# The Experience of Examining the PhD

## An International Comparative Study of Processes and Standards of Doctoral Examination

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Chapter 3

## The experience of examiners and examining

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# 3 The experience of examiners and examining

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This book provides a unique panoramic record of how PhDs are being examined today, from the perspective of experienced PhD examiners in countries all around the world. While the case-study chapters outline *inter alia* examination procedures used in different jurisdictions, criteria, and standards for awarding PhDs, the ways in which examinations are conducted and how examiners view various innovations such as interdisciplinary research, the use of other languages, and the inclusion or published papers, what may be of particular interest to many readers is the insight into how seasoned examiners *feel* about examining PhDs.

The assessment of PhDs, particularly the written thesis but also to a large extent the oral examination, is by and large an occluded practice. Previous studies have pulled back the curtain on what examiners look for in PhD theses (Mullins and Kiley, 2002; Bourke, 2007; Bourke & Holbrook, 2013; Golding et al., 2014; Kyvik, 2014); what sorts of questions are asked in doctoral vivas (Trafford, 2003); how supervisors nominate examiners for their candidates (Kiley, 2009); the challenges of being an external examiner on a PhD jury (Grabbe, 2003); how novice examiners approach assessment (Kiley & Mullins, 2004); and how examiners assess theses that include published papers (Sharmini and Kumar, 2018). However, relatively little has been written on the pleasure and pain points of doctoral assessment, i.e., what brings joy and frustration to PhD examiners.

The dozens of seasoned PhD examiners interviewed for this book shared with frankness and generosity not only how they go about determining whether a PhD passes muster, but how it feels when examining, what facilitates and impedes the process, what frustrates and delights them, how the PhD is evolving, and how they feel about the changes. Since all of the informants are also PhD supervisors, they work very closely with individual doctoral candidates from project inception (or earlier) to graduation and often beyond, and their empathy for candidates under examination emerged strongly from these interviews.

Before focusing on the frustrations and delights of examining, it is interesting to note the various motivations for adopting the role of PhD examiner that were identified by those interviewed. One examiner from La Plata, Argentina referred to examining as "a duty, as part of the responsibilities of a researcher." Whether explicitly or implicitly expressed, most respondents believed that they were nominated as examiners because they are experts in the area and they consistently apply

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the standards for the field of research and study. Informants from Thailand understood their role as examiners as important in maintaining the standards of their discipline, particularly because in their country "explicit institutional criteria for assessing dissertation quality are rarely offered." Considering it as an honourable task which one would never refuse suggests the background presence of certain dominant feelings which constitute a specific framework for level of commitment and engagement in the process. Differences in these attitudes were however noted by some respondents, with lower degrees of commitment observed among young generations of academics, who may take on examination duties simply for career advancement (e.g., an examiner from Argentina observed that some younger academics "display strategic behaviours, they will calculate whether it is of relevance for their résumés to participate in a board") or as leverage to have others examine their students (e.g., an informant from University of Aveiro, Portugal revealed that "a lot of people do not like to be part of juries. But, if you have a lot of students, you need to do it because you will need to invite people to your students' juries. So, you accept even if you are not an expert in the area. This is like a perverse process"). Perhaps, the reluctance of younger academics to take on examination responsibilities is explained by the fact that examining is described as time-consuming, practically voluntary, and often thankless work, which can sometimes be refused if it does not fit in the prospects and agenda of academics.

Expertise in the area is usually considered crucial, but in some contexts, there are few experts in the area complying with the requirements for examiners (e.g., in Bulgaria and Australia), which may lead to others with less expertise being appointed. In other contexts, the significance of expertise may be qualified by academics becoming automatically eligible after a period of being doctoral advisors (Connecticut, USA), and in yet others, examiners may be nominated because of their close relations with the supervisor (Connecticut, USA), while in certain jurisdictions this can deem them ineligible as an examiner (Macquarie, Australia).

The initial frame of mind with which an academic assumes the responsibility of examining a PhD can affect an examiner's attitude to the whole process, making specific factors more salient as motivating or driving their actions: criteria for assessment, questions asked to the candidate, reference to the supervisor and recognition of their role, fitting this extra work into a tight academic schedule, and including a record of doctoral examination among the priorities for the professional academic career.

## Pain and pleasure points

Our interviews with seasoned PhD examiners from universities in different countries revealed several aspects of examining that make it a vexing, frustrating, or challenging activity. Some of these "pain points" are particular to the culture, political climate, or policies of the informants' institution or country. Respondents expressed different attitudes and explanation of their behaviour in various contexts related to the specific regulations, traditions of PhD examining or recurrent practices and to their personal interpretation of specific cases. For instance, informants

from Macquarie University in Australia bemoaned the fact that the institution's Nomination of Examiners policies such as the mandate that at least one examiner be domestic can negatively impact the potential pool and expertise of examiners. One examiner explained the challenge and consequences thus:

> it's often really hard to get the Australian [examiner]. I mean, if I've been supervising with two other [X subfield] researchers, the chances that… there's an Australian [X subfield] person that one or other of us hasn't published with is almost zero …, so it means we just have to pick someone who's not in the area.

Those from Makerere University in Uganda highlighted the inconsistency in remuneration practices whereby only external examiners are paid, while internal examiners of the same work are not. As one informant put it:

> There is no appreciation/acknowledgement of individual effort. Makerere University pays external examiners but not internal examiners. So they take their time (examining) why should they be bothered to mark?… The university needs to shape up in this area.

Examiners from Beijing Language and Culture University (China) highlighted that the "blind review" assessment process and time pressures facilitates assessments that are superficial or biased:

> The online blind review may be impartial but the disadvantage of this system is there are too many theses for reviewing in the (thesis defence) season every year and the examiners may not have enough time to read the thesis closely and patiently, and [so] just give a grade to pass it, without giving much guidance and helpful comments for improving the thesis. That can mislead the supervisor and the student to believe their thesis is good and so they organize the viva as it is.

Those from the University of São Paulo were pained that many funding agencies in Brazil require applications to be in Portuguese, which limits international collaborations and discourages projects on topics relevant beyond Brazil. Against this policy set by funding agencies, informants from the University of São Paulo, commented on the trend of increasing internationalisation within graduate research, and it was observed that "it is now more common for examination boards to include professors from institutions abroad, a trend accelerated by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated need [and ability] to conduct oral examinations remotely."

Many of our informants commented on unethical, unnecessarily harsh, and/or unprofessional behaviour they had observed in other examiners in oral examination settings. For instance, examiners from the Universidad Nacional de La Plata (Argentina) spoke of "ethical betrayal" in which examiners grill candidates on

issues not previously flagged, and those from Jagiellonian University in Kraków (Poland) disapproved of those who failed to ask questions they had promised. The language of aggression ("violent," "extreme" and "slaughtering") used by informants from The University of Aveiro in Portugal communicated their abhorrence of examiner behaviour observed in oral examinations conducted in other countries:

> Another very different aspect in Brazil is that public examinations are more extreme: sometimes more violent, others more emotional. When examiners do not like the thesis they really exaggerate and say "I don't like it." And sometimes they say very violent things to the candidate.
>
> I think that in Spain there is clearly a situation of arguing, almost in the sense of a court. In fact, the act is called "court." And so, the external examiner plays this role of slaughtering.

On the other hand, informants from Beijing Language and Culture University (China) disapproved of "bystander examiners" who fail to contribute meaningfully to the discussion, while at Makerere University (Uganda), some internal examiners were observed as enacting a type of "silent rebellion" in response to their lack of remuneration by failing to attend the oral examination at all.

The pain points listed above refer to conduct displayed by *other* examiners of which our interviewees strongly disapproved. Focussing on their *own* experience of examining, the challenge most commonly related by the interviewees is what to do with substandard PhDs. On the one hand, there is pressure to pass PhDs that reach oral examination, especially when it is conducted in public (University of São Paulo), and/or to limit the extent of corrections requested (Thammasat University). Examiners from Sofia University (Bulgaria), Eduardo Mondlane University (Mozambique), and Durham University (UK) regretted passing borderline dissertations or those riddled with linguistic errors. On the other hand, examiners from Thammasat University and Macquarie University express distress at failing substandard PhDs, knowing that the outcome would devastate the student, their supervisors, and the enrolling institution. As one of the examiners from Sofia University put it, assessing borderline PhDs is "a torture for the PhD students and it's a torture for the jury." So, while the examination process can be joyous and rewarding, "being an examiner can be a burden and whenever a thesis might be problematic, it may be better to refuse an invitation" (Sofia University).

The massification of doctoral education is causing grief to many seasoned examiners, who feel that universities are under pressure to increase the number of on-time completions, which in turn has quashed creativity and risk-taking and lowered the standard of PhDs. In a similar vein, it was felt by many of the examiners that labour market forces are now a primary driver for students enrolling into PhD programmes, rather than a thirst to create knowledge or to solve research problems. Two interviewees from the Japanese university commented thus:

> About 10 years ago, I think there were still some vestiges of the large works. I think there was a sense that a doctoral dissertation had to be grandiose

> or quite thick in terms of volume and setting of issues, but nowadays, it is more important to write steadily and take as little time as possible, even if the issues are small.
>
> (Prof J-03)

> it's becoming more and more important to have a doctorate in education and other fields *to get a job* and *be promoted* to professor.
>
> (Prof. J-06, emphasis added)

Similarly, informant AM from Mondlane University (Mozambique) expressed regret that many candidates "are not doing their PhD to give their contribution in the academic or scientific area" but rather "because with a doctorate degree, mainly in the Civil Service, there is a change of what the salary scale is." Examiner Joe C from Durham University (UK) agreed, commenting that the PhD is at risk of becoming "instrumental to the next career step rather than a curious journey of knowledge acquisition" while his colleague Jane S felt that the pressure on PhD candidates to complete on time – sometimes within only two years – precluded the "luxury of thinking and reading time."

As a counterpoint to the distress felt when confronted with substandard dissertations, reading outstanding theses can bring much joy. As pointed out by examiner DD from Sofia University (Bulgaria), even very senior researchers can be persuaded by a well-executed PhD thesis to adopt a different perspective, akin to opening a new window on a problem or phenomenon: "somehow they even make you start thinking about things that you do in a slightly different way, because of what they've done." So, while examiners' frustrations and critiques of the PhD assessment process are palpable, there is also evidence that assessing PhDs can be a refreshing, gratifying, and joyous experience. It is spoken of as an honourable task (La Plata, Argentina) and a privilege; it gives seasoned academics the opportunity to "see what matters to on the whole younger, incoming academics, like what issues matter to them, what they think of the things that matter to me" (Macquarie, Australia), and it can help someone "fulfil something significant in their life" (Macquarie). And while oral examinations can be open to abuse, the debates conducted therein are also described as having the potential to be "enriching" (University of Aveiro, Portugal), a "celebration that needs to be lived as a party" (La Plata, Argentina), a "stimulating and meaningful discussion" (Durham University, UK), "absolutely thrilling" and "academic feasts" (Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Poland).

There is an expressed feeling of mutual learning in the examination process as "in this process we as supervisors also learn" (Mondlane University, Mozambique). Those academics involved in doctoral programmes and in supervisory roles have an additional incentive for participation in the examination process. Having made "that experience worthwhile for the candidate" is among the main positive experiences motivating examiners and is often referred to in their reflections on the examination process. As shared by a respondent from the Durham University: "because very few other people are likely to read their thesis

in detail and you're offering an opportunity to give them a quality discussion in relation to their work."

Internationalisation is another significant issue and excites those from countries that have to date been relatively closed, with the increased diversity in research areas and the PhD candidate body being described by an examiner from Sofia University (Bulgaria) as "ozonising." In a similar vein, examiners from La Plata (Argentina) welcomed interdisciplinary research projects, as they can "positively oxygenate" the respective disciplines and lead to "enriching dialogues… new contacts and paths between disciplines."

## Feelings when faced with ambiguity

So far, we have presented a range of experiences and feelings but there is one aspect of examining which stimulates particular feelings: when examiners have to deal with ambiguity or lack of consensus in assessment panels. Interviewees from most of the case studies spoke animatedly, indeed with passion, of scenarios in which such ambiguity or lack of consensus arises. For instance, in cases where a thesis is considered "borderline" and there is disagreement among individual committee members, open and lengthy discussion is of utmost importance, according to Thammasat (Thailand) respondents. But there is also a commonly shared view that engagement in discussion and deliberation is needed even when the reviews and the examiners' opinion is clear well before the public defence.

Our interviews reveal that differences in examiner's behaviours and assessment decisions are interpreted or explained in more than one way. Respondents from the University of Aveiro (Portugal) refer to institutional differences between "more classical universities" and "more recent ones," talking about "institutional cultures" that influence expectations. When asked further about divergences in examination culture, respondents from the Jagiellonian University (Poland) mention as possible reason disciplinary differences, rather than personal traits: "in security studies for example, if you get a reviewer from military science (…) they are very rigid regarding the area they think one should research." (R2).

Ambivalence among examiners is created at various stages of the examination process. For example, frustration and stress can be created by the extra work required (La Plata, Sofia) or the specific rules and procedures as in the case of Macquarie (Australia). Some concerns are expressed in cases of doctoral degrees based on collection of published papers (Durham, UK) as a new trend in awarding a PhD thesis.

Grading, deliberations with other examiners and Q&A procedures with the PhD candidate are described in contradictory or mixed terms by respondents. Experiences differ for examiners generally and for different occasions of the same examiner. Most of them, who are as already pointed out experienced examiners with a good record of previous doctoral examinations, refer to some specific cases of difficult or ambivalent experiences, which function as a point of reference for future engagement and shapes their pattern of behaviour as examiners.

Grading the work of doctoral students can be particularly hard, despite the overall agreement in the jury (Durham UK), for example for interdisciplinary

theses (Aveiro, Portugal) or for theses below the expected and required standards. Institutional academic culture of examining is a key factor in some cases tending to lead to compromise and close cooperation to reach the agreement on expectations (Makerere, Uganda) or acting as a gatekeeper (Thammasat, Thailand) by giving a hard time to candidates.

There is specific ambivalence related to the general expectation for the thesis under examination to pass in situations when the examiners are confronted with a poor or substandard thesis. A respondent from Sao Paulo University (Brazil) shares that "the pressure to approve a thesis – whilst unspoken – is huge." A respondent from Thammasat (Thailand) honestly said that "unless it is a very inferior dissertation, we tend to pass them" because "to fail them is like to ruin their future." Empathy and understanding are generally considered as relevant to the examination process and in some cases, according to a respondent from Thammasat (Thailand) it can be described as working towards a compromise. Poor performances during the final defence tend to be excused by examiners as a matter of stress: "they would say: 'I know he/she knows all this, but he/she was just nervous'" as a respondent from the Jagiellonian University (Poland) said. A respondent from the same university reflects on the image of examiners "well- known as being very kind-hearted" as "they believe that the sole fact of finalizing the PhD dissertation is in itself commendable and sufficient." And there is an opposite image of examiners who tend to be very strict and critical in their reviews. Interviewees from the University of Connecticut (USA) commented on a certain continuation from an advisory role to an examiner role which does not seem to be in conflict. Reviewers tend to continue to see themselves as advisors in that their goal was to help the student improve the dissertation.

A public examination was not seen in a positive light by most. In particular in relation to the participation of external examiners it opens the ground for mismatches of different cultures of assessment, for example, cultures incorporating arguing, questions and answers, more intense deliberations and focus on criticism on the one hand, and cultures including a series of stages before the public defence enabling reaching agreement and opinions in harmony (internal defence or approval for submission) on the other. Expectations differ, which also invokes feeling of discomfort and dissatisfaction or doubts about whether work is properly done. In particular, this is the case when reviewers read reports instead of questioning the candidate. For example, an interviewee from the University of Aveiro, Portugal recalls his/her experience as an external examiner in Romania:

> All members of the jury have to write and read reports and ask many fewer questions. So I had prepared many more questions and less text and during the oral examination, I realised that I had to give an appreciation of the thesis. (I1)

The context of the oral examination creates specific conditions for influences on the examiner, specifically when the examination process is a public one. It is intended to ensure accountability and transparency during the examination

process, and this aspect of accountability was stressed by all interviewees from Sao Paulo University (Brazil). Specific "side effects" are pointed out to a greater or lesser extent when examination is public. "Examinations are attended almost exclusively by family members of the candidate, rather than the public at large," as respondents share. This leads to a lot of "peer pressure" in additional to the potential "problems for the department caused by the non-approval of the thesis" or the pressure in the jury to reach a compromise.

There is a clear awareness of the high stakes of failure for the supervisors, which is often a major cause for unpleasant feelings. The potential for ambivalent feelings is irrespective of whether the supervisor is part of the examiners' panel, chairs the examination committee, or attends the PhD candidate's defence but makes no input during the examination (Makerere). The thesis examination is often felt as an indirect evaluation of supervisors' work (Sao Paulo University, Brazil). As an informant from Mondlane University (Mozambique) said, two roles emerge between supervisors and candidates: companionship but also a sense of co-authorship. The supervisor is assumed to have made a substantial contribution to the candidate's research, whether in the design of the project, the collection, analysis, or interpretation of data, or by having critically reviewed it. The interaction with and the role of the supervisor create a backstage for most of the experience of being an examiner. There is the feeling that the work of the supervisor is also being assessed and she/he is viewed as part of the candidate who is being examined (Makerere, Uganda; Mondlane, Mozambique; Sao Paulo University, Brazil). "Respect for the supervisor's opinion" is regarded "as a kind of code in academia in Japan," as a respondent from the case study in Japan says, and a conflict rarely occurs in assessing the dissertation because the examiners respect the supervisor's opinion.

## Involvement vs detachment in the examination process

Our interviews revealed that many of the attitudes and dispositions examiners have towards thesis examination appear to relate to the degree of involvement and interaction with the candidate and/or supervisory team which they are afforded during the examination process. While it is agreed that PhD assessment should be conducted in the most academically rigorous, objective, fair, equitable, and supportive way possible, there is significant variation in the examination policies, procedures, and roles that different jurisdictions and institutions have in place to achieve these goals. Some jurisdictions prioritise objectivity as a means to rigour, which tends to result in a more "detached" role and attitude, whereas other jurisdictions prioritise dialogic defence as a way of assessing the candidate, which results in a more "involved" role for examiners. Examples of these set ups are provided below.

When observed from the perspective of regulatory frameworks, we see that there are "detached" situations in which PhD assessment involves providing only written feedback on the thesis, with the examiner having no interaction with the candidate, his/her supervisory panel, or other assessors. This is the case in

Australian universities where there is generally no oral examination component, but is also true in the Chinese context where thesis examination is treated similarly to journal article reviewing, "a third-party approach, or a blind review" through an online platform. In this arrangement, the blind review process means that examiners became very detached. For Australia-based examiners, the general lack of oral examination and the requirement of the candidates having no social or professional connection or interaction with an examiner meant that they were only invested in the thesis, but not in the candidate.

In the more common scenario, examiners are sent the thesis for assessment and also invited to an examination meeting with the candidate and the supervisory team. An examination meeting may involve a public oral defence in which a candidate will be required to give a public presentation of the project and to respond to questions by the examiners and by the attending audience. In many cases, a public defence of the thesis is a formality to celebrate the milestone of completing the doctoral project. In Thammasat (Thailand), examiners take on a more empathetic approach in which examiners feel that the oral examination is a "chance for improvement" (Thammasat, Th-6). This level of interaction leads to a more "involved" role, as examiners engage directly with the candidate at a person-to-person level, rather than merely with a disembodied, depersonalised text.

This is not to imply that oral defence environments always lead to pleasant experiences. In some cases, a public defence may be attended by academics from other disciplines and non-academic attendees who "are eccentrics who always attend all possible things, sometime in order to ask crazy questions" (Krakow, Poland). This is the case in the Polish context, and the public defence can be a highly stressful event. The Polish examiners expressed empathy and attributed poor performances to stress (Krakow, R2).

While both internal and external examiners may encounter the above examination arrangements, in some universities, the internal examiner may also serve on the candidate's advisory panel. The structuring of supervisory/advisory panel will provide varied examination processes. For instance, in Connecticut (USA), one member of the advisory panel may also be appointed as an internal examiner. Internal examiners may have had interactions with the candidate over the years of candidature, which may predispose them to look (un)favourably on the candidate, and if they were also on the candidate's advisory panel, the examiner will have some appreciation and understanding not only of the research project but also the academic trajectory of the candidate. In this case, the examiner will likely be more sympathetic and feel more connected to the thesis. This intimate information about the thesis topic and the candidate can translate into a more celebratory approach to the oral examination (Aveiro, Portugal and Thammasat, Thailand).

The presumed status of the supervisor can shape and limit examiners' activities and judgements, and this may be affected by cultural factors. According to some interviewees, the cultural trait of respecting and deferring to supervisors' expertise and judgement that a thesis is ready for examination means that examiners feel that the thesis should be passed. This sense of respecting supervisors' expertise and judgement seems to be more commonly observed in

Asian contexts. For instance, as reported in the Japan case-study, examination in some universities in Japan will at worst result in minor revisions, but never failure. This can be a "face" issue, as "the candidate is the one examined of course, [but] the supervisor is also examined in a sense" (Japan). Interviewees in at BLCU (China) said academics are very likely to be invited to assess a PhD because they are the "acquaintance or friend" of the supervisor, and therefore assume examination duty "for the sake of the supervisor's 'face' and their good relationship 'guanxi.'" In this sense, then, the examination process seems to be more procedural, and thus the examiner's duty could be considered as somewhat "detached": their comments on the work are valued and respected, but there is little suspense over the outcome of examination. While this practice is only particular to Asian universities, colleagues at Durham University (UK) also mentioned that "examiners choose like-minded examiners with similar expectations and judgement" (Joe C, Durham). But "guanxi" (or relationship) can also be a reason for being detached, and for an examiner to turn down an invitation. In Bulgaria, frequently only a small group of senior academics were invited to assess thesis. If the supervisor was not someone already known, examiners were likely to simply to say no (MD, Sofia, Bulgaria). Personal relationship with the supervisors may become a factor for involvement.

Another presumed institutional practice of how doctoral examination should be implemented also played a role in framing examiners' degree of involvement or detachment, their empathy and commitment towards thesis examination. One might assume that the most straight-forward way to differentiate the role of an examiner is to consider the affiliation of the examiner: Is the examiner internal or external to the university? However, our interviews show that affiliation is not the primary reason for feeling involved or detached from the examination. The regulatory framework that governs a thesis examination and the cultural context frequently define how an examiner feels about the examination. In general, examiners might receive an honorarium for being an external examiner, but the monetary amount might be more symbolic than a true reflection of the required amount of time needed to examine a 150- to 200-page thesis. In some contexts, honorarium (or the absence of such payment) creates a sense of detachment and non-commitment from some examiners. In the case of Makerere (Uganda), when examination honorarium for supervisors and examiners is no longer available, some examiners "do not report for the viva voce" (Tukunde, Makerere, Uganda), and internal examiners delayed examination and took five months to review the thesis (Makerere, Uganda). This detachment from the examination was further exacerbated when internal examiners learned that only external examiners were paid, but not the internal members. So internal examiners then took a much longer time to complete the required thesis examination (Makerere, Uganda).

Monetary compensation is not the only reason that academics want to take on thesis examination, however. In the Argentinian context, many younger academics considered the importance of having the experience of thesis examination on their CVs (La Plata, Argentina). The thesis examination then became a tool for possible career advancement, especially for overseas employment opportunities,

rather than viewing thesis examination as an "honour and duty" (Sao Paolo, Brazil and La Plata, Argentina).

The feeling of involvement and detachment of the examiners can be culturally and structurally influenced by the process of examination. And as we have seen, the unique historical traditions of each institution and educational context means that there is no one necessary reason as to why some examiners may feel involved or detached.

## Conclusion

The findings from this large project show that doctoral examination is not merely a procedure. As in other aspects of teaching and learning, examination can be charged with emotions. Most doctoral examiners are supervisors, and many of them have some assumed ideas or experience of the examination process. Many examiners also translated their own doctoral experience into empathy for the candidates and process of being examined. The various strategies that examiners employed, as highlighted in this chapter, indicate that perhaps this is an area that deserves further research energy and investigation for academics around the world to better understand doctoral examination as a human process, rather than just another step in a cycle of producing more graduates.

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