Achieving a PhD degree: What examiner reports tell us about the doctoral examination process

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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.

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