

Examining Theses Workshop plan 1a: Short discussion session for experienced examiners

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Professor Mark Tennant, Dean, School of Graduate Studies, University of Technology, Sydney for Activity 1a

Ms Margaret Buckridge, Griffith Institute for Higher Education, Griffith University for providing a draft of her paper from the HERDSA conference, July 2001

Dr Margaret Kiley, CEDAM at the Australian National University, and Dr Gerry Mullins, Advisory Centre University Education, University of Adelaide for the paper they presented to the Deans & Directors of Graduate Studies, Fremantle, May 2001 which has been published as Kiley, M. & Mullins, G. (2002) 'It's a PhD not a Nobel Prize': How experienced examiners assess research theses. *Studies in Higher Education*, 27, 4, 369-386.

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Activity 1a: Overview

Time: Approximately one and a half hours

Activity 1a is simply a structured discussion in which experienced examiners are asked to share their reflections on their own practice. The facilitator uses the results of interviews with examiners conducted by Mullins & Kiley (2002) and Buckridge (2001) to add to the experience of participants and in summing up.

The facilitator will probably need to press participants to articulate clearly and specifically their thoughts on criteria against which they judge theses and the details of their strategies for approaching the task of examining. This type of discussion is often enhanced if participants come from different disciplines.

Preparation

1. Study detailed advice for facilitators.
2. It is strongly recommended that you read the detailed advice for facilitators of Activity 1a, Activity 2, Activity 3, and Activity 4.
3. Define your specific goals for this session. Are there issues that are currently causing concern at your institution?
4. Prepare Overheads 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 1.5 as desired.
5. Collect any University documents you decide to use and photocopy as necessary.

Procedure

Check with group to find out how much experience they have as examiners and why they have chosen to attend this session. This will help you decide how "interventionist" you need to be as facilitator and which issues to spend most time on, as well as introducing members of the group to each other.

Begin the session by introducing the two projects from which you will draw information during the session (Overheads 1.1 and 1.2).

Elicit participants' views and experiences of examining by using the questions in the detailed advice for facilitators. Compare as appropriate with the findings of the two projects, especially where your group differs.

Conclude with an overview of the findings (Overheads 1.3, 1.4, and 1.5), highlighting points of agreement or disagreement with your group.

Detailed advice for facilitators

For your introduction to the session

The majority of material for this session is drawn from two papers.

The first was presented to the meeting of Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies in Fremantle on 11 May 2001 which was subsequently published as. Mullins G & Kiley, M. (2002) 'It's a PhD not a Nobel Prize': How experienced examiners assess research theses. *Studies in Higher Education*, 27, 4, 369-386. The paper, It's a PhD, not a Nobel Prize: How experienced examiners assess research theses, was prepared by Margaret Kiley, CELTS, University of Canberra and Gerry Mullins, ACUE, Adelaide University. It reports the results of an interview study of 30 experienced examiners from a range of disciplines in five universities.

The project addressed the following questions:

- what steps do examiners go through in the process of reading a thesis?
- what criteria do examiners use to assess a thesis? Are these criteria derived from institutional policies or are they based on the individual examiner's understanding of what is required for a PhD or a Masters by research?
- do examiners use different criteria for different groups of students (eg, international students from non-English speaking backgrounds)?
- are there influences on the examiners arising from their knowledge of the university, department or supervisor of the student?
- what evidence do examiners collect as they read a thesis with a view to the formulation of their final written reports?
- are there critical points in the process of making judgments about a thesis which significantly influence the examiner's final evaluation of the thesis?

(Mullins & Kiley 2002)

In the course of their work, Kiley and Mullins found it important to discuss the purpose of the PhD as well. How an examiner viewed the purpose was a strong influence on the whole examination process.

The second report was a paper presented to the HERDSA conference in Newcastle in July 2001 by Margaret Buckridge, GIHE, Griffith University. It, too, reports on interviews with experienced examiners, 10 from the humanities and social sciences, including business. The title of the paper is How Strait the Gates? PhD examination, practice and principle.

This smaller scale investigation was prompted by Buckridge's study of a sample of 30 examiners' reports, which she found to be 'curiously opaque documents'. She became aware that the content of the reports did not always "offer an entirely consistent rationale" for the recommendation of pass, fail, revise or re-submit for re-examination. Buckridge is able usefully to compare her results with those of Mullins and Kiley because of similarities in many of the questions they independently formulated.

Leading the discussion

Starting with questions about how examiners go about the task and proceeding to more subjective questions about criteria, encourage your participants to discuss their own approaches and experiences. Use the results of the interviews reported by researchers, that are summarised below, for comparisons with the comments of your group. Be careful not to let your input dominate the session!

1. How long does it usually take to examine a thesis? Do you try to do it all in one go? How do you approach the thesis?

Interviewees report spending the equivalent of 3 to 4 full days, often over a period of 2 - 3 weeks, to examine a thesis. They usually try to clear blocks of time and often work at night or over weekends and away from their office.

Some read from cover to cover several times, but many read key sections like the abstract, introduction and conclusions first and then the whole thesis. Many check the references before reading the thesis to see what the sources were and whether there are any they will need to look up. Most take detailed notes as they read, but some will do a first reading for an overall impression before attacking the detail and checking to see whether their questions have been addressed.

2. What are your expectations as you begin the task?

Many examiners feel a sense of duty about examining, but they also report that they look forward to the opportunity to engage with new ideas and to read something that is interesting and highly challenging intellectually. Experienced examiners expect the thesis to pass mainly because they realise that it represents three to four years of effort by a talented student supervised by a qualified academic.

Examiners are very reluctant to fail a thesis and will spend a great deal of time trying to find enough merit to avoid a failure, or trying to formulate recommendations for revision that will save the thesis. It is believed that experienced supervisors/ examiners are even less likely to recommend a failure than their inexperienced colleagues, in part because they are aware of how difficult it is for a novice researcher to complete this task successfully.

Buckridge reports that the examiners she interviewed often spoke of areas of weakness that the supervisor should have required the student to address (things like the literature backdrop, the conceptual framework, the collection and analysis of data), suggesting that a less than good thesis could be seen as the result of poor supervision. On the other hand, they also noted that the candidate must make a "leap" from an adequate base for the research to an independent and imaginative engagement with it and that may not be something for which the supervisor can be held accountable.

You may wish to encourage participants to talk about what they think is the purpose of a PhD. In a personal communication, Margaret Kiley wrote:

We found interesting differences in responses depending on what [examiners] thought was the purpose, i.e. either to produce a well researched and well argued, sustained piece of writing called a 'thesis', or to demonstrate that one was capable of being an independent researcher (which might be through well written.... etc, but is also through showing how one would do the research again, where the dead ends were and how one got out of them etc).

3. *How important are your first impressions of the thesis?*

Interviewees report that their first impressions are very important, not irreversible, but very influential on their frame of mind for the rest of the reading of the thesis. Hence, the literature review is a key section of the thesis, a good indicator of whether the student grasps the problem. Similarly, for those who try to get an overview of the research by scoping the thesis, the Table of Contents, first and last chapters are indicators of whether the student has a "thesis", a clear point to make, a controlling idea.

"Sloppiness" - ranging from typographical errors to mistakes in calculations or referencing - is seen as an indicator that the research itself may be sloppy and that the results and conclusions might be untrustworthy.

They do stress that they are very careful to keep testing their first impressions and that some theses have "been rescued" or "proved to be disappointing after all".

4. *Can we list the characteristics of a poor thesis? A passable one? An outstanding one?*

If the group is large, you might want to divide into three sub-groups with each making one list.

Below are the characteristics identified during interviews with experienced examiners. After your group comes up with some suggestions, you may wish to compare their lists with these:

Poor

- Lack of coherence
- Lack of understanding of the theory
- Lack of confidence
- Researching the wrong problem
- Mixed or confused theoretical and methodological perspectives
- Work that is not original
- Not being able to explain at the end of the thesis what had actually been argued in the thesis

Passable

- Originality
- Student autonomy or independence
- Coherence
- Well-structured argument
- Selection of a problem worth investigating and also 'do-able'
- Substantial (in terms of quantity of work necessary to address the research question)
- Publishable
- Self-critical and reflective

Outstanding

- Elegant
- Creative
- Everything fits together

- Confidence
- Sophistication

5. *Are you aware of any particular influences on your judgments? Documents from the candidate's institution? Other examiners' views? Your knowledge of the supervisor, department, or institution? Whether some of the work has been published already?*

Documents

Most examiners write their reports in the form requested by the institution, but only one-third say they take institution-specific criteria into account.

Examiners' choosing to apply their own criteria may be a problem if, for instance, an institution explicitly says that examiners are not to fail a thesis on the grounds of choice of research question or methodology. At least one Australian university includes this instruction on the grounds that the work has been reviewed and approved at least twice at departmental level.

(You may wish to distribute your own institution's advice to examiners at this stage.)

Examiners' own research paradigms

You could steer the discussion to the influence of the examiner's own methodological stance. Most experienced examiners say that they can set aside their own research paradigms and see the research from the student's perspective. They also admit that since their own work is well-known, they are unlikely to be sent theses that approach the field from an entirely different paradigm.

Margaret Kiley reports that it seems to be most important that the student is consistent in her/his approach. It was inconsistency between the approach students said they were going to adopt and what they actually did that upset examiners.

However, if examiners are confronted with work which they believe to be completely inappropriate in its approach, what should they do? One examiner of a Masters thesis says that she wrote a report which said, in effect, that she would not fail the thesis since she had to assume that the student's supervisor approved the approach. Since this was a Masters thesis, she believed the student was dependent on the supervisor for guidance on such matters. However, she said that if the student had proceeded against the advice of his supervisor, he should fail. And she also said that if the student were a PhD candidate, she would fail him because awarding the doctorate would mean that he knew for himself what was acceptable in the field. Other examiners say they would refuse to examine such a thesis.

Other examiners

Most would not consult other examiners, they believe it is their job to make an independent judgment.

Supervisors/ departments

Very mixed responses. Many examiners said they were not influenced by who supervised and where the work was done, but then went on to admit that maybe they were. They said things like they worked hard not to be or were aware that they might be influenced but did not think they were in the end.

They expect good work from a well-regarded department so student may be blamed for poor work while good work is credited to the supervisor.

They don't expect much from a low-profile department so good work is seen as evidence of student's exceptional ability while poor work is the result of poor supervision.

Publications

Not common in all disciplines but generally viewed as a positive influence on assessment of the thesis in those areas where students are encouraged to publish during candidacy.

Again a mixture of views from favourable to scepticism (eg, re quality of some journals, how much supervisor contributed, and whether the published work was more the product of a 'lab' than the student's own work).

6. *If most examiners expect a thesis to pass, and indeed very few candidates actually fail, what is the point of the assessment process?*

Many examiners approach writing the report as a formative exercise: that is, they see their role as giving the student good advice so that the work can be improved before it finally goes to the library shelves, or better yet, is published. The problem is that students usually think of the examination process in terms of passing or failing or getting a grade, that is, a summative process. If they are asked to do revisions (improve the thesis before it goes on the shelf), they think they have been given a low grade at best, if not an outright failure. Indeed, if they do not do the revisions, they don't get the degree, and that is the same result as a failure.

At this point you may want to steer the discussion to the issue of resubmission for re-examination vs changes to the satisfaction of the department or university. What do these recommendations imply? That the thesis itself is deficient and should not become a public document as it stands? Or that the student has not yet demonstrated her/his potential as an independent researcher?

Often there seems to be a mis-match between the recommendation and the report. (This point is emphasised in Activity 4.) Experienced examiners see the exercise of writing the report as an 'educational' or 'academic' one where they are writing to a potential colleague. The other 'bit' i.e. ticking a box is something that seems an administrative requirement, and may be done at the last minute and so may seem to bear little relation to the long and detailed discussion in the report. This lack of consistency becomes quite a problem for committees trying to decide on reports when there are different results.

Mullins and Kiley discovered that in the humanities, examiners think of assessing the thesis itself, its success as a document. Hence, they see little point in having an oral examination to clarify ambiguities in the text. On the other hand, in maths/engineering, science and social science, examiners tended to think of assessing the capacity of the student to do research in the future. So they would welcome the chance to confirm the student's potential through oral examination or discussion when the thesis may not have been totally successful.

Here again you may find that it is useful to raise the issue of the purpose of a PhD (see #2 above).

Buckridge found many examiners engaging in exercises in "compensation". They start with the expectation that a thesis will pass, but they also have high expectations of the quality of the work - originality, substantial contribution to the field, etc. They are juggling the view of a PhD as a training in research exercise versus a gate-keeping exercise. So in the end they are setting a requirement that "the work meets at least the standard of independent research competence expected of a training exercise".

Sometimes examiners suggest compensating for work of a poorer standard by requiring the student to write a new final chapter in which s/he engages in reflective self-evaluation, a critique of the strengths and weaknesses of her/his own thesis (especially weaknesses) and suggesting how better to

address the question or how to reformulate the question.

7 Conclusion

Summarise the discussion that has occurred. Highlight especially points on which there were considerable differences of opinion.

If you wish, use Overheads 1.3, 1.4, and 1.5 to highlight the findings of the two reports of interviews with examiners.

Overhead 1.1: References

MULLINS, G & KILEY, M. (2002) 'It's a PhD not a Nobel Prize': How experienced examiners assess research theses. *Studies in Higher Education*, 27, 4, 369-386.

BUCKRIDGE, M (2001) How Strait the Gates? PhD examination, practice and principle Paper presented to the conference of the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Newcastle, July, 2001

Overhead 1.2: Mullins and Kiley 2002

Mullins and Kiley's project addressed the following questions:

- what steps do examiners go through in the process of reading a thesis?
- what criteria do examiners use to assess a thesis? Are these criteria derived from institutional policies or are they based on the individual examiner's understanding of what is required for a PhD or a Masters by research?
- do examiners use different criteria for different groups of students (eg, international students from non-English speaking backgrounds)?
- are there influences on the examiners arising from their knowledge of the university, department or supervisor of the student?
- what evidence do examiners collect as they read a thesis with a view to the formulation of their final written reports?
- are there critical points in the process of making judgments about a thesis which significantly influence the examiner's final evaluation of the thesis?
- what is the purpose of PhD study? What does this mean for the examination process?

(Mullins and Kiley 2002)

Overhead 1.3: Examiners report

Examiners report that they...

- Expect the student to pass
- Form strong first impressions of the thesis from their overview or early chapters
- Are very, very reluctant to fail a student
- Hold varying views about the purpose of the PhD and whether it is the thesis or the capacity of the student that is being examined

Overhead 1.4: Examiners' judgements

Examiners' judgements are not much influenced by...

- Institutional criteria
- Other examiners
- Their own methodological paradigm

Overhead 1.5: Examiners' judgements

Examiners' judgements are influenced by...

- Publications
- Their own experience as supervisors and examiners
- Knowledge of the supervisor, department, laboratory (but examiners report that they are aware that this may be an unfair bias and they try not to be influenced by this knowledge)