

What the examiners are looking for in a Postgraduate Thesis/Dissertation

by:

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The presentation is divided into two major topics.

- a. The role of internal and external examiners
- b. What the examiners are looking for in a Postgraduate Thesis/Dissertation

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a. The role of internal and external examiners

Student's thesis/dissertation work is not completed unless he/she is subjected to an examination on it, made whatever modifications are required to it as a result of that examination, and received a signed statement of faculty committee approval. (Mauch and Park, 2003:263).

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Thesis/dissertation examination (written and oral) is the final procedural step in student evaluation in the degree process.

This commonly involves an appointment of internal and external examiners by the university by virtue of their expertise in the discipline and the area of study.

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The thesis is the product of a scholarly and professional study at the honors or the master's degree level.

Sometimes, "thesis" is used synonymously with "dissertation."

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The dissertation is the product of student work at the doctoral level, distinguished from thesis study chiefly by its deeper, more comprehensive, and more mature professional and scholarly treatment of the subject.

(see Mauch and Parker, 2003)

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Examiners will be provided a copy of the temporarily bound thesis.

To submit to the university a written report on the thesis prior to the oral examination (viva voce).

- The examination is important to ensure that the student has adhered to the acceptable standards of scholarship before he is qualified to be admitted to the community of scholars.

- The outcome of the thesis examination which will be announced during the viva voce will determine whether the student is given the opportunity to move from the rank of student to the community of scholars who have already earned the respected title of "master" or "doctor".

Examination Results

The thesis committee during student's viva voce commonly use the following options regarding the thesis:

- Accepted without modification
- Rejected
- Accepted with major revisions
- Accepted with minor modification

B.. What the examiners are looking for

1. Broad relevance of the thesis

The thesis should be couched in broader context.

2. Significance of the thesis

Examiners will carefully assess whether the study has fulfilled what it has intended to achieve and what it intends to contribute.

This also includes the justification of carrying out the study.

3. Sound Knowledge of the Background

The examiners will certainly wish to satisfy themselves that the students have a sound knowledge of the background literature and the research subject.

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- They may ask the student to expand on a particular study to which he/she has referred in the literature review, or they may wish to explore the extent to which the student's research has added to the existing body of knowledge.

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Specific questions examiners may ask concerning review of literature

(Referring to Brown and Atkins 1998)

- To what extent is the review relevant to the research study?
- Is there evidence of critical appraisal of other work, or is the review just descriptive?
- How well has the candidate mastered the technical or theoretical literature?

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- Has the candidate made the links between the review and his or her methodology explicit?
- Is there any summary of the essential features of other work as it relates to this study?

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4. Appropriate Methodology

Methodology is one of the serious topics that examiners will check meticulously.

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Specific Questions Examiners May Ask Concerning Methodology

(Reference: Brown and Atkins 1988)

- What precautions were taken against likely sources of bias?
- What are the limitations in the methodology? Is the candidate aware of them?
- Is the methodology for data collection appropriate?

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- Are the techniques used for analysis appropriate?
- Under given circumstances, has the best methodology been chosen?
- Has the candidate given an adequate justification in the methodology?

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5. Analysis of data

- The examiners will certainly look very carefully at the ways in which student has analysed the data.
- If data is quantitative, they will check whether appropriate statistical tools are used.

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- If your data is qualitative, they may ask about the strategy used for selecting the data which is included in your thesis.
- They will certainly examine the analytic processes employed, and will wish to assure themselves that the data is analysed appropriately for a research degree.

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Specific Questions Examiners May Ask Concerning Presentation of Results

- Have the hypotheses in fact been tested?
- Do the solutions obtained relate to the questions posed?
- Is the level and form of analysis appropriate for the data?

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- Could the presentation of the results been made clearer?
- Are patterns and trends in the results accurately identified and summarized?
- Does the software appear to work satisfactorily?

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Specific Questions Concerning Discussions and Conclusion

- Is the candidate aware of possible limits to confidence/reliability/validity of the work?
- Reliability is concerned with the question of whether the results of the study are repeatable.

The idea of reliability is also related to another criterion of research – *replication or replicability*.

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- Validity is concerned with the integrity of the conclusions that are generated from a piece of research.
- Have the main points to emerge from the results been picked up for discussion?

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- Are there links made to the literature?
- Is there evidence of attempts at theory building or reconceptualisation of the problem?
- Are there speculations? Are they well grounded in the results?

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6. Contribution to Knowledge

Has the thesis made a significant contribution to knowledge?

Blaike (2000) states that most social research projects will contribute to one or more of the following:

1. the development of a particular area of theory or methodology

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2. the collection or accumulation of a new body of information or data;
3. the development of research methods or techniques;

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4. knowledge about or understanding of an issue or problem; and/or
5. policy and practice in a particular area.

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References

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Blaike, N. (2000). *Designing social research: the logic of anticipation*. Oxford: Polity Press.

Mauch, J. E. and Park, Namgi (2003). *Guide to the successful thesis and dissertation: a handbook for students and faculty* (5th ed.). New York: Marcel Dekker.

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