

Investigating External Examining for Marketing – A Current Project

Abstract: This project seeks to examine matters related to the appointment, role and impact of External Examiners for marketing components of business programmes at UK HEIs.

It is investigating issues such as institutional policies and processes for and about EEs including doctrine, expected duties, training and relationship management. Parallel to this, the viewpoint of External Examiners themselves is being considered. Attention is being given to their motivations, expectations and reflections based on their experiences before, during and after appointment on topics including assessment, programme coherence and structure, plagiarism and comparability with their own programmes.

Keywords: External examiners, marketing programmes, UK

Track: Marketing Education

1. Project Outline and Rationale

This project seeks to examine matters related to the appointment, role and impact of External Examiners for marketing components of business programmes at UK HEIs.

It will investigate issues such as institutional policies and processes for and about EEs including doctrine, expected duties, training and relationship management. Parallel to this, the viewpoint of External Examiners themselves will be considered. Their motivations, expectations and reflections based on their experiences before, during and after appointment on topics including assessment, programme coherence and structure, plagiarism and comparability with their own programmes.

Whilst the wider teaching and learning community takes a sporadic interest in these issues – such as the general research programme currently underway by the HEA - almost nothing has taken a Business School perspective and virtually nothing at all exists in respect of literature or professional body reporting for External Examiners of marketing programmes. It is hoped that the findings would be of great interest and significance for both every institution offering a marketing component in respect of teaching and of course collectively as a sector and beyond that to our stakeholders – such as the CIM.

The External Examiner system underpins much of what we do. Quality, consistency, coherency scope, syllabus and an objective assessment of teaching and learning practice are in whole or in substantial part dependent on External Examiners and the relationships they have with their institutions.

Investigation of the processes and doctrine they encounter, their objectives and stances, and their personal thoughts on quality would reveal a great deal about what and how things are done in respect of marketing education at UK HEIs.

Whilst the wider teaching and learning community takes a sporadic interest in these issues, almost nothing has been published with a Business School perspective and virtually nothing at all exists on External Examiners of marketing programmes. This funding would close that gap, and the findings would be of great interest and significance for both every institution offering a marketing component in respect of teaching and collectively as a discipline.

This project would have as context and comparison the current HEA project on External Examiners which is considering issues on an all-subject basis but not going deeply into issues on topics specific to individual disciplines.

2. Prior Literature

There is a sporadic history of the significance and importance of External Examiners being considered in literature (Biggs, 2001; Lewis, 2005, 2010). These prior studies fall into two categories – general overviews across UK HEIs (Clements, 2005; Hays and Bashford, 2009; Troy, 1987) or discipline specific studies. These latter tend to be in clinical subjects and engineering, with some from social sciences (Lawton, 2007; Gaunt, 1999). Business education generally, and marketing specifically can be considered as essentially unexamined territory.

The overall findings from prior studies of external examining provide a mixed perspective, which is by no means universally flattering. The most substantial recent work, a report produced by the Higher Education Academy on behalf of the UK higher education funding bodies, argues as follows: “Taken together, the literature suggests that external examining is not currently effective in guaranteeing comparable academic standards nationally ...” (HEA 2015: 40). This report provides the context for the current HEFCE/HEA project: *Degree standards: professional development and calibration for the external examining system in the UK* (HEA 2017), an ongoing project involving many UK universities with the aim of creating a system for external examiner professional development and for calibrating standards across institutions. This study concludes that the UK external examiner system does provide a useful external check on assessment procedures and a valuable ‘critical friend’ role; on the other hand it is suggested that: “if the purpose is to safeguard standards, the effectiveness of the system is considerably less clear cut” (HEA 2015: 87).

Published academic work on external examining is often based on far less comprehensive data than the HEA (2015) study, tending towards small-scale qualitative studies (Hannan and Silver 2006) and anecdotal reports based on personal experience (Clements 2005). Biggs (2001) provides an interesting methodological example of this, stating that: “I have tried to base the views expressed in the following sections on research where possible, but with some topics I have had to rely on many years of experience ...” (Biggs 2001: 229). Consequently, the conclusions from these studies are worthy of note and provide useful directions for additional research, but there is very little published research that meets the highest academic standards of reliability and validity.

Given the above caveats about the rigour of research in this field, it is nevertheless the case that the findings emerging from prior academic studies tend to reinforce the ‘mixed perspective’ found in the HEA (2015) study (which itself was based on extensive desk research and a survey of external examiners that achieved 602 responses). Indeed, a common method of organising the findings of these articles is into strengths/benefits, and weaknesses/costs, both those associated with the external examiner system, and those arising for the external examiners themselves. Table 1 summarises these findings.

While some of the issues mentioned in Table 1 are easily and unambiguously classified (for example: the systemic reputational benefit to the UK HE ‘brand’), others may straddle two or more categories. Most notably, certain costs and benefits that are felt at the individual level may arise from, and would need to be resolved at, the systemic level. For example, it could be argued that the system as it currently stands encourages ‘free riding’; institutions that fail to support their own staff who serve as external examiners elsewhere still benefit from the systemic reciprocity (Hannan and Silver 2006).

This is a problem for the individual who wishes to serve and who takes on an external examiner position without the support of his/her employer, but could only reasonably be resolved at the systemic level. Arguably, the majority of the issues classified in the ‘individual’ column of Table 1 also have some wider institutional or systemic implications. The sharing of good practice accrues directly at the individual level but clearly has wider institutional and systemic benefits; and, if the widely-perceived low remuneration for external examiners was to be improved, presumably the costs to institutions would rise.

Table 1: Pros and Cons attributed to external examining

	Systemic level	Individual level
Pros/ strengths/ benefits	<p>Comparability of academic standards (a)</p> <p>Reputational benefit to UK HE (a)</p> <p>Widespread external advisor system providing unbiased advice (d)</p>	<p>External mentoring ('critical friend' role) (a)</p> <p>Sharing good practice (a)</p> <p>Learning about course design elsewhere (b)</p> <p>Good on the C.V. (b)</p>
Cons/ weaknesses/ costs	<p>Difficulty in maintaining genuine EE independence (c)</p> <p>Difficulty in achieving consistency across modular/joint degrees (c)</p> <p>Concerns about training & professional development for EEs (c)</p>	<p>Modifying teaching to suit external examiner rather than real student needs (a)</p> <p>May distort the assessment process (d)</p> <p>Restricts educational innovation (a)</p> <p>Time pressure: doing own assessment and EE work at the same time (b)</p> <p>Poor administrative support (b)</p> <p>Not supported by own institution (b)</p> <p>Low remuneration (b) (c)</p>

(a) Clements (2005); (b) Hannan and Silver (2006); (c) Lewis (2005) (d) Biggs (2001)

This project would have as context and comparison the current HEA project (HEA 2015; HEA 2017) on External Examiners which is considering connected issues on an all-subject basis but not going deeply into topics specific or atypically relevant to individual subjects. This makes doing the project now opportune – the HEA project provides breadth, and this focused one provides depth for our specific discipline.

In the wider teaching and learning literature, this project would connect with work considering sector wide topics inside and outside the UK (Harker, Caemmerer and Hynes, 2016)

3. Aims and Objectives

The aims and objectives of this project are:

1. To establish commonality and variation in respect of policy and process institutionally in respect of External Examination for HE marketing education.
2. To establish the key issues, pressures and topics as seen and defined by prospective, current and former External Examiners of marketing components of business school programmes.
3. To produce a list of recommendations of changes to practice and policy for institutions and External Examiners.

4. Method

The team began by informally discussing external examinership with colleagues at our set of home institutions in respect of what the key issues might be. The outcome of these discussions has been to adapt the techniques for engaging and learning from the community of external examiners in marketing as a pragmatic acknowledgement of the sensitivity of key issues. Please see below for further comment on this.

The team has recruited and is interviewing at the time of report submission a set of 16 marketing academics involved in external examining, with the sample divided into four categories with four constituents in each:

1. Colleagues new to external examining – defined as from just appointed to one full iteration through the academic calendar.
2. Colleagues in post – defined as more than one iteration of their first external examinership
3. Colleagues in post at a second or subsequent external examinership
4. Colleagues ‘past’ their external examining career, looking back and reflecting

The team has developed an interview guide for these semi-structured interviews that is deliberately intended to allow replication in adjoining disciplines or in other non-UK systems. This guide was drawn from prior studies. As noted above, these have been largely qualitative and inconclusive. This work was therefore supplemented with informal conversations with a number of academics at the partner institutions. A draft guide was then circulated amongst the team and edited accordingly. A final interview guide was agreed on and includes questions about experiences of and attitudes towards external examining as well as the processes involved. Interviews are semi-structured to ensure some consistency in data collected across the data-set whilst allowing for more detailed discussion of factors that are of particular import to certain interviewees. A pilot interview, with one academic at Strathclyde was conducted in November 2017, to inform and contextualise the study. Interviews to date have lasted an average of 35 minutes.

Data analysis is ongoing with two of the team responsible for coding. This is occurring with the 2 team members coding the same transcripts separately and then meeting to discuss emergent themes, (Easterby-Smith et al, 1999).

5. Preliminary Findings

Pilot interviews conducted so far have identified diverse views among marketing external examiners and aspiring external examiners. Many of the themes identified in the literature review have also emerged from the pilot interviews. For example, a highly experienced (five external examiner positions over 20 years) external examiner asserted that his main reason for undertaking EE duties was to learn about how things were done, in terms of educational and course design practice, at other institutions. However, this was primarily for his own benefit and something in which he saw intrinsic merit, and he felt that little or no benefit had accrued to his employer from this experience; the employer seemed to be largely indifferent concerning his EE experience.

A moderately experienced EE (two EE positions over eight years) had also found her employing institution disinterested in her role as an EE; her view was that the role of EE was very burdensome and that she would not take on any more EE positions. Indeed, this interviewee seemed disenchanted with the EE system as a whole, emphasised the costs and time involved in running the process, and had serious doubts about the usefulness of the system. She raised the possibility that the EE system, particularly if it is strengthened, could be seen as a component of the new managerialism in higher education (Deem 1998; Deem, Hillyard & Reed 2007), and as a further mechanism by which managers seek to control and constrain academic autonomy.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, an aspiring EE (new to the HE sector and never having held an EE position) was rather more optimistic about the EE system. She held the view that external examining was a necessary and inevitable task that she would undertake as an obligatory contribution to the wider HE system; she was applying for her first EE position at the time of interview.

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