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ABSTRACT

This editorial raises questions about the research degree examination and in particular the apparent reluctance on the part of institutions and both regulatory and funding agencies to develop a common and transparent approach. Research Degree Examining is discussed as a Quality Issue in which the absence of norms adopted for taught programmes are questioned. What results is a confusing and muddled picture of assessment of the highest award of UK Universities. The editorial reviews issues arising from Candidates' Perceptions of the Process of Examination, including the viva, prior to the event, the choice of examiners and the approach adopted by the examiners. Examining the criteria employed in the examination and the approach taken, the paper highlights the enormous diversity of practice. The resulting discussion highlights the needs for national guidelines and points to the lack of clear direction in the recent joint funding councils' report.

EDITORIAL

RESEARCH DEGREE EXAMINING: QUALITY ISSUES OF PRINCIPLE AND PRACTICE

INTRODUCTION

Origins of this Special Edition

The current collection of papers has its origins in the first academic symposium that the UK Council for Graduate Education organized at Regent's College in London, in April 2002. The event brought together researchers from different backgrounds to report on their findings in relation to the topic of research degree examining. The symposium built on the outcomes of a specialist seminar that had been held on the same subject in 2000. In between these two events the Council had run a number of one-day workshops on PhD examining around the country.

The major driver for all this work was a concern about the examining process itself and the lack of critical discussion around almost every aspect of it: the thesis, the role of examiners, the nature of the examination and the importance and purpose of the viva. And, concealed within this broad set of issues, was a concern about the more detailed processes that establish equity and fairness, rigor and academic credibility for the highest qualification awarded by UK Universities, whilst at the same time permitting some flexibility and discretion according to discipline, disciplinary tradition, institution and institutional tradition.

Context

It became clear to the authors that unlike the examining of undergraduate and postgraduate *taught* course work, the research degree examining process had moved on little during the past thirty years at least – and probably longer. Perhaps more significantly, there was little evidence until quite recently of critical thinking around the process, its purpose, structure, efficacy and fairness. There have of course been periodic general statements about the examination both within discipline areas (e.g. UCoSDA/BPS, 1995) and more generally (e.g. CVCP, 1993). And there has been a recent increase in attention given to the topic by researchers: at the level of the experience of candidates (e.g. Hartley and Jory, 2000; Delamont et al, 2000) and of examiners (e.g. Johnston, 1997, Trafford and Leshem, 2002a); as well as in terms of institutional policies and practices (e.g. Jackson and Tinkler, 2000; Morley et al, 2002) and of the processes of assessment (e.g. Jackson and Tinkler, 2001; Powell and McCauley, 2002; Trafford and Leshem, 2002b). There have also been efforts made to introduce specific training programmes for academics involved in the examination process (e.g. Mertens, 2001; Cryer and Mertens, this Volume).

Research Degree Examining as a Quality Issue

Meanwhile, the Quality Assurance Agency, in its *Code of Practice for the Assurance of Academic Quality and Standards in Higher Education: Postgraduate Research Programme*s (QAA, 1999) states in Precept 10A that ‘Postgraduate research assessment

processes should be communicated clearly and fully to research students and supervisors'. It suggests that *'Institutions will wish to consider:*

- *the form in which postgraduate research assessment regulations and information should be made available to their research students, staff and external examiners, drawing attention to any exceptions or additional requirements that apply,*
- *the timing of the provision of such information,*
- *the mechanisms used for communicating deadlines in respect of the submission of research project work,*
- *the mechanisms used for communicating procedures relating to the nomination of examiners, the examination process (including any oral examination), the process and time taken to reach a decision and the potential outcomes of the assessment.*

Institutions are left to interpret this code with a resulting significant variation of practice.

In contrast the QAA devoted a whole code *Code of Practice for the Assurance of Academic Quality and Standards in Higher Education: Assessment of Students (*QAA, 2000) to assessment of taught programmes, illustrating the major differences in thinking between the taught and research modes of learning. Is the research degree examination not a form of assessment? The QAA definition of assessment helps us with a useful definition of what we should be attempting to achieve in the assessment of a student's academic work.

> Assessment is a generic term for a set of processes that measure the outcomes of students' learning, in terms of knowledge acquired, understanding developed, and skills gained. It serves many purposes. Assessment provides the means by which students are *graded, passed or fail*. It provides the basis for decisions on whether a student is ready to *proceed, to qualify for an award or to demonstrate competence* to practice. It enables students to *obtain feedback* on their learning and helps them *improve their performance*. It enables staff *to evaluate the effectiveness of their teaching. (QAA, 2000)*

In their different ways the papers in this special edition examine how effective the current diffuse system of research degree examination is in 'measuring the outcome of the student's learning' and again in enabling candidates to 'obtaining feedback on their learning' and to 'improve their performance'. Contributors also consider the efficacy of the system in terms of enabling staff to evaluate the effectiveness of their teaching, that is, how the current rather closed system operates in terms of providing feedback on teaching and resourcing of research programmes.

More recently, *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)* identifies key elements that must be a characteristic of the examination process. The report does not, however, articulate the key issues about how and why this should be implemented.

Again, contributors discuss some of these elements (such as access to reports and training for examiners) and consider how they may, or may not contribute to an enhancement of the quality of the process of examining.

THEMES WITHIN THIS CURRENT COLLECTION OF PAPERS

Issues arising from Candidates' Perceptions of the Process of Examination

Perceptions of Candidates Regarding the Viva, Prior to the Event

Many universities offer training courses for PhD students and these invariably contain sessions on preparing for the viva. Murray in her study reports on the kinds of questions that students ask, in these kinds of sessions and elsewhere, about the experience they are about to have. She points out that there are a series of recurring questions and that these indicate that students tend to be unsure of almost every aspect of the viva. It may be argued of course that there will necessarily be ambiguities in a situation where complex research programmes of varying kinds are to be assessed by examiners who come to the examination process with different levels of understanding about the topic and about the amount and kind of learning that might justify the conferment of an award. But Murray argues that, from the students' perspective, the level of ambiguity it too strong: 'that the viva is, for some students, too undefined' (Murray, this volume). In one sense, the upshot of this is that the students who are likely to do well in the oral element of the examination situation are those who can tolerate ambiguity and who can operate effectively at the

level of oral presentation of their ideas. It is noteworthy that these things are not necessarily part of many research degree programmes.

Murray also points out that for many students the onset of the examination process marks a time when they may seem to be returning to 'novice' status. They may have become used to operating as an expert in their department and in the wider intellectual community but the examination process provides a new setting in which they have to prove themselves again to a new kind of audience with a very particular agenda, which again may well be, in their perceptions at least, ambiguous. Of course, if they are returning to novice status then it is as a novice in this particular process of examination rather than in terms of the substantive area of their research work. The difficulty for candidates then becomes one of realistically assessing their role in the new situation that faces them. The problem for candidates, and indeed for their supervisors who may feel that they should arrange a 'mock viva', is that any such assessment that they make of their own role in the forthcoming event is confounded by the uncertainties of those organizing the process and of the examiners who are to take part in terms of their roles and the purposes of the process. This uncertainty is discussed further in the section in this current paper: *Perceptions of Candidates Regarding Examiners' Adopted Roles*; the usefulness of training programmes is discussed by Cryer and Mertens (this volume)

Perceptions of Candidates Regarding Examiners' Adopted

In her paper in this volume, Wallace focuses on why candidates often remain dissatisfied with their experience of PhD examination even when they have been successful in that

process. In her study she used an analysis of the kinds of language employed by candidates to describe their viva experiences as a way of trying to understand the different kinds of conceptual models that those candidates develop of those experiences. In methodological terms she employed a biographical rather than an ethnographical focus for her questioning. This approach allowed her to use the kinds of metaphor generated by her respondents as indicators of how the experience of the viva impacted upon them. In brief, there was a distinction between those candidates who used positive images drawn from games, sports and conversations and those who used more negative images of ordeal, interrogation and punishment. As well as this distinction was a clear indication that for one candidate at least there was confusion about 'why examiners were so critical and dismissive of her thesis when she knew they were about to award her a pass with only minor amendments' (Wallace, this volume) and for another confusion as to why he was being asked to make amendments 'to bring the thesis in line with the examiner's current thinking' when he was also told that his work was 'never anything except PhD [level]'.

Throughout most of the responses of the candidates in this study was the perception of a dissonance between the process of examination and the outcome. Interestingly, the major complaint was not that the viva was too rigorous but rather that it failed to examine their work as thoroughly as they would have wished and in this sense was not rigorous enough. Of course, the respondents would have gone into the examination phase with different levels of expectation, preparation and ability (see Wallace for an argument about the various responsibilities of examiners and candidates in the management of the viva and

see Morley et al in this Volume for comment on variations in the viva and in levels of preparation for it). But the study also indicates that the experience for students is in large part a product of the examiners' behaviours that are, in turn, a product of the role that examiners perceive that they should adopt. The effects on the experience of candidates will differ where examiners variously perceive their role as one in which they should: attempt to bring the candidate around to their own way of thinking; try to undermine the candidate's work in order to judge their ability to defend; check that the candidate is worthy of joining the world of academia by imposing a rite of passage; have an intellectual conversation which has no bearing on the result.

We would suggest from our experience of running seminars and workshops that such a multitude of notions of role do exist among the community of examiners. They may in part be defined on a discipline basis but are more generally the outcome of different traditions across the sector. Institutional guidelines may provide formal structures within which the assessment process should take place but they do not seem to impinge upon the effects that individual examiners may have as a result of the views on role that they bring to each new situation. For example, for some examiners the 'outcomes of the students' learning' (as referred to in the QAA definition of assessment quoted above) is to be found in the candidate's performance as a defender of his/her findings whereas for others the outcomes are to be found in the contribution to knowledge contained within the thesis (not necessarily in the candidate's defence of it). Indeed, these differences of view are sometimes enshrined in institutional guidelines or rules. Morley et al (this Volume) point out that in some institutions it is possible to produce a satisfactory thesis but to

subsequently fail to be awarded a PhD because of an unsatisfactory performance at the oral. And again, in many institutions it is quite acceptable for a student to defend a ‘somewhat unsatisfactory’ thesis if they perform well in the viva.

Criteria Employed

Denicolo cites a large number of aspects of the examination process where there is variation in practice across the sector. Supplementing her comments with some of our own the following set of differences arises and may provide a useful backdrop to some of the discussions that follow in this collection of articles. Each of the bullet points represents a different view or institutional practice some of the groupings of bullets are not mutually exclusive; in the section on experience required of examiners for example institutions employ some of these criteria in varying degrees. Clearly, by reducing instances to this format we have lost prevalence. Our intention here is merely to indicate range of differences – for a fuller discussion of these differences see Denicolo (this Volume)

Number of examiners:

- the number of examiners required by individual institutions varies from two to three or four.

Internal Examiners:

- may have been part of a continuous assessment of the candidate’s work,
- expected to be totally independent of candidate’s work.

Presence and Function of Supervisors:

- be paid to be present,
- be required to be present but not paid,
- be present if agreed by the candidate,
- be present if agreed by the candidate and the external,
- be expressly forbidden to be present,
- if present fully participate, participate in a limited way or be silent,
- be required to provide a report in advance of the viva,
- not be required to provide in advance a report,
- be required to make a recommendation as part of the exam process.

Experience and Expertise Required of Examiners:

- expertise in the study field,
- experience of doctoral level examining,
- experience as supervisors,
- possession of a doctorate.

Responsibility for Nominating an External Examiner

- the student has no say at all,
- solely a Research Committee and/or supervisor decision,
- negotiated process in which students nominate preference.

(note: issues in relation to this aspect are discussed in Powell and McCauley and Joyner, this Volume)

Criteria for Doctoral Work

- an original contribution to knowledge,

- demonstrate the creation and interpretation of new knowledge (through original research, sufficient to satisfy peer review) that extends the forefront of the discipline,
- potential to be published in some form.

Balance between Thesis and Viva as Evidence:

- the thesis forms the major source of evidence for the quality of the research and the level of scholarship,
- wider sources should be accessed, for instance progress reports and interim documents.

(note: the scope of criteria used by examiners is discussed by Powell and McCauley, this volume).

Perceived Purpose of the Viva

- a forum to authenticate authorship,
- a rite of passage into the guild of academics,
- a check the candidate's ability to explain orally his/her work and to provide indication of her/his breadth and depth of knowledge by being able to answer searching questions on theory and research practice,
- a confrontational experience in which candidates are required to demonstrate their ability to argue with academic rigour while standing up to critique from other experts.

The Viva as a Public or Private Event

- very few institutions make the Viva a public event,
- most do not make it public,

- a few have debated the issue in the light of different practices overseas.

Time Allocated to the Viva

- anything between one and five hours duration,
- science vivas are on average longer in duration than non-science vivas.

The Impact of the Viva on the Result

- a poor viva performance is unlikely, of itself, to change a decision from pass to fail,
- performance in the viva is critical,
- viva is a formative assessment,
- viva is a summative form of assessment,
- viva is both summative and formative assessment.

The Independence of Examiners and the Timing of Reports

- examiners expected to confer before the viva,
- examiners expected to confer only after the viva,
- written reports and recommendations required before the viva,
- written reports and recommendations only expected post-viva.

(note: the use of preliminary reports forms a part of the investigation reported in this volume by Powell and McCauley).

The Timing of the Release of the Result/Decision.

- candidates told at the beginning of the viva that a pass recommendation will be given,
- candidates told that the thesis was highly valued but some issues require further exploration,

- candidates told that the thesis was highly valued but nevertheless they must demonstrate a defence,
- candidates are told nothing and have to wait until the end of the viva to learn the result.

The Questions that Examiners ask

Clearly, the role adopted by examiners (or rather the role that they think they should adopt) will influence the kind, and indeed the number of questions that they ask. In his paper in this collection Trafford reports on an ethnographic study in which he collected the wording of questions posed by examiners and noted his observations of interpersonal relationships within critical incidents. He was able to do this across a range of discipline areas in his various roles as chair of examining panels, supervisor or examiner. In his paper he presents his findings in phases: 'prelude' (before the viva itself) 'opening', 'consolidating opinion' and finally 'closing'.

From his analyses of activity during the prelude phase it became clear that examiners rarely changed their opinion on the thesis, indeed this happened on only 8% of instances that he recorded. They used the time before the viva to clarify for each other what they found interesting and potentially problematic in the thesis. In the opening phase examiners invariable asked an introductory question of an icebreaker kind and then a majority (84%) asked candidates why they had chosen the particular topic for their doctoral research. In Trafford's view this acted as a kind of filter question that led examiners down any one of a number of avenues; subsequent questions related to (in

descending order of prevalence): conceptualisation, doctorateness, professional relevance, content, or methodology.

Whichever avenue was pursued there tended to be a difference in the kind of questioning, during the 'consolidating opinion' phase, according to the prior view that an examiner had taken of the merits of the thesis. Where examiners came to the viva situation with a generally positive view of the work then their questions tended to become more discursive and indeed where in the latter stages of a viva it seemed to become clearer to examiners that the work and/or the candidate was in fact worthy of the award then similarly the questioning became more discursive. On the other hand, where examiners were concerned that the work was not up to the standard required then they tended to ask more precise, technical questions. They also tended to probe the candidate more for evidence of a deeper understanding of issues within the thesis. Interestingly, this latter style of questioning was also more prevalent, independently of prior views on the quality of the work, in the questioning of relatively inexperienced examiners in contrast to that of their more experienced colleagues. As noted elsewhere in this collection of papers level of experience of examining is one of the key variables in determining kind of questioning and attitude to the whole experience.

Trafford's study also gives evidence for what, judging from our work in national seminars, is a widely held view across the sector: that traditions of scholarship across disciplines influences how examiners go about their task. At a basic level of time taken to conduct the questioning, according to Trafford's observations, vivas in Natural Sciences

took on average twice as long as those in the social sciences. At a more qualitative level, examiners in the former discipline asked more closed questions that illustrated a 'deliberate accumulation of understanding' on their part, they tended to move on to issues of contribution to knowledge only when they were satisfied with issues of argument, fieldwork practice and methodology. In comparison, examiners in the social sciences tended to emphasise a thematic exploration of issues within the thesis. These kinds of discipline-based differences are clearly important to those attempting to organize institution wide training courses for research students which contain sessions on the viva.

To summarise, it seems that candidates are likely to face different kinds of viva depending on the nature of their discipline and according to the predetermined views of the examiners. These two factors will be mediated by the relative experience of the examiners.

As well as differences in these 'external' features of the viva – candidates bring their own set of differences to the unfolding social exchange in the form of expectations of what counts as a doctorate and how that is likely to be assessed. In common with the paper by Wallace in this collection, there is a suggestion in Trafford's paper that some candidates at least were disappointed by the nature of the questioning they received. Here it is suggested that their disappointment was rooted in the way in which examiners were more concerned to pursue issues of doctorateness, conceptualization and methodology than they were to attend to 'content issues', the latter being the expectation of candidates. Again, this perhaps indicates that there is lack of clarity about what doctorateness means.

Candidates, in common with some examiners, may tend to expect the judgement of doctorateness to be made on the basis of the content within the thesis. Some examiners, however, seem to see the content as the 'vehicle for the research' (Trafford, this volume), while doctorateness itself is judged in terms of candidates' conceptual understanding of key issues and ability to analyse critically methodological ways of addressing them. This issue of the ambiguous balance between the assessment of the text on the one hand and the judgement making that goes in the viva on the other, is explored further in the paper by Morley et al (this Volume).

Views from the Examiners' perspective

Personal Views on the Examining Process

Joyner (this Volume) addresses the issues surrounding the selection and appointment of external examiners. He notes the lack of innovation in the research degree field before identifying two key principles, subject knowledge and wisdom and humanity, which should drive the appointment of examiners. Subject knowledge is more easily identified than humanity and wisdom, and his paper develops a personal view of how the latter can be achieved. In identifying criteria, the view is offered that the examiner should be matched to the student, a practice with which all would not agree but one which illustrates a fundamental dilemma in research degree examining, that of equity and standards across the sector and across disciplines.

One of the difficulties with ‘equity and standards’ across doctoral awards is that, as Morley et al (this Volume) point out: in the UK system the external examiner does not act as a moderator as is the case for taught course work. There is no moderation of PhD results in the same way that there is for all other levels of award in higher education. The only kind of moderation that does occur is in the informal way in which an external may become established as knowledgeable about the level of work and the ability to defend it that he/she can then use as a general marker of doctorateness and hence apply to individual studies and candidates within the discipline area.

In the final paper in this special edition, Grabbe gives a very personal view of the role of an external examiner highlighting the expectations and difficulties of the examining process and the highly personal involvement of the individual examiner in that process.

Lack of Consensus in the Views of Examiners

Powell and McCauley in their paper in this collection report the views of a range of academics on issues of: reports, assessment criteria, the remit of the examining task, training for examiners and criteria for appointment of examiners. What is striking is the lack of consensus on almost all points respondents were asked to consider. This clearly indicates that it is hard to find shared understanding of how the procedures of research degree assessment should be set out in principle and carried out in practice. Further, the remarks reported which underpin this lack of consensus indicate some fundamental differences of understanding about what constitutes research degree study and subsequently what constitutes examination of it.

Perhaps the most clearly exposed difference of view relates to the role of the oral questioning of the candidate as part of the examination process. Where for some examiners this oral component must be an unseen test of a candidate's abilities (as developed during a research degree programme) for others it is an open discussion of issues within the thesis that it is therefore quite reasonable to identify to the candidate (and his/her supervisors) some time prior to the viva itself. In this latter perception the prime purpose of the oral examination is to pursue issues within the thesis as presented for examination, thus time for the candidate to prepare a defence becomes quite reasonable.

A linked and perhaps more fundamental difference of view, that emerges from the Powell and McCauley paper is the disparity between examiners who implicitly see the focus of the examination process as relating to a consideration of whether or not the thesis makes a contribution to knowledge and those who see it as relating to a testing out of whether or not the candidate has learnt enough from the programme, in which they have tried to extend the boundaries of knowledge, to warrant the title conferred with the award. In this latter view it is the candidate's learning at Masters or Doctoral level that is being assessed. The difference of view noted here is also explored in Trafford and in Morley et al in this volume.

Support and Training for Examiners

Cryer and Mertens, in their paper in this volume, focus on the training and support of academics in relation to the examining process. They describe their own work in this area. They argue that a practice or mock viva is important in providing an experience that

demystifies the examination process and enables the candidates to fill in any gaps in their background knowledge and sharpen their ability to tackle the kinds of searching questions that they are likely to experience in the viva itself. Their training programmes involve recording and reflecting of viva experiences so as to enable understanding of the processes that are likely to go on. Their argument is that such reflection helps reduce anxiety about the examination and enables supervisors to help candidates perform to the best of their ability. They go on to discuss the web gateway and its evaluation. Clearly, the number of web hits that they cite indicates a demand for advice and guidance on aspects of the process of research degree examination.

Powell and McCauley in their paper (this Volume) report on the responses from a range of examiners in terms of the usefulness of training for examiners. The responses varied greatly with no clear consensus in either direction. On the whole however, clear guidance for examiners was generally considered a positive thing whereas the notion of mandatory training was less well supported. The reasons for skepticism are given in their paper.

Issues of Policy

Morley et al in their paper in this volume note the marked increase in research degree candidates within the wider increase in postgraduate students generally. They also note the shift from the notion of a doctorate as scholarship to one in which the focus is on research training. They go on to review the way in which the examination of research degrees has continued over recent years, citing possible reasons why the viva has survived in its present form and a range of difficulties that may arise from its form and

the procedures that underpin it. As with almost all other authors in this special edition they describe the viva process as potentially ‘mysterious, mystifying and unfair’.

They go on to question the notion of collegiality – which in one sense at least underpins the way in which research degree examination is carried out in the UK. They suggest that the notion may in fact mask some complex relationships of power and manipulation. Indeed, it is clear from our own experience of running seminars and workshops that in a worst-case scenario the kind of peer review that is intended to ensure rigour and fairness may in fact militate against these things by producing situations where the examination process is subject to potentially unfair and non-rigorous influences rooted in relationships and micro-politics. Despite the best efforts of many institutions to ensure fairness by asking for ‘prior relationships’ to be declared during the process of approving examination arrangements, perceived status of individuals and institutions may nevertheless combine with personal likes and dislikes and intellectual preferences to produce a powerful mix of influences on outcome. Morley et al quote some stories from the ‘academy’ that lend credence to anxieties in this respect.

CONCLUSION

The collection of papers highlights the breadth of thinking about the research degree examination and the viva in particular. They tend to suggest that the process is in need of examination in itself to ensure a commonality of purpose and practice across the UK. As in many other aspects of the research degree process the papers clearly illustrate the

minimal change which has taken place to practice over the last 50 years in contrast to the major changes which have taken place in examining of undergraduate and postgraduate taught programmes. It has not been our purpose to explain why this is the case, but more to identify variation and to question whether a more common approach would be to the benefit of student, supervisor and the research work itself.

Some of the contributing authors in this special edition (e.g. Morley et al; Grabbe) call, overtly or covertly, for more national influence on the research degree examining process in terms of more universally agreed standards and guidelines. Certainly, many in the sector would wish to avoid an increase in directives from Government appointed bodies on how Universities should operate their processes of examining in the context of research degrees. And Denicolo points to some views expressed to her of the dangers of too much standardization (which might lead to the 'production of pro-forma theses and the stifling of innovative research' [Denicolo, this Volume]). Yet there does seem to be a compelling argument arising from the kinds of study reported in this special edition for some clearer agreements at a national level about purposes and procedures for this most exacting of tasks – examining at doctoral level. And yet in the report Improving Standards in Postgraduate Research Degree Programmes *(HEFCE, 2003),* the authors shy away from making firm recommendations about the fundamentals of PhD examination and its conduct.

We have then a long way to go before we can be absolutely certain that practices in the University of Uttoxeter are things of the past.

‘The internal tells me it’s a pretty clear pass. You wouldn’t need to read the whole dammed thesis just flip through research background and methodology and go straight to conclusions…..

And at the viva you’d only need to spend 20 minutes chatting to the candidate about Coronation Street, another ten minutes writing 50 words about it being wholly original and suitable for publication and Bob’s your uncle’ (Taylor, 2001)

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