

# Examining Theses Workshop plan 3: Study and discussion of a difficult examiner's report, for experienced and mixed groups of examiners

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

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## Introductory activity 2

Time: approximately 30 minutes Abridged version of Activity 1a, Workshop plan 1a Choose a few of the discussion questions from Activity 1a to begin to get participants thinking about

the issues surrounding examination of theses which you wish to highlight in this session.

## Activity 4

### Overview

Time: approximately one and a half hours, including time to study reports

During this activity one examiner's report will be studied. This report is very critical of the thesis. Two other examiners recommend minor revision and no re-examination, but one of those two makes comments that suggest that she actually requires major revision. Participants will be asked to consider what outcome the University's committee should recommend.

Participants will have the opportunity to learn how their own institution manages such cases.

Participants will be able to develop strategies for writing reports that assist the candidate as well as the university that needs to know whether to award the degree with or without revision.

### Preparation

Study detailed advice for facilitators. It is strongly recommended that you read the detailed advice for facilitators of Activity 1a, Activity 1b, Activity 2, and Activity 3.

Define your goals for this session.

Print Handout 4.1. This is Part 1 of the examiners' report form used at Green Fields University.

Print Handout 4.2. This is the report of the very critical examiner.

Collect any University documents you wish to use and photocopy as necessary.

Book resource people as necessary.

### Procedure

- 1) Distribute handout 4.1.

Explain that Green Fields University asks examiners to choose one of 5 recommendations. These are typical of most universities' documentation, but there are variations. Compare these recommendations to those available to examiners of theses at your own university.

This form goes to the University's Higher Degree Committee along with copies of Part 2 of the examination report. Part 1 does not go to the candidate, but he will receive Part 2 after the Committee has decided on the outcome of his examination.

This could be an opportune time to make sure participants know what your university's forms look like and what advice is sent to examiners. It is probably wise not to assume that even experienced supervisors have copies of this material. They should have it and show it to students.

In Leo Lyons' case two of the examiners circle recommendation 2 and one chooses

recommendation 4.

2) Distribute handout 4.2.

Explain that Utopia University once allowed examiners to choose not to put their names on Part 2 of the form, preserving their anonymity if they wished. However, the option of anonymity is no longer offered.

You may choose to ensure that participants know the policy on anonymity at your university. A review of Australian universities' documentation found few explicit remarks on confidentiality. Freedom of Information legislation varies from state to state: you might want to check with your institution's legal officer about whether the university would be able to protect an examiner who wished to remain anonymous.

3) Set the task.

Participants should read the report carefully, making notes or highlighting anything that strikes them as particularly interesting, unusual, helpful or unhelpful.

Participants will need quite a bit of reading time (about 15 minutes) and should be encouraged to make detailed notes, especially about the specific criticisms of the thesis in this report. How serious do they believe these deficiencies to be? Are they bad enough that the thesis might possibly be failed?

4) Divide the group into "committees" to decide what the University should do about Mr Lyons' thesis. Ask each committee to appoint a secretary who will report to the whole group. The secretary should report:

- the final decision of the committee
- any points of disagreement among the committee members
- what issues arose in the course of their discussion

Allow at least 15 minutes for the committee meetings.

5) Reconvene the whole group and get reports from the secretaries.

Lead a discussion highlighting whatever issues are most consistent with your goals for the session.

You will almost certainly wish to review your University's procedures for deciding the outcome after examiners' reports have been returned. (See Detailed advice for facilitators).

## Detailed advice for facilitators

This activity is focussed more on the management of examiners' reports and the decision-making about outcomes of examination than on developing skills in writing reports or helping participants to articulate the criteria by which they judge theses. However, you may lead the discussion to these matters as well. In fact, you will probably not be able to avoid them.

One of the most important themes to emphasise is that even very carefully written reports will convey different messages to different readers. Margaret Buckridge (2001) read a sample of 30 examiners' reports and comments that she became aware that these were curiously opaque documents. Although their summative judgment was stated clearly - Pass, Minor revisions, Re-submit with major revisions, etc - the text accompanying the summative judgment did not always seem to offer an entirely consistent rationale for the judgment.

When participants form committees to discuss the outcome of Leo Lyons' candidacy, they often discover that there have been very different reactions to Alessio's report.

Some people find it a very "hard" report and Alessio an unsympathetic examiner. They remind the group that two examiners have said that it should pass with minor revisions.

Some think the student has made a real mess of things and that the other examiners are too "easy". They remind the group that one of the two who said 'pass' recommended substantial revisions in her report and that her recommendation was inconsistent with her report. They often are of the view that the 16 pages of additional comments show that Alessio really studied this thesis carefully.

Some condemn the supervisor for allowing the student to proceed with a program of research which was incoherent. They highlight the comment that the student will need the help of an experienced supervisor successfully to complete the necessary revisions.

Committees have come to many different conclusions in groups where I have used this material.

Some have simply said 'It's 2 to 1 in favour of pass with minor revisions and that is our recommendation.' They suggest that only Alessio's comments regarding editorial matters and things that are easy to correct should be addressed along with the recommendations of the first examiner and the less difficult matters raised by the second examiner.

Some have said that they cannot in good conscience let the student off with only minor revisions on the basis of the information currently before them. They have come up with a range of strategies to get further information and help, including

- 1) obtain a report from the supervisor,
  - 2) obtain a report from the Head of School (who would presumably consult the supervisor),
  - 3) consult the three examiners, possibly in a conference call,
  - 4) appoint a fourth examiner, possibly asking her/him to review the three examiners' reports as well as the thesis,
  - 5) conduct an oral examination with all three examiners present or on phone hook-ups or using questions submitted by the examiners,
  - 6) send all three reports to each examiner and ask them to consult each other and try to reach a consensus.
- Some have said that they believe that the university committee is ultimately responsible for

standards and that this student will have to do major revisions. Variations on this outcome are

- 1) that the major revisions might be reviewed internally, usually by the Head of School in consultation with the supervisor,
- 2) that the revised thesis be sent to Alessio only for re-examination,
- 3) that the revised thesis be re-examined by three examiners, preferably the original ones, but sometimes that does not work out.

You should steer the discussion to the line in Alessio's report where he says he would not oppose a decision to fail the thesis but he thinks something can be salvaged. Both Kiley & Mullins (2001) and Buckridge (2001) found that the experienced examiners they interviewed expected theses to pass and that they were extremely reluctant to recommend an outright failure. Should examiners approach the task with this attitude? What about standards? What makes a pass-able thesis?

The answers to these questions are dependent on examiners' views of the purpose of PhD study and what the thesis actually documents. Margaret Kiley reported in a private communication that

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 [done] through a well written thesis, but is also done through showing how one would do the research again, where the dead ends were and how one got out of them etc).

Essentially the difference in perspective can be described as saying that the PhD is a contribution to knowledge vs saying that doing a PhD is training in research. However, many people say these are simply 'two sides of the same coin'. (See also detailed advice to facilitators of Activity 1.)

What should an examiner do when s/he is deeply concerned about the quality of a thesis? Is it a breach of confidentiality to show it to someone else? Should s/he ask the candidate's university for the names of the other examiners in order to consult with them? There are no black and white answers to such questions, of course, and different institutions seem to have different ideas about these matters. One Australian university explicitly forbids collaboration between examiners; at least one advises each examiner of the names of the others and says consultation is acceptable; but most seem to be silent on the issue.

## Handout 4.1: Examiner's report

Green Fields University  
Examination of thesis for degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
Part 1  
Examiner's Report to the University

Part 1 of the examiner's report advises the University's Higher Degree Committee of your recommendation regarding the outcome of this candidacy. Part 2, which will be given to the student, offers advice to the student. Name of candidate: **Leo Lyons** Examiner: **Alexander Alessio** Thesis Title: **Mathematics Preparation of Incoming Students in Building Sciences** Please circle the recommendation you wish to make regarding this thesis.

Recommendation 1:

The thesis be passed with no requirement for correction or amendments and the candidate be awarded the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. The thesis makes a substantial and original contribution to the field and is worthy of publication.

Recommendation 2:

The thesis be passed without further examination provided that the candidate has made minor textual corrections as recommended by the examiner/s to the satisfaction of Head of School.

Recommendation 3:

The thesis be passed without further examination provided that the candidate has rewritten specific sections of the thesis as recommended by the examiner/s, this rewriting not changing the substantive conclusions of the thesis, to the satisfaction of the Head of School.

Recommendation 4:

The thesis be resubmitted for examination after rewriting specified sections of the thesis as recommended by the examiner/s.

Recommendation 5:

The thesis be failed and the candidate NOT be awarded the degree of Doctor of Philosophy and NOT be permitted to resubmit the thesis for consideration for a PhD in the revised form.

Signature of Examiner: Date:

# Handout 4.2/1: Processing an examination report

## Instructions

Attached is an examiner's report on a PhD thesis\*. The examiner recommends major revision and resubmission for examination, but says that he thinks the thesis is far from an acceptable standard and he would go along with a decision to fail it.

As is common in some disciplines, the report was accompanied by a list of proof-reading corrections.

What was less common was that the 2-page report and the list of errata were accompanied by 16 pages of detailed commentary on the thesis text. The examiner indicated specific errors of logic or fact, suggested major editorial changes, questioned specific points, and recommended additional resources or changes in methodology. The examiner said this material was to assist the student if revision were required.

You are members of the committee at Green Fields University which reviews examiners' reports and recommends whether students pass, fail, or revise. Minor revisions are reviewed internally; major revisions are re-examined externally.

You have already read the first two examiners' reports. Both recommend minor revisions and then the award of the degree without re-examination. The comments accompanying this recommendation in the first report suggest only minor editorial changes as one would expect. However, the comments of the other include criticisms of a more substantial nature, including lack of focus and lack of an underlying theory for the work, and problems with the presentation of data.

The first two reports are of average length (2 - 3 pages plus the errata sheet) and offer an overview of the thesis, comments of a general nature and a few specific points.

What is your committee's recommendation?

\* Please note: although this exercise is based on a number of situations I have encountered in several different universities, this examiner's report is fictional. No such thesis has ever come to my attention. Peggy Nightingale

## Handout 4.2/2

### Green Fields University Examination of thesis for degree of Doctor of Philosophy Part 2

Part 1 of the examiner's report advises the University's Higher Degree Committee of your recommendation regarding the outcome of this candidacy. Part 2, which will be given to the student, should document the reasons for your recommendation as well as giving advice to the student.

Name of candidate: Leo Lyons

Examiner: Alexander Alessio

Thesis Title: Mathematics Preparation of Incoming Students in Building Sciences

Recommendation: Revise and submit for re-examination

#### Summary of grounds for recommendation:

The candidate has surveyed literature relevant to the thesis.

The candidate has gathered a great deal of information, and the report is, for the most part, competently written and presented.

The candidate has not yet demonstrated a critical, perceptive and constructive analysis of the subject, but I believe it will be possible for him to do so with further work.

The candidate has not yet made an original and significant contribution to knowledge in this field, but there is potential for him to do so.

The biggest problem with this thesis is that it is at least two and maybe three theses and none of them is adequately developed.

The candidate has attempted first, to analyse the mathematics skills of students admitted to the Faculty of Building Sciences at Green Fields University between 1992 and 2000. He used data from an objective test and from an aptitude test administered to first year students in September and May (the beginning and end of the academic year).

Secondly, he investigated the relationship between these data, admission tests administered by the University, and the students' high school mathematics grades. He sought correlations between these scores and success at university as measured by retention rates, graduation rates, and grades in 4 first year subjects.

Finally, between 1995 and 1997, he developed and taught a remedial mathematics program and attempted to evaluate its effectiveness.

Work on the first topic is flawed by the choice of the aptitude test which the candidate himself seems to recognise is inadequate as a test of mathematical knowledge. He excuses this choice saying this was the best test available at the time and saying it was only later that other researchers exposed its inadequacy. The other test, a multiple choice test consisting of 100 quite basic algebra and geometry questions, was never piloted or validated in any way. At this stage of the work the candidate shows himself to be ignorant of methods of test design and development; his references include X (1989) which, by itself, should have alerted him to the deficiencies of his testing procedures.

Work on the second topic is flawed by very poor reporting of quantitative data. Detailed comments are attached, but in essence, results are not adequately summarised and highlighted in the written text. Data in tables does not "match" that in the text. Tables are inaccurately titled and column and row headings are unclear.

Work on the third topic is flawed by insufficient information about the mathematics remedial program and teaching methods and by inadequate evaluation of its effectiveness. Here was a rich opportunity for the "action researcher" to recount what actually went on in classes, what students said and did which helped the candidate decide how to modify the program between the 1995 offering and the 1996, but the only evaluation which is reported for 1995 is what some refer to as a "student smile sheet" and there is no

information offered about subsequent changes to or development of the program. In 1996, unless I have misunderstood the report, the candidate's main evidence for some improvement in mathematics skills is anecdotal evidence from first year teachers in the faculty.

As one might expect when there are three disparate topics, or "research questions" as the candidate calls them, it is a struggle to write a coherent thesis. The candidate tries hard to convince readers that the information collected from the aptitude test and the objective test helped him decide what kind of remedial program to offer. However, they were not, in fact, valid tests of the skills the candidate sought to develop.

Why the candidate embarked on the exploration of retention and graduation rates, etc is less clear. There is no attempt to compare similar data for students who participated in the remedial program. The data presented does turn up some information which should cause grave concern in both Faculty and University, but that is not what this project was supposed to be about.

The most disturbing aspects of this thesis in its current form are the candidate's apparent willingness to reach unwarranted conclusions (specific instances noted in attached pages), and his slipping into self-contradictory positions. On the theme of selection and admission of students, for instance, he has shown that the admission tests set at Green Fields University were not effective predictors of success and he has pointed out anomalous results for individual students. Yet in his concluding chapter, he seems to favour some sort of selection on the basis of mathematics skills without suggesting how it is to be done and while stating that his results do not support such a selection procedure. He also frequently expresses the opinion that students' skills must be developed throughout the duration of their enrolment and in the context of the various Building disciplines.

Another apparent self-contradiction is evident in the candidate's statement that he recognises that there are different types of mathematical skill. However, he uses the results of flawed tests of lower level skills to help him design a program to develop higher order skills.

How this work should be revised is difficult to prescribe. One option would be to turn it into a case study of a Faculty trying to come to grips with public demands for accountability and improved mathematics teaching in the schools, and with the need to teach students whose entry scores leave something to be desired, and with the desire to be fair and supportive of students in the Faculty when resources are constrained, etc, etc. Then the basic structure of the thesis might suffice if specific issues were dealt with as outlined on the attached pages.

Another possibility is to significantly edit the early chapters and significantly develop the material about the remedial program and its effectiveness. However, the candidate may not now have sufficient appropriate data to do this.

The decision about what to do next will only be possible when this examiner's response is compared to that of other examiners. To be perfectly honest, I would not oppose a decision to fail the thesis. However, I believe something can be salvaged from this work IF the student is offered the support of an experienced supervisor while he revises the thesis.

In case revision is allowed, I attach detailed comments for the student's use.

[16 pages were attached.]