

The prospect of mandatory oral PhD examinations much be considered carefully

As a member of the School of Design's research committee I was asked to provide feedback to the FABLE executive on the GRS draft proposal and guidelines for mandatory oral defence of doctoral theses. I believe there is much to consider here, broadly and in the finer details. The draft, if approved, poses a number of questions and challenges for a faculty like FABLE which is composed of such varied disciplines and professional courses.

I also write from experience as a long-serving PhD supervisor and thesis examiner for several Go8 universities, a one-time School of Design (ALVA) Associate Dean (Research) and Graduate Research Coordinator with responsibilities that included oversight of examinations for HDR candidates from the 3+ disciplines in the School.

The draft proposes, more or less, a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to the implementation of the oral defence and the justification for the initiative, potential practical and ethical challenges that will ensue implementation troubles me a great deal. I fear, if implemented across the entire University, uniformly and without allowing for alternatives (including the current mode(s) of examination to remain in cases), the policy will imperil initiatives undertaken here, in the School of Design in recent years, to foster and build our HDR program—possibly in other disciplines and professional courses across the University as well.

The case is not made why an oral defence will obviously enhance the rigour of examination in all cases, which otherwise leads us to the prospect of it becoming universally applied and mandatory at UWA by 2020. One can see in some disciplines, perhaps in the sciences where HDR students may be working together on a common project or overlapping project, that it becomes necessary to 'disaggregate' each student's involvement and acquired expertise so it can be examined. In such a case an oral defence, to complement a written thesis or other outcome of research makes sense. In many other cases, however, notably in many humanities disciplines, including design and critical studies in architecture, landscape architecture and visual arts (also art history) where the relation between one student and assessable outcomes is direct, the oral defence seems unnecessary and could make examination even more difficult owing to practical and other circumstances.

Neither is the case made why an oral defence will make an obvious improvement to the 'research student experience'. It may, in fact, make it worse, if it becomes even more difficult to locate appropriate and willing examiners or the IT breaks down or the student and thesis may be brilliant, but the former is disabled by intractable shyness or oral communication impairment.

I ran the idea of mandatory oral defence by three present or (recently) former associate deans (research education or training) or GRC's at the universities of Melbourne, Sydney and Queensland in areas of research cognate to my own and my colleagues in the School of Design. Only one institution of the three, UQ, has currently implemented such a scheme I am told, and only recently, though it would seem the idea has been or is currently under consideration at the other two. None of my contacts were enthusiastic about the idea.

One replied that while their institution did not have such a scheme, they were familiar with two others that did, including one additional Go8 university and RMIT. My contact added "But having been an examiner again for both these last year via viva and exhibition I certainly don't think it adds rigour... rather it muddled the whole process. And then I was

wheeled in by [supervisor's name redacted] to re-examine a PhD this year because the viva was so hopeless and watching the whole damn thing on video afterwards, which I had to endure, would not instil confidence. I don't think many examiners are able to do it."

Another contact replied that one of their objections to the idea of mandatory oral defence was that "anyone nervous, painfully shy, with anxiety disorders or a range of other health problems) would likely be materially disadvantaged by such a policy." S/he added that had *they* (my contact and respondent) been a prospective HDR student at an institution where an oral was required they would have gone elsewhere for enrolment.

I was thinking about a recent examination in my School where two examiners were employed by Australian institutions, but the third, by a Brazilian university and resident there. What would the examination have been like if instead of three, there were two examiners, and one of these was the South American asked to examine the thesis according to the proposed policy and guidelines? Assuming the Brazilian would not have come to Perth for two nights' worth of accommodation (see below, additional challenges) and would have skyped or 'zoomed' in, how would the examination have proceeded with one examiner interviewing the HDR student remotely, via digital software, and the other, present in the room?

Taking a 9am to 5pm working day as reasonable and given, the Brazilian would have had to make themselves available for the exam period (conceivably, according to the draft guidelines, for 3 hours for the oral defence and then for two periods of unknown duration before and afterwards) between the hours of 10pm to 6am *their* time. Alternatively, the members of the Thesis Examination Panel in Perth would have had to make themselves available between 8pm to 4am local time so the South American could fit the task into a standard working day there. One can only imagine what would happen over time were such a regime to be implemented. Decisions about the choice of examiners would become made on grounds of geography and time-zones, rather than finding the best person for the job. Then, again, practical challenges include IT issues and possible faults. I don't know much about South American telecoms and services, but where I live in Fremantle, I'd be very surprised to have continuous, uninterrupted Wifi for, say, a 5+ hour period. I also find long meetings via my computer screen cumbersome and irritating.

Thinking further about the challenges, the draft proposal and guidelines raise additional concerns:

With the reduction of examiners from three to two isn't the classification of theses likely to become *more* difficult in ways as well as limit the scope to establish plans for addressing corrections? As a supervisor I find it handy to have three sets of comments to 'triangulate' and come up with such a plan.

Practical issues, including smaller pool of willing examiners, inadequate or faulty IT to facilitate remote examinations (as above), constrained timeframe for examination (tied to periods of examiner availability for Perth-based assessment, travel times, etc.), costs.

Workload and availability issues for supervisors, GRC's and administrative staff to facilitate oral defences.

Subjective issues including possibility of belligerent examiners appearing together in the same room and/or via teleconference. As it stands, any one examiner of the three chosen by the Board of the GRS for a given HDR (written) examination does not know the identity

of the other two. Under this scheme they will and possible conflicts of interest and/or personality may have to be figured into the choice of examiners who will ultimately be obliged to participate in the oral defence.

Having determined the thesis as “ready to go to oral defence’ may render the defence an ‘add-on’ activity, a ritual devoid of any real value as one sees happening in some European countries or universities.

Are we not likely to find a reduced number of prospective Australian examiners willing to fly to Perth to arrive at a certain hour allowing them to meet with the Chair (in person) and the second examiner (in person or via teleconference), agree to an agenda, resolve areas of disagreement, then proceed with the examination (possibly three hours), arrive at a single determination, wait while the Chair prepares the final report and sign it, return to hotel (possibly, if there’s time) or otherwise get back on a plane that’s possibly the midnight horror?

Do we really expect an international examiner would be willing to travel to Perth for two nights’ worth of accommodation? One can only imagine what would happen over time were such a regime to be implemented. The costs of managing the scheme would grow and/or Schools would have to chip in to cover the additional expense of more nights or scrap the idea of international examiners showing up in Perth entirely. Short of that outcome, I can imagine another, where cash-strapped Schools would try to obtain ‘added value’ from the visit of an examiner (a commendable, but problematic move) by having them give a lecture, participate in teaching or some other activity—enterprise which could lead to additional conflicts of interest when it comes to the examination itself.

The role of the Chair of the Panel could become difficult to fill, particularly in smaller Schools or disciplines with limited numbers of senior staff ‘with a strong track record....etc.’ In some fields, for instance, Australian architectural history, where there is a relatively limited number of senior experts ‘with a strong track record....etc.’ in the country and so qualified and willing to serve as examiner, conflicts of interests are more likely to occur in such cases, where the Chair is required not to have had a “supervisory, personal, business or other relationship...with other members of the examination panel.”

Finally, the draft proposal and guidelines post and additional burden on an already reform-weary UWA academic staff community.

I strongly urge University authorities to reconsider the policy’s adoption universally, in a single form, across the entirety of UWA.

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12 May 2017