



# Meeting the Needs of Doctoral Examiners: Similarities and Differences within and between UK Institutions

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# Preamble

- All of the following is derived from experience and the research in the references\* included in pack.
- Participants should check own institutional regulations when internal examining and those of the other institution when external examining.
- All variants included here have logical rationales; you may not agree with them but this could be due to custom and practice of discipline.

\*These also include information on international comparisons, not included here.

# Background

- QAA CoP states that assessment processes should be “communicated clearly and fully to students and supervisors” and “be operated rigorously, fairly, reliably and consistently”.
- However, neither the processes nor the means of achieving those aims are defined.
- Tinkler and Jackson 2000 collected and analysed institutional regulations and found:

Procedures differ.

Criteria are left implicit or vague, leaving room for variation in interpretation.

# Current Definitions

- The defining difference between doctoral and masters degrees is: original contribution to knowledge worthy of publication (common to all Institutional regs.)
- QAA describes doctoral process as the creation and interpretation of new knowledge, through original research, sufficient to satisfy peer review, extend the forefront of discipline, and merit publication.
- See UKCGE Winter Conference and forthcoming QAA document on “Doctorateness” for detailed debate and QAA document in pack.

# Examiners – Selection Criteria

All institutions agree that:

- There should be at least 2 examiners, at least one of whom is external to institution (common range 2- 4; 2 External s for staff candidate)
- They must have experience in field and with methodology: usually as team – usually External is field expert.

Usually, External s should have had prior examining experience.

Many but not all specifically require supervision experience.

Few have formal requirement to have own doctorate – but it may be implicit.

## Examiners - Choice

Most often the rubric is that senior staff choose Examiners and choice is always ratified through committee to Senate process.

But in practice there is a range of negotiation with student from:

None

Student selects from Supervisor provided range

Supervisor selects from Student provided range

# Supervisors, Chairs and Viva

Regulations about presence of **supervisor** in viva differ between and within institutions from:

Expressly forbidden, or

Optional, depending on Candidate and External preference

Required, to

Required and paid for.

When present, they may be allowed specific limited input to process, or be expressly forbidden to engage.

Similarly, presence of **Chairperson** may be required always, required or advised in specific circumstances, optional or not mentioned at all.

## Pre-Viva Reports and Examiner Discussion

- Supervisors may or may not have been required to provide a pre-viva report.
- Increasingly but not yet universally, Examiners are expected to write pre-viva independent reports before conferring.
- These may or may not need to be submitted in advance.
- Regulations vary about timing of pre-viva discussion, from no mention to specifying after report received or day of viva.

# Balance of Attention and Credi

- The thesis volume and viva are intended to contribute evidence for decision, but emphasis varies by institution and discipline.
- There is seldom explicit definition, though, of whether focus should be the product (quality of final thesis and ability to defend it) or process (the calibre of the research itself and the development of research competence).
- Some academics think that the inclusion of progress reports in addition to the ‘sanitised’ thesis would be useful.

# Purpose and Centrality of Viva

- Purpose is seen variously as:

Forum for rubber stamping; authentication  
trial; rite of passage; check on key  
skills; confrontation – ability to  
argue, stand ground and counter  
critique.

- Style may be:

Celebratory and supportive; ‘teacherly’  
and stimulating; hostile.

- Length may be 30 minutes to several  
hours .

Plenty of room for misunderstanding  
between examiners and examiners and  
candidate/supervisor!

# Influence of Viva on Outcome

Most Examiners agree that poor viva unlikely to change thesis previously rated as pass to a fail

BUT

In marginal cases, viva is critical!

A poor thesis but marvellous viva would demand considerable amendments to the volume.

There is some growing concern about examiners influencing final version towards own interests through required amendments.

NB Variation between examiners about when to declare or hint at outcome – if at beginning, viva is then down-graded.

# Range of Outcomes

- All institutions have range from straight Pass to Fail, with Minor amendments, Major amendments, offer of lower degree with or without amendments, in between.
- Usually up to one year is allowed for Major amendments
- However, and critically, different time is allowed for Minor amendments, depending on the exact wording of the regulations, from 1 month from viva date to 4 months.
- This makes a **substantial difference to what can be considered 'Minor'**, especially when inability to complete by date means automatic failure.

# Guiding Prospective Examiners and Students



The variation within the system demands some consideration and action.

In the meantime, Examiners should be chosen wisely,

they should be prepared for differences in regulations, expectations of style etc,

and students prepared for a range of eventualities.