External Examiners

Muldoon, Mark

2009

MIMS EPrint: **2010.107**

Manchester Institute for Mathematical Sciences
School of Mathematics

The University of Manchester

Reports available from: http://eprints.maths.manchester.ac.uk/
And by contacting: The MIMS Secretary
School of Mathematics
The University of Manchester
Manchester, M13 9PL, UK

ISSN 1749-9097

Editorial

Some years ago when I first moved to the UK a Belgian friend gave me a copy of George Mikes's *How to be an Alien*. A slender—the ungenerous might say "slight"—volume, it combines stylish line drawings by Nicholas Bently with brief chapters offering advice on such important matters as Tea, The National Passion (queueing, apparently) and Sex. The last of these, perhaps now the best remembered, reads in its entirety:

> CONTINENTAL people have sex life; the English have hot-water bottles.

As a newly arrived young academic surrounded by lively, English-born students I had some doubts about this, but I enjoyed the book anyway.

Mikes was a Hungarian immigrant and a literary man so although he offered further chapters on Journalism, How to Be a Bloomsbury Intellectual and The Language, his book didn't prove much help with my own confusions. I'm an American, hence a native speaker of English, and though the minority dialects spoken in the British Isles have offered some enjoyable surprises, I haven't had too much trouble: the most vexing mysteries lay elsewhere. If now, after nearly 20 years of working in British universities, I were to write *How to Be an Alien Lecturer* I think I'd need a chapter on The External Examiner.

I was, and still am, deeply mystified by this office. I have consulted colleagues, studied back issues of the *THES* and encouraged librarians to fetch old, seldom-read reports from deep basements, but remain baffled. On the one hand, as Harold Silver and colleagues wrote in their 1995 report, *The External Examiner System: Possible Futures*, "There is little or no support for abandoning external examining ..." One of their conclusions

> The external examiner system should be retained and strengthened in whatever ways are necessary for it to operate effectively in the future. Other possible changes in higher education, such as any changes in the honours classification system, would only reinforce the need.

could stand as a summary for many pub conversations that I've had. On the other hand whole large, populous countries with extensive university systems (Germany, France, Japan, the USA ...) manage, despite a shocking lack of external oversight, to produce scholars of sufficient skill and learning as to compete favourably with British graduates for lecturing posts in UK universities. Indeed, with the possible exception of Denmark, no countries save Britain and its former colonies operate such a comprehensive system of external examining.

Part of the explanation for this discrepancy is historical. The first UK university regularly to employ external examiners was Durham, drawing them mainly from Oxford and Cambridge. Although the externals were, in part, simply extra hands for the setting and marking of exams, they were also clearly intended to help establish the perception that degrees from Durham were just as good as those from Oxbridge. But the true inventor of the modern system of external examination was the Victoria University of Manchester. Established in 1880 through the merger of colleges in Manchester, Liverpool and Leeds, one of the University's main aims was to enable its

teachers to examine their own students. Where the three progenitor institutions had been obliged to prepare students for exams set by the University of London, lecturers at the new university were meant to be able to "settle in advance what subjects were to be taught, how they were to be taught, and how the students were to be examined". Thus the 1880 Charter made provision chiefly for internal examinations, but as a concession "to those who thought there were moral or intellectual dangers ... owing to favouritism or competition, external examiners were to be added." Harold Silver writes[1]

> The examiners of the Victoria University were, according to the Charter, to be 'The Professors of the University', lecturers selected for the purpose, and 'certain External Examiners not Professors, Lecturers or Teachers in any of the Colleges of the University'. At least one such external examiner was to be appointed 'for each subject or group of subjects forming part of the courses of students required for University degrees'.

So here, at the outset, are many of the features of the current system, including most of the hopes—for uniformity of standards and fairness to individuals—that various colleagues have suggested as justifications for the interminable faffing that external examining demands. I suspect these hopes are unfounded. Perhaps because I've always worked in large departments, I find it implausible that either favouritism or spite toward individual students plays much of a role. And as to comparability of standards: the UK's university system has for a long time been so large that few external examiners can have a comprehensive view of what is taught there. In my favourite article on the subject[2] Ronald Barnett suggests that

> Firstly, we must have grave doubts that an external examining system is ever going to be adequate to the demands placed on it by a mass higher education system, with around one hundred universities and over one million students. In the new age, the implicit notion of uniform standards and homogeneity must come in for an even greater battering. But secondly, and even more serious in many ways, we have to doubt that the external examining system **ever** fulfilled the responsibilities placed on it.
>
> It appears likely that the idea was **always** a fiction; we just did not recognize it as such.

He goes on to make an important point—that we work in an age in which the "state voices the language of standards"—and to wonder whether, in addition to her function as a bureaucratic agent of quality assurance, the external examiner might still play some useful, educational role. He argues that she can, especially if, in a spirit of collegiality, the internal and external examiners work together to "construct the role" and imbue it with the virtues and powers it is imagined to have.

[1] In "External Examining in Higher Education: A Secret History", which appears in R. Aldrich, ed., *In History and in Education: essays presented to Peter Gordon*, Woburn Press 1996.

[2] Ronald Barnett (1996), "The idea of the external examiner: myth or legend?", in Gina Wisker, ed., *Making the Most of the External Examiner*, SEDA Paper 98, Staff and Educational Development Association, Birmingham.

But the state—having recently decided to abandon SATS for 14-year-olds—seems at last to be having second thoughts about the language of standards or at least about the concomitant focus on examining. And I am not persuaded that the virtuous, role-constructing circle that Barnett recommends is worth the effort. UK universities currently require something on the order of 10,000 external examiners and convention demands that these posts be filled by reasonably accomplished scholars: is it really the best use of their talents to have them reviewing exam papers? And is it really a good idea to prepare exams long before of the end of term, just to enable this sort of review? I suspect that I am not the only lecturer who has found himself, toward the end of a new course, wondering how he's going to cover all the material that went into an exam paper due before even half the lectures had been delivered.

My wife, who is also a foreign-born academic, recalls having read that "Home is where the bureaucracy pisses you off" and I suppose in this sense, as well as in many happier ones, British academia has become my home. Most of the time I cultivate a Mikes-like attitude of cheerful bemusement toward external examining, thinking of it as something akin to cellar-temperature real ale, red pillar boxes and a constitutional monarch: one of those things that makes Britain what it is. But sometimes I revert to the attitudes of my homeland and then I think of it as an anachronistic waste of our time and the taxpayer's money.

MARK MULDOON