

Developments in the Doctoral Examination in the UK

Professor Stan Taylor

Introduction¹

At the start of the 21st century, there was a flurry of 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; Powell and McCauley, 2003; Tinkler and Jackson; 2004; Pearce 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, 2007b). Subsequently in successive editions of its Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes (1999; 2004; 2014; 2018) the QAA made a series of recommendations intended to promote the adoption of good practice across the sector.

The purpose of the present paper is to see how far, nearly two decades on, variations still persist and how far recommendations for good practice have been implemented in nine key domains of doctoral examination, namely:

- 1) the criteria for the doctorate
- 2) consulting candidates prior to the nomination of examiners
- 3) criteria for their appointment
- 4) reporting by examiners prior to the viva
- 5) the role of supervisors in the examination process
- 6) access to the viva
- 7) the conduct of the viva
- 8) differences in the recommendations that examiners could make
- 9) procedures when examiners are unable to agree on a recommendation.

In order to investigate these policies and procedures, 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 but their awards were made 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. In four institutions, access to documentation relating to research degree examination was restricted to staff of the institutions, but in the remaining 127, 98% of those with their own research degree awarding powers, information was publicly available.

Findings

1. Criteria for assessment of the doctorate

In her paper Denicolo (2003) noted that institutional criteria for the doctorate were very general and varied between institutions, a contention strongly reinforced in the later study by Tinkler and Jackson (2004). This was despite the publication by the QAA (2001) of a Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) which for the first time contained a generic descriptor of the doctorate which was available for adoption or adaptation by institutions.

Subsequently, the QAA (2014: 30) issued a second edition of the FHEQ, which remains the current generic definition. Among the 127 institutions, 46 (36%) replicated the QAA criteria verbatim in defining the doctorate; a further 6 (5%) incorporated them in slightly reworded form; 48 (38%) used alternative wording but covered these criteria; and the remaining 28 (22%) had definitions which did not match the QAA definition in one respect, namely publishability. This may be matter for concern, however, research by Houston (2021) suggests that, irrespective of whether it is formally stated, examiners universally expect this criterion to be met.

2. Consulting candidates prior to the nomination of examiners

Denicolo (2003), Joyner (2003) and Powell and McCauley (2003) noted 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 and/or research committees.

In 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.

3. Criteria for the appointment of examiners

Denicolo (2003) noted that there was considerable variation in the criteria used by institutions for the appointment of examiners, and these were checked among the 127 institutions.

Employment status

In all 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, as had been the case earlier (see Morgan, 2022). 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.

The first three editions of the QAA Code (1999, 2004, 2014) went further, and suggested that examiners should not be appointed if they had any substantial involvement in the candidate's work or if their own work was the focus of the research project. Of the 127 institutions, 32 institutions (25%) banned any collaboration, including publications and research grants, between examiners, candidates, and members of the supervisory team either 'recently' or for specific periods from the previous two to five years. In 13 institutions (10%), there was a specific requirement that the examiners' own work should not be the focus of the research project.

Experience of examining

There is evidence (Mullins and Kiley, 2002; Kiley and Mullins, 2004; Kiley, 2009) that inexperienced examiners tended to have unrealistic expectations of what candidates should achieve, and were more critical than those who had such experience. This contention informed successive editions of the QAA Code (2004; 2014; 2018) in which institutions were asked to consider in what circumstances they might appoint an inexperienced examiner and, if so, what support they would need.

Of the 127 institutions, 33 (26%) made no mention of a need for examiners to have previous experience of examination. In 27 institutions (22%), the internal was not required to have previous experience, but the external was; 12 (9%) required that both examiners should have previous experience. In the largest group of 53 institutions (52%), the requirement was that, between the two examiners, they had previous experience of examination.

4. Reporting by examiners prior to the viva

Denicolo (2003) and Powell and McCauley (2003) reported that institutions varied in terms of whether examiners were required to confer and produce preliminary reports and recommendations before the viva, or whether there was only a final report and recommendation after the viva had been completed. The latter meant that there was no formal chance for examiners to scrutinise each other's judgements prior

to the viva and plan the latter accordingly, or for institutions to be informed about what examiners thought before meeting the candidate, which could be important in the case of appeals. These matters were taken up in successive editions of the QAA Code of Practice (2004; 2014; 2018) which made pre-viva liaison and reporting 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. The role of supervisors in the viva

Denicolo (2003) noted two major variations in the roles of supervisors.

Firstly, in some institutions supervisors were required to attend vivas, in others they could attend subject to the agreement of the candidate and/or examiners, while in others they were forbidden to attend at all. This issue was taken up in successive editions of the QAA Code (2004; 2014; 2018) which asked institutions to consider whether the supervisor should be present and, if so, whether this should be with the agreement of the candidate.

In 2021, information on this was available for 121 institutions; of these, only three (2%) gave supervisors an absolute right to attend; 88 (73%) allowed them to attend at the invitation of or with the written consent of the student; in 20 (17%) it was with the agreement of both the student and the examiners; in 5 (4%) they could be invited by the examiners themselves; and in 6 (5%), supervisors were not allowed to attend the viva at all.

Secondly, when supervisors could attend, she noted that some institutions allowed them to participate fully in the proceedings, others to a limited extent, and some required them to be silent observers. In the 121 institutions where data was available in 2021, 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 and accountability

As Denicolo, (2003), Park (2003) and Tinkler and Jackson (2004) have pointed out, in the UK the viva was, as Green (1998) put it, 'a closed intimate affair', and the only persons normally present were the candidate and the examiners, possibly the supervisor, and in some cases an independent chair or convenor. So the UK viva was essentially a private affair, with accountability only to the institution.

In order to extend accountability, it was suggested in the QAA Code of Practice (2004; 2014) that institutions should consider whether access to vivas should be made more open.

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.

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, 2005: 264) has described as an 'awesome' potential for the abuse of candidates by examiners, and in the late 19th and early 20 centuries there were numerous horror stories (see for example Burnham, 1994; Baldicchino, 1995; Hartley and Jory, 2000; Tinkler and Jackson, 2002, 2004; Delamont et al, 2004) about candidates being humiliated even when their theses were satisfactory and had passed with flying colours.

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.

With regard to advising examiners about their conduct of the viva. In all, 13 of the 127 institutions (11%) included such material in their documentation.

With regard to chairing the viva, information was

available for 107 institutions. Of these, 67 (62%) required independent chairs for every viva; a further 34 (32%) normally allowed the internal examiner to chair the viva but required an independent chair under specific circumstances (principally where there were two external examiners or where the internal examiner had limited experience of examining within the institution or where the viva was for a resubmission); in four cases (4%), it was up to the internal examiner to chair the viva; and in two cases (2%) there was either an independent chair or a recording was taken of the viva.

Recording was only mentioned by only five of the 127 institutions. As well as the two where recording was an alternative to an independent chair, there was one institution which required both an independent chair and recording, and two others which required recording only.

Overall, while there is evidence (see Sikes, 2017) that bad behaviour has not been entirely eliminated, as Houston (2018) has pointed out, successive Postgraduate Research Experience Surveys in the UK show exceptionally high levels of satisfaction among doctoral graduates with the fairness of the examination process.

8. Variations between institutions in the recommendations available to examiners

Pearce (2004) and Tinkler and Jackson (2004) both identified significant differences between institutions in the recommendations that examiners were allowed to make. Data on the recommendations that examiners can make was available for 127 of the institutions. The key ones were:

outright pass

All of the institutions had a recommendation to make an award outright with no further changes.

pass subject to minor corrections

121 institutions (95%) had a pass subject to minor corrections usually involving typographical errors or

small changes to the text or tables. Of these, 24 (20%) allowed between one and two months to re-submit, 79 (66%) up to three months, 11 (9%) more than three months, one left it to the discretion of the examiners and four made no mention of time limits. In most cases, minor corrections were signed off by the internal examiner and there was no further need for a viva.

pass subject to major corrections

80 institutions (66%) allowed for a pass with major corrections involving more substantive changes to the thesis; of these, one (1%) allowed four months to make the changes, one (1%) allowed five, 64 (80%) allowed six months, 11 (14%) more than six months, one left it to the discretion of the examiners and there was no mention of time limits in two (3%). Normally, major corrections were signed off by both the internal and the external examiner, and again there was no viva.

pass subject to corrections

Six institutions (5%) did not distinguish between major and minor corrections but only specified corrections to be done within six months.

pass subject to satisfactory viva or other form of test

34 institutions (28%) provided for a pass where the thesis was judged to be of the appropriate standard but the candidate was held to have failed the viva. Examiners had the option of a second viva or, where this would be inappropriate, setting a further test, e.g. a written one.

refer and resubmit

124 (98%) of the institutions allowed examiners to judge that the thesis was not yet at the appropriate standard but was capable of reaching it and that further work was required followed by resubmission. In 97 of these institutions (78%), candidates were given up to 12 months to revise and resubmit their theses; in 18 (15%) they were allowed up to 18 months, in four (3%), it was 24 months, and in five (4%) no mention could be found of limits. In all of these institutions, the revised thesis was considered

by both examiners. In 12 (10%) it was mandatory to have a second viva for re-submissions, in 89 (72%) it was at the discretion of the examiners, and in 22 (18%) there was no mention of whether a second viva would be needed.

be awarded a lower degree

All 127 institutions allowed examiners to recommend the award of a lower degree, either without further changes or subject to minor or major corrections and resubmission within specified periods.

not be awarded a degree

Again, all 127 institutions allowed the examiners to recommend that a degree should not be awarded and that the candidate should have no further opportunity to resubmit for the doctorate.

9. Procedures when examiners disagree

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 (75%) which had strategies for examiner disagreement. Of these, 3 (3%) accepted the recommendation of the external examiner as final; 2 (2%) had established internal procedures to arbitrate between examiners until they came up with an agreed recommendation; 38 (41%) appointed a new external examiner to re-examine the thesis and, where appropriate, the candidate, and whose verdict was binding, while 6 (6%) appointed a complete new examination team for the same purpose; finally, 43 (47%) noted that their method of resolution would depend on the circumstances. So, where there were more than two examiners, they would accept a majority verdict provided that this included at least one external examiner; where there were two examiners, the choices were to accept the verdict of the external or, if the internal examiner or chair felt strongly that this was wrong, to appoint a new external examiner to conduct a re-examination and deliver a final binding decision.

Discussion

By 2021 there was a very high degree of standardisation across the doctoral awarding institutions in a number of these domains including: requirements of examiners relating to employment; the independence of examiners from the supervisory team; requirements for examiners to report to the institution prior to the viva; and rules governing the presence of supervisors in the viva and their roles.

In a number of other domains, there was evidence of substantial convergence between institutions, including: the criteria for assessment of the doctorate; the requirement that examiners should have some previous experience of examining; awareness of the need to promote fairness in the conduct of the viva; the final recommendations that could be made by institutions; and the establishment of procedures in the event of examiner disagreement. But, in all of these cases, there were still significant minorities of institutions which, at least in their documentation, still did not conform to good practice.

In two domains, there was little or no change across the sector over the period.

One was with regard to consulting candidates about the nomination of examiners. This was formally stated as an entitlement in only one-fifth of institutions, i.e. in the remainder it was presumably optional. But, in practice, there would seem to be a strong case for such an entitlement. As Kumar et al (forthcoming) have suggested, candidates might well have had the opportunity to interact with potential examiners (via conferences, seminars, or reading their work or thorough other networks), and can provide additional scrutiny. Further, as Kiley (2009, p.902) has suggested, student involvement should be encouraged because a significant proportion ‘... are likely to engage in an academic career, discussing

issues of examination, the characteristics of appropriate examiners and the careful analysis of reports during candidature might assist graduates when they themselves become supervisors’. Lastly, an additional benefit of getting students involved in the nomination of potential examiners is that it can help the candidate to acquire a sense of audience especially when conversations about potential examiners are held early during the candidature and candidates may possibly find authentic and meaningful purpose for the writing by considering such an audience for their work.

The other related to access to the viva. The UK viva remained resolutely a private event where accountability is only to the institution. This has come under heavy criticism recently from two standpoints.

The first is that it may compromise the independence of the external examiner. As two experienced external examiners, Alexander and Davis (2018: 7-8), have pointed out, the function of the external is to be an impartial judge, but ultimately the decision is taken behind closed doors and up the institution:

“...the candidate’s supervisor may assume that the external examiner...can be relied upon to yield to pressure to pass the candidate regardless of the quality of the thesis. [Even]...if the external refuses to pass the candidate...it may go to appeal and his or her judgement may be overruled...”

The second is that the private viva may prevent wider scrutiny of doctoral theses, as has been illustrated by the recent controversy over the doctorate awarded to the feminist writer, Naomi Wolf. She subsequently published a book based upon her thesis, which was heavily criticised as

being based in part upon a mis-reading of historical sources (and in consequence 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’. However, Professor Tim Hitchcock, a specialist within 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. He was subsequently quoted (Grove 2021: 7) as saying:

“It shows that 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.”

That said it may be noted that international experience suggests that the fact that vivas are open and publicly accountability rarely makes a difference to the outcome. As Kumar et al (forthcoming) have shown, in such cases, procedures are often adopted whereby thesis is effectively approved by the examiners before candidates are allowed to proceed to the oral examination, which then becomes a rite of passage or purely ceremonial occasion.

So, for example, in Sweden public vivas are mandatory and indeed opponents are appointed to scrutinise the thesis and question the candidate during the oral examination (see Viberg, forthcoming). But, decisions about progression to the oral are only taken when examiners have given the nod, and it is almost unheard of for a candidate to be unsuccessful. Stigmar (2019) studied the outcomes of 15477 doctoral defences in Swedish universities between 1998 and 2017, he found only 18 did not lead to the award of the doctorate, a failure rate of 0.0012%. Again as Kumar et al (forthcoming) have shown, failure rates are non-existent or minimal in other countries with public vivas. It would then seem that the gains in terms of scrutiny from wider

access to the viva may be comparatively small.

But, as Bogle (2015: 1) has pointed out, even if outcomes might not be greatly affected, a public viva would be symbolic in aligning the UK to international practice, and also provide an opportunity for celebration:

“After all what could be a more fitting way for a candidate to cap off three or more years of hard work than demonstrating their mastery of their subject not only to experts but to peers, friends, and family.”

Conclusions

Over the past two decades, doctoral education has become standardised across the doctorate awarding institutions in a number of domains and sub-domains, and there has been significant convergence in many others. But this has not been sector-wide, and clearly there is room for review in a number of institutions.

In two domains, change has been almost wholly lacking. One is the entitlements of candidates to be consulted over the nomination of their examiners, and the other is holding the viva in private. In both cases, there could be potential benefits to candidates from the adoption of new policies. It would then at least seem worth debating these two features of the system for doctoral examination in the UK which place it as an outlier in terms of practice virtually everywhere else across the globe.

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About the author

Professor Stan Taylor

Stan Taylor is an Honorary Professor in the School of Education at Durham University in the UK. He has for many years specialised in doctoral supervision and has facilitated workshops for supervisors in universities in the UK, elsewhere in Europe, and the Far East.

He is an active researcher in the field and has a number of publications including (with Margaret Kiley and Robin Humphrey) *A Handbook for Doctoral Supervisors* (Routledge, 2018) and (with Margaret Kiley and Karri. A. Holley (Eds.)) *The Making of Doctoral Supervisors* (Routledge 2021).

In 2016, he was co-opted to the UKCGE's Executive Committee to oversee the creation of the Research Supervisors Network of which he is currently the chair. In 2018-2019, he authored the Good Supervisory Practice Framework on behalf of the UKCGE and led on the development of the Supervisor Recognition scheme which was introduced in 2020.

Recently he has co-authored a number of guides for the UKCGE, including (with Swapna Kumar and Vijay Kumar) *A Guide to On-line Supervision* (2020) and (with Robin Humphrey) *A Guide for Research Supervisors in Organisations Outside Higher Education* (2021).

His current project is a collaboration with Vijay Kumar and Sharon Sharmini on an edited volume entitled 'Doctoral Examination: Exploring Practice Across the Globe'. This is a study of how the doctorate is examined in 20 countries and will be published by Routledge in 2023.

Stan is an Honorary Life Member of the UKCGE and an Honorary Member of the Association of Professionals in Doctoral Education. He is a Principal Fellow of the Higher Education Academy and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts

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