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What examiners do: what thesis students should know

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Although many articles have been written about thesis assessment, none provide a comprehensive, general picture of what examiners do as they assess a thesis. To synthesise this diverse literature, we reviewed 30 articles, triangulated their conclusions and identified 11 examiner practices. Thesis examiners tend to be broadly consistent in their practices and recommendations; they expect and want a thesis to pass, but first impressions are also very important. They read with academic expectations and the expectations of a normal reader. Like any reader, thesis examiners get annoyed and distracted by presentation errors, and they want to read a work that is a coherent whole. As academic readers, examiners favour a thesis with a convincing approach that engages with the literature and the findings, but they require a thesis to be publishable research. Finally, examiners give not only a final evaluation of a thesis, but also instruction and advice to improve the thesis and further publications and research. We hope that these generalisations will demystify the often secret process of assessing a thesis, and reassure, guide and encourage students as they write their theses.

Keywords: thesis examination; postgraduate assessment; examiner expectations; postgraduate learning; research training

Introduction

When I (the first author) wrote my MA thesis and then my PhD, I had no idea what my examiners would do. I knew that I would dispatch my thesis and then some time later it would come back with comments and a judgement, but I did not know what happened in the middle. How would the examiners go about assessing my thesis? I had my suspicions based on how I read and judged research, and I had heard lots of anecdotes – especially the ones about the examiner from hell – but I did not know how examiners tend to approach a thesis, and this bothered me. This is a common concern: most thesis students are mystified by the process of examination (e.g. Johnston 1997, 333).

Now, as a supervisor and examiner, I am slightly less mystified by how a written thesis is examined, but much of the examination process is still hidden behind closed doors and I do not have access to what actually happens. My knowledge of what examiners do, like that of most supervisors, is based on personal experience of examining theses, observing how my thesis students were examined, anecdotes about the examination process, and ideal versions of what a thesis should be and what an examiner should do. This sort of personal knowledge tends to be partial and incomplete (Holbrook et al. 2007, 352). I have sent thesis students through the examination gauntlet, but is their experience typical? I know how I examine a thesis,

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but am I typical? I know how a thesis should be examined, but are they actually examined this way? As Denicolo (2003) pointed out, there can be a disturbing disparity between what supervisors expect and what examiners implement. So, what do examiners tend to do as they examine a thesis? Are there any general trends?

Institutional criteria and instructions also offer little guidance about how a thesis will actually be assessed. Each institution offers criteria for assessing a thesis, but these tend to be:

- Inadequate – as much attention is given to the size of the paper and the width of the margins as is given to what counts as a quality thesis (Massingham ‘Pitfalls along the thesis approach to a higher degree’ [*The Australian*, July 25, 1984, 15]).
- Vague – just what does it mean for a thesis to make a contribution to the academic field?
- Frequently ignored by examiners who prefer to follow their own standards (Mullins and Kiley 2002).

There is a clear need for more awareness about how a thesis is examined. Can we get it from the research literature? Researchers have investigated institutional policies (Tinkler and Jackson 2000), the purpose of the PhD (Jackson and Tinkler 2001), what happens during the PhD oral defence (Trafford 2003) and the criteria examiners use (Lovitts 2007). While these studies do shed light on thesis assessment, they leave a shadow that obscures what thesis examiners do as they examine a thesis.

Other studies have addressed what examiners do (see references indicated by *), but we cannot draw comprehensive, general conclusions about examiner practices from the diverse, fragmented conclusions in these individual studies. Some provide qualitative conclusions (e.g. Mullins and Kiley (2002), who interviewed thesis examiners), while others provide quantitative conclusions (e.g. Bourke, Hattie, and Anderson’s (2004) frequency analysis of the kinds of comments in examiner reports). Some studies draw conclusions about a particular type of thesis (e.g. master’s theses in Hansford and Maxwell (1993)), while others provide conclusions about a particular aspect of thesis assessment (e.g. the power relations indicated in examiner reports in Lovat, Monfries, and Morrison (2004); formative feedback in Kumar and Stracke (2011); or comments on the literature review in Holbrook (2007)).

A review is needed to synthesise and consolidate the diverse conclusions about examiner practices. To provide such a review, we (the three authors) synthesise the conclusions from the different studies, and frame them in terms of what thesis students need to know. By ‘thesis student’, we mean any research higher degree student – master’s, PhD or other doctorate – who is writing a thesis or dissertation. A supervisor or advisor is an academic whose official role is to provide research advice and guidance for a thesis student. A thesis examiner is an academic who reads the finished thesis, and gives a report recommending a result.

The aim of our review is to clarify what thesis examiners do as they examine a written thesis submitted for a research higher degree. In some countries, such as Australia, a thesis examination typically consists of two or three examiners reading the thesis and writing a report recommending a result, while in other countries, such as New Zealand, a viva or oral examination is a common addition.

In either case, the core of the assessment is the examination of the written thesis. The oral examination is frequently ceremonial or celebratory (Jackson and Tinkler

2001, 360) rather than part of the assessment. Even when it is part of the assessment, most examiners have already made their judgement before the oral presentation on the basis of reading the thesis, and the oral is merely to confirm their assessment (Denicolo 2003; Jackson and Tinkler 2001; Kyvik 2013; Trafford 2003). Thus, to understand what examiners do as they examine a thesis, we concentrate on what they do as they read the written thesis.

We adopted a qualitative systematic review methodology in order to triangulate and confirm the diverse findings from other studies. Our aim is to synthesise the relevant literature by distinguishing common conclusion from the different studies. We reviewed studies which used a range of methods – quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods – so we could not make the exact comparisons needed for the more common quantitative systematic review or meta-analysis. For more on the methodology of qualitative systematic reviews, see Bearman et al. (2012).

Our review contributes to the literature on thesis assessment by first triangulating common conclusions and synthesising these into a new, coherent picture, and second, by framing this as a clarification of an unclear and uncertain assessment process for thesis students. The result will be a new account of thesis assessment, useful for thesis students (and by extension their supervisors, and even new examiners).

The review process

We included English language, peer-reviewed journal articles about how written theses are examined. The articles were about master's, professional or practice doctorates, and PhDs. We only included articles from which we could infer examiner practices – for example, we could infer something about what examiners do from the criteria they employ, and what they write in their reports. We excluded articles that only addressed what happens in the oral examination.

Each article we included was methodologically sound, and published in a refereed journal, with most in first-tier journals (the top journals according to Q-Score, ISI and Australian Research Council rankings). Some of the articles were from small-scale studies published in less-prestigious journals. However, we triangulated the conclusions from these more limited studies with the conclusions from the more robust studies, so we could draw reliable conclusions in our review (as we discuss later).

We took several steps to identify articles for review:

- (1) We searched ERIC and Google Scholar for articles that matched any of the following keywords or close variations: examiner behaviour, thesis examination, PhD examination reports, examiner expectations, examiner reports, doctoral and thesis.
- (2) The second author read the article titles and abstracts to determine which articles met our inclusion criteria. If in doubt, they skimmed the whole article.
- (3) We then used a snowball technique for identifying further articles – when an article matched our inclusion criteria, we searched for other relevant articles by the same authors, or from the references.
- (4) One author read each article in full to confirm that they met our criteria for inclusion.
- (5) We were left with 30 articles that met our criteria (indicated by * in the references).

The total data from the 30 articles we reviewed include: 3504 examiner reports and recommendations for approximately 1324 theses, 426 rankings of thesis quality by examiners, and qualitative data from 698 examiners participating in interviews, questionnaires, case studies, focus groups or panels. Even though many of the articles reported Australian research, their results included examiners from all parts of the world. Half of the examiners analysed in these studies were from a broad range of countries outside Australia (Bourke, Hattie, and Anderson 2004, 184).

Our aim for the review was to identify general conclusions about examiner practices that would be useful for thesis students to know. Our ‘raw’ data were the findings from the articles in our review, and we used the following criteria to derive general conclusions from this qualitative and quantitative data:

- (1) Useful for thesis students to know – where knowing this would help them improve the quality of their thesis.
- (2) Repeated across several studies or triangulated (most of the conclusions we identified arose in most of the articles reviewed, but seldom in all, because no article covered all aspects of examiner practice).

Here is an example of how we derived general conclusions: we read an article about an interview-based study that concluded that examiners are irritated by typographical errors, and we judged that this would be useful knowledge for thesis students. We then confirmed that this conclusion was also drawn in other qualitative studies, and triangulated this with several mixed method studies which concluded that examiners often correct typographical errors in their examiner reports, and use large portions of their reports to do so.

To ensure our conclusions would be trustworthy and generalisable, we identified those generalisations about thesis examiners which several studies showed to be trustworthy. We also ensured trustworthy generalisations by triangulating the conclusions from one study with the conclusions that occurred in several different studies, which included data from examiners of different research degrees (PhD, master’s, and professional and fine arts doctorates), from the different disciplines and from multiple institutions and countries.

We followed an emerging coding process to organise the conclusions we identified into themes, similar to the review process employed by Amundsen and Wilson (2012). The second author identified common conclusions that emerged from a first reading of the articles under review, and organised these into tentative general themes. These themes were refined, revised and confirmed on subsequent readings by the other authors. In the final stage of the review, we chunked our tentative themes into 11 generalisations about examiner practices, which we now summarise and then discuss.

Thesis examiners tend to:

- (1) be broadly consistent
- (2) expect a thesis to pass
- (3) judge a thesis by the end of the first or second chapter
- (4) read a thesis as an academic reader and as a normal reader
- (5) be irritated and distracted by presentation errors
- (6) favour a coherent thesis
- (7) favour a thesis that engages with the literature

- (8) favour a thesis with a convincing approach
- (9) favour a thesis that engages with the findings
- (10) require a thesis to be publishable
- (11) give summative and formative feedback

Every claim we make is a common conclusion paraphrased from the articles we reviewed (indicated by * in the references). We did not reference each claim because this would have meant adding two or more references after most sentences. Instead, we only reference direct quotations or specific details from an article.

1. Examiners tend to be broadly consistent

Examiners tend to have common practices, despite some variability. All examiners seem to be looking for the same core qualities (Holbrook et al. 2008; Kwiram 2006, 142), which Lovitts (2007) calls the ‘universal qualities of a dissertation’. As a result, examiner practice is broadly consistent despite differences in institutional instructions (Holbrook et al. 2007, 342), discipline (Bourke, Hattie, and Anderson 2004; Lovat, Holbrook, and Bourke 2008, 69), nationality (Pitkethly and Prosser 1995), level of degree (Bourke and Holbrook 2013), or the experience of the examiner (Kiley and Mullins 2004).

Examiners also tend to offer consistent recommendations. For example, Holbrook et al. (2008) found examiners gave consistent recommendations for 96% of the 804 theses they studied. An inconsistency was defined as one or more examiners recommending accept or accept with minor revisions, while one or more examiners recommended revise and resubmit or fail. Even when the recommendations were inconsistent, the content of their reports, what the examiners wrote about, tended to be the same (Holbrook et al. 2008, 43, 45). Furthermore, inconsistent examiners tend to offer consistent recommendations if they have a chance to negotiate in a thesis examination committee or after viewing the oral presentation of a thesis student.

Inconsistency may be more common if a thesis is out of the ordinary, for example, an interdisciplinary thesis (Mitchell and Willetts 2009) or from a different cultural background (Devos and Somerville 2012; Wisker and Robinson 2012). Yet, such inconsistencies are the exceptions rather than the norm.

Other researchers found that examiners were more variable in their recommendations (Hansford and Maxwell 1993; Johnston 1997; Kemp and McGuigan 2009). However, these studies defined an inconsistency narrowly as any difference in recommendation. We concluded that examiners seem to generally agree on whether a thesis broadly passes or fails, but they disagree more frequently on the specifics, such as whether a thesis should pass with minor amendments or major revisions.

2. Examiners expect a thesis to pass

Examiners begin reading with curiosity and enthusiasm, expecting a thesis to be good and ‘hoping to find their task rewarding and enjoyable’ (Johnston 1997, 341). They know years of effort has gone into a thesis, and it has been judged worthy by supervisors (or at least passable); so, they anticipate it will pass, and even want it to pass (Kiley and Mullins 2004, 124).

Moreover, examiners are reluctant to fail a thesis. They consider a thesis a pass until it is proven a fail, and will only consider failing a thesis if there are significant errors or omissions that threaten the credibility of the research (Holbrook et al. 2004c, 112). Even then, examiners are distressed when they have to recommend a fail or even a resubmit. So, less than 1% of examiners recommend a fail (Lovat, Holbrook, and Bourke 2008, 70).

3. Examiners judge a thesis by the end of the first or second chapter

Even though examiners expect a pass, first impressions can change their mind. Examiners make an initial judgement about the quality of a thesis early in their reading, at least in the first two chapters and sometimes while they skim the abstract, table of contents, introduction and conclusion. They quickly decide whether the thesis is likely to be hard work or an enjoyable read, a ‘treat’ or an ‘endurance test’ (Carter 2008, 367).

This means the introduction and, perhaps, the literature review are particularly important in a thesis. As examiners read these, they are already deciding whether the candidate knows what they are doing.

There is also some inertia to an examiner’s initial judgement – it can change, but slowly. An examiner’s first impressions influence how he or she reads the rest of a thesis. If they have a good first impression, they feel they can relax and enjoy the thesis; if not, then they read more critically, looking for problems. If examiners read an excellent introduction, they are more likely to overlook problems in the rest of the thesis. On the other hand, if they read a poor introduction, the rest of the thesis needs to be excellent to make up for it.

4. Examiners read a thesis as an academic reader and as a normal reader

A thesis should be an enjoyable read in order to sustain an examiner’s good impression. Examiners take a lot of time and effort to assess a thesis, and if they are not enjoying the read, they are more likely to judge it to be poor quality. Examiners may read in the evenings when they are tired (Carter 2008, 368), and can take from two to four full days across two to three weeks (Carter 2008, 369; Mullins and Kiley 2002, 376). Some examiners even read a thesis several times.

For a thesis to be a good read, it must meet examiner’s academic expectations and their expectations as ‘normal’ readers (Johnston 1997, 340). They expect to read a thesis that is academically sound – for example, engages with the literature, and has an appropriate methodology and a logical structure – but they also expect a thesis to be clear, interesting, polished and easy to follow. Put another way, examiners expect reader-friendly writing; they want the candidate to make the thesis clear for the examiner, to give arguments that will convince the examiner and to explain the approach, conclusions and significance of the research in ways that the examiner will understand.

5. Examiners are irritated and distracted by presentation errors

Presentation errors tend to cause poor first impressions for thesis examiners. They make examining an irritating task rather than an enjoyable read. On the other hand,

examiners express a 'sense of relief and pleasure, or even surprise, when a well-presented thesis was encountered' (Johnston 1997, 339).

Examiners become distracted, irritated, frustrated and agitated by frequent presentation errors that could have been fixed easily (though a few errors will be forgiven as they are almost inevitable). Examiners will be annoyed by normal presentation errors such as typographical, grammatical, spelling and formatting errors or inconsistencies, as well as unclear writing; and they will be irritated by academic presentation errors such as an incorrect or inconsistent bibliography or citations, references that are omitted or misreported, incorrect publication dates or misspelled names, and citations and quotations that are misused.

Thesis students might think that presentation errors are unimportant, merely editorial, because it is only the research that counts. But, if there are frequent typographical or spelling errors, or if the formatting is unclear and inconsistent, examiners lose confidence in the thesis, doubt the quality of the research and conclusions, and start to question the competence of the writer. The examiner thinks: 'If the candidate makes errors with something easy like spelling, then what sorts of errors were they making in their experiments, in their analysis, and in their citations?' Thus, sloppy presentation is seen as a sign of deeper problems, a sign of a poor thesis.

To make it worse, once examiners notice sloppy presentation and have become suspicious of the quality of the thesis, they tend to read more critically, searching for faults. The examiners begin to look for more presentation errors, and they do not give full attention to the ideas in the thesis. They will begin to check references, figures, spelling and quotations, rather than concentrating on the content.

6. Examiners favour a coherent thesis

Examiners also favour coherence. Coherent writing has focus, flow, and a logical and explicit structure that integrates and connects the various parts of the thesis and gives clear bearings for the reader. Coherent writing often includes signposts and summaries that indicate what is coming and what has been done. This is especially important for an examiner reading a thesis in chunks over a week or two, when they may have forgotten Chapter 1 by the time they read Chapter 5. Without coherence, a thesis appears badly written, disjointed and unstructured, and it leaves examiners confused, baffled and puzzled.

In line with their academic expectations, thesis examiners also equate coherence with a convincing argument. A thesis is crafted into a coherent whole by threading an argument through it for the examiners to follow – connecting the research question with an answer, connecting various subsidiary conclusions and connecting these conclusions with the supporting data, evidence and reasons, and with the background literature.

7. Examiners favour a thesis that engages with the literature

Examiners look for a thesis that is situated in a relevant body of literature, and which demonstrates an accurate and comprehensive understanding of this literature. Although it is necessary for thesis students to explain what has already been written on their topic, it is not enough to merely describe, list or cover the relevant literature. Examiners want a thesis candidate to analyse, interpret, categorise, order or apply the literature in order to draw new insights and conclusions.

The literature should be used to provide: a rationale for the research, supporting evidence for the arguments and conclusions, and criteria against which to judge the contribution of the thesis. The metaphor of a story is useful here. The current literature tells a story. A thesis student engages with the literature by giving his/her version of this story, telling it in his/her own words in the literature review, and then advancing the story with new findings and conclusions.

Above all, examiners want to see critical engagement with the literature, rather than a list of who said what. To show critical engagement, a candidate might interpret, conceptualise, analyse or evaluate what has been written, supported with appropriate references. Or, the candidate might distinguish between primary data, interpretation and speculation (Holbrook et al. 2007, 349), and identify controversy, disagreement and ambiguity.

It is particularly important that thesis candidates use the literature as evidence to support their claims. Examiners want to read a thesis where the candidate has used the literature to argue that: their interpretation of the field is accurate; their research question and approach are worthwhile, appropriate and address a significant gap in the literature; and their results and conclusions make an important contribution to this literature.

Holbrook et al. (2004b, 103) suggest that examiners tend to use the literature review as a 'litmus test' for the quality of a thesis as a whole. A pass requires coverage and a working understanding of the literature; but, for a good thesis, a thesis candidate must critically engage with the literature (Holbrook et al. 2007, 353).

8. Examiners favour a thesis with a convincing approach

Examiners, especially experienced examiners, tend to be open to different research approaches, and they do not insist that candidates use the examiner's favoured approach (Mullins and Kiley 2002, 378). Examiners do insist, however, that the candidate must convince them that the approach they adopt is appropriate. A well-explained and justified approach, with clear acknowledgements of strengths and possible limitations, is more important than adhering to a predecided approach.

Examiners want to read a clear and researchable hypothesis, question or problem, and a method or research design that is appropriate for addressing this. In some disciplines, such as physics, chemistry or other sciences, there is a standard, assumed approach, and a candidate only needs to explain their approach if it deviates from this norm. In other disciplines where a variety of approaches are on offer, the candidate always has to explain and justify their methodological choices.

It is also important for examiners that a thesis does what it stated would be done. The candidate must apply their approach carefully and thoroughly, just as they had claimed, and they must ensure that what they say they will do matches what they actually did. In particular, once an approach is chosen, examiners expect thesis students to follow its internal standards, and they will criticise a thesis that deviates without adequate justification.

9. Examiners favour a thesis that engages with the findings

Examiners also favour a thesis that thoroughly engages with the findings, rather than merely listing what was found. A thesis candidate must interpret, analyse and critically appraise their findings, draw conclusions from them and show the implications

for the research question or problem (Holbrook et al. 2004c). On the other hand, examiners are vigilant for overstated, misrepresented or misreported findings, unconvincing analyses or interpretations and conclusions that go beyond what the findings can support.

In particular, examiners want thesis candidates to critically discuss how their findings connect with the literature. For example, which studies do the findings support or vindicate, and which do they discredit or undermine? How do the findings contribute to or advance the literature? What further research is now warranted?

10. Examiners require a thesis be publishable

Examiners *favour* a thesis that is coherent, with a convincing approach that engages with the literature and the findings, but they *require* a passable thesis to be publishable research. This is the key criterion that examiners use to assess theses regardless of the institution, country or discipline (Holbrook et al. 2004a, 127). Putting this in various ways, a passable thesis must be original, have ample scope and significance, and make a contribution or have an impact on the field, discipline or practice.

Although publishable work is often equated with original work, original research does not have to be ground breaking, unprecedented or paradigm shifting. Examiners expect a thesis to add something to a field, but they do not require the definitive contribution that transforms the field, the equivalent of the next theory of relativity. For example, an original contribution might be opening up a new area of research, or reframing an old issue; it could involve introducing a new method, theoretical frame or concept, or applying established methods, theories and concepts in new areas; a thesis can make an original contribution by gathering new data which lead to new findings and conclusions, or by providing a novel interpretation or synthesis of established data, theories or conclusions (Winter, Griffith, and Green 2000, 35).

Although originality tends to be an explicit criterion for examining a PhD thesis, it is not a stated criterion for passing a master's thesis (though it is expected for a firstclass grade). Nevertheless, examiners still expect a master's to make some lesser contribution to the literature (Bourke and Holbrook 2013, 415).

Examiners judge how original and publishable a thesis is by comparing it to the research that has already been done in the field. This is one main reason examiners expect a thesis to engage with the literature – this is how a candidate shows that their thesis contributes to a field, and is publishable in this field.

Perhaps the most convincing way to show examiners that a thesis is publishable is to publish from it. Mullins and Kiley (2002, 381) found that half of the 30 examiners that they interviewed were favourably influenced when the thesis they were examining included material published in good journals (though many of the interviewees had not examined PhDs which included publications). This may not be a universal tendency, however, as a few examiners said they were not swayed by the inclusion of published material in a thesis, because an examiner should make their own judgements without influence.

11. Examiners give summative and formative feedback

Thesis examiners make judgements about the quality of a thesis, but they also offer constructive, formative feedback about how to improve.

Examiners tend to see themselves as gatekeepers, upholding the standards for a master's or doctorate. As such, they give summative comments, like a final grade or evaluation: 'This is a fine thesis', 'This is a well-executed literature review', 'the analysis is deficient' (Holbrook et al. 2004a, 137). If a thesis meets their expectations, they give praise; but if it does not, examiners offer negative judgements. Fine arts examiners were a notable exception. Because thesis research in fine art is still very new, examiners did not see themselves as gatekeepers, but more as explorers of student work (Dally et al. 2004).

Examiners also see themselves as teachers, supervisors or mentors, aiming to assist a candidate by offering formative comments such as instruction, advice and guidance. Examiners treat a written thesis as a work-in-progress, and give instruction and advice regardless of the quality of the thesis. If a candidate has not met his/her expectations, they offer advice about how to improve the thesis. If the thesis has met their expectations, they offer advice about future publications and research. Examiners offer lots of advice about how a candidate can progress and develop as a researcher, even if the thesis is of the highest quality (Hansford and Maxwell 1993; Lovat et al. 2008, 73). In fact, examiners are more eager to offer this constructive feedback than they are to condemn the inadequacies of a thesis (Lovat et al. 2008, 71). More than a quarter of every examiner report is devoted to formative or instructive comments (Holbrook et al. 2004c, 105; Holbrook et al. 2007, 345).

Discussion

Even though a thesis is the ultimate assessment, most thesis students are mystified by the process of examination (e.g. Johnston 1997, 333), and this is contrary to good assessment practice (e.g. Biggs and Tang 2011; Brown and Knight 1994). In order to clarify how a thesis is assessed, we painted a new picture of what thesis examiners do, based on a synthesis of diverse studies. We sketched 11 general practices of thesis examiners.

The picture we paint of what examiners do confirms some of what we suspected or knew anecdotally, verifies whether thesis examiners do what we think they should, elaborates vague institutional criteria and systematises the fragmented knowledge we have from various other studies. This picture also provides a broader and more objective basis for giving advice to thesis students. It provides some reassurance that there really are some things that all examiners tend to do, things which we may have hoped or assumed they did, but did not know. It makes explicit the otherwise hidden practices of examiners, and thus enables thesis students to 'approach the examination in a more informed way' (Johnston 1997, 334).

There are limitations to our review of examiner practices, because we used broad brush strokes to outline the commonalities. We did not fill in the subtle details such as disciplinary variations (for more on this see Lovitts 2007), the differences between a mere pass and an excellent thesis (for more on this see Bourke 2007; Holbrook et al. 2007; Lovat et al. 2008; Mullins and Kiley 2002), or the relative importance or frequency of the things examiners do (for more on this see Bourke 2007; Bourke, Hattie, and Anderson 2004). This means there is scope for more detailed research to refine this review, and to better understand how theses are assessed.

Further research might articulate the thought process of examiners, such as what questions they consider as they examine a thesis. If we can articulate these

questions, we can clarify the criteria for examination, and offer more concrete advice for thesis students. For example, if examiners tend to ask themselves ‘What is the main conclusion? Is it well-supported?’, then we know that one criterion for a good thesis is having an explicit and defensible main conclusion, and we can advise thesis writers to ask themselves ‘Have I clearly stated what my main conclusion is? Will this conclusion be convincing for my examiners?’

Second, we need to research how examiners react to published material in a thesis. Publishing during candidature is not yet a norm in many disciplines, but it is likely that more and more candidates will publish given the increasing competition for academic positions. Several researchers have already noted an increase in student publishing (Hartley and Betts 2009; Lee and Kamler 2008; McGrail, Rickard, and Jones 2006). Will examiners tend to favour a thesis that includes material from quality publications? Will they tend to read it less critically than a thesis without published material? More research is needed, especially because the current literature is silent or ambiguous about the issue of publications in a thesis. Mullins and Kiley (2002) found that some examiners said they were positively influenced if a thesis candidate had published from their thesis, but they also found that some examiners denied any influence. Other research has also suggested that some examiners may not be influenced by publications (Bourke, Holbrook, and Lovat 2005; Johnston 1997).

A useful application of this research would involve linking each theme in this review with specific advice for thesis students. The 11 themes are often abstract and may not provide enough concrete detail for a thesis student to recognise what they can do to make their thesis coherent, for example, or to engage with their findings. Some general advice may be possible, but the advice may need to be discipline specific.

Conclusion

We reviewed studies of examiner practice in order to draw conclusions about what thesis examiners tend to do (while acknowledging that there will be exceptions). We aimed to synthesise common conclusions from methodologically sound studies, triangulated across a variety of studies, to create a new coherent picture of examiner practice.

What are the common conclusions from the literature about examiner practices that would be beneficial for thesis students to know? Thesis examiners tend to be broadly consistent in their practices and recommendations. They expect and want a thesis to pass and they are unwilling to recommend a fail. But, first impressions count, and as they begin to read, they will quickly make up their mind whether a thesis is likely to be high or low quality. They will read with academic expectations and the expectations of a normal reader. Like any reader, they get annoyed and distracted by presentation errors, and they want to read a thesis that is a coherent whole, not a series of unrelated points. As academic readers, they favour a thesis that engages with the literature, has a convincing approach, analyses and engages with the findings, and which is publishable. In fact, being publishable and making a contribution to the literature are the most important things that examiners look for. When they have finished, they give not only a final evaluation of a thesis, but also instruction and advice to improve the thesis and any further publications and research. We hope that these generalisations will shed light on the often secret process of assessing a thesis, and reassure, guide and encourage students as they write their theses.

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