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Examining the Examiners: an analysis of examiners' reports on doctoral theses

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ABSTRACT *Although the process of examining doctoral theses is important both in terms of maintaining standards for this qualification and in terms of its impact on individual candidates, there have been few analyses which have focused on this process. In this article, 51 examiners' reports of doctoral theses are qualitatively analysed for common themes. The analysis demonstrates variations in the format, recommendations and interpretation of recommendations among the reports. The importance which examiners place on the editorial aspects of the theses is also highlighted. The article suggests that examiners approach the task of reading a thesis with needs very similar to readers of any new piece of work. Enthusiasm to be engaged with new ideas in their field quickly dissipates if confronted with work which is not 'reader-friendly'. The article argues the need for more openness in the examination process and for more formal induction of examiners.*

Introduction

The PhD is an important award, recognised internationally to signify high level intellectual endeavours in a specialised field of study. Although there have been periodic debates about the suitability of the PhD as preparation for academic and research careers (*Campus Review*, 1994; Noble, 1994), a doctoral qualification nevertheless remains the expected qualification for many fields. Processes which safeguard the standards of doctoral qualifications are therefore very important. In Australia, studies for the majority of doctoral candidates culminate in the submission of the final thesis to independent examiners who recommend to the university whether the candidate should be awarded a PhD (Aylward & Murphy, 1996). Although procedures vary, examinations of doctoral theses in Australian universities are based more on the British tradition than on the American practice of an oral defence to a panel of examiners which includes academics who have supervised the candidate's preparation of the thesis. The oral examination or viva is not universally used in Australian universities, the process often relying instead on an independent examination of the written thesis.

This examination process is the platform on which the standards of doctoral qualifications rest. For doctoral candidates and their supervisors, the examination process looms as the 'crunch point', the time when a final judgement is made about the worth of several years of intensive effort invested in the conduct and write-up of a major research study. Obviously, the examination process is a very significant aspect of doctoral candidature. Considering its significance, it is surprising that the examination process is so enshrouded in mystery and sometimes even secrecy. Doctoral candidates and supervisors approach the process with much apprehension and often lack an understanding of its intricacies and subtleties. There are few published works which investigate or document the examination

process. Because of strict rules on confidentiality, examiners' reports are seldom open to scrutiny or any form of quality control. Furthermore, examiners are rarely in a position to exchange views about, or debate, the process in which they are engaging. The examination process for doctoral theses seems to be based on assumptions which are largely untested and on understandings which are not necessarily open for discussion. Given the more recent introduction of professional doctorates with their potential for different examination procedures, it is timely to raise a number of issues associated with the processes for examining theses.

In this article, examiners' reports of doctoral theses at one Australian university are analysed to see what can be learned about the examination process. By analysing the examiners' reports, we are able to learn about the criteria used explicitly and implicitly by examiners. Some examiners also share much regarding the process they use to make judgements about the work they are examining. The analysis is aimed at opening up the process of examination in order to help doctoral candidates and supervisors approach the examination in a more informed way. The discussion which follows suggests that the examination process does have some shortcomings and that there is a need for clearer guidelines for examiners and for more open discussion of criteria, examination procedures and assumptions on which examinations are conducted. The analysis also raises some more general issues about the doctoral examination process.

Few researchers have scrutinised the process of examination for doctoral theses. Nightingale (1984) reported on an evaluative study of the examination of research theses at Macquarie University in Australia. Although not citing specific data, that study concluded with suggestions for clearer guidelines and better articulated criteria to assist the examination process. A study by Hansford & Maxwell (1993) focused on a masters degree programme and included a quantitative analysis of records from 125 candidates. This study revealed the frequency with which examiners criticised various aspects of theses. Typographical and spelling errors, literature reviews, writing styles, conclusions and theoretical frameworks were among the categories of criticism most commonly made. Ballard (1996) analysed examiners' reports of successful doctoral theses, and highlighted the assumptions behind decisions which were made by the examiners. This pilot study focused on theses in four disciplines and commented on the examiners' expectations of the candidate and the thesis, examiners' expectations about the level of responsibility of the supervisor and the department in which the candidate undertook the research, examiners' assumptions about which theses were worth an unconditional pass, and the multiple audiences for which examiners' reports are written. Simpkins (1987) studied theses in the field of educational administration in an attempt to understand the way in which examiners assessed critical thinking. The study suggested that examiners in this field were looking for evidence of a style of reasoning which included informed understanding, objectivity, originality, intelligent mastery of objective argument, and knowledgeable handling of discussion processes. In a study which examined supervisory practices across a range of academic departments, Parry & Hayden (1994) noted the ways in which examiners were chosen. Nelson (1991) analysed theses in one research school at one university, commenting on the heavy workload incurred by the examination process and raising issues of the preparation of examiners. He concluded:

Just how examiners come to their individual decisions about what an examiner's report is, and what standard is required of a PhD thesis, is a mystery. They come to the task with little preparation, and after the first two or three theses what they do becomes self-confirming. (p. 24)

Noble (1994) provided an international overview of trends related to doctoral degrees, raising

general problems and making recommendations. Finally, several guides on thesis writing for postgraduate students have outlined procedures for the examination of theses in an effort to help students approach the process in a more informed way (for example, Phillips & Pugh, 1994).

The Study

The context for this study is one of the 'newer' Australian universities, which moved from a college of advanced education to university status in 1991. This transition brought with it the opportunity to offer a doctoral programme which gradually developed in the early 1990s. In September 1996, an analysis was undertaken of all examiners' reports which had been submitted to the university since it first offered a doctoral programme. The aim of the analysis was to highlight any trends and information which could be useful to the university in maintaining and enhancing the quality of its PhD programme. In total, 51 examiners' reports were analysed, covering 16 individual theses. The analysis involved noting the format of each report and then categorising the comments which comprised the report. These categories were used to highlight common themes among the reports. Points made in the discussion of these themes are illustrated by excerpts from the examiners' reports. The excerpts have been slightly modified to ensure anonymity for candidates and examiners. Candidates' names have been replaced by use of the generic term 'candidate' and references to the specific field of study have been omitted.

The examiners' reports analysed include those from five faculties of the university and cover disciplines such as applied science, law, communication, computing, management and education. The doctoral programme at this university is equivalent to 3 years of full-time study and involves the preparation and presentation of a thesis, which is the sole basis on which the doctorate is awarded. The primary supervisor is expected to compile a list of suitable examiners in consultation with the candidate, who may nominate additional names or offer reasons why particular persons should not be considered. The university higher degrees committee then appoints examiners on the advice from the faculty in which the candidate is studying. Normally three examiners are appointed, with at least two of these being external to the university. Supervisors or anyone else who has provided substantial advice to the candidate cannot be nominated as an examiner. The university guidelines indicate that at least one of the external examiners should be an academic with a doctoral degree or a favourable research reputation in the relevant field. In practice, it is unusual if all examiners do not fulfil this criterion.

Written documentation for examiners explains the university requirements for doctoral theses. Examiners may request further information or ask for an oral examination of the candidate, although this opportunity has not yet been taken by any examiners. The written documentation includes a description of the criteria which should be used to judge the thesis. These state that the thesis should:

- make a distinct and significant contribution to knowledge or understanding in the area with which it deals;
- afford evidence of originality shown either by the discovery of new facts or by the exercise of independent critical thinking;
- be satisfactory as regards its literary presentation; and
- contain a substantial amount of material suitable for publication.

In addition to making an overall recommendation, each examiner is asked to provide a written report giving judgements and recommendations. The examiner may ask to remain

anonymous to the candidate. Examiners of doctoral theses from this university have to choose one recommendation from four available. These are as follows.

1. A pass result for the thesis.
2. A pass result for the thesis, provided that corrections and/or additions as specified in my report are carried out to the satisfaction of the University.
3. That the candidate be required to resubmit the thesis for re-examination after revision. The nature of the further study and research needed for the revision is as specified in my report.
4. A fail result for the thesis.

Of the 16 theses examined so far in the programme 13 have been passed for conferral (three after resubmission and re-examination). A further three theses required resubmission after major revision and this additional work has not yet been completed.

Discussion of Results

Format of Reports

The reports analysed showed wide variation in style, length and layout. In length, they ranged from one page to 16 pages, with an average of about three and a half pages. Some provided comments chapter by chapter, whereas others analysed the work in a more holistic way. Most gave an overall, global assessment of the work followed by some more specific comments. A good number of the reports gave very detailed editorial corrections on an almost page-by-page basis. Although the documentation requested examiners not to mark the thesis, some noted their corrections on the manuscript whereas others appended their corrections to the report. Many of the examiners related their global comments to the criteria outlined in the written documentation sent to examiners.

Variation in Examiners' Recommendations

As well as showing diversity in format, the examiners' reports analysed for this article showed some instances of wide variation among recommendations made by different examiners of the one thesis. Two theses had recommendations which ranged from pass to fail, while another thesis had two examiners who recommended a pass with another examiner recommending resubmission and re-examination after major revision. Although the reasons for these inconsistencies were not clear from an analysis of the reports, there was some evidence that they may have related to the possible inappropriate choice of examiners—that is, examiners who were not knowledgeable about or who were not sympathetic to the approach taken in the study. One thesis, for example, had two recommendations which indicated major problems with the thesis. The third recommendation of a pass came from an examiner who commented in the report that s/he had a limited knowledge of some important aspects of the thesis. While the report recommending a fail result stated that 'Statistical analyses are woefully inappropriate and inadequate given the candidate's research aim as stated in the thesis', the examiner suggesting a pass admitted limited knowledge of the statistical side of the study.

The two examiners who recommended a pass of another thesis highly praised the thesis, with one commenting:

It was a delight to encounter a thesis which is of such a high standard in written English. I noticed very few errors or 'typos' to distract my reading.

One of the positive examiners of this thesis made a comment on the interesting way in which the author had approached and presented the literature review:

The candidate approached the review almost as a personal journey, showing how he built upon the knowledge to eventually arrive at an eclectic yet sequenced and coherent picture.

The examiner recommending a major revision commented:

Having struggled with the first 128 pages over three days and evenings, I have finally despaired.

This examiner provided seven pages of detailed criticisms of, and corrections for, this part of the thesis, including a suggestion that it should be structured around 'standard' components, with traditional thesis chapter headings. One cannot help but wonder if this examiner was the 'right' person to comment on what appeared to be a non-traditional approach to writing a thesis.

With respect to the third thesis showing diverse recommendations, one examiner commented:

I enjoyed reading this thesis and have no doubt that it should be passed.

This examiner continued by highlighting the topicality, style and insight in the work. The second examiner of that work stated:

In my opinion, this is a genuine and admirable Doctoral work, well worthy of the degree at any Australian university.

The third examiner, who recommended a fail, provided a six-page report, which mainly attempted to counter specific points made in the argument of the thesis, suggesting almost an ideological incompatibility with the substance of the thesis. This examiner concluded:

While the thesis displays considerable research and thought, I regret to say in my assessment it falls short of the key criteria for a PhD. . . . I do not think that the idea or the way in which it is deployed in this thesis displays sufficient originality or makes a significant enough contribution to the learning to merit the award of a PhD.

It might be possible to read into this examiner's report some evidence of insufficient experience in examining theses to distance himself from any arguments with which he disagreed on a personal level, but which were nevertheless validly argued within the study.

The diversity of recommendations demonstrated by some sets of examiners' reports highlights the importance of the university processes which resolve such differences. The regulations of the university's higher degrees committee set out a clear procedure by which an advisory panel is formed when there is a serious difference of opinion between examiners of a doctoral thesis. The panel comprises the faculty representative on the university higher degrees committee, the primary supervisor, the dean of the faculty and one or two other nominees with expertise in the field. The panel is not required to re-examine the thesis, but rather to base its advice on the material provided by the examiners' reports. The advisory panel may recommend the appointment of an external adjudicator.

What do Examiners' Recommendations Mean?

While the analyses revealed some inconsistencies in the recommendations made on individual theses, a closer analysis of the reports also showed evidence of inconsistent interpretation of

the grading recommendations among different examiners. That is, important inconsistencies in the examiners' reports arose from different ways of interpreting and using the four recommendations available to examiners.

There was evidence of some confusion between the first two recommendations, with suggestions for minor editorial changes sometimes contributing to the second recommendation and at other times being included in the first recommendation of an outright pass grade. Reports which recommended an outright pass contained suggestions for editorial changes and occasionally even suggestions for quite significant substantive changes. Sometimes, a pass recommendation was accompanied by up to a page of editorial suggestions. The result was that, in many cases, there was little difference between some reports which recommended a pass and others which recommended the second category of a pass after changes.

On the other hand, some examiners used the recommendation of a pass subject to amendments for theses with quite major problems, and these reports resembled more closely those which used the third recommendation, requiring resubmission and re-examination. However, there was no guidance within the documentation for examiners which would help them to determine the extent of revision which would be necessary for a recommendation of resubmission and re-examination. One would expect minor revisions of a more editorial nature to be associated with the recommendation of a pass subject to amendments and major revisions to be associated with the recommendation of resubmission and re-examination. Without this distinction, some examiners gave the former recommendation but suggested major revisions and rewriting. Criticisms in reports with this recommendation included the need to develop an underlying theory for the work, insufficient detail about data collection, problems with the presentation of data, and lack of focus. For example, one such report highlighted 'a number of significant flaws in the way the results have been interpreted and conclusions drawn' and another suggested the candidate reconsider 'the theoretical justification for the study'. Another report which made this recommendation suggested a rewrite for the thesis 'because it is below the standard required by the university'. One thesis which had been given the recommendation of a pass subject to amendments was found by the examiner to contain major shortcomings:

The candidate's thesis should, in my opinion, be regarded as a sound draft. The research is comprehensive, but lacks substantive development in relation to several key areas of knowledge. The net result is that the thesis does not meet the criteria for scholarship that are appropriate to doctoral research, though with further development it should most certainly do so.

These comments were not distinguishable from many associated with the recommendation of resubmission and re-examination. It is surprising that these seemingly serious deficiencies were not thought sufficient to warrant resubmission. They certainly do not appear to be comments one would normally associate with a pass. Perhaps reluctance to recommend resubmission arose from a desire not to re-examine the thesis, although there was an option on the proforma for examiners to indicate they were not willing to re-examine the thesis.

Although a failing grade was rare, it appeared to be given when there was little chance that revising the thesis would result in a pass. For example, one report which recommended a fail justified this grade in terms of the difficulty the candidate would have in redeeming the thesis.

Given the data that the candidate has available I very much doubt if anybody could turn the thesis into a passable product. . . . My estimation is that a radical re-write will probably take a year to complete, and that additional data will need to be

collected. . . . I have looked at a way of redeeming this thesis and the data as they currently stand, but without a *very* substantial amount of work I cannot see a way forward that will allow me, in all conscience, to award a pass.

This thesis caused me a great deal of concern and long consideration as to whether the thesis should be classified as fail or enable the candidate to re-work the data. The reason is my doubt that the candidate has an appreciation of the shortcomings of this research or the ability to add a necessary quantitative dimension.

What Do Examiners Look For in a Thesis?

By far the most common type of comment made in the examiners' reports related to the writing and editorial presentation of the theses being examined. Almost without exception, examiners commented on the writing and presentation of the thesis. Positive comments included:

The descriptive section of the thesis is extremely well presented, being concise and remarkably free of spelling, grammatical and typing errors.

The presentation of the thesis is of a very high standard. Attention to layout and accuracy has made it a pleasure to read.

The thesis' literary presentation is also superior.

Overall, the thesis is impeccably presented.

From a literary viewpoint, the work is engaging and well written.

Several of these comments and others suggested almost a sense of relief and pleasure, or even surprise, when a well-presented thesis was encountered:

It [the thesis] is written to a professional standard and is substantially free from spelling or formatting errors and major grammatical weaknesses. For this, I congratulate the candidate.

These positive comments can be contrasted with a range of critical comments which included:

Generally the thesis was very poorly edited and should not have been submitted with so many errors.

There were numerous instances of poor and grammatically incorrect sentences, an unacceptable number of inaccuracies . . .

I lost count of the number of times that singular nouns were referred to in the plural—an irritant that should not have survived proofreading. This added to the overall impression that the work was rushed and not subjected to adequate preliminary review.

However, I do recommend that this thesis is accepted only after minor editing to improve presentation and readability, and to bring the whole work to a professional standard, currently lacking.

Finally, proper proof reading is required. There are word omissions, and words apparently left over from editing. Take care with sentence structure and with clarity

of argument. The standard of literary presentation in the dissertation should be that of the journal and conference papers presented in support. At the moment, it is not.

Poor presentation appeared not to be sufficient grounds to fail a thesis, but it certainly put the examiner under duress and obviously detracted from much of the enjoyment in undertaking the role of examiner. For example, examiners who found errors in presentation often indicated that these had been a source of distraction or irritation:

I found the cumulative effect of these deficiencies distracting.

For my part, I found it very distracting and time-consuming to be continually stopping over things which should have been picked up before submission.

One examiner indicated that errors in referencing could hint at wider problems:

One has to keep in mind that there is often a relationship between the quality of presentation and quality of scientific results.

One examiner suggested that the university might consider using a professional editor for draft theses to overcome these problems.

It was clear that many of these reactions were made by examiners taking a role similar to a reader of any new piece of writing. Examiners require assistance to understand and follow the work, with poor presentation detracting from their enthusiasm for the work and causing extra time to be spent on the examination task. Some examiners criticised theses for not being 'user friendly'. Several commented on the need for the reader to be assisted, through the use of summaries, more logical sequencing, the use of signposts and the removal of excessive repetition:

The first chapter provided an effective advanced organiser for the reader explaining quite clearly the background and purposes of the study.

A better way of summarising the data would have been appreciated.

Re-organisation of the order in which the material is presented would assist the reader follow arguments.

The introductory paragraphs within the literature review are very helpful. I would suggest that a summary paragraph at the end of each section would give the reader an additional sense of priorities and focus and give the reader a what-did-it-all-mean type of understanding.

Responses from the examiner as reader were also evident in comments that some theses were too long, 'unwieldy', lacking in conciseness and focus. One thesis was described as 'benumbingly boring'. Other examiners drew attention to similar shortcomings:

As it stands, the early chapters of the thesis meander along with these repeated analyses doing little to stimulate the interest of the reader.

The notion of an examiner as a reader of a thesis, like a reader of any other piece of writing, may not be obvious to many postgraduate candidates and possibly their supervisors. There is sometimes an assumption that the examiner is an expert in the field and does not have the expectations of a 'normal' reader. It is worth remembering that *all* readers require assistance to understand the work, that they feel distracted and irritated by poorly presented work, and that they appreciate well-written, interesting and logically presented arguments. Examiners seemed to approach the reading of a thesis with an air of expectation and even enthusiasm,

but this was quickly dissipated if the thesis was not 'reader-friendly'. As one examiner explained in the opening passage of the report:

The thesis filled me with expectations of a major contribution to an area of research which has not been well covered by the research community. However . . .

Examiners approached the reading of a thesis with a sense of expectation and curiosity about new work in their field of interest, hoping to find their task rewarding and enjoyable. They willingly (and even gratefully) gave praise when their expectations were met and such enjoyment and stimulation were provided by the thesis:

Thank you for providing me with the opportunity to examine this engaging thesis in an important area. I found the thesis to be carefully conceptualised, well written and to provide a worthwhile contribution to . . .

I enjoyed reading this thesis and have no doubt that it should be passed.

I think my admiration for the candidate's thesis will be evident enough by now. It has scope, intellectual sophistication, and originality appropriate to PhD work, and a real relevance for all of us in this part of the world and I am confident that the other examiners will share my opinion.

I have much pleasure in recommending that this thesis be classified as a pass . . .

This thesis is a landmark publication . . . The candidate is to be congratulated. In a word, her thesis is superb!

Apart from comments relating to presentation of the thesis, there were few themes common to all examiners' reports. It would appear that examiners often had their own idiosyncratic preferences for what they were looking for in a thesis and, of course, they also responded to what they saw as the strengths and weaknesses in individual theses. The messages which came through the positive reports were not surprising. Examiners praised studies which were well designed, were insightful, were well conceptualised, were carried out competently, did what they set out to do, were thoroughly analysed, demonstrated a comprehensive knowledge of the literature and made a significant contribution to the field. Some comments which captured these ideals included:

. . . well conceptualised based on a critically analysed review of literature in the areas.

This is an important study, carefully and thoroughly designed. The strongest response one gets on reading it for the first time is of competent and thorough work.

The aims of this piece of research are achieved resulting in an impressively comprehensive treatment of this particular . . .

Altogether, the candidate presents a thorough scientific study which makes a significant contribution to our understanding of . . .

The problem appears well conceptualised and worthy of in-depth study. From the beginning the author makes the aim of the study clear.

Favourable reports contained phrases and terms related to complexity, originality, critical thinking, scholarly work, significant contribution to a field, novel concepts, innovative ideas and publishable outcomes. Not surprising is the correlation between these comments and the criteria set out by the university. Most of the comments related to the significance of the

contribution to the field, evidence of originality and the quality of the literary presentation. The criterion of suitability for publication was interpreted in different ways by different examiners, with some looking for work that was immediately publishable in its current form, whereas others looked for work with potential for future publication. Some examiners were happy to treat a submitted thesis as a draft which would undergo further revision and include input from the examiner. Most examiners, however, expected a thesis to be a final, polished version of the work.

Standards

Many supervisors and postgraduate students are concerned about how the required standard of a doctoral thesis is determined and applied, or even if there is an implicit standard associated with doctoral theses. The examiners' reports analysed in this article showed evidence that examiners do have some notion in their heads of the required standard for a doctoral thesis.

I am of the opinion that the thesis is unmistakably of pass standard.

In my view, one of the important features that distinguishes a doctoral thesis is the presence of firstly, a theoretical justification and secondly, an explanation of the location of the study in relation to a pre-existing body of theory or knowledge, assuming the existence of such a body.

It would be expected, in a doctoral dissertation, that the final chapters would include generation of novel concepts, frameworks or theory, in addition to delin-eation of policy recommendations.

. . . focuses on a significant topic but lacks the complexity that is basic to originality and critical thinking at the doctoral level.

The approach is innovative and original, and the thesis as a whole gives more than sufficient evidence of the requisite amount of originality for a PhD, as shown by the exercise of independent critical thinking.

In the absence of a scholarly analysis of foundation concepts underlying the research, the thesis cannot be regarded as contributing significantly to the area of knowledge to the extent that is required at the PhD level.

The following comment made in one report highlighted an important distinction between the standard required for the award of a PhD and work which was considered to contain an interesting, thoughtful and informed discussion:

The thesis contains a considerable amount of interesting discussion. I formed the impression that the author was a thoughtful and informed person with a considerable knowledge of the issues under consideration. However I do not think that the thesis as yet meets the standards for the award of a PhD in Australia.

It appeared that one of the yardsticks used to assess a thesis was its standard with respect to publishable work:

These various deficiencies lead the work, in my view, to fall short of the standard I would expect of both a PhD thesis and publishable work.

I think the thesis is good enough to be published as it stands, and I hope that's what happens. I would certainly buy a copy.

The candidate has prepared an excellent thesis and very clearly demonstrated an ability to carry out original research and distil the results into a form which is suitable for publication.

I am happy, therefore, to recommend a pass result. I note that this opinion seems to be in accordance with that of the referees of a number of respected peer review journals, since substantial parts of the work reported in this thesis have already been published.

These comments relate not only to interpretations of the university's set criteria for judging theses but also to more general notions held by examiners about the standards expected of doctoral theses. The fact is that the criteria published by most universities establish similar expectations and it seems that most examiners have relatively clear ideas about the standards required of doctoral theses in their field.

Direct Messages to Supervisors and the University

Although the doctoral examination process is sometimes conceived as assessing the university and supervisor as well as the doctoral candidate, there were few comments within the examiners' reports which were directed specifically towards supervisors and/or the university. As noted previously, one examiner suggested that the university consider using the services of a professional editor to ensure that theses submitted were of a professional standard. There were a number of other comments about poor presentation which conveyed the impression that the thesis had been submitted prematurely or without adequate revision and proof reading, although in only one case was this responsibility directly linked to the supervisor. The following comment raised a question about the supervisor but did moderate any implied criticism by admitting that the circumstances of supervision were unknown to the examiner. That is, examiners are never clear whether shortcomings can be attributed to supervisors or whether the candidate has failed to take advice given by the supervisor:

Given that one of the guidelines for assessing the thesis is that it should be prepared to publication standard, the large number of text and layout problems concerns me. Obviously the author has final responsibility for the thesis as presented, but I am wondering whether greater care in supervision would have picked up some of the issues raised. Of course I have no way of knowing what level of supervision was provided nor whether advice given may have been ignored.

In some cases, examiners offered congratulations to both candidate and supervisor, acknowledging the collaborative nature of the outcome:

The candidate and his supervisor should be congratulated for producing such a study which I believe adds to our understanding of . . .

Both the candidate and the supervisor should be congratulated on the completion of a worthwhile study and for their perseverance over the long years involved.

In this respect, the supervisor can be seen to have an ambiguous role. Documentation associated with the preparation and submission of theses states how the work must clearly be that of the candidate, who must take ultimate responsibility for its quality. However, a supervisor can be cast implicitly or explicitly as negligent if the work is below par, with an

expectation that the supervisor should act as a gatekeeper, preventing work being submitted prematurely or if it has been inadequately checked for quality and rigour. On the other hand, some examiners willingly acknowledge that both supervisor and candidate have worked together in a long-term professional relationship, both making significant contributions to the overall quality of the final product.

Acknowledging the Efforts of Examiners

Any analysis of a number of examiners' reports cannot fail to bring admiration for the time that many examiners commit to reading the theses and preparing their reports. Some reports were long (one being 16 pages in length) and many provided very detailed comments, questions, suggestions and corrections on an almost page-by-page basis. Some examiners even acted as editors of the work, meticulously noting every error and inconsistency:

I read the dissertation many times before completing my report.

There was also evidence that a great deal of consideration was given to the tenor of the report provided, particularly when the report was largely negative:

I am aware of the distress a report like the one I have provided is likely to cause the candidate. It has already caused me to lose a considerable amount of sleep. Please be assured I have not made my recommendation lightly.

There was evidence that the majority of examiners took their role very seriously and did not make their judgements lightly. They seemed to be aware that a doctoral thesis was the result of years of work by a candidate and that the examiner held a powerful position in judging the worth of that work. Criticisms were sometimes prefaced by a reminder that they should not be interpreted as detracting in any major way from the overall worth and quality of the study. This suggests that examiners weigh up the value of the thesis in a global way and then set about making more minor comments and suggestions on the detail. Examiners appear to be reluctant to fail a thesis or even suggest resubmission, perhaps considering the impact this is likely to have on the candidate or perhaps considering the amount of time and effort which has already been devoted to preparing the thesis.

Conclusions

The analysis of examiners' reports in this article highlights two types of comment made by examiners. One type of comment is directed at the intellectual endeavours reported in the thesis, including judgements which focus on significance of the study, contribution to the field, rigour of the research design, originality and scholarship conveyed by the work. Such comments are of vital importance in the appraisal of the thesis as a research study. The second type of comment is directed at the communication aspects of the thesis. Such comments relate to the literary presentation, the level of interest for the reader and even the accuracy of editing and proof-reading. The analysis in this paper supports findings by Hansford & Maxwell (1993) that comments about communication aspects of the thesis can dominate examiners' reports, particularly when there are shortcomings in this area. Although generally insufficient to fail a thesis, shortcomings in literary presentation (particularly the technical aspects of presentation such as editing and clarity) can be a strong deterrent to an examiner and result in a largely negative appraisal. Examiners quickly become annoyed and distracted by spelling, typographical, grammatical and referencing errors. There is a need for supervisors and doctoral candidates to appreciate that the examiner is a reader, like any other

reader, who requires assistance to navigate through this extensive piece of writing and who wishes to become engaged with the work.

Unlike assumptions that examiners are first and foremost experts in the field who will judge work accordingly, the examiners' reports analysed in this paper suggest that the examiner approaches the reading of a thesis just like a reader of any new piece of writing. Examiners require all of the normal forms of assistance which should be provided to any reader. They appreciate work which is logically presented, focused, succinct, summarised and in which signposts are used to help readers to understand the path they are taking through the work. Reese (1996) has highlighted how a doctoral thesis makes considerable writing demands on candidates because of the originality of the work being reported. In a way qualitatively different from previous writing tasks, candidates are writing for an audience which is not already familiar with the content:

When original material has to be explained and put in context, a premium should be put on clarity rather than, as too frequently, on obfuscation masquerading as profundity. (p. iv)

One of the problems with work that is poorly presented is that the examiner tends to lose confidence in the candidate and can become suspicious that there are deeper problems of inadequate and rushed conceptualisation.

In contrast to commonly held perceptions, there is evidence that most examiners do not initially set out to find fault in the work. Several of the reports contained comments which suggested that examiners approach the task of reading a thesis in their field of interest with a sense of expectation and curiosity, hopeful of being stimulated by exciting new developments. They appear to be only too willing to give due acknowledgement when these expectations are met. Perhaps there is a need for candidates and supervisors to be more considerate of the examiner and to keep in their minds that they are preparing some writing for a person who is undertaking a difficult, time-consuming task for which there are few rewards. One of the rewards which examiners seek is to read about some new ideas in their field and for those ideas to be conveyed in engaging and accurate ways.

This 'behind the scenes' look at the reports by examiners of doctoral theses at one university also highlights the inconsistencies and shortcomings associated with the process. Like all assessment of written work, the examination process has a significant element of subjectivity. Although more clearly written guidelines for examiners which specify the required format of the report, criteria by which the work should be judged and explanations of the categories of recommendations to be made might minimise the observed inconsistencies, such guidelines are unlikely to provide a watertight system. There are many parallels between the findings in this study and analyses of examination processes in undergraduate courses (e.g. Warren Piper, 1994; Warren Piper *et al.*, 1996). It is likely that much can be learned by exploiting these parallels and transferring to thesis examinations some of the quality assurance procedures already commonplace in the assessment of undergraduate coursework.

Examiners will no doubt continue to approach the process with some preconceived notion of the required standard of a PhD thesis and some idiosyncratic expectations of the way in which the study should be reported. If the PhD is considered to be the entry level qualification to the academy, then it is likely that many examiners consider themselves, either consciously or subconsciously, as the gatekeepers to that academy. There is a strong possibility that, as with gatekeepers to any community, examiners are most likely to pass theses which fit with their own ideologies. In this respect, the examination process for doctoral theses could be seen as conservative, with examiners tending to provide the

smoothest transition to those research studies and approaches most like their own. This conservatism has been reported as one of the shortcomings of the peer review process associated with research funding (Poole, 1993). Since the examination process is rarely discussed and not open to scrutiny to the extent that many other academic processes are, there is little opportunity to challenge this potential conservatism. Examiners of doctoral theses do not undergo formal preparation for their role and must rely on their own experience of being examined to guide their approach. There is a need for the examination process to be opened up and for various means of preparing examiners to be formulated and implemented.

Examiners are usually chosen through some combination of personal and professional acquaintance with the supervisor or through a reputation in the field of study of the candidate. Although some leaders in a field may be asked to examine a number of theses over the years, it is unlikely that they have been through any formal process of preparation for this role. It is likely that many examiners base their standards and procedures on how their own work has been examined by others, firstly as a candidate and then as a supervisor. Few academics, other than the very small number on committees which review examiners' reports, are in a position to read large numbers of such reports. It is therefore not surprising to find inconsistencies and variations in examiners' reports. These inconsistencies relate to the expectations, standards and criteria used to assess theses, to the interpretation of recommendations made and to the format in which the examiners' reports are written and presented.

The inconsistencies in approaches of examiners and the variability of the format and substance of examiners' reports highlight the important role which is played by the university committee which receives reports from examiners and determines the action to be taken for each candidate. In some instances, this committee is faced with divergent recommendations from different examiners. Even when overall recommendations are similar, the analysis in this paper suggests that divergent opinions about the value of the thesis might still exist. It is important for these committees to go beyond an acceptance of overall recommendations and scrutinise the nature of the evaluative comments made by examiners. There is a need to weigh up global comments against what can sometimes be numerous but far less significant negative comments or suggestions for improvement. Hidden within the text of examiners' reports are many clues about the value which the examiner has placed on the thesis. These clues must be recognised and interpreted.

Discussions about the doctoral examination process might even lead to some questioning of the purpose of the examination process. Is there an argument that once a thesis has passed, the comments made by the examiners become irrelevant? Is it the case that once someone has a doctoral qualification, the quality of the thesis is not important? Certainly, when a thesis has been accepted, the very detailed comments made by examiners of the thesis often do not play any significant, ongoing role. Such questions may lead to a portrayal of the examination process for doctoral theses as one which safeguards the minimum standard of theses without necessarily distinguishing quality beyond this minimum standard. This notion calls into question the need for elaborate and time-consuming examination procedures for doctoral theses and suggests that some simpler process for ascertaining whether the thesis reaches a minimum standard might be sufficient.

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