The Case for Lead Internal Verification: An Intrinsic Element of MCAST Quality Assurance Practices

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Abstract: Several measures have been developed and implemented at the Malta College of Arts, Science, and Technology (MCAST) over the past few years as part of an overarching College Quality Framework in order to gauge and assure quality. Such processes, which include, amongst others, the documentation of processes in the form of standard operating procedures and internal audits within and across its providing institutions, are in line with National Quality Assurance Framework requirements stipulated by Malta's National Commission for Further and Higher Education (NCFHE).

The findings from various internal audits carried out by the Quality Assurance Department have indicated that a number of quality practices were predominant, in that several observations showcased the strengths of the internal verification process underpinning its credibility and validity in assuring the quality of programmes delivered and the assessment decisions taken. Several factors deemed necessary to the vocational essence of the various programmes offered by MCAST and the robustness of the assessment/internal verification process feeding into internal and external audits were also identified.

Overview of internal verifiers' work, crucial to assessment validity and innovation, is a theme which recurs across a wide range of literature. The discourse also inclines to such roles resolving the problems with consistency and enabling innovation. All findings consolidate the analysis of the roles of assessors/internal verifiers and lead internal verifiers, in which their maximization is strongly conveyed, as manifested in a number of good practices identified by the trends observed in the data gathered. Nonetheless, this analytical exercise has also highlighted some factors which would benefit from attention and improvement in assessment skills and competences, particularly as these areas are considered crucial to the vocational education and training being delivered by MCAST.

Incorporation of the recommendations advocated by the findings would reflect the discourse which stems from the premise that internal verification yields greatest benefits when integrated within an explicit quality management framework. It serves to propel quality in relation to matters such as assessment, ensuring the validity and transferability of MCAST qualifications by adhering to the key indicators of a robust system, namely, manageability, sustainability, satisfaction, and consistency, to inspire and aspire to an innate quality culture.

Keywords: Quality assurance, vocational education and training, assessment processes, internal verification, lead internal verification.
Introduction

Over the years, the Malta College of Arts, Science, and Technology has developed and implemented an overarching College Quality Framework. In line with the findings of a study carried out by Warrington and Wilmut (2001), this calls for ‘a sophisticated structure designed to create a quality loop based on a continuous link between specification of standards, implementation of standards, monitoring, review/evaluation, and recommendations for amended stipulations’ Warrington and Wilmut (2001). Quality assurance is, thereby, driven by what academics and college management describe as a ‘feedback and feedforward’ impetus (Ferrell 2012), where conventional feedback inherently focuses on past performance and feeds back advice to the individual on a past activity while feeding forward is future focused, emphasizing the individual’s potential and his development in the future (Hirsch 2017). In a positive combination of these two poles, ‘ipsative approaches allow tutors and learners to acknowledge personal progress by comparing previous and current work, regardless of overall achievement’ (Ferrell 2012).

To this end, and in line with National Quality Assurance Framework requirements stipulated by Malta’s National Commission for Further and Higher Education (NCFHE), a number of measures to gauge and assure quality have been generated at MCAST; these includ, the documentation of processes in the form of standard operating procedures and the internal audits within and across its providing institutions, as well as corporate internal audits where the marine and aviation sectors are concerned. The findings of the audits, recorded in a number of reports, from 2012 where the MCAST Centre for Maritime Studies is concerned and between 2017 and 2019 in all other cases, were garnered from secondary and primary research. According to the accepted praxis, the former reviewed literature, current practices, and methodologies prior to setting objectives to satisfy the latter, which was in turn approached qualitatively through the review of documentation produced by the providing institutions and the application of qualitative instruments, including key informant interviews with management, semi-structured interviews with administrative staff and academics, as well as focus groups with students (Jankowicz et al. 2017). The data gathered during this process was then expressed quantitatively so as to identify factors and related trends that would instigate recommendations as well as further discussion and study.

In line with the results of the Warrington and Wilmut (2001) study, internal verification was identified as a key element of the MCAST College Quality Framework. This was reinforced by a request for continuous professional development in internal verification, to which end a course was designed, the first run of which was delivered in the first quarter of 2019 with its outreach being extended to three of MCAST’s institutes and their relative centres as part of the induction activities to the first semester of the 2019/20 academic year. Internal verification is intrinsic to MCAST college practices, contributing to the rigour and robustness of its assessment processes, thereby giving the college a competitive edge within the education industry if dynamically and soundly developed.

Background

A number of scholars in the field advocate the premise that internal verifiers be perceived as the practical expressions of the knowledge economy which celebrate students’ knowledge and expertise over ‘mechanistic definitions of competence’. Konrad (1998) asserts that internal verification is ‘the main component of the quality assurance system
and hence the area on which management processes should focus’ (Konrad 1998b). He also posits that, when internal verifiers are also practising assessors, the interplay of roles facilitates the development of workgroup expertise and promotes the concept of knowledge skills within communities of practice (Konrad 1998a and 1998b). Konrad drew upon Lave and Wenger’s situated learning theories where learning is regarded as taking place within ‘a Community of Practice where expertise is shared, distributed and delivered among its members’ (Lave and Wenger 1991).

Ownership of assessment processes is, thus, reinforced and ‘the assessment of knowledge becomes more reliable and valid’ (Konrad 1998a). The consequent improvement in skills among the assessment and verification community of practice enables it to develop into an expert component within the wider community of practice, by a process which evolves into ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ (Lave and Wenger 1991), not only within the providing institution but by linking into the wider community of practice of all providing institutions across the college through dissemination of practices, thereby enhancing the knowledgeable skills of this community. The communities of practice thus created should be ‘effective enough and reflexive enough to maintain standards, regardless of changes in circumstances and staff turnover’ (cf. Ranson 1994; Fryer 1997; Kennedy 1997).

Cotton (1999) concurs with Lester’s (1999) and Konrad’s (1998a and 1998b) insistence on the need for the building of coherent assessment system teams to reduce external/internal divides and ensure credibility and validity in assessing competence in context, thereby ‘making substantial improvements to quality assurance’, while Cook (1994) extends these elements to the management sphere. This was corroborated by Konrad who opined that ‘what is required to meet the highest standards of Quality is a clear leadership by those in executive positions’ in QA (Konrad 1998b).

Research Methodology

The methodology employed during the audit engagement was mainly qualitative in nature, resulting in phenomenologically based empirical work. In the main, it consisted of the gathering of information through initial individual meetings with the directors and deputy directors of MCAST’s providing institutions and general focus groups with all those involved: students, lecturers, institute vocational coordinators and student-support coordinators, as well as senior administrative officers. These were followed by individual sessions with staff directly involved with the educational and operational processes related to programme-planning, design, implementation, delivery, and review as well as students’ progress. Some of the areas discussed during these sessions arose from the observations of the documentation audited, i.e. internally verified assignment briefs and the internally verified assessed work of the students. In most cases, the process was continued with students, focusing on the particular programme they were following, their history, if any, at MCAST, and their future aspirations. There followed a paradigm shift within the study from the phenomenological to the positivist, as it went on to transcribe the qualitative information gathered into quantitative data through the application of basic statistical modelling.

In this way the widest possible range of tools was secured using a combined qualitative and quantitative approach. This also offered the possibility to use the qualitative and quantitative analyses of the same object or event as a means of triangulating the research findings (Jankowicz et al. 2017).
Triangulation

The exigencies of triangulation, whereby various groups within an organization corroborate, complement, oppose, or supplement the findings were thus observed to the full. The findings were then sifted with the purpose of succinctly extrapolating general observations classified as those directly relevant to the provider, examples of good practice which may be disseminated depending on their applicability, and commonalities of concern within and across the providing institutions. This latter exercise was fundamental in honing in on the pertinent strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to the providing institutions and MCAST as a whole.

Literature Synthesis

The foregoing scenario highlighted a major strength in MCAST's assessment strategy, that of internal verification. This, in turn, implied the need for a lead internal verification process, once again, supported by Warrington and Wilmut (2001), who found that 'as total quality management systems begin to develop in colleges and elsewhere, lead verifiers, having a broad and specific responsibility for quality assurance, appear to be emerging'. The outcomes of this study resonated deeply with the Lead Internal Verification (LIV) System undertaken by MCAST, since it was felt that:

- The LIV system gave due prominence to the importance of IV to quality provision;
- The peripatetic nature of the LIV system enabled consistent support for assessors;
- Models of good practice could be identified and disseminated;
- LIVs were an important strand in making assessors feel part of a community of practice;
- LIVs were valued for playing a mediating role in achieving coherence of standards;
- The LIV system was proof of the rigour of the process;
- Standards improved markedly because of LIVs.

Ollin and Tucker (1994) describe these roles as essential. The discourse also inclines to such roles resolving the problems with consistency and enabling innovation (Beaumont 1996; Eraut et al. 1996). Overview of internal verifiers' work, crucial to assessment validity and innovation, is a theme which recurs across a wide range of literature, including Spilsbury et al. (1994) and Cotton (1999). The latter maintains that 'assessment systems cannot be appreciated from the outside ... the spectator sees very little of the game. To appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of any system, the best observations are made from the middle of the team' (Cotton 1999: page reference?).

Lead Internal Verification Process

In line with MCAST strategic quality measures and the audit results, lead internal verification practices were triggered during the 2018/19 academic year. Providing institutions were requested to forward hard or soft copies of all documentation related to the assessment/internal verification process of randomly sampled units from each level offered by the institute/centre, from the drafting of the assignment brief to the assessor's/internal verifier's decisions on the former and the assessed student work. There were two further provisos:
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- The work sampled was to represent completed units; where assessment was still a work in progress, copies of the internally verified assignment briefs were to be forwarded;
- All the work sampled was to be internally verified.

In total, 93 assignment briefs from across all providing institutions, as depicted in Figure 1a, were submitted to the lead internal verifier. At that point in time, 28 samples of assessed student work were submitted for lead internal verification of the assessors’ and internal verifiers’ assessment decisions, as represented in Figure 1b.

**Figure 1a:** Assignment Brief samples submitted for lead internal verification

**Figure 1b:** Assessment Decisions sampled for lead internal verification
Lead Internal Verification Findings

Following the lead internal verification process, which generated proactive meetings with management, lecturers, IVCs and IVs involved, feedback reports were produced and issued to the relevant institute/centre management concerned in an ongoing process for further discussion with the lecturer/s concerned and dissemination of good practice outlined therein amongst all academic staff.

On analysing the findings, it may be concluded that a number of quality practices were predominant. The first aspect analysed was the use and compilation of the corporate front sheet. This was split into three areas of study depending on the outcome requested of the factor, as shown in Figure 2a. Figure 2a evidences the prevalent use of the corporate front sheet by 82.7% of the academic staff, while approximately 60% of the assessment criteria addressed by assignments directly reflected those in the unit specifications, with only 6% giving cause for concern as modified versions when compared to the assessment criteria found in the online repository and the remaining percentages denoting minor deviations. Where the Date Set is concerned, two approaches were noted. The date inputted either reflected the date when the assignment brief was compiled and submitted for internal verification or when it was distributed to the student cohort. In line with the schools of thought referred to above, the former would showcase the strengths of the internal verification process underpinning its credibility and validity.

Figure 2b demonstrates that, on average, 85% of five of the fields included were compiled accurately; the remaining 15% was as expected. The field for the Class/Group was included on the corporate front sheet of the assignment brief by only 69.2% of assessors.

![Figure 2a: Front Sheet Trends 1](image-url)
Notwithstanding that the course reference or code is not explicitly requested, it is implicitly required as it is fundamental to the audit trail, particularly where there are two or more different versions of the programme for different cohorts over the years and should precede the course/programme title as it is an integral part of it.

Figure 2c continues the positive trend, in that a minimum of 75% of the fields represented were compiled with the fields denoting the assignment title and type tottering on the borderline of this statistic. Both are deemed necessary to the vocational essence of the programme and the robustness of the assessment/internal verification process feeding into internal and external audits.

**Figure 2b: Front Sheet Trends 2**

**Figure 2c: Front Sheet Trends 3**

Figures 3 and 4 outline trends that evoke interesting interpretations and opportunities for development.
### Figure 3a: Assignment Brief Design Trends 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Yes (%)</th>
<th>No (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vocational setting</td>
<td>66.0%</td>
<td>34.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syntax recommendations</td>
<td>62.0%</td>
<td>38.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language relevant to the context</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities appropriate</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear Instructions and Notes</td>
<td>96.0%</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variety of Assessment Methods</td>
<td>24.0%</td>
<td>76.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breakdown of Marks Achievable per Task</td>
<td>92.0%</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criteria Specific Tasks</td>
<td>98.0%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Figure 3b: Assignment Brief Design Trends 2

- Sufficient time for optimum delivery of assessment product
  - Yes: 9.6%
  - No: 90.4%
Figure 3c: Assignment Brief Design Trends 3

The stacked bar chart in Figure 3a indicates highly positive trends. In most instances, and where possible,

- Appropriate tasks were embedded in a vocational setting with the language applied being relevant to the context;
- Clear instructions and notes, as well as a breakdown of the marks achievable per task, which recalled the specific criteria being addressed, were given to students.

Where syntax recommendations made by the lead internal verifier were concerned, these made major contributions in 6 cases with the remainder referring to minor amendments. The variety of assessment methods applied was not discernible from the documents submitted and could only be ascertained in 24% of the samples. An interesting finding, which came to light during the internal audit exercise when researching good practices in vocational education and training within the providing institutions, was the application of an assessment model piloted across all foundation-level programmes under the auspices of the then head of college. This model stipulated that a variety of assessment methods is to be designed and set for all units. With some tweaking, it is a model that may take the vocational education and training (VET) system to another level, from offering equality to establishing equity and may, therefore, be of benefit to students of all programmes, rendering authentication of the essence of VET that celebrates the individual's learning diversity potential. The role of VET is to recast the mould of the traditional education system in line with the veracity of Einstein's belief that 'Everybody is a genius; but if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid.'

Hence, an overall picture of the way in which criteria are assessed across the unit is required so as to intensify the rigour of the process. Such a finding requires that an assessment plan accompanies future submittals of internally verified assignment briefs and assessment decisions in order to ascertain that
• All criteria are being covered;
• A variation of assessment methods is being implemented; and
• Marks are being judiciously assigned to the relative tasks in line with the unit specifications.

The pie-chart in Figure 3b is testimony to the expertise of the academic staff, assessors/internal verifiers, in gauging the time required by the student to deliver the assessment product optimally. The 9.6% represents, in the main, the situations wherein lecturers engage students in a constant process of preparedness and thus the dates inputted do not impact the outcome.

The 3.8% in Figure 3c denotes the few front sheets which were not accompanied by the assignment brief. Hence, the lead internal verification process could not be completed in these cases.

Figure 4: Assessment Decisions – Front Sheet Trends.

Figure 4 also offers some interesting trends and opportunities for improvement.

• Apart from constituting a declaration of ownership, the corporately required signatures, standing at approximately 66% for lecturers and 83% for internal verifiers, are necessary to the audit trail.
• Over 91% of the samples had the total mark achieved by the student inputted on the front sheet, while only 75% included the mark achieved per criteria. This omission does not allow for holistic verification. Inclusion of such marks contribute to the audit flow and, therefore, a quality product.
• The dated student signature is essential to the quality assurance process where acceptance of the feedback given is concerned. All samples submitted for lead internal verification had been signed by the student concerned.

Figure 5 represents the output of MCAST assessors with respect to feedback, 25% of which was detailed and ties in with the schools of thought discussed in the opening paragraphs on ipsative approaches and the ‘feedback and feedforward’ impetus. Approximately 60%
of feedback was brief while the remaining samples either demonstrated some slight discrepancies or were mathematical in nature.

![Feedback Pie Chart]

Figure 5: Assessment decisions – feedback trends

**Conclusion**

The concluding discussion consolidates the analysis of the roles of assessors/internal verifiers and lead internal verifiers offered in the preceding sections, in which their maximization is strongly conveyed. This is manifested in a number of good practices identified by the trends observed in the data gathered. The latter also indicated that some factors would benefit from attention and improvement in assessment skills and competences. These areas are considered as crucial to the educational product being delivered by MCAST and, hence, are revisited below.

- So as to intensify the rigour of the assessment process, an overall picture of the way in which criteria are assessed across the unit is required.
  1. In the majority of cases, the variety of assessment methods applied was not discernible from the documents submitted. The role of vocational education and training is to recast the mould of the traditional education system. In this respect, a good practice identified at MCAST was the piloting of an assessment model across all foundation-level programmes, initiated by the then head of college, which stipulated that a variety of assessment methods is to be designed and set for all units, celebrating the individual’s learning diversity potential.
  2. Neither could it be ascertained that all criteria were being covered and that marks were being judiciously assigned to the relative tasks across all assignments in line with the unit specifications.

It is recommended that an assessment plan accompanies future submittals of internally verified assignment briefs and assessment decisions.

- Apart from constituting a declaration of ownership, the corporately required signatures of lecturers and internal verifiers are necessary to the audit trail.
While, in the majority of cases, the total mark achieved by the student was inputted on the front sheet, the number of those who included the mark achieved per criteria was less. This omission does not allow for holistic verification, neither in the first instance nor from the aspect of the lead internal verification exercise. Inclusion of such marks contribute to the audit flow and, therefore, a quality product.

As with the Warmington and Wilmut (2001) study referred to earlier, incorporation of the foregoing would reflect the discourse which stems from the premise that internal verification yields greatest benefits when integrated into an explicit quality management framework. It serves to propel quality in relation to matters such as assessment, ensuring the validity and transferability of MCAST qualifications as advocated by Tolley and Murphy (2000), by adhering to the key indicators of a robust system identified by Betteridge et al. (1996), as manageability, sustainability, satisfaction and consistency to inspire and aspire to an innate quality culture (Micallef Grimaud 2008).

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