

DOCTORAL EXAMINER REPORTS: A SCHOLARLY PERSONAL NARRATIVE

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Abstract: One mandatory requirement for the completion of a Doctoral study is the submission of a report by an external examiner that must include formative covering three distinct categories, namely, editorial comments, direct instructions and reflective questions. The purpose of this study is to provide a personal scholarly narrative of an external examiner who has assessed 16 doctoral theses over the past 14 years to highlight challenges encountered as well as to identify the average percentages that each distinct category contributed to the reports. A key challenge was determining what structure or format the report should take. An analysis of the reports reveals that direct instructions contributed 56%, followed by editorial comments (24%) and reflective questions (20%). It is recommended to offer a short course to academic staff who have completed their Doctorate to train them in various aspects of post-doctoral responsibilities, including the drafting of an acceptable Doctoral examiner report..

Keywords: PhD report, editorial comments, direct instructions, reflective questions

1. INTRODUCTION

“I love the freedom that the narrative form provides” [1]. This statement, by the late American novelist Sidney Sheldon, highlights a key advantage of personal narratives, being that of freedom. Personal narratives grant academic authors the freedom to express their lived experience within the bounds of acceptable educational theories and ideologies. These are seen as a set of epistemological beliefs concerning the nature and value of learning, teaching and the role of education and serve as a justification for particular approaches, pedagogies and methods to teaching [2].

Learning is not restricted to students. Academics, too, need to learn different skills [3]. For example, they need to learn to be reflexive in their thinking and aware of gaps in their understanding [4]. Academics holding a Doctoral degree are not exempt from learning, as they are exposed to new responsibilities where they need to develop or hone existing skills and/or bridge the gap in understanding new procedures, guidelines or principles. Some of these academics are also called upon to assess the research work of doctoral candidates from other institutions. This requires a special skill relating to the development of an acceptable Doctoral examiner report.

The doctoral examiner report serves a dual function and addresses different audiences [5]. The first function of the examiner report is a ‘gatekeeping’ one, in that examiners are responsible to an institution to effectively assess the thesis of a doctoral candidate against predefined standards of acceptance. The second function is an ‘enhancement’ one, in that examiners are responsible to the candidate to provide recommendations on how to improve the quality of the thesis. Despite the attempts of universities to standardize doctoral examiner reports, they are, in many cases, usually individualistic documents that are written in different styles and formats and draw on a mixture of official expectations of standards and the personal views and experiences of the examiners (Mullins and Kiley, 2002). Some of these reports may even be termed “horror stories” as they are aggressive in nature where candidates are basically attacked and aspects such as their methodology deeply questioned [6].

A possible solution to providing an acceptable format for the Doctoral examiner report that adheres to professionalism and impartiality lies in reflecting on the personal narratives of academics who have assessed several



theses over many years. Their experience can help academics who have just completed their Doctorate not to repeat mistakes when compiling their first examiner report but rather learn from the lived experiences of others. It must be emphasized that these lived experiences cannot be whimsical or haphazard or based on fickle or ungrounded theory. They need to be guided by theory, informed by practice and lived in reality. It is noteworthy, in this regard, that back in 2002 it was stated that a body of knowledge is not available to assist examiners in the assessment of Doctoral theses [7]. Subsequent years would have added to the discourse, with the current study furthering the contribution.

The purpose of this study is to provide a personal scholarly narrative of an external examiner who has assessed 16 doctoral theses over the past 14 years to highlight challenges encountered as well as to identify the average percentages of three distinct categories that are required within such reports. The article starts with a brief review of key requirements for a Doctoral (or PhD) thesis, followed by the study context and methodology. Results obtained from reviewing the Doctoral examiner reports are then presented and discussed.

2. THE PHD THESIS

A PhD thesis should be, by definition, original and innovative, and the result of an individual effort [8]. It should have one coherent narrative, rather than being a compilation of unconnected contributions [9]. The PhD thesis should show evidence of originality and theoretical/conceptual cohesiveness, communicated via the student's critical writing ability [10]. Original, coherent (or cohesive) and critical writing ability are fundamental terms that aptly describe what a Doctoral candidate needs to demonstrate within the pages of a thesis. Specific criteria that should be used to assess a PhD thesis includes [10]:

Making an original and significant contribution to knowledge of the topic under investigation;

Drawing on a well-argued and cohesive conceptual/theoretical framework;

Demonstrating the ability to critically evaluate and justify the research methodology and methods adopted;

Conveying information (written and verbally) succinctly; and

Producing a thesis of sufficient rigour that the work is evaluated as publishable in relevant discipline-specific journals.

3. Doctoral examiner reports

Doctoral examiner reports are synonymous with the PhD (or Doctoral) thesis. An examiner report has two components, namely a summative and a formative component [11], as previously noted. In their summative comments, examiners are accountable to the awarding institution that needs to ensure that examiners have followed institutional guidelines and assessment criteria [12]. In their formative comments, examiners address the doctoral candidates who are repositioned as learners. The comments are usually in the form of instructions and advice to help the candidates improve both their submitted thesis, as well as future publications [13]. The main purpose of formative feedback comments could fit into three distinct categories that include [5]:

Editorial comments: where the examiners give clear instructions about the editing of the main text such as spelling, grammar and organisation of chapters;

Direct instructions: where the examiners give clear prescriptive instructions about what the doctoral researchers need to do to improve their work; and

Reflective questions: where the examiners ask questions that are intended to motivate the doctoral researchers to explore alternatives and reflect in greater depth on the implications of their research work.

To help oneself complete the three categories, the following questions could be asked [7]:

‘How would I tackle the problem or research question identified in the abstract?’ – this links to originality or innovation

‘Do the conclusions follow on from the introduction?’ – this links to cohesion

‘How well does the candidate explain what they are doing?’ – this links to writing ability

‘Is the Bibliography up to date and substantial in number?’ – majority within the last decade and from peer-reviewed publications

‘Are the results clearly presented and significant in nature?’ – this links to writing ability

‘Are the objectives/research questions at the outset answered at the end?’ – this links to cohesion

‘What is the intellectual depth and rigour of the thesis?’ – this links to originality or innovation

The examiner ultimately looks for originality, a good understanding of the subject and at the quality of the literature review [7]. In other words, does the study make sense and draw on recent credible references (such as reputable journals) and well-substantiated results to contribute to the existing body of knowledge. On the other hand, a poor thesis would be characterised by a lack of articulation, clarity, cohesion, confidence, discernment, substantiation and understanding. Furthermore, poor referencing, language usage and careless textual or technical mistakes may prove irritating to an examiner.

4. METHODOLOGY

Scholarly personal narratives are pieces of scholarship that use the author's personal beliefs and experiences as a springboard and framework for scholarly inquiry [14]. The author's experiences are valuable as lessons learned from them may be shared in the public domain that may help others to pursue or avoid a specific course of action. Nash [15] writes that a scholarly personal narrative “is about giving yourself permission to express your own voice in your own language; your own take on your own story in your own inimitable manner”. One's own unique style would dominate the discourse and be primarily written in the first person.

The narrative begins in 2011, when the examiner assessed his first candidate from India. Content analysis was further used to evaluate the 16 Doctoral examiner reports that were compiled over a 14-year period. The reports were firstly examined in terms of development, gauging the change in format and quality over time. Format was perceived by the structure of the reports while the quality was perceived by the inclusion of commendation and mention of specific graduate attributes. The reports were reviewed with the three categories in mind:

Editorial – mainly language and formatting concerns were considered;

Direct – increasing the number of references or expanding on the explanation of figures or tables; and

Reflective – asking the candidate to express his/her viewpoint or requesting the candidate to substantiate critical statements.

It is important to note that the examiner specializes in the fields of Engineering Education and Electrical Engineering, and thus both fields are covered in the Doctoral examiner reports. The examiner completed a Master's in Education in 2007 and a Doctorate in Electrical Engineering in 2011. He has worked at three different universities in South Africa and thus has a good grasp of how postgraduate procedures and assessments can differ between institutions. He also understands the subtle differences between the two fields of study, where one requires an explicit research methodology and the other a practical, or experimental, set-up.

5. RESULTS FROM THE PERSPECTIVES OF THE EXAMINER

Figure 1 presents a breakdown in the number of international and national Doctoral examiner reports that I completed. All the international reports (9 in total) relate to Electrical Engineering, while four of the seven national reports relate to the field of Education. Assessing the two fields requires a different approach, as research in engineering is somewhat different from research in education [16].

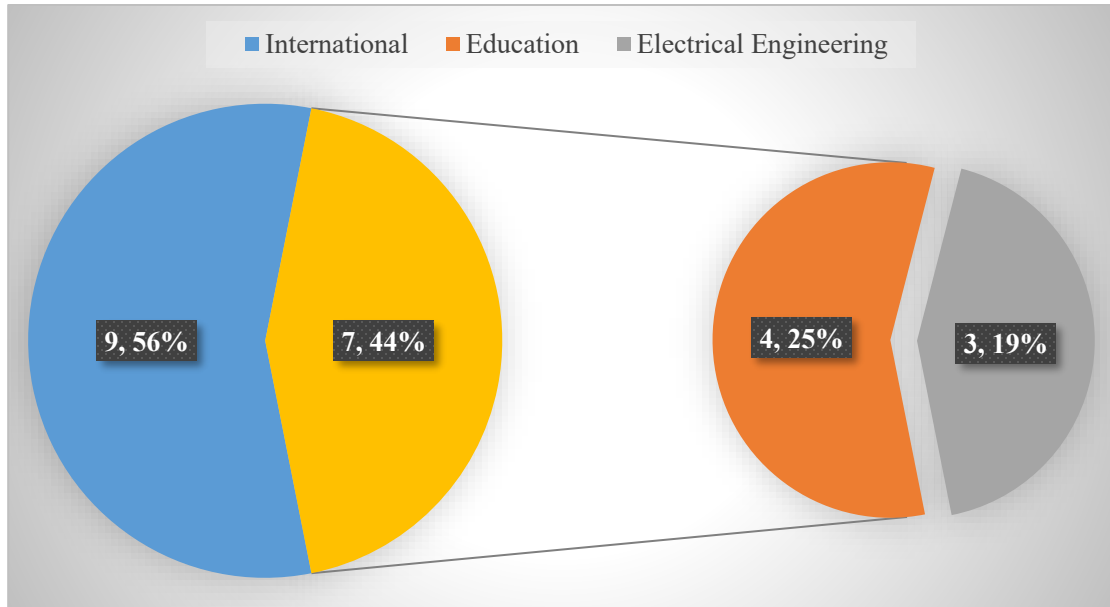


Figure 1: International versus national Doctoral examiner reports for two field disciplines

Figure 2 shows the percentage contribution of each of the three distinct categories. Direct instructions dominated the reports (56%) with editorial comments (24%) and reflective questions (20%) following suite. Initially in 2011, I focused more on direct instructions and editorial comments. As I examined more theses, I gradually adapted my comments to include specific commendation, graduate attributes and reflective questions.

For example, in 2023 I made the following statement “The level of grammar and language used is outstanding in this thesis. This is excellent and testifies to the diligence and commitment of the student in this regard. The work of the language editor should also be noted with approval.” A letter confirming language editing of a thesis is a requirement in South Africa and may even be included as an annexure in the final thesis of the candidate [17]. Unfortunately, some students are not thorough in following through on specific corrections requested by a language editor, and thus grammatical or spelling mistakes occur. I have found this in many of the theses which I have examined, with only a handful requiring a few language corrections, which led me to give the commendation in 2023. Thirteen (13) of my reports eventually contained commendation, or positive feedback relating to graduate attributes, that included the following phrases:

- Logical development;
- Keen awareness;
- In-depth knowledge;
- Ability to investigate and evaluate; and
- Ability to synthesize and create.

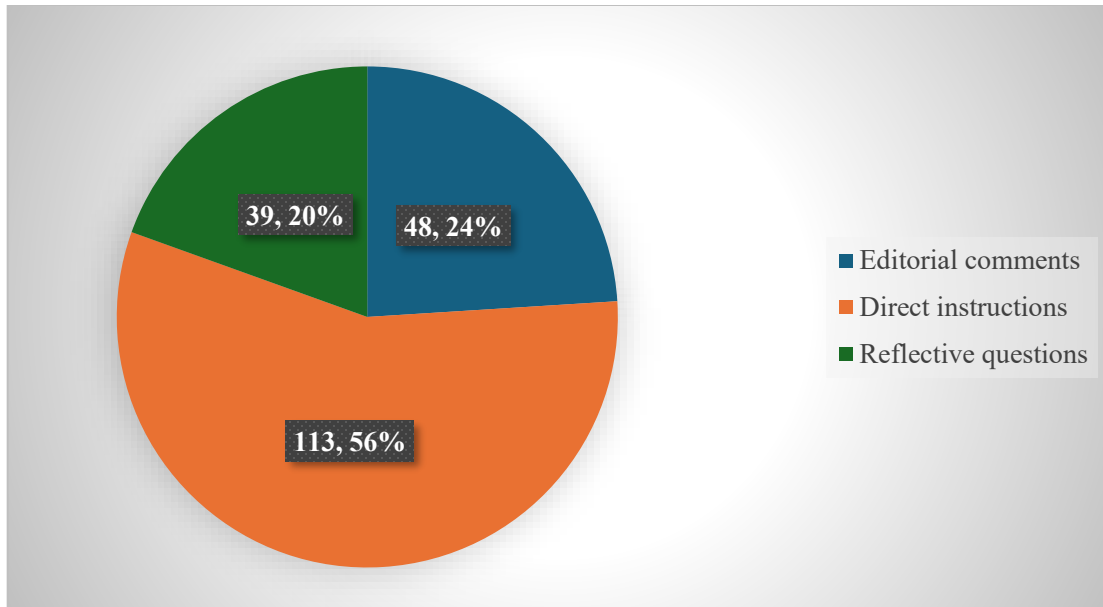


Figure 2: Percentage contribution for three distinct categories

An example where I mentioned a graduate attribute comes from a 2020 report, where I stated, “This is very good as it now highlights the student’s ability to analyse, interpret and condense a large amount of information into a table format that a reader can quickly review for the main points of the discussion.” In South Africa, the Qualification Standard for Doctoral Degrees identifies four skills-related graduate attributes at the doctoral degree level: 1) “evaluation, selection and application of appropriate research approaches, methodologies, and processes in the pursuit of a research objective; 2) reflection and autonomy; 3) communication skills, including relevant information and digital literacy skills; 4) critical and analytical thinking for problem-solving” [18]. Using such words as “the ability to” or “demonstrates” has enabled me to include specific attributes in each report which I now compile. Another enabler has been the awareness of graduate attributes that are required at the Doctoral level, such as specified by the Council of Higher Education in South Africa.

Lastly, I have sought to include more reflective questions in my reports. An example comes from a 2015 report where I requested a candidate to please consider adding information relating to student challenges of securing work-integrated learning along with its implications. I believe that it would have added another dimension to the study which I felt the candidate may have missed. Doctoral candidates are usually given an opportunity to defend their dissertation and respond to all criticism [19] during a Doctoral Defence, which is also called a viva. Providing reflective questions to a candidate before the viva is scheduled may help one to be better prepared for the question-and-answer session while also enabling the student to further develop his/her thinking ability. My review of the 16 Doctoral examiner reports further highlighted the following regarding reflective questions:

Six (6) reports contained no substantive reflective questions – however, a dissertation may be of a high-quality requiring only minor changes; and

Additionally, the following requests were made in several reports:

Please substantiate specific results or statements;

Please consider specific literature to support arguments / improve comprehensiveness; and

Please consider specific scientific methodologies for a course of action.

Figure 3 highlights additional terms which relate to my editorial comments and direct instructions given in the reports. Language and consistency dominated the editorial comments while many figures and tables were left unexplained by several candidates that required direct instructions. I believe that consistency is often a mark of quality [20], which I re-iterate in my reports. If students are consistent in formatting, referencing and discussions, then I believe that the quality of their work is worthy of consideration. Coherency was only mentioned in 9% of the

comments, while referencing took second place (29%). Referencing should not be a concern at the PG level with excellent reference managers (such as Endnote or Mendeley) that can simplify and enhance the process.

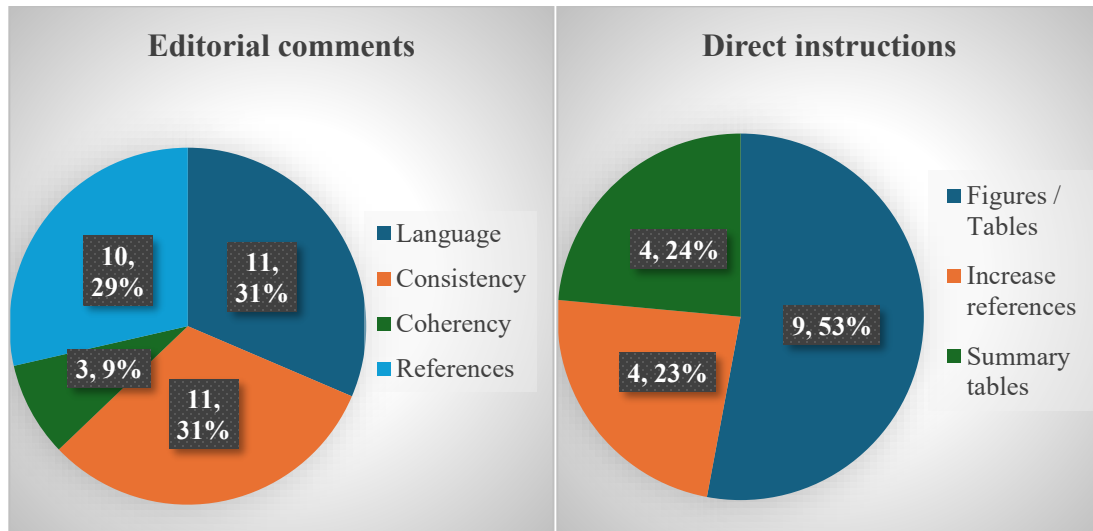


Figure 3: Common terms used in the editorial comments and direct instructions

Students need to reason on the figures and the tables that they present, interpreting their significance in the context of their study [21]. I often state in my reports that we cannot leave the reader to decipher figures and tables on their own. Simply adding a figure or table without explaining it in the text can contribute to a lack of cohesion, as the significance or importance of the figure or table is lost in translation. Further comments related to increasing the number of references (and especially from the last decade) and to the inclusion of summary tables which can help to synthesize and summarize in-depth discussions that draw on several scientific references.

6. LESSONS LEARNED

A challenge that I encountered in 2011 in writing my first examiner report was determining the structure or format for it. I had never written such a report before and had not attended any training or workshops relating to this. I therefore sought the guidance of my promotor who helped me with my Doctoral study. I compiled the report and asked for his review of it. His comments helped me to discern that I needed to break down the report according to specific criteria. For example, I could provide three sections covering commendation, suggestions and concluding recommendations. I expanded this in my second Doctoral report to cover each section of the thesis separately (abstract, front matter, individual chapters and the Bibliography) and then to provide a general summary where I restate the scientific contribution of the study and give my final recommendation.

A second challenge arose when making many comments in the PDF version of the thesis that had to be transferred to the report. I thus adopted a strategy of creating a comment block at the start of each section or chapter of the thesis which I could eventually just copy into the Doctoral report. I would add to this block as I progressed through the section, noting strengths and weaknesses. I would summarise the significance of the chapter in this block which could then easily be compared to the significance of the other chapters once copied into the Doctoral report. This helped me to determine if cohesion exists and if the candidate managed to ensure the golden thread. I believe that I learned the following lessons by reflecting on the reports which I compiled:

State the students' details (name and number) and title of the thesis upfront to clearly establish the identity of the candidate and his/her topic of research;

Break the report into sections, maybe focusing on the front matter, individual chapters and the references, and state, upfront, the focus or gist of each one to confirm your careful consideration of the thesis;

Seek to give commendation where due, and then offer specific critical feedback that can help to improve the quality of the thesis that will help to satisfy the 'enhancement' requirement of a Doctoral examiner report – this links to editorial comments and direct instructions;

Avoid being aggressive in your feedback comments or questioning the motives of the student to engender professionalism and impartiality;

Strive to offer succinct comments that highlight a concern or deficiency and suggest how to address it – this links to reflective questions;

List key graduate attributes that have been demonstrated by the candidate, or that still need to be developed, which can help to determine if the outcomes associated at the Doctoral level have been achieved;

Allude to publications emanating from the Doctoral study and state at least one key scientific contribution that can help to satisfy the ‘gatekeeping’ requirement of a Doctoral examiner report; and

Try to cover all three categories in your report, even if they are disproportionate, as this enhances the quality of your report.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to provide a personal scholarly narrative of an external examiner who assessed 16 doctoral theses over the past 14 years to highlight challenges encountered as well as to identify the average percentages of three distinct categories that should exist in each report. A key challenge in 2011 was determining what structure or format the report should take. Guidance was provided by a previous promotor of the examiner. Another challenge arose when many comments were made on the thesis that had to be transferred to the report. Using PDF documents has allowed these comments to be captured in the thesis of the candidate, which can eventually be synthesized into the Doctoral report.

The structure or format of the Doctoral reports changed drastically in 2012 and then remained generally consistent. The contents changed gradually to include specific graduate attributes required at the Doctoral level. Highlighting published work from the thesis, or what could still be published, also became more prominent. Direct instructions dominated the reports (56%), followed by editorial comments (24%) and reflective questions (20%). It is recommended to offer a short course to academic staff who have completed their Doctorates to train them in various aspects of post-doctoral responsibilities, including the drafting of an acceptable Doctoral examiner report.

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