

## Research Note

# Reflecting on the Purpose of the PhD Oral Examination

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I really enjoyed my exam, although the build up to it was more stressful... dreading the "unknown".

Due to the enclosed nature of the viva voce or oral examination for the PhD in New Zealand relatively little is known of candidates' experience and perception of this important event in their academic life. Like the British viva, from which it historically derives, the oral examination in New Zealand is usually held in private, unlike examinations for PhDs in parts of Europe and in the United States. This century there has been a great deal of interest in the examination processes for the PhD amongst researchers in higher education both in Britain (see Jackson and Tinkler, 2001; Tinkler and Jackson, 2004) and in Australia (see Holbrook et al., 2004; Kiley & Mullins, 2004). However, it remains something of an unknown to doctoral candidates. Morley, Leonard and David (2002), for example claim that, "Doctoral studies can be experienced as mysterious and mystifying" and in particular the assessment and examination process can seem "secretive" (pp.263-4).

Part of my role delivering workshops on the oral examination, which are offered as part of a doctoral skills programme at the University of Auckland, involves clarifying the examination process by offering candidates a broad historical and international context for the oral exam, as well as detailing the University of Auckland's specific examination procedures. Perhaps the most effective means of demystifying the event is through hearing of the experiences of recent PhD graduates (see Carter, 2008). For this reason, in 2005 I surveyed doctoral candidates at the University of Auckland with the primary aim of sharing their insights into the oral examination with prospective examinees in workshop situations. As the survey was conducted primarily for teaching purposes it has limitations as research data. However, the responses given by the candidates raise important questions about the nature and purpose of the oral examination for the New Zealand doctorate.

## The survey

The survey included no questions that related to the identity of the respondents, so there is no information on the respondents' age or gender, cultural background, time to completion, enrolment status (part-time or full-time) or their discipline. In addition, those surveyed were examined according to two different statutes regulating the degree of Doctor of Philosophy and this posed some difficulties for calibrating answers. The candidates were asked to participate on the grounds that

they sat an oral examination between 1 January and 30 June 2005; there were no other selection criteria. Each respondent completed an anonymous questionnaire composed of a combination of closed-ended and open-ended questions. The questions were grouped into three sections: preparation for the oral exam, the examination process and the aftermath. The response rate to the questionnaire was 35% (33 respondents of 94 potential participants). Of these respondents, one was asked to revise and resubmit, the remainder were awarded the degree either outright (5) or with minor corrections (26); two surveys returned did not identify a result.

## **What is the purpose of the oral examination for the PhD?**

Respondents to the survey considered the main purposes of the oral were to do with the clarification and authentication of the thesis, and to test their wider knowledge of the field. This is similar to responses made by British PhD candidates (see Jackson and Tinkler, 2001). Many respondents commented on the rigour of the examination but also described it as a positive experience: "Yes, the term *defence* is apt – a chance to do something new, put it out there for critical review, and defend your work/conclusions as part of a vigorous academic debate." Others reflected on the purpose that such a challenging event at the end of the PhD might have in terms of the overall degree: "Having the oral exam is an intimidating process but a helpful 'right [sic] of passage'. It helped me feel I had completed something." Another stated, "The oral examination feels (and is) like the final step in the PhD process." These two comments draw attention, partly through metaphor, to the purpose that the oral examination has at the end of the PhD process. As a "final step" or "[rite] of passage" the oral examination is couched in terms of ritual and both the above respondents intimated a degree of satisfaction in having experienced the final "challenge". The notion that the viva marks a doctoral candidate's transition from student to academic is ubiquitous in the literature that supports doctoral students to completion. Rowarth and Fraser (2006) state that one purpose of the oral examination is to provide assurance to the university that the candidate will be "a credible member of the academic community" (p.209). Dunleavy (2003) begins his discussion of the oral examination with the comment that "Life-changing events need to be marked by a rite of passage, and so it is with the doctorate where it is traditional for the final examination to be an oral one" (p. 217). Similarly, Urion (2002) describes the writing of a dissertation as "a ritual of initiation" into academic scholarship but also identifies the examination process as an "ordeal" that too often involves frustration and trauma (pp.1, 9). One respondent to the survey emphasised this aspect of the viva: "It was a very positive experience but also very traumatic" commenting on the complex and sometimes contradictory effect of the examination as both "intimidating" as well as "helpful".

## **What is being examined, the person or the thesis?**

One respondent to the survey highlighted the process of doing a PhD:

For me the undertaking of doctoral research was a significant journey. I learnt a lot and made mistakes I won't repeat. This *process* becomes lost in the *product*. While the final document clearly must be of a high standard, I think

that an important part of the process is the ability (and perhaps humility) to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses.

However, according to this candidate, the examiner had a different attitude to the purpose of the oral examination and approached it with a “traditional question and answer format” which the candidate perceived as creating “a defensive environment”. What is interesting about the response is her emphasis on the learning involved in doing the doctorate – not the acquisition of knowledge or production of a thesis so much as the ability to “reflect on the strengths and weaknesses”. This candidate draws attention to the development of the individual completing the PhD, primarily through the acquisition of a capacity for self-reflection; a capacity which she considered the oral examination ought to have provided her the opportunity to demonstrate.

This student’s comments highlight a question that has been at the fore of discussions around the PhD degree over the last two decades (Sutherland and Corballis, 2006): Is the main purpose of a doctorate to produce a thesis? The regulations that govern the PhD support the idea of product, describing the outcome of a doctorate as a significant and original contribution to knowledge. However, the form of the degree and the system of supervision has contributed to other perceptions (Lee and Williams, 1999). In the late 1990s discourse around the traditional PhD candidature drew attention to its function as “a process of person formation” (Kelly and Thorpe, 1998: p.151). Johnson, Lee and Green (2000) argue that through traditional practices of PhD supervision an “intelligible academic identity” is (theoretically) produced - a licensed scholar, a doctor, who is deemed safe to pursue research autonomously and unsupervised (p.136). The perspective of doctoral candidates is that doing a PhD can be both to do with the person and the product. As surveys of doctoral candidates in New Zealand (Middleton, 2001) and elsewhere (Leonard, Becker and Coate, 2005) have found, personal development is consistently identified as a contributing factor in the choice to undertake a doctorate.

More recent discussions (Gilbert, 2004; Barnacle, 2005; Sutherland and Corballis, 2006; Park, 2007) have also explicitly raised the issue of the purpose of the PhD, highlighting the balance between two potential outcomes: the person - researcher, potential academic or employee; and the product - the thesis, the contribution to knowledge. According to Gilbert (2004) there has recently been a significant shift in Australia from seeing the PhD as a “process of producing a research work (the thesis) to one of research training and the development of skills and expertise” (p.301). Barnacle (2005) goes so far as to claim that, in Australia, “a crisis exists in regard to what a Doctorate is meant to be” (p.181). In the UK, Park (2007) also identifies something of a crisis in the offing with “widely articulated tensions between product (producing a thesis of adequate quality) and process (developing the researcher), and between timely completion and high quality research” (Park, 2007, p.6).

In New Zealand, Sutherland and Corballis (2006) call for a reconceptualisation of the PhD, using the New Zealand PhD in English as a case study. Although they also identify a tension in the degree, these authors argue that it arises from a “dual focus” of the PhD as preparation for a career within and outside of academia (p.101).

Despite this wider debate about the purpose of PhDs there has been little focus on the oral examination, although Park (2007) has highlighted that the development of the skills agenda has implications for the assessment of PhDs (p.31). If one purpose of the PhD is to contribute to the development of a person who is skilled in research, how should this be reflected in the oral examination?

As the quote at the beginning of this section indicates, candidate and examiner(s) can perceive the purpose of the oral examination differently if they have a different perception of whether the function of the PhD is primarily the process of becoming a researcher or the production of a thesis.

## **What is the purpose of feedback in the examination process?**

Like the oral examination itself, the purpose of the examiners' reports can be perceived in a variety of ways. For the examiners, this will depend on what they see as the purpose of the PhD and how they perceive their function as examiners. In most New Zealand universities, the oral examiner has the opportunity to give feedback to the candidate in person as well as in the examiner's report. In Australia, according to Lawson (2004), the examiners' reports fulfil both summative and formative objectives: analyses of examiners' reports (see Lovat and Morrison, 2003; Holbrook et al., 2004) illustrate that examiners include both summative and formative comments in their reports; and that examiners' reports judge both "PhD skills and knowledge". However, there are questions that remain about the extent to which the reports are used by the candidates (Lovat et al. 2001, p.10).

The survey I conducted at the University of Auckland highlighted similar issues. The examiners' reports were considered useful by the majority of the candidates who had access to them (most of those who accessed the reports ticked *yes* when asked if they were useful). Of those who accessed the reports, a small number indicated that comments from the examiners related solely to corrections and amendments to the thesis. However, many described them as offering advice that was directed at the candidates' future career and publication activity. In terms of the value of reports, respondents most commonly cited "publication possibilities". Feedback on future research was also considered useful:

Feedback was more around thinking beyond the realms of my research.  
Future areas of inquiry! Very motivating.

They also indicated 'strengths' and 'weaknesses' that will assist in completing a plan for publishing journal articles and book(s).

Reinforced the unique contribution this study made to the field of knowledge. Highlighted areas of strength. Raised questions for consideration in future publications.

However, not all respondents to the survey considered the examiners' reports to offer feedback that was "motivating". One respondent had this to say of the examiners' reports:

For me this was the hardest part. The comments of one examiner were very critical of aspects of the work. While the overall outcome was seen as okay the later analysis of this critique I found disheartening. This impacted upon my attitude towards disseminating my work and my place within the wider academic environment – I suppose it is part of the process and reflects academic peer review procedures.

For this respondent, the impact of the report itself was not regarded as positive. Another respondent, who described the oral examiner as “aggressive and challenging”, commented that they “haven’t got around to applying” for the examiners’ reports” adding the explanatory note that they felt “too traumatised and afraid they will damage my confidence further”. Although both these candidates were awarded the degree following minor alterations to their theses, the process of the oral examination as a whole was viewed negatively.

While it may be that dealing with criticism from examiners is a part of a process of peer review or even a form of initiation into academic culture, the role of the examiner needs clarification. Are they “gatekeepers”, as Holbrook, Bourke, Lovatt and Dally (2003) suggest?

The survey of doctoral candidates at the University of Auckland also asked candidates to comment on the impact of the oral examination on their perception of themselves in terms of their academic competence, their desire to work in academia and the “publishability” of their work. These questions adapted were from Tinkler and Jackson’s (2001) report on their survey of doctoral candidates in the UK. In their survey, one in ten of successful candidates attributed a negative outcome to the viva (p.363). Similarly, for several candidates in the current research, the oral exam had the effect of decreasing their own perception of their academic competence. This seems surprising considering that only one was not awarded the degree outright, with the remainder successful in the award (either outright or with minor corrections). The negative impact of an examination that has had a positive result is an issue that merits further consideration.

## **Conclusion**

The oral exam or viva voce remains for most New Zealand universities a vital part of the examination process; for instance, even though the PhD regulations at the University of Auckland have changed twice since 2000 the oral examination has been retained. While most New Zealand universities have an oral exam, the situation is different in Australian universities, where oral examinations are rarely part of assessment for the PhD, although even in Australia, debates around the oral examination continue (see Kiley, 2006). In the UK, calls for reform of the PhD degree often focus on the examination process, as is outlined by Jackson and Tinkler (2001) and more recently by Park (2007). A question that arises in these studies is: What purpose does an oral examination for a PhD serve?

Is the main purpose to test knowledge or authenticity; or is it more constructive - an opportunity for examiners to give feedback to the candidate on their future research activity? How significant is the issue that candidates’ perceptions of the purpose of

the examination and role of examiners may not match those of the examiner, or that candidate and examiner can have a different idea of the purpose of the PhD itself?

Central to discussions of the oral examination is the issue of whether or not the main purpose of the PhD is to produce a thesis (an original contribution to knowledge) or a researcher, with certain skills and abilities. Coster, Dean of Graduate Studies at the University of Auckland, commented that as well as “bringing new insights to bear on their thesis topic”, postgraduate research students “should be looking to acquire skills which will prepare them for the job market whether inside or outside academia” (2006, p.11). Park (2007) has identified specific areas that should be addressed if the broader remit of a skills agenda is incorporated into the examination process in the UK and asks: whether the private, closed examination is appropriate; whether the focus rest solely on the thesis; and whether evidence of the candidate’s research training should be sought as part of the final assessment? (pp.31-32). If the New Zealand PhD is to retain its international standing, these questions are also relevant to the New Zealand PhD degree.

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