

My reflection on external examining in universities

Stage two of critiquing my curriculum vitae.

It looks like twenty-one years of external examining in higher education: fifteen universities, not to mention validating about forty-five programmes, interim reviews and departmental and faculty evaluations. A friend once asked if the standard was higher at Russell Group universities. Interesting word 'standard'; to what does it apply? Cleverer students? Cleverer tutors? Tougher marking? None of those. For me it is the seriousness of the effort to enable students to fulfil their potential. I only experienced directly one example in HE of an institution not caring to do this. Later, a university whose masters I had validated as an external and whose staff were great, suffered from a dean whose policy was to pile 'em high and sell 'em cheap. As I write that dean is in prison. And no, the standard is not higher at Russell Group universities.

A developing theme of those years was a sense of isolation. At the beginning staff would be allowed to play out more. As external examiners they swapped and pinched ideas from each other. It is a very good under the official radar means of professional learning. Today that is happening less and less. I would often turn up at a university to do my job only to be asked to sit in for a couple of other externals that could not turn up. In one year I think I stood in for seven externals. The isolation leads staff to believe that if things are going wrong it must be their fault. My job often included reassuring them that they were not alone. I would quote Young Mr. Grace of Grace Brothers:

"You're all doing very well."

Which leads me to another theme: senior management. If at interview a candidate for vice chancellor utters the word 'reorganisation' they should be shown the door immediately. To begin with, these people believe that all students come in a tidy package at eighteen to stay three years. Professional learning in education is untidy. Add on overseas students and it becomes more so. And yet staff must work to a QA system that keeps spitting them out. The consequences are more time on administration and less doing what they were appointed to do. I have been at examination boards that were totally given over to complaining about a reorganised system that was driving people demented.

I never encountered an examination board run like mine were run at Liverpool. Usually all the boring stuff was sorted pre-meeting and I would often send to externals a short paper to stimulate discussion of what we were learning from the work of students. I wanted a seminar rather than a meeting of traffic wardens. We broke no rules and all the required stuff received attention.

I found my twenty-one years fascinating. A good question to ask a collection of students if you get the chance is, do they learn from each other? Faces really light up when you ask that question. And I have learned so much from reading the work of students. They are professional critical sense-makers. It is not simply a case of them being taught a theory and learning to label accordingly something in their professional lives. If you have, say, twenty years of professional experience you don't simply learn a theory, you engage with it, challenge it and even formulate your own theories to be tested. When you see students doing that staff and externals can learn so much. As for what they have to say about changing government policy!

My biggest frustration was the failure to open the ears of policy makers to those professional voices.

EXTRACT FROM MY CURRICULUM VITAE

Experience of external examining in universities includes:

- a) University of Huddersfield, Post Compulsory (FE) ITT October 1996-September 1999**
- b) University of Manchester, MA in Education and PhD October 1998-September 2002**
- c) University of Brighton, BA and MA in Professional Studies October 2001-September 2005**
- d) New College Durham, validated by the Open University, Post Compulsory (FE) ITT October 2003-September 2006**
- e) University of Newcastle MEd and PhD October 2003-September 2006**
- f) University of York St. John, validated by the University of Leeds, MA in Education October 2003-September 2006**
- g) Marjons, validated by the University of Exeter, MA in Education October 2002-September 2005**
- h) University of Derby, MA in Education including their provision in Austria and Israel October 2004-2009**
- i) University of Greenwich, MA in Education October 2005-11**
- j) University of Portsmouth, MA in Education October 2008-12**
- k) London Metropolitan University, MA in Education October 2008-12**
- l) University of Teesside, post compulsory (FE) ITT October 2008-2015**
- m) University of Bath Spa, MA in Education 2009-2014**

n) South Bank University, MA in Education 2010-2014

o) University of South West Scotland, MEd 2013-17

I have also overseen the quality assurance systems for a range of postgraduate programmes at Liverpool John Moores. (October 2006-2011) and have been external validator for more than forty postgraduate programmes.

Cliff Jones 12th. July 2018