

An oral component in PhD examination in Australia

Issues and considerations

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While there has been considerable research on doctoral examination there is little that examines the various roles of the oral component and what issues one might consider if introducing or revising that aspect of the thesis examination process. This matter is of particular importance in Australia where it is not usual to have an oral component as part of the final assessment. However, there are a number of Australian institutions considering the introduction of an oral component. This paper, based on the literature and three research projects initiated by the Centre for the Study of Research Training and Impact (SORTI) at The University of Newcastle, Australia, addresses a number of the key issues that would need to be addressed if an Australian institution were to introduce an oral component to the doctoral thesis examination process.

Keywords: Assessment, doctoral, examination, oral examination, viva voce

Introduction

In the last 15–20 years there has been considerable international research related to the examination of doctoral theses (see for example Holbrook & Bourke, 2004; Lovitts, 2007; Mullins & Kiley, 2002; Powell & Green, 2003; Prins, de Kleijn, & van Tartwijk, 2015; Wellington,

2010). The published research relates to issues such as purposes (Jackson & Tinkler, 2001), methods (Golding, Sharmini, & Lazorovitch, 2014) and outcomes (Lovat, Holbrook, Bourke, Fairbairn, Kiley, Paltridge, & Starfield, 2015) with a substantial number of works relating to the oral component of thesis examination as identified by Crossouard (2011). It is this final issue, the oral

examination, that is the focus of this paper, particularly as in most cases in Australia there is not an oral component as a standard part of the PhD examination process.

In light of the existing research this paper specifically addresses the first of the two issues raised by Lovat *et al.* (2015) in the conclusion to their paper, where they argue that two things seem clear from the debate. The first is: 'the Australian and UK [United Kingdom] processes seem to have something to learn from each other' (p. 19). The second is: 'an incorporation of the requirement for an individual definitive report from each examiner, with a Viva as an additional and related component, would seem to constitute a process that offers the best form of quality assurance' (p. 20). They also note that the latter: 'offers a means of closure and/or celebration' (p. 20) – a theme that also arises in the work of authors such as Jackson and Tinkler (2004) and Crossouard (2011) and which, we argue, merits separate consideration from assessment considerations *per se*.

The proposal to address the issues related to the oral component of thesis examination in Australia arose from data collected in an extensive multi-project research program detailed later in this paper. Addressing the issue of the oral component of examination is particularly important given that Australia is one of very few countries that currently does not have some form of final oral assessment as a standard part of the doctoral examination process other than in Practice Doctorates, those involving the visual and performing arts, or where an examiner specifically requests an oral. This can be explained historically by Australia's geographic location, as can the historical situation for New Zealand (NZ). Partly because of this isolation, a particularly robust system of using external examiners and written reports developed for both countries, one that allowed for the involvement of international experts without the need for assembling in one place, in the way that the oral component has traditionally required.

As time went on and different global circumstances evolved processes have changed. For example, in NZ most of the universities that had traditionally not had an oral component have recently introduced this to the overall examination process. 'Should Australia also introduce an oral component?' has therefore become a prominent question for researchers and administrators in the area of higher degrees by research. In 2007, there was a move by the Group of Eight (eight of Australia's most research-intensive universities graduating a substantial percentage of the country's PhD candidates) to consider introducing some form of oral examination (Lane, 2007).

While the national review of Higher Degree by Research (HDR) education in Australia, colloquially called the ACOLA Review (McGagh *et al.*, 2016) found that: 'Many stakeholders considered that the Australian research training system would benefit from greater emphasis being placed on the assessment of the candidate and the skills gained, rather than focus predominately on the assessment of the thesis' (p. xvi) no specific recommendation was made regarding the introduction of an oral examination. It is suggested that this is, in part, a response to the critical literature around the quality of oral examinations in some countries.

However, Gould (2016) suggests that, as the doctorate develops into new forms and with pressures for some forms of standardisation globally, alternative examination processes might need to be implemented. For example, with the increase in the number of candidates submitting a Thesis with Published Papers and those undertaking Professional and Practice-based Doctorates might other forms of examination be appropriate?

In light of additional or alternative forms of assessment this paper considers the key issues related to the more extensive use of an oral component in thesis examination in Australian universities. Such considerations address issues arising from the literature that outline the educational positives and negatives of some form of oral component and build upon earlier and more modest suggestions by Kiley (2009). On consideration of the various issues it may well be that a suitable argument could be put forward to convince those countries that currently have an oral that it could be discontinued or substantially revised. Alternatively, institutions in Australia that do not currently have an oral assessment may choose to introduce such a practice. These decisions would need to be based on sound educational and ethical considerations, with some of those outlined below.

Therefore, this paper asks what key issues need to be addressed when making a decision as to whether an oral component should be introduced as standard practice in Australian doctoral examination?

Setting the scene in Australia

With approximately 8,000 Higher Degree by Research graduates per annum (McGagh, 2016 p. 2), in broad terms, keeping in mind that each institution has its own idiosyncrasies, it has been usual for the PhD, rather than the Practice Doctorate, in Australia to have the written thesis as the only item assessed in the final examination. Generally, the thesis is sent out to a number of experts

in the field whose reports are then collated and a final recommendation made by the university concerned. It is not uncommon for oral components to be included at various stages of the candidature, for example, at confirmation of candidature or a mid-term review, however, an oral component is rare in the final examination.

Taking into account the *Australian Graduate Research Good Practice Principles*, developed by the Australian Council of Graduate Research (ACGR, 2016), and referred to by most universities, in terms of the formal examination, the

candidate might (or might not) be given some opportunity to discuss potential examiners some time prior to submission. However, in many cases, the candidate will not be told the final choice of examiners. Furthermore, in most instances, examiners do not know the names of the other examiners. Most universities have clear policies on conflict of interest between examiners, candidates and supervisors and strive to ensure that confidentiality is maintained throughout the examination process.

Recognising the variations across institutions, the examiners, usually with no interaction with one another or the supervisory team or the candidate, independently return their reports with their recommendations to the university (Lovat *et al.*, 2015). The options for recommendation vary across universities but a pattern of 'accept as is', 'accept with revisions', 'revise and resubmit for re-examination', or 'fail' would be typical. On receipt of the reports by the university, various processes are put in place whereby the reports and their recommendations are discussed to determine a consolidated report. In many cases, the supervisor will be given the opportunity to comment on the reports but without necessarily playing a part in the final determination. Except in the case of 'fail', it is common practice in many universities that an overview of the reports will be forwarded to the candidate who, if changes are required, undertakes to make these changes under the guidance of the supervisor and/or academic unit. If re-examination is required, the revised thesis is generally re-submitted to the original examiners where possible and the process begins again. In the case of revisions, the supervisor (and perhaps Head of School or delegate) sign off on the revisions. Once all the required changes are complete and the final version of the thesis submitted to the university library, the candidate will be

deemed to have passed. Usually, the candidate is then told the names of those examiners who have agreed to their names being divulged. Many institutions allow the examiners to choose to remain anonymous.

Despite the lack of an oral component as standard practice in most PhD examinations in Australia, it is

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important to note that it is common for Australian universities to allow the thesis examiners to request an oral but most Deans of Graduate Research report that such requests are very rare.

In light of the above, can it be argued there is a more general need for an oral component in connection with the qualification? The Australian Qualifications Framework Council (2013, p. 64) suggests that one of the many qualities, doctoral graduates should have is:

'Communication skills to explain and critique theoretical propositions, methodologies and conclusions, [and] communication skills to present cogently a complex investigation of originality or original research for external examination against international standards and to communicate results to peers and the community.'

Hence a logical case can be made that in alignment with this framework an oral component would support the assessment of the communication component. On the other hand, analysis of data from England and New Zealand suggests that the oral component 'rarely, if ever, rendered [a] substantially different result from the one reflecting the individual judgements already made, and/or agreed on by the examiner panel beforehand' (Lovat *et al.* 2015, p. 16).

From the above it is clear that there are a number of outstanding issues related to the oral component and they comprise the focus of this paper. In particular, we examine some of the underlying intentions of the oral exam in England and NZ, given the considerable similarity to the overall Australian system, through considering some of the espoused benefits of an oral component and various practices engaged in during an oral exam. The focus on the possible introduction of an oral component in Australia particularly addresses the ACOLA review of Higher Degree by Research Training in Australia (McGagh, 2016) where the concern was expressed that the Australian system examines the research but questions whether the researcher is also examined.

The oral exam aka the Viva (voce)

Within the international literature, one finds a plethora of practices related to the oral component of doctoral examination. In parts of Europe and Scandinavia, these take the form of a 'public defence', sometimes as a very public and arguably ritualistic event once the final determination has been made. In this paper, we restrict our attention to what we describe as the Viva voce (or simply the Viva), an integrated part of the examination process normally restricted to the candidate and the examination panel, a process most germane to the tradition in England (see for example B Carter & Whittaker, 2009; Morley, Leonard, & David, 2003; Smith, 2014; Tinkler & Jackson, 2000, 2004; Trafford, 2003). Moreover, with the introduction in NZ of an oral component, there is also some research emerging from that country (S. Carter, 2008; Kelly, 2010).

While a range of views has been put forward regarding the purposes of the Viva in the UK, paraphrasing Tinkler & Jackson (2004), in Chapter 2 (p. 16) of their book, they suggest, in order of frequency, that the oral component:

- 'Examiners to check the candidate's understanding and ability...;
- Clarifies weak areas...;
- Serves as a means of authentication...;
- Allows examiners to further extend the candidate and their research...;
- Provides an opportunity for the candidate to defend the thesis...;
- Causes the PhD to be located within a broader context...;
- Tests the candidate's oral skills...;
- Allows for a final decision to be made on borderline cases...;
- Acts as a 'rite of passage'/ritual'.

These various purposes address a mix of areas, for example, organisational and ethical matters (authentication), educational issues (broad context and defending thesis), administrative considerations (decision-making and finalisation), and assessment (check understanding, clarification and skills).

Of interest, work by Green and Powell (2005) focuses particularly on the Viva as a rite of passage rather than a form of examination, particularly as they note from Tinkler and Jackson (2004 p. 29) that 32 per cent of UK candidates were informed of the outcome of the assessment process before going into the Viva. This is in line with a section of the research reported above in Lovat et al (2015). In other words, it seems that the decisions about the quality of the work are made during the examination of the written

thesis, with the oral component reinforcing this decision rather than altering it. Examples of variation may exist but the comparative study results suggest they are rare. So what then is the point of spending money and time on something that might not necessarily impact substantially on the final result?

Data sources

The data sources for this paper, in addition to the published literature, came from work undertaken by The Centre for the Study of Research Training and Impact (SORTI). The Centre undertook a program of research, the intention of which was to: 'try and understand better the nature and form that doctoral examination takes, including aspects that are easily measurable and those that are not...., including what mindset and intentions examiners appear to take into the process' (Lovat *et al.*, 2015, p. 6). The three studies in the program followed the same methodology, both quantitative and qualitative, allowing comparisons to be made between countries and between models of doctoral examination, that is, those with an oral component and those without. The first two studies focussed on Australia while the third collected reports from two countries with a comparable examination system to Australia but with the addition of an oral - New Zealand and England. This latter study also incorporated interviews with 82 experienced examiners from Australia, New Zealand and England.

In all cases, examiner reports were de-identified, converted to a standardised text format in terms of page and line length (text units) and coded in QSR N6 qualitative software following an established coding framework. The standardised format allowed translation of the coding into IMB SPSS for quantitative analysis based on text units. (For a full description of the methodology see Holbrook & Bourke, 2004; Bourke, Hattie & Anderson, 2004). In the case of the third study involving the Viva, the coding framework was extended to capture all reference to the Viva and a new framework established to code the de-identified and transcribed interviews. Additionally, in the third study, a sub-set of reports was analysed, using a linguistic analysis approach 'to better understand the evaluative language used in the reports' (Starfield *et al.*, 2015 p. 130).

With respect to the interviews (often undertaken by Skype or phone) those with New Zealand examiners revealed that most had examined theses both with and without an oral component. While some NZ universities have had an oral component for a number of years it is only relatively recently that an oral component has

become common practice across the country. However, of the Australian examiners interviewed some had taken part in systems with an oral component but most had not taken part directly in the oral examination process.

When Lovat *et al.* (2015) reported on the interviews, they commented that, unsurprisingly, interviewees were more supportive of the system which they knew best. So, English examiners generally reported positively on the Viva, NZ examiners, who were experiencing the introduction of an oral, were generally in favour of the new system, and Australian examiners who had not engaged in an oral exam could not quite see its value. However, those examiners in Australia who had engaged in oral components, perhaps as candidates or academics in overseas universities: 'Saw it as beneficial in terms of greater closure but did not believe it made any tangible difference to the judgement that individual examiners brought to the event' (Lovat *et al.*, 2015 p. 19). The findings from the studies are outlined, plus the literature provides the basis for the following.

Considerations related to revising or introducing an oral component into the doctoral examination process

In light of the literature related to procedures in the oral component, we outline in the following sections in three main categories, issues that an institution might need to consider if revising their oral examination or considering the introduction of an oral component to the thesis examination process. These categories are considerations relevant to: preparation for examination; the actual process of the oral component; and, the completion of the oral component.

Considerations relevant to preparation for examination

A substantial number of considerations highlighted in the literature relate to preparation for the oral component, with the main ones being: nomenclature; candidate preparation; sequence; access to examiner comments; who attends/audience; participant roles; costs; organisation and reporting.

Nomenclature is a seemingly simple issue of an oral component, and yet, as the following indicates, a number of issues need to be addressed. Is it a defence in the sense of the European model (Hartley, 2000) or similar to the US model (Lovitts, 2007)? Is it a Viva voce, the term used in the UK (Wellington, 2013), the oral as often used in NZ (S. Carter, 2008) or is there another term that more

adequately describes this assessment event? Should it be termed 'examination', with an appropriate adjective (e.g. 'oral examination') in order to distinguish it from the examination of the written thesis? Or, is it even an 'examination', given the findings reported earlier by Lovat *et al.* (2015) and particularly in light of the work by Clarke (2013 p. 250) where she suggests that, at the doctoral level:

- 'each assessment is of a single candidate, rather than a cohort of students, and by definition the candidate will have produced a unique output;
- the examiners are different; they have been chosen explicitly for their expertise in the candidate's research areas...
- each subject or field has particular expectations of what a successful doctoral graduate should have achieved...
- each university has its own unique regulations and guidance...
- each candidate has his/her own strengths and weaknesses...'

These points suggest that at the doctoral level what we consider examination is somewhat different from what we understand examination to be at the coursework level.

A second consideration relates to candidate preparation for the oral. For example, in most of the UK literature related to thesis examination and research supervision, there is extensive discussion of opportunities for the candidate to practise for the Viva situation. Examples include: 'Practice runs' organised by supervisors; and, opportunities for candidates to give one another mock or simulated Vivas (e.g. via video and examples on You Tube). These learning opportunities are additional to regular seminars in the department, as well as presentations at national and international conferences (Sharmini, Spronken-Smith, Golding, & Harland, 2014). Wellington (2010) suggests regarding preparing candidates one needs to consider: 'the importance of the *process* to students as well as the outcome; their need and desire for *formative* feedback and evaluation; and the *affective* aspects of the event' [italics in original] (p. 83). This, he suggests is particularly important when one appreciates that candidate misunderstanding and/or lack of knowledge of the purpose, processes and policies relating to the Viva can contribute to the levels of anxiety often reported in the literature (for example Bassnett, 2014; Crossouard, 2011).

A third consideration relates to the sequencing of the oral component. A number of universities in Australia have a pre-submission seminar. In most cases these seminars are not seen as part of the final examination process, but, could they be? Would it be possible to use

such a process more formally to address aspects of skills not accessed through examination of the written thesis only? What would it take to develop that into part of the thesis examination process?

On the other hand, where the oral takes place after the examination of the written thesis, there is a question as to whether the oral component proceeds even when it is clear from the reports on the written thesis that the examiners are suggesting a revise and resubmit, or possible fail. For example, according to comments from NZ colleagues, if the initial reports suggest a revise and resubmit, then the candidate is invited to undertake the changes recommended by the examiners, resubmit and then proceed to the oral component. The decision to proceed, regardless of the result, implies three things. First is that the candidate might perform so well in the oral that they will reverse the earlier decision of the examiners. The second suggests that the oral is considered integral to assisting the candidate in making the required revisions, with the third being that institutions are simply following through on a mandatory process. Moreover, postponing the oral until after revisions and resubmission tends to suggest that the institution considers the oral component as an additional process to the original examination.

Linked with the decision to proceed, or not, is whether the candidate has access to examiners' comments on the written thesis prior to the oral component. In England, it appears that, in the majority of cases, the candidate does not see the reports prior to the Viva, whereas, in NZ, the opposite is generally the case. Colleagues report that in some cases the reports were given to the candidate up to ten days in advance of the oral in order to allow them to prepare. Again, there are implications related to these practices. It might be argued that where the candidate does not know the issues to be raised from examination of the written work, the institution considers it more of an examination whereas, with an opportunity to prepare, it might be seen as more of a rebuttal, a practice that is in keeping with academic practice when applying for research grants and similar competitive processes.

Of course, whether the candidates are able to see the reports on the written thesis prior to the oral component assumes that the reports have been received, and in a timely manner. While anecdotes abound of the examiner reading the thesis 'on the train' to attend the Viva, Carter and Whittaker (2009 p. 174) surmise that: 'Reports may or may not be required to be submitted prior to the viva and may or may not be shared between the examiners.'

There are also many organisational issues in relation to the reports. For example, if a date is set for the oral, travel

organised for candidate and examiners, rooms booked and so on, and then one of the reports does not arrive, what happens? Alternatively, it might be argued that examiners could be more likely to return reports on time if they are aware of such related issues.

Another consideration related to an oral component concerns the audience. Wellington (2010 p. 77) found from his focus groups with candidates in the UK regarding the Viva that: 'By far the largest areas of doubt or even ignorance [of candidates] relates to rules and regulations for the conduct of the viva' along with duration and who attended the Viva and their role. As suggested above, the European public defence has a rich history of public engagement, whereas the UK Viva is more of a private affair with the candidate, internal and external examiners and, when invited by the candidate, the supervisor. In some cases, universities in the UK are now including a chairperson but where this is not the case the internal examiner takes on the role of chairing the event. The NZ model most frequently includes the candidate, at least one examiner, a neutral chairperson, and the main supervisor.

The role of the supervisor in the oral component is one of the most debated issues, and the focus is primarily on the nature of their contribution and impact on proceedings. While there is considerable variation in whether a member of the supervisory team is required to attend, or invited to attend with the candidate's agreement, where they do attend, the supervisor is usually there as an observer but do they, should they, have other roles?

In a similar vein what is the relevance and impact of others who might be included, particularly related to cultural diversity and health? In some situations, for example in various NZ universities, the candidate can invite a friend to attend, but this is as an observer only. An example, which might illuminate this issue, comes from Chen (2012) where she describes the process in one Canadian university which is a semi-public event wherein the candidate can invite a small number of colleagues, family and friends to attend as observers, with a total number of participants being about 10-12 persons. In some situations, the decision regarding participation is critical in terms of addressing student diversity, for example, those requiring particular cultural considerations and/or various health issues.

Decisions regarding the participants in the oral component highlight issues related to the purpose of this component of the doctoral examination. For example, in the European 'public' oral component, there has generally been agreement that the thesis has passed prior to it; this is quite a different process from the practice to be

found in the UK model. This leads to the question: could the written thesis be passed but the candidate fail the oral component, not because it was determined that it was not the candidate's own work, but due to lack of communication skills or other? In other words, could a candidate be required to re-sit the oral component only? This is where there is considerable discussion as to whether it is the thesis or candidate that is being examined and extends to consideration of different, if possibly overlapping, sets of criteria.

Another issue related to 'who should be present?' concerns whether there should be an internal examiner involved, or only external examiners. The Australian Qualifications Framework Council (2013) requires that, at the PhD level, each thesis be examined by at least two examiners external to the institution and who have an

international reputation in the relevant field. At the same time, this requirement allows for a third examiner who could be internal to the university in question. Hence lingering questions include: What are the advantages and disadvantages of having an internal examiner? If there is an internal examiner, what is their role? For example, in many English universities

the internal examiner chairs the oral examination process, whereas in some NZ universities the internal examiner ensures that all the required changes are suitably addressed. In other cases the internal is seen as someone who can explain the institutional circumstances, anomalies and policies.

Related to the involvement of an internal examiner, the NZ system faced a particular issue whereby there was considerable pressure to maintain the international nature of the doctoral examination process and yet introduce a practical and financially viable oral system. Therefore, as a minimum the written thesis is generally sent to an examiner at one of the other NZ (or if need be Australian) institutions, as well as to an international examiner. For the oral component, it is often the NZ examiner who attends the oral, not the international examiner, although with technology it is not uncommon for the international examiner to be involved by Skype or similar.

In addressing the various issues above one is confronted by the considerations of the cost involved: cost for examiners and candidates to attend, cost of organising, the

workload cost of the time involved for all participants and administrators along with the emotional cost, as outlined in much of the literature on the Viva.

Considerations relevant to the process of conducting the oral component

A number of issues are deserving of consideration in the conduct of the oral component, for example: Is there a structure or agenda for the event and, if so, who manages it? Does the candidate give a presentation at the commencement of the oral session? Is there an ideal length of the oral component? Can various participants be involved through Skype/teleconferencing? Does the questioning cover the thesis topic only or range more broadly across related disciplinary areas? Finally, what does it mean for all concerned when the examiners and

candidate come face-to-face?

The literature shows that it is not uncommon for the examiners to meet together prior to the oral session in order to determine an agenda or order of questions that lead from the simple, introductory style of question to more complex levels of analysis and synthesis (see for example Carter, S., 2008; Smith, 2014; Trafford

What are the advantages and disadvantages of having an internal examiner? If there is an internal examiner, what is their role? For example, in many English universities the internal examiner chairs the oral examination process, whereas in some NZ universities the internal examiner ensures that all the required changes are suitably addressed.

2003). This tends to lead to a more coherent and unified session. Another form of structure in the pre-Viva meeting reported by Trafford (2003, p. 115) is where 'examiners quickly establish their respective 'seniority' and extent of examining experience, while clarifying 'content' or 'methodological' roles'. Or, as Carter & Whittaker (2009, p. 173) suggest: the pre-viva meeting can be an interesting contest in which examiners can seemingly examine each other.' Trafford (2003), from his research on over 25 Vivas in the UK, classified the questions into different phases of the oral with questions that:

- address issues such as resolving research problems, content, and structure;
- concern the research question, choice of topic, location of study;
- allow the candidate to discuss the implications, awareness of, the wider literature; and,
- defend 'doctorateness'.

At the other end of the spectrum, examples were found of beginning with Examiner 1 who worked their way through the thesis, asking questions and airing

concerns, and then handing over to Examiner 2 for the same process. Having a neutral chairperson who has had some training, as in some NZ universities, can ensure that a coherent agenda is developed. In NZ, in many cases, the chairperson is often from a different discipline from that of the candidate and is quite explicitly not one of the examiners. While in the UK it is still not common to have a neutral chair, there is research to suggest that this situation, along with the private nature of the Viva, could lead to the unprofessional behaviour by some examiners. For example, Pearce (2005) provides four scenarios based on her research and experience. These are: the nitpicker; the jealous colleague; foul play; and, the good Viva where: 'a good viva is not necessarily an "easy" one' (p. 9). In her 'good viva' scenario Pearce (2005, p. 9) reports that:

Both examiners are so experienced and successful that they do not need to 'prove' themselves (either to the candidate or to each other) and the candidate is himself mature enough to accept that criticism of *part* of his thesis is not a criticism of the *whole* thesis (Emphasis in original).

Wallace (2003, p. 106) presents a particularly negative picture when reporting on candidates' experiences of the Viva, where she categorises experiences in the following way:

An ordeal ('torture'); a humiliation ('they burst into howls of laughter'); a trial ('court martial'); a process intended to break her ('army training') ...an inquisition or interrogation; a means of bringing the candidate's thinking into conformity with that of the examiner.

The length of the oral is often another issue for discussion, with the general view being that it should be 'as long as is needed'. For example, in the UK, Gibney (2013) reported in the *Times Higher Education* that: 'the viva... can last anything from 90 minutes to a gruelling five hours.' Given an already over-burdened academic regime, the thought of a Viva routinely going for five hours might be considered to be administratively unviable regardless of any specific views on the value of such an experience for the candidate and the examiners.

Particularly in Australia, given geographic distance from much of the locus of Western scholarship, the role that technology might play is an important issue. While many see the possibilities of using Skype or equivalent in order to enable the overseas examiner to participate, there are a number of issues to be considered. One is the simple issue of time differences, particularly for Australian candidates where an examiner is in Europe, the UK or North America with time differences of anything up to 12 hours. A

second issue concerns the reliability of the technology and a third, and more major consideration, concerns 'who is the person at a distance'? Could it be that the candidate has returned home or moved to undertake work and so is using Skype or equivalent to respond to examiners who are located at the other end of the connection in the university where they undertook their degree? Or, might be it best practice to ensure that the candidate is present with the chairperson, at least, even if the other examiners and supervisors are the ones who are connecting from outside the university through technology?

When the process of examination involves the written thesis only, the examiners are confined to the content of that document. If there is an oral component, however, a relevant issue is whether the examiners' questioning can range across related topics beyond those of the written thesis in order to assess the candidate's appreciation of the field more generally.

A further issue for consideration concerns the personality of the examiners. While in the Australian system the examiners do not meet with the candidate, or with one another, and where examiners can request that their names not be divulged to the candidate, might there be different expectations of behaviour if the examiner is face to face (even via Skype), rather than participating only as the author of a written report? How examiners differ in behaviours between an oral and a purely written scenario is unknown.

Considerations relevant to the actions following the oral examination

Two issues that would benefit from consideration regarding the conclusion and follow-up to the oral examination are: how, and with whom, is the final decision reached and, who should write the final report?

From the literature, the candidate and the supervisor (if present) are usually asked to leave the room once they have addressed the agreed questions. In some cases, however, the supervisor can be invited to remain in the room while the examiners deliberate. Whatever the process, the role of the supervisor would need to be thought through clearly. Once an agreement has been reached, usually the candidate, with the supervisor, is invited to return, after which the examiners report the recommendation that they are going to make to the university and, where it is a positive outcome, generally congratulate and share in initial celebrations.

It is clear from the literature that in the UK and NZ the final report from the oral examination is forwarded to the relevant institutional office for various administrative

and educational purposes. Questions arise concerning the actual report. For example, should it be: a combination of a final summative report written by the chair and signed off by the panel, with the initial individual reports appended? Or, should the report be comprised of edited comments from the reports of the written thesis integrated into the report arising from the oral? Or, might there be other alternatives that meet the needs of candidates, examiners and the institution and would these practices vary if the candidate has seen the reports on the written thesis prior to the oral component and has had the opportunity to respond, as is generally the case in NZ?

Conclusion

This paper has built on earlier research by the author team (Lovat et al 2015) and literature that has identified a range of issues, inconsistencies and problems with doctoral examination processes within and between systems in Australia, England and New Zealand. Among some of the foci of more recent research arose the issue of the need for, or desirability of, an oral component to examination, a practice that is common in the UK, a growing trend in New Zealand but almost entirely absent from the Australian system. The spectrum of considerations span the preparation for, conduct, and aftermath, of the oral component in thesis examination and address such issues as nomenclature, student preparation, sequence, access to examiner comments, who attends, participant roles, costs, organisation and reporting.

By addressing these issues from a sound, educational research perspective, we might be able to come up with some way of answering Gibney's (2013) query in her article *Are PhD vivas still fit for purpose? where she asks: 'So what could be done to improve the process?'*

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