

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Doctoral Final Examinations: (Ir) Relevance to new skills and future challenges

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Abstract: Despite the contemporary rapid evolution of doctoral programmes intended to produce skilled, versatile researchers able to address future challenges creatively, whether they stay in academe or engage in other professions, there has been no parallel scrutiny and development of the final examination processes. Further, these processes vary between disciplines, institutions and countries, yet all purport to ratify doctorateness. At preceding educational levels assessors/ evaluators/ examiners have the direction of aims, objectives and standardised criteria to guide them. Those who work with doctoral candidates have little more than custom and practice and their own limited experience to steer their decisions in a fast-changing environment (Denicolo and Park, 2013, Houston 2019).

We raise challenging questions about how important diversity can be retained while equivalence is demonstrated through adaptations that should provide transparent evidence of successful candidates' worth to key stakeholders, including funders, supervisors, progress reviewers, examiners, prospective employers and the researchers themselves.

Paper:

The contemporary rapid evolution of doctoral programmes, with their emphasis shifting to the development of a skilled, versatile researcher from the production of an erudite, sometimes esoteric, thesis, has not been matched by parallel progression in the final examination processes. We raise challenging questions about how these processes could be adapted to maintain the benefits of their diversity (disciplinary and geographical) while providing transparent evidence to employers and the wider society of the specific valuable skills of successful doctoral candidates.

Although we have embraced the skills agenda, supporting students and colleagues in their

development of transferable skills, we have long been concerned about how skill acquisition across such a broad and diverse community of scholars can be judged and, further, we have regretted that little attention has been paid to how they are guided in translating those transferable skills into different professional areas. At preceding educational levels assessors / evaluators/ examiners have the guidance of aims, objectives and standardised criteria to guide them; those who work with doctoral candidates seem only to have custom and practice and their own limited experience to steer their decisions in a fast-changing environment.

As a foundation for our forthcoming book (Denicolo, Duke and Reeves, 2020) on assessing and examining the doctorate conceived in response to this situation, we surveyed and interviewed academics from widely dispersed countries and across the range of disciplines about current local doctoral practices. Our expectations about (productive and potentially useful) diversity in detail were upheld, as were speculations about variance in adherence to the latest version of the Salzburg Principles and other challenges to the 20th century versions of appropriate doctoral study to orientate it to the rapidly changing employment needs of the 21st century.

There have been significant efforts globally to provide innovative programmes and opportunities for doctoral candidates to develop and enhance a wide range of research and professional skills relevant to a challenged world. What is concerning is that sparse effort has gone into aligning these developments in accrued learning with progress reviews and the final examination process. For instance, although many institutional regulations suggest that annual review processes should include evaluation of generic skill development with subsequent feedback on how to develop further, these can be honoured more in the breach than in practice. Responsibility for monitoring, assessing and advising on skill acquisition falls between the cracks despite the considerable effort made to encourage the candidates themselves to engage with Learning or Training Needs Analysis and to voluntarily participate in training.

For the final examination, there has been debate about whether a challenging viva voce: a) is still relevant in regions that have it; b) could be useful in regions that do not; and c) might be adaptable to demonstrate transferable skill acquisition. Some nodding recognition has been given to the electronic revolution by very circumscribed 'examinations at a distance'. However, the focus of the final examination rests paradoxically on the quality of written thesis.

(See for example Crossouard 2008, Denicolo and Park, 2013, Houston 2019, Lee and Danby 2012, Kiley et al 2018, Kumar and Stracke 2017, Nerad and Heggelund 2015, and QAA 2015 for further discussion of and support for these contentions.)

While that manuscript remains of some value in demonstrating traditional research abilities associated with academic apprenticeship, it fails to be a source of accessible and transparently demonstrable evidence of acquired professionally relevant skills to key stakeholders in society beyond the academy. However, it is beyond the academy where the majority will find employment and will be potentially able to make significant responses to future challenges. Further, qualification inflation means that employers requiring workers with those problem-solving skills and creativity, traditionally expected of doctoral degree holders, need to be more selective amongst those candidates as their numbers grow, yet they have little means to guide them about the specific package of other skills that each one has acquired in the process of doctoral research.

Nor are the final examiners of doctorates any the wiser. They are still required to recommend to the university authorities that a successful candidate has made a significant (in relation to 3-4 years equivalent of full-time study) contribution to knowledge that is publishable in some way. Worryingly, it is generally assumed, and only very rarely substantiated, that other skills acquisition has been monitored and ratified at progress reviews during the doctorate. Such reviews, along with the rubrics for final examinations, vary considerably with context, while detailed assessment criteria are hard to find. Thus, it is difficult for even those of us well embedded in academe to substantiate that there is any equivalence between doctorates and that specific candidates have acquired distinctive skills to a certain proficiency.

We have challenged ourselves and colleagues at EUA-CDE conferences and in SRHE workshops to consider these issues and how they might respond to the challenge. Some feel threatened by recent changes and would prefer to keep the status quo for assessment while others are strongly in favour of moving forward, that standing still is not a viable option, with various views in between. We would now like others to join us in considering the following questions.

- How can we develop broad, measurable objectives that accommodate diversity, beyond the Dublin Descriptors, for the skills that **must** be developed to demonstrate threshold achievement of doctorateness as it is now conceived?
- What necessary and sufficient doctoral quality criteria could we communicate globally to candidates, supervisors and examiners to guide their practice and establish equivalence of support?
- How could more elaborated criteria be adequately conveyed to the general public, including prospective employers, so that they can recognise both the universal and individual specific professional qualities derived from doctoral study?
- When, how and who should evaluate both the gradual progress in and the final achievement of the threshold quality of doctorateness to ensure global equivalence of outcomes?

Answers to these questions may generate radical transformation of doctoral assessment to complement recent changes in purpose and process.

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