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Working Paper

Assessment Methods and Practices in Higher Education in Denmark

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Abstract

This paper is aimed at foreign teaching staff in Denmark who are interested in gaining a better understanding of assessment methods and practices in Danish higher education. It addresses assessment practices and grading at Danish universities, with special attention to the use, preparation, conduct, and assessment of oral exams. It also examines the formal role of examiners and co-examiners, exploring possible differences between how international and Danish staff might approach the tasks of examining, co-examining, and grading. Finally, it considers some important issues raised by the increasing use of English as the examination language.

Assessment methods

Summative assessment is a core activity of any education system. Exams are important in different ways for students, for teachers, and for future employers. To ensure that students fulfil their degree requirements, universities must test them not only at the end of their degree programme but also during the course of it to guarantee progression and partial competences.

Exams inevitably structure and shape the work of students, who naturally want to pass their exams and succeed in their studies, and thus to reach high levels of competence and eventually find interesting and well-paying jobs. Exams are also high stakes testing activities with important consequences for the test takers: passing has important advantages, and failing has important disadvantages. In addition, the actual exam results are important to the students, since all final semester grades, which typically only reflect the

Appeals

Danish students have extensive opportunities to appeal against examination results if they do not think that these are fair. The university receives and evaluates appeals, usually at the departmental level, and has a system of appeal bodies that handle such matters. If the student disagrees with the university's decision, the student can appeal it by contacting the Danish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Higher Education. Appealing can result in not only the same or a better

grades received on exams, appear on the diploma. Teachers may stimulate students to do their best on exams by informing them of the final exam requirements in a positive and constructive way, and sometimes by reminding them of the negative consequences if they do not take their exams seriously. Teachers also sometimes measure their own performance according to the successful results of their students. Finally, future employers need exams to know the levels of knowledge, skills and competence of the job candidates. BA, MA or PhD diplomas inspire confidence, but the actual grades can also be of importance in understanding a candidate's profile.

Exams are the only summative form of assessment in Danish university education since no official grading occurs during the semester. With grading and testing not usually being part of the daily culture and power relations in Danish

classrooms, the Danish teachers typically approach the students in a non-authoritarian manner, and students and teachers therefore usually seem to be on a rather equal level. However, it can be important for international teaching staff to note that while teacher-student relationships appear informal and non-hierarchical, and students are often given considerable freedom in their studies – including no or little control of student attendance or performance during courses – examiners may have high expectations of student performance in examination situations (Blasco 2012).

Formal exam rules and regulations

All university courses are described according to the ECTS credit system and student performance is assessed in a variety of ways. According to the Ministerial Order on University Examinations and Grading (the Examination Order), in higher education, assessment can take the form of written, oral and practice-based examinations, as well as active course participation. These are not typological distinctions, but rather broad categories comprising a wide range of other parameters. Other important distinctions are, for example, whether the exam question(s) are set in advance or the students themselves are supposed to be able to formulate the questions (for problem-based exams), the exam is open book or closed book, or students must take the exam individually or are required to do so in groups. In addition, sometimes the focus is on the process, sometimes on the product, and sometimes on the presentation itself.

For at least one third of all exams in a degree programme, the assessment is conducted by an internal examiner, who is usually the teacher, and an external examiner from one of the national corps of external examiners. The external examiners are responsible for assuring the same standards for all examinations at a national level, and thus for their quality. For the rest of the exams, it is common to use internal co-examiners. This practice of internal and external co-examination was developed to ensure students' legal rights and to minimize bias.

According to Danish law (the Ministerial Order on the Grading Scale and Other Forms of Assessment of University Education (the Grading Scale Order, part 5), specific course objectives and assessment criteria must serve as the basis for grading. It is noteworthy, however, that Danish learning culture has traditionally placed emphasis on independent and critical thinking rather than rote learning, and that these qualities of exam performance may therefore be emphasized in assessments.

Assessment and exams: exam driven rather than process driven

Traditionally, almost all university examinations have been final exams counting for 100 percent of the course grade. Students in Denmark have therefore been inclined to focus on the final exam rather than the learning process during the semester, a tendency which manifests itself in some students choosing not to attend class on a regular basis. The last ten years, however, have seen an increasing focus on activating

students through assessment methods emphasizing the learning process during the semester rather than only the final product. Project work, portfolio exams and active course participation have therefore become more frequent as forms of assessment. Significantly, active course participation can only be assessed as pass/fail and is therefore seldom used for the core courses of a degree programme since it seems to indicate to students the minor importance of the course.

Objective-based assessment

In Denmark, where education at all levels, including higher education, is regulated by the Ministry of Education, the grading scale and its use is described in a ministerial order. The Danish 7-point grading scale consists of five passing grades (12, 10, 7, 4 and 02) as well as two failing grades (00 and -3). The scale was introduced in 2007 to make Danish grades more comparable in an international context and, pivotally, to provide a clear correlation between the descriptions for the individual grades and the academic objectives. Sometimes, a simple pass or fail can be given instead of a grade, though this may only occur in up to one third of the exams in a higher education degree programme.

Examiners who only have experience with the current grading scale may find it helpful to be familiar with the scale used at universities from 1971 to 2007. The significant difference between them is that the old scale did not explicitly relate the various grades to the course objectives but to student performance in a more general way, focusing on progression in learning corresponding to Bloom's cognitive taxonomy. It also had a separate grade (13) for the "exceptional independent and excellent performance," involving the higher order cognitive ability to synthesize and evaluate the material – a distinction that few students ever received. The current scale, on the other hand, explicitly relates the grades directly to the course objectives, and the top grade (12) simply covers the "excellent performance" in respect to the objectives. Some examiners may still be influenced by the old grading scale and may therefore tend to place more emphasis on student exam performance in general rather than on how well the student meets the course objectives. Agreeing on the criteria for assessment beforehand should help prevent disagreements in this regard.

Grade value	The 7-point Grading Scale	ECTS equivalent
12	For an excellent performance which completely meets the course objectives, with no or only a few insignificant weaknesses.	A
10	For a very good performance which meets the course objectives, with only minor weaknesses.	B
7	For a good performance which meets the course objectives but also displays some weaknesses.	C
4	For a fair performance which adequately meets the course objectives but also displays several major weaknesses.	D
02	For a sufficient performance which barely meets the course objectives.	E
00	For an insufficient performance which does not meet the course objectives.	Fx
-3	For a performance which is unacceptable in all respects.	F

Table 1. This translation of the Danish grading scale stems from Brabrand & Dahl (2009, 546-7). Unlike the official translation of the scale, which emphasizes the student's "command of the relevant material," this translation reflects the new emphasis on students meeting the course objectives which is reflected in the wording of the Danish version of the scale. We therefore recommend this translation over the one available online at the Ministry of Education (<http://www.eng.uvm.dk/Education/Primary-and-Lower-Secondary-Education/The-Folkeskole/7-point-Grading-Scale>) and in the Grading Scale Order published by the ministry.

Examiner roles

Understanding the formal roles of the internal examiner and the internal and external co-examiners is of course important for all new teaching staff; however, it is even more crucial for foreign teaching staff whose experiences of examination and assessment are necessarily different from those of the Danish teachers, who have been thoroughly immersed in the Danish tradition of examination and assessment through their own experiences in the Danish education system.

Examinations at Danish higher education institutions can be assessed in two general ways: through internal and external assessment. Internal assessment is conducted solely by an internal examiner at the university or by an internal examiner as well as an internal co-examiner appointed by the university from among the teachers at the university. External assessment is conducted by an internal examiner and an external

examiner appointed by the Ministry of Science, Innovation and Higher Education or the Ministry of Children and Education. At least one third of a programme's total ECTS credits must result from external assessment, which must cover the important parts of the study programmes, including the Bachelor project, Master thesis and Master project.

According to the Ministerial Order on Examination, examiners and co-examiners have different roles. The examiner must conduct the exam, while the co-examiner is responsible for ensuring that the exam complies with the formal rules and regulations applicable to the exam, as well as for guaranteeing that students are fairly treated and reliably assessed. The participation of external examiners from other institutions contributes to the stability of the scale and should help prevent grading bias.

I find it very helpful that the exams are in the hands of two teachers. This way we can share the responsibility and discuss various nuances of the exam performance. The challenge, though, can be when the marks are too distant, but we have always come to a compromise and argued the choice of the specific mark.

Assistant professor from Moldova

In practice, this means that the examiner poses the majority of the questions and leads the discussion with the student, whereas the co-examiner is restricted to adding comments and questions. Both are requested to take notes during the exam (according to examination order), but since the examiner's role is to be the interviewer, the co-examiner is expected to take notes for the assessment and evaluation, as well as for possible appeals.

External co-examiners all belong to different specialized corps of external evaluators nominated by one of the relevant ministries (*censorkorps*). Members must all be highly qualified professionals in the field with relevant educational backgrounds, and one third of them must represent potential future employers of the candidates.

Having an external co-examiner means having a co-examiner who is not directly affiliated with the

I found it interesting that all exams are graded by two teachers. It has been really helpful to discuss the grading and the criteria with my more experienced colleagues.

Assistant professor from Germany

university and who may have different perspectives on the subjects and methods, but who is required to be guided by the academic regulations in his or her assessment. An important point of the system of external examination is that it guarantees standardized assessment of all student exam performances in a specific field regardless of geographic location or institutional affiliation. The corps of external examiners generally meets at least once a year to discuss the conditions of the programmes and the performance

standards. The directors of the corps are also consulted about new academic regulations, and they exchange knowledge of new developments in the areas of forms of assessment, assessment and grading with the members of the corps.

The different viewpoints that an external examiner can bring to an exam situation play a crucial role in the examination system by minimizing subjectivity and creating opportunities for knowledge exchange. The basis of the assessment is nevertheless always the description of the assessment criteria in the academic regulations, and it is therefore advisable for the examiner and co-examiner to take time to agree on how to interpret the criteria before starting an oral exam or an assessment of a written exam.

Oral exams

Oral examination is an unusual type of exam outside Scandinavia, but there is a strong tradition of oral examination in the Danish educational system, from primary school through university. This probably stems from the tradition of orality in cultural life originating in the Danish folk high schools in the 19th and 20th centuries, which places value on the spoken word. It is also an authentic type of exam, comparable to real, working-life situations in which presentation skills, personal involvement, and commitment to the task at hand are essential.

Oral examination is a variable genre that can consist of presenting a paper or an analysis, answering questions, analyzing texts or other material, translating, debating, demonstrating, or performing. A number of parameters can be used to adapt this exam type to different learning objectives. These include:

- 1) the use of preparation time just before the examination, with or without specific material to analyze or questions to answer;
- 2) the production of a written report or synopsis to be defended orally. In this case, the assessment criteria will usually indicate how much the oral defence counts in the grading of the whole performance, with reference to the course objectives which serve as the basis for the grading;
- 3) the total examination time;
- 4) the time allotment for each element of the oral exam. It is common to start with a student presentation of the subject area, question or material, then move on to a discussion. But an oral exam can also consist of precise questions for the student to answer at the beginning, or there

In oral examination, strange things can happen. For example, once my student failed to say anything, and the time limit (maximum of 20 minutes) didn't help the situation. Thus, what I did was to rephrase the question and start talking about general issues in the course. In that way, the student started to gain confidence and started saying something to answer the questions.

Postdoc from Ethiopia

might be a text, picture or case to analyze, with or without preparation and access to the student's own notes, a textbook or the internet.

The actual knowledge, skills or competences to be assessed at oral exams are multiple, and the presentation itself or the student's dialogical skills can be more or less weighted, as can the level of disciplinary knowledge and understanding. It is therefore extremely important to make the assessment criteria clear, both to the student and to the co-examiner. These are usually indicated as the course or learning objectives in the academic regulations.

ORAL EXAMINATION

A successful examiner ...

- *is a good listener*
- *poses questions within a taxonomy of cognitive skills*
- *assesses and grades according to precise criteria*
- *guides students to understand grading and the formative role of assessment (feedback).*

Oral exams have the reputation of having low validity and reliability, involving a certain amount of luck and coincidence. This can in fact be the case when students draw the question or the topic they are to discuss immediately without preparation time, but in the case of a well-prepared student, this has very little importance even though students frequently attribute exam failure to selection of the wrong topic – or success to the opposite. For oral exams based on a written product prepared by the students individually or

In terms of the oral exams (1st year, 1st semester, BA) it was difficult to deal with the students being very stressed out – some were even crying in or right after the exam. The challenge was more to generate a reassuring atmosphere.

Assistant professor from
Germany

in groups, luck or coincidence is definitely not an issue. It cannot be neglected, however, that performance, self-confidence, exam nerves and personal appearance all play a role at oral exams, just as in other time-limited performance-oriented exam types such as time-limited written exams (*stedprøver*).

The examiner's approach to examination is extremely important for the success and fairness of this type of examination. Conducting oral exams is therefore quite challenging: it requires knowledge and experience to develop

a strategy for the total examination time allotted to each student (examined individually or in groups); for asking good, relevant and understandable questions adapted to each student's level and dialogical

behaviour; and also for calming down nervous students whose results ought not to be affected by their attitude or appearance. The setting of the oral exam is also important. Traditionally, the exam table is covered with a green tablecloth intended to calm students and stimulate concentration, and students are offered water, sometimes coffee and even chocolate or cookies.

Key steps to establishing a successful examination situation are creating a non-threatening, informal atmosphere and developing an effective dialogue technique allowing each student to perform to the best of his/her abilities, choosing questions dynamically based on the student's answers to previous questions, and avoiding "guess what I am thinking" questions. Ideal questions are open ended, allowing students to respond to the learning objectives and preferably leading them to express their opinions or ideas or provide new perspectives on the exam topic (cf. Andersen & Tofteskov 2008, chapter 7). It is also very important to remember that the oral exam is a test situation, not an academic dialogue between peers. Both the examiner and the co-examiner must focus on the student's actual answers rather than the behaviour or the good atmosphere, and they must focus on developing suitable lines of questioning in order to detect the precise level of the student's knowledge and skills.

The student's performance at the exam is only discussed by the examiners. Their evaluation time is included in the examination time, so the student normally gets 15 minutes out of 20. This usually gives the examiners time to evaluate against the criteria from the academic regulations ("course objectives" or "criteria for assessment"). Once the grade has been decided, the student is invited back into the room and given the grade and, ideally, general feedback, including the argumentation for the specific grade. In this sense, the exam contains a formative element.

Oral exams have traditionally focused on the performance at the end of the learning period and are therefore product oriented. New types of oral exams focusing more on the learning process have, however, been developed. Significant examples of this are project exams, which allow students to discuss the results of their project work during the semester, and portfolio exams, which require students to submit a portfolio of their coursework during the semester. The portfolio can be an electronic compilation of documents and other materials that represent the candidate's competence in the specific domain. The oral exam can be based on the whole portfolio and focus on the student's reflection on the learning process, on the student's own selection of one or two elements of the portfolio, or on a

In the oral exam, even with two examiners, when following up on what students are saying it is sometimes difficult not to get carried away to broader themes. This might be interesting to see whether students can situate problems more broadly and are aware of certain concepts, and thus should get a top grade. However, frequently such issues go beyond the contents of the course, and are thus an assessment of the general cultural capital the students have, instead of evaluating their learning from the course, which is what should be assessed, in order to give everyone a fair chance.

Assistant professor from Germany

random selection of works to be commented on. Portfolio exams have become more frequent in Scandinavian higher education during the last ten years, and are quite successful in placing emphasis on the semester's work. However, the evaluation in 2005 of the Norwegian quality reform of education (2003) points out that, in general, portfolio exams involving the evaluation of selected pieces of coursework have required more work on the part of teachers than on the part of students: teachers tend to get more correction work both during the semester and in connection with the exam, and it must therefore be stressed that the idea behind the portfolio is to stimulate student work throughout the semester, but to assess only selected pieces of student work.

I have only conducted oral exams once, but the Danish students clearly outperformed the foreign students. I later found out that was common.

Assistant professor from the U.S.

Oral exams can be conducted with one or several students at a time. This is especially relevant when the examination material is a project completed by a group of students during the semester. The group members then present the results together and are examined individually. The longer examination time allows for examiners to go deeper into the subject area and assess

the knowledge, skills and competences of each student. Group exams were used especially at the project-oriented Danish universities, Roskilde and Aalborg, but were abolished in 2006 by a ministerial order from the government then in office. Under the new Danish government formed in 2011, group exams are being reintroduced both in schools and universities. The challenge for examiners when it comes to assessing individual performances in groups depends on the learning objectives. If social competencies and collaborative skills are to be assessed, criteria for this specific assessment must be clearly stated.

In general, the challenges of oral exams are related to its dynamic and spontaneous character. Examiners need to agree on a shared understanding of the "oral examination genre" and the roles played. This is particularly important in respect to foreign examiners with no or little understanding of oral examination, and to students who may think that oral exams are unfair and depend heavily on personal appearance.

The challenge for students is the risk of misinterpreting the exam: they may think they need to know all the material inside out; instead they are commonly required to be able to discuss, think critically, actively engage in a dialogue, and communicate the material. It is therefore a good idea to prepare the students for the exam situation by being as precise as possible about the expectations, linking explicitly to the learning objectives and possibly creating mini-exam situations during the semester. This is especially important for international students with little or no experience with oral exams.

It is important to note that oral exams are public, though exemptions may be granted under special circumstances. Students can learn from attending other students' oral exams, and nervous students can actually benefit from knowing that their fellow students are present at the examination. It is therefore

advisable to use exams to prepare for other exams, and to teach students to share their learning experiences.

Written exams

Written examination is a common assessment method at the secondary and tertiary levels of education in Denmark and in many other countries. However, this type of examination may be designed, used, and assessed differently in foreign and Danish education systems, resulting in foreign and Danish teachers having differing conceptions of and approaches to the written examination.

Generally speaking, at the tertiary level, the written examination addresses a question/problem or set of questions/problems defined by either the examiner or the student. In the case of the former, the examination may be conducted as either a formal, sit-down exam lasting from one to eight hours or a take-home written assignment normally lasting from 24 hours to 14 days. In the case of a take-home paper or project for which the student defines the problem to be addressed, the student may be allotted anywhere from 24 hours to several weeks – or, for the Master’s thesis, up to six months – to formulate a problem statement and complete the assignment.

Danes are used to producing written texts, and sometimes it is a bit difficult for them to understand that in other countries, papers are not so common! (I never wrote a paper before coming here, besides the BA project, which was not that important, and that was the same for people from Poland and Spain). If your background is similar to mine, do not worry, lecturers and instructors will help you and give you suggestions on how to write a paper.

1st-year PhD student from Italy

The invigilated sit-down written exams are typically designed to test students’ basic knowledge and analytical skills in a subject, as well as their ability to work under pressure, while take-home papers offer students the opportunity to address their topics more critically and in-depth. Sit-down written exams and take-home papers are usually considered to be more reliable than oral exams by allowing for a more uniform and fair assessment of students’ work. The sit-down exam is however also considered highly inauthentic, as this way of working is virtually non-existent outside the education system (Andersen & Tofteskov 2008, p. 79). To encourage successful student outcomes, it is important that examiners carefully consider the questions to ask in set written exams. Written questions should be unambiguous and allow the students to demonstrate their command of the material in respect to the learning objectives of the course.

When assessing written exams, foreign examiners may find it helpful to be aware of how students and teachers have traditionally approached written assignments. First, it is important to recognize the strong link between this exam type and the written genres valued by the Danish schools. In the lower- and upper-secondary Danish classes, students learn to write essays and literary analyses, and the assessment of their writing skills in these genres emphasizes creative, critical and independent thinking skills. Likewise, at the

university level, the emphasis, especially for the open-book take-home exams, has traditionally been on critical, creative thinking and problem-solving involving synthesis and evaluation.

Project exams

Project work is a typical exam form at the secondary and tertiary levels of education in Denmark. Projects are normally problem oriented and often transdisciplinary and student driven. The actual writing process takes place under supervision, and the exam can be either oral, involving a defence of the product (a project report or a synopsis of the work), or written. In the case of the latter, the assessment only considers the written work; in the former, it must include both, and the academic regulations must indicate the weight of the oral and written components.

Project work is often done in groups and can be assessed in groups, but always with individual evaluation. This means that for written assessment, group members must declare which part of the report they are each responsible for. When the exam is oral, the report can be a common starting point, but it is not directly evaluated. All group members are present at the exam, but it is important that each student is individually responsible and examined.

Different types of written exams

	Sit-down exam	Time-limited take-home paper with a set question	Project or case- based exam	MA thesis
Invigilation and the possibility of a closed-book exam	X			
Based on a set question or problem statement	X	X		
Independent problem statement			X	X

Source: Andersen, Hanne Leth & Jens Tofteskov (2008). *Eksamen og Eksamensformer: betydning og bedømmelse* (Exam and exam forms: implications and evaluation), Samfundslitteratur, 72.

Plagiarism

Another issue to consider when assessing written exams is plagiarism. Copying the work of others without citation has become increasingly widespread since the advent of the internet with its easy access to student and expert papers as well as a myriad of other sources. Plagiarism can occur for many reasons, including a poor understanding of the subject, time and study pressures, and – importantly – a lack of awareness of plagiarism, which can result in unintentional plagiarism. For students writing in English as a foreign language, it can be particularly tempting to lift not only phrases but complete sentences and passages from more sophisticated writers of English. Added to this is the issue of students coming from educational cultures where knowledge rather than the individual source is considered central, or where it is not considered necessary for students to cite others' work until the graduate levels. For these students in particular, but also for Danish students, it is important to increase awareness of what plagiarism is and how to avoid it. And to help further prevent plagiarism in written exams, examiners can, for instance, design written assignments involving analysis, interpretation, and comparison – types of writing that are difficult to borrow from other sources (Andersen & Tofteskov 2008, p. 159;

<http://www.plagiarism.org/resources/student-materials/>: Plagiarism Prevention Guidelines for Educators)

Practice-based examinations and active course participation

With academic education increasingly becoming a prerequisite for non-academic careers, the ability to link theory and practice and to apply academic knowledge in practice is becoming more important. This also applies to exams.

Practice-based examinations are typically exams which privilege the relation between theory and practice, such as case-based exams and project work on authentic material in collaboration with external partners. In-service training during the degree programme is generally not part of Danish university education, but can be integrated in other courses and exams. This training must always be assessed at university rather than at the external partner institutions, unlike at Danish university colleges, where in-service training is an obligatory part of the degree programmes and is assessed at the visited institution.

Another way of relating theory to concrete practice in the real world is to relate project-oriented courses with partners outside university, such as private companies, organisations and high schools. Projects may be designed by students on the basis of authentic challenges presented by the partners. The assessment, however, must be done by the university, but as there might be an external examiner, the link can also be made at this point in the process.

Active course participation is the closest Danish exam regulations come to final grades. The participation must be active, regular and satisfactory, and this must be specified in the course regulations. The teacher

must further specify the meaning of active course participation at the beginning of the semester. It must be underlined that this assessment form can only be assessed as pass/fail.

The role of language

Language is always a dimension in exams, whether oral or written. Even the smallest presentation of requires a common language and is dependent on the student's linguistic competence and expression. If the examination language is neither the student's nor the examiner's own language, a loss of information, accuracy and nuance can occur. Complex, nuanced communication cannot take place without a high level of proficiency, from pronunciation and vocabulary to discourse competence.

In some degree programmes, English as a specific competence is part of the qualification profile that students acquire. In this case, there is usually a certain focus on language during the semester and language is assessed in specific exams or integrated in content-oriented exams. Part of the teaching staff will then normally be trained for this dimension. In other programmes, English is only the medium of instruction and communication, and is thus not part of the course content. Nevertheless, according to Ministerial Order on University Examinations, language is an obligatory part of the evaluation of all major written assignments, such as Bachelor projects, Master's theses, and Master's projects:

When assessing bachelor projects, master's theses, master's projects and other major written assignments, as well as their academic content, emphasis should also be placed on the students' spelling and writing skills, regardless of the language in which the assignment is written, cf. section 5. The curriculum stipulates the extent to which spelling and writing skills are weighted in the overall assessment of examination performance, but the academic content must always be weighted most heavily. (Ministerial Order on University Examinations and Grading (2012): 24-(1))

For teachers without expert knowledge of the English language, assessing the level of students' linguistic skills is of course challenging. The problem occurs in English-medium programmes where there is no focus on language skills development during the semester, even though such a focus might help students to develop their academic skills in general. Both teachers and students are usually expected to work as well in English as they would have done in their own language. The risk being run in these programmes is, however, a loss of academic standard and quality, even when the actual language competence is less important.

In actual assessment situations, teachers must frequently assess written assignments full of linguistic errors and marred by stylistic infelicities; students' oral language may also be

In oral exams I have found it very difficult to distinguish language abilities from the capabilities of the student in the subject area.

Associate professor from Germany

difficult to understand due to difficulties with the language: pronunciation, spelling, vocabulary, syntax, rhetoric and genre. The role of language in oral exams is not mentioned in the Examination Order; nevertheless, the assessment will always to some extent be the result of the student's ability to express complex and nuanced ideas, to present an argument and discuss results. In the major written exams, the language itself must be taken into account in the assessment (according to the ministerial order on examination), but the weight of this part of the assessment of the student's performance has to be defined in the academic regulations.

Even if language does not have to be weighted, students' lack of language proficiency can make it difficult for the examiners to determine the students' fulfilment of the exam criteria. Another problem is that English is not just English. For example, there are many types of accents in English as an effect of ongoing globalization, and examiners can have difficulty understanding the variety of accents they hear.

Several questions arise from the current use of English as a medium of instruction and examination: How do we assess exams that are clearly influenced by the level of linguistic proficiency? When should linguistic deficiencies be considered significant and play a role in the actual grading? When do they interfere with the content and the meaning of what is being communicated, and when are they simply irritating? Another issue that arises is possible bias resulting from the language of examination in English-medium courses. For English-medium courses, exams are supposed to be conducted in English, but sometimes Danish students have been allowed to take their exams in their own language while the foreign students must take their exams in English, which for many of them is a foreign language. This has taken place in programmes where language is only the medium of instruction, not part of the competence profile. This practice is problematic, not only because it can give the Danish students an advantage, but also because it is naïve to think that language and linguistic form can be separated from content and skills.

For a number of years now, Danish universities have offered English-medium degree programmes, and new programmes are being accredited each year. This leads to a discussion about whether the linguistic requirements for these programmes are clear enough. Some students complain, some teachers prefer not to teach in English, some ought not to. Language training does not seem to be a direct part of the accreditation criteria. There are clear requirements regarding quality assurance of all degree programmes, and most of the Danish universities have a language policy covering these programmes. The problem is that these policies have been more ambitious than real (Philipson 2009).

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to clarify not only the formal examination methods and practices in Danish universities but also much of the tacit knowledge of examination and learning traditions in Danish education held by the Danish teaching staff and students. The topics covered by this paper have often been

difficult for foreign teaching staff at Danish universities to acquire outside the teacher training programmes for assistant professors, and even in these contexts the focus has traditionally not been on the tacit knowledge and practices of examiners and students. Moreover, it fills a gap in the published literature on examination and assessment in Denmark, where oral exams and the challenge of language has not yet been covered. We therefore hope to have filled a gap for higher education teachers with very little or no prior experience of examination in Denmark.

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