

Examining Theses Workshop Plan 2

PowerPoint presentation and discussion

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Program for Option 2

Option 2 is comprised of just one Activity, a discussion of examining based on a PowerPoint slide presentation by the facilitator (see link on Examining Theses page of fIRST). Participants may be people who have no experience as examiners, or they may be somewhat more experienced. A mixed group would be effective.

Activity 2 (60 - 90 minutes):

Overview

Activity 2 is simply a structured discussion in which participants discuss points raised by the facilitator's presentation of the issues canvassed during recorded conversations of experienced examiners at Deakin University.

This type of discussion is often enhanced if participants come from different disciplines.

Preparation

Study detailed advice for facilitators.

It is strongly recommended that you read the detailed advice for facilitators for Activity 1, Activity 2, Activity 3 and Activity 4 (Workshop Guides, Examining Theses, Workshop Plans 1, 2 and 3).

Define your specific goals for this session. Are there issues which are currently causing concern at your institution?

Ensure equipment for projecting PowerPoint slides is functioning correctly.

Collect any University documents you decide to use and photocopy as necessary.

Print and photocopy Handout 1 – References if you wish to distribute this list of readings. Other references on examining are listed in the fIRST Bibliography.

Procedure

Check with group to find out how much experience they have as examiners and why they have chosen to attend this session. This will help you decide how 'interventionist' you need to be as facilitator and which issues to spend most time on, as well as introduce members of the group to each other.

Begin the session by introducing the project from which you will draw information during the session.

Elicit participants' views and experiences of examining by using the PowerPoint slides provided.

Detailed advice for facilitators

Leading the discussion

Use the PowerPoint slides to structure the discussion. Comments on each slide are provided below.

Slide 1 - Issues in Examining Theses and Dissertations

This presentation is the result of Deakin University's participation in the FIRST multi-university collaboration for the sharing of professional development materials for Higher Degree by Research supervisors.

This presentation consists of PowerPoint slides and notes. These may be used individually or by a facilitator for a professional development session. The topic concerns the key features of being an examiner of theses and dissertations. In many cases, especially at the doctoral level, examining is undertaken by people external to the university at which the candidate is enrolled. Therefore, this presentation is designed to deal with the general issues for examining in Australia and, to some extent, overseas. If the presentation is being used for preparing examiners within a particular university, perhaps for Honours' theses, then the seminar convenor may choose to supplement the presentation and discussion with the applicable guidelines.

The following slides and accompanying notes emanated from two recorded conversations between experienced examiners talking on a series of matters facing beginning examiners (see final PowerPoint slide). In total, these examiners have examined hundreds of theses or dissertations and most of them examine several each year. The slides cover the key elements of examination in sequence, from the initial approach and preparation through to writing and submitting the report.

Slide 2 - On being approached to examine 1

Initially, a particular examiner is approached to examine a thesis based on their expertise in the field or general area of the thesis. Inexperienced examiners often feel apprehensive when first approached to examine a thesis. Often a thesis is not specifically in their field and they may doubt their expertise. However, experienced examiners (who have often supervised many students) are far less concerned. They see that they are being asked for their particular

expertise and their general competence in the area. They can tell whether a research thesis is of significance (for a doctorate) and has been competently undertaken and written. It is also the case that two or three examiners are invited to respond and that the university will have the benefit of a range of examiners' reports.

It is usual for an examiner to know the candidate's supervisor, at least by reputation. This may influence your decision as to whether you agree to examine the thesis, particularly if the supervisor is well-known for high quality work or if they are known to work in a paradigm that is oppositional to yours.

On this last point, it is interesting to note that James Cook University instructs examiners that the research design of the project has been accepted by the candidate's department at a number of check-points during the candidacy and that examiners should not reject a thesis on the basis of the choice of topic or even the methodology.

Slide 3 - On being approached to examine 2

The examination is a measure of the candidate's performance. This can be assessed largely by an examiner with a general knowledge of the field. If you feel particularly uneasy about examining a thesis, there is no alternative but to decline the offer. However, if the topic is towards the edge of your field, or in the broad area of your speciality, it can be seen as an opportunity to stay abreast of interesting work that is currently emerging in the field. There are also intrinsic benefits in examining. You are not expected to be a definitive expert on all the theses you might be approached to examine. Despite feeling a little uncomfortable at first, your reading of the thesis will bring a perspective that is both useful and fair.

The external nature of the examination process is critical for quality control. Consequently, the academic community is relied on heavily and encouraged to take part in the examination process. It is a collective responsibility, something that needs to be done for the discipline and the area in general.

While experienced examiners feel an obligation to their profession to examine, the complex issues of time and workload can play complicating roles in formulating a decision of whether or not to examine a particular thesis. Current workloads do not always allow sufficient space and time for academics to agree to examine, yet the system depends on it.

In summary, it is good to accept if you can. You should decline: if you are not comfortable that you have sufficient expertise; if you believe that the persons involved or the approach taken mean that you cannot examine in an impartial and disinterested manner; or if you cannot complete the work in the time allowed (usually 2-3 months). You are not paid to examine, but it is normal practice to be offered an honorarium; the amount is normally that advised by Universities Australia.

Slide 4 – Preparing to examine

Experienced examiners report that first impressions are important. Most acquire an overview of the entire thesis with a quick scan of the table of contents, introduction and chapters. The argument of the thesis ideally should be clear from the abstract, introduction and conclusion.

Some experienced examiners recommend distancing yourself from your own research experience when preparing to examine. It is often said that new examiners are sometimes too hard on their first thesis examination. They need to recognise that there are two mutually exclusive types of thesis: a perfect one and a completed one!

When preparing to examine, many experienced examiners try to schedule a block of time in their diary free of interruption. This may also include agreeing on a date with the university to attend a performance or see an exhibition, or attend an oral examination. Most examiners take a couple of days to examine a thesis, but it can be much longer for a thesis which is unsatisfactory. A thesis is complex reading and therefore many examiners report that it is very difficult to reach a sense of the entire body of work or 'story' by reading just an hour here and there. Wherever possible, experienced examiners remove themselves from the work environment (usually by working at home) in order to minimise interruptions, such as telephone calls, emails etc., intruding on their concentration.

Systematically making notes and comments while you are reading helps you engage with the thesis, ask questions of it and make it a form of active reading. However, it is important to distinguish between a 'style' issue and a 'fundamental' one. Having read the thesis and systematically made notes, experienced examiners often return and attend to any problematic areas in more detail.

Slide 5 – Preparatory considerations

The question of the standard to be reached in the thesis understandably worries beginning examiners (and also beginning supervisors). While some of these concerns and subsequent advice are covered in more detail in slides 7 and 8, 'Making your judgment', it may also be useful to consider these issues in the preparatory stages. In this preparatory stage, experienced examiners advise:

- i. talk about standards and the 'amount' of original contributions required with senior colleagues as a preparation exercise (generally - not discussing the specifics of the actual thesis);
- ii. consider whether the contributions presented in the thesis make a difference in the field (solve a problem, illuminate a difficult matter, change the way people think about an issue etc.);
- iii. consider the significance of questions posed at the beginning and whether they are addressed effectively; and
- iv. consider whether the core material is worth publishing.

Slide 6 – Examining 1

Honours, Master and Doctoral theses have different entry and exit points which affect the amount and level of work that the candidate has undertaken. It is important to appreciate these aspects when examining. Universities often indicate in their guidelines to examiners the nature of their particular programs and what they expect the candidate to demonstrate in their thesis. It is important to examine in these terms, and not in terms of what you think the program and thesis ought to have been like. However, some universities provide less explicit advice on criteria than others and, if you have any doubts about what you should be expecting, it would be a good idea to contact the Dean of Graduate Studies (or equivalent).

Some doctoral programs, such as professional doctorates or those from North America, have

preliminary work which has previously been assessed. This should be indicated to you in the guidelines provided so you can expect an appropriate size of thesis or dissertation (as doctoral theses are usually called in North America) to examine. It is important to understand that the magnitude of the work you examine for some doctorates may be smaller in comparison with a traditional Australian, UK or New Zealand PhD examination, but the standard (and the status of the doctorate) is usually expected to be the same. Therefore, the quality of the work should be as high as any other doctorate.

In the case of a doctorate, matters of originality and significance of the research and its findings are important. This does not mean that the findings have to be 'earth shattering,' but rather that within the field and its context (especially in the case of research done by international students from developing nations in/on their own contexts) it makes a significant contribution. That is, the thesis adds usefully to the stock of knowledge and is worthy in terms of its significance to the field.

Most examiners, irrespective of the discipline, like to see a well-written story of the research. That is, a coherent narrative that contextualises the research/scholarship, what was done, why and how, and what the analysis and conclusions/implications are.

Slide 7 – Examining 2

It is important that the candidate illustrates that they have a critical awareness of the literature in the field of their thesis. This is also likely to be the body of literature to which publications from the thesis can be expected to make a contribution. It is important that the candidate also illustrates that they have a critical awareness of the methodological literature for their research design, and a critical awareness of the methods they have selected and used.

A good test of whether a thesis is significant is whether it has potentially publishable outcomes. Sometimes whole theses can be revised for publication, but commonly articles and papers are the sorts of outcomes one might expect. It may be that an Honours thesis is unlikely to lead to a refereed publication, but at least a conference presentation or publication might be expected. However, if you examine a doctorate and you cannot identify anything worthy or scholarly for a refereed publication, then there may be some difficulty in passing it.

It is not an examiner's job to mark or note every editorial error. Indeed, most universities ask that the examiner's copy of the thesis not be written on ('marked') at all. However, in some disciplines it seems to be conventional to attach a list of 'errata' to the report. If the editorial standard is poor, you should at least say so and perhaps give some examples. The normal procedure would then be to recommend that before the thesis is passed (if it is in other respects worthy) a full editorial check be undertaken and all fixes be made. Of course, this should have been undertaken before it was submitted.

Slide 8 – Making your judgment 1

When arriving at their judgments of a thesis, experienced examiners find that within the first five pages their judgment will begin being formed. If the first five pages are 'tight,' with a clear statement of the thesis (argument) and its aims and significance, then they expect it will be at least passable. Then, if the literature review validates the argument and the thesis

unfolds to be a ‘good read,’ they become drawn into the thesis and easily absorbed by it. However, if the opening pages are unclear and poorly structured and expressed, and have several errors, the examiners become disengaged with the story and ‘thrown out’ of it. In these circumstances, a judgment that the thesis will at least require revising is being formed. On the other hand, it is important to try to keep an open mind in case the quality of the writing of a thesis is uneven but the research work is, in fact, acceptable or better. Again, the important matters are the “fundamentals” over the “style”.

Slide 9 – Making your judgment 2

Look for the candidate’s ability to go beyond the formularised nature of reporting their research and think about the implications of their work more generally. A doctorate can be viewed as the preparation of the candidate to undertake a problem solving exercise and to clearly justify the conclusions they reach. The examiner should, therefore, look for a strong argument that is articulated in different ways, a strong coherence between what the candidate proposes they will do and what they actually do, how the literature relates to their findings, soundness of methodology, and whether it was an appropriate way to proceed. It may be that you would have developed the thesis differently or undertaken the research differently. However, the issue is whether the candidate’s approach was defensible as an approach. That is, is the thesis justifiable in its own terms?

In judging the thesis it is appropriate to consider the extent to which the literature survey and references are up-to-date. It may be reasonable that the most recent reference in a moving field is a few months old to allow for the time taken in writing, but lack of any references in the last few years would be of concern.

When finding that the candidate takes a line with which they disagree, experienced examiners suggest separating matters of fact from matters of interpretation or opinion. Facts should be correct, but if the data were difficult to obtain and the methodology was sound, some weaknesses in the factual evidence might be accepted (or forgiven) as far as the final outcome is concerned. Interpretation and opinion require objectivity by the examiner - is the interpretation reasonable, well argued, etc. Are contrary views (a) considered at all and (b) dismissed in an acceptable way? It is not uncommon for an examiner to accept a thesis with comments like, ‘I prefer a different interpretation to that of the candidate, but the issue has been handled competently and well argued.’

Slide 10 – Making your judgment 3

Should you discuss the thesis with colleagues? Some experienced examiners are not in favour of theses being passed around for comment. Others see value in checking their judgments with others before they write their reports, particularly if the thesis appears to be marginal. Remember, however, that it is your judgment that is sought, not the collective views of a department or tea-room.

In determining the extent of, and requirement for, further modification, it is useful to ask yourself the ‘style vs. substance’ question. That is, when the thesis is bound and put in the library, is it going to make a big difference if the candidate makes the changes? Are they essential? Are there additional points from which the thesis would benefit? Is there a benefit from encouraging the candidate to think in a different way? Are your suggestions ones that could best be used in subsequent publications or research?

The ultimate aim of the examination process is to recommend whether the essence of the thesis is worthy and the substance is appropriate. It is important to note that your judgment is a recommendation and that, typically, there will be at least one and maybe two other examiners making their recommendations too. In effect, you are not passing or failing the candidate: that is the university's job. However, your recommendation is normally very influential. Sometimes examiners' recommendations disagree and it is here that the reports become important.

Facilitators of this discussion will find more information about disagreements between examiners in the detailed advice to facilitators for Activity 2 and Activity 3 in Workshop Plan 2 and Activity 4 in Workshop Plan 3 (Workshop Guides, Thesis Examining).

Slide 11 – Preparing to write your report

Before writing your report, it is important to read the advice and requirements of the university. Each university has its own specific reporting requirements, although they all tend to have common elements, such as a written report and a recommendation form.

It is important to understand that the persons who read your examiner's report are likely to include people from quite different discipline areas. They are likely to include the chair of a postgraduate research committee or equivalent and - especially if there are contrary examiners' reports or if the thesis appears to be a failure - some or all of its members. These readers may have to form a judgment, usually with advice from someone within the discipline - such as a head of department, postgraduate research co-ordinator or sometimes the supervisor - as to whether the thesis be revised, re-examined, awarded a lower degree or failed. These people, from all sorts of discipline backgrounds, are likely to be the initial readers and they are the ones who will be really making the decision on the thesis. They need to be able to understand the reasons for your judgment of the thesis, which they expect to be supported, logically, by your report.

The other important readers are, of course, the candidate and supervisors. In this case, any recommendations you make for changes need to be clear and unambiguous.

It is suggested that a 'generosity of spirit' is required towards the candidate who has probably invested a lot of personal energy and time into the project and its writing. Make a clear and explicit distinction between having a commentary in a report where you are explaining your judgment of the work and a further commentary, where you might sound somewhat more critical, about what would be done with that work afterwards in terms of publication and/or further research. For example, 'The research is competent in this context, but in future publication the candidate might want to think about this, read this, make stronger links between this and this etc.'

Some experienced examiners recommend taking a break between reading the thesis and writing the report. This allows time to think through the advice you want to provide to the candidate and the university. Others find it more appropriate to write the report immediately after reading the thesis while the 'story' is still foremost in their mind. However, in this instance, examiners do suggest taking a break between sending the final report off in order to re-read and re-craft if necessary. Sometimes examiners send the notes they made as they read to the candidate to assist with revision for future publication. If you do this, be sure you make it clear that these notes were generated as you read and are for the candidate, not the

committee.

Slide 12 – Writing your report 1

Your report needs to alert the candidate to any areas that need to be addressed. Include information to help the candidate subsequently, especially in terms of revisions if you recommend such. It is worth trying to put yourself in the supervisor's position and think how you could use your report to guide the candidate in their revisions. In commenting on various aspects that would need to be addressed before publishing material from the thesis, you may even suggest avenues for publication.

Write the report in such a way that it is constructive for the candidate for the future. Reinforce/reaffirm the good things that the candidate has done.

Where specific guidance is not provided about the structure of your report, providing a hierarchy of comments may be useful. Commence with a general introduction about your perceptions and feelings about the overall structure, content, presentation and significance of the thesis. Then move through your specific comments, perhaps chapter by chapter. Then conclude with your suggestions for the future. Making your points in this way will be seen less as negative criticism and more as critically constructive comment. Remember to make explicitly positive comments (see especially the detailed advice for facilitators for Activity 2 in Workshop Plan 2, Workshop Guides, Examining Theses).

Slide 13 – Writing your report 2

As noted above, it is not the job of the examiner to act as 'proof reader' identifying grammatical and typographical errors etc. This could be dealt with in a general comment, such as, 'There are several grammatical and typographical errors that must be addressed throughout these chapters/sections.' If, however, the errors or written style impact upon the articulation of the argument, or if it is a systemic problem, then these become matters that should be addressed. They indicate a lack of rigour on behalf of the candidate that is unacceptable in research training.

If you receive a thesis that seems to be poor in several respects and you wonder why it was forwarded to you for examination by the university, it may be that the candidate submitted their thesis without their supervisor's approval. Most universities assert the right of the candidate to have their work examined, irrespective of whether the supervisor believes it is worthy or not. This is seen as an important principle although it may mean that some 'sloppy' work is submitted for examination.

While theses are generally put in the public domain (e.g., copies in the Library) and confidential material will generally be identified (e.g., by the examiner being asked to sign a non-disclosure agreement before seeing the thesis), you are not automatically free to use the contents of the thesis after reading it. The candidate needs to be able to publish and gain credit for their work before others use it. At the very least the approval of the author should be sought after the examination is over before the thesis is quoted or the contents used.

Slide 14 - How the university will use your report 1

The reports and recommendations are treated bureaucratically in the first instance by people who will identify any problems arising from the reports. Routine examinations and their outcomes - these typically include unanimous recommendations for passing, minor or major revisions - work through the system to the candidate and back again when any changes have been made and library copies printed and bound. Usually a university will reply at this stage and thank you for the report and state their process for paying the honorarium.

Slide 15 - How the university will use your report 2

For non-routine cases, the examiners' reports and departmental comments are usually brought before a formal meeting of the postgraduate research committee for discussion and consideration. The committee will be procedure-oriented and will not make judgments on technical issues of the thesis. They usually adopt a procedure that will resolve the situation constructively but, if not, in a manner that ensures that the candidate has every reasonable opportunity to defend their thesis.

If an examiner makes fundamental criticisms of the work, the candidate needs to be made aware of whether they can work on those areas or not. In this case, the university requires sufficient detail. Insufficient detail may mean the examinations officer has to contact the examiner to clarify the intent and substance of their comments. This can prove difficult if the examiner is unable to recall what their ideas were in the same level of clarity that they felt at the time of the examination and writing their report.

If you have recommended a re-examination you should feel obliged to undertake the re-examination. It is easier for you to do than for a new examiner to become involved. It also removes the possibility of another examiner having different views to you about the thesis and then failing it - usually there is only a pass/fail option for re-examinations.

Slide 16 – A final word

Examiners sometimes have quite different views on theses. Research by Kamler and Threadgold (1997) highlighted how one text was interpreted so diversely by examiners that they could have very well been reading different theses. This occurs even more frequently in interdisciplinary work as people cross disciplines and methodologies where the intersections are not necessarily easy. In the UK and US, where there are vivas that require examiners to see students face-to-face, the examiner must engage with the student, so negative dismissal of the student's document alone is difficult. Although one likes to think that all examiners are reflective, thoughtful and critically constructive in the way they examine theses, this is not necessarily always the case.

The thesis is a text that is open to a variety of readings depending on the identity of the reader, their background, their discipline and how they approach the reading. While most examiners try to be as objective and true to the criteria of their discipline as possible, the judgment is not as objective as one might initially expect.

There is need for dialogue and debate about the examination process and about what

constitutes a good thesis, both generally and specifically within the candidate's field. Examining theses is normally a solitary activity, but busy as we are, it is worth taking the time to reflect more thoroughly on what it contains.

Slide 17 – Further reading and resources

A CD which contains two discussions on examining that were the basis of these notes and also the PowerPoint presentation is available from the Research Institute for Professional and Vocational Education and Development. Please email ripvet@deakin.edu.au for further information.

Handout 1 is a list of references relevant to this presentation, provided by Professor Terry Evans, Deakin University.

FIRST Consortium – Workshop Guide

Activity 1b – Examining Theses, PowerPoint Presentation Handout 1

References

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