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The UK doctoral examination:
fit for purpose?

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Thesis: <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:07291f0e-e80b-4b06-a6af-b3ac8b90a00e>

Summary

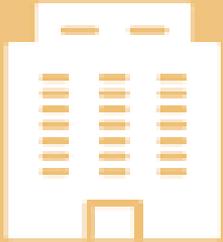
1. Background: the UK doctorate in the 21st century
2. The changing nature and purposes of the doctorate in relation to its assessment
3. The two-part final examination process
4. What respondents said about the purposes of the viva
5. Attributes and where they are assessed
6. Is the doctoral examination fit for purpose?
7. Conclusions



1 Background

Key points

Institutional
structures



Skilled labour &
good education



Innovation
systems



Access to ICT
infrastructure



- Transition to knowledge economy
- Demographic changes in higher education
- More emphasis on the 'transferability' of doctoral attributes to employment contexts
- Introduction of structured doctorates and cohort learning

The changing nature and purposes of the doctorate in relation to its assessment

- Literature on the doctoral examination, in particular the viva

Critical of final exam, viva in particular

Wallace and Marsh, 2001

Tinkler and Jackson 2002

Denicolò 2003

Bassnett 2014

Lovat et al, 2015

Poole, 2015 and 2017

Several others, including Morley et al (2002)

Value of viva

Hartley and Jory, 2000

Houston et al, 2022

Few authors openly support the viva

The two-part final examination process

Thesis: first element, stages 1 and 2

Viva: second element, stage 3

Independent judgements – stage 1

Individual examiners receive the thesis
Thesis is read once, twice or several times
Initial and general impressions of the candidate are refined by detailed analysis of the thesis

Shared judgements – stage 2

Examiners share their views on thesis quality
Some exchange pre-viva reports
Examiners meet to harmonise judgements just before viva

Final judgement – stage 3

Examination of the candidate during the viva
Emerging judgements finalised
Examiners agree recommendation and thesis corrections and inform candidate

Continuum of judgement: thesis (stages 1 and 2); and viva (stage 3)
Examiners' assessment emerges over time, concluding in the viva

What did respondents say about the purposes of the viva?

It makes the examination fairer, enables the candidate to explain what they have done, and avoids misunderstandings:

'[examiners might] mis-assess you by judging things in your thesis which you don't have the opportunity to defend...maybe if you explain it further in the viva...it makes sense' (STEM candidate 5)

'It's important for there to be an opportunity for the candidate to be able to defend their work face to face' (STEM internal examiner 3)

'To understand...choices [the candidate] has made...to clarify any misunderstandings...'
(AHSS internal examiner 2)

Attributes and where they are assessed

Originality or a contribution to knowledge

Key criterion for doctoral examination
Terminology differs between STEM and AHSS

Mainly evident from: thesis

Publishability

Almost as important as originality / contribution

Some publish before examination, others publish from thesis; often depends on discipline and thesis format
Mainly evident from: thesis

Research competence

Discipline-specific factors used to evaluate research competence; research integrity important to all, as is candidate's ability to understand the significance of their research and situate it in wider field

Mainly evident from thesis but also viva

Intellectual rigour

Displayed by attributes such as:
Critical, analytical and reflective thinking
Problem-solving and logic
Independent thought and research leadership
Thesis style and presentation
Many evident from viva but also thesis

Reference for full table: Houston, G (2021) Doctoral examiners' judgements: do examiners agree on doctoral attributes and how important are professional and personal characteristics? In: A Lee and R Bongaardt (eds.) *The Future of Doctoral Research: challenges and opportunities*. London: Routledge.

Quotes from respondents (STEM)

‘Deeper critical thinking and understanding of the subject...at the end you should be a researcher who...[has a] holistic understanding and critical thinking about the work you’re doing...’ (STEM external examiner 2)

‘We want to know [if] you realise that...there are always things that...you may not have proved sufficiently [so] what will you do more to prove it?’ (STEM internal examiner 3)

‘I like to see that they’re logical, that they can work their way through a problem’ (STEM ext. examiner 5)

‘The extent to which someone is in the driver’s seat for the research that they’ve done...can they ask their own questions, design their own [project] and then take charge of...converging all...this into a final product?’ (STEM supervisor 2)

‘Are they competent for other things in life? Are they going to bring the skills that they’ve learned from this doctoral research?’ (STEM int. examiner 2)

‘Really importantly, are they capable of thinking on their feet?’ (STEM external examiner5)

‘The advantage of the viva is that you’re asking them questions on the hoof...however much they’ve been coached...they wouldn’t be able to do that unless they’re competent’ (STEM ext. examiner3)

Quotes from respondents (AHSS)

`It's very important...the candidate shows they are able to conduct independent research' (Focus Group, female 3)

`A whole set of things...go...together...they ultimately come down to what might be called intellectual rigour in that the evidence and the argument stands up to challenge, and within that there are...a number of different attributes' (AHSS internal examiner 1)

`Two things are particularly important...the most important really is rigour' (Economics examiner1)

`Willingness to take a position...self-critical and critical'
(AHSS int. examiner1)

`If they're doing empirical work...the ability to be reflective is really important' (AHSS internal examiner3)

`You're looking for...research agility and flexibility and ability to problem-solve, to think on their feet, to think about new problems, new solutions...think divergently, creatively (AHSS supervisor 1)

Is the doctoral examination fit for purpose: a fair question?

- Many doctoral examiners and supervisors have no concerns about fitness for purpose
- This does not mean the examination cannot or should not be improved
- How can we make it just as relevant for candidates entering any career, both within and outwith academia?

Conclusions: discuss!

- Should the examiners be encouraged to comment overtly on the qualities / attributes of the individual, not just their work?
- How can we instil greater confidence in candidates of their employability in any context?
- How important is it that the outcome of the doctoral assessment remains a pass/fail judgement?
- How should we demonstrate that the award of a doctorate signifies a combination of research, professional and personal attributes?

Range £	Doctorate research %	Masters taught %	All %
Less than 15,000	0	2	4
15,000-17,999	0	4	6
18,000-20,999	1	11	13
21,000-23,999	2	11	12
24,000-26,999	4	16	21
27,000-29,999	5	11	11
30,000-32,999	17	11	11
33,000-35,999	20	7	6
36,000-38,999	14	5	4
39,000-41,999	10	4	3
42,000-44,999	5	2	2
45,000-47,999	4	3	2
48,000-50,999	4	3	2
51,000 and above	13	11	4