Examining doctoral examination and the question of the Viva

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The paper draws on a series of Australian Research Council (ARC) projects aimed at understanding better the process of doctoral examination. The early phase focussed on the Australian doctorate, which functions without a Viva, while the later phase was concerned with comparing the earlier findings with analysis of the United Kingdom (UK) and New Zealand (NZ) systems that include a Viva. Results showed some strengths and weaknesses of both systems and so the paper explores the desirability of drawing on the strengths of both examination models to minimize the weaknesses against a backdrop of escalating pressures on universities.

Keywords: PhD examination, Viva, examination reports, models of PhD assessment, cross-country comparison

Introduction

From about 1990, most Western and Asian countries, including Australia, experienced rapidly escalating doctoral enrolments (Norton, 2014) along with an emerging emphasis on standards (Shaw and Green, 1996; Johnston, 1997, 1999; Tinkler and Jackson, 2000). Nonetheless, until the early 2000s, there was a dearth of empirical research into doctoral examination (Johnston, 1997), which was described as lacking transparency and mysterious (Tinkler and Jackson, 2000). In response to this situation, a group of Australian educational researchers formed the Centre for the Study of Research Training and Impact (SORTI) and embarked on what was to become an intensive program of work funded through Australian Research Council Discovery Project Grants. The focus of the first two projects (described in this paper as Phase One) in

the program concerned the standards that examiners of Australian PhD theses employed, along with an analysis of examiner consistency and the criteria that examiners applied in judging quality (eg Holbrook, Bourke, Lovat and Dally, 2004a,b,c; Bourke and Holbrook, 2013; Holbrook, Bourke, Fairbairn and Lovat, 2014). Drawing initially on the text of Australian examination reports, using mainly a mix of quantitative, qualitative and philosophical methods, the intention of the program was to try and understand better the nature and form that doctoral examination takes, including aspects that are easily measurable and those not so easily measured, including what mindset and intentions examiners appear to take into the process.

A Program of Research – Doctoral Examination

	Project 1	Project 2	Project 3
Countries covered	Australia	Australia	New Zealand, United Kingdom, Australia
No of institutions	10	5	NZ 2; UK 3
No of examiner reports	804	351	823 (388 NZ; 435 UK)
No of candidates	2121 PhD	275	252 (100 NZ; 252 UK) all PhD
No of interviews	n/a	n/a	30 NZ; 31 UK; 21 Australia
Main focus	Standards applied by PhD examiners	Identification of PhD examiner criteria for thesis quality	Contribution of a Viva to PhD assessment
Methodology	mixed methods, philosophical analysis	mixed methods	mixed methods, philosophical analysis, linguistic analysis

Shading indicates the components of the three projects that are the subject of this paper

Figure 1. The PhD examination studies program

Concurrent with our work, there have been landmark studies in the USA (Lovitts, 2007) and England (Tinkler and Jackson, 2004; Trafford and Leshem, 2008), addressing issues especially germane to those countries but, together with our work, allowing for some generalizations to be made about the expectations, criteria and problems associated with the doctoral regime and specifically about the nature of examination. Golding, Sharmini and Lazarovitch (2014) note the substantial empirical literature that has allowed for these generalisations to be made, including about examiner beliefs and practices. There remain, nonetheless, unresolved issues and gaps that still need to be examined, not least in relation to the role and robustness of the Viva as a component of examination. Hence, the most recent project sought to explore the differences between the Australian model (ie the report-only model with no Viva) and models that included both reports and a Viva. This third project (described herein as Phase Two) compared the earlier Australian findings with analysis of PhD examination inclusive of a Viva as in the United Kingdom (UK) and New Zealand (NZ). The three projects and some comparative data thereof are outlined in Figure 1.

The next section of this paper will describe Phase One, namely, the report-only model in Australia and the method of analysing the reports, highlighting some pertinent elements of the published findings from our own work. When the paper moves to Phase Two, our findings are discussed in light of the literature about the viva in the UK and NZ, as well as highlighting a sample of our own most important findings.

Phase One: the Australian report-only model of PhD examination

A report-only model suited the geographical and isolation demands of Australia when the PhD was introduced immediately after World War II (Kiley, 2009). Especially in these circumstances, it was efficient and cost-effective, with minimization of need for travel in assembling examiners with suitable expertise. These benefits have been enhanced through modern technology, with independent, external examiners being no more than an electronic message away. Hence, in the Australian context, there has been no tradition of a Viva being required for examination, except for performance or practice-based theses (Paltridge *et al*, 2012; Starfield *et al*, 2012). Typically, the Australian doctoral student's final result will be determined by a university or faculty centralised committee that has no direct contact with the student. The committee will be informed by two or three individual examiner reports from experts who will normally be external to the university in question, with at least one being routinely from outside Australia. These reports

will accompany the committee's letter of decision to the student, normally just as they have been received by the committee.

These reports constitute individual definitive appraisals of the thesis, together with a recommendation ranging from 'pass without corrections' through to 'fail', with anything from two to seven intermediate steps, normally including a range from 'pass subject to minor corrections', through 'pass subject to major corrections', and 'revise and re-submit'. The examiners normally have no contact with each other or with the candidate; examiners will rarely know the identity of the other examiners and the student will not know these identities until at least the final decision letter is received. While most universities offer guidelines to examiners in how to construct their report, there is some evidence that these are rarely followed. Mullins and Kiley (2002: 380), for instance asserted: '… only a third of our examiners took institution-specific criteria into account in assessing the thesis … when it came to the point of making a judgement, they regarded themselves as the arbiters of a thesis.' This is consistent with our own findings from the first project wherein, for a sub-sample of two institutions (with different specificity of guidelines), only 20 per cent of examiners directly followed the guidelines from the respective universities.

When reports are returned to the university, they are managed by the centralised committee that will, in the process of determining a final result, normally request the supervisor's and/or relevant discipline area's input and, possibly, recommendation. Whether this is the case or not, it is ultimately the task of the centralised committee to determine the final result. Only rarely would the student be called upon to take any part in this process, these rare exceptions normally signalling a problem that the committee cannot resolve in the routine way. Once the result is determined and the student advised in writing, together with the uncensored individual reports, the identities of the examiners will be revealed to the candidate unless an examiner has requested anonymity. It is clear that, in the context of such a process, the definitive and determinative individual reports of the examiners are crucial to its successful implementation. If they are clear, informative and in agreement with each other, the committee's task is fairly easy. If not, then the task of the committee becomes more difficult. Because they are so central to the integrity of the report-only model of examination, the reports themselves became the main subject of interest in the authors' research program (Holbrook *et al*, 2004a,b). This applied to both Phases One and Two, although the latter phase also included interviews with experienced examiners about their individual reports as well as the nature, intent and utility of the Viva as an added step in the process.

Methods applied to analysing examiner reports

In all three projects, constituting Phase One and Phase Two, the same method of analysing the examiner report text was adopted but, in the third project (Phase Two), a linguistic analysis was added which examined the language of the reports (Starfield *et al*, forthcoming). In this work, we drew and built on studies such as those cited above, as well as on other studies of interviews with doctoral examiners in Australia (Mullins and Kiley, 2002; Kiley and Mullins, 2004). We also drew on work specifically directed to a study of the Viva as a component of examination, most particularly in Phase Two (eg Kelly, 2010).

Analysis of the reports drew on *QSRN6* software that supported iterations of coding, the first step of which involved establishing core categories that captured all text about thesis content and process, and dialogic and evaluative elements (Holbrook *et al*, 2004a, 2014), supported by confirmatory factor analysis (Bourke, Hattie and Anderson, 2004). For the third project, dealing with the Viva as an extra dimension of examination, categories were added that captured references to the Viva in the written report. In all three projects, decisional recommendations were collected from the participating universities and, where possible, from individual examiner reports. One main area of quantitative analysis concerned comparison of proportions of coded text designed to explore relationships between several variables, including examiner recommendation. Philosophical (more specifically epistemological) analysis focussed on the apparent knowledge assumptions being applied in the reports, justified on the basis that knowledge production and contribution (indeed original contribution) is supposed to sit at the very heart of the criteria applied to the quality of the doctoral thesis (Clarke and Lunt, 2014). The linguistic analysis in Phase Two drew on appraisal theory (Martin and White, 2005) in examining evaluative language in the reports.

Some quantitative and qualitative findings from Phase One

Quantitative analysis showed that reports averaged 2.5 pages, tended to be highly idiosyncratic in organisation, paid different kinds of attention to appraising literature reviews and findings, engaged with the reader in very different ways (in some cases addressing the candidate throughout, in other cases virtually ignoring the candidate), offered evaluative comments in different places and on different dimensions (eg summative, prescriptive, formative), and varied only slightly according to discipline (Bourke *et al*, 2004, Holbrook *et al*, 2004a; Holbrook *et al*, 2014).

Analysis revealed the reports to be, by and large, formal documents,

with what was coded as 'conversational text' comprising only 3 per cent of the total, and not to be found at all in 70 per cent of the reports. Similarly, what was coded as 'intellectual engagement' (defined as intensity of engagement representing something like 'excitement' with the substance of the thesis) also comprised only 3 per cent of total text, and not at all to be found in 79 per cent of reports. The text coded as 'formative instruction' was to be found in 63 per cent of reports and constituted 27 per cent of total text. This text assists the candidates to make improvement, but in itself indicates a problem or deficit. While comment by way of summation or judgement was positive, neutral or negative, positive comment of this type comprised 29 per cent of total text and was found in almost all the reports. However, the negative comment, comprising 4 per cent of total text, was to be found in about half of all reports, in many cases in castigating form. This was most evident in marginally passable theses in the use of words such as 'pathetic', 'frustrating' or 'unfit', or in caustic sentences such as 'There is almost nothing in the writing of the thesis to lift it beyond pedestrian flatness'. The extent and nature of negative or deficit comment was surprising in that the total sample represented such high levels of ultimate success, with less than one percent of examiner reports that recommended failure and only one thesis that finally failed (Lovat, Holbrook and Bourke, 2008).

Hence, it was surmised that there may well be a patterned assumption about the PhD report, a veritable genre that determines some of the tone, regardless of the fact that the object of comment (the PhD thesis) is meant to represent the peak of higher education productivity and is marked by overwhelming success rates. Added to this is the quantitative finding that reports were often more opaque in their relationship to a final recommendation than one might have expected. That is, one could not tell easily from the content or tone of a report precisely which recommendation would result. It was these anomalies, among others, that led to the idea that philosophical analysis might have something to offer. Herein, we turned to Habermas's (1972, 1974) 'ways of knowing' epistemology. Via its lens, we attempted to address questions like the following: What seemed to be going on in the minds of examiners about their task? How did examiners see themselves positioned against the thesis and candidate? Were examiners following to some extent an arcane genre of 'the PhD report' regardless of the content and quality of the thesis? How different was this genre from that of undergraduate marking? What kinds of knowledge were examiners assuming and dealing with?

Findings from the philosophical analysis: Habermasian 'ways of knowing'

Habermas's (1972, 1974) 'ways of knowing' thesis suggests there are three types of knowing, each impelled by what he refers to as a 'cognitive interest'. First, there is an interest in technical control which impels 'empirical analytic' knowing, a kind of descriptive or 'facts and figures' knowing. Second, the interest in understanding meanings gives rise to an 'historical hermeneutic' knowing, a kind of interpretive or communicative knowing. Third, there is an interest in being emancipated, a free agent as it were, which issues in a 'critical', or 'self-reflective' form of knowing. Herein, one wants to know that what one thinks one knows is the truth, able to be verified from the widest range of sources, free from bias or partisan interest, including from oneself ; hence, self-knowing is a final crucial step in the business of knowing. Habermas suggests that breaking the bonds of old unhelpful knowing cannot occur without this kind of self-knowing being attained. Critical/self-reflective knowing is therefore the knowing most associated with letting go of old conceptions and forging the new ground of originality. In this regard, the concept of critical/ self-reflective knowing seemed to have relevance for a knowing regime like the doctorate that is alleged to be centrally about its contribution to knowledge and, in that sense, its stretching of old boundaries in engaging with originality and creativity, a move that Habermas would describe broadly as *praxis*, practical action for change (Lovat, 2013).

Of direct relevance to the study is that each of the three ways of knowing implies a different positioning of the teacher against the learner (van Maanen, 1977) or, in this study, the examiner against the candidate. Where empirical/analytic knowing is operative, the examiner is most likely to be the 'expert'. The expert represents and stands as custodian of the body of conventional knowing to which the learner must conform. Where historical/hermeneutic knowing is operative, the examiner and learner are in something more like a 'partnership', communicating about meanings and negotiating about understandings. Herein, the concern is not with right or wrong knowing but with the kind of authentic knowing that results from interpretive understanding. When dealing with knowing of the critical/self-reflective kind, the traditional roles of examiner and learner are potentially reversed, with the learner being acknowledged as the one who is in control of their own knowing, and the role of the examiner being as learner. This has subsequently been titled, for ease of reference, as 'reverse' text, examples of which from report analysis include the following: 'Finally, my congratulations to you for working so capably an entire spectrum of theoretical and applied

research into pedagogical practice. It provided me with a number of new insights and I have learned much,' and 'There are those pleasant occasions when one is asked to review a paper or examine a thesis and you wish that you had written it. I believe that this is one of those experiences.'

The ramifications for the PhD study taken from this are that critical/self-reflective knowing is the kind of knowing that one might expect to be reasonably evident in a learning regime that is purportedly about work we variously describe as 'an original contribution', 'creative', 'innovative', 'breaking new ground' or 'incorporating new understandings', where, in all likelihood, the candidate has gone more deeply into a particular area than either the supervisor or examiners. Granted the over-riding and virtually universal alleged objective of the PhD to impel change, contribute to new insights and therefore somehow stretch the boundaries of our knowledge, logic would suggest that there would be fair evidence of examination text picking this up, at the very least when dealing with theses clearly judged to have been of the best kind.

In search of 'reverse' text

In this light, special attention was paid to those thesis reports that were unanimously rated at the top end of the reports under consideration, with the examiner's apparent positioning against the candidate being the focus (Lovat *et al*, 2004). This constituted about 5 per cent of 2121 reports on 804 theses. In a later study (Lovat *et al*, 2008), 23 of these reports were subject to even more intense analysis. Herein, the coding under 'formative' and 'summative' discussion, emanating from the qualitative analysis, became especially important. In this later study, three researchers read the reports, highlighting textual excerpts that were thought to represent the three Habermasian perspectives. Excerpts selected by at least two of the researchers were selected for further analysis and, finally, agreement that they did indeed match the assumptions connoted by the three perspectives. The result demonstrated that the primary mode of assessment across all theses, regardless of the final result conferred, fell more obviously within the bounds of 'expert' text, with little 'partnership' text and even less 'reverse' text. Greater evidence of reverse text would have served to endorse the logic that good PhDs should be heralded by examiner commentary reflecting critical/ self-reflective knowing, but this evidence was clearly lacking.

Within the 'expert' text were, predictably, high proportions of formative comments, where the examiner was either attempting to teach

the candidate how some aspect of the thesis could have been improved or was being explicit in pointing to some error. In other words, in this study of top-rated theses, regardless of the final judgement about quality, there was nonetheless a pervading theme of deficit that seemed to dominate the reports. It is important to note here that, as noted above, an additional component of Phase Two focussed on a linguistic study of 142 examiner reports, utilizing Martin and White's (2005) appraisal framework. This study uncovered both positive and negative judgements of the students' work, expressions of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the work, along with explicit and implicit judgement of the student in the reports (Starfield *et al*, forthcoming). This finding suggests that the mode of analysis of examiner reports may well influence the way they are perceived.

Nonetheless, in the context of our Phase One study, we were led by the above perception of a pervading deficit to consider the postulation that, in the PhD examination report, we may be dealing with a virtual literary genre, born of assumptions about the nature of the task and its incumbent duties, and built up over time to become a set of expectations attached to an informal yet quietly prescriptive aspect of academic culture (Lovat *et al*, 2008). If this were so, it would suggest that examination reports may largely be constructed according to this genre, with the quality of work under examination being of secondary rather than primary determining power in the formation of examiner text. The case has further been made that, were such a dominant genre in the examination script revelatory of the entire regime of the PhD, the potential was there for routine discouragement and even obstruction of the 'originality' and 'new contribution' factor that is meant to be its over-riding item of assessment (Lovat, 2013; Holbrook, Bourke and Fairbairn, 2015; Clarke and Lunt, 2014). Again, this is working on the assumption, informed by the Habermasian thesis, that a PhD regime replete with boundary stretching and original contributions should be evidenced by an examination genre that is fairly well filled with positive comment and robust self-reflective script. In fact, the evidence arising from examiner-candidate text seemed to show clearly that the dominant way of knowing, and the relationships constructed in the reports, betrayed that a far narrower and more minimalist regime was in place. Furthermore, one cannot help but wonder whether such a regime, if it is indeed the case, could not inhibit its designed pathway effect into further research and/or professional leadership.

Summarising Phase One

This earlier phase of the research therefore left us with a sense that, while

the processes were on the whole robust (Holbrook *et al*, 2008), there were some weaknesses and even potential quality assurance issues in the extant Australian process. These included two that seemed deserving of more attention, both based on the apparent anomalies noted above. First was the fact that, regardless of the positive feature entailed in having independent examiner appraisals, there was no opportunity for their reports to be calibrated through engagement between examiners, leaving a committee (with a range of disciplinary expertise) to negotiate a just result and the raw non-calibrated reports to be conveyed directly to the student. This seemed to entail unsatisfactory elements for both examiners and students. Second was the related fact that the student played no part in the process and so was not able to understand the mindsets of different examiners, address their concerns and/or celebrate closure of the process. This was the case even when the result and reports were positive but even more so when reports contained negativities (even with a positive result) that were not able to be addressed and therefore had potential to leave a student feeling crest-fallen. It was fairly natural that we considered then the possibility that the insertion of a viva might serve to redress both of these concerns. Consequently, in Phase Two, we posed the question: does a viva make a difference?

The Viva and its contribution according to the literature

There is a small but often-cited literature on the Viva (eg Jackson and Tinkler, 2001; Morley, Leonard and David, 2002; Trafford, 2003; Trafford and Leshem, 2008; Kelly, 2010). In broad terms, we found in this literature mixed and indeterminate views about the actual purpose and even usefulness of the Viva, especially as a vital mechanism in the final decision made about the thesis. Trafford's (2003) study of 25 cases found only two examiners reporting that their final recommendation was influenced by the Viva, seeming to confirm Jackson and Tinkler's (2004: 31) claim that 'the Viva is not usually the key site of decision making about the outcome of the examination process.' Morley *et al* (2002), Denicolo (2003) and Grabbe (2003) cast doubt on the centrality of the Viva as constituting a determinative step in final decision-making. Then there are the complications of different processes, for example, 'What about universities that have the tradition to tell students before the oral that they have passed? This suggests that the Viva is an irrelevance and that all that matters is the written thesis' (Grabbe, 2003: 131). Moreover, it is suggested that, in some institutions, the regulations discourage viva performance being given too much weighting in the final decision on the thesis's worthiness (Jackson and Tinkler, 2001). From another perspective, authors note that the Viva performs a celebratory role and

can offer 'a genuinely dialogic occasion' (Carter and Whittaker, 2009: 173). So it may be that the particular value of the Viva is based in something other than it being crucial to the final decision, although we acknowledge that this remains a contentious point and that there remains among many a belief that the Viva is in fact quite determinative in relation to the final result.

Phase Two: examiner reports plus Viva model

In the third project, we sought interviews with examiners in Australia, the UK and New Zealand, with the dual focus being on the individual report and its interface with the Viva. The examiners all had experience of multiple examinations and many had experience with different models of examination, ones with and without the Viva. The 82 interviews were fully transcribed, entered into *QSR NVivo 10,* coded by content to determine further questions and then explored from several angles guided by those questions and the literature. Work with the transcripts essentially followed the tenets of thematic analysis specified by Braun and Clarke (2006).

In addition to 'does the Viva make a difference?', other questions that drove this phase of the study included: Could the inclusion of a Viva bring a level of calibration to the Australian process that seems currently to be lacking? Could it serve to strengthen the assurance of the Australian award? Could we elicit evidence of examiners changing their mind about the worthiness of the thesis as a result of the Viva? Does the Viva offer a level of closure or sense of completeness that is currently lacking in the Australian process? (Lovat, 2014).

Of the 82 examiners, 26 per cent were from Australia, 37 per cent from the UK and 37 per cent from NZ. The sample included a number with experience across systems, be it an experienced Australian examiner who had completed their own doctorate in the UK or NZ, an experienced UK examiner gaining a post in Australia or NZ, or through regular involvement as an examiner in one or other of another country's system. The NZ sample is particularly interesting because NZ has moved steadily in the last few decades from the report-only model to one of including a Viva, although at the same time retaining most of the report-only protocol in the way individual examiner reports are generated and dealt with. It is therefore a true mix of both the typical Australian and UK processes.

In general terms, it seems that examiners see the merits in whichever process they are most experienced. The UK examiners tended to be especially strong advocates for the Viva as an essential component of examination, proffering the view quite commonly that they could not

imagine the process being adequate or complete without one. The Viva provides '… an opportunity to support the student through this process,' one examiner suggested. In spite of this, it was rare for anyone to be able to identify a result that had clearly been significantly changed by the Viva, there being common acknowledgement that reading the thesis and making a judgement on it was invariably the most determinative step in the process. 'The Viva is an opportunity to clarify, to make things better; it should never be seen as an opportunity to catch someone out,' was the view of one examiner.

What is the value-added nature of the Viva?

Quantitative evidence gathered in Phase Two seemed to confirm the view that the Viva rarely if ever rendered a substantially different result from the one reflecting the individual judgements already made, and/or agreed on by the examiner panel beforehand. Table 1 shows that the decisions made by individual examiners translate to the final decision made by the panel at about the same rate in Australia (where there is no Viva) as occurs in both the UK and NZ (where there is a Viva). Were the Viva an essential component in influencing the final decision, it is proffered that this would have manifested itself in this comparative analysis.

Nonetheless, the evidence seemed clear that the Viva was highly regarded by most UK and NZ examiners as an essential element in the process of examination. 'It is an opportunity to get to know the candidate in a way that is different from merely reading the text,' suggested one examiner. So deeply was this view held that, when asked how they would respond to being invited to examine according to the Australian process (ie to read the thesis and write a definitive report with no option of discussion with other examiners or the candidate), many of the UK examiners, in particular, said they would find it difficult, would have to re-think the way they read the thesis and wrote the report: 'I would be writing for a different audience … not the candidate but rather a moderating panel,' was one examiner's response. At least one examiner suggested they would have to decline because they did not feel they could do an adequate job. In terms of closure of the process and the transition to post-doctoral studies or career, UK examiners were by and large adamant that the Viva provided this in a way that could not be filled by any other process. Because the student gets to know more experienced academics in their field, one examiner pointed to the potential for an examiner to support a student in the long term '… writing references for them as they go forward,' for example.

TABLE 1

Comparison of examiner recommendations and committee decisions on thesis for Australia, NZ and UK

Examiner recommendation[1]/ Committee decision	Australia		New Zealand		United Kingdom[2]	
	Examiner %	Committee %	Examiner %	Committee %	Examiner %	Committee %
N	2121	804	300	100	201	100
Accept /Accept with editorial corrections	71	58	66	58	66	51
Accept with major corrections/ amendments	21	37	32	42	28	37
Revise and resubmit for further examination	7	4	3	.	6	11
Fail	1	0	.	.	1	1

1. This is the mean for the two or three examiners who examined each thesis.
2. The numbers are reduced here because only pre-Viva individual examiner recommendations are included and one UK institution did not require examiners to make a preliminary recommendation on the thesis.

There was a minority view put by UK examiners, principally from those who had close experience of both the UK and Australian processes, that the Australian process was superior in some ways, in spite of not including the Viva, the latter nonetheless being acknowledged to be of value. This view proffered that the Viva was no panacea in addressing the weaknesses identified in the Australian process, nor was it an effective shield against some of the worst effects of the increasing doctoral mass industry. This view identified examiner weariness, especially among the most sought-after examiners, the allied greater difficulty of assembling the best panels, and the exacerbation of all this when time and travel entailed in the Viva had to be factored in. This view pointed to an increasing tendency for inadequate reading and reporting to have crept into UK processes as a result of the above pressures. Inadequate reading was denoted by 'reading on the train', 'reading the night before' kinds of comments and was targeted especially at those universities that do not require the examiners' reports to be submitted prior to the Viva.

The main point being made was that sometimes the Viva is over-relied on as the instrument of decision-making because individual reports are not sufficiently definitive and not subject to scrutiny in the same way as the Australian reports. There were also comments made about the Viva not necessarily being a positive experience for a

candidate, even when the result is successful. This can occur when a panel is divided, does not show sufficient understanding of the thesis or when the good of the candidate is not a sufficient priority. Regardless, there was no-one among this minority who was arguing for elimination of the Viva but, rather that it should be positioned as an opportunity for clarification, closure or celebration that sat on top of the rigours of the report-only process of individual examiners providing a definitive report. Data from NZ confirmed this view, NZ seeming to have achieved the best of both regimes, in a sense, with the longer, more substantial independent report being retained but now incorporating a Viva as an extra step, so allowing for calibration between examiners, as well as student engagement and hence an enhanced experience of closure.

In relation to the Habermasian application of positioning the examiner, most UK examiners acknowledged that they functioned for the most part as 'expert', although the Viva offered some opportunities for collegial exchange beyond what was provided by reading at a distance (Clement *et al*, forthcoming). As to why there was little in the way of 'partnership' or 'reverse' text evident anywhere in the process, it was proffered that there was a caution demanded of the average thesis that forbade straying too far into the kind of innovation that might elicit such text from an examiner. According to this view, criteria related to precision, rigour, replication and staying within the bounds of accepted discipline knowledge were said to be the more important imperatives in assuring a successful doctorate. It was common for examiners to acknowledge that, as supervisors, they routinely discouraged a candidate from entering into overly original or speculative territory because of the risk that it could be seen to be at odds with the inherent caution that sits at the heart of doctoral assumptions and expectations. This confirmed the earlier suspicion, noted in Phase One, that doctoral examination might well constitute a genre that is determined by an inherent conservatism in the regime that, in turn, could have potential to overly tame if not mute the traditional claim that the doctorate was centrally about forging originality (Lovat *et al*, 2008). This new evidence not only confirmed this but seemed to suggest that it was not just an issue for the examination phase but that inherent caution and conservatism, with the potential to reduce the potency of the doctorate, could be there at every stage from enrolment to examination.

Australian examiners tended to be content with the way the Australian process worked, believing that by and large it did the necessary job of testing and measuring academic prowess and readiness for further research or professional leadership. In spite of acknowledging some of the weaknesses the study had identified in the

Australian process, no Australian examiner saw the system as being in crisis mode. They were nonetheless a little more interested than UK examiners in exploring other ways, especially the UK and NZ processes, and especially open to inclusion of a Viva as a way of addressing some of the identified weaknesses. Those who had experienced the viva in other places, mainly in the UK and NZ, saw it as beneficial in terms of greater closure but did not believe it made any tangible difference to the judgement that individual examiners brought to the event. Australian examiners also considered that expertise was the main ingredient they brought to the examination process and that 'partnership' and 'reverse' text were rare because they did not capture what the PhD was really about, least of all in an era that had seen it transition from being an elite-only to a more accessible degree program.

Summarising Phase Two

Moderating between the two processes, one is inclined to say that the inclusion of the Viva would probably not make a huge difference to the average Australian result, nor would it impel space for much discourse beyond that connoted by 'expert' text. It could nonetheless offer greater closure and at least a modicum of enhanced opportunity for collegial exchange between examiners and the student, currently absent from the Australian process. This could serve as a *de facto* rite of passage for the student into the world of academe or professional leadership. *Quid pro quo,* it would seem that the processes of at least some UK universities could benefit from the Australian practice of requiring a definitive and publicly scrutinised report to be provided by each examiner.

Putting these two things together for Australia leads us to the view that the substance of the current process of requiring a definitive independent report from each examiner should be retained. At the same time, as is now the case in NZ, it seems that a Viva would have the benefits of: allowing for better communication between the student and the examiners; more nuanced feedback and the opportunity for student response; a stronger chance for more collegial discussion and thereby less likelihood of student deflation; an overall greater sense of closure for the student; and, finally, the opportunity for a stronger measure of ceremonial entry to the academy or profession, something currently lacking among the formalities of the Australian process.

Conclusion

The two phases of the doctoral examination study have identified a range of issues deserving of attention. Peculiar to the Australian process is the lack of a Viva that leaves examiners out of contact with each other

from beginning to end, with a related inopportunity for calibration of the result by those charged with making this determination. Furthermore, the process disallows any communication with the student for clarification, response or celebration. The student has no involvement in the final and most crucial stage of the process with which they have been intimately involved for many years. These features were seen as potential and real weaknesses by the UK examiners who proposed the Viva as a way of addressing all of them. At the same time, while not denying the weaknesses or disavowing the potential benefits of a Viva as an additional component, most Australian examiners saw the weaknesses as strengths, most especially around the need for individual examiners to provide their own definitive report, rather than merely one that feeds into a Viva process. Of particular interest was the minority UK view that the report that merely fed into the Viva process constituted a potential weakness of the UK system, and that the Australian requirement for an individual definitive report represented a strength in terms of quality assurance.

Two things seem clear amidst the debate that is unfolding around the doctoral examination issue. First is that the Australian and UK processes seem to have something to learn from each other, and that an incorporation of the requirement for an individual definitive report from each examiner, with a Viva as an additional and related component, would seem to constitute a process that offers the best form of quality assurance along with a means of closure and/or celebration. In this context, the NZ model would seem to have much to commend it. The second point is that the doctoral examination process, whatever its shape and form, is under pressure from the combination of an increasing mass industry and reduced resourcing. In this respect, it is no different from many other features of contemporary higher education but, for the doctoral regime, a number of examiners reported experiencing how the quality assurance and overall adequacy of doctoral examination have been compromised beyond what is commonly acknowledged.

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