ExPeRA:

A Reflection on External Examining Roles and Practices in Irish Universities

Dr Sinéad O'Sullivan

University of Limerick

Dr Sorcha Uí Chonnachtaigh

National University of Ireland

Muhammad Irfan

University of Limerick

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1 Introduction

The nature and scope of higher education (HE) programmes and assessment have changed radically since the introduction of external examining[1] in the mid-19th century. The use of new and different forms of assessment, new forms of delivery, the advancement of work-based assessment, artificial intelligence, and introduction of microcredentials continue to challenge traditional quality assurance systems. As the HE sector takes stock of lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic, it is an opportune time to evaluate and challenge the assumptions (Bloxham & Price, 2015; Medland, 2019) that underpin the external examining system, which is an important part of the traditional bedrock of quality assurance in higher education, not only in Ireland but also in other jurisdictions.

External examining is a quality assurance mechanism used by higher education institutions to provide an objective review of academic standards and assessment. External examiners of taught programmes are appointed for a defined term of office and have expertise in the discipline of the programme, subject or modules that they examine.

This project is the first comprehensive analysis of external examining of taught programmes in eight designated awarding bodies (DABs) in the Republic of Ireland. It provides a basis for a sectoral examination of the fitness for purpose of existing approaches to external peer review of assessment and whether those reviewing, assessing or undergoing assessment have a collective understanding of the purposes of the process. It looks at the role of the external examiner and its impacts; examines institutional policies for external examining; identifies areas of good practice and proposes how these roles and the process can be enhanced and future proofed.

The participant institutions are the eight members of the Irish Universities Association[2]:

- Dublin City University (DCU)
- Maynooth University (MU)
- Trinity College Dublin (TCD)
- Technological University Dublin (TU Dublin)
- University College Cork (UCC)
- University College Dublin (UCD)
- University of Galway
- University of Limerick (UL)

1.1 Project Scope

The research in this project refers to external examining for taught programme only. External examiners appointed to postgraduate research degrees are excluded from the study.

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[1] Some participating institutions use the term 'external examination' for the processes described in this report. For consistency, the term external examining will be used throughout
[2] The National University of Ireland (NUI) is a federal university comprised of four constituent universities (UCC, UCD, Maynooth University and University of Galway) and a number of recognised colleges. NUI is invited to participate in activities of the IUA deriving from the membership of NUI's four constituent universities. NUI was involved in the project but only its constituent universities were participant institutions.

The project sought to address four key questions:

1. How do academic staff and external examiners operating within Irish higher education institutions understand the purpose of external examining as set out in respective institution's policies and procedures?
2. What influences do external examiners bring to bear in their judgement of assessment standards and classifications?
3. How appropriate are current methodologies and tools for external examining for different and emerging forms of assessment, programmes, and awards?
4. How can the role of external examiner and external examining be enhanced in our institutions?

To answer these questions, the project was broken down into four phases:

- A desk-based assessment of current literature on academic standards, external peer review of assessment and external examining which was undertaken in February –June 2023 and supplemented throughout the project.
- A desk-based assessment of each institutions' policies on external examining of participating institutions, conducted in July – October 2023
- A survey of external examiners and academic leads within participating institutions that addressed the four key questions which was carried out in July – September 2023
- Results of the survey were analysed November –March 2024 and this report has been written based on that analysis.

1.2   Report Overview

Chapter 2 outlines the current literature on external examining and academic standards. This literature looks at the history of external examining, its purposes, its use in different jurisdictions and the challenges to the process identified in the literature.

Chapter 3 presents an analysis of the policies for external examining in each of the eight participating institutions. The analysis looks at the common characteristics of the policies and areas on which some or all of the institutional policies are silent.

Chapter 4 sets out the methodology used in the survey of external examiners and academic leads in participant institutions. It describes the research methodology, population selection and measures to maintain the validity and reliability of the study.

Chapters 5 and 6 present key findings from the survey, including both qualitative and quantitative data, focusing on the role of the external examiner, importance of the tasks carried out by external examiners in carrying out their duties and responsibilities, and factors affecting the effectiveness of external examining.

Chapter 7 looks at findings relating to challenges identified by respondents to the system of external examining.

Chapter 8 looks at findings on respondents' view of academic standards.

Chapter 9 outlines a series of questions that institutions should consider which were identified on the basis of the research findings.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter will provide an overview of the most relevant literature on external examining. A key rationale for conducting this research is the lack of existing research and scholarship on external examining in Ireland. There have been no systemic reviews of external examining in Ireland and there is little academic literature on the Irish system. Ireland-specific publications on external examining are limited to regulatory guidelines. The ExPeRA project team is aware of ongoing research on external examining in the new technological universities (Aust, 2023), which will be a very welcome addition to the literature.

2.2 Scope

This overview of the literature focuses on external examining at subject or programme level for undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes and will not explore the practice for research dissertations, usually examined by desktop review and *vive voce* examination involving internal and external examiners.

There is a particular focus on the external examining system in the United Kingdom for a number of reasons:

- It is the origin of the Irish system due to historical involvement in the State and the State's higher education institutions.
- It is the oldest system of external examining (as we understand it) and has been the subject of substantial periodic review and academic scholarship.
- As in Ireland, universities are quite autonomous with their own degree awarding powers.
- The majority of external examiners in Irish higher education institutions are drawn from the UK higher education sector.

In reviewing key documents from the literature, three of the four key research questions will be considered:

1. What influences do external examiners bring to bear in their judgement of assessment standards and classifications?
2. How appropriate are current methodologies and tools for external examination for different and emerging forms of assessment, programmes, and awards?
3. How can the role of external examiner and external examination be enhanced in our institutions?

2.3 Historical Context

A system of external examining was first introduced in England by Durham University in the 1830s to ensure comparability with Oxford and Cambridge (HEA (UK), 2012: 7). This system was refined by the Victoria University, a federal university founded in 1880 comprised of three colleges in Manchester, Leeds and Liverpool (Lewis, 2010:24). The university charter explicitly identifies the maintenance of academic standards as a role of the external examiner.

The 19th century signalled a considerable turning point in the paradigm of educational assessment (Brown, 2022). Prior to this, assessment predominantly took place within the confines of educational institutions, involving oral examinations or essay writing tasks evaluated by the student's own tutors. The integrity and objectivity of these internal assessment strategies began to be questioned during the 19th century due to perceived inconsistencies in grading standards, potential biases, and the inability to compare student achievement across various institutions.

Prompted by these growing concerns, the concept of external examination was conceived as a solution to standardise, provide fairness, and ensure comparability of academic achievements across different educational institutions. Durham University is often credited with pioneering this model of assessment. Established in 1836, it was the first to adopt a system wherein examination creation and marking were done by external examiners, separate from the teaching faculty.

The evolution to external examining led to several significant alterations in the educational landscape. It facilitated student performance comparisons across diverse institutions and geographical regions, but also bolstered confidence in the institutions. It also promoted increased transparency and accountability in the evaluation process.

2.4   An Evolving HE Landscape

Since the 1830s, the higher education landscape in both the United Kingdom and in Ireland has changed in a number of key respects. The numbers of learners steadily increased during the nineteenth century and in the late twentieth century and subsequent decades, rates of participation in higher education increased to the extent that 'massification' was coined to describe it. The impacts of this on higher education have been profound with regards to our understanding of the purpose of higher education, the institution of the university, equitable access and participation (Tight, 2019; Hazelkorn et al, 2015; Alves & Tomlinson 2021) and also practical in terms of the challenges for external examiners and the external examining system (Hannon & Silver, 2004; Finch Report, 2011; HEFCE, 2015).

In the complex landscape of higher education, maintaining academic standards and ensuring the fairness of assessments have always been central. However, the system has changed substantially since the 1970s in terms of numbers of learners, profile of learners (wider participation), structure of programmes (modularisation and semesterisation), pattern and methods of assessment, democratisation of external examiners (no longer only senior academics), the involvement of practitioners in programme development and external examining (Lewis, 2010:26-7) and the conceptual understanding of assessment (constructive alignment, authentic assessment) (Hudson et al, 2017:1311).

The external examining system champions the comparability of academic standards across institutions, with the aim of ensuring consistency, objectivity, and the minimisation of bias in the evaluation of student work but is not devoid of challenges (Bloxham & Price, 2013). Disparities in the application and understanding of standards by individual examiners raise concerns regarding the system's reliability and validity (Bloxham & Price, 2013). A perceived emphasis on subject

expertise over assessment literacy (Medland, 2015) and standards literacy (Sadler, 2013) is a challenge to the effectiveness of the model.

2.5   The Role of the External Examiner

As higher education has expanded, the system has evolved; the advent of standardised tests, advances in technology, the introduction of modular learning and semesterisation (Silver et al., 1995), and the more recent focus on continuous assessment has significantly reshaped the landscape of external examining. The traditional role of the examiner focused on ensuring:

1. 'that degrees awarded in similar subjects are comparable in standard across higher education institutions and
2. that students are dealt with fairly in the system of assessment and classification' (Silver et al, 1995: i).

It is evident from the data gathered during this project and others in the UK that there is no single understanding of the role of external examiner (HEFCE, 2015:32) but that the two traditional elements identified above continue to be central.

The UK benefits from a more formalised, national approach to external examining and subject benchmarking (UKSCQA, 2021; Advance HE, 2018; QAA, 2024). The UK higher education system has a number of features: Teaching Excellence Framework, Research Excellence Framework, a concentrated focus on league tables (HEFCE, 2015:34-5) and a fee-paying system which lends itself to conceptions of the learner as consumer (HEFCE, 2015:70). We must acknowledge that given the preponderance of external examiners from UK universities contracted to act as external examiners in the Irish system, it is likely these examiners are bringing the understanding of the role and the academic standards of their own system with them (see QQI, 2024).

The periodic review (and research) of external examining in the UK demonstrates a persistent diversity in understanding of the role and responsibilities of the external examiner and an equally persistent set of challenges (both practical and conceptual) – more on the latter in Section 2.6 below. However, one notable change in this regard is the introduction of national expectations for external examiners. The Finch Report (2011:9) recommended the development of a national set of minimum expectations for the role of external examiners, by the time of the follow-up review this had been introduced (HEFCE, 2015:31). These expectations expanded the purview of the external examiner beyond the traditional two (ensuring comparability of awards and fairness in assessment) to related areas of evaluating the general appropriateness of academic standards for the relevant awards, comparability of student achievement and identifying good practice (external examiner section of the then QAA Code of Practice – cited by Lewis, 2010: 27-28). At the same time, the increase in assessment tools and dispersed pattern of assessment throughout the year meant that detailed involvement of external examiners in assessment processes was no longer possible. This marked a shift in the role from moderator of assessment (and sometimes 'third marker') to validator (Lewis, 2010:27).

2.5.1 Assessment Practices

There is little criticism of the traditional role of external examiners in ensuring the fairness of assessment processes, but there is evidence of variability in the classification of awards and that 'student success and progression may not be a simple reflection of academic attainment' (Stowell et al, 2015:1 cited in HEFCE, 2015:35). The award classification profile of comparator institutions was identified as a driver for changes to 'award algorithms' in some institutions. While it was acknowledged that external examiners may have little influence on the award algorithm, external examiners do have some influence on grading and borderline decisions (though this influence varies from institution to institution). This, however, is more of an academic standards question (see 2.5.2 below).

Related to the matter of fairness in assessment is the independence of the external examiner. However, the independence of external examiners is not always as straightforward as it may seem. While external examiners are always institutionally independent, in that they are primarily employed elsewhere, they may not be entirely free of connection to the programme. Niche discipline areas will have a limited pool to draw on (HEFCE, 2015:8) and specialist programmes (e.g. those at master's level) will often involve academic colleagues who know each other (Hannan & Silver, 2004). Bloxham et al note the difficulty of providing overly negative feedback as an external examiner, when it could affect later relationships and future employment opportunities (2015:1080). Shay's (2005) work on assessment demonstrates that true independence, particularly where relationships within a community of practice are concerned, can be difficult to achieve.

Another concern regarding external examiner judgements on assessment is their generally limited assessment literacy (Medland, 2015 and 2019). Surveys of external examiners suggests that this may not be a priority for individual examiners; few external examiners answered questions regarding theories of learning and assessment in Hannan & Silver's (2004) survey. One respondent stated, 'I don't think it's a necessary part of the training of an external examiner to know the theory behind learning and assessment' (Hannan & Silver, 2004: §5). Subject expertise can be evidenced (through teaching and publication records), and assessment experience can be evidenced too but little is required of prospective external examiners with respect to assessment scholarship (Medland, 2015:23-4). This could impact on an external examiner's capacity to evaluate the fairness and rigour of assessment practice.

2.5.2 Academic Standards

Gaunt (1999) suggests that external examining is the most reliable quality assurance mechanism with regard to academic standards since it is the only one that involves review of student output and internal assessment practices with respect to specific student outputs.

Hannan & Silver (2004:5) note the importance and variable practice of maintaining academic standards:

> Helping to maintain comparable standards and fairness to students remained an aim of external examiners, but standards, fairness and how the external actually operates are not uniform and straightforward.

Bloxham & Price (2014:3) note a number of challenges to the perception that the external examining system ensures maintenance of academic standards (or the comparability of academic standards): 'a lack of consistency in examiners' appointment and role, unwelcome variability in examining practices in different programmes, subject disciplines and universities resulting from weak or inconsistent institutional processes.

The Finch Report (2011:5) highlighted a tension in the UK system that arises (on a smaller scale) in the Irish context:

> Setting and maintaining standards in the UK system … exhibits a tension which must be resolved: over 140 universities and colleges separately set and maintain their own standards, but at the same time there is a public expectation that qualifications awarded by one institution are broadly comparable with those awarded by all others.

Like many systemic reviews of external examining in the UK, the Finch Report assumes one of the primary purposes of external examining to be the maintenance of academic standards. It also highlighted the innate variability of a system in which 'each institution with degree-awarding powers carries a unique responsibility for academic standards' (2011:7) but urged all institutions to adopt their recommendations with a view to meeting the objective of the review to support the comparability of academic standards (2011:11).

In the UK, like in Ireland, there are a number of tools providing national standards (UK Quality Code, PSRB[3] processes, and uniquely in the UK, Subject Benchmark Statements[4]). However, research into external examiner perspectives and practices indicates that individual external examiners rely on a number of interacting sources to guide their practice with differing emphases and degrees of influence; these include national standards/external documents, subject/discipline expertise, institutional assessment processes, community practices and personal experience (Bloxham & Price, 2014; Bloxham & Price, 2015). A further complication in the application of academic standards was the self-conceptualisation of external examiners, which Bloxham and Price categorised as 'the independent, the national safeguarder, the process checker and the thwarted independent (2014:7). Even where there is common 'quality language' employed by external examiners, their understanding and judgement regarding quality could vary significantly in practice (Bloxham & Price, 2014:6).

The literature also strongly suggests that it is a mistake to assume external examiners have a high level of 'standards literacy' for a number of reasons: (generally) limited institutional experience, the practical constraints of referencing subject/national standards at all times, the perception of threat to academic freedom that arises from enforced standards and the ongoing construction and reconstruction of individuals' standards frameworks (Silver et al 1995; Sadler, 2011; Sadler, 2013; Bloxham & Price, 2015). While most regulatory documents concerning external examining assume 'that there is a consensus on standards and that we can vest in individuals the ability to represent that consensus in judging the comparability of academic standards in a stable and appropriate way' (Bloxham & Price, 2015: 207), the problematised assumptions involved raise

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[3] Professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) are involved in the accreditation of regulated professions, such as medicine and engineering.
[4] For more context on the development of subject benchmarking in the UK, see G Williams (2010) Subject Benchmarking in the UK. In DD Dill & M Beerkens (eds), *Public Policy for Academic Quality,* Higher Education Dynamics 30: 157-181. DOI 10.1007/978-90-481-3754-1_2.

significant challenges for the external examining system. Given the similarities (in the external examining tradition and focus), the high proportion of UK-based academics in external examining in Irish universities and the limitations of the Irish system (see Chapter 3), it would be difficult to argue that the Irish system is any less vulnerable to such challenges.

Bloxham et al (2015:1079-80) identify a number of possible responses to these challenges:

1. **Clarification of Role**: It is crucial to define how external reviewers should approach safeguarding standards, emphasizing that their role should extend beyond merely checking assessment procedures to actively maintaining national threshold standards.
2. **Regular Calibration Opportunities**: Examiners need formal, ongoing opportunities to calibrate their standards. This can be facilitated through organized activities by disciplinary associations and national organizations, fostering a shared understanding of standards within academic communities.
3. **Reflection on Standards**: Institutional processes should encourage examiners to reflect on the origins and influences of the standards they use. The aim of this reflection would be to enhance awareness of personal biases and improve consistency between individual and national standards.
4. **Anonymous Review Systems**: Consideration should be given to implementing anonymous review systems where external examiners do not have prior knowledge of student identities or grades. This could help ensure independent judgment and mitigate concerns about the impact of negative evaluations on future relationships.
5. **Limitations of Explicit Standards**: While explicit standards can guide calibration discussions, they have limited effectiveness on their own. The development of shared meanings and understandings among examiners is essential for achieving consistency in standards.

Recommendation 1 would be more difficult in Ireland due to the limited availability of explicit national standards at a discipline/subject level. Recommendations 2 and 5 would require significant infrastructural and time investment in external examining (including community of practice development), which may prove practically difficult. Recommendation 4 would involve a substantial change to the system and the introduction of an approach similar to that used in Australia (see, for example, IRU, 2022). Easily achievable actions at an institutional level, such as developing user-friendly guidance and more consistent and centralised induction processes for external examiners, could enhance practice and address some of the challenges. More system-wide work on external examining would be required in order to introduce more transformative enhancements.

Given the similarities to the UK system, it would be logical to consider the elements of the regulatory infrastructure that we do not have, namely subject benchmarking statements. However, Sadler (2014) notes a prevailing concern that leads to the development of system-wide standards/codification, which will be familiar following the discussion above:

> [T]he challenge has been to devise a strategy whereby judgments about the comparability of different levels of underlying academic achievement can be made by different judges, in different places, at different times from different evidence.

While Sadler concludes discipline-specific 'standards' codifications are valuable tools in curriculum and programme development, teaching and assessment, and (importantly) consensus-building in the community of practice with regards to standards, this is where the benefits of codified standards ends: '[t]hey cannot safeguard academic achievement standards or lead to high levels of comparability in judgments of student performance' (2014:287). He argues that 'the key elements in codifications of academic achievement standards lack the appropriate linguistic properties [necessary to make them unambiguous and independent of context]' (2014:287).

2.5.3   Impact of External Examiners

The nature of external examining has changed somewhat in the recent past (Hannan & Silver, 2004; Lewis, 2010; Medland, 2019) and it is evident that there is a diversity in institutional policies regarding external examiner such that the impact of external examiner feedback can differ significantly. In some institutions, external examiners may have a sort of 'veto' power over the examination board decisions while in others they may have no power to decide individual grades (Lewis, 2010:28). It is likely that in some institutions there is still a more consensus-centric approach involving internal and external examiners (Silver et al, 1995:41).

Medland (2015:27) highlights the existence of systemic exclusion of external examiners from the 'programme community' (stakeholders including internal examiners and students) due to 'institutional or departmental rules, policies and procedures' that limited their interactions.

Hannan & Silver (2004) reported that the majority of external examiners found that their reports 'well responded to' but they also encountered numerous accounts of feedback being ignored by institutions. A number of participants in Medland's study (2015) indicated frustration due to uncertainty regarding the response to their feedback and recommendations and some reported that their recommendations had been ignored or repeatedly ignored.

2.6   Challenges

2.6.1   Induction vs training

Silver et al (1995:vi) noted that there was strong support for improving 'briefing and induction arrangements. In Hannan & Silver's (2004) study, it was clear that formal and institutionally centralised induction was the norm for new external examiners (though older institutions were less likely to have such arrangements); the quality of the process was considered to be variable from 'useless to valuable'. Some years later, the Finch Report (2011:9) identified a persistent need to make a recommendation regarding induction:

> Each institution should provide an induction for all external examiners they appoint, clearly outlining organisational procedures and practices and national expectations, and highlighting the crucial value of their critical approach to the institution and that they are part of the broader organisational system of quality assurance.

When Silver et al (1995:42) conducted their survey, training was already arising as a possibility, mostly due to changes in the HE system and approaches to teaching and learning more generally:

> [Th]e need for external examiners to be more aware of and able to deal with, for example, different forms of student assessment, course work and the sampling of examination scripts, changing course structures.

The 1997 Dearing Report (the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education) recommended a lighter-touch approach to quality assurance in HE with a corresponding strengthening of the external examining system, including the establishment of a register of recognised external examiners who would receive training and mentoring ('apprenticeship') (cited in Lewis, 2010:32).

Effective induction was held up as the appropriate alternative to training (Silver et al, 1995: 51). There was significant resistance to the possibility of training for external examiners related largely to the idea of a national/centralised system of training (e.g. the bureaucracy) and the practical risk of training becoming a requirement, which could lead to difficulty in recruiting (Silver et al, 1995:50-1). Hannan & Silver's (2004) study reinforced this view. A letter from the Chair of the Teaching Quality Enhancement Committee (TQEC, established by Universities UK and Guild HE), Sir Ron Cooke, to HEFCE in January 2003 is often quoted in the literature. He stated that the TQEC considered that 'imposing compulsory accreditation on the system of external examiners risks losing the expertise and goodwill of a great many' and advised against formally accredited training for external examiners (cited in Hannan & Silver, 2004). The Higher Education Academy (HEA) published a joint report and action plan with a number of other UK bodies in 2004 on enhancing supports for external examining (Jackson, 2004:9), which noted:

> Simplistic notions of training are unlikely to persuade the academic community of the merits of particular approaches. Identifying, through research, practice that works and creating opportunities for facilitated discussion focused on assessment and standards and the sharing of practice, are likely to be more influential.

The Finch Report did recommend that first-time external examiners receive mentoring and that 'training should be provided where necessary' (2011:9). This was not a recommendation for formal, accredited or national training, however.

By 2015, HEFCE's review of external examining arrangements could identify enhancement of induction processes but the theme of induction *and training* was common across the stakeholders consulted (HEFCE, 2015:10). This 2015 report recommended that the sector support the 'professionalisation of external examiner' by establishing 'a more systematic training to develop further knowledge and more consistent perspectives on the role, standards, assessment literacy and professional judgement' (HEFCE, 2015:12). They reported that there was localised mentoring and training (the latter relatively brief) in some institutions (HEFCE, 2015:45-6) and a concern regarding the inconsistency of existing training that had been introduced following the Finch Report (HEFCE, 2015:49). As part of a sector-wide degree standards project (2016-2021), Advance HE[5] established policy and developmental supports for external examiners with training for individual external examiners and institutions. Following completion of the Professional Development Course, academics can be added to the Advance HE external examiner directory, which currently lists over 5,000 academics (less than 1% from Irish higher education institutions (HEIs). This training, and the related directory, is entirely voluntary

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[5] Advance HE was formally established in March 2018 following the merger of three related agencies: ECU, HEA and LFHE. It is registered in England & Wales and Scotland (as a charity) and in Ireland as a limited company.

but it seems that interest on the part of prospective external examiners is relatively strong, which represents something of a shift in attitude around training within the community of practice.

2.6.2 Remuneration

Silver et al (1995:59) concluded that the external examining system was 'based on token payments for a reciprocal system of "goodwill and voluntary sacrifice"' much in need of change. The suggested it was vital that 'support for the recognition of external examining as a legitimate, expected, costed part of the normal duties of academic staff, given time to serve as external examiners, encouraged, and the activity recognised [via sabbatical, research funding, opportunities for development]' (58-9). Without such recognition, it was recommended that the fee be increased. It was noted that fees paid were inconsistent across the sector (1995: ii). This continued to be an issue 'partly because of its low level and partly because of the wide differentials between payment for equivalent duties in different institutions' (Hannan & Silver 2004: §11). This trend continued; on the basis of a review of practice, HEFCE recommended that the sector adopt 'equitable and appropriate remuneration' (2015:94).

2.6.3 Time/timing

The seemingly intractable matter of time and timing of external examining duties arises repeatedly in the literature: '[t]he amount of time expended in the activity, and the fact that examining and examination boards in the host and home institution coincided, were difficulties somehow to be coped with' (Hannan & Silver, 2004: §3). Silver et al (1995: vii) suggest that remuneration more broadly construed to include recognition and system-wide resourcing could ameliorate the problem of time and timing to ease the pressures:

> Additional funding is commonly seen as essential to cover additional remuneration to the external examiner or the alternative deployment of resources to the home institutions of staff acting as external examiners. The latter proposal has implications for salary or other rewards, for adequate release time, for compensation to institutions releasing different numbers of staff as external examiners, and for staff development.

HEFCE's (2015:45) review indicated that a minority of external examiners reported 'formal and informal allowance of time' for examining activities. There is no recent evidence of significant changes in the system regarding time (and the related resourcing of external examining in home examined institutions) for external examining; it is likely that these issues continue to be a challenge.

2.6.4 Understanding of the Role

Bloxham & Price's (2014) categorisation of external examiners' self-conceptions (as mentioned in Section 2.5.2 above) was based on their mixed-method study of twenty-four experienced external examiners across different types of HEI in four contrasting subject areas. These conceptions/positions on external examining were identified:

1. **The Independent**: 'expect[s] to use their own standards [rather than those of the examined institution] and perceive[s] their role as custodian of discipline standards within the external examining process'.
2. **The National Safeguarder**: 'draws on the standards of the awarding institutions to satisfy themselves that they are aligned with national standards (for example national benchmark statements and qualification framework or professional body requirements) as required'.
3. **The Process Checker**: 'focuses on whether assessment procedures are followed and uses the stated standards of the awarding institution'.
4. **The Thwarted Independent**: 'wish[es] to bring their own standards into the assessment process but the role they are expected to play is that of process checker'.

The 'process checker' approach may not be desirable if the maintenance of academic standards remains a central objective of external examining system (Bloxham & Price,2014). More deliberate consideration, in the Irish context, may need to be given to the distinct possibility of 'independent' or 'national safeguarder' external examiners from other systems and whether the discipline and/or national standards they may be referencing are appropriate for programmes in Irish HEIs. While understandings of the role of external examiner are conceptual, differences between the institutional/departmental understanding of the role of the examiner and the external examiner's understanding can be a practical problem too (e.g. leading to frustration when external examiner feedback is not acted on). This is more easily addressed where there is a clear and consistent induction process, but also where explicit discussion of the role of the external examiner is included in such induction to make expectations clear.

2.7 Alternatives to External Examining

External examining systems have been established in a number of countries around the world, most notably (though not exclusively) in former Commonwealth states where the British had influence on higher education: New Zealand, Denmark, India, Malaysia, Brunei, Malawi, Hong Kong and South Africa (Bloxham & Price, 2015). However, such a mechanism for quality assuring assessment and academic standards is exceptional.

Other approaches have been explored such as the OECD's Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) project, external referencing in Australia and the Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) and Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) in the USA.

The AHELO project proposed a cross-national assessment of learning outcomes which could be used to measure comparability of attainment across institutions and countries – "a PISA for higher education (van der Wende, 2011). Although the AHELO project failed due to lack of support (Harmsen & Braband,2021), Richardson & Coates (2015) maintain that the AHELO Feasibility Study demonstrated that cross national assessment could be useful for benchmarking of standards and increasing capacity within institutions.

In Australia, there is a relatively nascent system of academic calibration across (sub-sectoral) university groups, referred to as 'peer review of assessment' (CAULLT, 2019). This is defined in the Booth Report (Booth et al, 2015:6) as '*the practice of colleagues providing and receiving feedback on one another's unit/subject outlines, assessment tasks and marking criteria to*

ensure that assessment is aligned to intended learning outcomes and includes a calibration process to ensure comparability of achievement standards and an opportunity for professional learning'

The approach has received central support from the Australian Government's Office for Learning & Teaching and, despite its relative youth, has been developed in a sustained and evidence-based way (CAULLT, 2019; IRU, 2018). The practice of external referencing is underpinned by legislation (Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2017) and supported by the Australian Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA) (2019) guidance on external referencing.

Bedford et al (2016) reviewed some of the leading examples of the practice (most at institutional level, one at disciplinary level) and compared the practice to the UK external examining system as part of their external referencing of standards (ERoS) pilot project. The Australian models had some differences but generally involved blind (or double-blind) and relatively small sampling of student work (e.g. one item per grade band), to be considered alongside unit outlines, rubrics, course learning outcomes, national disciplinary standards, and external reference points. Peer reviewers reviewed material from institutions within their own 'institutional grouping' (self-selected alliances of similar institutions). Reviewers confirmed grades or advised higher/lower or in some cases blind marked the sample work. The feedback process is anonymous but generally received from more than one institution and all peer reviewers can engage in calibration exercises across the institutional grouping. The ERoS project identified improved communication between all stakeholders (reviewers, unit/module leaders and course/programme leaders) and a general increase in discourse around academic standards and assessment in the community of practice (Bedford et al, 2016:24). The intention with this approach is to sample a number of programmes on a 5-year cycle rather than reviewing every programme each year (Bedford et al, 2016:31). Yorke (2004) notes that there has been a reduction in evaluative literature on external referencing and in available public information from institutions.

The American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) has developed sixteen rubrics for the liberal arts. The [VALUE](#) rubrics were developed collaboratively by representatives of member institutions and implementation is supported the AAC&U with training and through the sampling of student assessment. The VSA was a response from the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) to the Spellings[6] commission's call for a robust culture of accountability and transparency throughout higher education. (Keller, 2014). Among its objectives was 'to support institutions in measuring and reporting student learning outcomes through original research and by providing a forum for collaboration and exchange" (Keller 2014). The VSA model puts assessment as a demonstrator of accountability and relies on institutions measuring and reporting on student attainment of learning outcomes originally against one of three benchmarks. Of interest is that the VALUE rubrics are now accepted as a VSA metric suggesting that the VALUE rubrics are used to demonstrate the use of assessment to engage faculty

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[6] U.S. Department of Education. (2006). *Charting the future of higher education: A test of leadership.* Final report from Commission on the Future of Higher Education. Retrieved from http://www2.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/hiedfuture/reports/final-report.pdf

members and students in student learning and in a culture of improvement rather than using data as a means to an end (Russell & Markle, 2017).

While moderation is a common approach within higher education institutions used to sample work from large cohorts of students or from different locations of delivery. Sadler (2013) and Berry (2024) suggest that while moderation of a single assessment provides assurance for that assessment, it is not a sustainable method of extending the principles of moderation across modules, programmes or institutions. Sadler (2013) refers to the 'calibrated academic' where having taken part in 'calibration processes', assessors '*would accept responsibility for grading against agreed achievement standards, participate in periodic (but not continuous) checking and recalibration, perform the bulk of the decision-making independently, and consistently produce grades with the desired properties without the need for third-party confirmation or adjustment'*. These calibrated academics would become a team of internal experts who would function as 'local custodians' informing and guiding colleagues.

3 Documentary Analysis of Policies on External Examining

An analysis of the participant institutions' [7] policy documentation on external examining was undertaken to identify the institutional positioning of the external examining process and the role of external examiners within the universities' quality assurance systems.

Existing policy documents outline the role of the examiner, how examiners are appointed, the obligations of the examiner in the context of review of module assessment, attendance at examination boards and requirements for the written reports.

In some cases, guidelines for external examining are informed by external documents e.g. the NUI policy on external examiners (which applies to the four NUI institutions) or QQI guidelines on external examining.

All policies refer to the role of external examiners in the assurance of academic standards and facilitating the benchmarking of standards nationally and internationally. Fairness and equity of treatment of learners is also a feature of some policies.

There are differing expectations within institutions on how assessment is reviewed. Some institutions prescribe that all assessment should be reviewed whereas others allow for department or faculty discretion to agree with the examiner what assessment instruments are viewed in advance and in retrospect.

In all cases, the role of the external examiner is described as advisory and a support to the internal examiner(s). The external examiner is not normally seen as an additional examiner however, they may be called upon to adjudicate on 'problem cases' or to actively participate in the grading of students in the case of practical, professional or performance assessments.

Other features of the role are to provide advice on programme design and involvement in periodic programme review.

All policies require that that a response is provided to the external examiner report. The responsibility for responding to this report is normally assigned to the head of the relevant academic unit. In most institutions, the response to the report is provided to the university rather than to the external examiner. Of note, the reports from external examiners are provided to the Head of Department who is then expected to circulate them to the relevant programme or module leaders.

While all policies have an expectation that the external examiner is provided with full programme or programme information, marking schemes and data relating to results, only one institution explicitly provides for formalised training. The nature of that training is not specified.

Perhaps related to the date of the inception of current policies, only one institution explicitly refers to remote external examining and attendance at examination boards.

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[7] The IUA member universities: DCU, MU, TCD, TU Dublin, UCC, UCD, University of Galway and UL.

4 Data Collection

An online survey was selected as the optimum method to be used for data collection. The survey was selected as it allowed a combination of quantitative and qualitative questions and conducting it online facilitated a significant participant reach across all institutions (and their geographically dispersed external examiners) participating in the project.

4.1 Survey Design

The survey was designed collaboratively with the participating institutions, adhering to institutional data protection requirements. It sought to ascertain how well institutional policies on external examining were understood and implemented. The survey design also sought to answer the research questions regarding influence that external examiners bring to bear when working within an institution.

4.2 Population

While this is a project about external examining, we decided to extend the population sample beyond those who are appointed by our institutions as external examiners noting that a number of our own staff also work as external examiners within the group of institutions but also within the wider Irish higher education system as well as outside of Ireland. Academic leads are also the primary point of contact and main support to external examiners at the programme/module/subject level. We also sought to get the views of academic staff who may not work as external examiners but who interact with external examiners and are participants in the process of external examining.

The questionnaire was sent to the following populations.

1. Those appointed as external examiners in each of the participating institutions.
2. Those identified as being the academic lead for taught programmes within the participating institutions. The 'academic lead' categorisation is use for course/programme directors, module convenors, module co-ordinators and similar academic roles that liaise with external examiners.

4.3 Survey distribution

The survey was developed using Qualtrics within the University of Limerick. To limit potential for data protection issues, it was decided that each institutional lead would co-ordinate the distribution of the survey within their own institution. Each institution identified its list of external examiners and academic leads and invitations were sent by a nominated individual within each institution. UCC Ethics Committee required external examiners to opt in to the survey rather than sending it to all appointed external examiners.

Recognising that there may be duplication of respondents as some institutions may use the same examiners or some academic leads may be examiners, respondents were asked to complete the survey only once in cases where they may have been invited more than once.

The survey was issued between 7th July and 15th September 2023 across the eight participating institutions.

4.4 Ethical Approval

Ethical approval was granted by the Faculty of Arts, Humanities & Social Sciences Ethics Committee of the University of Limerick, Social Research Ethics Subcommittee (SRESC)of Maynooth University and by proxy the relevant ethics committees/ other committees of the remaining participating institutions.

4.5 Response Rate

Institution	Date EE Survey Sent	No Recipients	Response		Date Academic Lead Sent	No Recipients	Response	
DCU	July 2023	205	37	18%	July 2023	183	26	14%
Maynooth University	October 2023	116	29	25%	October 2023	34	17	50%
TCD	August 2023	120 (UG only)	62	51%	August 2023	161 (UG only)	48	30%
TU Dublin	August 2023	320	81	25%	August 2023	259	22	8%
UCC	August 2023	103*	47	45%	July 2023	Not available	21	Not available
UCD	July 2023	217	89	41%	27th July 2023	488	111	28%
University of Galway	July 2023	302	49	16%	July 2023	191	21	11%
UL	July 2023	280	97	34%	7th July	280	44	15%

Table 4-1: Population and Response Rate

*Participants opted in to the survey

The invitation to participate was sent to 1,375 external examiners across eight institutions and 1,596 academic leads in seven of the eight institutions. Over 1,034 respondents commenced the survey with 773 respondents completing it or responding to the structured mandatory questions on the role and effectiveness of external examining. The response rate in Table 4-1 above refers to those that competed or responded to the structural mandatory questions.

4.6 Respondent Profile

Figure 4-1 below shows the breakdown of the respondents who **completed** the survey. This included 460 (60%) respondents who identified as external examiners (EE) appointed by the participating institutions, 203 (26%) as academic leads (AL) and 110 (14%) as academic leads who also act as external examiners (AL-EE).

Respondent Type

773 Responses

Figure 4-1: Respondent Profile

Figure 4-2 shows the distribution of responses of those appointed by participating institutions as an external examiner, showing a higher response rate from some institutions.

Location of Appointment as External Examiner

460 Responses
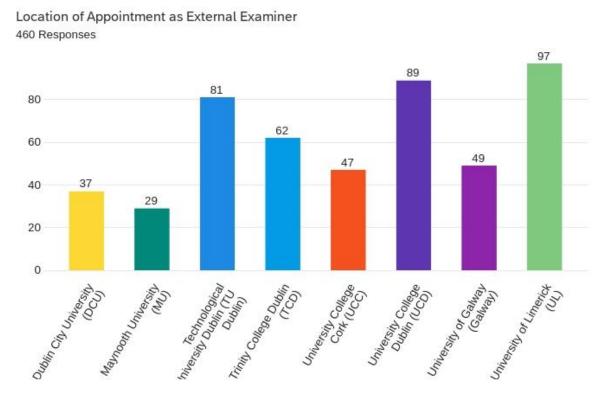
Figure 4-2: Location of Appointment of External Examiners within Participating Institutions

Figure 4-3 below shows the number of respondents who identified as academic leads within their institutions, with a significantly higher number of respondents from UCD when compared with other institutions.

Location of Institutional Leads

313 Responses
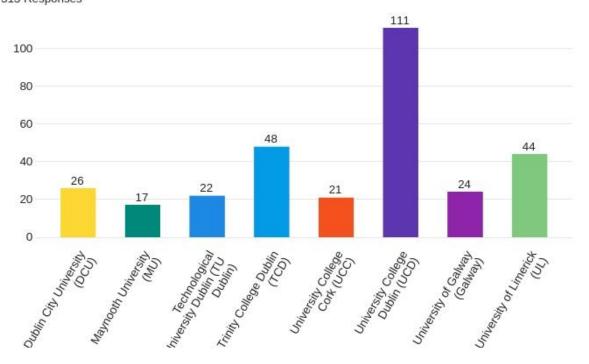
Figure 4-3: Location of Institutional Academic Leads within Participating Institutions

Of those academic leads that also undertake an external examining role outside their own institution, Figure 4-4 shows that seventy-two (72) respondents work as external examiners in participating institutions, twenty-four (24) work as external examiners in other HEIs in Ireland, sixteen (16) in HEIs in England, eleven (11) in HEIs in Scotland and eleven (11) in HEIs in Northern Ireland. A very small number work outside of this localised environment of the island of Ireland and the UK.

Academic Leads who are also External Examiners: Location of Appointment

111 Responses
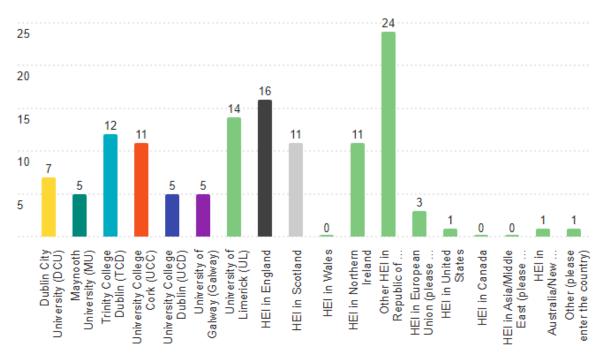
Figure 4-4: Examining Location of Academic Leads-

Looking at the location of those appointed as external examiners, Figure 4-5 shows this localisation can also be observed with 37% of external examiners located in England, 6% in Scotland, 3% in Wales and 32% on the island of Ireland. This is unsurprising given the similarities between the education systems, their use of external examining as a quality assurance process, the common language and geographical proximity (until very recently external examining typically involved travel to the institution of appointment at least once a year).

Figure 4-5: Jurisdictional Base of External Examiners

Figure 4-5 also shows that 16% (72) of examiners are located within the European Union. Of those, France contributes the highest number (12) followed by Germany, Italy, and Sweden (6) (Figure 4-6). Two examiners are located in each of Canada, Australia/New Zealand and in the Middle East or Asia.
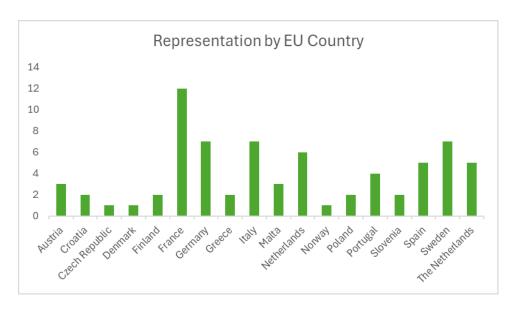
Figure 4-6: Location of EU Based External Examiners

Of the 570 respondents to the question on the basis of their appointment, 68% (390) are appointed at programme level (Figure 4-7 below).

Basis of External Examiner Appointment
570 Responses

Figure 4-7: Basis of External Examiner Appointment

Respondents are spread over the ISCED discipline subject areas used by the Higher Education Authority for statutory reporting in Ireland. (see figure 4-8 below)

Discipline Area of Respondents
774 Responses

● Choice Count

Figure 4-8: Discipline of Respondents

When reviewed by respondent type (Figure 4-9), the Arts & Humanities, Business Administration & Law, Health & Welfare disciplines are the most represented for those that identify solely as external examiners. This is somewhat mirrored in those that identify as academic leads who act

as external examiners with the Health & Welfare discipline being better represented in that group. The Health & Welfare discipline is the leading discipline for those that identify as academic leads.

Discipline Area By Type of Respondents
773 Responses
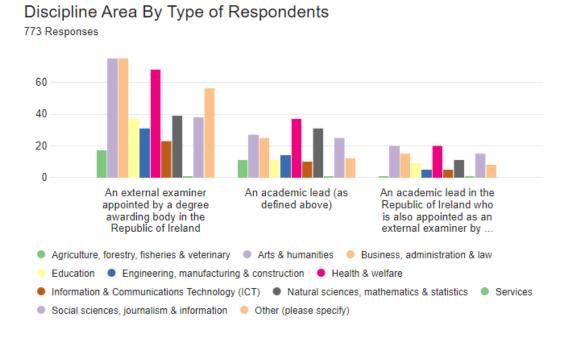
Figure 4-9:Discipline area by type of respondents

4.7   Study Findings

Examination of the data enabled the classification, sorting and arrangement of information from participating institutions that enabled further analysis of the relationships in the data and are contained in the following chapters.   Chapters 5 and 6 looks at the role of the external examiner, the tasks that external examiners are required to undertake in fulfilment of their duties and responsibilities and how participants view the importance and related effectiveness of those tasks.

The perceived challenges to the system of external examining are presented in Chapter 7.

Chapter 8 then addresses how respondents' views on academic standards, the influences that they believe external examiners bring to their role and is followed by respondents' views on strengths of and challenges to the external examiner system within Irish higher education.

5   The Role of the External Examiner

The study first sought to explore respondents' views on the range of tasks that external examiners are expected to carry out and their relative importance. Based on the literature review (Chapter 2) and the analysis of policy documents from the institutions (Chapter 3), the following range of tasks were included in the questionnaire:

a) Assurance of academic standards
b) Checking the accuracy of results
c) Acting as arbiter of results awarded to students
d) Checking that the distribution of award classifications is appropriate
e) Advising on curriculum/course content
f) Verifying that the quality assurance procedures of the institution have been followed
g) Resolving complaints raised by students
h) Making observations in relation to academic integrity
i) Evaluating the learning outcomes of the programme or module
j) Evaluating the programme and associated module assessment strategies
k) Reviewing key assessment tasks in advance of assessment
l) Determining whether or not the applied procedures for assessment are valid, reliable, fair and consistent
m) Determining the actual attainment of learners with respect to the programme or module learning outcomes.

Respondents were also invited to suggest additional tasks or roles that they identify as falling within the remit of the external examiner.

5.1   Task Importance

Figure 5-1 below shows that 722 (93%) of respondents believe that 'the assurance of academic standards' is the most important task of the external examiner. This is followed by 'determining whether or not the applied procedures for assessment are valid, reliable, fair and consistent' *(500, 65%)* and 'verifying that the quality assurance procedures of the institution have been followed' (420, 54%).

Of the tasks listed, only one task is identified with significance as not being part of the role of the external examiner. For this task, 'resolving complaints raised by students', 35% of respondents are of the opinion that it is not part of the role of an external examiner with a further 9% indicating that it is of no importance. However, 53% of respondents attach some importance to this task with 9% indicating that it is important.

These results suggest that upholding academic standards, procedures for assessment and evidence that quality assurance procedures are followed are considered as the most important tasks that external examiners should be asked to undertake.

Looking more closely at the data, the findings also suggest that respondents place importance on the role of the external examiner in advising on the design of programme and module outcomes

and assessment strategies. 679 (87%) of respondents believe that the role of the external examiner in 'evaluating the programme and associated module assessment strategies' is important or has some importance. 593, (77%) respondents also believe that 'evaluating the learning outcomes of the programme or module' is 'important' or 'somewhat important'.

External Examiner Tasks by Perceived Importance

774 Responses

Task	Important	Somewhat Important	Less Important	It is not part of the role	Not important at all	No Opinion
Assurance of academic standards	722				44	
Determining validity, reliability etc of assessment	500	202	44	16	8	
Verifying QA procedures of the institution have been ...	420	216	82	30	20	
Evaluating the programme and associated module ...	414	265	63	17		
Checking appropriateness of classifications	365	257	103	26	19	
Making observations on arrangements for academic ...	349	271	99	33	17	
Advising on curriculum/course content	326	275	126	28	17	
Checking the accuracy of results	322	261	125	39	25	
Reviewing key assessment tasks in advance of ...	300	250	120	55	38	
Evaluating the learning outcomes of the programme or ...	300	293	111	44	21	
Determining attainment of learners wrt learning ...	264	295	117	59	20	19
Acting as arbiter of results awarded to students	247	237	185	70	31	
Other	121	33	26			569
Resolving complaints raised by students	72	140	201	273	71	17

Figure 5-1: Respondents' Opinion of the Importance of External Examiner Tasks

5.2 Task Importance by Respondent Type

The order of importance attributed to tasks does not differ significantly between respondents who are external examiners (EE) appointed by Irish HEIs and academic leads who also act as external examiners (AL-EE). Table 5-1 below shows the percentage of respondents from each category of respondent who have classified each task as either 'important' or having 'some importance'.

In most tasks, EEs place more importance than academic leads (AL). AL-EEs place more importance on the role of the external examiner in determining the validity of procedures for assessment than EEs. ALs place less importance on the role of the external examiner in assuring that quality assurance procedures are followed, ranking it in 8th position of importance whereas EEs rank it in fourth position.

Task	All	External Examiner	Academic Lead who is an examiner	Academic Lead	Trend
Assurance of academic standards	99%	100%	100%	96%	
Determining whether or not the applied procedures for assessment are valid, reliable, fair and consistent	91%	93%	95%	84%	
Evaluating the programme and associated module assessment strategies	88%	90%	90%	82%	
Verifying that the quality assurance procedures of the institution have been followed	82%	88%	83%	68%	
Checking that the distribution of award classifications is appropriate	80%	82%	82%	76%	
Making observations on arrangements for academic integrity	80%	83%	83%	72%	
Advising on curriculum/course content	78%	80%	75%	72%	
Evaluating the learning outcomes of the programme or module	77%	81%	71%	70%	
Checking the accuracy of results	75%	84%	70%	58%	
Determining the actual attainment of learners with respect to the programme or module learning outcomes	72%	77%	71%	62%	
Reviewing key assessment tasks in advance of assessment	71%	77%	71%	59%	
Acting as arbiter of results awarded to students	63%	64%	60%	60%	
Resolving complaints raised by students	27%	28%	26%	26%	
Other	20%	20%	25%	16%	

Table 5-1: Comparison of Important and Somewhat Important Tasks by Respondent Type

A more significant difference can be observed between the categories of respondents on the degree to which tasks are deemed to be 'important' or having 'some importance'. Table 5-2

demonstrates that the variation between EEs and AL-EEs in most cases ranges between +2 and -2 percentage points in 6 of the 13 task statements excluding 'Other'. Significant variation arises in the perceptions of 'Evaluating the Learning Outcomes of the Programme or Module' (-10 percentage points), 'Checking the Accuracy of Results' (-14 percentage points).

Task	Variation between EE and AL-EE (percentage points)	Variation between EE and AL (percentage points)	Variation between AL-EE and AL (percentage points)
Assurance of academic standards	0	-4	-4
Determining whether or not the applied procedures for assessment are valid, reliable, fair and consistent	2	-9	-11
Evaluating the programme and associated module assessment strategies	0	-7	-8
Verifying that the quality assurance procedures of the institution have been followed	-5	-20	-14
Checking that the distribution of award classifications is appropriate	0	-5	-5
Making observations on arrangements for academic integrity	0	-11	-11
Advising on curriculum/course content	-5	-8	-3
Evaluating the learning outcomes of the programme or module	-10	-10	0
Checking the accuracy of results	-14	-26	-12
Determining the actual attainment of learners with respect to the programme or module learning outcomes	-6	-16	-9
Reviewing key assessment tasks in advance of assessment	-6	-18	-12
Acting as arbiter of results awarded to students	-4	-4	0
Resolving complaints raised by students	-2	-2	0
Other	5	-4	-9

Table 5-2: Variations of perceived importance of tasks between Respondent Categories

Variation is more pronounced between EEs and ALs where only one task statement has a variation of importance between +2 and -2 percentage points, 'Resolving complaints raised by students. Six statements have a variation of -10 percentage points or higher:

- Verifying that the quality assurance procedures of the institution have been followed (-20 percentage points)
- Making observations on arrangements for academic integrity (-11 percentage points)

- Evaluating the learning outcomes of the programme or module (-10 percentage points)
- Checking the accuracy of results (-26 percentage points)
- Determining the actual attainment of learners with respect to the programme or module learning outcomes (-16 percentage points)
- Reviewing key assessment tasks in advance of assessment (-18 percentage points).

Variation can also be observed between the perceptions of AL-EEs and Als, suggesting that they may have a difference in perspective brought about by their additional experience as an external examiner. This may be attributable to the large number of ALs from a single institution that responded to the survey and their institutional experience and definition of the role.

3 of the 13 task statements have a variation between +2 and -2 percentage points, which points to agreement on the relative importance of:

- Evaluating the learning outcomes of the programme or module
- Acting as arbiter of results awarded to students
- Resolving complaints raised by students.

A more significant difference occurs in 5 statements, which have a variance of 10 percentage points or higher:

- Determining whether or not the applied procedures for assessment are valid, reliable, fair and consistent (-11 percentage points)
- Verifying that the quality assurance procedures of the institution have been followed (-14 percentage points)
- Making observations on arrangements for academic integrity (-11 percentage points)
- Checking the accuracy of results (-12 percentage points)
- Reviewing key assessment tasks in advance of assessment (-12 percentage points)

This difference of perspective as to the importance of tasks undertaken by the external examiner points to a potential for conflict when the external examiner submits the report highlighting issues that they consider important but that the course director does not. The reverse may also occur; the external examiner report may also have no comments/feedback on matters that the course director rates as important but that the external examiner does not view as coming within their purview. In such cases, the course director may assume there are no issues whereas the external examiner does not see at as an issue for them to consider at all.

Looking more closely at the tasks that respondents consider not important at all or not part of the role provides greater insight into potential for differing concerns. Table 5-3 highlights that ALs (13%) consider the resolution of complaints raised by students and the review of key assessment tasks to be of more importance than EEs (8%) or AL-EEs (8%).

Task	All%	EE%	AL-EE%	AL%
Resolving complaints raised by students	9%	8%	8%	13%
Reviewing key assessment tasks in advance of assessment	5%	3%	5%	10%

Task	All%	EE%	AL-EE%	AL%
Acting as arbiter of results awarded to students	4%	2%	6%	6%
Checking the accuracy of results	3%	1%	5%	8%
Evaluating the learning outcomes of the programme or module	3%	2%	3%	5%
Verifying that the quality assurance procedures of the institution have been followed	3%	1%	1%	7%
Determining the actual attainment of learners with respect to the programme or module learning outcomes	3%	2%	1%	6%
Checking that the distribution of award classifications is appropriate	2%	2%	5%	3%
Advising on curriculum/course content	2%	1%	2%	4%
Making observations on arrangements for academic integrity	2%	1%	3%	5%
Evaluating the programme and associated module assessment strategies	2%	1%	1%	4%
Other	2%	1%	1%	4%
Determining whether or not the applied procedures for assessment are valid, reliable, fair and consistent	1%	0%	1%	3%
Assurance of academic standards	1%	0%	0%	2%

Table 5-3: Tasks Considered Not Important at All

As Table 5-4 (below) shows, there is less divergence among all categories of respondent on the tasks that are considered not part of the role of the external examiner. Thirty-five percent of all respondents agree that the resolution of complaints raised by students is not a task appropriate to the role of external examiner. This data suggests that differences in opinion within academic institutions as to the role are determined not by the task itself, but the perceived importance of it.

Task	ALL	EE%	AL-EE%	AL%
Resolving complaints raised by students	35%	34%	40%	35%
Acting as arbiter of results awarded to students	9%	10%	5%	8%
Advising on curriculum/course content	8%	7%	7%	10%
Checking the accuracy of results	7%	6%	5%	10%
Reviewing key assessment tasks in advance of assessment	6%	5%	6%	6%
Determining the actual attainment of learners with respect to the programme or module learning outcomes	4%	4%	4%	5%
Evaluating the learning outcomes of the programme or module	3%	3%	5%	2%
Checking that the distribution of award classifications is appropriate	5%	3%	5%	9%
Making observations on arrangements for academic integrity	4%	3%	6%	4%
Verifying that the quality assurance procedures of the institution have been followed	4%	2%	5%	6%
Evaluating the programme and associated module assessment strategies	2%	2%	2%	2%
Determining whether or not the applied procedures for assessment are valid, reliable, fair and consistent	2%	2%	2%	0%
Other	2%	1%	3%	3%
Assurance of academic standards	0%	0%	0%	0%

Table 5-4: Tasks not considered part of the role of EE

Of note here, is the disparity between the level of importance by all respondents placed on the assurance of academic standards (99%) and the 'determination of the actual attainment of learners with respect to programme or module learning outcomes' (72%). The level of importance of the role in assurance of attainment is significantly lower for academic leads at 62%. This suggests that the role of the external examiner is viewed as having more importance pre-assessment or in evaluating the process rather than the evaluation of whether the assessment has actually measured and upheld the required standard.

This chapter illustrates a consistency among respondents of the importance placed on the role of the external examiner to uphold academic standards, determining whether procedures are fair and consistent and in evaluating programme and module assessment strategies. There is some variation between respondent types when ranking the order of importance, however respondents are also agreed on matters not considered to be within the remit of the external examiner.

The next chapter looks at respondents' views on the effectiveness of external examining.

6 Effectiveness of External Examining

This chapter presents findings on the perceived effectiveness of external examining by respondents. It also points to the challenges facing the system of external examining and those factors negatively impacting its efficacy. Respondents also make recommendations for strengthening and enhancing the current external examining system thus underpinning its key quality assurance role in the assurance of academic standards.

In considering the purpose and role of external examining and external examiners, respondents were asked to rate the effectiveness of external examining on the task statements. Figure 6-1 below shows that 62% of respondents believe that the process is 'effective' when it comes to assuring academic standards with a further 33% believing that it is 'somewhat effective'. The process is deemed to be least effective when being used to resolve complaints or act as an arbiter of results.

Further examination of this data through the lens of its perceived importance provides further insights. Table 6-1 looks at each of the tasks in order of its importance as set out in Figure 6.1 and based on the number of respondents that considered the task to be 'important', cross references it to the percentage of respondents who consider the process to be effective.

As set out in Figure 5.1 above, 'assurance of academic standards' is considered to be the most important task of the external examining process by all respondent types. Of those that consider it 'important', 65% deem the process 'effective' while a further 33% deem it 'somewhat effective'. When comparing respondent types, 67% of EEs consider the process 'effective' while 30% deem it 'somewhat effective'. The perception among ALs shows a similar breakdown. However, only 59% of AL-EEs consider the process 'effective' with 32% viewing it as being 'somewhat effective'.

For EEs and ALs, the reviewing of key assessment tasks is seen to be the most effective, albeit it that the task is perceived to be of lesser importance. AL-EEs consider that advising on the curriculum or course content is most effective. External examining is seen to be least effective in checking the accuracy of results for all respondent types. It is likely that this response can be seen as supporting the premise that responsibility for ensuring the accuracy of results lies with the institution/programme board. A pattern can be observed in the data where the AL-EEs perceive a lower rate of efficacy of external examining in all tasks than the other respondent types. This may be due to the smaller population size among this group (110) versus 460 (EEs) and 240 (AL).

Effectiveness of External Examination Tasks

774 Responses

Task	Effective	Somewhat Effective	Less Effective	It is not part of the role	Not effective at all	No Opinion
Assurance of academic standards	62%	33%				
Determining whether or not the applied procedures ...	46%	37%	11%			
Evaluating the programme and associated module ...	44%	39%	11%			
Advising on curriculum/course content	39%	36%	16%	4%	3%	
Verifying that the quality assurance procedures of the ...	39%	35%	14%	5%	5%	
Reviewing key assessment tasks in advance of ...	37%	31%	15%	8%	6%	3%
Checking that the distribution of award classifications ...	34%	41%	13%	5%	4%	3%
Evaluating the learning outcomes of the programme ...	33%	41%	13%	6%	3%	3%
Making observations on arrangements for academic ...	32%	39%	16%	5%	5%	
Determining the actual attainment of learners with ...	28%	38%	18%	8%	5%	3%
Accuracy of results	27%	44%	17%	6%	5%	
Being an arbiter of results awarded to students	26%	34%	20%	12%	4%	4%
Other	13%	5%	3%			74%
Resolving complaints raised by students	9%	18%	20%	37%	8%	8%

Legend: ● Effective ● Somewhat Effective ● Less Effective ● It is not part of the role ● Not effective at all ● No Opinion
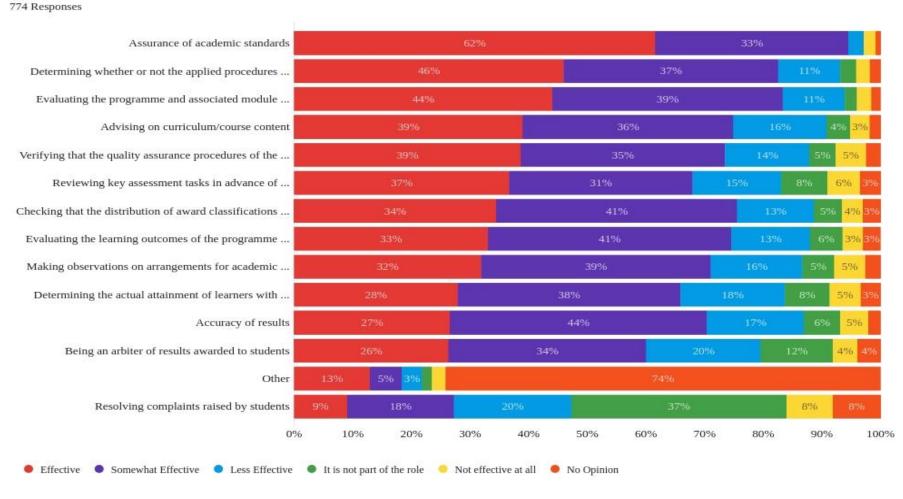
Figure 6-1: Respondents Views on the Effectiveness of External Examining

Task	All Respondents			External Examiner			Academic Lead – External Examiner			Academic Lead		
	RoI	E	SE	RoI	E	SE	RoI	E	SE	RoI	E	SE
Assurance of academic standards	1	65%	33%	1	67%	30%	1	59%	32%	1	63%	33%
Determining whether or not the applied procedures for assessment are valid, reliable, fair and consistent	2	63%	29%	2	65%	26%	2	61%	36%	2	57%	63%
Verifying that the quality assurance procedures of the institution have been followed	3	60%	32%	3	61%	31%	3	56%	39%	8	56%	29%
Evaluating the programme and associated module assessment strategies	4	64%	31%	4	66%	30%	=4	62%	33%	3	56%	35%
Checking that the distribution of award classifications is appropriate	5	57%	35%	7	57%	34%	6	55%	38%	4	59%	38%
Making observations on arrangements for academic integrity	6	56%	35%	7	58%	34%	=4	58%	36%	5	48%	36%
Advising on curriculum/course content	7	66%	27%	9	67%	26%	7	63%	28%	6	64%	27%
Checking the accuracy of results	8	55%	39%	5	56%	39%	=8	56%	36%	12	48%	42%
Reviewing key assessment tasks in advance of assessment	9	72%	21%	11	72%	21%	11	61%	36%	11	70%	18%
Evaluating the learning outcomes of the programme or module	10	63%	30%	8	66%	29%	=8	61%	30%	7	58%	34%
Determining the actual attainment of learners with respect to the programme or module learning outcomes	11	60%	32%	10	58%	33%	=8	59%	38%	9	68%	26%
Acting as arbiter of results awarded to students	=11	60%	32%	12	62%	31%	12	49%	35%	10	62%	31%
Resolving complaints raised by students	13	57%	25%	13	59%	22%	13	25%	50%	13	59%	27%

Table 6-1: Effectiveness of Tasks through the Lens of Importance by Respondent Type (RoI = Rank of Importance) E=effective, SE=somewhat effective)

6.1 Factors Contributing to Effectiveness

This section sets out the views of respondents when considering the strengths of or factors positively impacting upon the effectiveness of external examining in the participant institutions.

6.1.1 Externality

When asked about the perceived strengths of the external examining system, a common theme found in the responses was that, when done well, the presence of an external and objective voice to review and evaluate assessment strengthened and upheld academic standards:

> *It provides an outside perspective on the approaches to teaching, learning and assessment; the coherence of the overall programme; and assurance to module coordinators in terms of their grading and assessment practices.*

Its existence as a process is praised by external examiners in jurisdictions where a similar process is not used as described by this participant:

> Here in the US, we don't have external examiners/evaluators for program [sic] evaluation or *thesis/dissertation evaluation. Working in the two systems highlights the importance of externs in the assessment process.*

This externality is also perceived to enhance transparency and to provide reassurance to students of the standards and value of their learning and degree. National and international benchmarking of practice and standards is also associated with this externality. Academic leads note that the use, in particular, of international examiners adds an additional layer of validation to their work:

> The acknowledge[ment] from an external academic that the programme that you are offering is 'up to standard' and that it is on par with similar programmes around the country or in other countries is a strength of the current system.

6.1.2 Contribution to Course Development

Contribution to course and assessment design is also a perceived strength of the system where the external examiner and academic staff engage in discussion and mutual learning on different ways to assess and experiences with student cohorts. This engagement is perceived to enhance staff development and overall quality assurance as illustrated by this quotation.

> I thought it was a great opportunity for honest reflection. I really enjoyed learning about the programme that I evaluated... I felt there were opportunities to build new aspects for the programme, to ask for resources, that sort of thing. Both I and the faculty I talked and learned from it, I think.

6.1.3 Organisation and Communication

Access to materials in a timely manner also contributes to the perception of effectiveness of the process of external examining. Having a streamlined process which provides briefing documents on the role of the examiner, training on procedures and information on the programme under review is seen to be critical:

> Access to student assignments and tutor feedback through the VLE [virtual learning environment]. Regular correspondence by the programme leader and course administrators. In-person visits meeting staff and students.

A significant factor perceived to contribute to the effectiveness of external examining is the nature of the relationship between the examiner and the academic and administrative staff within the institution:

> Having externed in several institutions, and witnessing the system in my own school, the partnership with external examiners is highly valued and impactful on curricular review and reform, quality appraisal and professional revalidation of programmes.

This sense of partnership created over the period of the appointment of the examiner contributes to a supportive rather than regulatory function:

> It is collegial in the main, rather than overly regulatory, so is a support as opposed to being something to be feared. It is light touch but rigorous.

Dialogue between external examiners, academic staff and students is seen to add to the overall effectiveness of the process:

> I actually find that its most useful aspect is the sharing of experiences among colleagues in other institutions. I regard my role as external examiner almost as much in terms of supporting my colleagues in my discipline as a form of 'quality assurance'. Teaching and assessment have become increasingly complex for staff and there isn't enough recognition of that usually at institutional/managerial level, so this is something that external examiners can offer in addition to validating modes of assessment and grading standards.

6.2 Factors to Enhance Effectiveness

Given that a level of importance has been attributed to the listed tasks of the external examiner, the perception that in most of the tasks associated with the process, over 60% of respondents are of the view that the external examiner role is not as effective as they should be (somewhat effective) or not effective at all (see figure 6-1 above) , consideration must be given to the reasons for this. Data from this study points to several aspects of the process that respondents believe could contribute to an enhancement in the effectiveness of process as well as elements which are negatively impacting on the process.

6.2.1 Clarity on the Scope of the Role

A significant challenge to the role of external examiner is a lack of clarity on the expectations of the examiner. While 87% of external examiners indicated that they had received a briefing on their role and the expectations of the institution (Figure 6-3 below), several respondents point to frustrations where the recommendations of the examiner have not in their opinion been acted upon. An understanding of how an external examiners advice is to be considered and acted on is a critical component to the effectiveness of the process.

> Care ...[is]... needed with the expectations of an external examiner, both in terms of workload and on occasion a lack of understanding of what the role of external examiner entails.

As an external examiner, did you receive any of the following?
510 Responses

● Briefing on your role and expectations of the institution   ● Standards of the institution
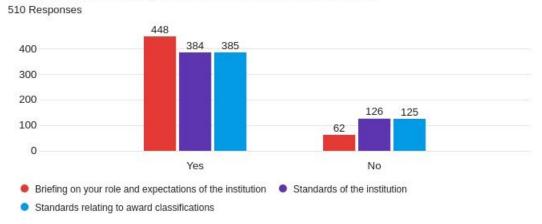● Standards relating to award classifications

Figure 6-2: Institutional Resources Received by External Examiners

Figure 6-3 also indicates that 25% of external examiners were not given information on institutional standards or standards relating to award classification. Institutions need to provide this information and to identify the level of importance assigned to different tasks that it requires of its external examiners so that the standards of the institution are made known to those involved in the process. As highlighted in 5.1.1 above, if the external examiner and academic staff have a different perception as to the importance of a particular task, a failure to respond to the examiner's comments may just reflect that, rather than an actual disregard for the external examiner's view.

As an academic lead, do you know where to access the following information...
264 Responses

● The role of external examiner and expectations of the institution   ● Standards of the institution
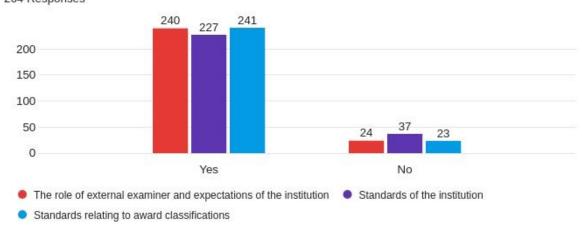● Standards relating to award classifications

Figure 6-3: Academic Lead awareness of Expectations and Information Required by External Examiner

While institutional policies indicate that the role is advisory, if external examiners are asked to comment on the standards and validity of assessment, they expect to have their comments acted upon or at the very least responded to. These frustrations which were reported by Hannan & Silver (2004) and Medland (2015) point to a requirement that institutional policies on external examining clearly outline the institutional expectations of the role of the examiner and communicate this both to examiners and to relevant academic staff.

> Unless an external examiner uncovers an absolute 'showstopper' of an issue, as an academic lead you're under no hard obligation to implement any of their recommendations if you don't want to. Obviously, some extern recommendations may not be practical or viable, but for those recommendations that are, I guess whether you implement them or not depends on how much you truly respect the externs, their role and the overall process.

In terms of responding to or implementing recommendations made by the external examiner, respondents point to the challenges imposed by lack of funding and of the potential for creating a two-tier approach to academic standards where differing approaches are taken to programmes that attract professional accreditation. Due to the absolute requirements for attaining accreditation, it is perceived to be easier for these programmes to attract the resources required to implement recommendations:

> Despite the guidance from EE arising from their assessments, the ability to act based on suggestions is a challenge. The significance of their reports in facilitating changes to staff / student ratio, equipment, need for additional staff to provide lab / practical classes more often is most often met with 'that would be nice to have' rather than 'let's act on this expert's suggestions'! This is frustrating for academic leads and EE alike, especially when they return annually over their term and the SAME issues and suggestions are discussed but without resolution. The exception to this appears to be programmes with external accreditation where specific standards are set to accredit programmes. These courses seem to get preferential treatment to the detriment of others.

These findings point to a need for institutional support of the external examiner process and a statement on what the expectations of the external examiner and process are and, critically, how the institution is expected to respond. This respondent expressed surprise at the different expectations of the external examiner that they found within the Irish system.

> I have externally examined for two Irish Universities now. There are a lot of similarities between what is expected of the role in these two institutions (e.g. checking proposed assessments). But I found the differences between expectations of the involvement of the external examiner in examination procedures and reporting quite different. I expected a degree of variability between the procedures but perhaps not as much as I found. In summary, I think the challenge of the current system is [to] provide a clearer template on what the role of the external examiner should be in the Irish HE system.

This points further to the need for each institution to document its expectations and to ensure that they are understood by all stakeholder, recognising that different institutions may have different expectations within their context, academic governance and quality assurance processes.

A future role for the external examiner is posed by this respondent where the examiner is not asked to look at specific scripts:

> I think reviewing the scripts could easily be an internal matter – whether it is 58 or 60 or 69 or 71 – I think the unit internally should decide what the final marks are – the externals should then review the overall classification within a module, within a year and a programme so we can comment on too many fails etc. It should be an analysis of the data rather than a review of individual student scripts. I think using externals to review individual scripts is an outdated form of assurance – the internal processes should be strong enough to address borderlines, fails etc.

This comment highlights the role that institutional quality assurance procedures should play in finalising but suggests that in some cases examiners may still be being used as additional examiners to decide on individual student marks, which is contrary to the stated role of the external examiner in most of the participating institutions' policy documents.

6.2.2 Workload and Time

The time allowed to undertake external examining is being continually constricted due to increasing pressures turnaround times to meet deadlines for examination boards and the publication of results. Examiners raise concerns about their ability to truly evaluate the materials provided within the timeframe giving rise to concerns that the process has become compliance based and 'tick boxy':

> The biggest challenge for me (and it seems for most externs) is time. In particular, sample exams for review generally land on my desk in the midst of my own corrections, with tight turnarounds required for both. As an academic lead, with very tight timelines for corrections and reviews before exam boards, I often find that feedback from externs is delayed, presumably because they are also busy with internal examining duties.

Suggestions from respondents to mitigate this issue is to spread the engagement with the examiner throughout the year or semester so that coursework materials are being viewed earlier than the traditional external examiner visit period. Related to clarity on the role, suggestions are also made that the external examiner review could take place over a different time period if their role is to act as more than an evaluator of grading and assessment.

> The review is annual, and if the purpose is to assess the fairness of grading and assessment, then it needs to be done on an annual basis. If not, it might be every three years and have 2 examiners (one insider to discipline, the second from a related discipline) who observe more broadly the educational experiences of students.

An interesting observation is made by one respondent on the impact of shortening the academic year, which has implications for the timescales in which processes can be managed:

> A major threat…. [to the external examining process] is the shortening of the academic calendar in many institutions to accommodate students traveling at summertime or international students. This has led to shorter study periods between the end of teaching & end of term assessments, but also led to shorter timelines for academics and support staff to mark papers, enter and process grades and allow for proper external review.

6.2.3 Changing Patterns of Assessment

Other factors impacting on workload and time include the changing patterns of course and assessment. External examining practices and procedures were developed to support an assessment approach that largely involved a single written assessment at the end of the academic year rather than at the end of a semester or period of learning. The current landscape of several elements of coursework, modules without terminal assessment, multiple modes of delivery, larger class sizes and increased interdisciplinarity is more complex and generates a significantly larger volume of assessment and workload, even if they are shorter. This breadth of delivery, while of value for student choice and experience, has led to challenges for the external examining process.

The appointment of module external examiners across a range of programmes requiring specific subject expertise has, in some cases according to this respondent, negatively impacted the oversight of programme performance and process reliability:

> The distinction between module and programme level External Examining means that an emphasis is placed on discussing marks and individual students rather than on processes and their reliability. The emphasis upon marks also disconnects the marking process from the teaching. More opportunities should be given for EEs to discuss course objectives, assessment setting and teaching methods.

It recognised however, that it is not reasonable to expect a programme examiner to have sufficient expertise in large programmes with several elective choices:

> For large UG programmes with multiple subject specific modules, it is not possible for one external examiner to provide a robust review of module content or expected learning outcomes at different levels of achievement. This is problematic.

This presents a challenge for institutions to find ways to adapt external examining processes to the differing forms of programme delivery.

6.2.4   Access to Materials and Systems

The increased use of virtual learning environments (VLEs) and other academic systems, while having the potential to enhance remote access to assessment materials, has added a layer of frustration for some examiners. Issues experienced include negotiating internal IT policies to allow examiners access to institutional systems and information that is not presented in a way conducive to external examining. In some cases, examiners indicated that they did not see all assessments and were provided only with terminal examination materials. The provision of access to external examiners is challenging for institutions as they have to balance this access with cyber and data protection concerns.

6.2.5   Virtual Examination Boards/External Examiner Visits

As the use of virtual examination boards and external examiner visits become more prevalent, there are mixed views among respondents on whether their use hinders or enhances effective external examining. Many respondents find that they are helpful as the need for travel reduces the amount of time involved in the process.

Others lament the loss of the dynamic that exists when the external examiner meets with the programme team and/or students. The use of online visits and examination boards is viewed by some respondents as being detrimental to the effectiveness of the process where it may be easier for recommendations to be ignored. A shortened timebound engagement is also seen to reduce the level of discussion and interaction, which, as highlighted above, is deemed to enhance the effectiveness of the process as a whole.

6.2.6   Training and Induction

Respondents point to the need for a form of induction or training to be provided to external examiners. The training requested refers to understanding education in the Irish context, the standards in use within the organisation and clarity on procedures and expectations.

In summary external examining is viewed as a positive and largely effective or somewhat effective process, contributing to programme development and providing external validation for programmes. Its effectiveness is enhanced by good communication and organisation by the appointing institution and where open dialogue is facilitated. Effectiveness of the different tasks associated with external examining are perceived differently by different respondent type with those identifying as external examiners viewing the process to be more effective than other respondents. Relatively small institutional changes could enhance effectiveness even more, however the issue of rising workload and the shortened time available to external examiners to complete the process is a matter of concern.

7 Challenges to the System

When asked to consider challenges to the sustainability of the current process of external examining, two main systemic issues were raised by respondents. These issues echo the findings of HEFCE (2015), Hannon & Silver (2004) and Shay (2005) relating to niche disciplines and professional acquaintance and have an impact on the long-term sustainability of the external examining system:

i. availability of qualified examiners
ii. market demands

7.1 Availability of Qualified Examiners

The ability of institutions to recruit suitability qualified external examiners is of concern to respondents. Reasons for this include a small pool of experts in some discipline areas, the failure of institutions to recognise the activity of external examining in their work allocation models and the remuneration offered by institutions to those taking on the role of external examining.

7.1.1 Widening the Pool

As highlighted above, the objectivity of the external examiner is considered to be a strength of the system. However, many respondents point to the manner in which appointments of external examiners where nominations are made from within a department, usually sourcing from a known network rather than from an external list.

Other respondents refer to the criteria used by some institutions as being limiting where some categories of academics or some jurisdictions may be ignored:

> External examiners need not necessarily be at 'full professor' or 'professor' level, and the assumption that these titles equate to people who are excellent in teaching, learning and assessment is not necessarily true. Colleagues at more junior grades who have an excellent track record in T,L&A should be eligible for appointment as they can bring fresh and innovative perspectives. This would also serve to widen the pool of available people.

This comment highlights one of the tensions of the current system, as to reliably comment on the appropriateness of standards where external examiners need a certain level of disciplinary standing, so to widen the pool requires a threshold level of experience from which to draw. Some respondents suggest for the creation of a national panel of external examiners that institutions can draw from.

7.1.2 Recognition for the Role

Another significant set of challenges impacting the recruitment relate to the recognition of the dual role of the examiner both by the institution that has appointed the examiner and by their home institution. External examiners point to an increasing workload involved in external examining due to the increase in coursework, different forms of assessment and increased class sizes. There is then a conflict of having to engage with external examining practices at the same time as being academic staff in their own institutions. While often encouraged to take part in external examining, they are rarely recognised for this work in their own institution.

> These 'extra' roles we take on are not allotted time in our workloads and yet we are expected to take on external examining on top of regular workloads (and in

order to have a basis for promotion). These extra work roles we take on need better recognition in the university system. It is simply not sustainable to ask people to take on these roles without proper acknowledgement of the time it takes.

7.1.3   Remuneration

Another indicator of recognition is the remuneration offered to external examiners. In the view of many respondents, current rates of renumeration are insufficient when balanced with the increasing demands of the role. Recent initiatives by the Office of the Revenue Commissioners, which have impacted on the payments to national and international examiners, are cited as further barriers to examiners taking on the role.

7.2   Market Demands

A concern raised by some respondents is the impact of market demands and rankings on academic standards. These pressures arise from the reporting of student success and attainment through international ranking systems and national returns such as the returns made annually to the Higher Education Authority. Student expectations also contribute to this pressure.

> 1. A pressure for programmes to demonstrate high student attainment as part of broader quality assurance processes and programme marketing. 2. In the case of postgraduate professional education programmes, pressure from students, who perceive themselves as consumers of a product i.e. they are paying substantial fees for the programme and qualification.

7.3   Changes in Degree Classifications

The opportunity was taken to explore the perceptions of external examiners and academic leads regarding the changes to grade distribution at overall award classification level over time. Figure 7-1 below shows that 61% of respondents did not believe that there has been significant change with 40% believing that there has been change.

686 Responses

Yes [39%]   No [61%]

Figure 7-1: Respondents perceptions of changes in grade classification over time.

Those that answered 'yes' cited a range of reasons that they perceived to contribute both positively and negatively toward award classification change. Figure 7-2 below illustrates the themes that are seen to contribute to grade change positively and negatively. These themes include:

- Ability of students
- Appeals /Litigation
- Change of grading practices
- Competition for students
- Coursework/Continuous Assessment
- Criterion vs norm-based standards
- Decline in student ability.
- Declining Academic standards/rigour
- Feedback to students
- Grading Practices
- group work
- Impact of pandemic
- Improvements in teaching
- Information to students
- Institutional Procedures
- Labour Market influences
- Large classes
- Online assessment
- Precarity of tenure
- Pressure from management/the system
- Rankings - impact
- Student expectation
- Student Support systems
- Untrained examiners
- Using full range of marks

Figure 7-2: Sentiment Analysis in Relation to Reasons for Change in Overall Degree Classification

Positive aspects of the system that are seen to have contributed to student achievement include the ability of students themselves, improvements in teaching and learning and the addition of academic support services such as writing and maths support. A change in grading practices (using the full range of marks, moving from norm to criterion-based grading), together with providing more and better information to students e.g. grading rubrics, are also seen to contribute to student achievement:

> Student expectations and supports - students are ambitious with high expectations for their results and lots of assistance now available to help them study, write and perform.

On a more negative note, pressure from management to retain students, the impact of rankings, and the precarity of tenure of academic staff may be to force academics into grading students more positively:

> Lecturers are often asked awkward questions if grades decline but rarely if they increase. Consequently, they tend to increase slightly every year.

Students' awareness of recheck and review procedures as well as complaints procedures are also seen as contributing to a 'complaint culture' and fear of litigation among staff which is also seen to contribute to a more lenient approach to grading, as illustrated by two respondents' comments:

> Students are very 'grade aware' and will appeal grades more readily than in the past.

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Student appeals and litigation - explaining and defending a lower result in marginal situations e. where a student could be 58-60% takes a lot of time and energy. Across six or ten modules, giving the 60% instead of the 58% adds up to inflation.

Respondents' view of the challenges facing the external examining systems are consistent with the findings of Silver (1995), Hannan & Silver (2004) and HEFCE (2015) suggesting that little has changed and that these challenges are persistent. Despite this however, the process has continued.

The next chapter looks at academic standards, including what is understood as academic standards and what influences external examiners bring to bear when evaluating academic standards. The potential for calibration or benchmarking activities is also addressed.

8 Academic Standards – Perceptions and Influences

The findings presented in Chapters 5 and 6 above demonstrate the importance respondents place on the role of the external examiner in assuring academic standards. This chapter presents findings whether there is a shared understanding of term 'academic standards', what influences or terms of reference external examiners use when they are assessing academic standards and respondents' views on issues that may explain movements when observed, in award classifications. Academic standards as a concept can be difficult to pinpoint and assumptions can be made as to a common understanding of what it means. In order to explore this further, respondents were asked to outline their understanding of what 'academic standards' means to them.

8.1 Defining Academic Standards

Academic standards as a concept can be difficult to pinpoint and assumptions can be made as to a common understanding of what it means. In order to explore this further, respondents were asked to outline their understanding of what 'academic standards' means to them. Respondents' responses to the question 'What do you understand by the term 'Academic Standards'?' provides insights into differing perspectives. These perspectives can be summarised as

   i. Proficiency in the discipline
  ii. Quality and integrity of processes supporting assessment
 iii. Benchmarking within and across institutions

For most respondents, academic standards are expressed as proficiency in a subject area based on defined learning outcomes and the attainment of students in assessment. They set the threshold levels for different degree classifications and are set in all aspects of curriculum design, assessment criteria and in the methods designed to meet programme and module learning outcomes. They refer to the "levels of knowledge base and skill sets achieved by students in relation to the curriculum", and include "performance-based measures, comparing class averages from one year to the next". These standards are considered crucial for "maintaining a shared professional understanding of what constitutes appropriate disciplinary knowledge and levels of achievement for the degree in question"

For others their definition of academic standards relates to 'quality assurance in higher education where these standards offer guidelines and a reference point for educational institutions. Delivery of a programme as designed and advertised, having procedures relating to academic integrity and the correction of assessment also form part of an understanding of academic standards.

Benchmarking of programme learning outcomes to the standards of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) provides a basis for national and international benchmarking. This respondent makes that point that such comparison may be made across institutions and in different subject areas.

> Common standards recognised cross-institution and cross a range of institutions, meeting the required learning outcomes expected at the various educational levels identified. The ability to correctly assume someone educated to a given level is of the same academic competency as someone else in the same or different subject area.

This interpretation is not necessarily shared where another respondent differentiates the unit of benchmarking to the same or similar discipline area.

> Academic standards are expected to be comparable across the same or highly similar degree courses and levels of study at different educational institute

Respondents' answers to this question demonstrates that there is a shared fundamental understanding or sectoral definition of what the term 'academic standards' means. This is reassuring, given that 'assurance of academic standards' is considered the most important task assigned to the external examiner. As noted above however, there is an apparent mismatch between the perceived importance of the task 'determining the actual attainment of learners with respect to the programme or module learning outcomes' which is a key pillar of an understanding of academic standards over more procedural tasks.

8.2 Factors Influencing External Examiners' Assessment of Academic Standards

Respondents were asked to indicate what influences they themselves bring to bear on their assessment of academic standards as an external examiner or if they were not external examiners, what influences they thought external examiners brought to the process. Three primary areas of influence are identified by both external examiners and academic leads and align with Bloxham & Price's findings (2014, 2015)

   i.   disciplinary standards
   ii. professional experience
   iii. institutional requirements.

8.2.1 Disciplinary Standards

The role of disciplinary standards is cited as an influence on external examiners' evaluation of material. Respondents cite the role of professional or regulatory body standards, both national and international as described by one respondent "awareness of both my own institutional standards and professional body standards and expectations of achievement". Four respondents explicitly mention the UK subject benchmarks with one commenting of its use where appropriate in the Irish context: "My knowledge of subject benchmark requirements in the UK and where appropriate, their relevance for the subject in the Irish context".

8.2.2 Professional Experience

Many of the respondents cite their own professional experience as an academic, researcher or lecturer. They evaluate their assessment of standards through benchmarking the material with that experience. Additional experiences as external examiners within the Irish, UK and other systems also informs their work highlighting that perceptions of standards can evolve and change as the examiner has different experiences. The responses point to the subjectivity of the examiner, e.g. 'I bring experience from within my own academic institution so can compare and contrast'.

The potential for this subjectivity to impact standards is noted by one academic lead:

> The influence of the examiner when comparing or contrasting academic standards is undoubtedly biased by the academic standards and practises of their own place of work and geographical location.

Academic leads expect that this experience will inform their role as external examiner and that external objectivity is valued:

> The primary role of external examiners is to bring their own knowledge and experience of setting and maintaining academic standards in other institutions to bear in benchmarking and comparing standards in the institutions to which they are appointed as external examiners.

The perceived ranking of the institution that the examiner is appointed from can also inform the impact the perception of the role and effectiveness of the examiner.

> Using my own discipline as an example, the acdemic (sic) standards of programmes in the RoI are higher than in England (where all of our external examiners have typically been based). In my opinion, an external examiner should come from a background of equal or higher academic standards. The goal of the external examiner process should be one of improving local standards.

8.2.3 Institutional Requirements

External examiners are also influenced by the standards and requirements of the institution into which they have been appointed. The provision of module and programme descriptors as well as the regulations of the institution provide a basis on which evaluations are made: "Standards and regulations set out by the QA documentation in the institution being examined".

Another perspective on understanding the national or sectoral context is provided by this respondent:

> Understanding the situation of the institution in the context of the nation and comparator institutions, and the nature of academic content being appropriate for students to operate as graduates both nationally and internationally.

The need to understand the context of the institution can sometimes cause difficulties for academic leads:

> They often can't see the wood for the trees, being tripped up by small matters and thinking mostly about how to import their own institutions' (and sometimes countries') practices
>
> into the institution where they function as external examiners."

8.3 Towards alignment on academic standards

Respondents were asked if the introduction of calibration type activities would be of benefit to the sector. The response was largely positive, observing that calibration of standards would allow greater consistency across institutions and mitigate against the perceived flaws in the external examining process:

> Yes, the definition of academic standards is vague and it is subject to different interpretations from academics with different levels of experience. As I mentioned, this is far from any quality system (I have worked both in the industry and in education and the external examination/audit system we operate is not fit for purpose and should be abolished, given that the institutions are self-accredited anyway).

This observation by a respondent highlights the need for ongoing dialogue among academics and questions how academic standards are influenced by the nature of the institution and the student body. The respondent suggests that there may not be as much variability within Irish institutions arising from these factors as observed in their home jurisdiction:

> Working at a Research 1 university, I'm acutely aware of the academic status of colleges /universities, and that standards/expectations of students/resources vary hugely across campuses. Academic standards vary accordingly. When I look across Irish universities, I'm not as conscious of same, but my observation may well be misguided.

Some respondents argue that this calibration exists already particularly in professional disciplines where the profession's standards and professional accreditation activities contribute to the alignment of standards:

> I think in the case of engineering, this standard is defined by Engineer's Ireland and calibrated through the periodic reaccreditation process".

Existing processes such as periodic programme review is also viewed as an opportunity to discuss and benchmark standards:

> I think it is inherent in our work and is widely understood. Unless there are fundamental changes, the process and systems for course design, approval and revalidation act as the conduit for understanding this. Internal structures should adequately provide these opportunities in good schools/colleges. Each college will have their own processes, and 5 year cyclical revalidation of all programmes should be the industry norm, not just in professional programmes.

Another opportunity to facilitate calibration of standards within current frameworks is the use of teams of external examiners rather than a single examiner, a phenomenon likely to be dependent on the nature of the programme (and/or student numbers):

> As an external, I was fortunate to work in a team of external examiners during my tenure. This was my first opportunity to engage with the duties in this way and I found it most rewarding. One always learns something new when acting as an external examiner but working as part of a team was particularly rewarding as I felt we were able to discuss standards across all four institutions plus the one we were appointed to.

The predominant view from respondents was the need to facilitate discussion among academic staff and discipline experts on standards where new technologies and methodologies are also considered:

> Careful, innovative thought is required to generate interdisciplinary and international opportunities to discover and apply learnings which can be transferred to specific settings while also stretching academic standards into new standards capable of sustainably embracing new technologies.

Perceived barriers to this discussion include the level of time available to academic staff and their ability to engage in formalised activities while ensuring that outcomes are not potentially constraining the discipline:

> [A]n opportunity for discipline experts to share what this means is potentially valuable. However, I would not want this to become constraining or result in defining the discipline too narrowly or too fully, which squeezes out room for innovation.

While consistency across the sector was expressed by some respondents, the ability to standardise across multiple autonomous institutions with different missions, goals and resources would be challenging and perhaps not an appropriate approach. What is evident is the need for transparency, ensuring that there is a shared understanding of academic standards coupled with

ongoing dialogue among and between faculty and external examiners is an important factor in maintaining standards. This includes having clear and timely communications, clarity on roles, training, closing the loop etc. As noted above, providing national, sectoral and institutional context for extern examiners is critical to ensuring that shared understanding.'

9   From Reflection to Action: Ten Considerations for Enhancement

Reflecting on the findings of this study, ten considerations have been identified for institutions to consider and contribute to the enhancement of current policy and practice. In presenting these considerations, it is acknowledged that they may already form part of institutions' existing policies and practice. In highlighting them, they are intended as a benchmark or best practice against which institutions can evaluate their existing practice.

1. **Institutional Assessment Policy and Practice**
   Do existing policy(ies) and processes for external examining reflect their purpose within an institution? Is there clarity on how the recommendations of external examiners are addressed and how the institution manages this oversight?

2. **Engagement and Communication with External Examiners**

   Is there a specified induction and training process for new and current external examiners exist? Does that include information on the Irish HE system context, roles and responsibilities, information on the NFQ, specific institutional or programme standards, regulations, grading norms, and feedback?

3. **Close feedback loops:** Are there systems in place to report internally on how external examiners' feedback has been acted on and to inform examiners on how the institution has responded to feedback??

4. **Delimit the virtual aspects of external examining**: Recognising the opportunities provided by technology and online platforms, do institutional policies clearly outline their expectations of what aspects of the external examining process can or should not be carried out online?

5. **Consider the accessibility of online material**: Are assessment materials are provided to external examiners within learning management systems accessible? Is specific attention given to the requirements for access and how materials are organised?

6. **Managing the Examiner workload**: Are there opportunities to spread workload over the academic year, such as extending the engagement of external examiners beyond 'one visit' per year, making use of online platforms or viewing course work earlier?

7. **Explore collaborative examining**: Are there opportunities to facilitate external examiners to meet at programme or discipline level. Could team external examination be considered for large interdisciplinary programmes?

8. **Establish communities of practice**: Is there potential to provide development opportunities for academic staff to discuss academic standards, moderation and grading to assist in creating a shared understanding of standards?

9. **Formally recognise external examining**: How do workload allocation models recognise the time spent by academic staff working as external examiners in other institutions. Is external examining recognised within an institution's faculty promotion and professional development processes?

10. **Perform a systematic review**: Is there an opportunity to review recruitment practices for external examiners which looks at the identification of potential external examiners and their remuneration.

10 Conclusion and Future Work

This project sought to address four questions

1. How do academic staff and external examiners operating within Irish higher education institutions understand the purpose of external examining as set out in respective institution's policies and procedures?
2. What influences do external examiners bring to bear in their judgement of assessment standards and classifications?
3. How appropriate are current methodologies and tools for external examining for different and emerging forms of assessment, programmes, and awards?
4. How can the role of external examiner and external examining be enhanced in our institutions?

Results suggest that there is a consistent understanding of the overall purpose of external examining with some variation in the perception of the importance of certain tasks within the duties and responsibilities of the role between external examiners and academic leads. There is universal agreement that the assurance of academic standards is the most important role of the external examiner, followed by the determination that assessment procedures are fair and consistent.

Disciplinary standards, professional experience and knowledge of the appointing institutions requirements inform external examiners assessment of academic standards. Professional experience is deemed to be important by academic leads, but they are also conscious that the process can be subjective and influences from other jurisdictions or institutions may not always be positive or appropriate to the context of the institution where external examining is taking place.

External examining brings several positive aspects to the institution. The opportunity to avail of external and objective expertise and to benchmark programmes and modules to similar comparable national and international programmes is seen to provide benefit and provide students and other stakeholders of the quality of the programmes offered. While challenges to the current practice of external examining are highlighted, when done well external examining is seen to be effective in assurance of standards.

The challenges cited related to the sustainability of the process in a growing sector where the number of programmes, assessment types and student enrolments is increasing. Sourcing and recruiting external examiners are impacted by the time now required to assess materials and the timing of external examining activities which clash with academic staff's obligations in their own institutions. While the introduction of remote external examining and attendance at online examination boards can mitigate this, some external examiners are of the view that the process is more effective when undertaken face to face. Remuneration of external examiners and the sustainability of recruiting appropriately qualified external examiners is also a concern.

Institutions are invited to consider questions which have been categorised into actionable topics. These are presented to allow institutions further enhance the process and practice associated with external examining. As designated awarding bodies, the participating institutions are

responsible for the assurance of their academic standards. The policy documents examined in this research suggest that many of the answers to these questions are already contained within those policies. They will, however, serve as a benchmark with which to evaluate the effectiveness of current policies and practices and to enhance induction and orientation processes for external examiners. There is an opportunity to explore further how opportunities for academic staff to discuss academic standards either at an institutional or inter-institutional level will serve to continue both internal and interinstitutional dialogue and reflection on standards (Bloxham et al (2015)).

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12 Appendix 1 : Questionnaire