

Preparing for examination

Ideally, discussion with candidates should be held early in candidature to ensure that they understand:

- the examination process
- finalising the thesis (and coping with the accompanying emotions)
- what examiners will be looking for

It is important for students and supervisors to be fully aware of the University's policies on examination e.g.

- What are the University's expectations of a PhD or Masters thesis? What is the difference?
- Who selects examiners? What say does the candidate have?
- Can a candidate include their own published work? If so, how?
- Is there a word limit?
- What 'kinds' of examiners are appropriate in certain sorts of multi-disciplinary research: Content experts? Methodology experts?
- How strategic can supervisors and candidates be with the selection of examiners e.g. is it a good idea to appoint an examiner who might be a future employer?
- What are the University's rules on conflict of interest between candidate and examiner, and between supervisor and examiner?

In the last few months prior to submission many supervisors have found it useful to draw up a timeline with candidates regarding availability for a final read by the supervisory panel. Candidates often overlook, or are unaware of, supervisors' other commitments, or don't know of them, and are bitterly disappointed when the supervisor cannot read the final drafts when they had assumed.

It is also useful to work out the order in which supervisors will read chapters e.g. broad, structural checking should come before more detailed grammatical checking and different supervisors will be skilled in different areas.

Candidates generally underestimate the time it takes to:

- make the final changes suggested by the supervisor or advisers
- rigorously proof-read their final draft
- format the final document
- print, copy and bind.

Working with candidates to draw up a realistic timeline can help avoid some of the stressful moments that often accompany this stage of candidature.

A tip that many candidates have found useful is to print off the introduction and conclusion of the thesis and read them as one document to check for coherence and consistency. (Several examiners when interviewed commented that this was what they do when they first read the thesis.)

Students, at this stage of candidature, may well experience *Impostor Syndrome*.

Impostor Syndrome manifests as feelings of inadequacy and of being a 'fake' someone who will be unmasked for what they truly are, and in this case it is someone who will be found out not to be capable of undertaking a doctorate at all.

Another emotion that some students experience at about this time, is feeling unsupported. This happens when they realise that for one brief moment they know more about a particular topic than possibly anyone else. These feelings can manifest in procrastinating behaviours or, as sometimes happens, disappointment in their supervisor's (apparent) lack of knowledge and ability: "When I started I thought he was a real expert but I've discovered he's really not that good at all!"

Another pressure can come from families. For example, a first generation Australian-born Greek candidate had been encouraged by a proud and loving family until he got close to the end of candidature when his father started commenting along the lines of 'I suppose once you're a doctor you'll think you are too good for this family.' This candidate delayed submitting by over a year rather than face the dilemma of hurting his father. Only with the help of an understanding uncle did he manage to finally submit.

Helping candidates through these emotions can certainly assist in timely, and confident, submissions and completions

What examiners will be looking for

Research by Mullins and Kiley (2002) Kiley and Mullins (2004) and Kiley and Mullins (2006) suggests that experienced examiners in Australia expect that the thesis will pass and want it to pass. Rather than taking a summative approach to the examination process, they generally adopt a formative view where they aim to assist the candidate in improving their work.

However, less encouraging for candidates, is the view expressed by most experienced examiners that they have a strong sense of the quality of the thesis by the second chapter, and often even earlier in their reading. Based on extensive interviews it appears that the questions that examiners have in mind as they read include:

1. How would they have tackled the problem set out in the abstract and the title?
2. What questions would they like answers to?
3. Do the conclusions follow on from the introduction?
4. How well does the candidate explain what they did?
5. Is the literature reviewed substantial, relevant and up-to-date?
6. Is the research worthwhile? Does it contribute something new, or provide a new way of looking at existing knowledge?
7. How much work has actually been done?

8. What is the intellectual depth and rigour of the thesis?
9. Is this actually 'research'?
10. Is there an argument?

Winter et al (2000) suggest that a doctorate ought to:

1. be a report of work which others would want to read
2. tell a compelling story articulately whilst pre-empting inevitable critiques
3. carry the reader into complex realms, and inform and educate him/her
4. be sufficiently speculative or original to command respectful peer attention (p.36).

Examiners report that they are 'turned off' by sloppy presentation (incorrect referencing, poorly labelled figures, inappropriate use of technical terms) particularly as this is considered an indication that the research itself, the data gathering and analysis, may also be sloppy.

Examiners also worry when there are unexplained inconsistencies between what the thesis sets out to do and what is actually done (hence the hint to candidates above).

In summary the characteristics of a poor thesis are:

1. lacking coherence
2. lacking an understanding of the theory
3. 'sloppy' presentation
4. lacking confidence
5. researching the wrong problem
6. displaying mixed or confused theoretical and methodological perspectives
7. presenting work that is not original
8. not being able to explain at the end of the thesis what had actually been argued in the thesis.

Selecting examiners

Selecting examiners is a crucial role for supervisors. It is helpful for some candidates to be able to visualise a possible audience for their work, rather than just 'the examiners' and so discussing potential examiners early in candidature can assist in this.

Generally supervisors discuss potential examiners with candidates as often candidates have a good sense of the researchers in their field who would do justice to the work. Candidates generally also have the right to state who they would not want as an examiner, generally someone they know to have strongly opposing views, methodologies and/or practices than the candidate.

One area which often causes difficulties in the examination process is the selection of examiners who are not sympathetic towards, or do not have an understanding of, the research methodology adopted by the candidate. When selecting examiners it is worth keeping in mind that there is now some research to suggest that experienced

examiners (rather than inexperienced examiners) will be more likely to see the thesis within the context of the research education experience i.e. the equivalent of three years work, not the Nobel Prize (Kiley & Mullins, 2004; Mullins & Kiley, 2002; Trafford, 2003).

The selection of appropriate examiners can also provide candidates with a potential employer e.g. a postdoctoral position, or as support in applying for positions e.g. Professor Smith, a world expert in the field, and one of the examiners for my doctoral thesis, commented that: 'This is one of the best theses I have read in many years of examining'.

Given the different roles of supervisors, consider how you might:

- coach a candidate regarding the selection of examiners e.g. assist in the preparation of a clear summary of the work that can be sent to potential examiners
- facilitate the examination process e.g. remind the candidate, well in advance of administrative matters
- mentor a candidate e.g. along the lines of the example above with 'Professor Smith. Resources on Submission, Examination and Completion

Waiting, and then once the examiners' reports come in...

Once candidates have submitted their thesis they often need support in re-adjusting to a different pace of life and a less intense intellectual period.

Having a clear understanding of the process, and knowing that their supervisors are 'on their side' can assist in the nervous wait.

References

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