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## Behind the curtain: External Examiners' Experiences about Thesis Evaluation

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### Abstract

*Evaluating a thesis is important because it ensures that students' research is valuable and meets high academic standards before they are awarded their degrees. The study aimed at exploring the experiences of university-level English teachers as external examiners for Master of Education (M.Ed.) theses in English Education at the Faculty of Education (FoE), Tribhuvan University(TU). Sample population this qualitative study consisted of 17 University-level English Education teachers who worked as external examiners to evaluate the theses written by M.Ed. students specialized in English Education. The researcher employed judgmental sampling to select the sample. He used semi-structured interview technique to collect the data. The data was analyzed employing thematic approach of qualitative data analysis. Findings revealed several systemic issues in the thesis evaluation process. Participants noted thesis evaluation as ritualistic practices where procedures often became routine. This leads to inconsistencies and compromised evaluation quality. Supervisors' unfamiliarity with thesis writing guidelines prepared by FoE created further challenges. This unfamiliarity also affects feedback quality and evaluation standards. The study also identified variability in thesis quality, difficulties in integrating feedback, and ethical concerns, such as requests for biased evaluations. Time constraints emerged as a critical issue which limits the depth of review and feedback. Additionally, misalignment between examiner expectations and institutional requirements, along with inadequate institutional support, further complicated the evaluation process. These findings underscore the need for a re-examination of evaluation practices, enhanced training for supervisors, and improved institutional support to ensure a fair, consistent, and effective thesis evaluation process.*

**Keywords:** Academic Rigor, External Examiner, Feedback Integration, Impartiality, Supervisory Knowledge

## Introduction

Thesis evaluation is essential in the academic framework. It ensures that thesis meets the required standards of quality and rigor (Tinkler & Jackson, 2001; Lessing, 2009). It is essential for validating research findings, upholding academic standards and assessing the students' original contributions to their field (Mafora & Lessing, 2014). Holbrook et al. (2004) and Kyvik and Thune (2015) also state that thesis evaluation is a crucial step in validating students' scholarly contributions and ensuring their research meets rigorous academic standards before degrees are awarded. External examiners are often appointed to review theses to ensure the work meets quality and standards comparable to other institutions. They also help identify areas for improvement and ensure that assessment practices are fair and consistent.

The Dean's Office at the FoE, TU, appoints external examiners to evaluate theses written by the M.Ed. students of both affiliated and constituent campuses under FOE, TU. And the external examiner appointment process is very systematic in nature. Upon completing their theses, M.Ed. students submit their work to their respective departments, accompanied by their thesis supervisors' recommendations. Then, the campus formally requests the Dean's office, FOE to appoint external examiners through a letter or email. The Dean or Assistant Dean appoints external examiners from different campuses to provide an impartial review. The examiners visit the campuses to conduct a thorough evaluation and hold a viva voce examination.

The respective campus forms three committee members to evaluate the theses submitted by the students. Among the three members, one is the head of the department, one is the thesis supervisor and one is the external examiner appointed by Dean's office. External examiners who were appointed from outside the campus provide an independent and objective perspective that is crucial for maintaining the integrity of the evaluation process. Their presence ensures the evaluation process is free from internal biases and pressures (Joyner, 2003).

External examiners play a pivotal role by offering an impartial perspective on the quality and rigor of the theses (Mafa & Mapolisa, 2012). Their primary responsibilities include assessing the originality, methodological soundness, and overall contribution of the thesis (De Beer & Masona, 2009). Their reflective practice allows them to scrutinize a thesis comprehensively and provide constructive feedback that can guide students in refining their work (Phelps & Shilling, 2018). However, balancing their roles as evaluators and mentors can be challenging, requiring continuous reflective practice to ensure that feedback is both rigorous and supportive (Carter & Whittaker, 2009).

Empirical evidence underscores the value of reflective practice in thesis evaluation.

Structured and collaborative reflection leads to more detailed and constructive feedback (Lovat & Toomey, 2009). Additionally, institutional support is crucial for fostering reflective practice, including training and resources for examiners (Hannan & Silver, 2000). Advancements in technology, such as digital tools and online forums, offer new opportunities for enhancing reflective practice (Sweeny, 2008). Ethical considerations, including confidentiality, impartiality, and fairness, are integral to reflective practice, and institutions should provide clear guidelines and training on ethical reflection to align examiners' practices with professional and institutional standards (Shenton, 2004).

The thesis evaluation process involves three stages: initial reading, report preparation, and the viva voce (Mullins & Kiley, 2002). Each stage presents its own set of challenges and requires distinct skills. The initial reading involves assessing originality, methodological rigor, and contribution, while report preparation requires a balance between critical evaluation and constructive. The viva voce allows students to defend their work and examiners to probe deeper into the research, though it can be challenging when differences in opinion arise or when students struggle to defend their work (Johnston, 1997).

The existing literature has extensively examined the roles and experiences of internal examiners. However, there is a notable lack of comprehensive research on the experiences of external examiners (Petersen, 2007). Delamont et al. (2004) and Trafford (2003) also state that the focus of most studies has been on internal evaluation dynamics, including issues such as examiner biases, candidate pressures, and the standardization of evaluation criteria. In a same way, Schulze (2011) states that there is a growing recognition of the need to explore how external examiners navigate their roles, the specific difficulties they encounter, and their overall impact on the evaluation process. This research has provided valuable insights into the unique experiences of external examiners in the context of FoE, TU. Thus, this research contributes to the broader discourse on academic assessment by shedding light on the often-overlooked experience of external examiners and providing recommendations for enhancing the evaluation process.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This study utilized a descriptive phenomenological qualitative research design to investigate the experiences of external examiners in the thesis evaluation process. The qualitative approach was selected for its capacity to offer a profound and detailed understanding of the personal experiences of the external examiners. This method is particularly suited to capturing the complex and context-specific nature of these experiences (Giorgi, 2012)

## **Sample and Sampling**

The sample for this study comprised 17 English teachers who were appointed as external examiners by the FoE at TU during the academic year 2080-2081. These examiners were selected from seven different campuses across Nepal, including two from Dadeldhura Multiple Campus, Dadeldhura, two from Prithvi Narayan Campus, Pokhara, three from Butwal Multiple Campus, Butwal, three from Mahendra Ratna Campus, Tahachal, Kathmandu, two from the Central Department of Education, Kirtipur, Kathmandu, three from Surkhet Multiple Campus, Surkhet and two from Sanothimi Campus, Sanothimi, Bhaktapur. The researcher utilized non-probability judgmental sampling to ensure the inclusion of participants with relevant and significant experience in the thesis evaluation process. Initially, the researcher requested the Dean's Office, FOE, TU to provide a list of external examiners appointed between Bhadra 2080 and Asadh 2081. From the list of 24 external examiners provided, 17 were selected based judgement of the researcher. After selecting participants, their names were arranged alphabetically and then renamed as P1 to P17 to ensure their anonymity.

## **Data Collection Technique**

The researcher employed semi-structured interview to collect the in-depth exploration of the external examiners' experiences. An interview guide was developed with open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed responses about the participants' experiences and views on the thesis evaluation process. The semi-structured format allowed flexibility, enabling participants to provide comprehensive insights while addressing specific aspects of their experiences (Creswell, 2013).

## **Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data collected from the interviews. This method involved following stages: familiarization with the data through transcription and thorough reading of the transcripts, generating initial codes by highlighting significant statements and concepts, and organizing these codes into potential themes (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2017). The identified themes were then reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the data. This process involved checking the coherence of the themes in relation to the data set and defining and naming the final themes. The findings were presented thematically, based on the analysis of the interview data.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **Ritualistic Practices in Academic Thesis Evaluation**

The majority of participants stated that the thesis evaluation process often takes on a ritualistic character, characterized by established norms and procedures that shape how

evaluations are conducted. These ritualistic practices, however, reveal systemic challenges that affect the overall quality of the evaluation process. Participants described a process where external examiners visit the campus, conduct a cursory review of the theses, perform the viva voce, provide feedback, sign the approval sheet, receive their remuneration, and then leave the campus. P7 noted, "The whole process feels very mechanical, with little genuine engagement." This procedure rarely includes a follow-up to verify whether the feedback has been incorporated by the students. P12 mentioned, "There is no real accountability to ensure that feedback is actually implemented." Additionally, some supervisors assure students that as long as the external examiner is well-compensated, their signature on the approval sheet is guaranteed. P14 said, "It sometimes feels like the approval is more about the payment than the quality of the work." These statements highlight the need for a more thorough and accountable evaluation process to ensure the integrity and quality of academic assessments.

This ritualistic adherence to procedural norms creates a routine framework that examiners are expected to follow. This rigidity can result in inconsistencies and pressures that compromise the depth and effectiveness of evaluations. Vernon (2006) notes that strict adherence to such rituals can lead to variable quality and fairness in the evaluation process. Systemic challenges embedded in these rituals include balancing thoroughness with efficiency, maintaining consistent standards across diverse theses, and minimizing personal biases. The ritualistic nature of these practices highlights the need for a critical re-examination and potential revision of the evaluation frameworks to better align procedural efficiency with the quality of feedback provided.

### **Supervisory Knowledge among Supervisors**

The study revealed a significant gap in the supervisory knowledge among thesis supervisors at the FoE, especially among the supervisors of affiliated campuses. Despite the existence of specific formats and guidelines prepared by the FOE Dean's Office for thesis evaluation, many supervisors are either unaware of these guidelines or lack a thorough understanding of their application. This gap is evidenced by inconsistent feedback provided to students, varying standards of evaluation, and discrepancies in the expectations for thesis structure and content. P7 stated, "I have experienced contradictory advice from, supervisors which makes it hard to understand what is truly expected from the suggestion." Similarly, P9 also said, "The feedback from the supervisor are often vague and do not align with the guidelines provided by the Dean's Office." The lack of familiarity with the FOE's guidelines among supervisors poses a critical challenge to maintaining academic standards and ensuring fair and objective thesis evaluations. Supervisors play a pivotal role in guiding students through the research process, from proposal development to final defense. When supervisors are not familiar with established

guidelines, it leads to mixed messages about what constitutes a high-quality thesis, causing confusion and inconsistent academic expectations among students. This inconsistency affects the comparability of theses, making fair evaluation difficult. Ineffective feedback from supervisors, misaligned with institutional standards, hinders students' improvement and academic success. Additionally, the approval of substandard work compromises the institution's credibility. Unclear guidance increases student anxiety and stress, causing delays and frustration in their academic progress. Adherence to standardized guidelines ensures quality, consistency, and fair evaluation, supporting students' academic achievements.

### **Varied Thesis Quality**

Participants noted experiencing a wide range of thesis quality, with some theses being exceptional while others barely met minimum standards. P7 said, "I have seen exceptional theses alongside those that barely meet the minimum standards." P11 noted, "Dealing with such a broad range of quality levels is both rewarding and frustrating."

The variability in thesis quality presents challenges for maintaining consistent evaluation standards. Sadler (2009) suggests that differing levels of quality complicate the application of uniform assessment standards, leading to inconsistencies in feedback. Mudavanhu (2017) recommend setting baseline standards and providing additional support for weaker theses to mitigate these issues. Ensuring a minimum quality threshold and offering targeted assistance to students could enhance consistency and fairness in evaluations.

### **Feedback Integration**

Participants faced significant challenges in ensuring that feedback was effectively integrated into revised theses. P3 commented, "Providing detailed and constructive feedback is one thing, but ensuring that the student acts on it is another challenge." P9 also remarked, "I have noticed that feedback is sometimes superficially addressed rather than thoroughly incorporated." These comments underscore the difficulty in not only delivering quality feedback but also in ensuring that students fully understand and implement the suggestions, which is crucial for their academic development and the overall quality of their work.

The integration of feedback is a critical aspect of the evaluation process. Malone (2014) notes that effective feedback should lead to meaningful improvements in the thesis. However, students may struggle to fully incorporate detailed feedback, resulting in inadequate revisions (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Knowles et al. (2011) emphasizes the need for clear, actionable feedback and support mechanisms to help students understand and implement evaluators' comments effectively.

## **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations, such as maintaining objectivity and avoiding conflicts of interest, were prominent themes. P2 mentioned, "Upholding ethical standards is critical in the evaluation process." P6 noted, "Once, when I was appointed as an external examiner at an affiliated campus in Rupandehi District, I arrived in the evening. The campus chief had arranged for me to stay at a local hotel. I checked in around 4:25 PM. At 6:00 PM, the supervisors, campus chief, assistant campus chief, and all the students who had submitted their theses for the viva voce gathered at the hotel. They invited me to join a soiree organized by the students. The event continued until 11:00 PM. During the soiree, the campus chief requested that I accept the theses easily."

External examiners have reported encountering requests for payments in exchange for favorable thesis evaluations, often indirectly from campus chiefs or supervisors at affiliated campuses. This practice undermines the fairness and integrity of the evaluation process, creating implicit pressure on examiners and leading to concerns about their professional ethics. The involvement of campus leadership in these corrupt practices further complicates the issue, making it challenging for examiners to report malpractice due to a lack of formal reporting channels and fear of retaliation. The overall impact includes potential damage to institutional reputation, a decline in academic standards, and increased financial burdens on students. Addressing these issues requires enhanced transparency, stricter oversight, and support systems for both examiners and institutional leaders to maintain a fair and credible evaluation process.

Upholding ethical standards is fundamental to the integrity of the evaluation process. Nyika (2014) emphasizes the need for objectivity and fairness to maintain credibility. Russell (2006) also emphasize the importance of strict ethical guidelines to prevent conflicts of interest and ensure impartial evaluations. Adhering to these ethical principles is essential for maintaining trust and fairness in the evaluation process.

## **Time Constraints**

Participants reported that time constraints significantly impacted the quality of thesis evaluations. The Dean's Office generally appoints external examiners only two or three days before the viva voce date. Consequently, examiners are expected to evaluate up to five theses per day, which makes it challenging to conduct thorough reviews and provide constructive feedback.

P13 noted, "The time allocated for reviewing a thesis is often too short to provide a detailed and comprehensive evaluation." In a similar manner P8 articulated, "With the increasing number of theses to evaluate, the pressure to meet deadlines often compromises the quality of feedback."

The findings reveal a critical gap in the thesis evaluation process related to time management and workload. The short notice given for appointment and the high volume of theses to review create a situation where examiners struggle to balance speed with the depth of their evaluations. This pressure may lead to superficial assessments rather than the detailed and constructive feedback necessary for the improvement of theses. The concerns expressed by participants' point to a systemic issue within the evaluation framework. Insufficient time not only affects the quality of feedback but also may undermine the overall rigor of the evaluation process. The findings suggest a need for better planning and allocation of resources to allow examiners adequate time for thorough reviews, thereby enhancing the quality and effectiveness of feedback provided to candidates. The challenges associated with time constraints align with Quan-Baffour & Vambe (2008), who assert that time limitations often lead to superficial reviews, reducing the effectiveness of feedback. University of South Africa (2008) similarly highlights that inadequate time for assessment compromises the thoroughness of evaluations. Addressing these issues may involve extending the evaluation periods or optimizing the review process to ensure examiners can offer more detailed and constructive feedback.

### **Subjective Judgment**

Subjectivity in evaluations emerged as a significant concern among examiners. The participants acknowledged that their personal expertise and backgrounds inevitably influenced their assessments. P5 candidly mentioned, "My background and expertise inevitably influence my evaluation. While I strive for objectivity, personal biases can sometimes affect my judgment." This highlights the inherent challenge in maintaining complete impartiality, as examiners' unique perspectives and areas of expertise can shape their interpretation and evaluation of students' work. Despite efforts to remain objective, the subtle influence of personal biases can lead to variations in how theses are assessed, potentially impacting the fairness and consistency of evaluations. This underscores the importance of having clear, standardized guidelines to help mitigate the effects of subjectivity and ensure a more uniform evaluation process across different examiners.

The issue of subjectivity reflects personal biases and varying expertise can lead to inconsistent assessments Cantwell and Scevak (2004) and Nicol et al. (1999) also emphasize the need for objective criteria to minimize the influence of personal biases. To enhance the reliability and objectivity of evaluations, it is crucial to establish clear, standardized criteria and involve multiple examiners to provide a balanced assessment.

### **Expectations Misalignment**

Misalignment between examiner expectations and institutional requirements emerged as a significant issue, creating challenges in the evaluation process. P16 expressed

this concern by stating, "I sometimes feel that my expectations for a thesis are higher than what the institution seems to expect." Similarly, P10 remarked, "There needs to be a clearer understanding between the institution and examiners about what is expected." These comments highlight a critical gap in communication and alignment, where examiners' personal standards and the institution's official criteria do not always coincide. This misalignment can lead to discrepancies in how theses are evaluated, with some examiners potentially holding students to higher standards than those set by the institution. Such inconsistencies can cause confusion and frustration for students, who may struggle to meet varying expectations. To address this issue, it is essential for institutions to establish clear, consistent guidelines and ensure that examiners are fully aware of and aligned with these standards. This would help create a more uniform evaluation process, reducing the potential for subjective discrepancies and supporting students in meeting clearly defined academic expectations.

The misalignment of expectations between examiners and institutions can lead to confusion and inconsistencies in evaluations. Merriam and Bierema (2014) argue that aligning expectations among stakeholders is crucial for maintaining consistency and fairness in assessments. Sankaran and Hill (2005) also suggest that clear communication and regular updates about evaluation standards can help bridge this gap and ensure that all parties are on the same page.

### **Institutional Support**

The level of institutional support varied among participants, affecting their evaluation experiences. Some examiners reported receiving ample support, while others faced challenges due to inadequate resources. P1 said, "In some cases, I received ample support and resources from the institution, which facilitated a smoother evaluation process."

Institutional support is crucial for effective thesis evaluation. Popescu and Popescu (2017). argue that adequate resources and guidance are essential for thorough assessments. Vernon (2006) highlights the importance of consistent institutional support for facilitating a smooth evaluation process. Improving institutional support, including providing necessary resources and guidance, can enhance the quality and efficiency of evaluations.

### **Reviewer Training and Calibration**

Participants noted that lack of adequate training and calibration among reviewers affects the consistency of evaluations. P2 said, "There is often insufficient training for reviewers on the evaluation criteria, leading to varying interpretations of what constitutes quality." In a similar vein P5 mentioned, "Calibrating evaluators to ensure consistent standards is a challenge."

Training and calibration are critical for ensuring consistency and fairness in evaluations. Kritzinger and Looock (2014) suggests that regular training sessions and calibration exercises can help align reviewers' interpretations of evaluation criteria. Golding (2017) supports this view by emphasizing that well-trained reviewers are more likely to apply standards consistently, which can improve the reliability of the evaluation process.

### **Feedback Delivery Methods**

The methods used to deliver feedback were also a point of concern. Participants reported that some feedback was delivered in ways that were not always constructive. P2 stated, "The feedback provided often lacks clarity, making it difficult for students to understand and act upon." P14 also said, "Effective feedback delivery methods need to be standardized to ensure clarity and usefulness."

Effective feedback delivery is crucial for its impact. Ismail et al. (2014) highlights that feedback should be clear, constructive, and actionable to facilitate meaningful improvements. Golding et al. (2014) emphasize the need for standardized feedback delivery methods to ensure consistency and clarity. Improving how feedback is delivered can enhance its effectiveness and help students better understand and implement evaluators' comments.

### **Administrative Burden**

Participants also noted the administrative burden associated with the evaluation process. P11 said, "The amount of administrative paperwork involved in the evaluation process can be overwhelming and detracts from the time available for actual thesis review." P13 also articulated, "Reducing administrative tasks could help examiners focus more on the quality of their feedback."

Administrative tasks can be a significant drain on the time and energy of examiners. Denicolo (2003) suggests that streamlining administrative processes can help alleviate some of the burdens associated with thesis evaluations. By reducing paperwork and administrative overhead, institutions can enable examiners to focus more on providing high-quality feedback and conducting thorough evaluations.

### **Conclusion**

This study has shed light on the complex and often problematic nature of the thesis evaluation process at FoE, TU. The findings reveal a pressing need to address several systemic issues that affect the quality and fairness of evaluations. The ritualistic practices that dominate the evaluation process suggest a disconnect between established procedures and effective assessment. These rituals, while intended to standardize evaluations, often

result in inconsistent quality and ineffective feedback. There is a clear need to reassess and reform these practices to enhance the depth and accuracy of evaluations. Additionally, the study highlights a significant gap in supervisors' familiarity with evaluation guidelines. This lack of awareness leads to varying standards and unclear feedback, further complicating the evaluation process. Addressing this issue requires improved training and better dissemination of guidelines to ensure consistent and high-quality assessments.

The findings also point to challenges such as time constraints, ethical concerns, and the influence of subjective judgments. To address these, it is essential to provide more institutional support, streamline administrative tasks, and implement robust training programs for evaluators. By making these adjustments, TU, FoE can improve the consistency, fairness, and overall quality of its thesis evaluation process, ultimately fostering a more rigorous academic environment.

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