

IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS OF THE PROCESSES AND PRINCIPLES USED DURING THE EXTERNAL EXAMINATION OF PHD THESES AT MAKERERE UNIVERSITY-A QUALITATIVE STUDY.

Namatende Irene Rebecca^{1,2*}, Onen David¹, Emmanuel Asher Ikwara², Henry Kisur³, Mukwenda Hillary¹
¹East African School of Higher Education and Development, College of external Studies, Makerere University.
²Child Health and Development Centre, College of Health Sciences, Makerere University.
³Busitema University.

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Abstract

Background

This study explores the processes and principles used during the external examination of PhD theses at Makerere University. It details the historical, theoretical, conceptual, and contextual dimensions of external Ph.D. thesis examination at Makerere University. It further traces the global roots of external examination, analyzes Makerere's unique context, and adopts Pryor et al.'s 5Ps Model to understand its effectiveness. The paper addresses challenges, including delays and debates on relevance, emphasizing the need for efficient and principled examination processes for academic quality assurance.

Methods

This qualitative study at Makerere University employed an interpretivist phenomenological approach, using purposive sampling and semi-structured interviews for key stakeholders. The case study design, document review, and NVIVO-guided analysis ensured methodological rigor and ethical considerations, enhancing research validity.

Results

The study on external examination at Makerere University reveals diverse participant roles, emphasizing adherence to principles and processes. Positive aspects include emphasis on competence, excellence, and professionalism. Challenges, such as delays and recognition issues, suggest areas for improvement. Overall, the university demonstrates commitment to principles and structured processes, but identified challenges indicate room for enhancement.

Conclusion

The Makerere University Ph.D. thesis external examination study reveals a commitment to principles and processes with identified challenges.

Recommendation

Recommendations focus on timeliness, internal examiner recognition, structured induction, and continuous improvement for an enhanced examination system.

Keywords: External examination, Ph.D. theses, Makerere University, Academic quality assurance, Principles, Processes
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*Corresponding author: Namatende Irene Rebecca**

Email: inamatende@gmail.com

East African School of Higher Education and Development, College of external Studies, Makerere University.

Introduction

The external examination of Ph.D. theses is a time-honored practice in higher education, rooted in historical traditions that have evolved over centuries (Nussbaum, 1998; Palmer, 2017). This manuscript embarks on an in-depth analysis of the intricate processes and underlying principles governing the external examination of Ph.D. theses at Makerere University. In doing so, we traverse through historical, theoretical, conceptual, and contextual perspectives to comprehensively explore the multifaceted dimensions of this critical aspect of academic quality assurance.

Historical Perspective

The external examination system, as applied to quality assurance, is not a recent development but one with deep historical roots (Wang et al., 2022). The roots of this practice can be traced back to the early 19th century, gaining traction in new universities as a means of establishing the credibility of academic standards (Fyfe et al., 2017). The practice's origins are diverse, from agreements between Durham University and the University of Oxford to the early experiences in Germany, France, and Denmark, where laws mandated external referees during examinations (Weidemaier et al., 2013). In the United Kingdom, the external examiner system took shape with the establishment of the University of Durham in

1932, gradually spreading across universities over the following five decades. Meanwhile, in Uganda, external examinations of Ph.D. theses have a history dating back to the early 1950s, with a significant turning point occurring in the 1990s when Makerere University formalized its systems for external examinations (Whyte & Acio, 2017). During this period, collaboration with international experts became integral to ensuring the credibility and quality of doctoral programs.

Theoretical Perspective

To understand the effectiveness of the external examination system at Makerere University, we adopt Pryor et al.'s 5Ps Strategic Management Model (1998). This model posits that effective organizational operation requires the formulation and execution of strategies, guided by defined purposes, principles, and systematic processes. The five Ps—Purpose, Principles, Processes, People, and Performance—serve as a lens through which we examine the strategic management of external examining, aiming to align its practices with organizational objectives.

Conceptual Perspective

Framed within Pryor et al.'s 5Ps Model, our study delves into the Purpose, Principles, Processes, People, and Performance aspects of external examining at Makerere University. Purpose involves scrutinizing the goals and objectives of external examining. Principles encompass the guiding values and behaviors stipulated in the graduate handbook, and Processes entail the systematic steps followed in conducting external examinations. People refer to those engaged in managing external examination processes, and Performance involves tracking the progress of Ph.D. students and evaluating external examiners' outputs.

Contextual Perspective

Against the backdrop of global and historical contexts, the paper situates Makerere University's external examination practices within its own unique context. While external examination is a requirement for every Ph.D. and Masters student, challenges such as delays, quality concerns, and debates on the continued relevance of external examining have emerged. These challenges underscore the need for an in-depth analysis of the management of external examination processes, focusing on efficiency, adherence to principles, and the achievement of intended purposes.

In the subsequent sections, we delve into the detailed analysis of the processes and principles governing the external examination of Ph.D. theses at Makerere University, shedding light on the evolving landscape of academic quality assurance. This study therefore aimed to explore the processes and principles used during the external examination of PhD theses at Makerere University.

Methods

Research Philosophy

The study adopted a qualitative research philosophy grounded in the interpretivist's phenomenology, drawing on Edmund Husserl's perspective (Brough, 2009). This approach emphasizes the importance of understanding experiences from those who have lived through them, aligning with the epistemological assumption that knowledge is socially constructed. The interpretive lens was chosen to explore the nuances of the application of Pryor's 5P's Model in managing external examinations at Makerere University.

Research Approach

A qualitative research approach was employed, considering the nature of the study objectives and the research questions. The focus was on collecting in-depth information from key stakeholders directly involved in managing external examination processes at Makerere University. The research involved purposive sampling, targeting individuals such as DVCAA, DVC F&A, Director QA, Director DRGT, School Deans, and other relevant personnel.

Study Design

The study utilized a Case Study design, recognizing its suitability for testing theoretical models in real-world contexts. This design facilitated an in-depth exploration of the application of Pryor's 5P's Model within the specific context of managing external examinations of Ph.D. theses at Makerere University. Makerere University is located on Makerere Hills, which is one of the many hills in Kampala, the Capital City of Uganda. Participants were recruited in early June and data collected between late June and early July.

Study Population

The target population included Deputy Principals, School Deans, DVC AA, DVC F&A, Director QA, Director DRGT, Academic Registrar, Members of Academic Board, Members of Higher Degrees Committee, external examiners, PhD program coordinators, and other key individuals involved in the external examination process. The study interviewed 18 participants, purposively selected for their diverse roles and responsibilities.

Sample Size and Sample Distribution

The qualitative sample size comprised at least 18 respondents, deliberately selected based on their positions and responsibilities related to external examination processes at Makerere University. Face-to-face interviews were conducted to gather in-depth information. A sample size of 18 participants was arrived at after a saturation point was achieved where by the respondents were having very similar responses whenever a research question was posed.

Sampling Techniques

Purposive sampling was employed due to the study's focus on a small number of participants, chosen based on their positions of responsibility within the university. This technique ensured that key stakeholders directly involved in external examination management were included in the study.

Eligibility criteria (Inclusion and Exclusion)

Participants eligible for the study had to be enrolled staff at Makerere University involved in handling of PhD candidates' examinations and provided written informed consent. Exclusion criteria involved excluding everyone who did not provide a written informed consent even when he/she was handling PhD candidates' examinations at Makerere University.

Data Collection Methods and Instruments

Document Review

Document review was utilized for gathering information related to systems and institutional levels. The framework analysis matrix guided this process, using Pryor's 5P's Model as predetermined themes.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders to elicit detailed insights into the management of external examinations. Customized interview guides were designed for different participant categories.

Research Procedure

Following proposal approval, introductory letters were obtained from the Dean of EASHESD, facilitating access to the university community. Research assistants aided in the distribution of semi-structured interview guides. The research procedure involved face-to-face interviews, with a focus on obtaining comprehensive and accurate responses.

Quality Control of the Instruments

Quality control measures included face validity and trustworthiness. Face validity was ensured through collaboration with supervisors, and trustworthiness was maintained through credibility, conformability, dependability, and transferability measures.

Data Management and Analysis

Audio files underwent transcription, and resulting transcripts were imported into NVIVO version 20 for coding.

Thematic content analysis guided data examination, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the research topic.

Research Validity and Reflexivity

Validity was enhanced by engaging key stakeholders, and reflexivity was maintained through training and preparation. A reflexive journal documented both verbal and non-verbal cues for a nuanced interpretation of findings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical values, including proper citation, permission acquisition, confidentiality maintenance, and plagiarism avoidance, were adhered to. Anonymity was preserved through the use of identity numbers, and ethical principles were integral to the research process. This research was conducted among human participants, underwent a thorough review, and received approval from the Makerere University Research Ethics Committee, under protocol number MUREC-2022-289. This ethical approval demonstrated the commitment to safeguarding the welfare and rights of the study participants, promoting ethical conduct in research, and building trust with the community and stakeholders involved.

Results

Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

The study's demographic characteristics of the participants were diverse, reflecting the key roles and positions held by individuals involved in the external examination of PhD theses/Dissertations at Makerere University. The data, as presented in Table.1, indicates that the study involved a range of participants from various administrative and academic units within the university. The gender distribution among the participants was as follows: There were two male Deputy Vice Chancellors, one from the Finance and Administration unit and the other from the Academic Affairs unit, as well as one male Director of the Directorate of Graduate Research and Training (DGRT). Additionally, there was one female and one male Program Coordinator, along with one male Professor who participated in the study, representing key roles in Quality Assurance and academia, respectively. The College Principals involved in the study included two females and three male Deans, as well as three male Deputy Principles, focusing on the leadership of different colleges and student welfare. Furthermore, one male manager Quality Assurance, two male and one female Registrars played vital roles in academic and administrative aspects.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

<i>Participant Category</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Number</i>
<i>Deputy Vice Chancellors</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Director of DGRT</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Program Coordinators</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>1</i>
	<i>Female</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Professor</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Deans</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Principals</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Deputy Principals</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Manager Quality Assurance</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Registrars</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>2</i>
	<i>Female</i>	<i>1</i>

Assessment of the extent to which the management of external examination at Makerere University adhere to its set principles.

Overview

This section presents the results related to the objective that aimed to evaluate the extent to which the management of external examination at Makerere University adheres to its set principles and guidelines. Principles, in this context, are considered as guidelines or regulations that students and academic staff are expected to follow when engaging in the external examination process, as outlined in the Makerere University Graduate Handbook (2013).

To understand the degree to which external examination at Makerere University adheres to its set principles, study participants were asked for their insights and opinions. The findings are summarized below.

Responses Indicating Adherence to Principles:

The majority of the respondents affirmed that the management of external examination at Makerere University considers certain key principles when appointing external examiners. These principles include competence, excellence, professionalism, knowledge, and confidentiality. Participants stressed the importance of adhering to these principles in ensuring the quality and integrity of external examination processes.

Competence

External examiners are expected to be experts in their subject matter.

Excellence

The University seeks to appoint external examiners who can uphold high academic standards.

Professionalism

Professional conduct is essential in maintaining the integrity of the examination process.

Knowledgeable

External examiners are required to have up-to-date knowledge of international best practices in curriculum design and assessment.

Quotations from Participants on Adherence to Principles

A participant stated, "*Fairness and objectivity in the work, timeliness for both students and external examiners is crucial.*" Another participant emphasized, "*One of the principles of external examination is that the external examiner should not have been closely involved in the internal workings of the school, for example teaching for the past three years.*"

Findings from the document review also highlighted the significance of principles.

For instance, *Makerere University's Graduate Handbook (2023) underlines the importance of external examiners' comments on assessment instruments, student performance, and the reliability of the marking process.* These principles help ensure the integrity and consistency of educational programs across institutions.

Challenges in Adherence to Principles

While the majority of respondents acknowledged the importance of adhering to principles, some challenges and gaps in adherence were identified during the study. These challenges included:

Delays in marking and submission of reports, leading to delays in completion rates.

Failure to process external examiners' allowances on time.

Failure to recognize internal examiners, which raised concerns among participants.

In conclusion, the study findings indicate that the management of external examination at Makerere University largely adheres to its set principles, with a strong emphasis on competence, professionalism, confidentiality, and knowledge. These principles are viewed as critical for maintaining the quality and integrity of the external examination process. However, the study also identified some challenges, such as delays and recognition issues, which suggest that there is room for improvement in ensuring consistent adherence to these principles.

Assessment of the extent to which the management of external examination at Makerere University adhere to its set processes.

Overview

This section delves into the results related to the objective which aimed to evaluate the extent to which the management of external examination at Makerere University adheres to its set processes. Unlike the previous section focusing on principles, this part explores the adherence to processes within the external examination system.

Adherence to Processes

The study examined whether the management of external examination at Makerere University adheres to its set processes. The responses of participants revealed that the university takes the external examination process seriously and follows a set of structured processes. Key aspects related to the adherence to processes include:

Timeliness: External examiners are expected to complete their assessments and submit reports within a specified timeframe, usually between two to three months.

Confidentiality: The process is designed to maintain the anonymity of external examiners to students, underscoring the importance of confidentiality.

Fairness and Objectivity: The process is structured to ensure fairness and objectivity in the assessment, which helps prevent conflicts of interest and bias.

Independence: External examination is perceived as an independent assessment process, essential for maintaining its integrity.

Compliance with senate Regulations: The conduct of external examinations at Makerere University is governed by Senate regulations, ensuring that processes align with university rules and standards.

Quotations from Participants on Adherence to Processes

A participant emphasized, *"The process starts from the student notifying the supervisor that they are ready for examination. Indeed, sometimes the supervisor may be the*

one to say that the student is ready to submit the thesis." Another participant highlighted, *"External examiners are given a timeframe of three months to assess and bring back the report."*

Challenges in Adherence to Processes

While the majority of respondents noted the adherence to processes, some challenges and gaps in adherence were identified during the study. These included:

Delays in marking and submission of reports by some external examiners, which resulted in delays in completion rates.

Failure to process external examiners' allowances on time, which could affect their motivation and commitment to the process.

Issues related to the recognition of internal examiners were raised as a concern among participants.

Institutional Insights:

The Makerere University graduate Handbook (2014) and the External Examiner Handbook (2022/2023) offer guidance and regulations for the external examination process. While Makerere University doesn't have an institutional induction process for external examiners, the university provides guidelines and information to external examiners through resources like the External Examiner Handbook.

In conclusion, the study findings indicate that Makerere University largely adheres to established processes in the external examination system. The university prioritizes timeliness, confidentiality, fairness, objectivity, independence, and compliance with Senate regulations. However, the study also highlighted challenges related to delays, allowances, and recognition of internal examiners, which require attention and improvement for a more effective external examination process. These insights help enhance the overall quality of external examinations at Makerere University.

Discussions

The presented results provide a comprehensive insight into the demographic characteristics of participants involved in the external examination of Ph.D. theses at Makerere University. The diversity in roles and positions underscores the complexity and multifaceted nature of the external examination process. This diversity includes key figures such as Deputy Vice Chancellors, Program Coordinators, College Principals, Deans, and various administrative roles, collectively contributing to the oversight and management of external examinations.

Adherence to Set Principles

Positive Aspects

The study reveals a positive inclination towards the adherence to principles in the management of external

examination at Makerere University. Participants emphasized the importance of principles such as competence, excellence, professionalism, and knowledge in the appointment of external examiners. These principles align with the university's commitment to upholding high academic standards and ensuring the quality and integrity of the external examination process (Gamage et al., 2020).

Quotations from participants highlight the significance of fairness, objectivity, and timeliness as critical components of adherence to principles. The emphasis on external examiners' independence from internal workings also resonates with the principles outlined in Makerere University's Graduate Handbook. The acknowledgment of these principles as essential for maintaining the integrity of the examination process reflects a shared understanding among participants (Levitt et al., 2017).

Challenges

However, challenges in adherence to principles were identified. Delays in marking and report submission, delayed processing of external examiners' allowances, and issues related to the recognition of internal examiners surfaced as areas of concern. These challenges can impact the efficiency and effectiveness of the external examination process, potentially leading to delays in students' completion rates and raising questions about the fairness and objectivity of the process.

Adherence to Set Processes

Positive Aspects

The results concerning adherence to set processes reveal a commitment to structured and systematic procedures in the external examination system at Makerere University. The focus on timeliness, confidentiality, fairness, objectivity, independence, and compliance with Senate regulations underscores the importance placed on the integrity of the external examination process.

Quotations from participants highlight the initiation of the process from the student notifying the supervisor, the specified timeframe for external examiners, and the structured nature of the assessment. These aspects contribute to a transparent and accountable process, aligning with the university's commitment to excellence in academic evaluation (Biggs et al., 2022).

Challenges

Despite the positive aspects, challenges in adherence to processes were identified, mirroring some of the challenges found in the adherence to principles. Delays in marking and report submission by external examiners, delayed processing of allowances, and issues related to the recognition of internal examiners emerged as recurrent challenges. These challenges, if not addressed, have the

potential to impact the overall effectiveness of the external examination system (Svensson & Paramonova, 2017).

Institutional Insights

The study also provides insights into the institutional frameworks guiding external examination at Makerere University. The Makerere University Graduate Handbook and the External Examiner Handbook serve as crucial resources, offering guidelines and regulations for the external examination process. While the university lacks a formal induction process for external examiners, the availability of these resources ensures that examiners receive essential information and guidelines for their roles.

Overall Implications

The study's findings suggest that Makerere University has established a robust framework for the external examination of Ph.D. theses, with a strong emphasis on principles and processes. However, the identified challenges highlight areas for improvement. Addressing issues related to delays, allowances, and recognition of internal examiners will contribute to a more effective and streamlined external examination process.

In conclusion, the in-depth analysis of the processes and principles used during the external examination of Ph.D. theses at Makerere University reveals a system that, while generally robust, requires ongoing attention and refinement. The commitment to principles and processes is evident, but the identified challenges should be addressed to ensure the continuous enhancement of the quality and integrity of the university's doctoral evaluation procedures. This study provides valuable insights for academic administrators, policymakers, and practitioners seeking to strengthen the external examination system at Makerere University and similar institutions.

Strengths

This study on the external examination of Ph.D. theses at Makerere University demonstrates strengths in offering a comprehensive understanding of participant demographics, positive adherence to principles and processes, enriched by participant quotations. Identified challenges allow for targeted interventions, and institutional insights enhance context.

Limitations

However, limitations include the study's institution-specific focus, potential participant bias, and a lack of comparative analysis. The absence of explicit recommendations and a detailed qualitative analysis suggests opportunities for future research. Overall, while contributing valuable insights, ongoing attention to limitations ensures continuous improvement in Makerere University's external examination system.

Conclusion

The study on Ph.D. thesis external examination at Makerere University provides a nuanced understanding, highlighting positive aspects such as a commitment to principles and structured processes. Despite key roles played by Deputy Vice Chancellors and Program Coordinators, challenges like delays in marking and recognition of internal examiners were identified, potentially affecting system efficiency. Institutional insights from handbooks contribute context, emphasizing a need for ongoing attention and refinement. Makerere has a robust framework but must address challenges for continuous improvement. Valuable for academia, policymakers, and practitioners, this study lays a foundation for enhancing Ph.D. thesis examinations at Makerere and similar institutions.

Recommendations

Recommendations for improving the external examination process at Makerere University include implementing measures to enhance timeliness, addressing internal examiner recognition through formalized mechanisms, establishing a structured induction process for external examiners, and implementing continuous quality improvement mechanisms through regular reviews and stakeholder feedback. These initiatives aim to streamline processes, support internal examiners, provide clearer guidelines for external examiners, and ensure ongoing enhancement of the examination system.

Abbreviations

DVCAA: Deputy Vice Chancellor Academic Affairs
DVC F&A: Deputy Vice Chancellor Finance and Administration Director
QA: Director of Quality Assurance Director
DRGT: Director of Graduate Research and Training
EASHESD: East African School of Higher Education Studies and Development
Ph.D.: Doctor of Philosophy

Declaration

Availability of Data

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the principal investigator Irene Namatende without undue reservation.

Competing Interests

All authors declare no competing interests.

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Authors' contribution

The conception of the idea, initial manuscript drafting, analysis, result interpretation, and subsequent manuscript revisions were collaborative efforts among all authors who reviewed the initial draft and subsequently contributed to further revisions of the manuscript and granted approval for the final version of the manuscript.

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