

Learning from External Examiners about the Application of Critical Research Skills

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ABSTRACT This research was undertaken against the background of increased pressure by government on Higher Education Institutions in South Africa to increase throughput and participation rates, but also to improve quality at the same time. Research supervision is one of the aspects of academic life that is most affected. Supervisors accepted a whole range of accountabilities and adapted their supervision styles as part of a more personalised approach to supervision. A number of external examination reports have been included in this study. The researchers aimed to get a better understanding of certain aspects of external examination reports of Masters Dissertations to investigate to what extent the application of critical research skills have been applied in these dissertations by external examiners. It was found that many students lacked the ability of clear argumentation and to present work that is conceptualised logically. They found it particularly challenging to present coherent reports that illustrate the development of a piece of research within a framework where the problem statement and research aims were treated as central aspects. Finally it was proposed that the current practice of supervising students at the university should be reconsidered. Students' dependence on supervisors, should be augmented by including structured and open opportunities for the development of research skills.