

# THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE DOCTORAL EXAMINATION AT SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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## ABSTRACT

The doctorate is the apex of all qualifications in universities worldwide and in South Africa. The expected outcome of the doctorate is original research, presented as a thesis. The thesis should demonstrate a student's ability to do high-level research and contribute meaningfully to a discipline. Thesis assessment is through the submission of written examiner reports by examiners external to the university. However, the literature indicates limitations in thesis examination. A qualitative study was undertaken at six South African universities to gather data from a purposeful sample of expert informants and relevant documents. Lave and Wenger's (1991) Community of Practice theory informed the inquiry. The findings indicated challenges in appointing examiners; vague criteria for ancillary requirements to the thesis; and discrepancies in the quality of examiner reports and examiner recommendations, which delay graduation. Recommendations were made for a more transparent examination process and supervisor training in the examination process.

Keywords: doctoral examination; higher education institutions; South African universities

## INTRODUCTION

The doctorate is the apex of all qualifications in systems of higher education worldwide and also in South Africa (Mouton, Boshoff and James 2015). The production of doctorates is increasingly linked to university funding, reputation and rankings as well as larger issues of the nation's economic competitiveness (Devos and Somerville 2012). The production of doctorates at the 23 public higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa is unsatisfactory as indicated by an average 13 per cent pass rate (DHET 2013, 17). The DHET has responded to the problem by increasing the monetary rewards to institutions for student throughput. This has placed enormous pressure on supervisors who already work in challenging conditions created

by academically under-prepared students, their lack English proficiency and supervisor overload (Mouton et al. 2015, 2). Additional factors influencing poor outcomes at this level reported in the South African literature are poor supervision, inadequate student research skills and underdeveloped academic writing ability (Choke 2011; Lessing 2011; Mafora and Lessing 2014; Schulze 2016a; 2016b).

The generally expected outcome of the doctorate is original research, presented as a thesis (Bourke 2007). The thesis should demonstrate a student's ability to do high-level research and "make a significant and original academic contribution at the frontiers of a discipline or field" (DoE 2007, 29). In South Africa, the assessment for the award of the doctorate is through the submission of written examiner reports on the thesis by examiners external to the university who should evaluate the thesis in a "clear, rigorous, fair and consistent" manner (Mafora and Lessing 2014). The master's examination overlaps with the doctorate examination, with minor differences, but it is not the focus of this study.

In this article, we argue that insufficient attention has been given to the administration of the examination process as factor impacting on the effective delivery of doctorates. Our lengthy personal experience as supervisors, external examiners and non-examining chair of the examining committee has suggested several limitations in the administration of thesis examination. These observations link with a rapidly growing body of literature dealing with various aspects of the thesis examination (Golding, Sharmini and Lazarovitch 2014) With regard to the issue of examiner experience, inexperienced examiners appear unsure of the boundary conditions relating to an excellent and a poor thesis and rely rigidly on institutional criteria and their own subjective postgraduate experience of supervision and examination in their assessment when making their evaluation (Kiley and Mullins 2004). Conversely, experienced examiners hold clearly formulated expectations of what constitutes a good thesis, approach the examination with the expectation that the candidate will pass and are generally cautious about recommending a re-write and re-examination. Further, experienced examiners were aware of the potential problems created by inexperienced examiners (Mullins and Kiley 2002). In terms of selecting examiners, academic expertise as well as personality factors play a role in examination and experienced supervisors are advised also to consider personality traits of nominated examiners, thus protecting their doctoral students from inappropriate examiners (Kiley 2009). In addition, examiners may be skilled only in a certain methodological approach and hence evaluate the candidate's research through a particular lens, leading to inappropriate corrections recommended to the candidate (Mullins and Kiley 2002). Another common problem in thesis examination is inconsistency between examiners, or with the decision of the examining committee, and discrepancies between narrative reports and the final

recommendation for the thesis (Holbrook, Bourke and Lovat 2008). The most problematic discrepancy is where examiners disagree on the nature of corrections required by the candidate: minor, major or extensive corrections which necessitates a re-write and re-examination (Kemp and McGuigan 2009). Assessment is also influenced by issues of power inherent in different epistemologies and the subjectivity involved in what constitutes doctoral knowledge production (Devos and Somerville 2012; Lovat 2004). Thus, examiners may disagree whether a study has made a “significant contribution to new knowledge” or not (DoE 2007).

In South Africa publications on thesis examination are, to a large extent, surprisingly few. Mafora and Lessing (2014) explored the scholarly expectations of external examiners of master’s dissertations by an analysis of their examination reports. However, the study aimed to improve supervision and not the examination process. Another study (Lessing 2009) identified problem areas in thesis examination: inexperienced examiners were uncertain how to approach the examination process due to a lack of formal training and mentoring and external examiners did not always demonstrate objective evaluation and were influenced by personal preferences. In contrast, experienced academics tended to examine according to self-developed guidelines rather than the written institutional guidelines they received from the respective institutions. Albertyn, Kapp and Frick (2007) recognised the problematic nature of postgraduate research assessment in South Africa and developed a set of criteria as well as rating scales for each criterion to facilitate the assessment of theses. This provided a possible standardised approach to thesis examination; however, it proved less lenient to the candidate.

### **Aim of article**

In the light of the above discussion, the main research question of this study was formulated as follows: How is doctoral thesis examination administered at selected South African HEIs? To address this question, a qualitative study was undertaken at six South African universities to gather rich data from a purposeful sample of expert informants. The aim was not to compare universities as such, but to examine the administration of thesis examination, the limitations experienced and the way in which these are addressed with the view to making recommendations for the more effective examination of doctorates. The inquiry was informed by Lave and Wenger’s (1991) notion of a Community of Practice (CoP) which served as theoretical framework for the study.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

According to Lave and Wenger’s (1991) theory of CoP, learning is an activity which is highly social and collaborative. During this pursuit learners attain new capabilities most effectively

through interaction in a learning community that implements relevant skills. Learning in a CoP is not only about acquiring skills and information; it is also about constructing an identity as a knower in terms of the competence required and expected by the community (Wenger 1998). A CoP refers to any group engaged in joint activities and committed to shared values, which reproduce the community over time through the introduction of new members or novices who initially function on the periphery of the community until they become fully functioning members of the community. The academic CoP comprises lecturers, students, administrators, support staff, supervisors, examiners and many others. Through legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) in the CoP, the neophyte performs as a developing member of the community with the aim of acquiring full participation in and membership of the CoP by meeting the standards and expectancies, also called the “regiment of competence”, of that community. The ability régime encompasses the capability to: (i) participate productively with other practitioners in the relevant practices of the CoP; (ii) implement efficiently the skills of that CoP; and (iii) grasp the essences and the worth of the CoP’s operation (Wenger 2010, 180). LLP participation is typified by collaboration, reciprocity and sharing knowledge. Learners engage in the actions, discussions and deliberations of the community, while the community hones its own practices through the new members who join (Wenger 1998). Successful learning is illustrated by the production of an acceptable artefact of some kind.

Applied to our topic, doctoral students enter the academic CoP at the commencement of their studies and function as novices on the periphery before full entry into the global research community (Wisker, Robinson and Shacham 2007). The doctoral student’s formal entry into the CoP as a fully functioning member is signified by the production of the thesis and its successful assessment by senior members of the CoP; this proves that the student has met the set of criteria and expectations, the “regimen of competence” (Wenger 2010, 180) recognised by other academics. Thus, a thesis is expected to embody intellectual grasp, a cohesive argument, comprehensive and critical engagement with the literature, mastery of methodology, quality presentation, and most importantly, originality, potential for publication and a significant contribution to knowledge (Winter, Griffiths and Green 2000). In the absence of this, participation of the learner in the academic CoP would have been pointless (Wenger 2010). Thus, the thesis examination process is a core activity of the CoP. This activity does not occur in institutional isolation but fits into the broader social systems that include other similar academic communities and a rich multiplicity of interrelated practices, unlimited by geography and time. This complex “landscape of practices” (Wenger 2010, 193) includes intellectual artefacts (the thesis and the examiners’ reports), core people (the doctoral candidate, supervisor, non-examining panel and external examiners, local and foreign), the examiners’ expertise in

and prior experience of examination practice, as well as the wider local and global academic community who will eventually also have access to and be enriched by doctoral knowledge production. The latter incorporates the supervisors and examiners' interactive relationships, in person and virtual, with their academic peers around issues of examinations and standards. If the examination results are such that a doctoral student is required to re-write the thesis and re-submit for re-examination, he or she is withheld from full participation in the CoP until this is done.

## METHOD

An exploratory and descriptive, therefore qualitative, inquiry was conducted to address the research question (McMillan and Schumacher 2014). Six HEIs were purposively selected for participation, namely the University of South Africa (UNISA), University of the Western Cape (UWC), Tshwane University of Technology (TUT), University of Pretoria (UP), University of Stellenbosch (US) and the University of Cape Town (UCT), thus involving a maximum variety of institutions. Table 1 contextualises the six institutions and provides most recent statistics regarding doctorate enrolment and pass rates (DHET 2013, 8, 17).

**Table 1:** Background information and pass rates of the sample of HEIs

Name	Background information	D students	D graduates	D graduation rate %
<b>UNISA</b>	Mega open and distance learning (ODL) institution	1 872	202	11
<b>UWC</b>	Formerly disadvantaged; initially established as a "Coloured" institution; gained university status in 1970 and autonomy in 1983 on same terms as the "White" institutions; more students from disadvantaged communities graduated	676	111	16
<b>TUT</b>	Merger of three technikons; traditionally not a strong research focus; the largest residential HEI in South Africa (TUT u.d.); historically disadvantaged	315	32	10
<b>UP</b>	Large residential university; formerly advantaged; historically Afrikaans medium	1 978	242	12
<b>US</b>	Formerly advantaged; historically Afrikaans medium	1 382	225	16
<b>UCT</b>	Oldest SA university; formerly advantaged; historically English medium	1428	205	14

Note: Graduation rates as percentages are calculated based on the number of students who graduate in a particular year, irrespective of the year of study, divided by the total number of students enrolled at universities in that particular year.

At each institution, one expert participant, the incumbent with overall responsibility for doctoral studies, such as the director of research or the faculty chair of the masters' and doctoral committee, was purposefully selected. At a later stage, two additional expert participants with responsibilities related to the support of doctoral students were located through institutional webpages of two institutions. Thus, eight participants comprised the sample.

Data were gathered by interviews, email communication, and scrutiny of policy documents and guidelines for thesis examination on institutional websites. The first author conducted individual semi-structured interviews with participants in their offices, using an interview guide focused on the administrative process of thesis examination. Interviews lasted for more than an hour, and were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Email communication was used to clarify any issues which arose in the interviews and to gather additional information. Such follow-up communication with participants and the scrutiny of the analysed data by both authors enhanced the study's trustworthiness. In addition, formal written policy and procedures for thesis examination per institution as available on institutional websites allowed triangulate with the data gathered in the interviews.

Transcribed interviews were analysed by identifying segments of meaning in the transcribed interviews, coding them, and identifying categories and sub-categories (McMillan and Schumacher 2014). For example, the "process of appointing examiners" was coded AE. This constituted one category with several sub-categories such as "frequency rules of examiners" (FRE) and "South African versus non-South African examiners" (SAvNSA). The ethical committee of the College of Education at Unisa granted ethical clearance for the study. Participants were assured in writing of confidentiality, anonymity, privacy, voluntary participation and the right to withdraw or to refuse to comment.

## **FINDINGS**

The findings are organised according to three themes which emerged from the data: the process of appointing examiners; ancillary requirements to the thesis; and discrepancies in quality of examiner reports and recommendations.

### **The process of appointing examiners**

Five of the six universities in the sample followed the same procedures with minor variations with regard to the process followed to appoint examiners and the constitution of an examination panel. The process is outlined in this discussion in terms of: role of supervisor, criteria for examiners, constitution of the examination panel and examiner frequency. The deviant case (Unisa), that is, the variant to the emerging pattern (McMillan and Schumacher 2014, 332) is

discussed separately hereafter.

In all the institutions the supervisor nominates a set number of examiners (and alternates) who are external to the university to the Head of the Department who submits them to the examination panel. Beside the exception mentioned above, the supervisor contacts the examiners to ascertain willingness and availability to examine the thesis. An abbreviated curriculum vitae (CV) with relevant publications in the field as well as a motivation preferably accompanies the nominations. A participant said, “Those CVs will be scrutinised to see whether the examiner will be able to do the examination for that specific field”. Nominees should have expertise in the relevant field and special care should be taken in the case of a multi-disciplinary thesis. Neither the interviews nor document analysis indicated whether criteria for examiner suitability included prior experience as an examiner. At only one institution (TUT) in the sample, the supervisor also assesses the thesis together with the external examiners. In all remaining institutions the supervisor is excluded from examining. However, in five institutions (excluding thus the deviant case) the supervisor functions as a non-examining member of the examination panel who, without a vote, may supply additional information if necessary. The supervisor also attends an oral defence if required (see below) as an observer.

Exclusions to the examiners are as follows: a nominated examiner should not have been a collaborator in the candidate’s work and any other collaboration should be disclosed (UCT); the external examiner is defined as one who has not graduated from the same institution within the last seven years (UWC). In all six cases the identity of examiners should not be disclosed to the candidate. The final number of examiners appointed varied per institution from two to three. All six expressed preference for at least one foreign examiner. One institution (UCT) stipulates that all examiners should be foreign. However, a case can be made if the expert in the field is located in South Africa. The participant explained, “Of course, if the world expert in X happens to be right here in South Africa then we would see that as a feasible examiner.” The foreign examiner(s) extends the CoP beyond geographical boundaries to include the global CoP (Wolbrink, Kissoon, Mirza and Burns 2017). One participant stressed that at her institution, the appointment of foreign examiners is used to build collaboration with specific foreign institutions with which the local university has already formed bonds. Examiner identity is not allowed to be disclosed to candidates during the examination process across the sample but in five institutions it may be disclosed after the results have been made known, subject to written examiner permission.

In all cases but one the appointment of examiners is dealt with by a faculty committee, variously named, with minor variations in membership: a committee of assessors comprising the dean, deputy dean for postgraduate studies and senior academics in the faculty; postgraduate

committee comprising the dean and heads of departments; Education Higher Degrees committee or faculty research committee. All examiners are furnished with detailed criteria for the assessment of the thesis through a narrative report and sometimes an additional checklist although these differ in rubrics and specificity among institutions. These criteria are also available in the thesis examination policy and procedures on institutional webpages and are thus in the public domain for open scrutiny.

With regard to frequency stipulations on appointment of examiners, one institution (UCT) has no frequency rules. The participant said, “UCT has no frequency rules. I imagine if there were such a rule, it would be resisted, because the experts are the experts”. Four institutions dealt with the frequency issues on an informal, ad hoc basis. One participant expressed the proviso as follows:

“We try not to over-exhaust our examiners. We’ve got a very good administrative officer. She sits in the panel meetings, so she will say: ‘We have used this person twice now in the past two years’ ... and a new person will be appointed.”

In the deviant, the role of supervisor in the examination process is very limited and ends after the he or she has nominated examiners. Initial contact with examiners and their appointment is done by the Chair of the Department. The supervisor has no place on the examining committee (non-examining chair and the external examiners) although he/she is required to submit a non-evaluation report on the thesis. The university’s official guidelines, corroborated by the participant, do not indicate what weight (if any) this report has in the examination process. Further, according to the participant, the identities of the final selection of examiners are withheld from the supervisor throughout the process of examination. Any identifying information is deleted from examiners’ reports when they are given to the supervisor with a view to the candidate making recommended corrections. Candidates are disallowed information about examiner identity also after the results are published, except with special permission. With regard to the frequency rule, this university had the most stringent requirements regarding frequency. The participant explained, “Supervisors may not use the same examiners more than once per year”. The official guidelines of the institution indicate that each college should keep a record of external examiners and the frequency of their appointment and frequency should be avoided. The practice at this particular university links to Golding et al.’s (2014, 563) observation that in many instances in higher education “much of the examination process is still hidden behind closed doors and I [the supervisor] does not have access to what actually happens”.

The above discussion highlights the critical role of the supervisor in this phase of the

examination process, a role which is understated and may not be fully appreciated by institutions (Golding et al. 2014). Later problems in the examination process (see sections entitled “Procedures for handling discrepant examiner reports” and “Quality of reports”) arise from faulty examiner nomination and appointment. The supervisor occupies a key role of the supervisor in nominating examiners who are both academically able and temperamentally able (Kiley 2009). Further, Bourke, Holbrook and Lovat (2007) point out that familiarity with the administration of the examination process falls within the purview of supervisor competence and is jeopardised by supervisor ignorance. Moreover, candidates are often mystified by the “often secret process of assessing a thesis” and are entitled to enlightenment (Golding et al. 2014, 563). Again, in this regard it is the responsibility of the supervisor to familiarise candidates with the process. In this study only one institution (UWC) had an extensive document to school the supervisor in all steps in the administrative process of the examination and which stressed supervisor responsibility to convey details of these steps to the candidate. In addition, all other actors in the examination process should be fully familiarised with the stipulations of university policy for thesis examination. This forms part of the “regimen of competence” required of all members of the CoP for its healthy functioning (Wenger 2012, 3). Interestingly, in certain cases in this study, the participants gave contradictory information or were ambiguous about the guidelines for thesis examination as contained in the written policy and procedures of their institution.

### **Ancillary requirements for the doctorate**

In many universities worldwide, ancillary requirements are stipulated for the doctorate but criteria in this regard are generally vague (Trafford 2003). Four institutions required a viva (oral defense), or colloquium, in which the doctoral candidate defended his/her work. Two institutions (UCT and Unisa) did not require an oral defence due to the nature of the university (distance education where candidates do not necessarily reside in South Africa) or the strong preference for a panel of foreign examiners. The participant from UCT said,

“We don’t have a defence, we don’t have a viva. The reasons are because our examiners are all international and it would be very expensive. We are starting to experiment with skyping and video conferencing so we will see how it goes. But what do you do for music and art students?”

The nature and status of the oral defence is not standardised across the sample and remains somewhat ambiguous. It may take the form of an “academic conversation” or be largely celebratory and ceremonial rather than form part of the assessment (Jackson and Tinkler 2001). While all institutions furnish specific written guidelines to examiners as to the criteria for the

thesis and/or a checklist, no clear guidelines in policy documents could be found for the viva. In all cases where it is practiced in this sample the viva takes place after the reading of the thesis and most examiners have already made an evaluation based on the text. Thus the oral is merely to confirm their assessment. It remains a moot point whether a candidate could be actually referred back to make major corrections or do a re-write (and thus re-examination of the thesis) on the basis of an oral defence. The participant at one institution highlighted other problems around the oral defence:

“We have a compulsory oral on D Level. The panel looks at the thesis and examiners’ reports before the oral takes place ... the supervisor attends but may not participate ... it is basically troublesome – the student struggles to defend himself and the supervisor wants to assist but it is the student’s study.”

The oral defense is also problematic in South African context where most doctoral candidates are English Second Language speakers and may find verbal expression in an examination more challenging than first language speakers.

Certain faculties in one institution (UCT) also requires the submission of a publishable journal article based on the thesis. A participant commented,

“In health sciences it is pretty much a standard view that you must get two articles published while you are doing your PhD. But, in health sciences the students very often are working on a project. It can be co-authored, but they must have contributed to the substance of the research.”

In the other institutions the idea of a publication accompanying the thesis is desirable as stated in policy documents but has not been fully operationalised due to practical problems. Again, criteria for the assessment of the journal article are vague: the policy documents do not state if the article should have already been published or not, and no criteria for evaluation are given if the article has not been published nor is the weight allocated to the article in the examination outlined. At one institution where the article is not compulsory but left to faculty discretion the policy document states that doctoral students should be informed of this additional requirement at registration.

### **Discrepancies in recommendations and quality among examiner reports**

Golding et al.’s (2014) review of the literature on thesis examination indicates that problems arising from the variation in examiner reports regarding report quality and final recommendations are common in higher education although this only occurs in the minority of examinations. Although there are minor variations across the universities in this sample, in

essence the range of recommendations available to examiner and the decisions of the examining committee can be consistently summarised to the categories listed below. These categories are also commonly used in HEIs abroad although foreign institutions usually include a distinction between minor and major corrections which do not require a re-write (Bourke 2007). These are:

- (i) Accept the thesis as submitted;
- (ii) Accept the thesis following minor corrections to the satisfaction of the examining committee and/or the supervisor – one institution adds the further category of major corrections without a total rewrite;
- (iii) Require the entire thesis to be revised according to examiner report and resubmitted for re-examination by all examiners on one further occasion; and
- (iv) Fail the thesis without the opportunity for revision and re-examination.

The examining committee scrutinises the examiners' reports and consensus on examination reports is necessary to come to a decision about the thesis. Where there is a discrepancy in the options chosen by the examiners in terms of the categories outlined above, in all cases but one the committee may override the minority report or the chair of the committee may negotiate a solution with the dissenting examiner concerned. In cases of deadlock an arbiter is appointed whose decision regarding the assessment is final. One participant highlighted the discomfort created by discrepant reports and stressed the importance of a judicious and proactive appointment of suitably qualified examiners. She said,

“The principle is when you appointed the examiners, you demonstrated that you had academic confidence in their judgements. Now that their reports have come back, you can't say: 'Oh, I don't like this. I now question their academic judgement'. So the appointment and the selection of the examiners are crucial.”

This viewpoint was emphasised by other participants. One participant explained the implications of the re-write and re-examination category, “It can take very long – up to a year. So the candidate may only be able to re-submit by the need of the following academic year.” Another participant added that a co-supervisor may be appointed on the occasion of a re-write and re-submission to assist the candidate in the revision. Although the examination of masters' dissertations falls outside this study, participants mentioned the additional difficulty of significant variation in the grade awarded for a master's dissertation (ranging between a distinction mark [75%] and failure [49% and below]).

Another problem is the discrepancy between the examiner's narrative report which does

not reflect the final category chosen. At one university, majority reports from the examination panel which override a dissenting examiner are disallowed under all circumstances. A disturbing comment made by one participant suggested that universities have at times to cope with nepotism or a conflict of interests where an examiner is a friend of a member of the examining panel. The same participant made another unproven speculation based on anecdotal evidence that certain examiners tend to choose the re-write and re-examination category in order to be remunerated a second time for the re-examination. In the case of this institution examiners are paid in full for re-examination; this is not the case at all the other institutions. This participant also raised the issue of the fifth category: major corrections as distinguished from minor corrections but which do not require re-examination. In her view inexperienced examiners do not always grasp the implication of a re-write and resubmission. She felt that the inclusion of the additional category would address this problem. This amendment has been recommended to her university and would hopefully be implemented in the near future.

Four of the six institutions gave the supervisor and candidate the right to appeal against a decision provided correct channels are followed. One participant agreed however that his was not an easy process and could put the candidate at risk. The participant said,

“We have a template where students actually indicate all the various suggested changes and then also for the student, particularly at PhD level, to say: ‘I think that in the light of these and these studies that have been done, it would detract from the value of the thesis’ ... the option is there but it is not mechanical. It is that tricky academic, because the supervisor also needs to be sure that this in fact does not kind of put the student at risk, but at the same time, all our theses are going to be open to public now and it’s got to be a proper feasible document.”

In the light of these weaknesses in administrative process of thesis examination which were identified by this study Wenger (2010, 2) points out that the usefulness of CoP as learning theory to organisations should not be idealised. External factors which may be “dysfunctional, counterproductive or even harmful” over which CoP participants have scant control may constrain their production of practice (Wenger 2012, 2).

All participants also mentioned difficulties with regard to the quality of the narrative reports of examiners. There was variation in length, scope and rigour. One participant mentioned that one faculty at her institution had compiled a black list of disappointing examiners, who were avoided in future. General vague reports which only summarised the thesis or could be applied to another number of theses were problematic. Another participant mentioned the tardiness of some examiners to submit reports on time which created a delay in the entire process. She said, “Examiners ask for postponement or they simply ignore emails in which they are asked to submit their results”. In summary, discrepancy in examiner, report

quality and recommendations, relate to limitations which may exist in the CoP. Kemo (2008) mentions that to be effective members of a CoP should engage in the activities required of them within a given period. Unnecessary delays in delivery of outcomes affects internal organisation efficacy. An atmosphere of trust and solidarity is needed as well as quality contributions made by all parts of the CoP to the whole.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The assessment of the doctorate thesis remains a key concern for scholars, practitioners and education authorities which wish to ensure smooth delivery of a maximum number of doctorates annually. New and innovative ways in which assessment is conducted are needed to ensure adequate, accurate and fair thesis examination in the interests of doctorate production. This article explored the administrative process followed by six South African HEIs in the examination of the doctorate through a qualitative inquiry informed by Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of CoP. With one exception findings indicated that the nomination and appointment of examiners is more or less standardised at a crucial component of effective thesis examination which involve a number of senior members of the academic CoP, including the supervisor albeit his/her non-examining role. Furthermore, the role of supervisor is crucial in nominating suitable examiners, including foreign examiners, which should include academic and non-academic factors. Ancillary requirements to the thesis such as the viva and/or submission of an article differ across the sample largely for practical reasons. Criteria for the assessment of these ancillary practices remain vague also in written documents. Although limited to a minority of cases, variation in quality of reports and discrepancies in the category chosen by the examiner to indicate the final decision regarding a thesis is problematic. Examiner differences in the choice of categories regarding the nature of corrections or a re-write and re-examination may require the appointment of an arbiter and re-examination has financial implications for the institution notwithstanding the delayed entry of the doctorate as full-fledge member of the academic CoP.

Based on the literature and the findings it is recommended that attention is given to the training of supervisors which extends beyond the conventional supervision of the research project. Supervisor training should include exposure to all steps of the examination process. The supervisor's responsibility should also incorporate informing the candidate about thesis examination. Supervisors should also be supported where needed in the nomination of suitable examiners. Inexperienced supervisors may lack access to professional networks from which to make nominations particularly with regard to foreign examiners. Training should include the role of professional ethics in the examination process so that procedures do not need to "protect"

the integrity of the examination from the possible unethical contamination by supervisors or any other members of the panel. All successful and sustainable CoPs have focused, well-defined purposes that are directly tied to the sponsoring organisation's mission, and opportunities for training of inexperienced members of the CoP should be provided. Furthermore, supervisors although non-voting and non-examining members of the examination panel, should be informed of the course of the examination process. This will also go far in reducing the secrecy and lack of transparency that often surrounds thesis examination. Finally, the addition of a fifth category dealing with major corrections which do not require a re-write and re-examination should be added to recommendations available to examiners. This will serve to address the conundrum of re-examination and its impact on the production of doctorates.

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