How to examine an HDR thesis
(and why it is good to do this and what we as supervisors can learn from the process)

Denise Cuthbert
Dean, School of Graduate Research
Examination of Australian PhDs: some distinctive features

- Generally, examination is conducted entirely on paper
- Unlike US PhDs, examination is entirely *external* and hence analogous to the peer review process
- Its textual modality is thought to give rise to more requests for amendments than other examination modes such as the viva
- This modality is also thought – by critics – to place undue emphasis on the ‘research’ without assessing the ‘researcher’
- Examination is a relatively low-risk exercise for candidates compared with candidature (many more will fail to complete and even get to the examiners than those who fail through the examination itself). Attrition runs high, less than 1% fail.
Research on the Australian thesis examination process and experience


How to go about the examination of an HDR thesis

• Hold a critical awareness of thesis examination as a hybrid activity: part ‘peer’ review, part formative and part summative assessment

• Measure the thesis against the key criteria: originality, contribution to knowledge, contribution to a field, demonstration of a capacity for independent research and appropriate reporting of findings

• Measure the thesis against the objectives set by the author: does the thesis set out to do what it says it will do? Does it fail to do this and/or does it actually do something different from this?

• As distinct from other kinds of research, the research thesis must be clearly located in relevant literature/s: are there gaps in the literature reviewed and engaged with in the thesis?

• Is it structurally sound, logically presented, well argued, clearly expressed?

• Does its presentation reach the standard “as for” publication in the field?
How to go about the examination of a thesis

• I look first at the bibliography for comprehensiveness, currency and accuracy: a good (but not sufficient) measure of scholarship

• Other examiners report reading introduction and conclusion (bookends) first and assessing their consistency

• Remarkably, most experienced examiners will make a provisional assessment of the quality of the work on the basis of the first chapter: further reading tends to confirm this assessment.

• I keep running notes of substantive points and errors noting page numbers and refer to these in detail in my report. The standard I apply is “as for” publication and a pass is conditional on all errors being corrected.

• Substantive points? Minor amendments or major revision and resubmit will depend on number and substance of these points.
The report

• Generally you will be provided with a pro forma with tick boxes and invited to provide a written report to support the assessments registered on the pro forma.

• Endeavour to produce a report that is appropriate in length and detail to the degree being examined.

• How long? 20 pages is too long (unless it is a dissenting report). 2 paragraphs is not long enough.

• Generally 3-4 pages of detailed and engaged commentary

• I try to balance commendations with recommendations (praise with criticism)

• I also try to distinguish between changes needed in order to achieve a pass and those changes which might be made at the point at which the candidate publishes from the work.

• You are at liberty to request to direct written questions to the candidate and reserve your assessment of the thesis pending responses to these questions. (This can avoid major revisions).
Discussion point: Do you have to like/agree with a thesis in order to pass it?

You examine a highly polished, impeccably presented thesis in your field which masterfully employs a methodology which you have little interest in and/or some issues with? The thesis presents original findings.

Can you pass this thesis?

Or, how do you pass this thesis?
Why is it good to examine HDR theses?

• Keep abreast of cutting edge work in your field

• Quantifiable ‘esteem’ factor: invitations to examine are a very good indication of your standing in a field (like invitations to peer review work submitted for publication)

• Examining a thesis also develops supervision skills: reading a thesis with the examiner hat clearly highlights the sorts of issues on which a piece of work can stand or fall.

• Also helps you sort the first order issues from those less important as you prepare your own candidate’s for examination

• Accepting invitations to examine earns you credits in your scholarly networks, creating a pool of prospective examiners on whom you may draw in the future
Questions and discussion