

External assessors' reports – do they provide valid and useful information?

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Abstract

The engagement of external assessors or examiners is one of the approaches which may contribute to overall quality assurance in institutions of higher learning .

Aims: The aim of the present study was to determine the quality of the reports received following an onsite visit, utilizing a purposefully designed template, and identify any significant shortcomings.

Results: Only 90% of the expected reports were ever received, with 66% of reports being received unacceptably late. Just over 18% were deemed to be of excellent quality, while 32% were classified as being below average or poor demonstrating questionable academic professional responsibility of certain examiners.

Keywords: *External assessor/examiner; reports; quality assurance; University of Malta.*

1. Introduction

Ensuring quality assurance in higher education is a necessary element in the maintenance of standards, enhancing validity, enabling mutual recognition of qualifications across institutions and develop quality culture within institutions (INQAAHE, 2016). The engagement of external assessors or examiners is one of the approaches which may contribute to external quality assurance of the academic process and enable comparability between the host university and other reputable institutions of higher learning (QAA, 2012).

The system of external examiners has received a fair share of criticism, (HEFCE, 2009; QAA, 2009). Medland (2015) has questioned the assessment literacy of external examiners and has suggested ways how the identified gaps can be addressed. Bloxham and Price (2013) make a strong case that while in principle the system appears to deliver, there is a lack of strong evidence that it is a valid system which fulfils its function effectively. Despite all the flaws identified, the external assessor system, still remains a key contributor in maintaining and monitoring academic standards (Universities UK, 2011). It is therefore essential to identify any shortcomings that the system may present and seek ways to address them to strengthen the process.

The research conducted for this paper focuses on the leading university in the Mediterranean island state of Malta, however, it is applicable to wherever external assessors are employed to contribute to the quality assurance process of the university. At the University of Malta (UM), external examiners have, for many decades, been an integral and statutory part of the examination system at all degree levels. This paper relates to the first cycle and second cycle degree courses of university studies. External examiners are required to draw a formal free text report within a month of their visit to the University and forward it directly to the Office of the Rector (UM 2011; UM 2019a). In line with European Guidelines (ENQA 2015), the suggestions made in the report are reviewed and taken into account when revising the current structures and procedures to improve standards.

Our literature search did not identify an objective method by which to assess external examiners reports'. Our aim was therefore, to devise an objective method to assess these reports in order to determine their quality and use it to verify the academic standards, both of examination processes as well as the structure and content of degree programmes.

2. Methods

The quality of the external assessors' reports were assessed by two independent evaluators with long-standing experience in teaching and academic administration: AC1 and AC2. The evaluation of the reports was based on a set of criteria which were assigned a numerical value

and used as a uniform template. The reports were assessed evenly, irrespective of subject or academic discipline.

2.1. Template Development

A specific template was developed based on review of the relevant literature and analysis of reports submitted to the University over the two previous academic years. All reports received by the Visiting Lectures and External Examiners Committee (VLEEC), through the Office of the Rector for the academic years 2015-2016 and 2016-2017 were evaluated in detail by AC1. Each report reviewed was assigned a unique identifier code based on date of receipt, which ensured serial order and provided anonymization of reports.

AC1 assessed the reports by systematically comparing their contents with the brief provided to external visiting examiners together with their letter of appointment (UM 2019b). Based on this review, an initial scoring range constructed on five categories was devised, with 1 being poor/useless, 2 below average/basic, 3 average, 4 above average and 5 very good. A report of the work conducted outlining the methodology used and the template obtained was submitted for scrutiny and eventual approval by the Senate of the University of Malta, the highest body governing academic matters at the Institution. Following discussion and feedback, Senate endorsed the template for assessment of external examiners' reports. The scale used for measurement was then piloted on reports received by visiting external examiners for the academic year 2017- 2018 to ensure applicability. Following the piloting exercise the scale underwent minor revisions which resulted in the template used in the present study- University of Malta External Visiting Examiners Assessment Report Template-UMEVEART (Table 1).

2.2 Assessment of Reports

All reports received by VLEEC for the academic year 2018-2019 were independently reviewed in detail by two assessors; AC1 and AC2. Each reviewed the anonymised reports independently and assigned the scores in accordance with UMEVEART (Table 1) which, together with demographic factors were analysed using statistical software providing descriptive statistics and Spearman correlation coefficient based on the two sets of independently obtained scores. The individual scores assigned by each assessor were discussed during a consensus meeting. A difference in score of 1 point was taken to be minor, while a difference in score of more than 1 point was discussed and a score agreed upon following a joint second review of the report in question. Spearman correlation coefficient was calculated once again following the consensus scores.

Table 1 UMEVEART score and interpretation

Score	Interpretation
5	Excellent
	Analysis and insights detailed Excellently structured and written Extensive in scope Comprehensive Detailed analysis of students' performance Comments on students opinions Detailed recommendations of a practical nature Accurate appraisal of local milieu
4	Above average/ Very good
	Covers all angles of assessment process without going in detail Useful comparisons with other institutions and standards Provides general recommendations Shows insight Demonstrates a passable understanding of the local context
3	Average/good
	Provides the basic requirement and minimum acceptable standard as an expert report Describes standards achieved by students Provides a basic description of the examination process Lists strengths of the process with some comments Lists weaknesses of the process with some comments
2	Basic /below average
	Report of a 'routine' nature Lists facts with little comment No significant comparisons such as between students or with other institutions Any comments provided are deemed unhelpful Poor assessment of the local situation Generally lacks insight
1	Useless/poor
	Very rudimentary narrative No significantly meaningful comments Lacks structure No useful recommendations Contradictory Poor grammar and syntax A 'cut and paste' report

3. Results

A total of 106 external examiner reports were received from an expected 118. During the first two months following the external examiners visit, only 36 reports were received, a further 45 were received within four months whilst 25, trickled in over the last two months of the calendar year. The majority of reports (n=70), were received from external examiners based in the UK, another 33 were from examiners based in EU member states, with 6 originating from Ireland and 5 from Italy. Only 3 reports originated from non-EU countries (Iceland, Ukraine and the USA). Nearly three fourths of the reports, n=68, were drawn up by male external examiners.

3.1. Report Scores

The pre-consensus and post-consensus scores assigned to the reports by the individual assessors were only minimally different. Most reports were of an average quality. Post consensus scores indicate that between 23% and 32% of reports were below average, while 32% were above average. Assessors AC1 and AC2 assigned identical scores in 69 cases. A difference of 1 was recorded in 32 cases and it was only in 5 instances where the difference in score was 2. The Spearman Correlation Coefficient for the pre-consensus scores of the two sets of grades was 0.849, ($p < 0.01$), while with regard to post-consensus scores, this was 0.902, ($p < 0.01$).

4. Discussion

In the absence of an objective method available to identify the quality of the reports, it was deemed necessary to develop a template and apply it to the reports that were received by the University as an exercise in audit in its own right. The initial step was to establish the necessary criteria against which to assess and grade the report. It is important to clarify that the assessment was a qualitative exercise and the scores assigned do not denote a mathematical approach to assessment. The template used to analyse the reports provided consistent results with a very strong correlation between two independent assessors ($r_s = 0.902$, $n = 106$, $P < 0.001$). Variation in scoring was minimal, mainly denoting one scorer's tendency to grade slightly lower down the scale, however on discussion, consensus was easily reached. Utilizing criteria developed by the European Union (Eurostat, 2014) to support the production of good quality reports, the template demonstrates the ability to provide results which are coherent, comparable and of significance across the diverse Faculties, and disciplines. The outputs from the template are clear, understandable and are very convenient in terms of interpretation. Most importantly, it has provided the University with an objective standard method/framework for assessing the quality of the external visiting examiner's reports, which in turn is an indicator of their individual usefulness to the quality improvement process of the University. The UM has deliberately opted not to provide a standard template

for examiners to fill in, as there is a tendency for the filling of a pro forma to foster a 'tick box' approach, providing very limited insight. Some Heads of Department, took it upon themselves to produce particular templates for the examiners to fill in and submit as a report. When completed template pro formas were assessed, using UMEVART, several of these reports were found to be lacking in detail or substance. While predesigned templates did provide space for free text to be included in addition to tick boxes, in most cases, comments consisted of a sentence or two of text, which proved to be of limited value.

A number of shortcomings were identified through the use of the template. Some of the issues identified were related to questionable academic professional responsibility on the part of the examiner. The academic ethic defined by Dill (2005) as 'social controls and norms that set standards for academic conduct and influence of professional choices' of a number of examiners left much to be desired.

The timely submission of external examiners' reports was found to be problematic since only 38% of the reports were received within an acceptable timeframe, and furthermore 10% of reports were never received. The absence of these reports presents limitations to the overall quality assurance mechanisms that are available to the Institution as a body, and in particular to individual leaders of academic entities, course coordinators and administrative staff. The majority of visiting examiners (66%) were affiliated with UK universities, an indicator of Malta's generally and the UM in particular, historically close relationship with the UK. The language of instruction at the UM is to a very large extent English, while the medium used for administrative purposes is exclusively English.

Women external examiners were in the minority with only 36% of reports being submitted by women. This is reflective of the gender gap in academia, especially evident in senior academic positions. (EUI, 2018) It also demonstrates a lack of sufficient awareness of gender mainstreaming at the UM.

The reports forwarded by the appointed external examiners were of variable quality, and this in turn impacted on the value of the reports themselves to the host university. The level of quality itself was random and the source of the reports could not be stratified by any useful attribute such as subject areas, theoretical components or assessments of a practical nature. In a small number of instances the report sent by particular external examiners was deemed unacceptable in terms of quality as the purported reports consisted of a few bland sentences. In such instances the respective Head of Department was requested to contact the external examiner to rectify the issue. In all the instances, revised improved reports were forwarded and it is these latter versions that were included in the present study.

At the top end of the spectrum of quality, the reports were expertly drafted and addressed all crucial aspects. Very often they afforded penetrating insights into the strengths and weaknesses of the systems they assessed and subsequently offered useful and realistic advice

aimed at improving both the learning experience of UM students, as well as the soundness of their assessment. A total of 18% of reports were deemed to be of excellent quality and a further 13-14% being very good. However, most of the reports received were of average quality, with the provision of very basic information; while tendering some degree of feedback, they lacked depth and were mostly descriptive in nature. On the other hand, the reports of a poor quality were indicative of either incompetence at this particular task assigned, to carelessness, or to a combination of both. Just over 23% of the reports were deemed to be of 'Below Average' or 'Poor' quality. Although this is an improvement over the previous academic year (26%), it is still a matter of concern. The reports of quite a number of external examiners did not sensibly address basic and essential elements of an academic assessment process. This is problematic as it fails to contribute to the University's quality assessment and quality improvement programme. External examiners providing poor reports would have failed the University in its quest to maintain standards. As a corollary, allocation of funds for poor or useless reports may be considered a waste of the University's limited resources. Kerr (1994) indicated that an external examiner's task is one that requires significant commitment but delivers little compensation. He commented on the decline in academic ethic and the rise of a 'new academic' culture which seeks to do less. The findings of this study support this theory and the results are somewhat unpleasant as predicted by Dill (2005).

This study has some limitations. The template was designed with the requirement of the University of Malta and may not be directly applicable to all other universities. However, with some slight modifications and validation to fit different circumstances it may be applied in other settings of higher learning. The results derive from one university, the numbers reported are low, but this is a national university of a small island state. The data represents all the reports received in one academic year, rather than a random sample. It therefore affords clear insight into the issues which need addressing.

5. Conclusion

Being cognizant of its responsibility of producing future leaders and professionals, the University is working on shifting the curve towards a higher quality reports to strengthen its quality improvement process. The problem areas identified therefore need to be addressed with sensitivity but firmly. In selecting external examiners, a structured system could be set up whereby the selection is dependent upon a set of agreed criteria and includes gender mainstreaming. This could possibly help overcome issues such as appointing external examiners on the basis of personal relationships, whereby the examiners would find it difficult to criticize a programme or an assessment process run by a close or former colleague. It could also help address the current gender imbalance. While the external examiner system has the potential to strengthen the University's quality assurance ethos, it needs to be

effective in delivering useful robust feedback. Overall, the current system related to external assessors needs to be reviewed and updated. A revised system should be able to address most of the shortcomings identified in this study, primarily the quality of reports submitted as well as their timeliness. Future research could examine the quality of reports both over a number of years as well as discipline-specific in the aftermath of necessary interventions to ensure that the system being employed is effective, valid and reliable.

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