



The final examination of the UK PhD: fit for purpose?

Gill Houston
Ingrid Lunt

This presentation is based on a recently accepted journal article with the same title, forthcoming in Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education

1) The research

- PhD research into the final examination (2019)
- 10 viva observations in 6 UK universities across a range of subjects
- 43 interviews with actors in the vivas plus experienced examiners

2) The context for the paper

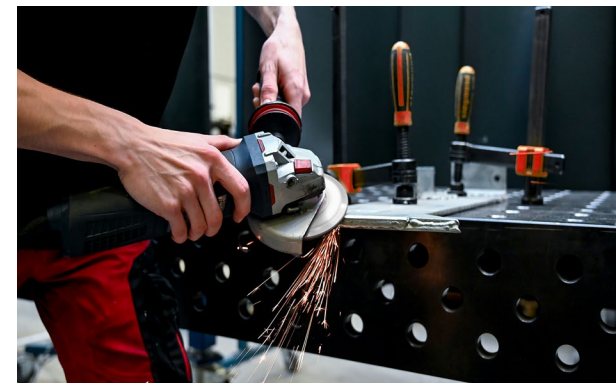
- Evolution of the PhD; doctoral researcher aims/outcomes
- The purpose and integrity of the final examination in the light of these developments and employability research
- What more could we do to help doctoral graduates with their transition to the next stage?

Evolution of the PhD and doctoral researcher aims

- Fundamental changes to the doctorate and its purposes in last few decades – knowledge economy
- Scholarly model for doctoral researcher is now *independent*, supported – learner
- Revolution in doctoral training process e.g. cohort-based, structured research training for many
- Rationale for doctorate transformed from academic apprenticeship for the minority to a mainstream qualification used to enhance *career prospects*



DTPs/DTCs/other
structured
training



Attributes currently sought in UK final examination

- The PhD study enabled a range of attributes to be identified:

Doctoral attributes: a simple typology

A1 Originality *or* contribution to knowledge

A2 Publishability

A3 Research competence

A4 Intellectual rigour, including professional and personal skills

(Houston, 2019 and in Lee and Bongaardt, (eds), 2021)

Thesis:

Displays technical elements of research: design; methods; methodology, statistical approach, integrity; grasp of field and literature; validity of results; and contribution to knowledge.

Viva:

Explores technical elements to determine authorship, candidate's knowledge, approach, fitness as independent researcher and ability to discuss research outcomes and implications.

Research abilities, understanding,

achievements and skills

Communication of research: thesis structure, coherence, argument, fluency, how research is situated in the wider field, future research possibilities, lack of typographical and grammatical errors.

Assesses the candidate's personal characteristics and professional skills, e.g. verbal reasoning, intellectual rigour and agility, analytical ability, communication, integrity, leadership, etc.

Dual

focus

Personal and professional characteristics and skills

Q: What attributes/ characteristics/abilities/skills do you think examiners are looking for in PhD candidates?

A: *The only criterion I was really aware of was originality...that you had to make some substantive contribution to knowledge* (AHSS-C1)

A: *They make it very clear...from when you start that it has to be an original piece of work that contributes to knowledge* (STEM-C1)

A: *So that you could see...that my work was a coherent and original contribution to knowledge* (AHSS-C5)

A: *The quality of the work and the originality and how much it adds [to the field]* (STEM-C5)

A: *I was trying to get something that was as original as possible* (STEM-C4)

A: *You should make a contribution* (STEM-C3)

A: *I would have thought one of [the criteria] is: does this piece of research contribute to our stock of knowledge about that particular area?* (AHSS-C4)

How can the final examination better reflect doctoral purposes / outcomes?

How can attributes developed during the doctorate be taken into account in the final exam?

How could we increase graduates' awareness of their professional and personal skills to build confidence for employment?



What more can universities do to prepare doctoral graduates for varied and satisfying employment commensurate with their abilities?

University of British Columbia: Public Scholars' Initiative

<https://www.grad.ubc.ca/psi/>



- Open to *all subjects*, any employment sector
- Up to \$20,000 support available for each candidate
- Involves *'rigorous scholarship in non- or alternative academic settings'*
- Doctoral researchers write their thesis on research conducted in relevant context
- Broadens the concept of scholarship to include employment contexts and prepares researchers for many different careers
- PSI network as at 2021: 261 doctoral scholars

So what else could we do? Some ideas...

1. Encourage doctoral researchers to think about how they are developing a coherent set of attributes, to include research, professional, and personal skills
2. Strengthen the concept of personal development plans for doctoral researchers so they are recording their attributes during their programme
3. Require examiners to comment explicitly on research, professional and personal attributes, and where they are evidenced, as part of their reports

A source of tension?

- Retaining the integrity of the doctorate as a research degree while ensuring it is a qualification that prepares graduates for multiple careers

Thanks for listening! 😊

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