39 More than a checkpoint? Exploring the pedagogical role of doctoral progression assessment

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Abstract

There is an expectation that all doctoral programmes in the UK will include a form of progression assessment (QAA, 2020), with individual institutions having autonomy to determine specific processes and criteria. Yet, despite the potential significance of this assessment to the doctoral journey (Smith McGloin, 2021) it has previously received very limited empirical attention (Dowle, 2023; Sillence, 2023), particularly in relation to its pedagogic, rather than pragmatic, role. Supported by theory relating to the concept of assessment for learning (Wiliam, 2011) the present study sought to utilise narrative event-focused interviews (Jackman et al, 2022) to investigate student experiences of doctoral progression assessment at one university. The study framed the assessment as a potential learning event and considered perceptions of its impact on personal academic development. The findings highlighted the role of written and oral examination within this process and explored student perspectives of the pedagogic aspects of these processes.

Full paper

There is an expectation that all doctoral programmes in the UK will include 'some form' of 'clearly defined' progression review system (QAA, 2020), however there are no standardised assessment criteria for this and individual institutions have autonomy to determine their own processes. As a result, there is significant variation in progression assessment design, terminology and guidance (Sillence, 2023). For example, assessment may include a desk-based review of a written report and/or an oral examination with an independent panel. This variation is reflected in guidance for doctoral students, which conceptualises progression assessment as ranging from the production of a 'mini thesis' (Cryer, 2006) to engagement in a 'mock viva' (Trafford & Leshem, 2008). Driven by the positioning of doctoral completion rates as a key performance metric for institutions (HESA 2023), the primary, pragmatic, purpose of progression assessment appears to be grounded in an assumption that it plays a key role in improving continuation and completion rates (QAA,2020, Dowle, 2022). However, whilst progression assessment has been framed as a potentially significant factor in the doctoral journey (Smith McGloin, 2021), as an aspect of doctoral education it has received very little empirical attention (Dowle, 2023; Sillence, 2023).

Whilst QAA reports have previously highlighted concerns regarding clarity and consistency of doctoral progression assessment (Clarke, 2013), it has not been until very recently that examples of small-scale empirical research have began to investigate progression assessment in more detail in an effort to generate learning to inform design. This work has explored aspects including perceptions of effectiveness (Dowle, 2023), academic staff perspectives on design (Sillence, 2023) and impact on student mobility (Smith McGloin, 2021). Whilst some additional studies have been undertaken in wider international contexts (Mewburn et al, 2014; Barlett and Eacersell, 2019) and progression monitoring has been addressed in some studies concerned with broader questions relating to doctoral completion (Vidak et al, 2017), evidence to inform design and practice in this area remains limited. Furthermore, where progression assessment has been the subject of academic discussion, this has often centred on predominantly pragmatic, rather than pedagogical, considerations such as consideration of its role in completion rates (Clarke, 2013; Vidak et al, 2017) and/or the framing of progression assessment as primarily functioning for purposes such as institutional quality control (Sillence, 2023).

The present study aimed to complement and develop this existing pragmatic focus by investigating aspects of the progression review process from a primarily pedagogical perspective. The study sought to investigate the experiences of a small group of doctoral students who had recently undertaken a progression review stage at a post-1992 UK university. The university's progression process includes a progression examination as the first stage of assessment, occurring 12 months after registration for full time doctoral students. The assessment process includes a

requirement to submit a written progress report and then sit an oral examination with examiners who are independent of the supervision team. Students must pass the progression examination in order to continue with their research degree. The study utilised narrative 'event-focused' interviews (Jackman et al, 2022) to elicit detailed accounts of students' experiences of undertaking their progression assessment. Theory relating to the concept of 'assessment for learning' (William, 2011) was then used to develop an analytical framework which supported deductive thematic analysis of the students' individual accounts. The study did not seek to identify generalisable information about student experience, but rather to illustrate, explore and provoke consideration of the pedagogic potential of progression assessment.

The findings of the study frame the doctoral examination assessment as a potential learning event and consider students' perceptions of its impact on their academic development. Within this the role of written and oral examination as part of the assessment process is explored alongside student perspectives of the pedagogic aspects of the process and examiner practice. Implications for practice, design and future research are outlined.

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