

Developments in the Doctoral Examination in the UK



At the start of the 21st century...

- **There was a flurry of academic interest in the examination of the doctorate in the UK (see Tinkler and Jackson, 2000; Jackson and Tinkler, 2001; Denicolo, 2003; Joyner, 2003; Morley et al, 2003; Park, 2003; Powell and Green, 2003; Pearce 2004; Powell and McCauley, 2003; Tinkler and Jackson 2000, 2002, 2004;).**
- **These studies suggested that there was a high degree of variability in policies and procedures for doctoral examinations between institutions, a finding that was replicated in later reviews undertaken by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA, 2007a and b).**

Subsequently...

- **The QAA in successive editions of its Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes (1999; 2004; 2014; 2018) made a series of recommendations intended to promote the adoption of good practice across the sector.**

Aim

The aims are to see how far, nearly two decades on, the recommendations have been implemented and, where appropriate, discuss whether further development may be needed.

Objectives

To review progress in the domains of:

- 1) The criteria for the assessment of the doctorate;**
- 2) Consultations with candidates prior to the nomination of examiners;**
- 3) Criteria for the appointment of examiners;**
- 4) Reporting on the thesis by examiners prior to the viva ;**
- 5) The attendance and roles of supervisors in the examination process;**

Domains (cont.)

- 6) Access to the viva;**
- 7) The conduct of the viva;**
- 8) Notification to candidates of the final recommendations of examiners;**
- 9) Variations between institutions in the recommendations available to examiners;**
- 10) Procedures when examiners disagree.**

Method

- **In 2021 a survey was undertaken of the web sites of the 150 higher education institutions in the UK which provide doctoral programmes.**
- **Of these, 19 did not have awarding powers of their own and their awards were validated by other institutions, and they were excluded.**
- **For the remaining 131 institutions, a search was mounted for public documentation relating to doctoral examination, including variously institutional ordinances, rules and regulations, codes of practice for research degrees and research degree examinations, and handbooks for examiners, supervisors and candidates.**

Method (cont.)

- **In four institutions, access to documentation relating to research degree examination was restricted to staff intranets;**
- **But in the remaining 127- 98% of those with their own research degree awarding powers- information was publicly available.**

Summary of findings

1 Criteria for the assessment of the doctorate

- **Original studies find considerable variability in criteria between institutions**
- **Subsequently QAA published the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (2001 and 2014)**
- **Data available on criteria for the 127 institutions:**
 - **36% replicated the QAA criteria verbatim**
 - **43% used alternative wording but covered the criteria;**
 - **22% had definitions which matched the QAA criteria in all but one respect, publishability**

Question

Is it a matter for concern that one-fifth of institutions did not have an explicit publishability criterion for the doctorate?

2 Consultations with candidates prior to the nomination of examiners

- **Studies found that practices varied considerably between institutions for nominating examiners, from candidates being consulted and their preferences taken into account through to nominations being made without reference to them by supervisors.**
- **In only 24 (19%) of the 127 institutions, there was an explicit requirement for candidates to be consulted about the nomination of examiners, although in all cases it was stated that they had no right of veto.**

Question

- **Should consultation with candidates over examiners be encouraged more strongly in the UK?**

3 Criteria for the appointment of examiners

Studies found that there was considerable variation in the criteria used by institutions for the appointment of examiners, and these were checked for a number of dimensions, three of which were:

Employment status

- **In all 127 cases, internal examiners had to be either currently employed or recently retired and research active. In 121 (95%), they could be any grade of academic staff, in 5 (4%) probationers were barred from being examiners, and in 1 (1%) they had to be a senior lecturer or professor.**
- **External examiners obviously had to be employed by other institutions. In 62 institutions (49%), this was the sole criterion; in the other 65 (51%), staff who had previously worked at the awarding institution could act as external examiners provided that they had left between two and five years previously.**

Independence from the supervisory team

- **One of the key recommendations of successive editions of the QAA Code of Practice (2004, 2014, 2018) was that supervisors should not be allowed to examine their own candidates**
- **In 124 institutions (98%) there was a blanket ban on any past or present member of the supervisory team being an examiner, and only three institutions (2%) provided for exceptions.**

Experience of examining

- **Evidence that inexperienced examiners tended to have unrealistic expectations of what candidates could achieve and were more critical than experienced ones;**
- **QAA Code (2004; 2014; 2018) asked institutions were to consider in what circumstances they might appoint an inexperienced examiner and, if so, what support they would need;**

Experience of examining (cont.)

- **Among 127 institutions**
 - **27 (22%) required external only to have experience**
 - **12 (9%) required both examiners to have experience**
 - **53 (42%) required that, between the two examiners, they had experience of examination.**
 - **33 (26%) of institutions made no mention of experience**

Question

- **Is it a matter for concern that one-fifth of institutions have no requirement for examiners to have experience of examination?**

4 Reporting by examiners prior to the viva

- **Studies found that institutions varied in terms of whether examiners were required to confer and produce preliminary reports and recommendations before the viva, or whether these were only expected after it had been completed;**
- **The latter meant that, effectively, liaison between examiners prior to the viva was private and that there was no chance to scrutinise their deliberations;**
- **This matter was taken up in successive editions of the QAA Code of Practice (2004; 2014; 2018) which made pre-viva liaison a requirement;**
- **In 2021, all of the 127 institutions required that examiners independently made preliminary reports on the thesis to the institution in advance of the viva so that their views were known prior to the oral examination and not just afterwards.**

5 Attendance and role of supervisors in the viva

- **Studies found variations in the circumstances in which supervisors could attend the viva and, if so, the roles they were allowed to play;**
- **These issues was taken up in successive editions of the QAA Code (2004; 2104; 2018) which asked institutions to clarify supervisor attendance in the viva and supervisor roles;**
- **In 2021, information on these matters was available for 121 institutions;**

5 Attendance and role of supervisors in the viva (cont.)

- **Only three (2%) gave supervisors an absolute right to attend the viva; 88 (73%) allowed them to attend at the invitation of or with the written consent of the student; in 20 (17%) supervisors could attend with the agreement of both the student and the examiners; in 5 (4%) supervisors could be invited by the examiners themselves; and in 6 (5%), supervisors were not allowed to attend the viva at all**
- **With regard to roles, only one institution accorded supervisors an absolute right to speak in the viva; in the remaining 120, the supervisor was present only as an observer and only allowed to speak if invited to do so by the examiners.**

6 Access to the viva

- **In the UK, viva is as Green (1998) put it, 'a closed intimate affair', and the only persons normally present are the candidate and the examiners, possibly the supervisor(s), and in many cases an independent chair or convenor;**
- **It was suggested in the QAA Code of Practice (2004; 2014) that institutions should consider whether access to vivas should be made more open;**

6 Access to the viva

- **However, there has been virtually no movement in this direction in the UK over the past two decades or so. Of the 127 institutions, there were only five which made any wider provision for attendance other than the main actors; the UK viva remains firmly closed.**
- **Attracted recent criticism on the grounds of:**

1) negating the independence of the external

The ostensible reasons why an external examiner is appointed is to confer visible impartiality in the examination, make use of expertise from outside the university, and ensure that common standards are applied. However, the candidate's supervisor may assume that the external examiner is someone who can be relied upon to yield to pressure to pass the candidate regardless of the quality of the thesis. In any case, if the external refuses to pass the candidate...it may go to appeal and his or her judgement may be overruled, in some cases summarily without open discussion and with few controls on the process of re-examining.

Alexander and Davis (2018: 7-8)

2) preventing wider scrutiny of theses

- **Controversy over the Oxford doctorate awarded to Naomi Wolf;**
- **She subsequently published a book based upon her thesis, which was heavily criticised on the ground that it was based in part upon a mis-reading of historical sources (and for that reason ended up being pulped by her American publisher);**
- **The thesis was embargoed by the university for six years and then made available with a list of what was described as ‘minor corrections’;**
- **But an expert in the field disagreed and described them as major, and on this basis questioned whether the thesis would have been passed with minor corrections if there had been wider expert scrutiny in a public viva. He was quoted as saying:**

Question

... the British doctoral examining system is not as transparent or rigorous as it should be compared with other countries At some level, a doctorate should require a public examination, but that is not really the case here – I'm not sure UK higher education has got this one right.

(Hitchcock, quoted Grove 2021: 7)

Do you agree?

7 The conduct of the viva

- **The fact that the oral examination in the UK is private creates what Anderson (cited in Morley et al, 2003: 264) has described as an ‘awesome’ potential for the abuse of candidates by examiners;**
- **The need for preventative measures was taken up in successive editions of the QAA Code of Practice (2004, 2014, 2018) which recommended variously offering examiners advice about the conduct of the viva, the use of independent chairs, or the use of other means such as recording to ensure that the process was fair and transparent.**

7 The conduct of the viva (cont.)

- **With regard to advising examiners, 13 of the 127 institutions (11%) included such material in their documentation;**
- **Information on chairing the viva was available for 107 institutions and of these:**
 - **67 (62%) required independent chairs for every viva;**
 - **34 (32%) normally chaired by internal examiner but provision for independent chair under specified circumstances;**
 - **4 (4%) always chaired by internal;**
 - **2 (2%) either an independent chair or recording of the viva;**

Question

- **Is it a matter for concern that independent chairs/
convenors are not ubiquitous?**

8 Notification of final recommendations

- **Studies showed variations in how far institutions permitted examiners to inform candidates of the results of the examination from at the start to after the end of the viva to until the decision had been ratified by the institution;**
- **Issue was taken up in two editions of the QAA Code (2004: 2014) which asked institutions to have clear policies on when and how results could be communicated to candidates;**

8 Notification of final recommendations (cont.)

- **Among institutions:**
 - **75 (61%) made no mention of when candidates could be informed;**
 - **2 (2%) start or end;**
 - **42 (33%) at the end of the viva;**
 - **6 (5%) only when formally notified by institution**
 - **2 (2%) candidate informally told by independent chair.**

Question

- **Should all institutions be encouraged to have clear policies stating when candidates will be informed about the outcome of their examinations?**

9 Variations in recommendations

- **Earlier studies identified significant differences between institutions in the recommendations that examiners were allowed to make;**
- **Recent survey showed common ones were:**
 - **Outright pass**
 - **Pass subject to minor corrections**
 - **Refer and resubmit**
 - **Lower degree**
 - **Failure**

9 Variations in recommendations (cont.)

- **Different ones were:**
 - **80 (63%) had 'pass subject to major corrections' and 'refer subject to major corrections' while 47 (37%) had only 'refer for major corrections';**
 - **34 (27%) had 'pass subject to satisfactory viva or other form of test' for cases where the thesis was deemed to be satisfactory but the candidate's performance in the viva was not.**

Question

- **Should institutions be encouraged to standardise their recommendations?**

10 Procedures when examiners disagreed

- **One of the issues brought up in one of the early editions of the Code of Practice (QAA, 2004) was of a need for clear procedures in the event of examiners disagreeing;**
- **Of the 127 institutions, there were 92 (72%) which had strategies for examiner disagreement**
 - **3% took the recommendation of the external as final;**
 - **2% had internal procedures to arbitrate between examiners until reached agreement**
 - **41% appointed a new external examiner whose decision was final**
 - **6% appointed a complete new examination team**
 - **47% said method would depend on the circumstances**

Question

- **Is it a matter for concern that a minority of institutions have no published strategy in the event of examiner disagreement?**

Conclusions

- **Over the past two decades, there have been significant changes in many aspects of doctoral examinations in the UK;**
- **In some domains, there is much greater standardisation than two decades ago, particularly with regard to;**
 - **Independence of examiners from the supervisory team;**
 - **Reporting by examiners prior to the viva;**
 - **Status and role of supervisors in the viva.**

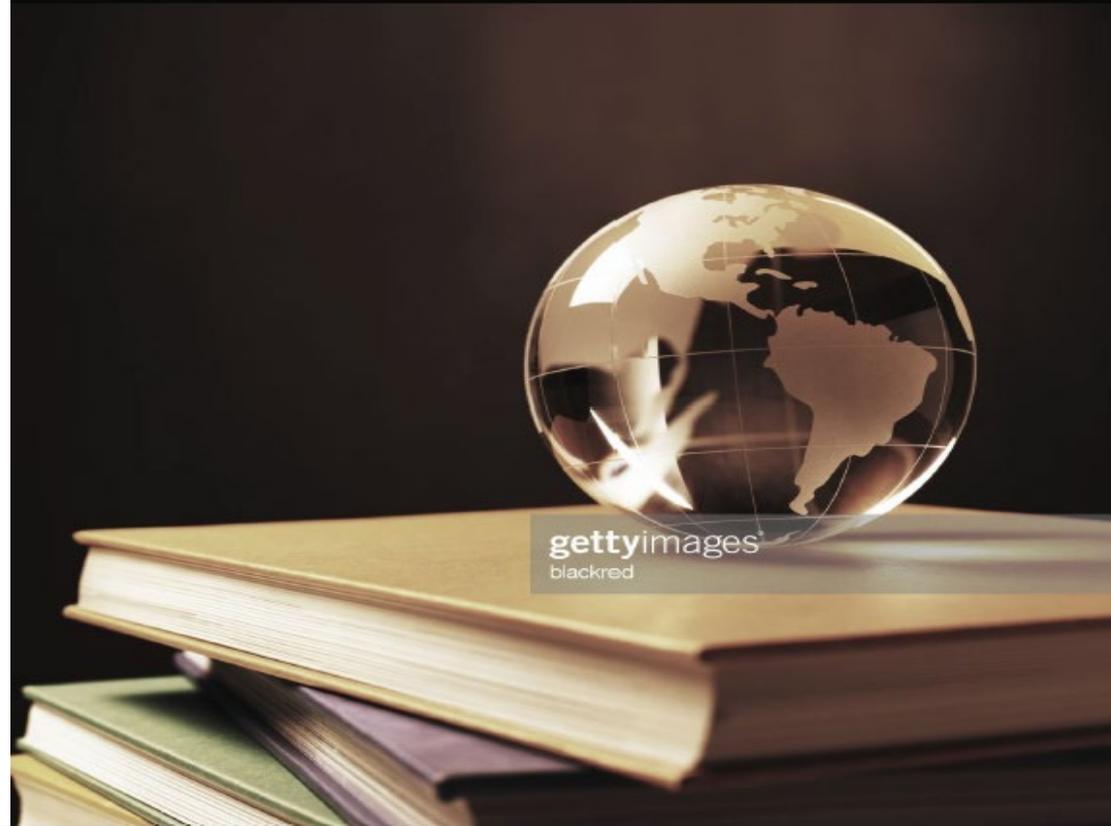
Conclusions (cont.)

- **But there still are issues which institutions may need to address, in particular in relation to:**
 - **Consultations with candidates about nominations of examiners;**
 - **Access to the viva;**
 - **Examiner recommendations;**
 - **Policies for informing candidates of the outcome;**
 - **Policies in the event of examiner disagreement.**

Doctoral Examination

Exploring Practice Across the Globe

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Thank you

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