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The examination of research for dissertations and theses

First submission: 18 September 2007
Acceptance: 8 February 2008

Specific knowledge and skills are required to maintain the quality of the examination of postgraduate research. Preliminary research indicated that there was a need to investigate the examination of postgraduate research. Individual and focus group interviews were used in a qualitative research to determine the views of examiners of dissertations and theses on the issue of examining postgraduate studies. An interview schedule was compiled from the literature investigation and used as an outline for the discussions. It was found that experienced examiners follow a definite structure in the examination of postgraduate studies, the examination process does not always run smoothly and remuneration was mentioned as a problem. The examination of dissertations and theses is not a process to take lightly and examiners need proper guidelines and training to enable them to be effective.

Die eksaminering van navorsing vir verhandelinge en proefskrifte

Bepaalde kennis en vaardigheid is noodsaaklik om gehalte in die evaluering van nagraadse navorsing te behou. Voorlopige navorsing het aangedui dat 'n dringende behoefte bestaan aan 'n ondersoek na die eksaminering van nagraadse navorsing. Individuele en fokusgroeponderhoude is in 'n kwalitatiewe navorsingsprojek gebruik om die siening van eksaminatore van verhandelings en proefskrifte te bepaal. 'n Onderhoudskedule is aan die hand van 'n literatuurstudie saamgestel en is as raamwerk vir die besprekings gebruik. Dit is bevind dat ervare eksaminatore 'n definitiewe struktuur in die eksaminering van nagraadse studies gebruik, dat die eksamineringsproses egter nie altyd vloeiend is nie en dat eksaminatorsvergoeding aangedui is as 'n probleem. Die eksamineringsproses geskied nie lukraak nie en eksaminatore het deeglike leiding en opleiding nodig om hulle in staat te stel om die verwagte gehalte van eksaminering te handhaaf.

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Acta Academica
2009 41(1): 255-272
ISSN 0587-2405

SUN MEDIA
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> The PhD dissertation is the ultimate educational product. It reflects the training of its author and the technical, analytical and writings skills developed in the doctoral program (Lovitts 2005: 1).

The quality of postgraduate research is determined by, among other things, the quality of the evaluation or assessment done by examiners, the knowledge and skills of supervisors and the extent to which students' expectations of the supervision are met. Johnston (1997: 334-9) emphasises the importance of the examination process to "safeguard the standards of doctoral qualifications". She also found in a study that the examination of the same thesis by different examiners results in both positive (pass) and negative (fail) comments. She thus came to the conclusion that there are many inconsistencies in the recommendations made on individual theses. Examiners often tend to focus on the writing and editorial presentation of the report instead of on the academic properties. She also indicates that examiners interpret the guidelines for examination as provided by the university differently.

Similar findings emerged in the preliminary research at a workshop held at a conference of the Educational Association of South Africa in Pretoria in January 2002. Attendees felt that

- examiners interpreted the guidelines for the examination of dissertations differently, which resulted in inconsistent comments on the candidate's work;
- there was a discrepancy between the marks awarded by different examiners to the work of the same student;
- the examination process could be subjective as examiners were evaluating from a personal frame of reference;
- reports were often unbalanced as evidenced by numerous negative comments on work that was highly rated or *vice versa*; work was poorly rated without proper justification.

Following on this preliminary research and the request from the participants, a subsequent literature review reveals that little research was indeed done on the processes involved in the assessment of postgraduate research reports. However, there has been a long-standing concern with the criteria for the examination of postgraduate studies. Nightingale (1984: 145) analysed examiners' comments on 58 theses submitted at an Australian university and concluded that the

statement that PhD theses should make "a substantial and original contribution to knowledge" did not provide an adequate guideline and that examiners needed more detailed criteria or guidelines for examination. In 1996, Ballard found that examiners replaced the traditional qualities ascribed to a successful thesis, namely originality, scholarship and the advancement of knowledge with less lofty expectations in terms of imagination, competence and mastery (Mullins & Kiley 2002: 371).

In 1992 Phillips reported on interviews held with 58 academic staff concerning the criteria they applied as external examiners (Mullins & Kiley 2002: 372). He found considerable agreement on the format and general content of theses, as well as what was expected with regard to standards. The interviewees emphasised technical proficiency, originality (which they regarded as "creative" or "significant") and conceptual development. Hansford & Maxwell (1993: 78) examined 255 examiners' reports and found that examiners focussed on format and presentation, the literature review, the theoretical or philosophical framework of the thesis and the problem of unsubstantiated and/or over-generalised conclusions. They concluded that there is little comment on research questions and design, data collection and analysis, and on the supervision itself.

From this review it is clear that academics are of the opinion that particular knowledge and skills are required to examine postgraduate research but the nature thereof is vague and in many cases intuitive. The research question reflected on in this article is: what are the academics' perceptions of the examination of postgraduate dissertations and theses?

1. Research design

1.1 Approach

A qualitative, interpretive research approach was followed and the research took place in a natural environment where the researcher acted as an instrument in the collection and analysis of the data (Creswell 1998: 14). The researcher adhered to the necessary ethical measures

in the accumulation of data on how examiners experienced the examination process of postgraduate studies and the necessary measures were taken to ensure the rights and privacy of the participants. The phenomenon was not only studied empirically, by means of individual and focus group interviews, but was supplemented by findings from the literature, and described as accurately as possible. The researcher focussed on the meaning which the participants attributed to the examination process, and the captured data was rich in descriptive detail concerning the participants' attitudes and feelings (Swann & Pratt 2003: 3).

1.2 The research process, techniques, methods and data production

The research process comprised three distinct phases of data collection:

1.2.1 Internalising the research question

A literature study emphasised the research paradigm and frame of reference, and enhanced the researcher's insight into the field of study and the findings of other researchers on the topic (Mouton & Marais 1992: 24). It enabled the researcher to compile an interview schedule and to pinpoint the subject of research, namely an investigation into examiners' perception of the knowledge and skills necessary for examining postgraduate studies.

1.2.2 Collection of information

A literature review as well as individual and focus group interviews were used to collect the data (De Vos 2005: 346). Interviews provided rich descriptions and explanations of situational influences on the problem under research. It also gave the researcher access to the perspectives of the examiners who had been interviewed, and provided a holistic understanding of their view of examining postgraduate studies and their perceptions of the challenges faced in that regard (Scheurich 1997: 61).

In interpreting the gathered data no distinction was made between the data obtained by individual interviews and focus group discussions since both tools provided similar information.

GABA's model for trustworthiness addresses ways of reducing biases in the results (Poggenpoel 1998: 349-51). The following appropriate techniques were applied to ensure the validity of the qualitative findings:

- Triangulation of methods was used — individual and focus group interviews were supported by field notes.
- Uncertainties were clarified during the interviews.
- Sampling decisions were made carefully.
- A tape recorder was used and the data was transcribed *verbatim*.
- The researcher as well as an independent researcher analysed the raw data to reach consensus about the categories that emerged from the themes and to check the consistency of each other's analysis.
- The researcher remained objective and did not participate or reveal personal views during the interviews.

According to the above model, the data was processed by tape recording interviews and taking notes during the focus group discussions. These tapes and notes were used as a basis for processing the data. The analysis process was intuitive and the researcher used different thinking strategies, such as induction, synthesis, bracketing and logical thinking to identify different themes and categories. The raw data gained was processed to identify themes, categories and subcategories. The researcher worked by identifying repetitive categories mentioned by the workshop and focus group participants. The emerging information was interpreted, explained and compared to the literature in order to construct meaning to answer the research question.

1.2.3 Application of the collected information

Bearing the findings of the literature study and the initial workshop in mind, the question underpinning this investigation was: How do academics perceive the knowledge and skills necessary to examine postgraduate studies? Thus, the aim of the research was to investigate the views of academics from various universities on the issue of examining postgraduate studies.

The compiled interview schedule to expand the initial research question includes the following questions:

- What knowledge and skills does an examiner need?
- What are you looking for when examining?
- Must the examiner be an expert on the topic or is he or she examining a process?
- How many examiners do you appoint?
- What process do you use for appointing examiners for postgraduate research studies?
- Do you make examination reports available to students?
- Do you make examination reports available to the supervisor or promoter?
- What feedback do you give to external examiners?
- How do you feel about an anonymous examination?
- What do you think of the idea of registering as an examiner?

1.3 Context and sampling

Purposive sampling was used in this research (Bernard 2000: 176, Newman 2003: 213). Participants who had experienced the examination of dissertations and theses of postgraduate students and who would be able to provide a variety of perspectives were engaged. This type of sampling suited the researcher's needs because academics who were interested in and had knowledge of the examination of postgraduate research reports attended the conference sessions and were willing to take part in focus group discussions and individual interviews at various universities.

Focus group interviews were conducted at two international conferences (Johannesburg and London) through workshops facilitated by the researcher and attended by academics interested in the examination of research reports. Seven academics from various South African universities attended the workshop in Johannesburg, while the thirteen attendees in London came from ten different universities in Africa, Australasia, America, Canada and Europe. These workshops were supplemented by individual and focus group interviews at various South African universities. The Faculties of Education and Economic Sciences of various universities were contacted and academics

interested in the topic participated in the interviews. Seventeen academics from Education and eighteen from Economic Sciences took part in the investigation.

Table 1 gives a summary of the participants in this study. This is not a representative sample for generalisation of findings, but enough responses emerged to shed light on the research question.

Table 1: Participants in the study

University	Number of participants	Faculty	Research tool
Free State	5	Education (2) Economic Sciences (3)	Individual interviews Individual interviews
Fort Hare	3	Education (1) Economic Sciences (2)	Individual interviews Individual interviews
Rhodes	6	Education (3) Economic Sciences (3)	Individual interviews Individual interviews
Western Cape	5	Education (2) Economic Sciences (3)	Individual interviews Individual interviews
Stellenbosch	8	Education (5) Economic Sciences (3)	Focus group Individual interviews
North-West	8	Education (4) Economic Sciences (4)	Individual interviews Individual interviews
Johannesburg workshop	7	Education (6)	Focus group
London workshop	13	Economic Sciences (1) Various (international)	Focus group

Some of the participants had considerable experience of supervising and examining postgraduate research, while others were very unsure of what they had to do. This is in line with the view of Delamont *et al* (2004:113) that one must not assume that a large number of examiners are totally confident about the examination process and know exactly how to examine a dissertation or thesis.

2. Discussion of the findings

It must be noted that, according to the discussions in the research, the academics in South Africa experience the same issues as their counterparts at overseas universities. In some cases the administrative issues differ on minor aspects (for instance, the research question). Similarly, the views of academics in the two academic disciplines are similar. No differences emerged that could justify a comparative study between various faculties. It appears that the problems experienced by academics are universal, and cross over the boundaries of a university, a country or different subject disciplines. A discussion of the four main categories in the findings on the examination of dissertations and theses from the focus groups and individual interviews follows.

2.1 Expectations for dissertations/theses

Participants were unanimous in their expectations for dissertations and theses. According to the regulations in the academic yearbooks of universities, as quoted by a participant, a master's student should be able "to do a thorough literature study and to integrate the knowledge gained". A doctoral student was expected to make "a substantial and original contribution to knowledge and work independently". This is in line with the view of Lovitts (2005: 1) that the awarding of a PhD indicates that the student is able to do independent scholarly work and has a certain amount of technical, analytical and writing skills. Anderson *et al* (2006: 15) indicate that students should adapt an open and questioning perspective which includes a critical evaluation of existing research literature.

Examiners and, in particular, inexperienced academics were not always very clear on what is expected from them and how to approach the examination of a dissertation or thesis. As one examiner put it, "the examiner as well as the student needs clear guidelines to what is really expected in a dissertation". The expectations of examiners are to a great extent moulded according to their interpretations of the examination guidelines provided by the universities and their own frame of reference. In the words of Sayed *et al* (1998: 278): "Postgraduate work at the Masters' level is commonly conceived as inducting

students into the academic enterprise, or in terms of an apprenticeship", while "originality and independent work" is expected from a doctoral candidate.

Many participants in the focus groups and in the individual interviews lamented the fact that unfortunately lecturers do not undergo any formal preparation for their role as examiners and that they have to rely on their own experience of being examined to guide them in the process. This fact was also raised by Johnston (1997: 346). Some participants admitted that in the process of experiential learning their earlier examination reports were perhaps not as objective and unbiased as they should be, and that these were not fair to the student or the supervisor.

Guidelines were regarded as important not only for the examiner, but also for the postgraduate student ("how do you prepare for examination if you do not know what is being examined?") In this regard the following is mentioned in the literature: According to the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA in Britain), students should know exactly what is expected of them and "postgraduate research assessment processes should be clear and operated rigorously, fairly, reliably and consistently" (Jackson & Tinkler 2001: 356). There needs to be greater clarity on the examination process, which implies greater transparency of procedures, and the provision of more guidance for candidates, supervisors and examiners about examining.

Delamont *et al* (2004: 203) suggest that new supervisors, who are unsure of their own ability to judge a student's work, should read some successful theses and talk to the supervisors if possible.

Mentors who guide and support could also assist inexperienced examiners with the examination process. This guideline was suggested by many academics, covering the range of participants, but they agreed that very little was done in this regard at their respective universities. At most this was done informally by a few people.

2.2 Aspects to be considered in the examination

Different examiners approached the task of examining a thesis differently, but the process of examination as outlined by examiners was more or less similar. One of the participants explained:

> I first read through the table of contents [...] then I read chapter 1 and the last chapter [...] to get an idea of what is planned and what the student accomplished, [. . .] then I will look at the bibliography to see what sources had been used. Then, I speed read, actually glance, through the whole study [...] that gives me a good idea of what it is about. Yes [...] the next thing is to read everything in detail and evaluate it [...] and of course look at the references and bibliography. I make many notes while reading to assist me in writing my report.

Similar outlines were reported by various examiners. There is great value in first getting an overview of the study and to acquaint oneself with the scope of the report before one investigating the detail presented.

Another participant indicated that as he worked, he generated a number of questions, such as: what is the research problem? What aims does the student have? In what context and within what background is the study done? Are the findings and conclusions substantiated? And, is there a golden thread running through the thesis, linking all the different aspects? The use of questions in the examination process assists a reader to focus on what is read.

Other participants mentioned the following important aspects: coherence of themes, connection of themes with objectives and background, the analysis of the problem and the relationship between objectives and findings. One participant sought "logical thinking and scientific formulation ... clear problem statement linked to the objectives, and whether these are reached". Another examiner felt very strongly about "argumentation and using language in a symbolic way", while the following question was also reflected: "Is the consulted literature properly organised, structured and documented, and does it cover the recent status of the research field?"

This was all in accordance with the findings of Lovitts (2005: 6) that the thesis must be well written and organised, show mature independent thinking and understanding of the literature, and that the

argument must be focussed as well as logical, rigorous and sustained. The thesis should be a report on enriched data from multiple sources. This is also in accordance with Delamont *et al* (1998: 169) who interviewed experienced examiners in a study conducted in Britain and found criteria such as coherence, rigorous argument, "meaty" and thoroughness. They concluded that besides the technicalities which must be correct, the examiner has to judge whether the student has mastered appropriate indeterminate skills and displayed the right indeterminate qualities.

Examiners should bear the following questions in mind when reading the thesis:

- What questions and answers would they have liked?
- Did the conclusions follow on from the introduction?
- Was the research design clear?
- Was the bibliography up to date, substantial enough and correctly prepared?
- Were the results worthwhile?
- How much work had actually been done?
- What was the intellectual depth and rigour of the thesis?
- Was this actually 'research' — was there an argument? (Delamont *et al* 2004: 151, Mullins & Kiley 2002: 377).

Although these questions provide worthwhile guidelines for the examination process, the examiner should stay objective and avoid personal preferences. None of the participants in the study referred to the possibility of subjectivity, but Johnston (1997: 345) found much subjectivity in the examination of theses which result in inconsistencies and shortcomings in different reports on the same thesis.

The possibility of subjectivity is also found in a study by Mullins & Kiley (2002: 372-7) who interviewed 30 experienced examiners on different aspects of examination, including the effect of first impressions on the examiner. Although not irreversible, they found that first impressions influenced the examiner's frame of mind in respect of the remainder of the thesis.

This aspect also surfaced during the interviews. The message was clear that the examiner was not supposed to compare the work of the student with the way he would approach the research, but to

objectively evaluate the student's approach. One must remember that there are various ways to approach a research issue, and the task of the examiner is merely to evaluate the process followed by the student.

2.3 Passable or poor dissertations or theses

Examiners have definite ideas about a passable dissertation or thesis. As one put it: "There must be a coherence of themes … technical aspects are important ... there must be a connection of themes with the objectives and the background". The analysis of the research problem, linking the research problem with the research objectives, on the one hand, and linking the research methodology, on the other, as well as the relationship between objectives and findings was considered to be crucial. It was also mentioned that "originality" and "creativity" are important aspects in research.

In a study conducted in Britain by Winter *et al* (2000: 31-4), 31 examiners were requested to reflect on the criteria they used to decide whether a PhD was acceptable, and on what they meant by original and publishable. Their findings were that a PhD ought to

> be a report of work which others would want to read; tell a compelling story articulately whilst pre-empting inevitable critiques; carry the reader into complex realms, and inform and educate him/her and be sufficiently speculative or original to command respectful peer attention.

Participants in the interviews regarded sloppiness as a common descriptor of a poor thesis. Sloppiness was typically demonstrated by typographical errors, poor language usage, mistakes in calculations, inconsistencies in referencing and footnotes. Sloppiness was regarded as an indication that the research itself might not be rigorous and the results and conclusions could not be trusted. One examiner mentioned the problem of "too much written and too little said". This often causes the examiner to begin to read the thesis differently.

This view was backed by the literature, in which a poor thesis is characterised by sloppiness, lack of careful thought, and weak, unconvincing or invalid arguments (cf Lovitts 2005: 8, Mullins & Kiley 2002: 378, Nightingale 1984: 142, Shannon 1995: 14). Delamont *et al* (2004: 113) as well as Phillips & Pugh (2000: 151)

emphasised the importance of the candidate's grasp of the literature, the adequacy of the methodology and the likely opportunities for publication. These aspects must be evident in the thesis.

2.4 The appointment of examiners and the administration of the process

At all participating universities dissertations and theses are examined by two or three persons, some of whom are usually external examiners. It is normal practice that the supervisor is one of the examiners. At one university, all three examiners were external. In the case of a dissertation, one and in the case of a thesis, two would be international academics. It was also mentioned that sometimes a practitioner was used as an examiner, provided that he was academically justified. This was done to avoid research to be totally remote from application and usability. One of the participants mentioned that, "An internal examiner is necessary for quality control and comparison of international standards with the external examiners".

At most of the participating universities the supervisor suggested the names of possible external examiners to examine the dissertation or thesis, but the final decision was made by a higher degree committee to avoid over-use of a particular examiner or to prevent the possibility of appointing only trusted colleagues. One of the supervisors felt very strongly that:

> The supervisor should select examiners of his own choice, because they (supervisors) know the academics that are experts in the field and appreciate their approach to research.

He requested CV's from the potential examiners "to determine authority of the subject field". Another confirmed and said: "I am really irritated by an examiner who does not know the applicable research methods".

Quality of examination is regarded as essential and participants prefer experts in the field to act as examiners for their candidates. It is also indicated that the examiner must have sufficient knowledge of the research approach followed by the student, and be open-minded to evaluate the work submitted for examination.

Regarding the expertise of the examiner, one of the participants said: "Examination of a dissertation or thesis is about the process of research and the examiner must be an expert on that". A number of supervisors rated content and process of equal value in the examination process. They did not place much emphasis on expertise on a specific topic, although expertise in the study field was considered important.

Both these views are also found in the literature. Tinkler & Jackson (2000: 170-4) emphasise academic credentials, experience and objectivity as important criteria in the selection of examiners. Johnston (1996) questioned the assumption that examiners are seen as experts on the topic of the thesis. She stated that examiners appreciate work which is logically presented, focussed, succinct, summarised and provides a golden thread throughout.

At most of the universities a non-examining chairperson administered the examination reports. The non-examining chairperson discussed the reports with the supervisor and in the case of discrepancies between the reports, "the supervisor reflects on the differences by means of a memo". In the rare case where the problem could not be solved, "an arbiter is appointed ... he gets the thesis and the reports of the other examiners and then ... makes a recommendation to the examining committee". At some of the universities the supervisor compiled the summary of the reports himself. This was not considered by the participants as negative or "unacademic", since the original reports are also submitted.

Various academics admit that a negative examination report reflects negatively on the supervisor as well. It is thus important for the supervisor as well as the researcher that the process be executed transparently.

In general it was found that students did not receive copies examination reports. This was due to university policy and not academic reasoning. It was suggested that this was to protect the examiners to write the examination report without concerns of possible legal action by the student. One of the participants stated:

> If the student wants to see the reports you must get the external examiner's consent for that [...] and it then the (partial) report must be without revealing the name of the examiner.

Another one mentioned that students only received (partial) examination reports when they had to make corrections.

Feedback to supervisors was crucial according to the participants. These reports can be viewed as peer review on the supervising process. It was said: "Seeing report results help the supervisor to grow". In these reports the supervisor can learn from the insights of other academics. Bear in mind that the supervisor was intimately involved in the research process, therefore an objective evaluation by another academic could serve to bring perspective. The supervisor could use this feedback to improve his supervision with future studies.

One of the examiners reacted to the question of, "How would you feel about a body for the registration of examiners?" with, "No ... experienced examiners do not need that". Another lecturer said: "No, that is going too far ... we do not need a certificate for everything that we are doing". It was pointed out that there could be numerous administrative problems in creating such a register. However, someone else commented that, "it would be of value for quality assurance and I would love it".

Examiners also experienced problems with the examination process, as one participant put it: "There are many problems due to red tape ... not easy to untangle that" and "what really irritates me, is the unfair prevention of a distinction".

2.5 Remuneration for examining postgraduate studies

Although the aspect of remuneration was not explicitly questioned, several participants mentioned it in both the interviews and the focus group discussions. One examiner stated that it took him at least two weeks to examine a thesis, while "I am paid peanuts for the job". Another participant said: "I am definitely not doing the work for the money. One has to act as external examiner, because sometime or other you will need an examiner yourself". Delamont *et al* (2004: 142) indicated that "being the external examiner of a thesis pays considerably below the hourly rate of the UK national minimum wage". It appears that universities need to attend to this aspect — especially in view of academic integrity and the subsidy earned.

3. Conclusion

Experienced examiners followed clear self-developed guidelines in the examination of postgraduate studies. An overview of the thesis was reached by studying the table of contents. After gaining this initial background, the report would be read and evaluated carefully in terms of the research problem, research objectives, context and conclusions. Integration of information, coherence of themes, the relationship between objectives and findings, logical thinking, scientific formulation and sound argumentation were factors that experienced examiners took into account. This was followed by reading and comparing the first and last chapters in order to determine whether the research question had been answered and the aims of the study had been met. Examiners also checked references to sources and the bibliography. A poor thesis was characterised by sloppiness which included typographical errors, mistakes in calculations, referencing and footnotes.

There was little difference in the policies for the appointment of examiners, and the examination process was more or less similar at the various institutions. Although minor differences did occur, the use of external examiners for the assessment of postgraduate studies was mentioned by all participants.

There were conflicting responses to the question of a body for the registration of examiners. This issue requires to be investigated in order to determine the advantages and disadvantages of the idea, and overcoming administrative problems.

Examiners are not trained to examine postgraduate reports but gained their expertise through experience. In none of the interviews did participants mention that formal training to become an examiner had been provided to them. Experienced examiners who had developed their own guidelines on examining postgraduate studies could act as mentors for inexperienced examiners. Formal guidelines for the examination of dissertations or theses would be of great help especially to inexperienced examiners. This could be supplemented by in-service training or shadow examining under the auspices of a mentor.

The examination of dissertations and theses finally determines the quality of postgraduate research reports, and examiners need proper guidelines and training to enable them to be of the expected quality.

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