, the appointment of an external examiner is arguably based on their subject expertise. For instance, within the national criteria for the appointment of external examiners, 'competence', 'experience', 'qualifications', and 'sufficient standing, credibility and breadth of experience within the discipline to be able to command respect of colleagues' (Finch Review, 2011: 14) are the most prominent criteria. But from a poststructuralist perspective assessment is increasingly argued to be 'co-constructed in communities of practice and standards [that] are socially constructed, relative, provisional and contested' (Orr, 2007: 647). Therefore, if assessment practices are 'situationally contingent' and embedded in local cultures (Shay, 2005: 669), and external examiners are unfamiliar with these, this will surely limit the extent to which they can effectively draw upon and apply their own co-constructed and situationally contingent subject expertise to another institution.

If the poststructuralist perspective is taken to be true, then surely the role of assessment literacy becomes far more pertinent. Indeed, Bloxham and Boyd conclude that 'there is an obligation to ensure that examiners are sufficiently experienced, alert to the vagaries of professional judgement and conscious of developments in good assessment practice – in

other words, that they are assessment literate' (2012: 631). But, for a system based on largely unchallenged assumptions:

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 and Price, 2015: 12)

In responding to this question, the aim of this research is not to attack the external examining system, but to investigate how assessment literacy is demonstrated within the written reports of external examiners. The first step towards achieving this aim, therefore, lies in conceptualizing and identifying the constituent elements of the concept of assessment literacy.

Assessment literacy

While assessment literacy has been discussed within the broader educational literature, largely in relation to teacher training for compulsory education (e.g. Stiggins, 1991; Popham, 2009; DeLuca and Klinger, 2010), focus has generally resided in establishing whether assessment literacy is apparent in teacher practices, rather than attempting to conceptualize it. Within the HE context, the concept of assessment literacy is in its infancy and accompanied by very little literature. Of the literature that does exist (e.g. Smith *et al.*, 2013; Price *et al.*, 2012), there is also a focus on the general lack of assessment literacy in both academic staff and student practices (Price *et al.*, 2011), but some attention has also been paid to its conceptualization. For instance, Smith *et al.* (2013) argue that assessment literacy in students requires awareness of the purposes and processes of assessment in relation to learning trajectory, as well as the ability to be able to evaluate personal responses to assessment tasks. They define the concept as:

[an] understanding of the rules surrounding assessment in [the] course context ... use of assessment tasks to monitor or further learning, and ability to work with the guidelines on standards in their context to produce work of a predictable standard.

(Smith *et al.*, 2013: 46)

Some discussion related to the concept of assessment literacy is also located in relation to assessment expertise, the professionalism of assessors, and assessment scholarship. For instance, while discussing the professionalism of assessors, Holroyd (2000) notes that assessment scholarship is underpinned both by 'assessment craft knowledge' developed through engagement and some reflection upon the process of assessing work, and 'assessment scholarship' developed through knowledge of the assessment literature and research. While evidence of both subject expertise (Cuthbert, 2003) and assessment craft knowledge (Holroyd, 2000) within examiners' practice have been identified, Holroyd points out that these are not sufficient in themselves within the current HE context. He concludes by highlighting the importance of developing assessment scholarship that is grounded within knowledge of the assessment literature and its relationship to practice. However, there is an abundance of evidence that highlights how weak alignment is between assessment-related theory and practice (e.g. Boud and Falchikov, 2007; Black, 2000) and, as a result, 'a lack of assessment scholarship amongst the majority of markers' (Price, 2005: 226).

An initial attempt at conceptualizing assessment literacy should, therefore, include reference to subject expertise, assessment craft skills, and assessment scholarship. In their book *Assessment Literacy: The foundation for improved student learning*, Price *et al.* (2012) have expanded upon this, describing assessment literacy within the HE context as:

a combination of knowledge, skills and competencies, including knowledge of a vocabulary and a grammar ... being assessment literate equips one with an appreciation of the purpose and processes of assessment, which enables one to engage deeply with assessment standards,

to make a choice about which skill or which area of knowledge to apply, to appreciate which are/are not appropriate to a particular task, and why ... assessment literacy are enablers (thresholds): they enable one to go beyond a grasp of basic principles towards a deeper understanding and engagement.

(Price *et al.*, 2012: 10)

This quotation serves to expand the conceptualization to include a complex set of interrelated elements that combine assessment standards, and the application, justification, and deep engagement with the three characteristics outlined above. However, this is rather broad in nature, so it was necessary to first identify the key elements of Price *et al.*'s (2012) conceptualization against which to evaluate the assessment literacy of external examiners who have, so far, been overlooked.

The key elements of assessment literacy were identified during the pilot phase of this study, described below. Once this had been completed, the main body of the research was undertaken in order to evaluate the extent of assessment literacy demonstrated within the written reports of a sample of external examiners.

Method

Objective

The aim of this study is to evaluate the extent of assessment literacy demonstrated within the written reports of external examiners, thereby testing the validity of the unchallenged assumption of its presence within the external examining system (Bloxham and Price, 2015).

Participants

The external examiners involved in the study submitted written reports to one university located in the South-East of England during the 2012/13 academic year. A total of 134 written reports were submitted during the year. While it is acknowledged that the reports do not represent the entire interaction between the examiner and the host institution that, in some cases, involves a longitudinal, rich, and meaningful engagement, it is assumed that the report will represent a summary of the key points emerging from the overall interaction between the external examiner and the institution.

A sample of master's-level reports ($n=28$) was chosen at random from across the institution, totalling 21 per cent of the overall reports. The institution consists of four faculties. The total number of reports submitted to one of the faculties was seven, so for the purposes of consistency and equal representation, seven reports were randomly selected from each of the three remaining faculties.

Pilot phase

This phase involved the identification of the key elements of assessment literacy against which to evaluate the sample of external examiners' written reports. Initial open thematic coding of a small sample of the data (i.e. the written reports) was conducted using Price *et al.*'s (2012) book as the theoretical framework. This book was used to identify a range of elements considered central to the conceptualization of assessment literacy, which were then developed, combined,

and refined with the analysis of each written report. Ten written reports were subjected to this initial open thematic coding before theoretical saturation was reached as the conceptual boundaries had been delineated (Strauss, 1987). This resulted in the identification of six subtopics, as follows:

1. **Community:** this comprises the programme stakeholders and focused on whether local assessment practice, standards, and criteria are shared; i.e. the 'collective consciousness'.
2. **Standards:** these represent the standards underpinning professional judgement (i.e. institutional, disciplinary, and national standards/benchmarks) and focus on the development of shared understanding.
3. **Dialogue (including feedback and/or relational dynamics):** the emphasis here is on the interaction between staff and students, students and students, etc., and the role of feedback in developing assessment literacy.
4. **Self-regulation:** 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.
5. **Programme-wide approach:** 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.
6. **Knowledge and understanding:** 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.

Procedure

After the identification of the six subtopics found to constitute assessment literacy, a framework-analysis-based approach was adopted to analyse the data. This is a technique developed in the 1980s by Ritchie and Spencer, characterized by the thematic framework, which is used to classify and organize data accordingly. As such, each study has a distinct thematic framework comprising a series of main themes, subdivided by a succession of related subtopics. These themes are then charted into a matrix, where every respondent is allocated a row and each column denotes a separate subtopic. Data from each case is then synthesized within the appropriate part(s) of the thematic framework. See Ritchie *et al.* (2006) for a fuller explanation of the technique.

For the purposes of this study, there is a single main theme: assessment literacy. As outlined above, this was divided into six subtopics, forming the columns in the framework analysis. Each individual external examiner was then allocated two rows. Evidence from each of the external examiner reports was then entered into the framework, with evidence to support the presence of a subtopic appearing in green font, and evidence against appearing in red font (see Figure 1).

External examiner	Assessment literacy subtopics						Knowledge and understanding
	Community	Standards	Self-regulation	Dialogue	Programme-wide approach		
IA	Comparison with own community; not present at any exam board	Equivalency to professional bodies; reflects and achieves benchmark criteria; marking constituent within and between modules	Indicated what students had/had not learnt; what of feed-forward?	No continuing dialogue (no advice for future enhancement); feedback = justification with no opportunity for dialogue; no quality enhancement or need for continuing dialogue	Did not feel qualified to comment on the programme as a whole – only had access to proportion of modules available		Learning outcomes aligned with assessment, allowing students to demonstrate their attainment; focus on student development; balance between theory, practice, and personal development
IB	Staff providing good level of support for students			Seems to encourage formative assessment to support development of students (formative assessment not explicitly mentioned); evidence of the influence of the external's disciplinary background on feedback produced	Marking consistent across modules		Focus on achieving learning outcomes but what of exceeding them? 'an appropriate range of marks was employed' – echoes norm-referenced assessment.
IC	Communication between markers is clear	Appropriate and clear assessment tasks and criteria; standards are consistent with QAA and own institution; programme is in line with expectations and standards in the UK		Feedback 'rarely formulaic and always contains something constructive for students to build on'; quality and quantity of feedback on mark sheets complimented	Strong consistency within and between modules		Constructive alignment implicitly underpins comments; recommendation to diversity assessment tasks used, but no reference to literature or why this might be important

Figure 1: Extract from the framework analysis

Findings

The following section is divided according to the six subtopics identified for the framework analysis. As subtopics that constitute the main concept (or theme) of assessment literacy, there is inevitably some overlap, but they are sufficiently distinct so as to remain as subtopics in their own right.

Community

Within this subtopic, the key findings that emerged surrounded integration of the external examiners within the programme and broader community, as well as their influence upon that community. The most frequent complaint emerging from the external examiners' reports was a strong sense of exclusion from the programme community. This exclusion was divided between self-inflicted reasons (such as being unable to attend exam boards, and in some cases being unable to attend any of the exam boards) and externally imposed exclusion. Externally imposed exclusion was the aspect that was by far the most frequently commented upon, and was conveyed through reference to the institutional or departmental rules, policies, and procedures being inaccessible and opaque, or restrictions on the level of interaction allowed between the external examiner and the programme stakeholders.

A number of participants highlighted uncertainty regarding whether their advice and recommendations had been acted upon, and there were examples where the advice and recommendations had been repeatedly ignored. Nevertheless, examples of good practice were also apparent in some of the reports, and these served to support the integration of the examiner into the programme community, or to provide advice on how a greater level of integration might usefully be achieved. These practices included the use of inductions at the start of the examiner's contract, and the ability to meet both programme staff and students outside of the formal exam board in order to establish a dialogue on a more informal basis.

In relation to the programme-level community, where programmes were identified as exceeding the benchmarks or minimum requirements set out by the QAA, institutional policy, and professional bodies for instance, they were often recommended for broader dissemination. This dissemination ranged from an institutional level that crossed disciplinary boundaries, to a national and even international benchmark for the particular discipline in question. A number of participants also indicated their intention to apply the good practices identified within the programme to their own practice and institutions.

Standards

Issues related to the quality assurance process were by far the most mentioned subtopic, being present in all of the written reports sampled. Commonly used terminology included 'appropriate', 'comparable', 'transparent', 'consistent', and so on. A particular focus of comments related to the maintenance of standards. In other words, a great deal of attention was paid to whether modules or programmes met the threshold standards set out by institutional policies, the QAA, and various accrediting or professional bodies.

Difficulties in maintaining standards were also frequently identified, particularly in relation to any lack of consistency between staff and modules. Unclear or opaque rules, policies relating to the moderation process, and procedures for when mismatches between markers emerged were also highlighted. Of particular note was the much lower level of discussion surrounding quality enhancement and how programmes might be developed in future.

Self-regulation

This was by far the least mentioned subtopic of assessment literacy, appearing in only one-third of the written reports sampled. Despite the burgeoning research into peer assessment and review within the literature and its relationship to increasing self-regulation, it was only mentioned on one or two occasions, and explicit mention of self-assessment was noticeably absent. Of the comments that did relate to self-regulation, there was a balance between more positively and negatively slanted feedback. Positive comments tended to focus on identifying how modules promoted self-evaluation and critical thinking, while negative comments demonstrated the adoption of a deficit model in which students were blamed for a lack of critical thinking and self-regulation skills, with little or no advice on how to address this issue. The most positively discussed programmes identified staff who were involved in self-regulation and thus were modelling this behaviour to their students who were then seen to be replicating the behaviour. In this respect, self-regulation was described as being fully integrated into the programme structures, and staff and student behaviour.

Dialogue

The majority of comments relating to this subtopic focused on feedback. Contrary to advice in the associated literature, comments appeared to focus on feedback as a one-way transmission or monologue. There were also many examples of a lack of dialogue between programme staff and the external examiner. For example, some reports contained little or no advice or recommendations (i.e. feedforward) for how a programme might be developed or enhanced in future. Reports also indicated how advice had been seemingly ignored. As such, there was little evidence of feedback being part of a continuing dialogue.

Despite there being several decades of literature highlighting the benefits of increasing formative assessment to support the development of the learner, this concept was only explicitly mentioned on one or two occasions. Approximately half of the comments relating to feedback focused on the importance of justifying the grade (i.e. a one-way monologue) and there were lots of criticisms of inconsistency between the feedback of different markers and the relationship between the mark awarded and the feedback received. For example, the word 'good' was used in relation to work that received marks in the 50s, the 60s, and in the 70 per cent + boundaries. However, there was little advice on how to overcome such issues, thus reinforcing the finding emerging from the Standards subtopic concerning the much lower level of focus on quality enhancement.

On a more encouraging note, the other half of comments relating to feedback appeared more closely aligned to the literature. These comments focused on feedforward and how this had been used to support the development of the student as a learner, identifying a range of good practice. For example, the explicit discussion of assessment expectations prior to the submission deadline, the annotation of student work to draw attention to specific aspects that required development, the use of printed rather than handwritten feedback, and the provision of feedback to students who were considered to be doing well already. But, as mentioned previously, few of these encouraged a continuing dialogue.

Programme-wide approach

Only half of the written reports mentioned the overall programme. The majority of comments related to module-level issues. Where the programme-level approach was mentioned, it was

discussed only fleetingly and largely in relation to how the external examiner did not feel qualified to comment on the overall programme as they had not had access to all modules that constituted the programme. The only other comments related to the level of consistency, or lack thereof, between modules and/or markers, although, as mentioned above, there was little advice on how this might be addressed.

Knowledge and understanding

Only two of the external examiners referred explicitly to the assessment-related literature; one made reference to a National Union of Students' publication, for instance. There were implicit references to one or two of the more influential assessment-related concepts in all reports analysed, constructive alignment being the most prominent of these. For instance, all reports contained some form of comments relating to the alignment of aims, learning outcomes, assessment, and/or marking criteria, and so on. It should be noted that this is likely to be due to the concept of constructive alignment underpinning the questions asked within the report pro forma, especially in view of the fact that no explicit mentions are made to the concept. As a result, and as mentioned within the Standards subtopic, this encouraged a focus on the achievement of the benchmarks or minimum requirements of a module, rather than looking at how practice might develop in order to exceed such benchmarks. A greater diversity of assessment methods and use of the whole range of marks from 0 to 100 per cent were also widely encouraged, although the focus was largely on the upper level of marks (e.g. 70 per cent +). But, once again, little justification was provided for this advice.

On a more concerning note, some of the comments appeared to contradict the assessment-related literature. For instance, there were a number of comments that seemed to echo the norm-referenced approach to assessment (i.e. where students are ranked across their peer group), when institutions generally now subscribe to a criterion-referenced approach (i.e. assessing students' work according to predefined criteria), which is seen to be fairer. This is also partially reflected in the multiple references to the 'appropriate' or 'expected range' of marks being used, which would seem to be grounded in norm-referenced traditions where certain proportions of students are expected to obtain grades from across all classifications possible.

Conclusion

Mounting criticism of external examining in the UK has highlighted it as a system 'under strain' (HEFCE, 2009) and in need of development to meet the demands of the current HE context. However, it is identified as an example of best practice internationally (Finch Review, 2011), and one that is still highly valued as a means of safeguarding standards across the UK. While the drive towards standardization across the system has resulted in a great deal of focus on the reliability, comparability, and transparency of procedures, far less attention has been paid to the quality of the underlying practice (Bloxham, 2009). As identified in the introduction, of the research that does exist, the findings do not inspire confidence and point to a system that is underpinned by largely unchallenged and unsupported assumptions (Bloxham and Price, 2015). One such assumption revolves around the assessment literacy of external examiners, which has provided the focus of this study. Two areas of expertise are argued to underpin the external examiner role: subject and assessment expertise (or assessment literacy). With greater attention being paid to the subject expertise of an external examiner during the appointment process, the second area of expertise (i.e. assessment literacy) appears to have been largely overlooked, both in practice and research. This study therefore served to identify some of the key elements underpinning

the concept of assessment literacy (i.e. the six subtopics identified earlier), and used these to evaluate the extent of assessment literacy demonstrated within a sample of external examiner reports submitted across one institution during a single academic year.

Before outlining some of the initial conclusions, a number of limitations of the research should be acknowledged. Firstly, external examiner comments will be informed by the questions contained within the report pro forma. However, these are only guidelines for the responses of the external examiners, and open-ended text boxes are also included, which allow for the entry of free text in line with aspects of the programme that the external examiner feels are particularly pertinent. Nevertheless, what it does highlight is that the focus in the literature on the assessment literacy of staff and students should not only be extended to include external examiners, but should also encompass those people who are involved in the writing and development of such pro formas, who generally reside within an institution's quality assurance department. Secondly, as the study discussed within this article is a small-scale piece of preliminary research, it should be noted that further research is planned in order both to corroborate and to extend the findings in line with the conclusions drawn below. In short, this research has three key aims: (1) to validate and extend the above pilot study findings through the analysis of a sample of written external examiner reports from a range of other institutions; (2) to conduct semi-structured interviews with a sample of external examiners associated with the above aim in order to illuminate how assessment literacy is conceived and enacted, and identify the influential factors impacting practice; and (3) to conduct four semi-structured focus groups with external examiners aimed at identifying how assessment literacy might best be supported and developed through the establishment of a broad community of practice.

The main conclusion emerging from the findings of this research study is that the assessment literacy demonstrated within the sample of external examiner reports analysed was variable. The importance of the relationship between knowledge and understanding of the assessment literature and practice within assessment literacy served to identify some stronger and weaker examples of the assessment scholarship (Holroyd, 2000) demonstrated within the external examiner reports. There were some very good examples of reports that offered evidence-informed advice on how to close the theory–practice gap, and some examples that appeared to contradict the literature. For example, encouragement of norm-referenced assessment and a focus on feedback as a monologic justification of the grade. It would, therefore, appear that many of the gaps between theory and practice are reflected in the comments of some of the external examiners. In other words, some external examiners may in fact be compounding and perhaps propagating the continuing existence of this gap through low assessment scholarship. This would appear to highlight a need for supporting the development of understanding of the theory–practice relationship. However, it is acknowledged that the external examiner role is undertaken alongside a full-time post, and is not particularly well remunerated. In order to address this issue, attention must therefore be given to how the continuing development of assessment scholarship might be most efficiently implemented.

The primary focus of the external examiner reports analysed was quality assurance and the maintenance of institutional and disciplinary standards, largely linked to the standardization of procedures. This necessarily focused attention on the achievement (or otherwise) of the minimum standards set by institutional and national benchmarks. However, there now exists a body of literature highlighting the difficulties or indeed 'futility' of attempting to codify and assure academic standards (Bloxham *et al.*, in press; Sadler, 2014). One means of addressing this lies in the development of a shared understanding through the provision of 'formal opportunities to calibrate standards on a regular basis' (Bloxham *et al.*, in press) both on a disciplinary and on a national level. What characterizes such standards, and indeed seemingly a great deal of the

underlying practice of external examiners, is the tacit and individual nature of it. In their work on communities of practice, Lave and Wenger (1991) highlight the fundamentality of engaging in an activity in order to develop shared understanding. Indeed, Price notes that ‘Without articulation and socialisation processes to facilitate tacit knowledge transfer the possibility of the existence of a discourse community is put into question’ (2005: 223). In view of the strong sense of exclusion from the programme community that the external examiner reports demonstrated, it would seem plausible to conclude that the development of a shared understanding with the programme community is difficult to achieve in practice.

While the findings highlighted a range of good practice for supporting external examiners to integrate more fully within the programme community, it would appear that a wider conceptualization of the role remains elusive. Therefore it is suggested that the development of a broader external examiner community of practice, which transcends disciplinary boundaries, might serve to support the articulation and socialization of external examiners towards the facilitation of tacit knowledge transfer and wider conceptualization of the role. This community might also serve to support the development of assessment scholarship through the sharing of experience and understanding of the wider literature. This, in turn, could support external examiners to engage in self-regulation and perhaps encourage greater integration of this subtopic of assessment literacy within the programme teams that they work to support. As a result, perhaps the focus of the external examining system could be redirected away from the standardization of procedure, and towards a focus on illuminating and developing the quality of the underlying practices of the role. In other words, perhaps the focus of the external examining system might be broadened to incorporate quality enhancement, not only of modules and programmes but also of the external examiners themselves.

The aim of this study was not to question the existence of the external examining system, particularly in view of the poststructuralist underpinnings of the introduction, for which much can be gleaned from the social interaction and engagement in dialogue around the examining process that the system encourages. While the instigation of a register of external examiners was rejected within the Finch Review (2011), it is arguable that the creation of a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Price, 2005) of external examiners may go some way towards the establishment of an ongoing dialogue in which the assumptions upon which the external examining system rest can be critiqued, and the quality of the underlying practice can be illuminated, shared, and developed. This could result in a broadening of focus beyond the standardization of procedure, which is tantamount to tinkering at the edges of practice, and a greater commitment to quality enhancement of assessment practices. Therefore, future avenues of research may be grounded in the establishment of a community of practice of external examiners, which aims to articulate and develop the tacit knowledge and unchallenged assumptions that underpin the role and address key questions such as: what level of assessment literacy might we expect from external examiners? Do disciplinary differences exist in assessment literacy? And, how might the assessment literacy of external examiners (and programme teams) best be supported and developed?

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