

Achieving a PhD Degree: What Examiner Reports Tell Us about the Doctoral Examination Process

Deborah Chetcuti*, Joseph Cacciottolo, and Nicholas Vella

University of Malta, Malta

deborah.chetcuti@um.edu.mt

ABSTRACT

Achieving a PhD degree is viewed by academic institutions as a major landmark of success and achievement. It gives recognition to researchers and provides entry into academia. Considering its significance, a PhD degree is not awarded lightly and doctoral candidates undergo a rigorous examination process that involves the evaluation of a written thesis and the viva voce defence of this thesis. This study seeks to gain a better understanding of the way in which examiners go about assessing doctoral work with the aim of providing more transparent and clear guidelines for examiners. Data for the study included 50 written examiner reports for twelve doctoral candidates who submitted their thesis to the Faculty of Arts at the University of Malta, for the years 2017-2018. The findings suggest that examiners in their reports include summative comments about the quality of the work. They are impressed by work that makes a contribution to knowledge, is critical and analytical and is not marred by typographical or grammatical errors. At the same time, examiners provide extensive feedback to help students improve their work. This suggests a shift in the doctoral examination process from the traditional role of summative gate-keeping to a more formative learning experience.

Keywords: PhD degree, assessment, higher education

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1. Introduction

Achieving a Ph.D. degree is viewed by most academic institutions as a major landmark of success and achievement (Park, 2005). Unlike other degrees it endows the recipient with the title 'Doctor' (Trafford & Leshem, 2008), and provides entry into institutional academia (Yazdani & Shokooh, 2018). In most universities, the awarding of a Ph.D. degree follows a rigorous examination process that involves the assessment of a written doctoral thesis and in some universities the defence of this thesis orally during a viva voce (Wellington, 2013). This examination is conducted by an examination board set up by the awarding institution and usually includes both internal as well as external examiners.

The examiners who are experts in the research field of the doctoral work being examined, are asked to evaluate whether the doctoral work has reached the required and expected standards based on a set of established assessment criteria. They then make a recommendation, as to whether the Ph.D. degree can be awarded without changes or subject to minor or major modifications. This recommendation is presented in a written examiner's report that includes comments about the general quality of the work, and where modifications are required, feedback comments that indicate how the doctoral candidate can improve the work (Kumar & Stracke, 2011). This combination of a summative judgement and formative feedback makes

the PhD examination a distinctive assessment process since it is “part grade and part gauge of what still needs to be done” (Holbrook, Bourke, Fairbairn & Lovat, 2014, p. 983).

2. Defining ‘Doctorateness’

When examining doctoral work, the first thing that needs to be identified is whether there are any common qualities that examiners look for, what is referred to in the literature as ‘doctorateness’ (Trafford & Leshem, 2008). While some researchers like Wellington (2013) argue that it is futile to look for “some inner core meaning or essence which is common to all” (p. 1501), other researchers (Poole, 2014; Holbrooke et al, 2014) suggest that ‘doctorateness’ can be established based on common core characteristics. For some authors such as Trafford & Leshem (2008) and Hodgson (2020), evidence of these common characteristics can be found in the written thesis and include qualities such as a conceptual framework, coherent arguments, an appropriate methodology and a contribution to knowledge. For other researchers (see Nerad, 2012; Yazdani & Shokooh, 2018), ‘doctorateness’ is not only demonstrated through the written thesis, but should also be reflected in the personal research skills and abilities that a doctoral candidate develops throughout the research journey.

These theoretical definitions of ‘doctorateness’ have been used by universities to establish clear criteria to guide examiners in their examination of doctoral work. In European universities, based on the Bologna agreement of 1999, the standards and expectations for doctoral work have been collated together to form what are known as the Dublin Descriptors (see Denicolo, Duke & Reeves, 2020). These descriptors suggest that a doctoral degree can be awarded on the basis of contribution to knowledge and to society, on a sound knowledge of the research area, and on evidence of the development of research skills and competencies (Bernstein et al., 2014). Most universities in different countries use criteria which more or less focus on similar skills and characteristics. What remains problematic is that although, universities have established criteria and regulations, it is not very clear how examiners actually interpret these criteria, and “examiners may interpret the criteria based on their own scholarly understanding and interpretation” (Kumar & Stracke, 2011, p. 212). Furthermore, while examiners are expected to provide feedback for doctoral candidates in their examiner reports, there is no evidence to suggest that they are provided with any training or guidance about how to do this. This points to a clear need for more research into the way in which examiners make their judgements about doctoral work and for “more awareness about how a thesis is examined” (Golding, Sharmini & Lazarovitch, 2014).

3. The Study

The need for more knowledge about the examination process at doctoral level, identified in our review of the literature, led to the study that is reported in this paper. As examiners of doctoral work ourselves, we wanted to gain a better understanding of the doctoral examination process, in order to inform our own practice and provide more information for examiners, doctoral candidates and supervisors about examiner expectations. This led to our main research questions which included: (1) what criteria do examiners use to evaluate doctoral work; (2) how do they interpret these criteria? and (3) what kind of formative feedback do examiners provide for doctoral candidates?

The study was carried out within the context of the University of Malta which has clearly established assessment criteria (see Table 1) for the examination of doctoral work. Using these criteria, a Board of Examiners made up of internal and external examiners, makes a

recommendation as to whether the Ph.D. degree should be awarded with, no changes or subject to minor editorial changes or major modifications. Following an oral viva voce, examiners present a written report that includes a summative description of the quality of the work and where modifications have been requested, feedback as to how these revisions can be carried out to improve the work before final submission.

Table 1.

Assessment criteria (outlined in UoM, PhD regulations, 2018)

In assessing a thesis, the Board of examiners shall require:

- evidence that it represents a significant contribution to knowledge in a particular field of study;
- evidence of originality;
- evidence of the ability of the student to relate the subject matter of the thesis to the existing body of knowledge;
- evidence of the ability of the student to apply research methods appropriate to the subject; and
- a satisfactory level of literary presentation.

The data used in the study included examiners' reports presented to the University of Malta. Examiner reports were chosen since we believe that they give valuable insights into what examiners expect from a Ph.D. thesis (Holbrooke et al., 2014). We looked at the examiners' reports presented to the Faculty of Arts, University of Malta for the academic years 2017 and 2018. In total, for these two consecutive years 12 students presented their thesis to be examined for the award of a Ph.D. degree. The examination of these 12 theses, involved a total of 50 examiner reports written by 21 examiners from the University of Malta and 21 external examiners. Permission to use the examiner reports was obtained from the University of Malta Ethics committee (UREC), and throughout the study the reports were treated with strict confidentiality and all references to names of examiners or students removed.

The examiner reports were analysed using a thematic analysis (Boyzatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). The reports were read and re-read in order to establish common themes and coded into specific categories. We used two different methods to analyse the data. In the first part of the analysis, the data was analysed deductively, using the UoM assessment criteria as categories. Following this initial analysis, the data was then analysed inductively, in order to explore any categories that emerged from the data itself. Comments from the examiner reports were then selected to illustrate the themes and categories and provide a more in-depth understanding of the examiners' expectations.

4. Results

4.1. What Do Examiners Look for in a PhD Thesis?

In our analysis of the examiner reports we observed that 71% of the examiners used the criteria established by the University of Malta and included in the PhD regulations of 2018 (see Table 1), when making a judgement about the quality of the doctoral work. As can be seen in Figure 1, the criteria are used extensively, with the most common expectation of examiners being that the doctoral work made a significant contribution to knowledge. However, we could also observe that 29% of the examiners also used criteria based on their "tacit knowledge about what a PhD in their discipline should be like" (Tinkler & Jackson, 2004, p. 109). These additional criteria used by examiners were: evidence of critical analysis and reflection; presentation of the research work within a context; and evidence that the work had the potential for publication or had already been published. These results suggest that the examiners in the study, similar to other research studies (Holbrooke et al., 2014) were looking for common core qualities, to recommend the award of a PhD degree. However, they

also looked for other skills and characteristics to give added value and a more holistic picture of both the research product, the thesis and well as the skills developed by the doctoral researcher (Holbrooke et al., 2014).

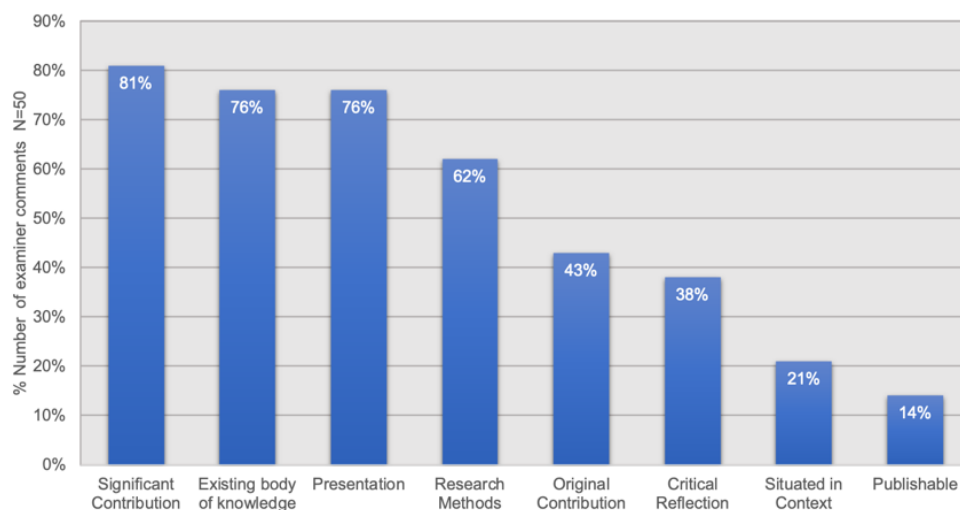


Figure 1: Criteria used by examiners

4.2. How Do Examiners Interpret the Assessment Criteria?

The research (Holbrooke & Bourke, 2004) suggests that while examiners are quite consistent in their recommendations as to whether a doctoral degree should be awarded or not, there are some variations in the way in which they interpret the different criteria. In our study, we therefore also looked not only at the criteria that examiners used, but also their personal interpretations of the specific criteria.

4.2.1. Significant and Original Contribution to Knowledge

The most common criterion used to establish whether the research work carried out by the doctoral candidate demonstrates ‘doctorateness’ is that the work has made a contribution to knowledge in the research field (Holbrook & Bourke, 2004; Golding et al, 2014). The PhD regulations of the University of Malta (2018), use two criteria to describe this contribution, asking for evidence of both a significant as well as an original contribution to knowledge. However, what was evident from the analysis of the examiner reports, is that the examiners placed more emphasis on the contribution being significant and were rather sparse and vague in their comments regarding originality. In fact, most of the examiners describe the work as being original, without really explaining why. Typical comments made by examiners were:

Constitutes an original contribution to understanding in this field... (*Ex3, UoM*)

It is to be commended for its original contributions to... (*Ex16, UoM*)

The examiners placed more emphasis on the contribution to knowledge being ‘significant’ and were more explicit, about what they expected from research work that made ‘a significant contribution to knowledge’. For most of the examiners (23 out of the 34 examiners who commented on significance, 68%), making a significant contribution involved the development of a strong theoretical framework that was either new, or continued to build and expand theoretical discussion in the research field. As stated by an examiner:

This research work has made some significant contributions to... This is demonstrated by the candidate’s attempts at constructing and theoretically elaborating an analytical

framework through which one could further understand...by using and building upon previous literature (*Ex16, External*).

Furthermore, a number of examiners (13 out of 34 examiners, 38%), expected that the research filled what they describe as a gap in the research, with new knowledge, in order to be considered 'significant'. As stated by an examiner:

The thesis provides clear evidence of a significant contribution to knowledge in the field of ... in that the theme was never tackled and is timely for a number of reasons (*Ex32, UoM*).

These results seem to suggest that within the context of the Faculty of Arts, making a contribution is an important feature irrespective of whether it is described as 'original' or 'significant' and hence like Wellington (2013) we would argue that the use of these adjectives is superfluous.

4.2.2. Existing Body of Knowledge

Current research suggests that examiners favour a Ph.D. that shows engagement with theory which makes "use of up-to-date sources" (Holbrooke et al, 2014, p. 4) and "demonstrates an accurate and comprehensive understanding of the literature" (Golding et al, 2013, p. 569). The Ph.D. regulations of the University of Malta (2008), simply describe this criterion as 'the ability of the student to relate the subject matter of the thesis to the existing body of knowledge'. As indicated in their reports, examiners (20 examiners out of the 24 who commented on the literature, 83%) were in fact impressed when the doctoral candidates used an extensive amount of literature, to build their theoretical and conceptual framework. As stated by an examiner:

Overall, the literature review, with over 400 references, that included a range of sources from academic papers and book chapters to technical documents and newspaper reports suggest a wide reading, comprehension of texts and their use in developing and integrating them to the local scene in the thesis (*Ex32, UoM*).

The examiners on the other hand, were highly critical when the literature used in the work was dated or not related to the main framework of the research. Reflecting the view of other examiners, an examiner expressed his annoyance in the following way:

The dissertation demonstrates that the candidate has read a number of key texts on...however, some of the sources are repeated throughout and some others are rather dated...the references and discussion were limited (*Ex21, UoM*).

With regards to the review of the literature (existing body of knowledge), examiners also expected the candidates to be critical and analytical in the way in which they situated the subject of their research within the existing body of knowledge. As stated by an examiner:

With regard to the use of literature, the candidate needs to be more critical especially when it is clear that his underlying conclusions do not really tally with that of others. He needs to make his criticism more explicitly in the text. Indeed, a more critical approach should be taken with regard to a large portion of...(*Ex16, UoM*).

These results suggest that while examiners consider it important for a thesis to contain a wide coverage of recent, relevant literature this is not enough and as pointed out by Golding et al. (2013), examiners also require a doctoral candidate "to analyse, interpret, categorise, order or apply the literature in order to draw new insights and conclusions" (p. 569).

4.2.3. Appropriate Research Methods

What is particularly significant, in this research study is that from the examiner reports it could be seen that comments about research methods were found in 31 out of the 50 examiner reports presented to the Faculty of Arts (62%). This is quite low when compared to the comments made with regards to other criteria for example (81% of comments made regarding significant contribution to knowledge). This is surprising, considering the importance of the research methodology, in any research study. However, this finding can be related to the fact that the study looked at examiner reports from the Faculty of Arts, and as pointed out by Holbrooke et al. (2014) research methodology is considered to be more important by examiners in Science Faculties.

When examiners did comment on the research methodology, the main expectation was that as pointed out by Trafford & Leshem (2008), the doctoral candidate gave a clear indication of the choices made, and that the methods chosen were within a specific research paradigm. As stated by an examiner:

This chapter opens with consideration of the research approach, locating and justifying it within a pragmatic world view, and making the case for the decision to adopt a mixed methods design with three phases (*Ex23, External*).

The main expectation is that the doctoral candidate shows the ability to think like a researcher and explain and “justify their methodological choices” (Golding et al, 2014, p. 570).

4.2.4. Coherent Presentation

The major claim to ‘doctorateness’, is undoubtedly the ability of the candidate to make a scholarly contribution to knowledge in the research field (Wellington, 2013). However, another quality that is given importance by examiners is presentation. Examiners favour coherent writing, which they describe as “writing that has a focus, flow and a logical and explicit structure that integrates and connects the various parts of the thesis and gives clear bearings for the reader” (Golding et al., 2014, p. 569). Presentation was also important for the examiners at the University of Malta. In fact, comments about presentation were noted in 38 out of the 50 examiner reports (76%) presented to the Faculty of Arts. Examiners commented on the good use of language and style, coherent presentation, spelling, and the presentation of figures and tables and referencing. In the words of one examiner:

The thesis has demonstrated an adequate level of literary presentation. It is clearly structured, meticulous in its use of language, and copiously referenced. Typos are very few and far between (*Ex25, UoM*).

At the same time, examiners were very critical when the presentation showed many typographical errors or lacked coherence. In the words of an examiner:

There were also some stylistic slips that were particularly pronounced in this chapter, in particular an overuse of very short paragraphs. This creates a disjointed effect that does not reflect the amount of scholarship and research informing this chapter (*Ex20, UoM*).

Although poor presentation is not considered to be a failing aspect, a study by Johnston (1997) suggests that examiners are “distracted and irritated by poorly presented work” (p. 340). The use of language is considered to be especially important for examiners in the humanities (Mullins & Kiley, 2002).

4.2.5. Critical and Analytical Reflection

Evidence of critical and analytical reflection is not included as a formal assessment criterion in the Ph.D. regulations of the University of Malta (2008). However, similar to examiners in other studies (see Golding et al, 2014), examiners in the current study expected students to critically appraise their findings and draw conclusions from them. In fact, comments about critical reflection were observed in 18 out of 50 (36%) of the examiner reports. The importance of critical reflection is identified by an examiner from the University of Malta who comments positively on a doctoral candidate who:

...demonstrates a capacity to reflect critically on her work, pointing out possible shortcomings, but also as is appropriate, makes tentative recommendations that in her view would improve the.... (the research area) (*Ex20, UoM*).

The inclusion of critical reflection as an expectation of doctoral achievement, is also an indication that examiners are not only assessing the written thesis but that as argued by a number of authors (Nerad, 2013; Denicolo et al, 2020), examiners also look for personal and professional skills that prepare doctoral researchers for their future careers. As pointed out by Mullins & Kiley (2002, p. 386), “a PhD is a stepping stone into a research career. All you need to do is to demonstrate your capacity for independent, critical thinking.”

4.2.6. Situated in a Context

In a study by McKenna, Quinn & Vorster (2018) examiners highlighted the importance of context in research. Presentation of the context allows the examiners to understand the specific historical, cultural and political background of the research study. Context is not included in the current criteria of the PhD regulations, University of Malta (2018). However, in the current study, 11 out of the 50 examiner reports (22%) included comments on the importance of the context in a Ph.D. thesis. The inclusion of a discussion about the local Maltese context was deemed to be especially important by external examiners:

This chapter outlines the Maltese context for the study well and in great depth. It demonstrates the candidate’s high level of engagement and understanding of the policy and planning context for...particularly effective are her knowledge and explanation of the current Maltese context (*Ex23, External*).

At the same time, while the examiners who commented on context, considered a discussion of the local context to be an asset, they also expected the doctoral candidate to move beyond the immediate local context and situate the research within the wider international context. As pointed out by another external examiner:

There are also many interesting finds such as...Unfortunately, this point, and others like it is lost amongst the mass of ‘stuff’ the thesis contains because it is not set up in contrast to existing scholarship on....in other European countries and so its singularity and indeed originality is not drawn out (*Ex8, External*).

4.2.7. Publication

The debate around what constitutes ‘doctorateness’, has in recent years focused on the discussion of whether doctoral candidates should be required to publish their work in peer reviewed journals prior or following the submission of their thesis. Most universities, including the University of Malta do not include ‘publication’ as one of the requirements to be awarded a Ph.D. degree. However, some researchers such as Poole (2015), are advocating for the inclusion of ‘publishability’ as a criterion for the award of a PhD degree. Poole (2015) argues that while criteria such as ‘original contribution’ or ‘significant contribution’ may be

interpreted differently by examiners, having published work is a fact and not open to interpretation.

In the examiner reports analysed in the current study, very little reference is made to publication of work. In fact, we found comments about publication in only 7 out of the 50 examiner reports (14%). These comments focused on the potential of the work to be published since in the study, only one student out of the twelve who submitted their work to the Faculty of Arts, had actually published prior to submission. For the examiners, the potential for publication, or prior publication was an indication of the high quality of the work. As stated by the examiners:

...the thesis constitutes a major and very substantial work of scholarship, conducted with great commitment and diligence. I look forward to seeing ...published journal articles and/or a monograph in the near future based on the research (*Ex23, External*).

However, in our view, while we recognise that being able to communicate research through publication is an important skill, more research needs to be conducted about the impact of including 'publication' as a requirement for the award of a Ph.D. degree.

4.2.8. Some Reflections

From the results of the current study, we can start to develop some ideas about examiner expectations for doctoral work. While the number of examiner reports used in the study is small and we cannot make any generalisations, some insights emerge. From our analysis of the examiner reports in the current study, we have identified four major criteria that examiners make use of when examining doctoral work (see Table 2) and these include a combination of the formal university criteria, which are extended by examiners to meet their own personal expectations of doctoral work.

Table 2.

Assessment criteria for doctoral work (developed from study)

In assessing a thesis, the Board of examiners shall require:

- evidence of contribution to the theoretical knowledge in the research field;
- evidence of a critical and analytical understanding of the existing body of knowledge in relation to the theoretical framework of the study;
- evidence of the ability to conduct appropriate research and develop a personal identity as a researcher;
- evidence of the ability to present results coherently and be able to communicate them to the academic and non-scientific community, possibly through publication.

Although not exhaustive, these criteria can be used as a starting point by examiners when they are asked to examine doctoral work; by doctoral candidates and supervisors before final submission; and by university educators and policy makers in their discussions of assessment practices in higher education.

4.3. Formative Feedback

In their examiner reports, in addition to comments about the strengths and weaknesses and the general quality of the work, examiners at the University of Malta are also expected to include a list of remarks regarding any specific improvements or minor mistakes requiring correction (PhD regulations, University of Malta, 2018). This feedback is considered to be formative since it provides the doctoral candidate with information that allows them to improve their work by reducing the gap between their current performance and a specific goal (Hattie & Timperley, 2007), allowing them "to attain the level required to become a member of a scholarly community" (Kumar & Stracke, 2011, p. 217). By providing

formative feedback, examiners at doctoral level, also take on the role of mentors and teachers (Kumar & Stracke, 2011).

In our analysis of the examiner reports, we observed that examiners took this mentoring role very seriously. In fact, feedback was provided in 47 out of the 50 examiner reports presented to the Faculty of Arts (94%). The feedback was provided either as comments and amendments made in the actual text of the thesis, or added as an appendix (ranging from 1 to 7 pages of comments) to the final report submitted to the university. As stated by an examiner, the purpose of the feedback was not to be critical but to assist the doctoral candidates in achieving their Ph.D. degree to the best of their potential:

...the candidate was reassured that this was an opportunity for her to engage with the feedback of five established (examiners) who were seeking to push her to improve her work further by addressing problematic areas (*Ex 8, External*).

4.3.1. Types of Formative Feedback

We were also interested in analysing, the type of formative feedback that examiners were providing for the doctoral candidates. As reported in a number of studies regarding feedback at doctoral level (Holbrooke, Bourke, Love & Dally, 2004; Kumar & Stracke, 2011), the feedback is provided in various formats. The comments can include: editorial corrections of language mistakes; clear direct prescriptive instructions on what the doctoral candidates need to do to improve their work; and dialogic comments which usually are in the form of questions that are meant to help the doctoral candidates reflect on their work and explore alternative scenarios or explanations. In our analysis of the examiner reports in the current study we observed that the examiners were using mainly three types of feedback comments:

1. **Editorial:** where the examiners give clear instructions about the editing of the main text such as spelling, grammar and organisation of chapters.
2. **Instructional:** where the examiners give clear directions about ways in which the thesis can be improved in a prescriptive manner.
3. **Dialogic:** where the examiners make suggestions such as asking questions, exploring alternatives, and providing new possibilities for reflection.

Holbrook et al. (2004) describe editorial comments as comments which seek “the correction of mechanical, typographical or referencing errors” (p. 143). In fact, when giving editorial feedback, in the examiner reports that were analysed, examiners asked for revisions in the use of language mainly spelling, grammar and punctuation. As stated by an examiner:

The presentation is satisfactory. There are however a number of typographical errors to be corrected. There are 100 minor stylistic errors marked in the text - mainly limited to missing punctuation, missing words or letters and the odd change in font size etc. I have marked the hard copy text in some detail to help the candidate in this (*Ex8, External*).

The second type of feedback provided was mainly instructional feedback. This kind of feedback was very prescriptive as described in other studies (Holbrooke et al, 2004), usually included fix-it type of comments that left no room for discussion or interpretation (Holbrooke et al, 2004). Examples of such instructional feedback include:

General conclusion should be re-written to bring out more explicitly what the findings of the work are and how it contributes to... (*Ex4, UoM*)

He also needs to make use of some recent literature (gives examples) to beef up his original arguments with their analysis and conclusions. (*Ex16, UoM*)

Instructional feedback is highly specific and enables the doctoral candidates to reach specific learning goals (Kumar & Stracke, 2011). However, it remains a top-down form of feedback and the doctoral candidates are mainly passive recipients of information.

The final type of formative feedback that was identified in the examiners' reports, is being described as dialogic feedback. This type of feedback can be described as a 'reflective response' and suggests that the examiners "focus on nurturing emerging ideas and do not attempt to be dictatorial" (Stracke & Kumar, 2010, p. 28). By asking questions and motivating the candidate to reflect on the work, the examiners challenge the candidate and create a dialogue which is used to generate discussion and clarification (Holbrooke et. al., 2004). As stated by an examiner, providing dialogic feedback:

...means that the candidate is provided with an excellent range of opinions and suggestions, which going forward for publication and an academic career is invaluable (*Ex8, External*).

Such dialogue enables doctoral candidates to "become highly self-regulated learners during the process of completing their doctoral journey so as to ensure that they become contributing members of an academic community of researchers and scholars" (Stracke & Kumar, 2010, p. 21).

5. Conclusions

The study started off with the aim of finding out more about the examination process at doctoral level in order to provide more information for examiners, doctoral candidates and supervisors and contribute to the process of increasing transparency about assessment practices at doctoral level. While we do not attempt to make any generalisations, the main insight we obtained from our analysis of the examiner reports, was that examiners at doctoral level take on a dual role: that of evaluator and 'gatekeeper' into academia and the profession, as well as that of mentors and teachers who assist the doctoral candidates in achieving their goal, the PhD degree and also prepare them for their future careers (Golding et al, 2014). In their role as evaluators, although they are provided with official assessment criteria, examiners also bring with them and make use of their personal experiences regarding the qualities they expect from doctoral work. While the official criteria developed by the University of Malta focus mainly on the product, or the thesis, we could observe that examiner expectations went beyond this, and they also looked for professional and research qualities that reflected the development of "an independent scholar with a certain identity and level of competence" (Yazdani & Shokooh, 2018, p. 42).

The study also brings to the forefront, the mentoring role of examiners. This is a unique aspect of assessment at doctoral level, since the examiner is not only the judge but the teacher. This requires a reconceptualisation of the doctoral examination process, where the doctoral thesis is considered to be "work in progress" (Bourke, Hattie & Anderson, 2004); and feedback takes on a crucial role. The examiners in their role as mentors, use the feedback to engage in dialogue with the doctoral candidates in order "make sense of information from varied sources and use it to enhance the quality of their work or learning strategies" (Carless, 2015, p. 192). This positions the learner, in this case the doctoral candidate as an active participant in their own learning journey.

Within this context there is a need for more training and professional development for examiners, so that they can embrace their dual role as evaluators and mentors and develop a better understanding of what is expected out of them during the doctoral examination. Through dialogue the doctoral examination can become an enriching experience for both

examiners and doctoral candidates who are helped not only to achieve their Ph.D. but also to become better researchers and professionals in their future careers.

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