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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper reports the findings of a small survey of the views of individual academics in relation to four issues regarding research degree examiners: the use of their reports, the scope of criteria they use to make judgements and the assessment remit given to them, their training and the criteria used for their appointment. The responses indicate lack of consensus on almost all points and suggest some fundamental differences of view on the nature of research degree study, its subsequent examination and on the roles of examiners within the assessment process.

### **Key words**

Research degree examining, evidence in research degree assessment, training of examiners

# **THE PROCESS OF EXAMINING RESEARCH DEGREES: SOME ISSUES OF QUALITY**

## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper considers specific issues related to research degree examining, namely:

- (a) use of examiners' preliminary reports by candidates and supervisors,
- (b) scope of criteria used by examiners to make judgements and the remit of the examination process in terms of comment upon research provision,
- (c) desirability/undesirability of formal training for examiners,
- (d) criteria used to appoint examiners (with specific reference to RAE rating).

The above is not claimed to be an exhaustive list of issues related to the topic in question, rather it represents a sample of the kinds of points raised in various discussion fora and sources in the literature. First, the issues discussed in this current paper have consistently arisen in UKCGE specialist seminars and training workshops on research degree examining (see Powell and McCauley, 2002). Second, these issues have been discussed in the literature for some time without any necessary resolution (e.g. CVCP, 1993; UCoSDA/BPS, 1995), have reappeared either directly or obliquely in more recent publications from QAA (notably 1999; 2000a; 2000b) and form part of a growing questioning of the system of doctoral examining (e.g. Green and Shaw, 1996; Hartley and Jory, (2000); Jackson and Tinkler, 2000a & 2001; Johnston, 1997). Third, the review commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Councils of England, Scotland and Wales (HEFCE, SHEFCE & HEFCW), *Improving Standards in Postgraduate Research Degree Programmes* (HEFCE, 2003) contains mention of

these issues. Indeed, some recommendations are made in this review document that have a direct bearing on practice related to the issues set out at the opening of this current paper. Notably (and for convenience listed in the same order as above), there are recommendations relating to ‘Independent Review and Examination’ such as:

- (a) “*Supervisory team to have access to examiners’ reports following the viva*” (Appendix D, page 49) and similarly, “*Examiners’ reports to be made available to the student following the viva*” (Appendix D, page 49),
- (b) “*External Examiners requested to provide comments on the broader issues of the research training and environment to an appropriate institution-wide body*” (Appendix D, page 49).
- (c) “*Training for examiners to be available as part of the institution’s staff development*” (Appendix D, page 49).
- (d) “*at least one of the examiners should be from a minimum [3a] RAE rated department*” (Table 6, page 20).

Clearly, we have been selective in choosing the four issues noted at the outset of this paper from a range that are worthy of discussion. Our argument for such selection is that these issues are significant in as much as they tap into some central themes relating to research degree examination and therefore form a reasonable starting point for debate. At a more pragmatic level, our selectivity also enabled a manageable set of questions to be derived and answers collected.

## **PURPOSE AND METHOD**

### **Focus on Individual Views**

It would have been possible to survey institutional practice in relation to our chosen issues. From our experience in running seminars as noted above we can be fairly sure that practice across the sector varies to a greater or lesser extent depending on the specific issue within the topic of examining (Powell and McCauley, 2002) and this experiential view is supported by reported findings, for example by Jackson and Tinkler (2000b). For the purpose of this paper however we decided to focus not upon existing institutional practices, but rather upon what individual academics think about the issues themselves. To this end we specifically asked respondents for their individual, considered views not for a representation of their own particular institution's practices.

### **Use of a Questionnaire**

We elected to survey the views of a range of academics - as far as possible from across the disciplines and from both pre 1992 and post 1992 institutions. Because of time and resource constraints we further chose to survey an opportunistic sample (but trying to include from the outset the two dimensions mentioned above). In short, we devised a questionnaire, piloted it on colleagues in differing disciplines and kinds of institutions and then circulated the revised version (see Appendix 1 for a summary of questions) via email to a range of colleagues and their contacts. This informal way of gathering feedback clearly did not allow for any scientifically robust method of categorisation or stratification. But it did allow for a snapshot view of the kinds of reaction from academics to the issues concerned. We must accept that our sample size is small. However, we were concerned to access a range of views not to determine the

prevalence of particular kinds of practice. Certainly, in this paper we do make reference to the numbers of responses within the various categories – but we do this not to indicate in any sense national trends but to try to determine how broad is the range of views on the selected topics. Our main focus is on the kinds of remarks made by respondents and what those remarks indicate about underlying beliefs.

## **Respondents**

Our intention was, then, to begin to engage with the questions that the issues raised in the minds of colleagues. Responses were sought in confidence, however respondents were asked for minimal information about (1) experience as an examiner and (2) discipline area. The resulting information about the nature of the respondents is summarised in Appendix 2.

## **The Questions**

The first two questions (*Should examiners' preliminary reports on the thesis be made available (1) to the candidate? and (2) to the supervisor ?*) were concerned with the use to which preliminary reports might be put. We decided here to focus on the use of preliminary reports rather than final reports in part to give a precise definition to our question and secondly because this had been a particularly contentious issue in various seminars. In so doing we were not following precisely the HEFCE review mentioned above, where mention is made of 'reports' without defining whether these are preliminary or final. No respondent claimed to be unfamiliar with preliminary

reports – though as already noted we have not surveyed institutional practices to determine their use and status.

The third question (*Should examiners take into account the quality of research training and research environment when reaching a judgement and be asked to make written comment on the research environment in the department/research grouping?*)

seeks to tap into views on the range of the task that should be expected of examiners.

We wanted views on whether or not an examiner should be expected to go beyond what was presented to them in the thesis itself and in its defence at an oral examination and to consider the candidate's work in the context of the supervision, training, resources etc that had been made available to them.

The fourth question (*Should examiners have to undergo formal training?*) sought views on the place and purpose of training for examiners. Again, this issue, which may seem somewhat innocuous at first glance, has proved contentious at various discussion fora.

The fifth question (*What criteria, if any, should be used as a basis for appointing an examining team?*) addresses the issue of the appointment of examiners and the criteria that might reasonably be used. Here we made specific reference to RAE rating as a possible criterion because it figures as such in the HEFCE review referenced above.

## **RESPONSES**

As noted above, respondents were asked to give their own personal view on a series of questions based on their experience as an examiner. The majority of responses were, to a lesser or greater degree, justified by additional comments. This section sets out the individual questions and analyses the responses.

**1. Should examiners' preliminary reports on the thesis be made available to the candidate?** (respondents were given the options of *before, after or never*)

Summary of responses

| Before | After | Never |
|--------|-------|-------|
| 8      | 13    | 8     |

*BEFORE the oral examination*

Eight of the respondents argued that preliminary reports on the thesis should be made available to the candidate before the oral examination. There was a theme among the comments that suggested that the quality of the viva would be enhanced by availability of preliminary reports. It was generally felt that allowing students to prepare a defence to any areas of criticism would lead to a more dynamic process and to a more effective examination of weaker or problematic areas. There was another theme of '*why not?*' within the eight responses, with respondents noting that the candidate should be enabled to prepare a defence to examiners' concerns. For example:

*“.....reports should be written in a way that allows almost all of their content to be fed back to the candidate before the viva. This would give the candidate time to prepare a defence to any areas of criticism”.*

One respondent felt that it might be useful to retain a final paragraph of the report for confidential comments (“*as with things like grant reviews*”), noting that examiners should be warned that this confidentiality might not hold if a student made a request under the Data Protection Act. Another noted that the examiner would need to be made aware that the student had access to the report and would need to ensure that sufficient justification for the final comments was provided.

*AFTER the oral examination*

Thirteen of the respondents felt that giving students access to preliminary reports after the oral examination was good practice in terms of student feedback:

*“[It is] Helpful for student to see other perspective – provides additional feedback for student and supervisor and dept... Students require as much guidance as possible when making alterations/corrections.”*

Indeed it was noted that the PhD is rather isolated in terms of the rest of academic assessment in not offering rigorous formal feedback – which in some sense at least matches the significance of the piece of work to be assessed. It is possible according to some scenario for a student to work full time for four years at the highest level available under the current system and get no written feedback on the work submitted. Reference was made to the fact that access to reports after the viva might encourage a more transparent process and be in line with the Freedom of Information Act. Some respondents commented that criticisms made in the preliminary report are often resolved in the viva, and that the final report presents these revisions in terms of what

the examiners have agreed. It was felt by some that making candidates aware of any disagreements between examiners before the oral exam would not be helpful.

Finally, there was a theme in the responses suggesting that there is a need to balance the needs of the student with the requirements of a sound and fair process of assessment. For example:

*“This is a tricky issue as it tries to balance both the needs of the research student as well as the independence and confidential nature of the examination system.”*

For some respondents at least there was an underlying anxiety that the needs of the student might be addressed to the detriment of the examination process itself. Again, by way of example:

*“On the one hand it could be extremely useful for students who have to revise a thesis or who have not been successful to see the justification for the examiners’ decision, whilst on the other hand if examiners knew that the report would be made public knowledge then this may inhibit their tendency to be frank and may result in rather bland and unhelpful reports. My personal view is that one would not wish for the report to influence the candidate’s performance in the viva.... However I would feel quite comfortable as an examiner in having to defend the position that I took in a report on a thesis should there be some queries at a later date. Consequently if the report was made available subsequently to the candidate, especially in the corrections stage, then I would support this.”*

*NEVER*

Eight of the respondents argued that preliminary reports on the thesis should *never* be made available to the candidate. There was consensus among this group that such availability might impede frank comments and could possibly lead to student litigation. In one sense this, for some respondents at least, was a matter of audience.

For example:

*“I think the audience for these reports is the examination team - a PRELIMINARY report (which assumes a 'final' or further more formal report) provides the basis of their discussion, the preparation for the viva and then of course will inform the final report which I think should be available to the student.”*

Here, the respondent is drawing the distinction between preliminary and final reports and again other respondents also noted this distinction of treatment for these two kinds of reports. A further argument was that giving preliminary reports to the candidate might lead to confusion in the reporting process. Again this is almost a matter of audience – to whom and for what purpose are these reports being written? The issue of audience is again noted by this respondent this time in relation to a distinction between supervisor and student:

*“The supervisor’s expertise may be needed to mediate the messages to the candidate. I would prefer to write an honest, if sometimes blunt, report which does not mince words, rather than have to write it in a suitable format for the candidate to see. Candidates are inexperienced and can’t always see the wider picture, including the relative strength of the comments in relation to other candidates and theses.”*

**2. Should examiners' preliminary reports on the thesis be made available to the supervisor ?**

Q2 - Summary of responses

| Before | After | Never |
|--------|-------|-------|
| 13     | 13    | 3     |

*BEFORE the oral examination*

Thirteen respondents felt that supervisors should have access to preliminary reports before the viva. Certainly, most respondents, if they related their answer to their previous answer in relation to the student, suggested that if the candidate was to see the reports then so should the supervisor. This would enable the supervisor the opportunity to work with the student on areas of contention. One respondent however did suggest that:

*“Yes [the preliminary reports should be made available to the supervisor] - but via the student – if the student so wishes – not directly.”*

*AFTER the oral examination*

The same number of respondents (thirteen) argued that the supervisor should only be allowed to see the preliminary reports after the examination. Generally, it was argued that seeing the reports before the viva might lead to unfair influence on the examination process and focus the oral examination unduly on specific questions, whereas seeing reports after was deemed to constitute useful feedback for the supervisor (e.g. ‘enhancing good practice/useful staff development’).

## NEVER

Three respondents suggested that supervisors should never see the preliminary reports. These three respondents who believed that the reports should never be seen by the supervisor argued that this would allow clear and effective examining procedures to be followed. Two of the three respondents referred to their earlier answer – i.e. suggesting that the same issues of damage to the exam process, the risks to the initial candour of examiners and the opening up of possible litigation applied here in the case of the supervisor just as it had done in relation to the candidate. One response sums up the perspective of this group of respondents:

*“Again as above I think it's not necessary since the purpose is to inform the examination team etc. But I'm assuming that the vital issues raised in prelim. reports will form part of a final report anyway which would/should be made available to all concerned i.e. student, supervisor(s).”*

### 3. Should examiners:

**(a) take into account the quality of research training and research environment when reaching a judgement?**

**(b) be asked to make written comment on the research environment in the department/research grouping?**

#### *Q3 - Summary of Responses*

| Responses to 3a and 3b | Number of responses |
|------------------------|---------------------|
| No to 3a and 3b        | 20                  |
| Yes to 3a and 3b       | 4                   |
| No to 3a and Yes to 3b | 2                   |
| Yes to 3a and No to 3b | 3                   |

## ***NO***

Twenty respondents argued that the answer to both these questions should be ‘no’.

Their reasons may be summarised as follows:

- that, at present, it is the thesis and not the process that is being assessed; the examiner is judging the student not the department/ provision,
- that the candidate’s competence as researcher is a key issue attested by the award, not how or why s/he did or did not reach that standard,
- that assessing research training and the environment would have implications for the defining of the PhD: the examination should be of the material that is offered in the thesis itself – no more, no less,
- that comparable pass standards should be expected and applied regardless of candidates’ research training and the environment in which they have worked,
- that other mechanisms should be in place to assure the quality of these issues,
- that this would not be in the best interest of the student,
- that examiners are paid to judge the candidate and the thesis – anything else is outside of their remit and fee.

One of the respondents perhaps acts as a useful exemplar of the stance taken within these ‘no’ responses:

*“No to both – PhD study takes place within a departmental environment but is not dependent on it nor resulting from it In any case how would they do it – they would be judging a generality from one instance?”*

## **YES**

Four respondents answered YES to both of these questions, their reasons may be summarised as follows:

- that these factors would allow the external examiner to ascertain the level of independence shown by the student,
- that the degree is supposed to be about ‘research training’, and because examiners in other areas are supposed (rightly) to comment on resources and support arrangements.

A theme running through these responses was that research degree examination needs to be seen in the context of examining across HE. For example:

*“Because the degree is supposed to be a research training, and because examiners in other areas are supposed (rightly) to comment on resources and support arrangements.”*

## **NO (3a) and YES (3b)**

Two respondents replied *no* to question 3a (taking account of environment in making judgements) and *yes* to 3b (written comment to the department on research environment). The response below summarises both these respondents’ views:

*“The judgement made reflects the quality and standard of the work and this should be looked at independently of issues such as quality of research training and the research environment. However, comments on the environment and, indeed, the quality of training could usefully be fed back to the department/research grouping.”*

### **YES (3a) and NO (3b)**

Three respondents answered that they did think that the examiners should take environment into account when make judgements (though one of these respondents was equivocal about this) but that they did not think that this was a matter to be passed on to the department. These views can be summarised by this response:

*“A PhD is fundamentally about a training in doing research and this should be evident within the thesis and in the oral examination. It is therefore perfectly reasonable to bear in mind the research training of a student when coming to an overall view. Clearly this is also balanced with the contribution to knowledge that they are suggesting they make. It would seem inappropriate to pass judgement on the department or grouping of research in an institution, since there would be little hard evidence upon which to base such a decision.”*

### **4. Should examiners have to undergo formal training?**

Q4 – Summary

| Yes | No | Undecided |
|-----|----|-----------|
| 15  | 11 | 3         |

### **YES – Examiners should have to undergo formal training**

Fifteen of the respondents felt that examiners should undergo some formal training.

The notion of 'training' however differed considerably - it ranged from ways of gaining understanding about:

- the mechanics of the viva and how a face-to-face occasion might differ, for example, from a video link,

- the qualities that comprise a PhD,
- institutional legislation,
- the relationship between all those involved in the oral examination,
- the purpose of the viva,

and incorporated skills such as *how to question/examine*.

It was felt that training would allow parity and comparability of treatment for students and would promote a level of professionalism amongst examiners, improve learning and teaching standards and assure the quality of the research environment.

One respondent felt that examiners should have regular publications, since training could only address the formal aspects “*but not the academic standing*”. Others felt that examiners should be paid a consultant rate to ensure quality and that supervisors and examiners should be accredited. One respondent mentioned that training should not be compulsorily given the low pay and work involved.

#### **NO – Examiners should not have to undergo formal training**

Eleven of the respondents felt that examiners should not have to undergo formal training. It should be noted here that some of these respondents felt that some training experiences might (though even here they tended to equivocation) usefully be available but that these should not in any sense become mandatory (formal). Overall the eleven respondents note, *inter alia*, that:

- at least one of the examiners should be an experienced examiner – all panel should have the PhD level attainment themselves and therefore there is no need to specific training,
- the best training is to act as an internal examiner in the first instance,

- to make training essential at this point in time might create more difficulties than it would solve – it might dissuade some colleagues from taking part in what is already a fairly thankless task,
- such training would be impossible to arrange for all settings (and hence might offer a distorted view of the ‘success’ of any such training).

The equivocation mentioned above and the general sense of these eleven responses may be summarised by the respondent who suggested:

*“No. However, It is important to try to ensure some parity of experience. I think that detail written guidance should be provided on the structure, appropriate lines of questioning and on how to maintain the correct atmosphere.”*

### **Undecided**

Three of the respondents remained undecided. The indecision was mainly at a pragmatic level. Their view is perhaps best represented by this respondent:

*“This is difficult – for operational reasons – who would do it – and therefore be accountable for quality. I would suggest that, if at all, it should be part of training for research degree supervision and examination which would be an institution’s responsibility. And [it] would cover a wide range of supervisory elements as well as examination.....I don’t think you can divorce examination from the overall process.”*

**5. What criteria, if any, should be used as a basis for appointing an examining team? Please make specific reference here to your view of the relevance of RAE rating in this respect.**

## **Criteria for Appointment**

The following criteria were given by the majority of the respondents:

- subject expertise – as demonstrated by publication or research activity,
- examining experience or training,
- supervisory experience,
- possession of own PhD or an unquestionable leader in their field.

Respondents felt that the team should have complementary rather than overlapping expertise. One respondent stated that there should be no existing co-operative or professional links between the examiner and the student/supervisor and another that the examiner, “*should also be sensitive and empathetic to the situation of the candidate and be scrupulously fair*”.

## **Relevance of RAE Rating as a Possible Criterion**

Twenty-three of the respondents felt that the RAE was inappropriate as a basis for appointing an examiner. Many of this majority were emphatic in their response (using terms such as ‘wholly’, ‘absolutely’ and so on). Their suggestions may be summarised as follows:

- that RAE rating was levied at institutions and not at individuals - RAE ratings are a composite mark for a group effort and no way relate to individual performances,
- that staff in highly rated RAE departments did not have a monopoly on subject expertise or experience.

Two respondents supported the notion that RAE rating was a possible criterion. The one response below summarises both:

*“They [examiners] should be research active in terms of being submitted in the RAE exercise.... And in a department with a sufficiently high ranking (3a) to be in receipt of HEFCE QR funds.”*

Two of the respondents made no reference to the RAE rating at all.

## **SUMMARY DISCUSSION**

### **Question 1. Availability of Preliminary Reports to Candidates**

Clearly it is important to note that this question focused specifically on the *preliminary* reports of examiners (as was discussed earlier in this paper). The tone and content of answers might have been quite different if the question had been addressed to final, or post-viva, reports. This focus did result in a range of responses, with equal numbers (8) respondents answering *before* and *never* and with a majority (13) answering *after*. There was a mix of issues with some respondents being concerned with legal implications and others with the possibility of inhibition resulting from availability and with the matter of purpose. Certainly, a proposition that research degree candidates should receive more feedback on their work than is presently typically the case – might well receive wide support. The difficulty clearly comes in deciding when and how that feedback should be generated and delivered. If the purpose is to affect the process of the viva - by allowing the candidate to identify and discuss issues that arise in the examiners’ minds from the work - then making

preliminary reports available becomes tenable, if not necessarily desirable. However, the answers given in this small survey indicate that such a procedure would be likely to change the nature of the reports themselves. In short, the audience for, and purpose of, the reports would be defined by their availability to the candidate.

The lack of consensus among our respondents may indicate a lack of shared understanding of the purpose of the viva itself. The comments made by respondents suggest that while for some it is important that the viva should be an ‘unseen’ examination, for others it is more of an open discussion of issues arising from a sustained piece of research work and where, therefore, candidates should be able to prepare themselves for an agenda of questions. It may be argued that in both cases, candidates are examined on their abilities to engage in the debate and on the qualities of the work itself. The difference then becomes a matter of emphasis on style of examining – on exactly what kinds of knowledge and skills are being tested.

It is perhaps worth noting that in France at least, examiners write reports prior to the viva that are then circulated to the candidate and to the ‘Director of Studies’ (equivalent to a Principal/First Supervisor). The stated purpose here is to enable candidates to make adjustments to their presentation (which opens the viva itself) so as to address any concerns expressed in those reports and to enable them to organise their defence of the thesis. They are, of course, able to seek advice in this pre-viva period.

## **Question 2. Availability of Preliminary Reports to Supervisors**

As in the responses to Question 1 it is clear that respondents are influenced by different notions of the purpose of the viva within the examination process. Also, the responses to this question indicate a difference of opinion as to the nature of the supervisor's role at the time of examining a thesis. Those respondents who believe that the supervisor should see the preliminary reports prior to the oral examination see this as an extension of the student/supervisor relationship. Those who believe that the supervisor should not see the reports tend to argue that the supervisory function ends once the examination process has begun.

It is perhaps worthy of note that when the question was posed in relation to *students*, eight respondents chose 'never', while when the question was posed (to the same respondents) in relation to supervisors, only three responded 'never'. Clearly, then, there is a tendency among some respondents to see it as appropriate for supervisors to have access to preliminary reports but not students. One interpretation of this could be the suggestion that supervisors might be able to make more effective use of that access than their students; another might be that they are in some sense more 'trustworthy'. Clearly these interpretations could only be tested by follow up interviews and it may be unhelpful to speculate further here.

**Question 3. (a) Taking account of the research environment and (b) commenting on that environment to the department.**

As with the first two questions there was no overall consensus in answers here, though there was a clear majority (20 out of 29) who felt that examiners should not take the research environment into account when making judgements on individual

candidates nor be expected to make written comment on that environment as part of their role. For this majority the examination should be concerned with the product of the learning whether that is in the thesis or in the candidate's abilities. In this sense, these respondents see research degree examination as an assessment of learning, how students arrive at the point of assessment is of importance but not necessarily to those charged with examining. Four respondents answered positively to both questions. For this minority individual effort has to be seen in terms of the context in which it is expended. Also, the analogy is drawn with external examining in other areas of academia where those examining are, explicitly or implicitly, charged with commenting on the process that has led to the work being sampled.

There was a small group of respondents who provide an interesting contrast in terms of views. Two replied *no* to the issue of context influencing judgement and *yes* to written comments being fed back to departments with another three respondents giving entirely opposite views. Again, this difference of view would seem to indicate polarised understandings of the nature of the assessment process for research degrees in general and of the viva in particular. For the first group above the matter of assessment of the products of individual achievement is perhaps paramount whereas for the second those products cannot be examined in isolation of the training. We may draw the conclusion that, for this latter group, research degrees are about the process of learning about research and, in a sense, it is that process that has to be judged.

#### **Question 4. Should examiners have to undergo formal training?**

The question was framed in a fairly robust way with respondents being required to go beyond the issue of training for examiners *per se* to address it within the context of compulsion ('*have to undergo*') and formality. If the question had been asked only about the possible usefulness of training or kind of training likely to be most effective then it might well have provoked a more consensual set of responses. In short, while responses were split to the question as asked, with fifteen for and eleven against and with three undecided, there was a thread running through all three groups that suggested that respondents tended to be supportive of the notion that examiners needed to be given access to ways of coming to understand their task more fully. The differences in view tended to be about how that 'access' can best be realised and about how 'understanding the task' can be interpreted.

For some, training was gained appropriately 'on the job'. In this view examining teams should be constituted so as to contain experience and therefore new examiners could always learn from their more experienced colleagues. Another feature prevalent among those who answered no to the question was that their negative response related not so much to the potential of training as to the pragmatic difficulties of its delivery and indeed with the specific issue of adding a further burden on what is already perceived as a thankless task.

Again, the question posed did not distinguish between training for external and for internal examiners and clearly the pragmatics of delivery are different in these two instances. Nevertheless, if there was a consensus at all in the responses it was that more attention needs to be paid to giving examiners structured experiences that enable

them to better understand their task and gain some notion of parity in the treatment of candidates within the examination process.

**Question 5. Criteria for appointing an examining team with specific reference to the relevance of RAE rating.**

There is perhaps little surprise in the criteria suggested by our respondents although not all would agree with all of the criteria suggested (in the main, subject expertise, examining experience or training, supervisory experience, possession of own PhD). However, it is perhaps worth noting that many institutions require the first two of these four criteria but not the last two. Our experience in workshop discussion suggests that some colleagues would argue that supervisory experience does not relate to examining at all and again that being well-published and/or an 'acknowledged leader in an academic field' is more important than the possession of a PhD itself.

Here again a fault line may be described as demarcating two broad groups. On the one hand are those who see the examination of a research degree as a matter of assessing the cumulative product of some years of research training and who therefore see no relevance for prospective examiners in having supervisory experience or indeed in having the experience of studying successfully for a research degree award themselves. On the other hand are those for whom the examination of a research degree necessarily requires taking into account, or at the very least 'having an understanding of', the process of learning that has gone on during the research programme. For this latter group supervisory experience is of relevance to examiners because it helps them to judge that process within the supervisor/student relationship.

Similarly, to this latter group having undertaken, successfully, a PhD oneself enables understanding, albeit of a one-off kind, of the experience that candidates go through and thereby enables the process to be taken into account.

The issue of the relevance of RAE rating as a possible criterion for the appointment of examiners produced the only real consensus in the survey, with twenty-three of the respondents expressing the view that the RAE was inappropriate as a basis for appointing an examiner. Their views clustered around the two points that such ratings apply to departments or other groupings not to individuals and in this sense represent composite 'marks' that may bear little relation to individual performances and that in any case staff in highly rated RAE departments do not have a monopoly on subject expertise or experience of PhD study or examining. Clearly, there is little support among our respondents for linking RAE rating of units to viability of individual academics as examiners. The point is made that the RAE was set up to measure the research performance of units of assessment. Opinions will vary as to how successful it is in that respect but the issue here is that it was not designed, in as far as we are aware, to be used as a measure of how competent an individual research academic is likely to be as a research degree examiner. In short, there is a danger of taking a measure of one thing and applying it to another.

### **Concluding Remark**

The one clear feature of this survey is that there is little consensus among respondents. In one sense this may be a feature of the way the questions were posed, testing responses to some very specific issues likely to produce polarised views. But it

also perhaps reflects some profound differences in the way in which research degree study is viewed and therefore subsequently how the process of examination is perceived. It is not just that respondents differ in their views about face issues of research degree assessment but that they differ fundamentally in what they think candidates need to have done during their research programmes, how they may prove that they are worthy of the award in question and finally, therefore, what the examiners' roles are in the process of judging that proof.

This lack of consensus might not matter in a richly diverse system that can accommodate differences because it is robust in its essential *raison d'être* – but the range of responses noted in this paper do not indicate that quality. Candidates and examiners are therefore both exposed in a situation where the basic ground rules of research degree examination across the UK sector are not clear and where the rigour of individual institutional regulations may serve only to mask inherent uncertainties.

### **Acknowledgement**

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## **APPENDIX 1**

### **Summary of Questions Included in the Questionnaire**

Preamble:

The purpose of this short questionnaire is to try to ascertain views of experienced research degree examiners on some current issues in relation to PhD examination.

*N.B. we are not trying to survey what happens in different institutions or what HEFCE may recommend or require in the future but rather what experienced examiners think should happen about these things and why.*

Please give your *own personal view* on the following questions based on your experience as an examiner. You do not need to justify your responses but it would help us to obtain a broader understanding of opinion if you do. *Respondents and responses to this questionnaire will be treated as confidential.*

Questions (N.B. in each of the first five questions space was allowed on the questionnaire for respondents to elaborate on their responses – in the case of questions 4 and 5 respondents were directed to a particular issues)

1. Should examiners' preliminary reports on the thesis be made available to the *candidate*: Before the oral examination/ After the oral examination/ Never

2. Should examiners' preliminary reports on the thesis be made available to the *supervisor*: Before the oral examination/ After the oral examination/ Never

3. Should examiners:

(a) take into account the quality of research training and research environment when reaching a judgement?

(b) be asked to make written comment on the research environment in the department/research grouping?

4. Should examiners have to undergo formal training? (Please elaborate on your answer – noting, if possible, the nature of any training seen as desirable/essential)

5. What criteria, if any, should be used as a basis for appointing an examining team? Please make specific reference here to your view of the relevance of RAE rating in this respect.

6.

(a) How many examinations (as an examiner) have you taken part in approximately?

(b) What is your discipline area?

## APPENDIX 2 Summary of Information about Respondents

1. Number of respondents was twenty-nine

2. Examining Experience of Respondents:

- the total number of examinations completed by respondents was 370
- the mean number of examinations completed was approximately 12
- the range was 1 to 50

3. Discipline areas of respondents:

|                        |   |
|------------------------|---|
| Urban Planning 1       | 1 |
| Literature             | 1 |
| Geography              | 1 |
| Engineering            | 3 |
| Education & Sociology  | 1 |
| Environmental Science  | 1 |
| Accountancy            | 1 |
| Natural Science        | 1 |
| Psychology             | 2 |
| Management             | 2 |
| Educational Psychology | 1 |
| Health Sciences        | 2 |
| Sociology              | 1 |
| Biology                | 3 |
| Bioscience             | 1 |
| Education              | 1 |
| Computer Science       | 1 |
| Linguistics            | 1 |
| Plant ecology          | 1 |
| Science                | 1 |
| Law                    | 1 |
| Not given              | 1 |