Research and evaluation

Thesis Examination: Opening the black box

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Abstract

PhD thesis examination is an extremely high stakes assessment. General agreement in academia internationally is that a ‘passing’ thesis should make a significant, original contribution to knowledge, that would be acceptable for publication in the discipline. However, between these parameters there is much uncertainty in practice (Tinkler & Jackson, 2004; see also Lovat, Holbrook & Bourke 2008; Lovitts, 2005). Additionally, the skills of PhD examination are not well articulated within the academic community; the general view of the work and process of thesis examination is that it incorporates the skills of marking with those of peer assessment (Holbrook & Bourke, 2004), and yet it is neither. Training for PhD examination is seen as difficult, because of the subjective nature of the work and the absence of scaffolding structures: there is no way to provide rubrics, criteria, or standards against which a thesis is to be measured. Examination relies on an examiner's knowledge and experience, working within guidelines provided by the institution supplying the thesis – which may appear idiosyncratic. But, as Gilbert (2009) points out in his discussion of thesis examination, in educational practice we expect a desired outcome to be articulated, so “an educational enterprise which lacks clarity about its goals will struggle to ensure they are achieved” (Gilbert 2009, p. 57). One of the issues of thesis examination identified in my study (Ward, 2013) is that it is a ‘black box’ – little or no training is available for undertaking it, and little opportunity exists for academics to discuss their work as examiners. A short presentation about issues of PhD examination will be followed by small group discussions for participants to discuss what they have found most difficult and most rewarding about thesis examination, followed by a general discussion on this important topic.

References


Theme

Ways of enhancing thesis examination, processes and practices (theme 5)