

EXAMINER COMMENT ON THESES THAT HAVE BEEN REVISED AND RESUBMITTED

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Introduction

Since the 1980s there has been a growing interest in the 'visibility' of doctoral processes, particularly with respect to supervision, but more recently with respect to examination. Questions are being asked that encompass a range of issues from examiner selection through to the rigour and credibility of assessment procedures. Many commentators have pointed out that doctoral examination, and doctoral study generally, is an exceedingly complex phenomenon that has yet to be subject of sustained and systematic research.

How students achieve success, the role supervisors play in getting a candidate's thesis to submission stage, or through an oral defence, and what constitutes quality in postgraduate research are all areas that are receiving attention in the field of research training in higher education.

There are only a handful of empirical studies addressing doctoral examination in the literature. As Morely, Leonard and David (2002) have pointed out studies of the assessment process and its consistency tend to be rare because access to examination documentation is difficult. In addition many institutions do not call for extensive documentation of process. Tinkler & Jackson (2000, 2001) investigated examination procedures and student and staff responses to examination in the UK. They obtained documentation from 20 universities (based on a stratified sample of old and new universities) and drew on questionnaire responses from some 100 examiners and candidates from two of the 'old' institutions. In Australia, Kiley & Mullins (2002) collected data from a small number of institutions and 30 examiners. Johnston (1997) collected 51 examiner reports from one institution across five faculties over several years. Pitkethly & Prosser (1995) utilised the reports of 74 thesis candidates at one institution. There were some common threads in the findings including general agreement among examiners and institutions about the core principles involved, namely that the thesis demonstrate originality and make a contribution. Evidence from a comparative cross-national survey by Kouptsov (1994) further bears this out.

In their study involving interviews with experienced Australian examiners, Kiley & Mullins (2002) noted that examiners appeared very clear in the distinctions they made between poor, acceptable and outstanding theses, but they also detected that examiners went into

the process anticipating that students would pass. It would seem that those who examine are inherently interested in doing so and approach the task in a positive light (Johnston 1997, Tinkler & Jackson 2001, Kiley & Mullins 2002). However, a poorly written thesis generally had a negative effect on the examiner (Johnston 1997, Kiley & Mullins 2002). A panel of 67 scholars from the USA, UK, Australia and Canada identified writing quality as one of the most problematic issues about PhD study (Noble 1994). Most researchers in the field have pointed out that editorial errors and presentation issues attract a substantial proportion of examiner comment.

Institutions tend to differ in the guidelines they provide for examiners. Tinkler & Jackson (2000, 2001) identified considerable procedural variation in examination across English universities, as well as vagueness in terms used. On the basis of content analysis of reports, Johnston (1997) found examiners tended to follow university guidelines or recommendations about how to report on a thesis, whereas Kiley & Mullins (2002) reported the opposite on the basis of interview data. They found examiners had established their own criteria, and noted but did not use guidelines.

Background

This report is one in a series on a project investigating doctoral examination through the use of examiner reports and candidate information (Holbrook, Bourke, Farley & Carmichael 2001, Bourke & Holbrook 2001, Holbrook, Bourke, Lovat & Monfries 2001, Holbrook, Lovat & Monfries 2001, Holbrook 2001, Bourke, Scevak & Cantwell 2001, Lovat, Holbrook & Hazel 2001, Anderson 2002, Bourke 2002, Holbrook & Bourke 2002, Holbrook 2002, Lovat 2002, Holbrook, Bourke & Lovat 2002). The project is being undertaken by a team of investigators located in the Centre for the Study of Research Training and Impact (SORTI) at the University of Newcastle. It is in the process of drawing on data from multiple institutions Australia-wide. The results reported here are based on the findings from the first completed institutional case study - a regional university in the second band of research quantum. The data was collected late in 2000 and drew on the examination of the 101 most recently completed candidates across eight broad fields of study.

This paper focuses on what examiners write in reports on theses that are returned to the candidate for major revision and resubmission. It compares examiner comment on six PhD theses, with particular emphasis on the nature of the initial examiner comment and then comment after resubmission. It also compares examiner comment on the six resubmissions with comment on a further 95 theses from the same institution for which resubmission was not required. It is very unusual for a candidate who submits a thesis to fail outright. It is also rare for an examiner not to want to secure some changes to the final product. The obvious question is why on both counts. The questions that guide the analysis extend beyond a comparison of comment pre and post resubmission, to the nature of the process and expectations about doctoral study and thesis quality.

Examination procedures vary across Australia. In the institution reported here three examiners are appointed for each thesis. Each examiner is required to recommend a rating and provide a written report. Examiners are given very broad guidelines, no template, and are asked to consider the originality of and contribution of the thesis. The final decision on the thesis is made by a committee representative of all the broad fields of study. It bases its decisions on both the ratings and reports. Of the 101 candidates, six were required to undertake a major revision and to be submitted for re-examination (hereafter cases A-F see Table 2). In only one case had an examiner recommended a fail. The spread of the recommendations before and after resubmission is detailed below.

Approach

The methodology of the project and its evolution have been described in full elsewhere (Holbrook, Bourke, Farley & Carmichael 2001, Holbrook & Bourke 2002, Holbrook 2002, Bourke 2002, Lovat 2002, Anderson 2002). The research questions guiding the larger project are grouped with an emphasis on examination process and outcome but also extend to what we can learn from process and outcome about the skills and knowledge required at PhD level.

To obtain a direct a grasp as possible of examiner consistency, thesis qualities, examiner execution of role and application of standards, the methodology had to go beyond straightforward content analysis. A mixed method study with three dimensions was called for to allow the team to draw as much as possible from multiple data sources (e.g. 3 reports per thesis of some three and a half pages in length and a large number of different student variables), and to provide a firm superstructure for validation, theory building and testing.

The intention has been to gather multiple case data with a core of replicable analyses. Each institutional case requires, in pre-coded form, the doctoral candidate enrolment and supervision history on record for 100 of the most recent doctoral completions representing all broad fields of study. Content and other text analyses utilise N5 software. Content analysis data (by category in proportion of total text units) is tabulated and merged with candidature and other data using SPSS.

Dimension I in the study focuses primarily on the quantitative information, initially obtained from university records, and subsequently from the quantifiable elements of the text in the examiner reports (core coding categories). Dimension II is primarily about the features and attributes of the reports. The reports are subjected to text analyses that identify core content and explore patterns, emphases, discursive and other communicative qualities. Dimension III moves further into the symbolic realm and the deconstruction of the reports. The culture and language of the doctorate, what it is to become accepted as 'Doctor', and the disciplinary 'knowing' that this assumes, contribute layers to the examination process and text that extend from clearly articulated expectation to assumption and myth. This is represented in Figure 1.

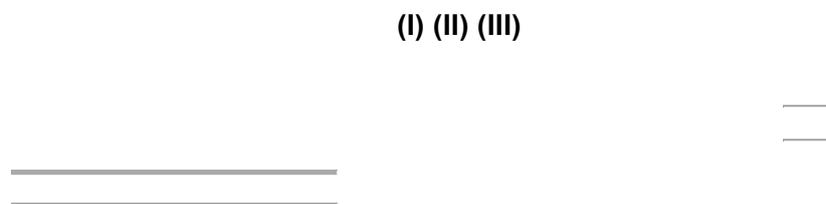


Figure 1

Prior to the analysis undertaken in this paper the team's focus was the initial examiner reports. All the reports including the resubmissions had been coded together, but this paper marks the first time we have separated out and compared the core text analysis for the initial reports with the text analysis of the resubmission reports, and then compared the resubmission group with the total. On the basis of the findings from the statistical analysis

reported below, we went back to the text to see what else would emerge from closer inspection of the way in which the examiners presented their comments, their 'turns of phrase' and a finer-grained analysis of their main issues with the thesis prior to and after re-submission (the top level of arrows moving from I to III in Figure 1 above).

The statistical analysis is based on the core text analysis. The core analysis is repeatable across institutions. Examiner comment about the thesis falls into three core groupings:

- comment that is about the examiner and the process of examining,
- comment about the detail of the thesis, and
- comment that is evaluative.

Selected detail about the coding categories (or nodes) falling within these core groups is provided in Table 1. There is considerable overlap between the last two groupings. In our core analysis we also have a category that identifies a mixed bag of information about the way in which the examiner makes their comments, for example sentences that contain the use of 'I and me', or text that demonstrates close engagement with the subject matter. Space dictates that we cannot provide extensive detail on all these categories or the results of the examination of the total candidate group, these findings have been reported at length elsewhere.

In addition to listing selected coding categories, Table 1 shows the proportion of initial examination reports that include at least one mention of each of these categories. For example, the scope of the project is mentioned at least once in 45 per cent of the initial reports.

Table1: Categories of comment and their frequency of occurrence in the initial reports (N=303)

Selected Category of comment (& node designation)	In % reports
Detail about the subject matter & its treatment	
Scope (3 1 1*)	45
Significance/Contribution (3 1 2)	69
Publications arising (3 1 3)	27
Publications existing (3 1 4)	11
Literature - coverage (3 2 1)	53
Literature -error &/or inaccuracy (3 2 2)	23
Literature - utilisation (3 2 3)	24
Approach (method & methodology) (3 3)	60
Analysis & reporting (3 4 1)	89

Topic related issues raised by the examiner (3 4 2)	44
Substantial issues of communicative competence (3 5 1)	73
Editorial comments (3 5 2)	50
Evaluative Comment	
Positive summative comment (5 1 1)	80
Neutral summative comment (5 1 2)	52
Negative summative comment (5 1 3)	16
Formative instruction (5 2)	68
Instructional commentary(5 3 1)	56
Prescription (5 3 2)	56
Other judgement (5 4)	88
Resubmission/plagiarism (5 10 2)	2
Comment about the examiner and the process	
Providing personal & professional context (2 1)	59
Noting specific or anticipated criteria for examining (2 2)	71
Noting the 'model' or 'best type' thesis (2 3)	8
Mentioning supervisor of 'team' (2 4)	16

* The coding has a numeric designation as well as a label. N5 facilitates hierarchical coding to nodes. There are some further 'layers' of coding and categories not reported here.

Examiner recommendation

The university involved in this study requires that three independent examiners be asked to provide written reports and a recommendation on each thesis submitted for examination. Five possible categories of recommendation are offered to the examiners by this particular university:

Category 1: Accept the thesis without amendment,

Category 2: Accept the thesis but invite the candidate to make minor corrections, Category 3: Accept the thesis only after specified corrections have been made, Category 4: Require the candidate to revise and resubmit the thesis for further examination, and

Category 5: Fail, without the opportunity for revision.

The University's Research Higher Degree Committee then considers the examiner recommendations and reports and makes its decision, which is one of the five possibilities offered to the examiners. See the far right hand column in Table 2.

Candidate characteristics

Of the 101 PhD candidates six were required by the University's Committee to revise and resubmit their thesis for further examination. No candidate was failed, and the other 95 candidates may or may not have been required to revise their thesis, but were not required to resubmit the thesis to be re-examined. Some candidate characteristics and the examiner recommendations on these six theses are summarized in Table 2. Age was that recorded at the beginning of candidature, total time was measured as the equivalent of full-time candidature, and full-time percentage indicated the mix of full-time and part-time candidature. None of these six candidates took leave from their studies during candidature.

With a mean age of 46 years, this group was significantly older on commencing their degree than the other 95 candidates who were not required to resubmit their theses (33 years). Although two candidates had been enrolled for much more than the 'normal' period of candidature, one had been enrolled for less. The mean period of candidature for the resubmission group (4 years) was not significantly different from that for the others (3.7 years). In terms of type of enrolment, this group had more part-time candidacy (43% full time) than the others (67% full time).

With respect to these six theses, 15 of the 18 re-examinations were undertaken by the same examiner who had initially examined the thesis. Of these 15 examiners, 12 made a more favourable recommendation when re-examining the thesis, one made the same recommendation (to accept the thesis without amendment), and two made less favourable recommendations (in one case moving from initially requiring resubmission to subsequently failing the thesis). As one thesis resubmission per candidate is permitted by this university, any examiner who was still dissatisfied with a resubmitted thesis had only the option of recommending that it be failed.

Table 2: Basic descriptive information on six candidates required to resubmit their theses for re-examination, individual examiner recommendations and final committee decision

BROAD FIELD OF STUDY	GENDER & AGE	TIME: Total & Full-time %	RECOMM. EXAM à RE-EXAM			FINALDECISION
			Examr.1	Examr.2	Examr.3	
Case A Arts & SS	M, 39 yrs	7 yrs, 31%	4 à 1	2 à 1	4 à 5	2
Case B Arts & SS	M, 38 yrs	9 yrs, 0%	4 à 2	3 à 1	4 à 1	2

Case C Arts & SS	F, 53 yrs	7 yrs, 87%	5 à 1 ¹	4 à 1	3 à 2	2
Case D Education	F, 41 yrs	2 yrs ² , 67%	2 à 1	4 à 2 ¹	5 à 1 ¹	2
Case E Health	F, 57 yrs	4 yrs, 17%	4 à 3	4 à 2	1 à 3	3
Case F Science	M, 45 yrs	4 yrs, 56%	1 à 1	4 à 1	4 à 3	2
MEANS	46 yrs	4 yrs, 43%				

Notes

1. In each of these three cases the re-examination was done by a different examiner, after the initial examiner declined to re-examine the thesis.
2. Enrolment time at this University - presumably had a previous enrolment elsewhere.

Examiner comment: a comparison of the initial and re-examination reports on resubmitted theses.

As might be expected, re-examination reports were far shorter than initial reports, and this difference was also statistically significant. In some cases a re-examination report referred back briefly to comments in the initial report (see Table 3).

When the examiner reports are coded (the pre-standardised) lines of text (text units) are coded at categories (nodes). The core coding categories account for 100% of the text in each examiner report, i.e all report text is coded at one or more of the nodes. This allows for a direct comparison of coded comment as a percentage of total text units. So, one can ask, did examiners comment proportionately more of one type of thing in the initial examination reports than in the reports on a resubmitted thesis?

The analysis shown in Table 3 compares the proportions of text allocated to each node in the initial reports (n = 18) and the re-examination reports (n=18).

There were statistically significant differences (at the p<0.10 significance level) in the proportions for four nodes. In each case there were higher proportions of the aforementioned nodes in the re-examination reports than found in the initial reports.

Table 3: Comparison of percentage differences between initial examination and re-examination

NODE ¹	INITIAL EXAMINATION	RE-EXAMINATION
	Mean% (SD)	Mean% (SD)
Publications arising (3 1 3)	0.62 (1.80)	4.10 (8.29)
Use of first person (4 3)	17.9 (13.8)	32.1 (22.4)
Neutral summative comment (5 1 2)	2.07 (2.27)	5.84 (6.44)
Other Judgement (5 4)	5.68 (6.93)	13.4 (13.9)
All evaluative comment (5 1 to 5 4)	82.0 (21.8)	66.4 (31.5)
Length of reports (number of text units)	165 (137)	85.8 (113)

Note

1. In this and subsequent tables, it was noted that most of the distributions for the codes were positively skewed. However, when distributions were normalized, only minor variations in means were observed, and significances were not altered substantively. Means for the raw data are reported in these tables.

One is the node '*publications arising*' (3 1 3). Text in this node captures examiner remarks about possible publication from the thesis. Examiners commented more on the publications that might arise from the thesis in their re-examination report. This stands to reason given that the initial presence of major flaws in a thesis would distract examiners from the potential for publication. It needs to be borne in mind that the numbers are small. Mention of publications arising occurred in only six of the re-examination reports compared to three in the initial reports. But in the latter all three examiners were not the ones to require major revision either. It appears from these findings that a thesis judged to meet the standards set by examiners was also deemed ready for dissemination to a wider audience.

Two nodes falling under the broad category 'evaluative comment' were also more prominent in the re-examination reports. In most thesis reports examiners provide at least one tight summative comment that captures the primary elements of their judgement on the thesis in whole or major part. Such comments might be wholly positive or wholly negative. In the re-examination reports there is more of the node '*summative -neutral*'. This type of comment is neither wholly positive nor negative but often neatly straddles the fence. It can also be described as a category of qualified judgement, e.g. 'the revised version of the thesis is considerably improved over the original submission...However, there are a number of modifications to the thesis that I consider should be made before it is accepted'. One can hypothesise that in a re-examination situation examiners are more likely to comment in ways that reflect the fact that the thesis was flawed originally. Also unless a student re-writes and re-designs the whole thesis, which is rare, it is highly unlikely that quality will be so improved

as to win unreserved positive evaluation. The straddling the fence phenomenon reflects the history of the thesis

The other evaluative category that was more evident in the re-examination is '*other judgement*'. This node captures evaluative comment that is not summative, nor contains any element of instruction, so these statements tend to cover a lot of ground. '*Other judgement*' is a catch-all node for stand-alone comments with an evaluative element. They can be emotive and may range from emphatic to casual. Examples are: 'congratulations to the candidate on this thesis', 'I am satisfied that the candidate has mastered the essential aspects of research and writing at this level'. The examiner seeks to convey an impression but not in a way that engages with the thesis subject matter very closely or in detail. Comments such as these tend to occur early or at the end of the report, like a 'trimming' or garnish to the main fare. Sometimes the impression is conveyed that they are used to mediate or soften the impact of a critical, or densely technical, body of comment.

Another difference between the initial and the re-examination reports is evident in the *dialogic elements* - the manner of the examiner presentation. In this instance there is significantly more use of the first person in the re-examination reports. One might venture that the examiner is relaxing into a more collegial role - sharing rather than dictating information. The use of first person in the initial reports was typically linked with comment that demonstrated dissatisfaction, frustration or disappointment: 'I do not believe that the defects could be remedied within a one-year period', 'I believe that this argument is unsuccessful', 'it is unclear to me...', 'I am unsure what to make of the argument I have reservations, I would like to have seen more critical discussion'. The use of first person delivers emphasis. By contrast the comments in the re-examination, while still containing comment that was negative in tone, also contained a substantially increased proportion of first person statements that were positive and supportive: 'I find these sections quite informative', 'I congratulate X on his production of a convincing and important contribution...', 'I found this chapter to be highly original and thought provoking. They were also linked to compromise or concession, of the 'I still have concerns in one or two areas', variety. The coding category '*summative-neutral*' also captured the text that reflected this type of 'qualified' judgement

When all the evaluation categories (Nodes 5 1 through to 5 4) were summed it was found that the initial examination reports included a significantly greater proportion of evaluative comment than the re-examination reports. This indicates that evaluation nodes other than neutral comment and other judgements, although not significantly different when taken singly, were significantly different collectively. The most common evaluative category, formative evaluation (node 5 2), particularly exhibited this difference constituting 39.1 per cent of initial report content compared with 22.5 per cent of re-examination reports. Because there was wide variation in these proportions for each examination, they were not statistically significantly different ($p=.0.105$).

A comparison of the initial reports on resubmitted theses and reports on theses not requiring re-examination

For the initial examination, the proportions of text coded at the core coding categories (nodes) were compared between the 6 theses (18 examiner reports) that were required to be re-examined and the other 95 theses (285 examiner reports) that were not re-examined. The mean proportions of text coded to nodes in reports that were found to differ significantly are shown in Table 4.

In reports on theses that did not require re-examination the 'scope' of the thesis figured more prominently than in those that required resubmission. Scope statements are the type of

statements that tend to elaborate on the ground covered by the thesis and are usually adjacent to statements on '*significance*'.

For those theses to be resubmitted proportionally more was written about the extent to which the literature in the field was covered, while compared to those not re-examined less was written about the use of the literature (i.e how the candidate extracts and applies the knowledge gained from the literature). An examination of the text relating to these coding categories in theses which required resubmission revealed that the most common criticisms in regard to the literature coverage were that important literature had been omitted, the literature employed was not current, or the research questions were not grounded in the literature.

Table 4: Proportions of initial examination report text codes that differed between theses requiring re-examination (N=18) and theses not requiring re-examination (N=285)

NODE	RE-EXAM REQUIRED Mean% (SD)	RE-EXAM NOT REQUIRED Mean% (SD)
Thesis scope (3 1 1)	0.75 (1.26)	3.59 (8.16)
Literature coverage (3 2 1)	7.77 (10.9)	3.78 (8.02)
Literature use/theory (3 2 3)	0.49 (1.04)	1.81 (4.15)
Topic related issues (3 4 2)	21.6 (20.4)	9.66 (17.3)
Positive summative comment (5 1 1)	3.16 (3.94)	9.70 (13.5)
Instructional commentary (5 3 1)	20.4 (22.7)	8.51 (12.7)
Other judgement (5 4)	5.68 (6.93)	14.8 (17.3)
Length of report (text units)	165 (137)	111 (114)

Discussion of *topic related issues* comprised 22% of the total report for the theses which required re-examination, more than double the proportion that was devoted to these issues in the theses which did not require re-examination. Typically, the examiners spent a considerable amount of time either questioning or contradicting the candidates' assertions, or providing detailed information about the topics being discussed. Often the topic related sections were several paragraphs and sometimes several pages long. The examiners appeared to adopt a 'teaching' (or expert) role in these lengthy monologues in which they endeavoured to 'enlighten' the candidate or expand the candidates' knowledge and

understanding of particular issues. Candidates were often directed to read more widely or to read specific literature, even basic beginner literature:

A serious reading of this basic text (often used in undergraduate courses) would have forestalled quite a few misunderstandings.

With respect to evaluative comment, proportionally more *'instructional commentary'* was written on theses that were subsequently re-examined, and there was proportionally less *'positive summative'* comment and *other judgement* on these same theses.

The theses which required re-examination contained more than double the proportion of instructive comment (20%), compared to the theses which passed (9%). Instructive comment refers to statements by the examiners which suggest that the thesis could or should be better. Instructive comments were generally directed at perceived problems in the methodology, results or conclusions sections of the theses. Common methodological problems identified by the examiners included methods which were poorly explained, not justified, inadequately thought through, inappropriately applied or fundamentally flawed. In regard to results, examiners expressed dissatisfaction when results were overstated, misreported or misinterpreted or when there was insufficient information provided:

there are a number of areas where the work could be significantly improved, and there are some areas where the author seems to have over-interpreted the data to an extent that requires revision.

Conclusions were criticised if they were not explicitly related to the research questions or to the 'real world', were not adequately discussed or if the strengths and limitations of the study were not acknowledged or explained: 'Many emotive statements are made with little or no academic support'.

Lack of originality was also cited as a major obstacle. In one instance 'originality' was cited as the required standard:

The thesis is a well-constructed body of substantial work but it has to meet the criterion in the Schedule of "original and significant contribution" for a degree at this level.

Issues of originality are raised later in this paper.

There was significantly less positive summative comment and 'other judgement' in the theses requiring re-examination. This is not completely surprising as these comments typically reflect an overall satisfaction with the worth of a thesis.

As also shown in Table 4, reports on theses requiring re-examination were significantly longer than other reports. There may be two reasons for this finding. It may be that examiners felt a need to write more in justification of a harsh report than a favourable report. Alternatively, as discussed above, more lengthy reports for the theses requiring re-examination may have been due to the extra instruction that examiners included for candidates who they felt needed more guidance in the conduct of their study. The correlation between the rating given to a thesis on the five-point scale and the length of the written report was 0.480 ($p=.0.044$) for the 18 initial reports on re-examined theses, and was 0.412 ($p<0.001$) for the other 285 reports.

Differences in reports of examiners recommending change and those not requiring change

For the six theses that were re-examined, there were, of course, a total of 36 examiner reports. Of these, 32 reports required revisions to the thesis and four did not. When the text coded at the core nodes of these two groups of reports were compared, the proportions of only two were statistically significantly different, those that captured the use of the literature and evaluative comment of a 'prescriptive' instructional type. (see Table 5).

Table 5: Differences in proportions of text codes of re-examined theses in reports of examiners requiring revision (N=32) and examiners not requiring revision (N=4)

NODE	REVISION REQUIRED	REVISION NOT REQUIRED
	Mean% (SD)	Mean% (SD)
Literature use/theory (3 2 3)	0.63 (5.25)	0 (0)
Prescription (5 3 2)	7.04 (12.7)	0 (0)
Length of report (text units)	134 (135)	53.5 (18.1)

Only examiners who required theses to be revised included any of these two nodes in their reports at all. This suggests that comments on the use of the literature were not made unless revision of these theses was required, e.g., 'The discussion is very unsatisfactory and devoid of reference to the literature'. Prescriptive comments direct candidates to fix certain aspects of the thesis. Generally, there is no discussion or negotiation about these directives which are issued as a command rather than a suggestion, for example, 'The Latin translations.... need to be the candidate's own and they must be correct'. Clearly, the four examiners who judged the theses to be already at an acceptable standard did not indicate that there was any need for such action to be taken. But care must be taken to point out that they may have identified such weaknesses, but did not consider they warranted mention.

When the lengths of examiner reports were compared for the two groups, the examiners requiring revision of the thesis wrote significantly longer reports than the examiners who did not require revision. As discussed above this may have been due to examiners justifying their request for re-submission or to the extra instruction the examiners provided for candidates who did not demonstrate a required level of mastery.

The degree to which the literature and its scope and use cropped up in the resubmissions is extremely interesting. Are examiners weighting this aspect more, or is it an indicator of deeper flaws, much like a litmus test? At this point therefore we extend the analysis to attempt to elicit as fully as possible what examiners mean, what expectations they bring to the process and what they understand by thesis examination. Concentration on these few scripts, in the full knowledge of how they differ from a large number of others, provides the opportunity to test and hone emerging theories about research culture and assessment parameters. To this point we have focussed on the core coding categories, but the questions

above require a close reading of the text and more abstract and/or extended levels of categorisation.

Examiner language changes between a pre and post resubmission report. The use of the first person and more prescriptive discourse flags this. Are there other indicators? In theses with significant flaws examiners provided more detail and engaged in more instructional commentary. One feature of instructional commentary is the overarching nature of such comment, sometimes tending to the general, but often general in the sense... 'if it were me I would do this a different way'. Not all examiners have the same expertise or set of understandings, the same expectations, or even the same tolerance for ambiguity, error or methodological scope. Moreover different elements of a thesis may trigger these in different measure within the one examiner. This also turns our attention to the 'role' of the examiner. How examiners play out their role appears to be triggered by the quality of the thesis as they perceive it. So role may be another litmus test of quality.

Examiner knowledge

If perception of quality is the end point of this puzzle then a starting point is how examiners 'know'. The 'Ways of Knowing' thesis of Jurgen Habermas (1972) suggests that there is a consistent pattern across discipline areas by which knowledge is revealed and further negotiated. Human perception arises from a series of 'cognitive interests', interests which are part and parcel of the way the human mind works. These interests are three-fold. First, there is an interest in technical control which impels an 'empirical analytic' type of knowing. Second, the interest in understanding meanings gives rise to an 'historical hermeneutic' way of 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. As far as Habermas is concerned, all three interests are operative regardless of the discipline area.

Where empirical/analytic, or technical, knowing is operative, the supervisor or examiner is most likely to be the 'expert'. The expert represents and stands as the custodian of the body of technical and conventional knowing to which the learner must conform. Hence when examiner comment falls within the realm of expert it has an hierarchical feel to it. When an academic is called upon to examine a thesis it stands to reason that their expertise is being called upon. They expect this, as they see themselves in the role of upholding standards (Kiley and Mullins 2002). Expertise manifested in an assessing or accrediting role such as that of 'examination' finds quintessential form in the grade given.

For many examiners specific elements of the thesis are open for negotiation. Where historical/hermeneutic knowing is operative, the supervisor or examiner are more like partners with the candidate, communicating about meanings and negotiating about understandings. Herein, the concern is not with 'right' or 'wrong' knowing but with knowing that results from interpretive understanding. Examination will not only exude negotiability but will have a co-learner 'feel' to it. The question is how likely is it that examiners will demonstrate this quality of 'knowing' in a situation where the thesis falls well short of expectations?

When dealing with knowing of the critical/self-reflective type, the traditional roles of supervisor/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 former being as listener. The challenge here for any traditional modes of teaching/learning relates to the fairly obvious truth that learners may often 'know' in ways that are beyond the knowing of the teacher. This is the way of knowing which, it is said, is a necessary precursor to the stretching of the boundaries of knowledge, to genuinely new knowing taking place. Granted the elevated status which the PhD enjoys in the learning system, and especially granted the

mandatory tenet related to originality, one might hypothesize that this type of knowing would be fairly prominent in the average dissertation, but very likely to be absent in a thesis deemed unsatisfactory.

Examiner response to resubmission

The report on a thesis is a vehicle for justifying the examiner recommendation. Theses that have flaws attract more 'instructive' comment from examiners and more prescriptive instruction at that. 'Should' is a word that very frequently crops up in relation to instructions about how to improve a thesis, along with '[you] need to', 'have to', etc.

Moreover where resubmission is called for by an examiner we also find the input of the expert and 'colleague' marked by the language of deficit and of frustration, disappointment and even anger. The selected excerpts show the range of responses to flaws, as the language of deficit, and frustration, disappointment and anger.

Deficit	Frustration, disappointment, anger
Systematic failure to consider or discuss alternate theories or ideas	To the extent that I understand this at all, I am left wondering how widely the candidate read...we are all bound to read as widely as possible whether we like it or not
Surveys the field in an idiosyncratic and eclectic way	Choice of the literature was ad hoc (I've read it so I'll use it)
Much more reading and conceptualization needs to be done	This is confusing
Much of the argument takes place in isolation from current scholarship	Baffled
Devoid of reference to...	Amazed
Many emotive statements are made with little or no academic support	Puzzled
Seriously outdated resources	Irritating
Shallow understanding	Pretentious
Lacking in depth	Absurd line of argument
Needs more rigour	It is an insult to the reader
Serious misunderstanding of theory	I am hard pressed to see how...
It seriously misrepresents the evidence	Sloppy
The claims made are too far in advance of the data	More credence is given to political developments and opinions than to evidence

<p>Much of the chapter seems to be purely speculative</p> <p>One of the biggest problems was over generalization and lack of contextualisation</p> <p>The whole needs to be designed and rewritten</p> <p>Demonstrably flawed</p> <p>It is entirely unclear what hypothesis is being tested</p> <p>Has not demonstrated to me that they have sufficient understanding of experimental design</p> <p>Unconvinced about the validity of the analysis</p> <p>...here rests the main methodological problem</p> <p>My main problem with the thesis is methodological</p> <p>I do not feel this thesis is contributing anything original</p> <p>My major concern is the criterion of originality...much of the thesis has an uncomfortably familiar feel to it</p>	<p>Bluntly the work is repetitive, diffuse and over-long</p> <p>Feeling of being stranded without a line to grasp on to</p> <p>Confusing, vague and repetitive</p> <p>Hopelessly jumbled</p> <p>Odd use of evidence</p> <p>This simply begs for discussion</p> <p>The discussion has the appearance of being dumped in to make up words. I have no idea what the author means by it.</p> <p>The arguments are a nonsense</p> <p>X needs to be clarified right from the start</p> <p>A good example of the bad use of overgeneralised statements</p> <p>Highly debatable and demonstrably wrong</p> <p>What is your claim?</p> <p>Where exactly [are you] coming from?</p> <p>I think this is pretty implausible</p>
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Figure 2

There is also another frame - that of reconciled expectations. Ranging from happiness and relief that the thesis meets all of most of the examiner's concerns, through to qualified acknowledgment that the thesis has tipped over the line into the acceptable category. But where is that line drawn?

The following cases provide illustration of the way examiners apply their knowledge, execute their role and some glimpses of how 'acceptable' and 'original' are defined.

Digging in - becoming tougher

In case A (see Table 2 above) the third examiner's (A3's) initial recommendation was for the candidate to re-submit. After the re-examination, however, they 'dug-in' and recommended a fail. This was atypical. Most who re-examined a thesis that still had flaws either accepted the flaws that remained or they asked that they be given further attention without the need for re-examination. In A3's initial report the hierarchical text of the expert was in evidence but intensified in the second report. In the earlier report, one senses an openness to engage at a

more collegial level. This is seen explicitly in a couple of places where the examiner commends the candidate for wide reading and persistence, and more subtly when the examiner momentarily takes the blame, rather than passing it on to the candidate, for not understanding aspects of the thesis. In one section, for instance, sentence after sentence begins with a phrase of the following kind: 'I do not know ...'; 'I also do not understand ...'; 'I'm not sure ...'; 'I also don't follow ...'. Such phraseology provides the candidate with some space for retrieval - a gesture which signals to the candidate a willingness to be convinced about these things. The proviso is that the re-submitted thesis takes full account of the expert critique being offered. In the second report, there is no such concessionary text. Here, the examiner is far more impersonal, detached and closed to further consideration. More commonly, we find phrases like '... the thesis is quite unconvincing'; 'It is extremely hard to follow'. When the examiner uses the first person in this case this signals the 'expert': 'I find this argument unconvincing', 'I could not follow...', 'I found it impossible ...'; 'I recommend...'.

There was also a case where one examiner recommended an unqualified pass in the first report because the thesis 'more than adequately meets the requirements of the degree...the thesis is a valuable and original contribution to knowledge' with few limitations that do not prohibit it from being 'commendable', 'original, independent and credible', then provides a more qualified recommendation of acceptance in the second report 'only after corrections have been made'. The second report is also longer as well as more reserved in its support, appearing to suggest that limitations that were tolerable on the first reading are in need of correction on the second reading. There is also the strong element of 'the student has not followed through thoroughly enough on my comments'. For example, the text reads:

In my previous assessment of this thesis, I referred to some limitations with the qualitative analysis. These criticisms still apply...There has been an attempt to discuss ...[the choice of method] and define ...[the sampling procedures] but the candidate does not adequately explain...'.

It would seem that what the examiner conceded was a limitation in the candidate's skills initially, is vindicated and more clearly in evidence the second time around. The language suggests their faith is shaken.

One can only speculate as to what is going on in the mind of this examiner. Of course, the answer may be as simple as the fact that a second reading always renders greater insight, or that this particular examiner put more time into the exercise the second time around. However, could it be that he/she felt a little intimidated by the fact that at least one academic peer had set a higher standard in refusing to accept these limitations, and so the second report provided an opportunity for a little face-saving? Whatever the explanation, the semiotics tell us that the regime of expertise is ramped up significantly in the second report

There would, on the surface, appear to be two threads of expertise evident in thesis assessment. Their existence warns against simple classifications. One level is the expert in an area, field or approach, the other is the expert on what a PhD is or should be within the discipline and even more generally (e.g. as an artifact). Where there are flaws in the latter we see what a fine line there can be between expert opinion and gatekeeping.

Necessary concessions

Examiners often felt they had to make a concession on the basis of the effort they recognised had gone into the production of a thesis. The extent of the effort combined with redeeming features, such as attention to the examiner's points in the resubmission (often noted specifically by the examiner as having been done) would lead to the examiner taking

the position that 'now' after following their advice, the revised version was acceptable. There were three cases where one examiner recommended rating 4 the first time and 1 the second. This is the most extreme change of position in all the cases of resubmission.

In two of the three cases the examiner was still seeking some improvement despite recommending category 1, saying such things as: 'I still have concerns', 'remain unconvinced' (A1); 'still some issues unresolved', 'argument loses intellectual tension', and 'I am not convinced still that [the argument] holds equally well for all the cases X makes for it' (C2).

The exception was B3. Initially this examiner delivered their report 'with regret' about having to recommend the candidate revise and re-submit. In the first instance the examiner thought it 'not well set in the literature', methodologically 'flawed'. They also thought the key theoretical model in the particular thesis was inadequately clarified, suggesting:

...[the candidate] needs to consider the question of what all this means...'

On re-examination the examiner 'unhesitatingly' recommended acceptance without need for revision, urging the candidate to publish (with some information about where and what the candidate might expect of the market for their work). They believed the candidate 'showed every sign of being an informed, thoughtful and above all committed, scholar'.

Another examiner of the same thesis was a great deal more negative (B1). In the initial examination they were not convinced that the work had the potential to pass given their estimate of the amount of revision necessary. Indeed, the examiner suggested:

it seems to me that much more reading and conceptualisation needs to be done in addition to a substantial rewrite...perhaps the candidate, after discussion with the supervisor, and if a suitable rewrite seems impossible, should consider submitting the case studies in an appropriate contextual setting for a Masters degree. This would I believe, still involve considerable rewriting, but rather less in terms of reviews of the appropriate literature. The model could be presented without being defended in the way it would have to be for a PhD.

The insight this comment provides about the 'level' of PhD study is taken up in the next major section.

The first report for B1 is harsh and objective, the latter depicted by the persistent use of the third person, e.g. '... these chapters made no sense at all ...'; '... the whole needs to be re-designed and re-written'. The only use of the first person is reserved for the most damning comment of all: 'I am not particularly sanguine about the chances of a rewrite being possible within one year', and then going on to recommend the downgrade option.

In the second report B1 stated,:

This is now an excellent thesis that contributes significantly to the area of [X]. The candidate should investigate publishing the work either as a monograph or as a series of papers...'

The examiner goes on from these very positive words, which clearly acknowledge sufficient original contribution to warrant publication in relevant professional journals, to identify about 20 quite small errata, half of them to do with commas and apostrophes (in contrast to their previous report where a comment on errata was dealt with in one sentence of 2 lines). It may

well be there were fewer typographical and grammatical errors in the copy submitted first, or that errors of this type become more obvious when larger flaws are not clamouring for attention, nonetheless, as this example illustrates, the attention to the artifact, when all that was substantial about the thesis had been said in four lines. This examiner holds to the position of expert, while conceding major revision of their initial assessment. Most examiners nominate at least some typographical errors in a thesis, regardless of the tone of their discourse, but the examiner who holds to the position of expert regardless of the quality of the thesis, is the unassailable gatekeeper.

Examiner 2 for that same thesis (B2) moved from a category 3 to 1. All examiners of this thesis had identified methodological weaknesses and problems with the scope of the literature as the main reasons for their recommendation and were consistent in agreeing there had been, as 2 put it, 'significant improvement' at resubmission. This examiner also provided comments to assist the candidate to publish, going as far as to nominate specific journals, but was not as unstinting as the third examiner, conceding that the thesis presentation was 'quite good'.

The examination process tends to lock examiners into the language and position of the expert almost without exception but, as already indicated, the subtle differences reveal much about the type and level of expectation. One such exception is when an examiner feels vulnerable in a situation where they had indicated no major problems, only to discover that their peers think differently. F1 believed the thesis met all the criteria for the award the first time. In an unusual twist for the institution concerned, this examiner saw the other examiners' initial reports before writing their report for the resubmitted thesis:

I did read the comments of the other referees and the responses and modifications made by ...[the candidate] and found these illuminating. The expertise of the referees in...[the particular area] is vastly superior to mine and I could appreciate the changes they wanted made to the thesis, I am sure it has benefited from the exercise. I can only repeat my initial assessment that within the areas of my expertise the thesis was more than satisfactory and I am comfortable with my recommendation that a PhD is warranted.

It is useful to point out that in his initial report the examiner was impressed by the care with which the thesis had been produced, its clarity and its contribution in a notoriously difficult area wherein 'all the scientist can do...is employ a statistical approach, interpret the data with care and not overstate the findings', just as the candidate had done. The examiner had also discussed 'a possible different set of interpretations with the candidate - a collegial approach - no instruction, no deficit, no disappointment and some humility with respect to their own 'expertise'.

Arbiter, supervisor and colleague

In previous analyses of the initial examiner reports for all 303 examiners we identified that the examiner appeared to take on three distinct roles, sometimes all within the same report. The first is the arbiter/assessor role, so clearly illustrative of expert knowing defined above. The second is the collegial role where an examiner is exhibiting close engagement with aspects of the thesis, and virtually carrying on a 'dialogue' with the candidate.

This role is less distinct and less in evidence in any form in the resubmission cases, except where the first examiner gave the thesis a category 1 or 2 recommendation. F1 for instance, commiserates with the candidate about the difficulties of the field and tells them they are 'doing a good job'. D1 only sought minor revisions and then did not re-examine the thesis. This examiner also commiserated with the candidate on the complexity of the area even

while indicating their opinion was 'partly different' on several key points to that of the candidate's .

In E3 the language use is very indicative. Instead of using 'should', they consistently use 'could': "greater use could have been made", 'could have extended the analysis', 'could have been strengthened'. Apart from these slim examples the only other signs of the collegial role was in advice about publication.

The third and final role is that of 'supervisor'. It is notable that when major flaws are evident, particularly in the reading and identification of the literature, examiners start providing lists of references the candidate needs to read. They also begin to supply common interpretations of the literature. Assisting the candidate to position their study is the quintessential role of the supervisor. On more than one occasion examiners mention the supervisor in this regard. There can be little doubt the intention is to admonish that individual, however gently, that they have failed in that task. In every case of identifying major flaws the examiner assumed the supervisory role and slipped into instructive mode, including broad commentary about the scope of the flaws and more prescriptive instruction about what to read, how to fix and what to address. It is particularly interesting that these individuals engaged in less 'formative' instruction overall than in cases where the candidate had not been required to revise and resubmit. The committee that appraised the comments must have been struck by the forceful and unadorned nature of comments about paucity of literature, lack of originality, evidence of bias, inadequate interpretation, methodological weakness and inaccuracies (See Figure 2 above) and this may have been instrumental in their decision to require resubmission.

What is perceived as 'original' research?

Is original work necessarily quality research? There is some indication that it is perceived as such. It is perhaps telling that one examiner looked for originality because they were told to, and another acknowledged novelty. Originality is clearly no straightforward quality, for all the obviousness implied in the word itself.

Rarely is a candidate's 'original' work original in an individual sense. It is the product of a team effort, the primary team being the candidate and his/her supervisor(s), especially in the stage of identifying and positioning a project's originality. Certainly, the findings above tell us that a key test of originality resides in credible demonstration of the candidate's (and supervisors') command of the literature. In many instances it is the examiners, acting as supervisors, who alerted them to the original potential of their project. Another test may be the examiner's admission they have learned something new - the celebration of new knowing.

Can we test this hypothesis? If we look to those examiners who did not examine the initial thesis, without exception these individuals indicated they had learned something from the thesis. They were impressed by the candidate's knowledge. Which does raise another interesting if tangential question: If the candidate responded to the examiner's guidance, then is their work as original as when they succeed in doing this without examiner input?

Clearly the issue of originality is quite central to the expectations of examiner. But what constitutes the quality package? Is originality enough? The resubmission process goes some way to providing some answers.

Examiners identify a critical mass and mix of complementary good features. Three examples can suffice here. The first is based on a case where the examiner is replaced. Originality

encompasses novelty and an interesting approach, but above all the skills to make the best of the original element and proof of a grasp of what is going on in the discipline or field.

Case C Examiner 1 (initial)

I do not base this judgement on the credibility or lack of credibility of the candidates thesis (his ideas) so much as on what I see as a number of flaws in the presentation, in the marshalling of evidence, and in the attempted demonstration of the case, offset by an interesting and often attractive approach to the topic... A PhD thesis ...must provide evidence that the candidate has absorbed the major previous discussions of the topic in question.

Case C, replacement for Examiner 1 (re-examination)

X recommends some interpretations that are, to this untutored eye, at least novel. On these grounds, I will concede that the thesis satisfies the minimal requirements for the successful completion of the doctorate. Central to these I take to be command of a few primary texts; the ability to make wise use of the secondary literature and specific research tools: and the capacity to assemble ones findings - including a novel insight or two - into a readable and pleasing whole.

The same combination is evident in two initial examiner comments:

Case B Examiner 3 (initial)

This thesis addresses an interesting and important topic using materials which have not been carefully scrutinised in the past. The account given is a valuable one. However I have a number of problems with the thesis: it is not well set in the literature; it has methodological flaws; the model needs some modification; the presentation needs minor attention

Case E Examiner 1 (initial)

I have major difficulties with this thesis. The major weaknesses are that the contents are not well linked to the research literature and the research component is relatively small and appears to have been used to justify more than it deserves. Indeed, most of the conclusions are based more on findings from previous studies than on the authors own research...I wonder if this thesis is really at the standard required of a PhD? While the central idea is sound, the thesis reads like several poorly-connected small studies that have been put together post-hoc, with poor connection to the academic literature, inadequately thought-through and applied methodology, and poor linkage back to the real world. Despite the obvious work done by the candidate, I think that major revision is necessary

In effect examiners seek to learn from a thesis, but they also expect the candidate to rival their own knowledge base, their own expert status. They do not want to step in as the supervisor to facilitate that process but, if they have done this, they will subsequently concede that the outcome meets or at least approximates what they had sought. Regardless

of discipline, recognition by the examiner of a command of the literature is an indicator of originality.

Conclusion

The current analysis of a small sample of theses that were required to be re-submitted has identified a number of features that appear to be important to examiners when they are making a judgement about the worth of a candidate or the value of a thesis. The issues that differentiated acceptable from non-acceptable standards of research were mainly concerned with the content of the thesis, the candidate's approach to conducting a study or analysing its findings and the significance of the research to its particular field. The examiners' criticisms focused on the substance of a thesis and whether or not a candidate had the ability to present an hypothesis that was grounded in current literature and thoroughly and systematically investigated. Of less concern to examiners were features of presentation such as mechanical or editorial errors. Although numerous grammatical and typographical errors were often listed as essential corrections in reports requesting re-submission of a thesis, these reports did not contain a significantly greater proportion of text devoted to editorial comments than reports on theses which did not require revision. This finding suggests that while examiners are concerned with defects in presentation, such flaws are not crucial to an examiner's final evaluation.

To try and get at the notion of what examiners decide on and how, and how others (such as a university committee or the candidate and supervisor) might make sense of their evaluation it is necessary to undertake some very close analysis of their reports. Examiners are aware that, in some senses, their report becomes a 'public' document. Another study would be well placed to explore what the examiner had in mind when they cut and pasted such a document together (i.e their intent). But from such a public document what can we learn of the process? Resubmission provides some insights into process and in so doing, provides some indicators of what is acceptable or base-line 'quality' in a thesis.

If a thesis is flawed the examiner exercises their knowing in specific turns of phrase that also suggest specific roles. All examiners are arbiters but if they detect significant flaws this position solidifies into gatekeeping by the virtually unassailable expert. The language is of deficit and usually marked at several points by frustration bordering on anger or disappointment. Theses that get to submission stage do not usually disappoint. For all their expert status, examiners are usually happy to grease the hinges. Their gatekeeping, as Tinkler and Jackson (2001) found in relation to the viva, performs a largely ceremonial function. They are prepared to concede if their own knowing is acknowledged in the revision.

If an examiner moves into the supervisory role this is one indicator that the thesis is perilously close to base-line (i.e acceptable) quality, and also may suggest it is not original. It would seem that problems with coverage of the literature may be the very strongest indicator that the thesis is not only poor quality but not original. Clearly these findings are based on few cases from limited disciplines and only one institution. Nevertheless, they provide a useful springboard into further cases, and suggest that it may be possible to identify elements of thesis quality that can be illustrated, verified and generalised.

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