

Examiner feedback and Australian doctoral examination processes

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Doctoral thesis examination is the litmus test for doctoral quality. Of those candidates who reach examination, most are notified they have more work to do on their thesis. Receiving and responding to feedback are integral parts of a formal learning process that continues until the final thesis is submitted. However, little is known about what happens after examiner reports are received by an institution, how recommendations and feedback are filtered through institutional processes to influence thesis outcomes, or about the roles that candidates and supervisors play in determining and giving action to thesis revisions. This article reports the findings from a desktop review of institutional protocols and policies governing doctoral thesis examination in Australian universities. Given that the PhD Viva, or oral examination, is rare in Australian universities, the authors question whether current examination processes allow adequate opportunities for candidates to actively engage with examiner feedback and take advantage of this final opportunity to demonstrate, or further develop, authoritative judgement and research autonomy.

Keywords: doctoral examination, examination process, examiner report, response to feedback

Introduction

A key indicator of research excellence institutionally and systemically is the quality of doctoral theses and this in turn presupposes robust, fair and equitable assessment processes. Getting assessment right is fundamental to any successful academic program and is therefore especially critical in high stakes programs such as those for higher research degrees. There are approximately 8000 higher research degree completions annually in Australia and hundreds of thousands of completions world-wide (OECD, 2016). What distinguish doctoral thesis examination from other types of assessment are the level and focus of the degree. The award of the doctorate implies both the completion of a successful product (thesis) and the development of a well-qualified researcher. Institutions have become increasingly

publicly accountable to ensure that both conform to the appropriate standard. In order to fulfil the traditional aim of knowledge creation, doctoral education needs to develop and elicit the highest levels of cognitive functioning and skills in candidates (Kandiko & Kinchin, 2012). Recent debates concerning the aims of doctoral study have also positioned the thesis as an 'object of learning' and it is in connection with the latter that feedback by examiners requires further study. The intention of examiner feedback, implicitly or explicitly, is to broaden the outlook or extend the knowledge of the candidate (Holbrook *et al.*, 2004). It is an interesting feature of doctoral examination processes that examiners are able to feed into learning at the examination stage. It is even more intriguing that there is little evidence about how this feedback is managed through institutional processes and how it influences candidate outcomes.

There has been intensifying interest in studies of assessment feedback in higher education (Pereira, Assunção, & Niklasson, 2016), including doctoral education. Almost two decades ago, Tinkler and Jackson (2000, p.168) observed that the PhD examination process was 'shrouded in mystery' and attempted to 'shed light' on this process through an interrogation of institutional policies governing examination practices in Britain. In a recent review of research investigating thesis examiner practices, Golding, Sharmini and Lazarovitch (2014) called for more detailed research to 'demystify' examination processes and better understand how theses are assessed. While many aspects of the process are clearly set out in policy, much of the mystery resides in the less visible facets of decision-making and discussion. Some time ago, a review of PhD examiner guidelines and reporting conventions in Australian universities identified numerous 'institutional differences' in examination processes, noting these reflected 'matters of detail rather than matters of substance' (Lawson, Marsh, & Tansley, 2003, p.36). However, that work did not tease out the silences or gaps in the documentation and tended to overlook processes post the point of receiving examination reports, including the role and treatment of feedback.

This article reports the findings from the first stage of an ARC Discovery Project investigating the processes, practices, and impacts of the end-stage of doctoral examination. It explored the policies governing PhD examination in Australian universities to understand how the examination process is enacted and what impact these processes and the absence of a Viva might have on candidates' engagement with examiner feedback. The paper will commence with a brief overview of literature on summative and formative assessment, with a focus on student engagement with feedback, and the critical components required for an effective feedback loop.

Summative and formative assessment

Scriven (1967) described assessment as a single process involving both summative and formative elements. An evaluation is summative if it is used in decision-making concerning the end result of an educational process (Scriven, 1967), while formative assessment can be used by learners to improve their performance (Sadler, 1989). The doctoral thesis examination process starts with summative evaluation where a judgement is made about the quality of a product according to specified criteria or standards. This is followed by formative assessment which identifies any possible deficiencies in

meeting the criteria and provides feedback about how to address these gaps (Sadler, 1989). The final step is for the learner to use this feedback to 'improve their product' or inform future activities (Taras, 2009). The doctoral thesis examination framework used by institutions nationally and internationally is part 'grade' (summative assessment of doctoral standard) and part 'gauge' of what still needs to be done to a thesis (formative assessment) in order to meet doctoral standards (Holbrook *et al.*, 2014).

The summative aspect of doctoral assessment is reflected in the examiners' final recommendations about whether the thesis is at a standard deemed to be 'doctoral'. In the Australian context, the recommendation options available to examiners typically include passed with no requirement for correction or amendment, passed subject to minor or major revisions, resubmit or failed (Lovat *et al.*, 2015). To judge the quality of a thesis, examiners are usually provided with specific guidelines addressing the originality and significance of the project, as well as the merits of different elements of the thesis itself, such as the literature review, methods, results, conclusions, etc. However, previous research on Australian doctoral examination processes has found that even when examiners are provided with specific assessment criteria, they do not necessarily follow these when making judgements about thesis quality (Mullins & Kiley, 2002). Delamont, Atkinson and Parry (2000, p.4) observe that examiners make judgements about 'indeterminate' skills and qualities of the candidates. It is difficult for candidates to interpret and act on examiner feedback to address any gaps between their own work and 'acceptable' standards if the skills being judged, and the standards that candidates are aiming for, are unclear or ill-defined.

Formative feedback and the feedback loop

In countries such as Australia, NZ and the UK, formative feedback makes up the majority of comment in the average examination report, directed primarily at improving the thesis and/or subsequent publications (Holbrook *et al.*, 2014; Lovat *et al.*, 2015). Examiners spend considerable effort in providing feedback on doctoral theses they consider to be worthy of doctoral standards and even on those of exemplary quality (Lovat *et al.*, 2008). Regardless of the quality of a doctoral thesis, examiners tend to treat a thesis as a work-in-progress and, in their reports, position candidates as learners (Starfield *et al.*, 2017), offering them advice and feedback about improvements

to the thesis or guidance about how they can develop as researchers (Golding *et al.*, 2014).

Research on assessment consistently identifies a number of common key themes regarding feedback for learners. The most prominent issue is that the feedback process is a dialogic loop in which assessment results and comments only become 'feedback' if the information is 'fed back into' the original system or learner to effect improvements. Feedback is not a one-way transmission of information and, according to Sadler (2010), is only valuable insofar as it is used. Similarly, Carless and Boud (2018) assert that students need to use feedback for improvement purposes. Without action, comments do not become feedback.

To turn 'formative instruction' into 'feedback', the learner needs to be actively engaged in the 'feedback loop.' From their systematic review of research concerning learners' receptiveness to and implementation of feedback, Winstone *et al.* (2017a) identified four 'recipience' processes that can affect the uptake and implementation of information and the ultimate completion of the feedback loop. These include the characteristics and behaviour of the receiver, characteristics and behaviour of the sender, characteristics of the message and characteristics of the context.

Characteristics and behaviour of the feedback receiver

The giving and receiving of feedback are a communication exchange between a sender and receiver of information. Most of the research on feedback has focused on the role of the sender (Burke 2009), however, Johnson and Johnson (1994) emphasise that the receiver's role is just as crucial as is the role of the sender in the effective transmission of a message. According to Winstone *et al.* (2017b), the success of the feedback process relies on learners being in a state of 'proactive recipience'. The extent to which examiner recommendations are acted upon depends on both the capacity of a candidate to interpret examiner feedback as well as the candidate's willingness to accept and incorporate the feedback. Carless and Boud (2018, p.5) assert that students require 'the understandings, capacities and dispositions needed to make sense of comments and use them for enhancement purposes.'

For feedback to be effective, the feedback receiver needs to take an active and volitional role in responding to and acting on the comments provided by the feedback sender. Nash and Winstone (2017) contrast the agentic learner who takes responsibility for making decisions

and taking action based on instructor comment with the 'consumer' mentality of learners who are content to be 'passive recipients of education'. Compared to 'passive receivers', engaged learners understand and value feedback, are able to make decisions about how to incorporate the feedback and are self-regulated and motivated to act upon the advice. Both the feedback sender and the feedback receiver share responsibility for the effective implementation of feedback, which is reliant on four essential elements: Awareness - understanding what the feedback means; Cognisance - knowing how to act upon the feedback; Agency - having the opportunity to act upon the feedback; and Volition - having the desire to interrogate and engage with the feedback and instigate the strategies required to implement the feedback (Nash & Winstone, 2017). As discussed next, the educator has a major role in supporting the learner's awareness and cognisance by providing clear feedback that can be understood and acted upon, however, the learner has prime responsibility for the volition and agency necessary to incorporate the feedback into the examined product or future endeavours (Nash & Winstone, 2017).

Characteristics and behaviour of the feedback sender

While the receiver needs to be willing, or at least prepared, to accept feedback, the sender also shares responsibility for the effective uptake of the feedback they are providing (Winstone *et al.*, 2017a). Instructional comment needs to be clear and communicated in a way that enables the learner to understand, value, and act upon the advice being given. As illustrated in Nash and Winstone's (2017) responsibility distribution model, the educator is primarily responsible for the clarity of the message so that the student can then be aware of what the feedback means. The educator also has major responsibility for ensuring that sufficient details are provided so that the student understands (is cognisant of) how the feedback can be acted upon.

In order to act upon feedback, learners first need to appreciate and value the feedback and then make judgements about what actions to take. In order to appreciate and value feedback the receiver needs to be assured of the expertise and credibility of the feedback sender. As noted by Starfield *et al.* (2017), examiners of doctoral theses are typically selected because of their expertise and academic achievements in the relevant field of research. Thus, candidates are generally confident that the feedback they are being given is coming from an esteemed and trustworthy informant.

Characteristics of the message

High-quality feedback clarifies what good performance entails and provides corrective, 'task-specific' advice for how the current work can be improved, or 'process feedback' regarding what could or should be done in the future (Winstone *et al.*, 2017a). Some researchers in the higher education context have found that learners prefer future-oriented feedback regarding skills development (e.g. Carless, 2006), while others maintain that the 'ideal' is a balance between task-specific and process feedback (Sadler, 2010). The results from Winstone *et al.*'s review of assessment feedback in the higher education context suggested that as well as the focus and content of the feedback, a critical or negative tone, nuances in the wording of the message and tacit or ambiguous comments also influenced learners' attitudes towards the feedback and their motivation to act on it. Higher education students were found to be less likely to act on feedback that was perceived as being negatively judgemental, unconstructive or insensitive. Similarly, some studies found that university students often reported feeling confused and unsure how to respond to feedback that was couched in unfamiliar academic discourse or that did not clearly communicate what changes should be made or if any revisions were actually required (Jonsson, 2012).

In the Australian doctoral examination process, examiners provide feedback to candidates via a written report and for most doctoral degrees there is no oral examination or any direct contact between the examiner and the candidate. Thus, candidates generally have no opportunity to clarify with examiners the meaning or intent of the comments provided in the written report. Monfries and Lovat (2006) analysed 23 examination reports for top-rated theses in one Australian university and found a 'pervading theme of deficit' and a high proportion of text devoted to how some aspect of the thesis could have been improved, even in cases where the examiners had recommended that the thesis should be passed without any revisions or amendments. From their analysis of the discourse of 50 examiner reports from one New Zealand university, Starfield *et al.* (2017) noted that because of the multiple roles that examiners assume when writing their reports, doctoral candidates may have difficulty in distinguishing whether or not examiner comments are intended as feedback for further action. These authors argue that institutions may need to 'provide more explicit guidance to examiners and raise examiners awareness of the need to more clearly distinguish the functions of their comments' (Starfield *et al.*, 2017, p.54).

Characteristics of the context

It could be assumed that if educators clearly communicate the ways in which students' work has not addressed the required standards or criteria and have clearly conveyed information regarding what needs to be done to address these inadequacies, then students will be cognisant of the gaps or errors in their work and, as long as they have the motivation to act upon the advice, will be well equipped to remedy any omissions or inaccuracies. However, Price, Handley and Millar (2011) argue that engagement with feedback is influenced by both individual and contextual factors. From their analysis of student perceptions of feedback in higher education systems, Price *et al.* (2011) concluded that engagement with feedback is a socially embedded process that operates within the discourses, policies and culture of the learning institutions. Lovat *et al.* (2008) postulated that the abovementioned dominance of 'deficit discourse' in examiner reports could be emanating from an incumbent set of cultural expectations in a 'doctoral regime' that positions examiners as experts, and doctoral candidates as novice researchers who require further instruction. This in turn brings the discussion back to an earlier point about seeing the thesis as an object of learning and that learning, and learner status, do not cease at the point of examination.

Winstone *et al.*'s (2017a) review of the literature also identified several characteristics of the higher education learning and assessment environment that have the potential to affect learners' engagement with feedback adversely. Key among these were the timing of feedback delivery, institutional policies and the lack of opportunities for face-to-face dialogue. Learners who have to wait a long time to receive feedback are typically less engaged with the feedback once it finally arrives and are less motivated to act upon it (e.g. Nicol & McFarlane-Dick, 2006). As noted previously, the giving and receiving of feedback is a communicative event and numerous assessment researchers and theorists have noted the importance that learners place on responding to educators and completing the dialogic feedback loop (Winstone *et al.*, 2017a). As a general rule, Jonsson (2012, p.72) recommends 'an active and dialogic model of feedback.' This has some bearing on the value of an oral component to doctoral examination. From their review of the role of the Viva in the PhD examination process, Lovat *et al.* (2015) suggest that the inclusion of a Viva is unlikely to change the results of the examination process but might offer candidates an opportunity for collegial discussions with their examiners and thus provide a greater sense of closure.

The context for this study

The introduction of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) in 1995 aimed to provide a nationally consistent description and hierarchical classification of all tertiary awards and qualifications. The framework, which was revised in 2013, describes the characteristics of each qualification in terms of learning outcomes and specifies progression pathways from Certificate 1 qualifications (AQF Level 1) to doctoral degrees (AQF Level 10). The AQF Level 10 criteria explicate the specific knowledge and skills that candidates are expected to have acquired and be able to apply in order to qualify for the award of a doctoral degree. The summary statement for Level 10 indicates that 'graduates at this level will have systematic and critical understanding of a complex field of learning and specialised research skills for the advancement of learning and/or for professional practice' and be able to demonstrate 'autonomy, authoritative judgement, adaptability and responsibility as an expert and leading practitioner or scholar' (AQF, 2013, p.63). McInnis (2010) argues that while the AQF creates transparency and consensus about the requirements for each qualification among different sectors, it is limited in its capacity to directly ensure academic standards. While examiners are tasked with making judgements and recommendations about doctoral standards, final responsibility for determining whether a candidate will be awarded a doctoral degree rests with the institution.

Higher degree by research (HDR) examination processes are not static and appear to be in a state of flux given the changes in the scope and the forms of the doctoral degree. In every institution, examiners have the option of passing or failing the candidate outright or requiring changes of a lesser to more major extent – the most extreme being revise and resubmit. What do candidates have to do to meet the demands made of them at this point and how is the need to successfully meet these demands evident in policies and decision-making processes? We limit our focus in this paper to the policies and processes connected with securing examiner reports through to the decisions around awarding the degree and making revisions. Based on the above, we targeted the processes which govern how candidates and supervisors receive and respond to examiner feedback. In the discussion, we consider the impact that current processes

might have on candidate agency and engagement, in light of the research on feedback receptiveness and the factors that can affect the uptake of examiner guidance and completion of the feedback loop.

Method

The authors undertook a desktop review of publicly available doctoral examination policies and procedures from the total population of 39 Australian universities that offer PhD degrees and are listed on the Universities Australia website (www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/australias-universities/university-profiles#.W4Sr22eQmws). The thesis examination policies and procedures were sourced from each university's web-pages in July and August 2018. The search terms included: thesis examination/examiner; doctoral thesis; and PhD thesis.

The review collated information relating to the following seven aspects of the examination process: examiner and examination criteria; determining examination outcomes; reconciling disparate examiner reports; responding to examiner reports; revision procedures and the terminology used to describe recommendations and revisions; and the inclusion or absence of a Viva in the conduct of the examination. Information was typically sourced from several policy documents as well as from guidelines provided to students and examiners. Complete data from the 39 universities was available for all aspects, with the exception of examination criteria, where we could only locate this information for 19 institutions. We acknowledge that that there is likely to be additional information concerning internal processes that was not publicly available. The Stage 2 interviews with Deans or Directors of Graduate Studies from ten universities will provide further insights into examination processes.

Results

Examiner criteria

In Australia, university policies dictate a common set of criteria which must be applied to the selection of examiners. All of the universities surveyed for this project stipulated that PhD examiners must be external to the university in which the candidate is enrolled and have no conflicts of interest, thus ensuring impartiality

Higher education students were found to be less likely to act on feedback that was perceived as being negatively judgemental, unconstructive or insensitive.

and minimising any chance of bias or subjective judgement. In addition, examiners must have a doctoral qualification or equivalent, be currently active in the field of research and have international standing in the research topic. Just over one quarter (11) asked that examiners have adequate experience in examining – or at least supervising – HDR students, with one university explaining that ‘inexperienced examiners might be more critical’.

Close to one quarter (10) of universities required that there must be at least one examiner from outside Australia. One university suggested selecting an examiner from an international candidate’s home country, to facilitate the examiner later becoming a mentor to that candidate. It is also noteworthy that there is sometimes a degree of flexibility about the requirements for examiners being external or international, due to the need in some disciplines for the examiner to sight a creative work in person. Several universities mention other requirements: that examiners are drawn from different institutions, or that they are available for an oral examination if required, or available for a certain period (to provide the report within two months, for example), or that they are well-informed about the standards expected of the thesis. A few universities asked for examiners who have empathy for the theoretical framework used by the candidate, or even expertise in that framework.

Examination criteria

Thesis examination criteria were located for 19 of the 39 universities. Of these, the majority described common features and standards expected in a doctoral thesis including: a systematic and comprehensive literature review; effective and rigorous methodology that is appropriate for the thesis topic; results presented in an accurate and logical manner; and a lucid discussion and conclusions that are linked to the research questions. In addition, the thesis (or parts thereof) had to be suitable for publication and the literary presentation was expected to be clear, discernible, coherent, accurately and cogently written, concise and authoritative. The criteria mostly referred to the thesis, but 12 institutions referred to the research skills and qualities of the candidate, while two universities referred separately to both the essential elements of the thesis as well as the specific skills and competencies of the candidate. Ten universities specifically mentioned the requirements of the AQF concerning the candidate’s capacity to demonstrate and independently apply their research skills and knowledge.

Determining examination outcomes

In most universities, once examiner reports are received, they are read and ‘evaluated’ by an HDR panel or committee and a recommendation is made based on the examiners’ recommendations and comments. In some institutions, the recommendation is determined by a committee delegate such as the chair of a faculty research or thesis examination committee, and then considered by a key individual such as the Dean, Director or Deputy Dean of Research. The recommendation is generally made prior to student notification and without consultation with supervisors. There were eight universities where supervisors played an integral role in assisting the committee to decide about the classification level and a further four where supervisors were consulted only if the committee were seeking advice to help reconcile examiners’ divergent views. At one university the candidate and the supervisors received the examiner reports before the committee and were required to provide a response to the examiner comments before a determination was made. Under this arrangement, the candidate’s response to examiners and the Principal Supervisor’s commentary on the examiners’ reports were considered along with the examiners’ reports to assist the committee in making their recommendation.

In about a quarter of the universities, the supervisors were consulted as part of the determination of outcomes process and thus received the examiner reports before the candidates, but in the majority of universities the reports were sent to the supervisors and candidates at the same time along with the committee recommendation. The three categories – Passed with no amendments, Revise and resubmit, and Fail, were evident in every institution. There was also always an option for a thesis to be passed with amendments. The majority of Australian universities (24) favoured five levels of classification with the additional two recommendations being – Passed with minor amendments and Passed with major revisions. At the 15 universities with only four recommendation options, the minor and major revisions were combined into one category. An additional option of awarding an appropriate master’s degree instead of Fail at PhD level was offered by 14 institutions.

Reconciliation of examiners’ reports

Most universities included several options for reconciling disparate recommendations by the examiners. In addition to seeking input from the supervisors or heads of schools and faculties, the next most common method was to contact the ‘reserve examiner’ or appoint an additional

examiner. In this case, neither the candidate nor the supervisor is given the original reports until after the additional examiner's report has been received. In one university the original examiners could be contacted and asked to provide additional information in either written or verbal form. Three universities have an option of appointing an adjudicator or arbitrator whose role is to consider and report on the research and review the reports of the examiners, while 25 institutions reserve an option to ask or require candidates to participate in an oral or written examination.

Responding to examiner reports

As noted by Lovat *et al.* (2015), most doctoral candidates are required to make either minor or major revisions to their thesis before the degree is conferred. At most universities, the supervisor and candidate appear to be given joint responsibility for making the decisions about the extent and nature of any revisions. However, four universities stipulate that the decision on how to respond to examiner reports will be made by the Thesis Examination Committee or the Chair of such committees, apparently without consultation with the candidate or supervisor. This advice could be general ('address all points raised by examiner X') or specific ('insert a discussion of YYY on p.37'). Another university advised candidates that 'rewriting instructions will be composed by your supervisory panel, endorsed by the School or Institute Research and Higher Degrees Committee and then approved by the Research Studies Committee'.

There were various terms used to describe the 'revisions' required under the 'passed with amendments' category. The most common terms in order of decreasing frequency were, amendments, corrections, and revisions. These terms were often preceded by the descriptors 'minor' or 'major'. Less frequently used terms included changes, additions or additional work, rewriting and clarifications.

Revision processes

In 19 of the 39 institutions, candidates who were awarded a 'pass with amendments' (either minor or major) were required to prepare a response to the examiner reports. This response was usually completed by the candidate in conjunction with their supervisors and then submitted to an examination committee or delegate for review and final approval. There were various terms used to describe the 'form' or 'report' that candidates were required to submit. These included: Table of amendments, Detailed response to Examiner comments; Response to

Thesis Examiner reports, and Thesis corrections letter. Candidates were usually advised that they did not need to make all the revisions recommended by the examiners, but they should still address all of the examiner comments and if any changes suggested by the examiners were not enacted, then the candidate should provide a justification as to why the suggestions were not implemented. Candidates who completed a thesis by publication were also warned that 'having published sections of the thesis in a peer-reviewed format is not an adequate defence for not actioning suggested changes.' There were also various terms used to describe the thesis that was submitted along with the response to the examiners' report. The most common was revised thesis, followed by corrected thesis and final copy of thesis.

Apart from the general instructions provided to candidates about the format of the amendments report and the timelines allocated to the various levels of revisions, very few universities provided information about the process of undertaking revisions and the respective roles of the candidate and supervisor in deciding what and how examiner comments should be addressed. However, one university specifically noted that throughout the thesis examination and review processes, the role of the supervisor should be as 'guide, advisor and critical reviewer rather than co-author or editor of the thesis.' Another university attempted to assist candidates, supervisors and the examination committee in interpreting examiner reports by providing specific guidelines for examiners about how to write 'valid' suggestions for revisions:

The examiner must state clearly in the examination report what the candidate needs to do to address issues and to provide specific guidance to the candidate as to how he/she can address the issues raised. Vague statements that can be interpreted as opinion, such as "it would have been good if ...", "the candidate could have ...", "discussion of ... would have been useful", without specific direction, such as "the candidate must ...", "the candidate should ...", cannot be given weight. The candidate will not be expected to respond to vague comments or statements of opinion.

The inclusion of a Viva

At the time of writing, only 2 of the 39 universities incorporated a Viva as an integral and compulsory part of the PhD examination process. These initiatives were relatively recent with one university introducing the Viva requirement in 2016 and the other in 2018. There were 25 universities where a Viva could be conducted as an option to resolve examination outcome differences or where

it was essential in some disciplines or for conjoint and cotutelle programs. Two universities allowed candidates to choose whether they wanted to participate in a Viva as part of their PhD examination. While a formal Viva was uncommon, ten universities referred to a public seminar or oral presentation that occurred three to six months prior to submission. At five of these ten universities, the seminar and subsequent feedback appeared to be purely formative in nature, while three universities specified that this presentation was a milestone that must be passed before thesis submission and the other two universities indicated that the oral presentation 'may form part of the approved examination process'.

Discussion

In the discussion, the authors will examine what has been learned about policy in respect to the end stage of examination and features identified as integral to closing the feedback loop.

Candidate receptiveness

An integral part of responding effectively to feedback is managing 'negative' emotions that can arise when the feedback is interpreted as 'criticism' or implies that the learner has been deficient in some way. Candidates who strongly believe their thesis is a 'finished product' at the time of submission are unlikely to be in a state of 'proactive recipience' when they receive examiner feedback recommending that revisions and improvements can, should or must be made.

If, as Golding *et al.* (2014) and Kandiko and Kinchin (2012) suggest, doctoral candidates tend to focus on the PhD as a 'product', then a mismatch might arise between candidate, institutional and examiner expectations of the purpose and contents of examiner reports. In their attempt to standardise processes for examining PhD theses in Australian universities 15 years ago, Lawson *et al.* (2003) recommended that candidates be provided with the same materials that are developed for examiners so that the formative elements of examination feedback will be anticipated well before thesis submission or the receipt of examiner reports.

The current review of documents available on university websites regarding examination processes suggests that candidates now do have access to detailed information about examination criteria, how examination results are determined, and the processes required for responding to examiner reports. It remains to be seen if students take this on board and feel well informed.

Candidate agency

Stracke and Kumar (2010, p.19), note that 'the ultimate aim of doctoral education is to train scholars to become independent learners' and independence as researchers is also specified in the AQF. Given this expectation, it appears incongruous that candidates should be the last to receive feedback about their thesis or if, as is the case in some institutions, decisions about which examiner comments should be addressed is relegated to supervisors or an examination committee. When examiners make it clear that a candidate needs to do more, then is the thesis 'not doctoral', not complete, or something else again? Is the candidate trusted? If doctoral candidates are being adequately prepared to meet the AQF Level 10 standard of demonstrating 'autonomy, authoritative judgement, adaptability and responsibility as an expert and leading practitioner or scholar' (AQF, 2013, p.63), then the implicit questioning of candidate readiness to make decisions about how to implement feedback suggests fundamental tensions in the interpretation of recommendations and candidate agency. As noted by Nash and Winstone (2017), the effectiveness of feedback depends on both the learner's cognisance of what needs to be done as well as the opportunities provided to the learner to engage with, and act on, the feedback provided. Winstone *et al.* (2017b, p. 2026) suggested that 'feedback without action is unproductive' but actions based on supervisor or committee advice without reflective engagement by the candidate can be equally unproductive.

Characteristics and behaviour of the feedback sender

The desktop review confirmed Starfield *et al.*'s (2017) contention that Australian universities apply strict criteria to ensure that examiners are impartial experts in the field of study. While an examination or HDR research committee might reserve the ultimate role of selecting two to three examiners, it is supervisors who are tasked with nominating an appropriate array of suitable examiners from which this choice is made. Thus, both supervisors and candidates should be confident about the characteristics, expertise and credibility of the examiner. While a strict selection process appears to ensure examiner credibility, what appears more problematic and less easy to address directly in policy, is the quality of feedback. Without knowing the individual, feedback can be difficult to target and not all examiners may have the same facility in their communication of feedback. The desktop review revealed that at least one university provided explicit and prescriptive guidance to examiners about how to write

their report in a way that clearly differentiated essential revisions from optional improvements, in an endeavour to clarify the intentions underlying examiner feedback. While the development of more specific guidelines for examiners has the potential to improve the clarity of examiner reports, Lovat *et al.* (2015) noted that examiners rarely follow the guidelines they are given. Nonetheless, clearer guidelines for examiners about the importance of explicating what changes they require is both possible and useful.

Characteristics of the message

A separate issue to the clarity of the feedback sender and the characteristics of the examiners' message concerns the implicit message that is being communicated to candidates and examiners by the terminology that institutions use to describe examination outcomes and required changes to a thesis before it can be passed. The review indicated that the terms 'amendments and corrections' were often used in the context of minor changes while 'revisions' was more often associated with recommendations requiring major changes. While these terms were typically used interchangeably, they have quite different meanings, with amendments suggesting changes for improvement and corrections, suggesting changes to rectify an error or omission. Revision is technically a more neutral term signifying a change or alteration, but it implies a more serious 'problem' with a thesis because of its usual association with the recommendation categories of 'Accept with major revisions' or 'Revise and resubmit'. Regardless of the term used to describe the required changes, the descriptors of 'minor' and 'major' carry loaded implications for candidates about the magnitude of the 'problems' that examiners identified in their thesis. The difficulties involved in accurately gauging the extent of the changes that examiners required was evidenced by the substantial proportion of universities that elected to dispense with demarcations between minor amendments and major revisions. This dissolution goes some way to alleviating candidates' likely negative emotional response to reports that explicitly categorise the changes that need to be made as 'major'. A small proportion of universities appear to be conscious of the impact of the words they use to describe recommendation categories with more

neutral terms such as changes, clarifications and additions gaining prominence.

Contextual influences

The current review also revealed that the inclusion of a Viva in the Australian PhD examination process is rare. All universities required written examiner reports, but only two institutions incorporate a Viva in the examination process. At both of these universities, the introduction of the Viva is very recent, with one commencing the Viva in 2016 and the other in 2018. The inclusion of a compulsory or optional pre-submission seminar at some universities provides an opportunity for candidates to gain formative feedback from academics within their own institution prior to thesis completion, but this mechanism does not address the communication gap between a candidate and their ultimate expert examiners.

Candidates who strongly believe their thesis is a 'finished product' at the time of submission are unlikely to be in a state of 'proactive recipience' when they receive examiner feedback recommending that revisions and improvements can, should or must be made.

Nicol (2010)

argues that feedback can only be effective if it involves a 'two-way dialogic process' and it could be assumed that feedback provided through written examination reports, without the inclusion of a Viva, constitutes a 'one-way process'. However, when minor or major changes are required, candidates in most Australian institutions are asked to provide a response to the examiner reports in which they explain the changes they have made and, where necessary, justify why they have not acted upon some of the examiners' suggestions. While this response is not sent to the examiners, the decisions and revisions are considered by an examination committee or delegate and thus the feedback loop is completed to some extent, albeit with a different 'expert'. This process ensures that candidates are 'cognisant' of the feedback (Nash & Winstone, 2017) but the extent to which candidates are actively engaging with the feedback, taking prime responsibility for making decisions, and willingly embarking on revisions is unclear.

Conclusions

The desktop review of the policies and processes of Australian universities investigated the channels through which doctoral candidates receive and respond to examiner reports, and the language that is used to describe examination recommendations and thesis

revisions. The analysis suggests that some current doctoral assessment practices might inadvertently have an adverse impact on candidate receptiveness to, and engagement with, examiner feedback. Specifically, there appears to be a lack of emphasis given to candidate agency and volition in the processes that govern decisions about thesis revisions. Universities are understandably concerned with maintaining standards and ensuring that examiner reports are taken seriously and objectively considered. However, there might be scope for providing more immediate access to examiner reports and allowing PhD candidates to assume greater responsibility for interpreting and digesting examiner feedback and taking the lead in making decisions about the revision strategies.

As well as having an opportunity to be actively engaged in responding to examiner feedback, candidates need to be willing to embark on incorporating changes that they may not have anticipated. Candidate volition to act on examiner feedback might be negatively impacted by the terminology surrounding changes, such as classifications of 'major' and 'minor' and the use of terms such as 'corrections' and 'revisions' when perhaps 'amendments' is what examiners intended. A more consistent use of terminology might assist candidates, supervisors and university committees to accurately interpret examiner reports and determine whether examiner comments are identifying flaws that need to be rectified or are offered as optional adornments to complement the existing work.

Given that the majority of Australian doctoral candidates do not complete a feedback loop through dialogue with their examiners at a Viva, we need to consider whether current examination processes allow adequate opportunities for candidates to actively engage with examiner feedback and take advantage of this final opportunity to demonstrate, or further develop, authoritative judgement and research autonomy.

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