

“It’s nearly time to submit your thesis”
Notes for PhD supervisors in humanities and social sciences
at the University of Wollongong

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5 April 2014

Disclaimer

This is a personal account and not intended to be official advice. Always check with university officials concerning the latest rules governing submission of theses.

You’re supervising a PhD student, and the thesis is getting close to completion. What do you need to do to help ensure a smooth passage through the examination process?

Having supervised several dozen PhD students over the past 25 years, I thought it would be useful to spell out some of things I’ve learned about the procedures, expectations and professional norms that apply to examination of theses. I’ve included some related information about supervision too. I focus on examination of PhD theses; many of the points apply equally to masters, honours and other theses.¹

These comments are for background information only. You should always check the formal process and consult with relevant individuals, especially because the formal processes continue to change and because special circumstances are relevant to many students.

Supervisors

PhD students normally have two supervisors, one called the principal supervisor and the other called a co-supervisor; sometimes there are two or more co-supervisors.

Supervisors are expected to be sufficiently knowledgeable in the field to guide the student to learn research skills, in an apprenticeship fashion, and to write a thesis.

Knowledge of the topic

Supervisors are chosen, in part, because of their expertise in the field of the thesis. However, research students are supposed to be developing their capacities and

¹ Always check the rules relevant to the degree involved.

eventually doing original research, so it is a common experience that at some time the student knows more about the topic than the supervisor. Furthermore, sometimes students gradually shift their topic away from the supervisor's main areas of expertise. Then there are cases in which a supervisor leaves and a new one, who knows relatively little about the topic, takes over.

Supervisors do not need to know everything about a topic in order to give suitable guidance. Students are bound to read sources, undertake surveys, do experiments or do other work that gives the student understanding not shared by the supervisor. This is an essential part of the development of autonomous research capacity.

Supervisors, although they do not have detailed knowledge of everything the student does, need to be assured that the student is performing capably. This can be achieved by seeing that the student's knowledge foundations and research skills are sound, and looking for signs that the student's performance is adequate.

Sometimes a question arises about whether the supervisory team has sufficient knowledge and skills to oversee the student's topic. This can be illustrated by the situation in science and technology studies (STS), which is the social study of science and technology, drawing on fields including history, sociology, political science and economics. Within STS there is a tradition of "controversy studies," involving social analyses of scientific and technological controversies, such as over solar neutrinos, microwaves, cancer therapies or climate change. These sorts of studies often involve some examination of the scientific research in the field. Some students have the advantage of a technical background; others learn about the field through their studies.

Supervisors of controversy studies theses do not need specialist expertise. For example, the supervisor of a thesis on the nuclear power controversy does not need a PhD in nuclear physics, nor is such a degree sufficient for supervising such a thesis. Indeed, nuclear physics expertise is a relatively small component of what it is required. Nevertheless, to ensure an adequate treatment of technical aspects of the subject, there are several options: adding a co-supervisor with specialist knowledge; inviting a specialist to read drafts of relevant chapters; and submitting articles to refereed journals.

The same approach applies in all sorts of other areas, especially on topics that involve knowledge in different fields, for example media and politics or history and psychology. In many cases, it is useful to invite someone with specialist knowledge to read through the final draft of the thesis.

Length of thesis

The usual PhD thesis in the social sciences is commonly said to be 80,000 to 100,000 words long. However, at Wollongong — unlike some other universities — there is no word limit, and some theses are much longer. Quite a few theses I've supervised have been longer than 100,000 words, sometimes as long as 200,000 words. There is no lower limit either.

Some students find it easier to write a long thesis than a shorter one. My view is that there is no point in forcing a student to shorten their thesis if the overall quality is consistent, especially if shortening requires significant effort. For examiners, clarity and readability are more important than length.

Duration of candidature

Nominally, full-time PhD students are expected to finish in three years, or six years for part-time enrolment. In practice, this target is seldom reached. Only half or so of enrolled students finish their degrees and, of those who do, a more common length of enrolment is four or five years. Some students receive a scholarship. Because most scholarships are for a maximum of 3.5 years, it is often advisable for students to switch to part-time enrolment after this, or take leave of absence.

It is worth knowing that some successful academics took a very long time to finish their PhDs. In recent years, the Australian government has put financial pressure on universities to push research students to finish as soon as possible, but nonetheless most students still take quite a bit longer than the expected three or four years. This is especially true in the humanities and social sciences, where many PhD students are mature age and have other commitments, such as jobs and children.

Examiner procedures

Most Australian PhDs are by thesis only, without any coursework component. Therefore, assessing the quality of the thesis is crucially important. There are two principal points of scrutiny: the supervisors and the examiners. Before a thesis is submitted for external examination, the supervisors have to sign a statement attesting to its presentation, authorship and content. Beyond the formalities, supervisors have a stake in students submitting a well written and well argued thesis, because a poorly constructed thesis can reflect badly on the supervisors as well as the student.

At the University of Wollongong, PhD theses are examined by two external scholars of high standing. Four or five possible examiners are chosen by the supervisors and student, and approved by the head of postgraduate studies for the relevant school. The supervisors and student sign their approval of these potential examiners. This is a protection for students, to prevent selection of examiners hostile to the perspective taken in the thesis, as can occasionally occur when examiners are chosen by departments, as occurs in some places.

(It is possible for students to submit their theses without support from their supervisors. This option is available to overcome situations in which a supervisor is unreasonably holding back a student. It is quite rare for students to take this step. In such instances, the Thesis Examination Committee will decide whether the thesis can be sent to examiners, and may seek the informal opinion of an independent Wollongong academic.)

From the four or five potential examiners, the supervisors then select two as the actual examiners, with approval of the head of postgraduate studies. Supporting evidence of the suitability of the examiners must be submitted. The student is not supposed to know the identity of the examiners until after their reports have been submitted.

Over a number of years, the University of Wollongong has gradually changed its procedures for selection of examiners, making them ever more stringent concerning potential conflicts of interest. No more than one examiner can be from Australia or from the candidate's country of origin. Examiners cannot work at the University of Wollongong or been employees in the previous five years, and cannot have collaborated with the supervisors in the previous five years. The same examiner cannot be used more than once per year by the same examiner. Anyone who has assisted the candidate's research in any way, for example suggesting methods to use or commenting on drafts of chapters or articles, is not allowed to be an examiner.

These and other rules concerning conflict of interest are designed to prevent choosing of examiners who will give the thesis an easy run due to personal connections. There are some supervisors who do not want their students' theses to undergo scrutiny by people outside their personal network. These sorts of problems are especially prevalent in technical disciplines, where problems also arise due to co-authorship of papers on which a student's thesis is constructed.

Examiners read the thesis, write a report and make a recommendation from a list of options. At Wollongong, the options are

- (a) no changes required
- (b) make minor changes to the satisfaction of the head of postgraduate studies
- (c) make substantial changes to the satisfaction of the head of postgraduate studies
- (d) make substantial changes to the satisfaction of the head of postgraduate studies and sighted by the examiner(s) for confirmation that the changes are satisfactory
- (e) make substantial changes and resubmit the thesis to examiners
- (f) attend an oral examination
- (g) receive a masters degree (possibly after changes)
- (h) fail

The examiner reports, and a recommended option from the head of postgraduate studies, are considered by the Thesis Examination Committee (TEC), made up of representatives from the major campus units. If the examiners differ significantly in their recommendations — for example one examiner ticks recommendation b and other recommendation e —the TEC nearly always seeks a report from a third examiner.

The TEC's recommendation is then sent to the candidate, who has a year to make any requested changes. If resubmission is required, then the TEC will consider the reports of the examiners the second time around.

Relatively few theses pass with no changes, probably less than ten percent. Most theses require minor or major changes, with a relatively small percentage requiring resubmission. Outright failure is rare, amounting to perhaps one or two percent of theses. This reflects the screening by supervisors of theses. Failures can be an acute embarrassment to supervisors, not to mention being devastating for candidates.

In most cases, the TEC requires that all changes recommended by all the examiners be made to the thesis. Members of the TEC seldom have specialist expertise in the field of the thesis, and therefore address their task by following the recommendations of the examiners rather than second-guessing them. In a few cases, there are serious differences of opinion between examiners, in which case the TEC may be guided by a majority opinion (when a third examiner has reported) or by advice from the head of postgraduate studies.

Duration of the examination process

The examination process can take several months, sometimes quite a few months. Examiners are supposed to report within six weeks, but many take longer, despite weekly reminders from the Research Student Centre. The TEC meets once per month to consider examiner reports; waiting for the next meeting can add a week to a month to the process. If a third examiner is considered necessary, this can require several more months before the candidate receives the examiner reports. If the candidate has to make changes, this is an additional delay, sometimes up to a year for major changes. If the thesis, after being revised, is resubmitted to examiners, the process essentially starts all over. Even after the final version of the thesis is approved by the head of postgraduate studies, there is a delay before graduation. Some students choose to graduate through conferral by the Vice-Chancellor, which happens monthly; many choose instead to graduate at a formal ceremony, held twice per year.

Taking into account all the steps in the process, it is possible to graduate as soon as three or four months after submission, but this is rare. A more usual delay is six to nine months, and periods over a year are not uncommon. The most frequent sources of delay are tardy examiners and time taken to make revisions.

Choosing examiners

The choice of examiners is vitally important, but is an imprecise art. Examiners normally must have PhDs and are expected to have relevant expertise and an overall sympathy for the approach taken by the students. It is unfair to send a thesis relying on positivist epistemology to a poststructuralist examiner, or vice versa.

One of the very few studies in this area found that most experienced examiners approach their task in a similar way, reading the thesis looking for evidence of what the candidate has accomplished.² It is commonly said that experienced academics are safer choices as examiners, because they have seen many theses, either as examiners or supervisors. Recent PhD graduates are sometimes examiners, but have fewer benchmarks for comparison: sometimes the only thesis they know well is their own, which of course is of a high standard, so they may expect a similar calibre from others.

² Gerry Mullins and Margaret Kiley, “‘It’s a PhD, not a Nobel Prize’: how experienced examiners assess research theses,” *Studies in Higher Education*, 27(4), 2002, pp. 369–386.

Another common piece of advice is to choose examiners who are in the field, but not necessarily specialists in precisely the same area as the thesis being examined. If there are three people in the world who have researched the history of Irish pulp mills, it might be risky to send a thesis on this topic to one of them, in case they have a particular preferred orientation to the topic or are threatened by a potential competitor. Someone with a broader perspective might be more suitable, for example someone with expertise in pulp mills generally, in Irish history or in the history of technology. A few examiners judge theses harshly when they do not conform to their own interpretations about the topic.

If a thesis crosses disciplines, choosing examiners can be especially tricky. An examiner from each of two disciplines is a possibility, but the risk is that each such disciplinary specialist will judge the thesis mainly on its treatment of their own field, thus creating an unrealistically high expectation for the thesis. In such circumstances, it is worthwhile considering examiners who are generalists or who are known for being open-minded. Narrow specialists should be avoided.

Because the choice of examiners is so crucial, time and care should be taken in selecting them. After a student has put years of work into a thesis, rushing a decision about examiners is unwise.

Ultimately, there are no guarantees. The thesis may be excellent, yet your ideal examiner finds shortcomings. It is best to prepare students for the likelihood of having to make revisions. Perfection is impossible; it is reasonable to submit theses when they are good enough, rather than demanding an ever-increasing standard. On the other hand, sometimes there is a pleasant surprise, when a thesis passes with no changes.

Contacting examiners

If possible, one of the supervisors should informally contact the nominated examiners before submission. If they agree to be examiners, then the thesis can be sent to them immediately after submission.

Normally I email each of the two prospective examiners about a month before the expected date of submission, inviting them to be an examiner, telling when the thesis is expected to be submitted, and attaching the thesis abstract. For examiners who may not be familiar with the Australian system, such as ones from the US, I tell a bit about the expectations for theses and examination reports. If they agree to be examiners, then the nomination-of-examiners form can be filled out. The majority of people

approached agree to be examiners, which is a reflection of the sense of collegiality in the academic community. Examiners receive an honorarium of a few hundred dollars, but this is just a token considering the many hours of work involved in reading a thesis and writing a report.

At this point, the student does not officially know which individuals have been asked. However, if someone declines to be an examiner, it may be necessary to go back to the student and negotiate additional names.

There is no requirement to have the examiners arranged before submission. In some cases, for example when a deadline has been imposed, examiners may be chosen after submission.

It is important for the supervisors not to say anything to the examiners about the student or about the quality of the thesis, for example about how good it is or that it has particular weak points or that the student has had to surmount some challenging obstacles. Ideally, the examiners evaluate the thesis entirely on its own merits, without inside knowledge about the student or the candidature. Examiners are not supposed to know the identity of other examiners, so their reports are prepared independently.

Examiners are instructed to send their reports to the Research Student Centre. Occasionally an examiner will contact me, for example to ask a question or to tell me they are delayed in reading the thesis. I tell them that all communication should go through the RSC. For everyone concerned, it is better not to discuss the content of the thesis with the examiner until after the entire examination process is completed.

Publications

In the sciences, it is routine for research students to publish articles during their candidature, often in collaboration with their supervisors and perhaps others in a team. This can raise problems in assessing the student's contribution and ensuring sufficient originality on the student's part, and sometimes may involve exploitation of the student's work.³

In the humanities and social sciences, it is far less common for supervisors to co-author with students. Indeed, many supervisors refuse, as a matter of principle, any such co-authorship. It is also less common for students to be encouraged to publish

³ Brian Martin, "Countering supervisor exploitation," *Journal of Scholarly Publishing*, Vol. 45, No. 1, October 2013, pp. 74–86.

before submitting their theses; some supervisors advise their students to concentrate on their thesis and not work on articles.

The idea behind this advice is that a student can publish papers after completing their thesis. However, students often feel burnt out after submission, and lack the incentive to write articles. Furthermore, writing articles is a somewhat different skill than writing a thesis, and requires practice. Supervisors may feel after thesis submission that their main job is over, with the student being left high and dry, with no papers written or submitted.

The lack of encouragement to publish articles (sole authored or co-authored) is gradually changing, in part due to a push by university officials to encourage greater research outputs (with the sciences seen as a model) and in part due to greater competition for academic jobs. Decades ago, having a PhD was often enough for obtaining a lectureship in some fields, but now several publications, or perhaps a book and several articles, may be needed to obtain an entry level academic post. Ambitious students realise they need to publish during their candidature.

When submitting their thesis, I advise my students to include a page, towards the beginning, listing “Publications in support of this thesis.” Publications, especially in refereed journals, signal to examiners that referees have already scrutinised some of the student’s work.

Consultation

Procedures keep changing. I’ve been caught out on several occasions when I assumed that processes would operate the same as with previous students. So it is wise to check with the Research Student Centre and the head of postgraduate studies to make sure everything is being done according to the rules. It is also wise to consult with colleagues, at Wollongong and elsewhere, about obtaining comments on thesis drafts and obtaining suggestions about possible examiners.

Supervisors can learn a lot by talking to other PhD students, current and graduated, to learn about their worries and experiences. Sometimes rumours spread among students, or even among academics, that have little or no basis.

After submission

In the final months before submission, many students work incredibly hard. The actual submission can seem like an anti-climax. After concentrating on the thesis topic

incredibly hard, suddenly there is an absence or silence that lasts for months. A key focus of the student's life is missing, and this can sometimes result in lethargy and aimlessness.

It is worth spending time with students planning further activities, for example giving talks, submitting papers to academic journals, writing popular accounts, converting the thesis to a book, or starting a new research project. A transition plan helps to maintain the momentum developed while writing the thesis.

It is also valuable to take time to celebrate the achievement. Students can organise several celebrations, with their friends, family and fellow students — even with their supervisors! There can be celebrations again when the thesis, after revisions if necessary, is finally approved. And then again at graduation. Supervisors may feel like celebrating too, having helped contribute to a great achievement.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to the many staff and students who have helped me learn about supervising and thesis submission. Sue Flint and David Mercer offered useful comments on a draft of these notes.