QUALITY ASSURANCE AT DOCTORAL LEVEL

The paper 'Trends 2003: Progress towards the European Higher Education Area' stated 'It is becoming more and more acknowledged that the European tradition that still exists in many disciplines (i.e. leaving doctoral students largely to their own devices and providing them only with more or less intensive individual tutoring and supervision) is for many reasons not suited any more to the needs of modern societies'[1]. I would like to examine experiences in one country – the United Kingdom. In doing so, I hope to suggest that, although in some respects the UK has taken the lead in work on doctoral programmes and transferable skills, by no means all of the problems have been solved. In doing so, I should make it clear that, although I work as an Auditor for the Quality Assurance Agency, I speak today in a personal capacity. Other nations might profitably look to the UK, it is true, but perhaps as much to learn what does not work, or at least does not yet work properly, as about what does. At least, though, the UK has at least been *asking* some of the tougher questions.

As we have already seen at this Conference, the UK does offer a range of doctoral models. Let me begin, though, with what the Americans call an 'in-your-face' statement. It is this. The Quality Assurance which underpins the doctoral qualification is still more fragile than it should be. If the UK example is typical, then questions must be raised about the robustness of mechanisms designed to secure standards and also give students and employers confidence that the standards achieved are comparable both across subjects and across the sector as a whole.

Two problems present themselves. The first concerns the descriptors of achievement and the second the nature of the assessment itself. It is more than five years now since the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland was published. Descriptors of doctoral achievement are, as you can see from the OHT, necessarily imprecise. Successful doctoral students should demonstrate the ability to create and interpret 'new knowledge' at the forefront of an academic discipline (or professional practice) and, in showing a 'detailed understanding of applicable techniques for research and advanced academic enquiry, should be able to

[1] Trends 2003: Progress towards the European Higher Education Area, 2003 para .5.1.1, p62

‘conceptualise, design and implement a project for the generation of new knowledge, applications or understanding at the forefront of the discipline’.

Now these descriptors are both worthy and useful. However, they operate at a high level of generality and they give very limited guidance as to their specific applicability at the subject level. The UK’s Quality Assurance Agency has produced what are called ‘Benchmarking Statements’. These guide both the curriculum and the assessment of nearly all undergraduate programmes of study and some Masters. There is, however, no equivalent for doctoral work, leaving too much in the sometimes arthritic hands of disciplinary custom and practice. One way forward would be to extend this benchmarking exercise to doctoral work. Such a development would enable statements to be made designed to ensure that the four criteria identified for work at doctoral level were actually and verifiably present in dissertations.

This brings me to my second ‘problem’: the form of assessment of most doctoral work. Conventionally, at least in the arts and humanities, a PhD is awarded on the basis of two criteria. Firstly, students produce a dissertation which is normally between 80,000 and 100,000 words in length. They are then quizzed on their methodology, results and, perhaps, the overall significance of the work in a *viva voce* examination. In practice, if the Dissertation is judged to be of sufficient standard, what happens in the *viva* is irrelevant to the outcome. It might be considered that the production of one piece of work (however long and however deep the research) is a narrow basis on which to award a doctoral qualification and especially so given the range of attributes which a doctoral student is supposed to display.

It is also worth asking who is judging the work. Conventionally, a PhD thesis is examined by two people: one examiner external to the Institution and one internal to it. In practice, the external examiner’s view takes precedence when differences of opinion arise. This is understandable on two grounds. Firstly, external verification is likely to be considered the more secure means of assuring standards. Secondly, in many Schools or Departments, only one true expert in the area covered by the thesis is in post and he or she will have acted as supervisor to the research. The UK has in recent years moved decisively away from permitting supervisors to act as external examiners. Supervisors are insufficiently distanced from the candidate. Many will feel

that – at least in part – it is their own work which is being judged. For this reason an academic less expert in the subject matter, but more distanced from the candidate, acts as internal examiner. Thus, expertise is sacrificed for objectivity, leaving the assessment the external examiner in an even more powerful position when arguing on subject-specific matters.

I suggest that the basis upon which the majority of PhD qualifications are awarded is fragile. What effective safeguards exist against the judgment of a 'rogue external', whose opinions might be overly informed by knowledge of, or sympathy with, one particular – and possibly highly controversial – approach or methodology? In the absence of specific guidelines, either from the QAA or (in the great majority of cases) the Institution itself, what assurances can a candidate have that his or her work is being judged against robust and effective criteria? How can an employer be sure that the range of attributes specified in the Qualifications Framework is present in the thesis? Without a rigorous *viva*, furthermore, how can the assessment make any judgment about wider qualities and transferable skills? In the circumstances, it is surprising that the UK system does not generate more appeals and litigation. Far too much is dependent on implicit, rather than explicit, criteria and on the judgement of one individual.

The successful doctoral dissertation, of course, should result from effective training in research methods and from the appropriate deployment of a range of relevant techniques. There is little or no explicit testing of the training itself. Some forms of doctoral work, furthermore, require more such training than others. This introduces a further dimension when evaluating the comparability of doctoral work. It was to meet such difficulties that UK research councils – albeit over a long period and with different levels both of urgency and prescription – introduced research training requirements applicable to all students funded by the Councils in their doctoral work. The guidelines were formulated by senior academics and published by the Research Councils. Institutions had then to demonstrate how the programmes which they put in place met the criteria which had been developed. Those which could not would not be entitled to receive research council funding, with all of the negative reputational connotations which such a judgment carried with it.

Let us examine both the subject-specific and the general knowledge and skills which one Research Council – the new Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) has developed in the last two years.

Given that these were developed by two quite different organisations, it is interesting to note how closely the AHRC guidelines conform with the broad statements of the Quality Assurance Agency's Qualifications Framework. In operational practice, however, a number of difficulties are encountered. Firstly, students not in receipt of research council funding are under no obligation to undertake an Institution's research training programme, unless the Institution deems this essential. Practice varies and it has to be acknowledged that there is a tension between what an Institution might consider good training practice and the need to maximize fees income. Secondly, there has been a considerable amount of consumer resistance to research training programmes. These vary both in design and in quality. Many students object to undertaking training which, although it might seem to be generically 'useful' is of limited, if any, practical value to the specific dissertation project. They take a short-term (and possibly non-strategic) view. They want their PhD by the least encumbered route. Differential motivation, attendance and achievement have all been pronounced features of many training programmes. Tensions have also been experienced between the needs of individual departments or schools and the resources available centrally to mount training programmes for limited numbers of students.

Thirdly, in the conventional PhD, successful completion of a research training programme forms no part of the overall assessment of the dissertation, beyond a 'pass/fail' judgment or an attendance threshold. If research-training programmes are considered important to the production of a successful doctorate, we have to ask why they play an exiguous role in its assessment.

Thinking along these lines has led to the development of a number of 'taught doctoral' programmes. These, in effect, yoke research training to the production of a PhD Dissertation, including both elements in the assessment package. A number of models have been developed in the UK over the past four or five years and early indications are that they are popular with students. Many appreciate the broader base to their studies which the taught programme provides. In many cases, also, study can

be largely home-based. On the other hand, participation in taught modules ensures that students interact with one another, at least in the early stages of a course, thereby reducing the risks associated with the ‘loneliness of the long-distance scholar’.

In the Lancaster PhD in Applied Linguistics by Thesis and Coursework, to take one model from many, students (most of whom work part-time and away from the University over a programme which lasts for five years) choose three modules in Applied Linguistics (from a suite of 16 including English grammar, Language and Education and New Englishes) and three Research Methods modules (from a suite of nine, most of which are related to the specific needs of linguists). They produce 3 5,000 word-essays in each of their six modules and then move on to concentrated study of a thesis, whose maximum length is 70,000 words (as compared with the conventional Lancaster maximum of 100,000 words). The requirement from the coursework is only that it be passed. The PhD award otherwise depends exclusively on the quality of the thesis.

Taught PhD programmes vary in range and intensity. All, however, tend to be marketed on grounds of flexibility, choice and guaranteed effective preparation for research. In Birmingham, for example, such programmes are stated to prepare ‘students to undertake doctoral research by enabling them to design a portfolio of coursework particularly suited to their thesis. It allows students to combine a broad foundation’ in a relevant discipline ‘and its research methods through taught and assessed coursework with the full training and research experience offered by the traditional PhD’.

So where does the balance sheet lie? A trained auditor will want to ask a number of questions about the taught PhD. Are the course offerings indeed comparable? How do either the Institutions themselves or the research councils funding students taking them know this? Is it justified to have a mere pass/fail criterion for the ‘taught’ elements? How does the research training offered differ from that offered on taught Masters’ programmes, if at all? If it does not, is the programme constructed at the correct academic level. Has enough thought been given to issues of progression within the programme? There are broader issues to be raised as well. Should such programmes be considered exclusively as the first step on the road to a career in

research, or are they better considered as – in European terms – the ‘third cycle of studies’? Should PhD work be designed predominantly for researchers when the evidence suggests that only a minority of students, at least in the arts and humanities, go on to careers exclusively or predominantly rooted in research? If so, should specialist research training and opportunities be funded (or funded as extensively) by states wedded and glued to ‘delivery’, ‘relevance’ and ‘performance indicators’?

This has been a very brief, and necessarily over-simple resume. Nevertheless, it suggests, firstly, that Quality Assurance in the UK has proceeded at a slower pace for doctoral work than at other levels and, secondly, that the existing system is both confusing and less secure than might be expected. Greater emphasis might profitably be placed in two areas. We should seek to clarify what curricular and skills expectations should be required of our doctoral students, whatever their programmes of study. We should also provide more generic guidance to Institutions on how to ensure that success in a doctoral programme does not depend excessively upon the opinion of a single individual and perhaps also upon a single piece of work. Much work remains to be done. I believe that the UK experience should be studied for warnings as well as exemplars.

E.J.Evans
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QUALITY ASSURANCE AT DOCTORAL LEVEL

DESCRIPTOR FOR QUALIFICATIONS AT DOCTORAL (D) LEVEL

Doctorates are awarded to students who have demonstrated:

i) the creation and interpretation of new knowledge, through original research or other advanced scholarship, of a quality to satisfy peer review, extend the forefront of the discipline, and merit publication

ii) a systematic acquisition and understanding of a substantial body of knowledge which is at the forefront of an academic discipline or area of professional practice

iii) the general ability to conceptualise, design and implement a project for the generation of new knowledge, applications or understanding at the forefront of the discipline, and to adjust the project design in the light of unforeseen problems

iv) a detailed understanding of applicable techniques for research and advanced academic enquiry

QUALITY ASSURANCE AT DOCTORAL LEVEL

TYPICALLY, HOLDERS OF THE QUALIFICATION WILL BE ABLE TO:

a) make informed judgements on complex issues in specialist fields, often in the absence of complete data, and be able to communicate their ideas and conclusions clearly and effectively to specialist and non-specialist audiences

b) continue to undertake pure and/or applied research and development at an advanced level, contributing substantially to the development of new techniques, ideas, or approaches;

and will have

c) the qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and largely autonomous initiative in complex and unpredictable situations, in professional or equivalent environments

QUALITY ASSURANCE AT DOCTORAL LEVEL

AHRC SUBJECT-SPECIFIC KNOWLEDGE, UNDERSTANDING AND SKILLS

i) Understanding theoretical issues, the nature of evidence and argument, and the relationships between practice, theory and criticism

ii) Developing research methods and skills and practical techniques appropriate to the project

iii) Developing knowledge and understanding of the research context of the project, and of trends in the discipline

iv) Developing knowledge, understanding and skills in analysis and synthesis of research material

v) Developing knowledge and understanding of related disciplines where appropriate

vi) Specialist knowledge, understanding and skills such as an additional language, methodology or technique

QUALITY ASSURANCE AT DOCTORAL LEVEL

AHRC CORE GENERIC SKILLS

Research students should develop over the course of their doctoral study

i) Written communication skills appropriate for the academic context and beyond

ii) Oral presentation skills, including giving research papers and discussing others' research findings

iii) Designing and managing a project

iv) ICT skills, including appropriate word-processing and other ICT skills (such as creating and using spreadsheets and databases) as relevant to the research base

v) Bibliographical skills and contextualising practice-based research

vi) Identifying and using web-based resources

vii) Record-keeping and record management

QUALITY ASSURANCE AT DOCTORAL LEVEL

AHRC CORE GENERIC SKILLS (CONTINUED)

viii) Personal and career development, and broader employment-related skills (such as participating in workshops and conferences, or, if students undertake undergraduate teaching duties, relevant support and training