

## Assessing a PhD thesis – The Examiner’s Perspective

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### Background:

Professor of Australian Studies but a Human Geographer well known for working in the areas of gender/women’s studies, urban studies, suburban studies, Australian Studies, regional change and the cultural industries. I have published extensively in all of these areas.

I also attend conferences (IAG, IGU, AAAG but also SOAC, Cultural Studies and in the past Gender/Women’s Studies ones) and am a member of the Institute of Australian Geographers (Urban Studies, Indigenous Studies and Economic Geography Study Groups).

It is on the basis of this expertise, publication output, networking and visibility that I am asked to assess PhDs and Masters theses.

I also have a PhD which is the minimal requirement for being an examiner (ie you can’t teach or examine for a degree more than you have!). So I have been through it and chose the best, highest status and toughest examiners I could as I valued their opinion of my work! They also helped recommending publication and acted as referees (and mentors) for later career steps and jobs.

### Recent Examination experiences:

Usually I examine about one every few years, Masters and PhDs. Experience is valued by inviting institutions and is seen as something that we do to confirm and enhance our reputations. While paid – usually around \$200 clear! for a few days work – I do it to see where the latest issues are at in a body of literature or discipline ie to learn something rather than the money.

Approach is sometimes via people I know directly but more usually through institutions and colleagues who know of me and my work. They are usually asking more than they need, overseas as well as Australian examiners and so it is OK to say no (and I have done so on the basis of competing work demands or lack of interest in the topic). I have to suggest 5-6 examiners at Deakin for 3.

You are given considerable notice that the thesis is coming and therefore it is scheduled it into my work life. It is therefore both irritating and sometimes a real problem if the student doesn’t deliver on time and it all has to be renegotiated. This might mean that I cannot do the task. So it is wise to keep to the agreed schedule.

I know that the student may or may not know that I am the examiner at the end (I have a choice on the revealing of my name and usually agree as this enhances the value of the comments and the thesis outcome for the student if someone reasonably eminent has marked their work). I also know that the student should have been asked who they did NOT want to examine their work and therefore I am not on their hit list. Some examples of theses marked:

1. Sorting out a nightmare in Gender Studies at University of Sydney – mediating between two conflicting examiners who could not agree. Basically had to re-assess the thesis and make a judgement call
2. Chinese migration experience in the White Australia era
3. Cultural capital
4. Housing in master planned estates – so poorly written and badly conceived that I failed it!

Two out of three examiners need to agree.

It is rare for a thesis to be passed with no changes but it is possible (mine was!).

Usually there is at least minor expression and reference corrections (and this is OK).

Where there are major re-writes this really shouldn't happen and while you can submit without your supervisor agreeing, it is an unwise thing to do as there are clearly good reasons for such a judgement and it is best to have as few problems and outstanding issues as possible before submission. Otherwise they will have to be corrected these later and it can prejudice an examiner. That is why your time line is critical so that you can complete on time and not submit a sub-standard piece of work to meet a deadline.

Examiners have the option to fail a thesis outright – and I have done this once – or recommend a PhD be awarded a masters if it is more in that realm (in terms of scope, length, and primarily originality). So it is a real exam...there are no guarantees but your supervisor should know.

Being an expert in the field and having published a lot it is possible that a student will engage critically with my work. This should NOT be an issue (though I know of at least one case where the examiner was incensed about this and did not declare what was ultimately a conflict of interest and failed a student. This is a real problem and the best advice here is to list an academic whose work you really slam as someone not to be an examiner and for others do a critical but respectful evaluation of their work).

Usually examiners are NOT allowed to know each other or correspond. They are of course not allowed to be known to the student or have anything to do with the student while the examination is occurring. Otherwise the integrity of the arms-length process can be compromised.

I have also sent theses back where the English expression is very poor and refused to examine them until it was brought up to a decent standard – we are awarding degrees in English!

#### **What I look for in a Masters:**

Degree of originality but can be an original synthesis of existing materials

Concordance with the word limit

Good formatting, expression, structure and argument

Accurate referencing

#### **What I look for in a PhD:**

##### **Same but also...**

The key thing is the original contribution to knowledge at an international PhD standard.

So I have to know – or be informed by the student – of the extant literature and where the gaps are. This has to be carefully set out with the literature review interrogating the existing work in a purposeful manner. The research questions and the methods should flow from this.

There is also a somewhat subjective call that a thesis is at a HDR standard. This comes with experience and is hard to quantify or put into a neat rubric!

I also have to know that the methods are robust, grounded in a relevant literature and generate high quality data which is analysed in a clear, transparent and perhaps replicable way (though may not be possible with qualitative methods).

There needs to be a thesis, an argument, a puzzle to be solved and the thesis needs to deliver at least something along these lines, even if it is not definitive (it is a social science!)

Often, you can't answer all the research question (s) even with a PhD and so you need to write what you could not do in the final part of the thesis as suggestions for further research.

Otherwise an examiner may bring up the gaps and absences as negatives in their assessment of the thesis. You need to have thought about this and noted these gaps.

Presentation is important – good writing should be taken for granted at this level – as is good referencing and formatting. Nothing annoys an examiner more than poor writing and sloppy referencing. There is no excuse for this.

Ultimately the majority of higher degrees get through with at most minor corrections and so be sure to submit the very best you can with all of the necessary qualifications and you should be fine!