



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF BUSINESS, SOCIAL SCIENCES & EDUCATION

**Dynamics in Doctoral External Examination: Is it Quality or
Formality at Play?**

“An Evidence-Based Paper”

By

Maria Kaguhangire Barifaijo, & Gerald Karyeija, PhD

Uganda Management Institute

CITATION: Barifaijo M.K & Karyeija G, (Jan, 2016). Dynamics in Doctoral External Examination: Is it Quality or Formality at Play? “An Evidence-Based Paper”: *International Journal of Social Sciences & Education*. Volume 2 (1), 17-43. ISSN 2105 6008.

ABSTRACT

Internationalization and quality assurance requirements are driving universities into competitive pressures to gain acceptable standards for a competitive edge globally. Joint supervision, examination moderation and external examination are some of the endeavors made. The paper analyzes the conventional criteria used in the selection of external examiners in a bid to enhance quality. Globally, external examination is intended to promote reputation, quality, institutional profiling, and also to fulfill national quality assurance frameworks. However, the authors find incongruence during selection processes that are critical for its purpose. Characteristics such as methodological expertise, discipline-related competences and training orientation have more often been disregarded. Instead, experience, and the reputation of an individual and or the institution the examiner works have been adopted. The paper therefore attempts to answer the following question (1) why are there challenges with external examination? (2) What are the quality related issues with external examination? And (3) What are the culminating implications? To address these questions, the authors have advanced The Attribution Theory. Using in depth interviews and reviewing several documents, the authors have found more unrest and frustration in this arrangement than the quality it intends to achieve. Whereas different institutions apply different judgment criteria, literature has found a common specification by all institutions to be an “original contribution” required of a candidate. The paper concludes that inadequate networking systems, economic conditions and the “hello” effect may have rendered external examination less effective in Ugandan Universities, which has influenced the outcome of external examination process.

Key words: accomplished thesis, doctoral candidates, doctoral examination, examiner consistency, external supervision and examination, graduate education, higher education internationalization, public defense, supervision and thesis assessment.

1.0 Introduction

External examiners can and should play a key role in the discipline-specific quality assurance of higher education and research globally (Gearóid Ó Conluain, 2010) since their primary role is to verify that standards are achieved. External examiners are relied upon to report objectively on whether or not academic research reports and other academic activities have met globally acceptable standards. As such, external examination has been a critical area in an attempt to internationalize higher education to gain acceptable standards for a competitive edge in higher

education (Kelly, 2007) and strengthen quality of doctoral theses. Some of the measures taken in doctoral programmes are external facilitation for taught components, joint supervision, external examination and public defense of doctoral theses. The authors believe that although such efforts may lead to visibility of HEIs, they cast doubt as to whether this necessarily leads to quality. There have been inconsistencies regarding this belief according to literature (Kelly, 2007; Knight, 2007 and Davis & Parker, 1997), which is what this paper tries to address. The authors acknowledge the vital role higher degrees play in profiling higher education institutions, and, PhD research has been found by (e.g Davis & Parker, 1997) to have immediate impact on universities, thus, the quality of theses is an important contribution to the national and institutional research profile and professional practice.

Undoubtedly, to be considered an external examiner, one must possess an acceptable and recognized qualification, necessary background, repute academic and professional standing; and research expertise qualifying him or her to examine doctoral researches (Kelly, 2007; Knight, 2007). Hence, like other countries, Ugandan Quality assurance frameworks require external inputting form of external supervision and examination (NCHE, 2006). This requires impartial experts in the area from reputable institutions; with publications and experience and other requirements that institutions deem necessary. Although the process of doctoral examination has been a contentious issue, it is surprising that there isn't sufficient literature, discussion and scrutiny on the topic. There are a number of challenges; selection criteria by the institution, lack of flexibility of external examiners where methodological approaches differ, lack of honesty to decline where examiners do not have the competency or feel uncertain about the content of the thesis (Gearóid Ó Conluain, 2010). These aforementioned challenges are further exacerbated by lack of clear guidelines to these external examiners. More critical however, has understood the purpose of the public defense and its guidelines in the research process in Ugandan Universities. The primary role of the external examiner is to verify that standards are achieved. Therefore, the reliability and validity of the assessment feedback becomes of particular importance to the institution and the nation at large. Hence, traditionally, external examiners review sets of draft examination papers and their associated marking schemes as well as major dissertations/theses (Kelly, 2007). It is also necessary that external examiners understand the guidelines of an institution, including the pass mark.

Why the need for External Examination?

The purpose of the external examiners system includes; ensuring that the university degrees are comparable in standard to those awarded by other universities globally; ensuring fairness and consistency in assessment procedures and student classification; scrutinizing the effectiveness and appropriateness of the assessment system and; assuring the wider community of the standard of the universities' degrees, and of the fairness of its assessment procedures (Kwiram, 2006). Therefore, their roles include; assessing whether the dissertation is qualified to proceed to Final Oral/Public Defense, provides a review of the strengths and weaknesses of the dissertation and recommends revisions, participates in the final oral examination whenever possible (Golde Walker& Associates, 2006). External examination therefore relies on external, independent expert examiners to make written recommendations to the University on the acceptability of the thesis; these processes should be transparent and arm's-length; should be internationally benchmarked because it is supposed to appoints the best examiners available, irrespective of their geographical location. Each examiner is encouraged to consider the thesis in light of its; value of original contribution to knowledge in the field and its value to other researchers, originality, publish ability, applicability, and (potential) impact; engagement with the literature and the work of others; grasp of methodology; capacity for independent, critical thinking; coherence of research program, its arguments and conclusions and quality of presentation (Gilbert, 2004).

The concept and dynamics of Doctoral theses

A doctoral thesis is a "long piece of writing on a particular subject" which requires critical attention in every aspect. Although the definition seems deceptively simple, the underlying implication could be the "period of time" spent writing it, rather than the thesis itself. Hence, according to Tinkler& Jackson (2004), the "long" comes to refer to the process rather than the document itself, and in far too many cases, the "piece of writing" never gets completed. The word "thesis" comes from the Greek, meaning "position", and refers to an intellectual proposition

Wright & Cochrane (2000). A Doctor of Philosophy degree (short-form Ph.D. or PHD), is the highest academic degree possible. Getting a Ph.D. doctoral degree involves extensive studying and quite intense intellectual efforts. No more than one-percent of people achieve a doctoral degree! For this reason, society shows great respect and recognition for a person with a Ph.D. doctoral degree by addressing Ph.D. doctoral degrees achievers with a most impressive greeting and title of "Doctor". Simply put, a doctoral thesis is a scholarly document. It is generally lengthy (although we have all heard the stories of doctoral candidates in math and science who present one, perfect equation chapter and are awarded their doctoral degree). However, the authors are concerned with rigor involved and attention given its assessment. To us, the length of the thesis does not necessarily matter.

However, the trend is currently toward somewhat shorter documents, and candidates are encouraged or advised not to exceed 300 pages to become reader friendly. It should focus on the critical issues in the topic. Since it is a scholarly document, it contains extensive references to the works of experts in the field, in the form of citations to journal articles, monographs and books. In addition, a doctoral thesis frequently contains an empirical component, reflecting some independent study or data gathering (use of a questionnaire, interviews, standardized instrument) on the part of the author. Each thesis has some research design involved. An empirical study may be qualitative, quantitative or descriptive, and there are many variations of each of these designs (Kelly, 2007). Hence, the variation of theses writing is what results into different types of judgments by examiners (Denicolo, 2003). The bottom line, and one that is all too easily forgotten, is that the thesis is a scholarly document. It is not a paper, and it is not a journal article, and it is not a book, although it shares some characteristics with each of these documents (Mullins & Kiley (2002). It is not a collection of abstracts; it is not an annotated bibliography; it is not an overview of a topic; it is not a discussion of the writer's personal viewpoint (Powell& McCauley, 2002). A typical thesis follows the classic five chapter format: Introduction (with all of the traditional subheadings); Review of Literature; Methodology; Findings; Summary, discussion/Conclusions/Implications and recommendations. There are frequently Appendices (copies of instruments and permission letters, for example). It is for this reason therefore, that the authors are concerned that given this kind of rigor, the examination process lacks some analytical consideration.

A discussion of standards in doctoral research does beg the question: What exactly is the outcome by which a PhD candidature can be measured? Whether the thesis is sufficient for assessing this or if there other equally relevant criteria for monitoring quality are questions that have been foremost in the minds of the doctoral candidates for quite some time (Nettles& Millett, (2006). The three concepts of; i) generic academic skills, ii) graduate destinations and iii) standards within the postgraduate research experience all deserve further careful attention. A thesis can be assessed on the way it performs an academic argument, not solely on the content and this is perhaps one way in which consensus on academic standard may be approached. This matter is complicated somewhat by the different forms in which PhD might take – project or thesis. Different standards are said to apply, but project based PhDs are less clear cut. As the paper points out, not all knowledge takes the form of text. In fact a cultivated criticality and the ability to make sound judgments in the face of multiple and conflicting evidence and/or perspectives is one of the attributes that is valued in higher degree graduates (Lovat, Monfries& Morrison 2004; Nettles& Millett, 2006).The literature on examination and doctoral thesis quality has mostly emerged from the UK and Australia and on the whole indicates that, except in all but general terms (Morley et al., 2002; Shaw & Green, 2002), doctoral ‘qualities’. To be able to answer the mysteries that surround external examination, the authors had these questions:

- (1) What influences selection of external examination?
- (2) What are the challenges related issues with external examination? And
- (3) What are the culminating implications of these challenges?

Theoretical Exploration and Literature Review

The Attribution theory (Weiner, 1980, 1992) emphasizes the idea that learners are strongly motivated by the pleasant outcome of being able to feel good about themselves. It incorporates cognitive theory and self-efficacy theory in the sense that it emphasizes that learners' current self-perceptions will strongly influence the ways in which they will interpret the success or failure of their current efforts and hence their future tendency to perform these same behaviors.

According to attribution theory, the explanations that people tend to make to explain success or failure can be analyzed in terms of three sets of characteristics. That the cause of the success or failure may be internal or external; that success or failure may be either stable or unstable and that the cause of the success or failure may be either controllable or uncontrollable. A controllable factor is one which we believe we ourselves can alter if we wish to do so. An uncontrollable factor is one that we do not believe we can easily alter.

The Ugandan Quality Assurance Frameworks

All public and private higher educational institutions in Uganda are currently managed under the Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act, 2001. The creation of the National Council for Higher education was intended to enhance quality in higher education institutions. Its mandate among other things is to regulate and guide the establishment and management of institutions of higher learning; regulate the quality of higher education, equate qualifications and advise government on higher education issues. The major functions of NCHE to; advise the Minister of Education on higher education issues, establish an accreditation system for institutions and programmes, investigate complaints in HEIs and take remedial action, evaluate national human resource requirements, set national admission, teaching and research standards, ensure that institutions of higher learning have adequate physical structures and education facilities, determine equivalences of academic and professional awards and help set up a system for credit accumulation and transfer between institutions and programmes. Therefore, in order to strengthen its mandate the NCHE requires HEIs comply with the regulations especially the external input of other credible scholars. This is intended to profile our institutions, strengthen quality and market the products through standardized qualifications. It is believed worldwide that the role of external examination is to benchmark the institution and improve the quality of research (Garry, 2007). However, it has been shown that such experts work from their own “internalized criteria” (Mullins and Kelley, 2003) which is rarely, if ever, publicly articulated. Rarely, are the reports published to the beneficiaries to perfect their research challenges. Another challenge is uniformity in doctoral thesis examination, because setting pre-defined, specific “thesis content” standards in advance would be difficult.

The need for quality has tripled in the past few decades because of the increased need for higher education that has seen mushrooming higher education institutions, increased student enrolment and dwindling public financing for higher education (Shaw & Green, 2002). They argue that the numbers are higher as compared to previous years where there were relatively few candidates that were destined for scholarly pursuits - where, thesis quality was not a public or pressing issue, as evidenced by the lack of research and publication on the issue (Tinkler & Jackson, 2004). With the rapid 'massification' of doctoral degrees and the growing need for cross-disciplinary work to tackle emerging social and scientific problems, there has come the realization that not only is there an absence of benchmarks, but an absence of information about the degree and its evaluation (Morley et al., 2002). Therefore, institutions heavily rely external examiners for their collective experience of knowledge and skills (Hoddell et al., 2002). But what is the correspondence between peer review and thesis examination? For most students, thesis examination constitutes the only instance of independent scholarly review of their complete project.

The overriding goals of most universities, which stand at the apex of the educational pyramid, tend to be public and certainly not for profit and they are achieving research excellence across many fields, and providing high-quality education. They pursue these goals by having relatively light faculty teaching loads, emphasizing research accomplishments in recruitment and promotion decisions, adopting international standards for awarding degrees, and being highly selective about the students they admit (Grabbe, 2003; Hoddell, Street & Wildblood, 2002). They are most closely connected to advances in knowledge, monitor breakthroughs in many fields, and also investigate ways to exploit important results for social and private gain (Holbrook, Bourke, Fairbairn, & Lovat, 2007). Their instruction – generally for both first and post-graduate degrees – should be aimed at the country's most hard-working and best-prepared students. Research universities also have the capacity to offer the most complete programs of general education.

Methodology

The authors employed a qualitative approach and specifically analyzed external examiners' reports from the different examiners and doctoral theses for those candidates that had been failed and those that had passed by same examiners. The then School of Education, Makerere University was used as a Case Study. A sample of three departments namely, The East African Institute of Higher Education Studies and Development (EAIHESD), Department of Curriculum Design and Management and the Department of Foundations of Education were selected as the sample, from 2006 - 2010. This decision was reached due to the high numbers of graduate candidates in these departments during that period. A total of twenty one (21) reports from seven (7) External Examiners were reviewed. Eight (8) of these concerned failed candidates and thirteen (13) were on candidates who passed. The seven (7) examiners are from all over the world (Australia, South Africa, Namibia, Tanzania, Kenya, Rwanda and Uganda). Among the key informants interviewed included the Director of Graduate Studies, the Dean School of Education, Heads of Department, doctoral candidates, supervisors and some members of the Graduate Board. Some of the external examiners were contacted via email since it was not possible to conduct face-to-face interviews.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of this investigation are consistent with the existing literature, but differ slightly on the way the institutions have addressed such challenges. Apart from some effort in Australia regarding the doctoral examination challenges, there are a few published works which have labored to investigate or document challenges of examination processes of doctoral theses. Yet, while examiners play a pivotal role in defining and shaping the practices in their disciplines, Denicolo, (2003) found very little in the literature that explores the selection process, examiners expectation, their basis for judgment and outcome.

Factors influencing the selection of external examiners

To begin, with, the first question was to establish factors that influence selection of external examiners. This is because examiner selection assumes critical importance when there are few checks and balances of examiners following proper process and examiners may be relatively inexperienced (Saladoba & Newstead, 1997). Going by international standards, Bourke et al (2004) note that there are four major reasons for examiner selection thus; expertise, reputation, publication and experience. It was found that Makerere University had very clear guidelines in place, however, individual schools and departments applied different criteria for examiner selection and they gave different reasons for examiner identification. One key informant had this to say “...*actually the university has no money so we only have to negotiate with those closest to us and willing to go for years without pay...*” Although Makerere University followed vigorous selection criteria for external examiners, there were some limitations in that some examiners were approached to examine theses not in their area of specialization. The findings established that actually all the external examiners sampled were highly qualified to examine doctoral candidates, but they were not necessarily content experts in some cases. Hence, authors concur with the previous researches on the reasons for examiner selection. This means therefore, like the selection process, examiners too, flouted examination guidelines, whereas others had other reasons. Although findings showed that some examiners carried out this task with insufficient expertise, Mamdani (2007) expressed his worry along these lines as well, when he observed that On this, Kelly (2007) cautions examiners to decline external examination where they do not have expertise and also to stick to the guidelines provided.

The findings of this investigation concur with Holbrook’s, et al(2001) on the content of the examiners’ reports. This was in many instances judged by the, comments and judgment made that unveiled the level of expertise in the methodology and content by specific examiners. On this, Knight (2007) found that when approached for this cause, some examiners exaggerate their profiles in terms of publications and experience in terms of PhD supervision and examination and leave out (1) expertise in the area of study and (2) their methodological approaches, yet, this is what often leads to subjective and quite often wrong judgments. Important to note, is that while the requirement for publication, experience and reputation do not vary across countries,

expertise both in area and methodological approaches vary significantly. For example, the areas of competency are as varied as the examiners we have across nations and methodological approaches most times are different. On this, Shaw & Green (2002) agree with the authors about the misconception on who qualifies to examine doctoral students. Whereas literature (Knight, 2008; Mullins & Kiley, 2002 and Basheka, Nkata, and Barifaijo, 2013) has established the inconsistencies in selection of examiners, the authors found proximity and cost to have been major influence for examiner selection in most low income Uganda.

Inadequate Funding

Worldwide, higher education has numerous challenges regarding funding, attracting quality internal and external faculty and; sustaining international linkages and partnerships (Katunguka, 2007). Faced with these problems, in whatever combinations, it is not surprising that the research endeavor and the quality of research in Africa has been perceived with mixed grid, and this, has affected doctoral research, supervision and examination the most. These problems exacerbate the difficulty of countries to compete globally in a situation where international cooperation, partnerships and networks are increasingly important to successful research. These circumstances have stimulated an increasing interest in the potential of Ugandan networks as one way of developing research capacity on the country. That withstanding, there has been a dilemma of selection criteria of external examiners that is anchored on international benchmarks, where there are varying methodological approaches, cauterization factors, and institutional guidelines. In some countries, a doctoral external examiner is involved right from the proposal writing stage and some countries require candidates to publish articles before examination and then graduation - as opposed to Makerere where none of the above is in place or emphasized. In Uganda for example, a doctoral thesis is sent out for examination to three examiners (one external who must be external to the candidate's university and two internal who may or may not be the candidate's supervisors).

Each examiner independently submits a detailed written report on the thesis and makes a summary recommendation to the university's Postgraduate Studies Committee, which considers all of the reports and makes a final decision concerning the award of the degree. Like many other Universities, Makerere University has been going international by external examination of

its higher degrees theses and dissertations. While most Master's dissertations have been sent for external examination in universities within East Africa, external examination for the doctoral theses have been sent beyond Africa to ensure quality and benchmarking. Hence, a thesis can provide some evidence of this but this can also be ratified through regular interaction and monitoring and further requirements for public presentations during candidature.

Absence of clear guidelines

The authors also note that different doctoral requirements and lack of proper guidelines have significantly influenced examiners' judgments'. Research and informed debate reveal that institutional practices in relation to research degree examining vary considerably across institutions and countries in general (Mullins & Kiley, 2002). This is a mixed methods investigation of consistency in PhD examination. At its core is the quantification of the content and conceptual analysis of examiner reports for 804 Australian theses. First, the level of consistency between what examiners say in their reports and the recommendation they provide for a thesis is explored, followed by an examination of the degree of discrepancy between examiner recommendations and university committee decisions on the theses. Two groups of discrepant recommendations are identified and analyzed in-depth. Finally the main sources of inconsistency are identified. It was found that the comments of a small minority of examiners were inconsistent with each other or with the committee decision in a significant way. Much more commonly the texts of examiner reports were highly consistent and were closely reflected in the final committee decision. It is also true that the different examination procedures for different institutions could be lack of formally articulated curriculum in relation to assessment (Gilbert, 2004) that prompts concerns about different criteria and judgments. This article seeks to identify the issues and challenges in doctoral external examination in Uganda and Makerere University in particular as a case in question.

Quality of Examiners

Surprisingly, even resumes of these external examiners make no mention of their methodological strengths to guide selection processes and; a good majority remain silent on the matter. May be, the appointing institutions never request for this kind of information. Emphasis has often put on

specific location in the appropriate field, but even then, institutions hardly constitute clear guidelines for examiners. Universally, there are four criteria for external examiner's selection which are conventional. These are: (1) academic credentials and content expertise (2) reputation (3) experience; and (4) independence. Although most universities comply to the above criteria, institutions are silent on the varying training orientations that provide multiple methodological approaches, which, in the authors' views have sparked off a lot of controversy, discontent, dissatisfaction and disharmony, at the detriment of the doctoral candidate's progression.

Controversies in external examiners' reports

Findings revealed that some of the external examiners reports are self-contradictory. For instance, one of the cases assessed revealed that the examiner awarded 31% and recommended the candidate to resubmit her work. The comments however did not match the grade and most sections were rated "very good" and "excellent" except the discussion of findings that was rated poor. On resubmission, the candidate was this time awarded 42% and this is what the report read: "..... the candidate made most of the corrections except chapter one which had earlier attracted 12/15 marks..the candidate has good understanding of the subject matter and her thesis could be redeemed but at an extra cost. If the university is not willing to pay, the candidate should be asked to pay me \$150 for reexamination'. Yet another supervise stated ""..This thesis is certainly redeemable! I deserve to be paid \$300 because the thesis is too big! By the way, because of its size, by the time I received it, the last chapters had fallen out and I did not even read them! I have used a rubber band to hold the huge thesis together. This gives credence to the view that the University is now looked at as a source of income. A market place.

So then, the question of the authors was: Where did she get marks for those chapters if she was not in position to read because of the length of the thesis read? Still, the authors find dishonesty in this kind of assessment.

"...At my university, we are paid \$250 for a doctoral thesis and \$200 for a Maters dissertation... The pay is too little for this kind of work! Let the candidate address those corrections and send it back for re-examination, but at a cost...!

The candidate resubmitted the thesis as per the university regulations and in the second evaluation report, the report was exactly the same as above comments but with reduced grade from 48% to 46% after adding 12 marks in total for improved sections and still declaring it a “fail” and advising the candidate to meet his costs since she was willing to look at it again. However, in total, when 12 extra marks is added to 48 marks the total becomes 60% and not 46% like she reported. The authors still found this outrageous! Isn't this commercialization?

This External Examiner spent a full year with the student's doctoral thesis, yet the university regulations allows up to three months. This external examiner was reminded thrice. In his reply, he argued “..I have not been paid for the previous work... and emphatically stated, “..In fact I have eight dissertations marked and ten not yet marked. I cannot use my money again to post the finished 2 theses and 6 masters dissertations because I haven't been paid my honorarium allowance and costs incurred in postage... Unless I am paid, I will not examine the ones I have...”. As a way of intervention, the candidates were asked to produce other copies which were resent for examination.

This examiner made the following comments “..This is an excellent thesis with high level of originality...”. However, the final mark was 52% and recommends submitting! This examiner marked only three (3) chapters. One, two and three! There was no sign of assessment in chapters four and five. So then, what was the basis for “Original work” and at the same time, the recommendation to resubmit? Secondly, would brilliant ideas as he claimed attract only 52 marks? This state of affairs was quite intriguing and leaves a lot to be desired with the purpose of external examination. In this scenario, what is this candidate supposed to correct and what contribution does such a report make to an institution? Considering the divergence and inconsistencies in the two reports therefore, it was doubted whether the examiner was knowledgeable, was simply not interested or an opportunist looking for mere financial benefit.

On the same candidate, after the second attempt, it was found that the report remained exactly as first one but this time, the marks had changed. This is what the examiner wrote: “...I am willing to look at it again if the policy on re-examination permits?. I also need extra payment for this kind of work... By the way, I am not a supervisor or an editor to correct editorial and grammatical errors this work is for the supervisor and the candidate.....”. Such attitude led to

Bourk, Holbrook & Lovat, 2007b, to strongly recommend a choice of a recognized expert in the area of the dissertation research, experienced with assessing doctoral work, and sufficiently distant from the candidate, the research supervisor(s), and the institution in question to objectively judge the merit of the thesis without any bias or prejudice. Although, findings showed weaknesses in the quality in some of the doctoral theses, the assessment needs to be coherent and consistent to guide the institutions.

Whenever a PhD thesis is examined, examiners typically require something more from the student, whether it is the correction of typographical errors in the written document or more substantial changes. It is also in the nature of doctoral candidature that there is the expectation that the new researcher can always learn more, and that the thesis is but a step on this path (Mullins & Kiley, 2002). This explains why most examiners provide some comment that is instructive or formative at the final point of a thesis examination (Holbrook, Bourke, Lovat & Dally, 2004a; Tinkler & Jackson, 2004). Furthermore, there is evidence that the type, extent and tone of this comment reflect the overall evaluation of the qualities of the thesis (Bourke, Hattie & Anderson, 2004). This paper focuses on the standards that examiners apply and how consistently they apply them.

Due to strict rules on confidentiality, examiners' reports were seldom open to scrutiny or any form of quality control, and this made it difficult to share views of examiners and supervisors to engage and synthesize comments made to be able to address specific challenges yet. Hence, findings revealed that there was a fundamental breach of academic prudence and transparency by some external examiners according to the report. This paper, as earlier noted, builds on experiences as PhD students but also as coordinators of graduate programmes. External examiners were from the following countries; Australia, South Africa, Namibia, Cameroon, Nigeria, Rwanda, Kenya and Tanzania

The role and responsibility of the external examiner need to be stated explicitly. Otherwise, there is a risk that some issues will not be adequately addressed by either the provider or the external examiner because each assumes that the other is responsible. The same applies to the extent of an external examiner's authority. In all of this, the provider must allow for the fact that the external examiner's time is limited. Therefore, the burden of gathering, analyzing and presenting

necessary evidence will need to be borne by the provider. The external examiner's report should describe the evidence considered and note any deficiencies for future reference. Surprisingly, the general appraisal of the thesis by the external examiner was that 'This is a good thesis if the candidate put in more effort and show interest in his work! It should be sent back for re-examination if the policy permits – as I said, at a cost!'. Because of the unique style of this examiner, we included a third report from the examiner to illustrate the magnitude of the problem at hand.

The other case, one PhD thesis, the external examiner scored the dissertation 62% and made the following comment: "Make corrections and send back for re-examination...I must make sure that these corrections are done...but I should be paid because I am now doing the job of a supervisor..". Evidently, this may not be strengthening quality nor does it promote internationalization! If the pass mark for a doctoral thesis is 60%, why should the draft dissertation be taken back to the external examiner?

The Fifth case study indicates the following: This examiner, made comments; "Well developed idea and clearly supportive argument. However, the candidate should present 6 chapters of the thesis instead of five.." Let quantitative be separated from qualitative findings in chapter four. This will give this piece of work a logical flow..! This was quite disturbing since the guidelines and marking guide had been forwarded and clearly required only five (5) chapters as these institutions in question stipulated.

This examiner declined to score the candidate but instead advised the university to pay him more money for double work. Efforts to reach this examiner to clarify the matter were futile, and finally when approached, this is what he said "...you are just a coordinator and not the appointing authority. If the university has any problems with what I did, let the graduate school Director write to me officially..." Even after a clarification was made, he insisted that the candidate rewrites and resubmits the dissertation addressing the issues of cauterization, without any score.

The Sixth case was s more dramatic, because, as soon as the examiner received the thesis, he wrote back requiring the following: The detailed curriculum vitae of the candidate, and; Proof

that the candidate had published work from his thesis. He observed, "...I will only begin examining after receiving these requirements..."! Mark you, this was not part of his ToR in the provided guidelines because different institutions apply different criteria!

The Seventh case was thus: This examiner used same template and writes half a page of a report. Same comments in all cases and all candidates score above 80% without comments in the books. In some cases, the names of candidates were sent back with wrong research topic. For example; this examiner examined two theses and forwarded them on the same day. Although they were supposed to have different reports, they had the same topic. He wrote "...Contribution of Religious Doctrines in the promotion of HE...." For a candidate who had researched on Gender inequities in HE....." This is because he had previously written for a priest with that title and used the template for a different candidate, with a different topic.

All these cases demonstrate that the external examiners quite often renegade on their expected functions. They tend to veer away from reviewing the appropriateness and quality of the theses and judge whether the candidate meets the requirements set by a given institution, in line with international standards and instead adopt their own criteria. The authors question whether chapterization or even length or size would tremendously affect the quality of a dissertation. Thus, in many instances, the very basis of external examination, which is to ensure that an assessment is done in a valid, reliable, fair and consistent manner is eventually undermined and circumvented.

The examiner is required to consider the thesis in light of its value of original contribution to knowledge in the field, to other researchers, publish ability, applicability and impact. The examiner should also consider the engagement with the literature and the work of others; grasp of methodology; capacity for independent, critical thinking; coherence of research methodology, its arguments and conclusions, and; the entire quality of presentation (Gilbert, 2004). Whereas guidelines are often provided, research (Mullins & Kelly, 2003) found that these examiners often times work from their own internalized criteria which is rarely publicly articulated, yet, setting pre-defined, specific thesis content standards in advance would be difficult. First, the paper makes a general approach of the selection criteria of external examiners using both the context and available literature, and also highlight the anecdotal empirical research published from

which institutions can draw guidance. It also tackles challenges of the varying methodological approaches to research, the honesty of external examiners; and doctoral supervision dynamics. Clearly pertinent in the authors' experience is also financial constraints and proximity that guide institutions in selection of examiners. The second part of this paper involves the sharing of experiences of both the graduate programmes' coordinator in her administrative roles and the ordeal of the doctoral candidate as he grappled with inconsistencies, subjectivity and dishonesty of his examiner.

It is important therefore, that external examiners receive proper guidance on the specific writing style, research approaches and methodologies, formats of writing; and sometimes chapterization of the thesis required by the institution. But, in situations where the institution fails to provide such guidelines, the examiners end up using common sense and often times, apply what works in their own institutions. Although there is little understanding on the entire process regarding thesis examination process, Phillips & Pugh (2000) note that some factors are universal taking into consideration that this marks the peak of many intensive years by doctoral candidates. Hence, like Lovitts (2007), the authors have found that the examination process is critical for both the doctoral candidate as it safeguards standards of the PhD Level and; forms an integral part of the quality assurance and enhancement processes in any academic institution. Being an important award that is recognized internationally, a doctorate signifies the highest level of intellectual mastery in a specialized field, and is usually accorded the highest regard for its uniqueness in nature – unlike other types of qualifications. However, because of strict rules on confidentiality, examiners' reports are seldom open to scrutiny or any form of quality control mechanism (Lester, 1998), otherwise, synthesis of examiners' reports would go a long way in addressing this situation. Sadly, even examiners are rarely in a position to exchange views about or debate on the process in which they are engaged. Therefore, examination process for doctoral theses seems to be based on assumptions which are largely untested and on understandings which are not necessarily open for discussion (Davis & Parker, 1997).

Unarguably therefore, doctoral education has been a critical tool in developing the professorial workforce, university leaders, the management arena, policy formulators and the research domain. Hence, it is very important that doctoral studies, researches, supervision and

examination processes be given careful attention. In this, it is critical to be mindful of the complexity, dynamism and challenges in the conduct of doctoral programs and the entire process. In spite of discrete differences between institutions, countries, regions and continents, the similarities in the issues facing doctoral external examination internationally are more striking than the differences. Hence, the harnessing of a global collective to address these issues will likely serve to not only forge the future viability of doctoral research and final judgment but to improve institutional profiling and international standing. Within a context of accountability and quality assurance management, the range and specificity of criteria that are used to judge doctoral work is of particular relevance (Gilbert, 2004; Golde, Walker & Associates, 2006).

Quality of supervisors

Another critical challenge in the quality of doctoral thesis is the supervision itself as most lack training in doctoral supervision and public relations which would enhance doctoral supervision. Once universities attain this, it will not only benefit the student, but as Mackinnon (2004) asserts, it would also benefit the inexperienced supervisors. No doubt, external examination brings about professional development and improves the profiling of an institution. Mackay (2005) found that actually, doctoral supervision required training and that often times the failed theses are due to poor supervision. In support of Mackay's argument, Katunguka (2006) concluded that the outcome of doctoral candidates is determined by the input of their supervisors. He however, advised governments and institutions alike that if research is not given top priority, where supervisors and examiners are adequately compensated for their time and effort, developing countries will always lag behind. Complicating factors here are the market to take on our graduates. On this, Phillips and Pugh, (2000) believes that the products at doctoral level are determined by a number of factors; quality of doctoral candidates, research skills of doctoral candidates, supervision expertise of supervisors, induction program, the environment, funding; quality of academic training, quality of professional development program, quality of infrastructure and facilities for doctoral students, quality assessment of the PhD thesis and proper guidelines for external examiners.

In fact the assumption that professors and academic with PhD degrees can supervise students effectively has been widely been challenged. Hence, supervisor training as part of professional

development practices is actually encouraged to improve the doctoral supervision activities. Study supervision is therefore unquestionably a demanding scholarly practice as supervisors increasingly need “super vision” (Mackinnon, 2004) in dealing with more diverse and demanding academic and administrative challenges. Self-efficacy and intellectual ego are therefore enhanced by professional development of supervisors, through training workshops and seminars. With professional development through training, supervisors would then appreciate their different opinions and approaches, which will see the doctoral student complete on time.

Just introduced in 2006, public defense was not well understood and doctoral candidates at Makerere did not benefit from it. For example, one professor in the audience at public defense asked the candidate to explain how she collects data using questionnaires and things that is research! It was found that public defense was adopted without clear guidance, and on this, the candidates paid highly. Judgement about quality of doctoral researches have two, sometimes competing criteria to consider: the quality of research training received and the quality of research output, that is the thesis. Therefore, while the emphasis has been on examination (both external and oral defense), doctoral supervision could have caused discontent.

How are institutions addressing such challenges?

The paper concludes that whereas external examination was pivotal for the visibility and quality of institutions, some lacked honesty to admit their shortcomings. Hence, there were various challenges in external examination that required; selection criteria by the institution, lack of flexibility of external examiners where methodological approaches differ, lack of honesty to decline where examiners do not have the competency or feel uncertain about the content of the thesis and greed for financial benefits. The paper also concludes that some of the guidelines lack clarity to guide examination process. There was of clear understanding of the purpose of the public defense and its guidelines in the research process. The paper further concludes that selection process determined by “know who” and the quality of examination by financial constraints. Institutions lack sufficient networking to enable the source genuine and credible examiners. Further, the paper concludes that failing to compensate examiners competitively, different training orientation, different format of writing a thesis, different requirements before

submission (e.g. publishing articles before final submission) all contribute to the challenges. The authors also find evidence of lack of independence in the supervision process, where, *the* examiner reviews the proposal, supervises and participates in the examination process which further reduces quality and impartiality.

The policy should make provisions for dealing with disputes that might arise. The provider's policy should, for example, address the possibility that there may sometimes be disagreement between internal assessors and external examiners. The formal agreement with the external examiner is a useful place to summarize the expectations of both the provider and the examiner. Providers will have their own practices for drawing up such contracts and dealing with any breaches, including the possibility that an external examiner may not be able to complete his or her full term of appointment. In addition to the supports already mentioned, there is also a need to make provisions for supporting external examiners who find themselves frustrated or overwhelmed by their role or who are having difficulties in establishing an effective working relationship with the programme team. The external examiner should be briefed about who will have access to his or her (full) reports and to whom they should be addressed. When conducting self-assessment for the purpose of Institutional Review, providers should survey and/or interview their external examiners. External examiners should also be interviewed as part of the five-yearly programmatic review process.

Recommendation

As a strategy of moving the standards and achieving quality and international recognition, the discussion paper proposes a more proactive and consultative approach to standards setting thus, through strengthening the graduate guidelines for selection criteria of external examiners, vigilance in networking to source for competent examiners, strengthening quality of doctoral dissertations through peer reviewed papers from their work, understanding the role of an opponent and continued training of supervisors and increase research funding to strengthen capacity and visibility. Common specification by all institutions is an "original contribution". Putting aside the question of selection of external examiners, we believe it may not always be feasible or appropriate to set generic standards for PhDs supervision. Differences in PhD types

also need to be dealt with. As a caution, institutions should appeal to examiners to be honest and decline to take up the appointment of examining whenever they feel uncomfortable with the topic and the competence. Intellectual torture on doctoral students and they get scot free from this ‘terrorist’ approaches. Vagueness in what is looked for by examiners, caused by vagueness in specification of examination criteria. The paper further recommends that selection process should be carefully handled to select examiners who can add value and also provide clear guidelines to be clear on the format and chapterization. There is also a need for active networking to source for credible external examiners. Examiners who fail to return candidates’ work should be warned or their appointments cancelled. Lastly, all reports by external examiners should be made available for scrutiny and dialogue. Hence, institutions should appeal to examiners to be honest and decline to take up the appointment of examining whenever they feel uncomfortable with the topic and the competence.

References

- Bourke, S., Hattie, J., & Anderson, L. (2004) *Predicting examiner recommendations on PhD theses. International Journal of Educational Research, 41(2)*, 178–194.
- Bourke, S., Holbrook, A. & Lovat, T. (2005, June). *Using examiner reports to identify quality in PhD theses*. Paper presented at the AARE Focus Conference: Quality in educational research, Cairns. Retrieved 17 January 2008 from <http://www.aare.edu.au/05papc/bo05011y.pdf>
- Bourke, S., Holbrook, A., & Lovat, T. (2007a). *Relationships of PhD candidate, candidature and examination characteristics with thesis outcomes*. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the AARE, Adelaide, November 2006. Retrieved 17 January 2008 from <http://www.aare.edu.au/06pap/bou06655.pdf>
- Bourke, S., Holbrook, A. & Lovat, T. (2007b). *Examiners and examination outcomes*. In C. Denholm & T. Evans (Eds), *Supervising doctorates downunder*. Melbourne: ACER Press:
- Davis, G.B. and Parker, C.A. (1997) *Writing the Doctoral Dissertation*. 2nd ed. New York: Barron's Educational Series.
- Denicolo, P. (2003). *Assessing the PhD: A constructive view of criteria. Quality Assurance in Education, 11(2)*, 84–91.
- Gilbert, R. (2004). *A framework for evaluating the doctoral curriculum. Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education, 29(3)*, 299–309.
- Golde, C., Walker, G., & Associates (2006). *Envisioning the future of doctoral education: Preparing stewards of the discipline*. Carnegie Essays on the Doctorate. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Grabbe, L. (2003). *The trials of being a PhD external examiner. Quality Assurance in Education, 11(2)*, 128–133.
- Hoddell, S., Street, D., & Wildblood, H. (2002). *Doctorates: converging or diverging patterns of provision. Quality assurance in education 10(2)*, 16–70.

- Holbrook, A., Bourke, S., Fairbairn, H., & Lovat, T. (2007). Examiner comment on the literature review in PhD theses. *Studies in Higher Education*, 32(3) ((in press: accepted June 14, 2006).
- Holbrook, A., & Bourke, S. (2004). An investigation of PhD examination outcome in Australia using a mixed method approach. *Australian Journal of Educational and Developmental Psychology*, 4, 153–169.
- Holbrook, A., Bourke, S., Lovat, T., & Dally, K. (2004a) Investigating PhD thesis examination reports. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 41(2), 178–194.
- Holbrook, A., Bourke, S., Lovat, T., & Dally, K. (2004b). Qualities and characteristics in the written reports of doctoral thesis examiners. *Australian Journal of Educational and Developmental Psychology*, 4, 126–145. Retrieved 17 January 2008 from http://www.newcastle.edu.au/group/ajedp/Archive/Volume_4/v4-holbrook-et-al.pdf
- Holbrook, A., Bourke, S., Lovat, T., & Dally, K. (2004c). PhD theses at the margin: Examiner comment of re-examined theses. *Melbourne Studies in Education*, 45(1), 89–115.
- Jackson, C., & Tinkler, P. (2001). Back to basics: a consideration of the purposes of the Ph.D. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 26(4), 355–366.
- Lawson, A., Marsh, H., & Tansley, T. (2003). Examining the examiners. *Australian Universities Review*, 46(1), 32–36.
- Kwiram, A. (2006). Time for Reform? In C. Golde, G. Walker and Associates (Eds), *Envisioning the future of doctoral education: Preparing stewards of the discipline*. Carnegie Essays on the Doctorate. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Lovat, T., Monfries, M., & Morrison, K. (2004). Ways of knowing and power discourse in doctoral examination. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 41(2), 163–177.
- Lovat, T., Holbrook, A., & Bourke, S., (2007). Ways of knowing in doctoral examination: How well is the doctoral regime? *Educational Research Review*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2016/j.edurev.2007.06.002>
- Lovitts, B. (2007). *Making the implicit explicit: Creating performance expectations for the dissertation*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.
- Morley, L., Leonard, D., & David, M. (2002). Variations in Vivas: quality and equality in British PhD assessments. *Studies in Higher Education*, 27(3), 263–272.

- Mullins, G., & Kiley, M. (2002). 'It's a Ph.D., not a Nobel Prize': how experienced examiners assess research theses. *Studies in Higher Education*, 27(4), 369–386.
- Nettles, M., & Millett, C. (2006). *Three magic letters: Getting to Ph.D.* Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Phillips, E.M. and Pugh, D.S. (2000) *How To Get A PhD*. 3rd ed. Buckingham: Oxford University Press.
- Powell, S., & McCauley, C. (2002). Research degree examining—common principles and divergent practices. *Quality Assurance in Education*, 10(2), 104–115.
- Powell, S., & McCauley, C. (2003). The process of examining research degrees: some issues of quality. *Quality Assurance in Education*, 11(2), 73–83.
- Shaw, M., & Green, D. (2002). Benchmarking the Ph.D.—a tentative beginning. *Quality Assurance in Education*, 10(2), 116–124.
- Sloboda, J. A., & Newstead, S. E. (1997, September). Guidelines for examiners: An evaluation of impact. *Psychologist*, 407–410.
- Holbrook, A. (2001). PhD examination: The barely mapped frontier in assessment. Seminar paper presented at the Annual Conference of the AARE, Fremantle.
- Holbrook, A., Bourke, S., Farley, P. & Carmichael, K. (2001). Analyzing PhD examination reports and the links between PhD candidate history and examination outcomes: A methodology. *Research and Development in Higher Education*, 24, 51-61.
- Holbrook, A., Lovat, T. & Hazel, G. (2001). What qualities are rare in examiner reports? Seminar paper presented at the Annual Conference of the AARE, Fremantle.
- Johnston, S. (1997). Examining the examiners: an analysis of examiners' report on doctoral thesis. *Studies in Higher Education*, 22(3), 333-347.
- Sloboda, J.A. & Newstead, S.E. (1997). Guidelines for PhD examiners: an evaluation of impact. *The Psychologist*, September, 407-410.

Rawson, M. (2000). Learning to learn: more than a skill set. *Studies in Higher Education*, 25(2), 225-238.

Teddle, C., & Tashakkori, A. (2003). Major issues and controversies in the use of mixed methods in the social and behavioral sciences. In A. Tashakkori & C. Teddlie (Eds), *Handbook of mixed methods in social and behavioral research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Tinkler, P., & Jackson, C. (2004). *The doctoral examination process: A handbook for students, examiners and supervisors*. Berkshire, England: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

Woods, B. (1998). Issues in the supervision and assessment of doctorate theses using qualitative approaches. *Clinical Psychology Forum*, 114, 28-29.

Wright, T. & Cochrane, R. (2000). Factors influencing successful submission of PhD theses. *Studies in Higher Education*, 25(2), 181-196.

Altbach, G. P. (2006) *The Private Higher Education Revolution: An introduction*. NCHE, Kampala

Basheka B.C., Muhenda M.B., and Kittobe J. (2009) *Programme Delivery, Quality Benchmarks and Outcomes Based*

Education at Uganda Management Institute: A correlational approach. NCHE, Kampala

Dzvimbo P.K. (2006) *The International migration of skilled human capital from developing countries*. NCHE, Kampala

Kabeba M.R. (2010) *Budgetary and Financial Reforms and the Crisis in Research in Africa. A case study of Uganda*. NCHE,

Kampala.

Kasenene E.S. (2010) *Improving the effectiveness of public and private education in Sub-Saharan Africa: The case study of*

Uganda. NHCE, Kampala

Kasozi A.B.K. (2006a) *Regulating Transnational Higher Education in Uganda; consumers should be cautious*. NCHE

Kampala

Kasozi A.B.K. (2006b) *The State of Higher Education 2005: Executive summary*. NCHE

Kayongo P. M. (2010) *E-learning Services vs. Physical Education Institutions; which way to go in financial terms?* NCHE,

Kampala.

Makerere University News Magazine (January – June 2011)

Mamdani M. (2007) *Scholars in the Marketplace*. CODESRIA, Senegal.

Mpaata A. K. (2010) *University Competiveness through Quality assurance; The Challenging Battle for Intellectuals*

Okwakol M.J.N. (2009) *The Need for Transformative Strategic Planning in Universities in Uganda*. NCHE Journal Kampala.