



Meeting the Needs of Doctoral Examiners: Criteria for Assessing the Written Thesis

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Guidance for Examiners

Some institutions, such as the University of York, reproduce the criteria from the QAA 'Framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland' in their regulations.

(See your packs for a copy of the framework)

Others, e.g. Exeter University, give guidance such as:

In assessing a PhD/EdD/DEd Psy thesis, the examiners are required to look for:

- (a) evidence that it forms a distinct contribution to the knowledge of the subject;
- (b) evidence of originality;
- (c) evidence of the candidate's ability to relate the subject matter of the thesis to the existing body of knowledge within the field;
- (d) a satisfactory level of literary presentation.

Generality to Specificity

All of these are clearly, and deliberately, couched at a general level, to cover the range of possible theses produced within and institution. What is less clear to a novice examiner is exactly what they should be looking for as evidence of these achievements.

Contribution to knowledge – may be small but must be non-trivial!

Originality may be of topic, process or outcome or some combination.

Publishability – of standard of at least two refereed journal articles or the basis of a book or monograph.

Focussing Further: What a thesis shouldn't be like

Mullins and Kiley (2002) (see Refs List) found that examiners often knew what a poor thesis looked like. In summary:

- Lack of coherence
- Lack of understanding of theory
- Lack of confidence
- Wrong problem researched
- Confused theoretical or methodological perspectives
- Work not original
- No explanation at end about what has been argued

Intuitive and Shared Criteria

By considering the guidance given to supervisees, and good examples of their work that demonstrate evidence for these achievements, prospective examiners can begin to make explicit the criteria they are using – so they can be subject to challenge and peer review.

My own version (Soc Sci), adapted and extended by colleagues, is humbly proffered in the SRHE Guide, pp12- 13, in your pack.

Is this Adequate for Current and Future Needs?

Recent years have seen great changes in the support and training of doctoral students, in the purposes of the doctorate and requirements of those holding that qualification.

Some Institutions, such as Aberystwyth, have added to the criteria from the QAA Framework, e.g. :

“And holders will have completed research training that provides the qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment, viz:

- the exercise of initiative and personal responsibility;
- decision-making in complex and unpredictable situations in professional or equivalent environments;
- the independent learning ability required for continuing professional development.”

But again no guidance is given about acceptable evidence of these attributes.

Whether they could be demonstrated in the thesis or are better provided separately, perhaps in a PDP, is a matter for debate.

Questions to Consider



Consider **your** implicit criteria are.

What might be effective ways to:

- Ensure equivalence of marking in a diverse field
- Provide flexibility to cope with evolving environments
- Satisfy international comparisons
- Provide more explicit guidance to examiners, candidates and those preparing them?

These and other such questions will be considered further at the next UKCGE Winter Conference.

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UKCGE Winter Conference 2010

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- Monday 15th February 2010
- The British Library Conference Centre, London
- Hosted by The British Library
- <http://www.ukcge.ac.uk/events/eventsarea/wc10.htm>