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Professional learning: lessons for supervision from doctoral examining

Gina Wisker^{a*} and Margaret Kiley^b

^a*Centre for Learning and Teaching, University of Brighton, Brighton, UK;* ^b*CEDAM, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia*

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Most research into research supervision practice focuses on functional, collegial or problematic power-related experiences. Work developing the supervisory role concentrates on new supervisors, and on taught development and support programmes. Most literature on academics' professional learning concentrates on learning to be a university teacher and, latterly, a researcher. However, the research supervisor's role is constantly evolving in response to experiences with students, and reflection on this can contribute to professional learning. Initial research suggests examiners learn from examining experiences feeding back into supervisory roles. We argue that being a thesis examiner provides academic staff with opportunities to learn about their own supervisory practices, enhancing their professional learning. Our research reports on examiner perceptions of learning from examining doctoral theses, which can be taken back into supervisory practice, and translated into advice for other supervisors and doctoral students.

Keywords: examining; doctoral supervision; professional learning

Introduction

Research supervision is undertaken as a variously intense learning relationship between supervisor or supervisory team and individual student or research project group, depending on discipline and context. Much research into student and supervisor interactions focuses on the continuum between supportive collegial interactions enabling students to take ownership and develop (Lee, 2008; Watson & Schuller, 2009; Wisker, 2005; Wisker, Robinson, Trafford, Warnes, & Creighton, 2003), and more problematic power relationships emphasising hierarchy, which can lead to excessive control or neglect. How supervisors learn about their practice is considered in some research literature (Bills, 2004), through development literature (McCormack & Pamphilon, 2004), and workshops supporting such development. Research supervision is a role undertaken when supervisors themselves have already (in some cases just recently) gained their PhD and published. For some, the only exposure to models of supervision is the practice of their own supervisor(s). For more experienced academic staff, the supervision of undergraduates and master's students might enable their exposure to, and development of, a set of models, theories and reflection processes (Hammond, Ryland, Tennant, & Boud, 2010). Most

*Corresponding author. Email: G.Wisker@brighton.ac.uk

new supervisors are expected to undertake a workshop or course for a 'licence' to supervise. There is already an expressed tension here between the emphasis on initial development, and the long term, ongoing nature of supervisory practice with a variety of students whose learning behaviours and demands on supervisory support are likely to be at least as varied as their projects. Hammond et al. (2010) suggest another way that supervisors learn their craft is by being on teams with experienced supervisors who model good practice. However, there is little about learning from being a thesis examiner.

Our questions are: What and how do supervisors learn from being examiners? What could examiners take from their examining experience to their supervisory relationships and practices? How can the experience of PhD examining feed into professional learning, both formal and informal, for the benefit and clarity of examiners, supervisors and students? These questions are particularly pertinent given the perplexing finding by Hammond et al. (2010) that workshops related to examining theses were least attended yet rated as most useful by their respondents, all practising supervisors in Australasia.

While there is literature on the expectations and practices of examiners of doctoral theses, work carried out into the professional learning of university academic staff has to date addressed neither the learning of examiners nor ways in which that learning feeds back into supervisory practice. Our research on examiners' professional learning for supervisory practice grows from our own experiences as examiners and supervisors, and from the literature on professional learning (Åkerlind, 2003; McAlpine & Asghar, 2010); on supervisors (Pearson & Brew, 2002; Wisker, 2005); and on examiners (Hartley & Fox, 2004; Lovat, Holbrook, & Bourke, 2008; Mullins & Kiley, 2002; Trafford & Leshem, 2008).

Professional learning

Professional learning of supervisors takes place both informally and formally and is the subject of a range of literature (Chambaz, 2008; Cribb & Gewirtz, 2006; Deem, 2006; Halse, 2007; Pearson, 2005). Much informal learning is situated learning, in which the supervisor is a member of a community of practice (Wenger, 2007) participating in legitimate peripheral participation (Vygotsky, Cole, John-Steiner, Scribner, & Souberman, 1978). Other learning takes place in formal settings with facilitated inputs, sometimes with syllabi and assessments. We argue that much else is gained through reflecting on professional practice. Halse and Malfroy (2010, p. 89) comment: 'doctoral supervision is a specific, specialized type of professional work'. Their research discovered that supervisors see distinct shifts in ways in which they conceptualise and practise doctoral supervision towards increased professionalisation, the distance of personal relationships and intervention in students' work to ensure quality. Supervisors are often isolated in their work: 'The actual practices of postgraduate pedagogy have been, traditionally, a somewhat mysterious and intimate phenomena, particularly within the arts, humanities and social sciences' (Halse & Malfroy, 2010, p. 89). McWilliam (2002, p. 107) describes research supervision as an excessively stimulating and even 'seductive' business, and others, including Vilkinas (2007) and Lee (2008), develop frameworks and management models attempting to explain its variation. Many books guide supervisor development (Delamont, Parry, & Atkinson, 1998; Denholm & Evans, 2007; Taylor & Beasley, 2005; Wisker, 2005[2012]). However, Boud and Lee (2005,

2009), Green and Lee (1995) and Halse and Malfroy (2010) indicate that in the current climate of intense focus on research, and growing postgraduate numbers, a more strongly developed discourse of pedagogy for research education is needed.

As with supervision and research (Pearson & Brew, 2002), the examination of doctoral research is located in a variety of learning environments inflected by discipline, university history and standing and cultural context. Research to date does not focus in depth on either disciplinary differences or cultural context in supervisory practices, and further work needs undertaking to clarify expectations and processes arising from those differences.

With the worldwide imperative for graduating thousands more doctorates in the next decade (HELTASA, 2010; IDERN, 2010), a new emphasis is needed on professional learning development for examiners and supervisors to accompany that growth and ensure shared values, criteria and behaviours. We suggest that findings from research into thesis examiner practices can contribute to that discourse, professionalism and the development of shared good practices through *supervisor learning*, particularly learning from examiner practices.

Supervisor learning

Supervisory development and training is now widespread across the UK (following the review of provision: Metcalfe, Thompson, & Green, 2002), Europe and Australasia. In some universities, including the University of Brighton, where one author works, there are compulsory courses inducting supervisors into roles and responsibilities, acting as a 'licence to practice', while elsewhere, such as Gothenburg, Sweden, there are semester-long certificated courses. Some universities follow initial development with supervisor fora to encourage sharing of issues, good practice and the latest research on supervisory and doctoral practices.

Supervisors can benefit from research-informed literature of good supervisory practice. So, supervisor development workshops run by both authors use research on examiner expectations, processes and practices (Holbrook, Bourke, Lovat, & Dally, 2005; Mullins & Kiley, 2002) and on characteristics examiners recognise as necessary for passable and good-quality theses (Trafford & Leshem, 2008; Wisker, 2010) to encourage supervisors to consider ways to work with PhD students to help them achieve.

Examiner practices as a learning context

In addition to actually examining theses, academics learn about being thesis examiners in four main ways: from being examined themselves as doctoral candidates; attendance at workshops relating to examining theses; the increasingly popular practice in Australia and the UK of sharing examiners' reports with the other examiners; and by being engaged in oral examinations (vivas). Based on analysing experience of attending UK PhD vivas, Trafford (2002) provides insights into examiner practices which could be useful for PhD students. Having been part of the viva for other candidates, examiners can point their own PhD students in the direction of the final exam and viva.

Research into the practices of examiners reveals that most set out anticipating the thesis will pass (Mullins & Kiley, 2002). Supervisory committees or teams contribute to this gate-keeping process, as do research degree committees. Much

has been written about appropriate quality (Mullins & Kiley, 2002; Wisker, 2010) and research into examiner practices reveals processes of scrutiny of the thesis, and the criteria (Lovitts, 2007; Winter, Griffiths, & Green, 2000) against which a thesis is judged by examiners (Holbrook et al., 2005; Kiley, 2009; Kiley & Mullins, 2004; Mullins & Kiley, 2002). Across a range of studies (Holbrook et al., 2005; Lovitts, 2007; Mullins & Kiley, 2002; Tinkler & Jackson, 2004) there is general agreement that examiners seek a number of characteristics in a good doctoral thesis, including: critical analysis and argument; a rigorous, self-critical approach; contribution to knowledge; originality, creativity and a degree of risk taking; comprehensiveness and coherence; a scholarly approach; sound presentation and structure; and sound methodology. Given that examiners can identify these characteristics, we suggest this be usefully fed into development activities for supervisors and examiners alike and advice given to students carrying out their research, when preparing the final submission and preparing for the viva.

Methodology and methods

This study involved two stages. Stage 1 re-examined three previous data-sets while asking the questions: Did the interviewees report any learning occurring while examining that contributed to their subsequent supervisory practice and if so, what was it?

Stage 2 involved undertaking interviews with a third sub-sample of experienced examiners to clarify and confirm earlier findings.

In Stage 1, the first study involved interviews with 40 very experienced Australian examiners across the disciplines to determine how they examined theses, why they examined the way that they did, and what they had in mind when they examined. The 40 examiners came from seven Australian universities, although many had (a) examined for a range of universities outside Australia, and (b) worked or undertaken doctoral studies outside Australia, and were conversant with a range of doctoral education processes. Of the interviewees, 59% were male and 41% female. Fifty-four per cent came from Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics disciplines and 46% from Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences. Each was interviewed using a semi-structured protocol, with the interviews transcribed and analysed for themes and major issues. The analysis for this data-set employed a grounded theory approach given that it was one of the first studies of its kind in the field. When the data-set for this project was re-examined it emerged that over 50% of those interviewed had, to a greater or lesser extent, discussed how the process of examining had influenced their supervisory practice.

Still in Stage 1, the second study involved interviews conducted for the UK Doctoral Learning Journeys (DLJ, 2007–2010) and the third study was the parallel project (1998–2011). DLJ was a UK-based, staged study focusing only on Humanities, Social Sciences and Health, involving a large-scale survey to doctoral students across the UK, the mapping of the doctoral learning journey of 30 students and interviews with 20 supervisors and 20 examiners across eight participating universities. The ‘parallel project’ involved interviews with 20 supervisors and 12 examiners outside the UK, across all disciplines including the sciences, to augment the DLJ project.

These linked studies involved interviews with examiners who had each examined 15 or more doctoral theses and were also experienced supervisors. Each participant was interviewed using a semi-structured protocol, with the interviews

transcribed, read through thoroughly and analysed by identifying themes and major issues emerging in examiner language and comments. We were careful to ask specific but not leading questions and themes emerged from exhaustive reading and categorising of the evidence in the transcripts of examiner interviews. Interview extracts were categorised in terms of emerging themes discussed and evidenced using quotations from the examiners, below. The findings indicated that most interviewees reported learning from the examining process which they could take back into their supervision.

Following re-examination of these earlier studies, we then undertook Stage 2 which involved interviews with a small sub-sample ($n=6$) of experienced examiners/supervisors from the DLJ and parallel project, from all disciplines and a range of countries, selected based on their specific identification of learning gained from examining. We invited our experienced cohort to focus on the learning gained from the examining process that influenced their supervisory practices and sought responses mixing both personal narrative and professional lessons learned, so respondents were invited to comment beyond specific questions if this explained their learning.

The questions (deriving from the research questions) were:

- (1) What and how do supervisors learn from being examiners?
- (2) As an examiner what have you taken/could you take from your examining experience to your supervisory relationships and practices?
- (3) How can the experience of PhD examining feed into professional learning, both formal and informal, for the benefit and clarity of examiners, supervisors and students?

This second stage was based on recognition of reflective practice underpinning and informing much professional learning (Pearson & Kayrooz, 2004). A response mode enabling a personal professional narrative with a view to providing lessons learned based on experience and reflective insights could, we felt, provide rich data to act latterly as information and guidance for other examiners who are also supervisors, and for supervisors and students more generally.

Interpretation

The interview data interpreted and discussed, below, derives from both Stages 1 and 2. The results from Stage 2 highlight several themes concerning supervisors learning from examining. Our analysis indicates that there are two broad findings. The first was overall learning about the research in the thesis, for example, what examiners seek regarding issues such as standards and quality; writing; use of literature; and coherence. The second concerned the processes: reflecting on development of supervisory practices and the organisation of the examination. We categorised respondents according to discipline and gender. As respondent A reported: ‘The simple thing you learn is the rules of the game – they help you to prepare [your own] students’ (Soc Sci Male: A, 2).

More specifically, lessons learned include an appreciation of:

- Quality and standards, in terms of master’s and PhD differences, and generally what to expect in a good or passable thesis.

- The significance of up-to-date literature and analysis rather than description.
- Writing the text as a coherent document in argument and style and presenting it in a scholarly fashion.
- Processes of supervision and examination.
- Clarifying role as a supervisor, including supporting candidates progressing through the learning process and gaining a level of confidence, ownership and self-actualisation allowing them to ‘defend their thesis’ in the text or oral examination.
- How different examiners approach the assessment process.

We do not claim that this is an exhaustive study of examiners and what they might learn from examining but rather an initial foray into supervisor learning through thesis examination.

The research thesis

Respondents consistently reported insights into what made a ‘good’ thesis including: appreciation of quality and suitable standards; appropriate, scholarly writing; situating the research within the literature; and comprehensiveness and coherence.

Quality and standards

Examiner A discusses learning from other experienced examiners and perceiving differences between master’s and doctoral theses:

What I learnt from my early experiences of doctoral examining concerned the significant scholarly differences between Masters and Doctoral research. The clarification/nature of gaps in knowledge, and then the claim for contributions to knowledge were approached and handled quite differently by many examiners – and perhaps this told me about the individuality which they brought to their role. Similarly, levels of conceptualisation were different in the two programmes as was the approach to, and issue of, the literature and conceptualisation. (Soc Sci Male: A, 2)

For students who are moving between master’s and doctoral studies, having a supervisor who can both articulate such insights and model differences in scope and depth at the conceptual levels expected could be very useful.

Respondent G discussed the nature of quality in a PhD thesis in her discipline and how her awareness of this fed back into her own supervisory practices and advice to students. Criticality is the main learning point here. As an examiner, her experience of identifying in theses how, where, why and in what ways students defend their choices of methodology and theorising influences her work in her discipline. Students need to learn not just to slavishly carry out their research but to be able to defend their choices, and to be critical about their questions, methodology and results. They should develop questions, identify and defend answers and choices. Those who did this in the theses which she examined offered a model – feeding into useful teaching to benefit her own students.

Respondent 29, an experienced Social Sciences examiner, reported something that goes through his head when examining is ‘I’m *%#@ if I’d let that out’ (Soc Sci Male: 29, 1). He reflects on his own supervisory practices while examining. At one stage, he was aware that one of his own students was about to submit with the

exact same problems he was seeing in the thesis he was examining – and yet he knew he had done his job as a supervisor.

Writing

The importance of clear, accurate and scholarly writing was something many interviewees reported learning from examining. For example, Respondent F concentrates on advice on the importance of the writing process, learned from examinations he has conducted and, in the UK context, attended at vivas where the written text is interrogated:

Examiners read a doctoral text. The thesis as text provides the evidence which enables them to make a judgment about whether the candidate has produced an acceptable piece of doctoral writing. Therefore, supervisors must emphasise that good writing is at the heart of the matter. They need to help their students understand what good writing at the doctoral level entails. Doctoral research is, in effect, doctoral writing. Doctoral writing is making meaning ...

... doctoral writing is not simply a matter of writing-up since it is also a process of creative writing. Supervisors need to become writing coaches or writing mentors. (Soc Sci Male: F, 2)

The literature

Interviewees commented on the literature review as a significant reflection of the quality of the thesis, learning which they actively took back to supervisory practice. Respondent 5, for example, reported:

It is unusual that if someone does a poor job of the literature review that they will suddenly improve, or vice versa [he expects that the literature review should tell a story]. There would not be many supervisors who would allow a thesis out where at least the literature review wasn't OK. (Sci Male: 5, 1)

Examiner G had been made very aware of the importance of regularly updating literature; levels of risk that should or should not be taken in writing a thesis; the importance of presentation; and student learning from the doctoral education process, noting:

... the time lapse between the initial reading which is done by the student and the up to the minute literature which might be known to the examiner ... I prompt my students to keep the references current.

... ultimately there has to be a balance between what the student wants to write and the basic elements required in a thesis, this particularly applies to the 'maverick' students or a student from a culture which is different from that of the examiners.

Being an examiner also emphasised to me that ultimately the student must have ownership of the thesis and be aware of the learning that has taken place. (Soc Sci Female: G, 2)

Comprehensiveness and coherence

Coherence and consistency were issues our respondents became more aware of through examining theses. Examiner G reports that:

As a supervisor, having an opportunity to look at what is required of a PhD student and the thesis from an examiner's perspective has made an impact on the way in which I subsequently supervise my own students. When I was an examiner at xxx, it struck me that it is important that my students are aware that the examiner will encounter the thesis as a finished product, not having been on the journey with the student. Therefore the student should clearly state their reasons for choosing the topic, particularly if the topic is culturally sensitive. Making the context clear is so important. (Soc Sci Female: G, 2)

Respondent B commented that, having been an examiner, she is more able to assist students to consider how their written work appears to examiners and the need for consistency:

Yes I don't think students know, I tell them that, but I don't think they are aware that we read like that. I mean I read beginning, end and then ... I will go back and forth and check the consistency of the theories. (Hums female: B, 2)

Similarly from a Science respondent:

The thesis has to be a presentation that is all encompassing ... It has to look like one body of work – a thesis has to be more than several independent things, it has to have an overall structure. (Sci Male: 10, 1)

These few examples outline lessons that examiners reported learning through examining and how they assisted their own candidates in improving their work.

Processes

Additional to learning about aspects of quality theses from their examining experience, respondents reported that some supervisory processes they undertook had changed as a result of examining: in particular, their ability to be able to put themselves in the shoes of a potential examiner for their own doctoral students.

Developing supervisory processes

Our early rescrutiny of data identified supervisors whose experiences of being examiners fed directly or indirectly into their practices. For Examiner C, learning from the viva process was deliberate, virtually a personal research route, with the 'examiner-supervisor transfer' being focused, intended and articulated:

I learnt by listening, checking that I understood what another examiner intended to ask in a viva and then to see how candidates responded to those questions. Being ... a genuine participant observer in doctoral vivas was perhaps the most direct way that I learnt about doctoral examining. (Soc Sci Male: C, 2)

The deliberate linking of learning from examination into supervisory practices and research is also demonstrated well in the following:

[I learned by] recognising the direct connection between examiners' questions, notions of 'good' (value judgement intended) research practice even if it was a disputed view by some examiners, and how candidates defended their research and their written thesis. So, my supervisory approach evolved to reflect these concerns. I sought not to focus on the obvious methods, methodologies and approaches that were so well catered for in the many excellent texts. My focus was to challenge my candidates to think about the nature of a doctorate, the way in which examiners examined and the significance of conceptualisation in doctoral research. In these ways my learning developed my skill and capability to supervise. (Soc Sci Male: D, 2)

This examiner also noted the direct relationship between his examining experiences and his duty and role as a supervisor:

My primary supervisory role is to enable candidates to develop higher-level research capabilities, and to undertake doctoral-level research, then it is their role to read, think, ask questions and draft text for me to see and comment on. (Soc Sci Male: D, 2)

From this examiner and E and G following, we deduce that the behaviours developed and used as supervisors derive from examining experience, operating as professional learning in practice:

I suppose my supervising style is a preparatory approach to equipping candidates to appreciate the strategy that examiners have towards assessment via their questions. Since they want to understand a candidate's 'why' of the research, then candidates also have to understand that. My role then is to be Socratic in exploring their views and assist them to develop further. (Health Female: E, 2)

As an example of her learning from examining, Respondent G provided tips:

- The importance of listening to the student.
- To encourage the 'maverick' whilst guiding the student to be rigorous.
- The need to understand the student's reasons for the choice of topic.
- That it is crucial to enable the student to go beyond the descriptive.
- That it is vital to encourage the student to appreciate viewpoints and perspectives beyond their own. This involves an awareness of current literature.
- That ultimately there has to be a balance between what the student wants to write and the basic elements required in a thesis.
- Before the thesis is submitted to avoid anything that is avoidable, for example, typographical errors.
- That ultimately the student must have ownership of the thesis and be aware of the learning that has taken place as a result. (Soc Sci Female: G, 2)

She developed an understanding about the examiner's 'take' on the work and what this means for her own students and the selection of examiners:

The experience of examining also made me aware that the examiner might have a totally different 'take' or perspective on the topic than that of the student so that it was important as a supervisor for me to encourage the student to acknowledge other opinions and research even though the ideas might be counter to their own argument. (Soc Sci Female: G, 2)

Respondent E helps summarise by discussing the processes of examining and lessons learned for supervisors to pass on to students:

It's in their field and they know this should be there. The supervisor has a duty to say, 'Well this is my area and this is my rationale,' and really the student has an opportunity to defend that and say, 'In fact, I don't agree with you.' Supervisor needs to learn the value of the conclusion chapter as an indication of quality of thought transformation and conceptual work – and enable students to engage. (Health Female: E, 2)

Most respondents reported learning from examination about the development of supervisory practices, about the examination process, and how they might apply those insights both to the examination practices and when preparing their own candidates for examination.

Examination processes

An understanding of how examiners respond to written work can be particularly helpful:

I can't bear bad writing and so I am influenced by this. Even a student who is struggling with language can still have a feel for style. (Soc Sci Female: 16, 1)

Examiner E reports learning about being able to predict how an examiner might respond to written work:

... it's correcting and understanding the mistakes and redirecting where that will improve the mistakes but it's not letting the examiner say, 'This is the thesis I would have written; why don't you go off and do that?'... I will tell the students that when the examiner sees your title and they don't know very much about your work or even when they have read the abstract they already have an idea in their mind about the journey they would take and now you have to convince them that the one you took is the right one and that you can defend it. (Health Female: E, 2)

Examiner H comments that he uses his own learning from the examining process to support supervisors as novice examiners:

When I am the more experienced examiner ... I too have tried to prepare novice/inexperienced examiners before our viva...Is my role as a mentor then what other examiners do at such time? Yes. (Soc Sci Male: H, 2)

Discussion

Many examiners reported that they reflect on what they see submitted to them by other supervisors, their discipline colleagues, and expected indicators of quality in a thesis in the discipline. They consider pointers to be taken back to their own supervisory practices. The experience of being involved in examining other students' theses affects examiners' recognition of the qualities of acceptable theses. They can define certain characteristics of quality, then recalibrate what they expect as passable or of merit in relation to theses deemed worthy of examination which are approved (in most cases) by other supervisors. They pass on their knowledge of ways of expressing the research in the thesis and of quality indicators in action to their own students.

There seems to be a community experience of shared learning related to the expected quality in action of passable PhDs in a variety of disciplines, and for

Trafford and Leshem (2008), having been part of the viva, they (as supervisors) are more able to identify the characteristics of successful PhDs towards which students can then be guided. This reflective trajectory resembles that of supervisors. Examiners report that by reading someone else's student's work and formulating a report against justified, established and agreed standards they take back guidance insights into quality for their own students and their own practice. One corollary of this could be street-smart students would ensure their supervisor had substantial examining experience in their discipline. Meanwhile, as experienced examiners, these supervisors need to ensure that they carefully choose examiners for their own students' work who are not only significant in their field but also unlikely to behave inappropriately at the viva or in examining a thesis.

Examiners frequently commented that they supervise differently having examined because they can now see what works well in terms of expression, presentation, conceptual level and argument, and what in particular prejudices examiners against a thesis. Analysis suggests that examiners learned several main lessons, which they then applied to their supervisory practices, falling into the two main areas of quality of the research and thesis, and processes of supervision and examination. Not all the learning is identical across the different examiners but the findings reported above represent the range of learning they identified between them.

Conclusion

Our work offers a number of preliminary considerations related to research supervisor learning from being a doctoral examiner. Acting as an examiner for a PhD represents a form of professional learning which our respondents felt contributed to their work with research students in varying ways, including specific advice about how to design and express research, organise and write their thesis, make claims and back them up with evidence, develop arguments and acknowledge limitations while emphasising achievements meriting the award. Some insights and advice taken back to their students specifically relate to the research learning journey and some to ways in which students write up and present their work. In countries with oral examinations, this advice also extends to ways of behaving in the viva to maximise confidence in a good piece of work, answering questions with composure and appropriate eloquence in difficult contexts.

Examiners of doctoral theses effectively have no formal training for this role; instead, they learn by doing. It could be useful for new examiners to reflect on the learning gained from the role to feed into both their supervisor practices and activities as examiners. Examining doctoral theses provides valuable opportunities for professional learning for supervisors who learn first-hand of the examining processes and of the expected qualities of a thesis. Examiners in our study indicated how they took that learning directly back into their own supervisory practice to support students through producing and (where appropriate) defending their theses in examination.

Demystifying the processes and practices of doctoral thesis examiners is a valuable outcome from research into the ways in which examiners approach, read and process doctoral theses and the generic and discipline-related quality indicators sought in the passable thesis and the thesis of merit (Holbrook et al., 2005; Mullins

& Kiley, 2002; Trafford & Leshem, 2008). This learning can be most usefully shared amongst supervisors, students and examiners since, as with other forms of assessment, having a shared understanding of criteria both builds the quality assurance certainties of the intellectual community awarding doctorates, and provides students with something more tangible and articulated to work towards, reducing unnecessary anxiety.

Given the preliminary nature of the study, future research involving a larger sample and giving specific attention to disciplinary differences could aid understanding of how the thesis examination process can assist supervisors in working with candidates.

Notes on contributors

Gina Wisker is the head of the Centre for Learning and Teaching, University of Brighton, UK, where she also supervises PhD students and teaches undergraduates literature. She is a National Teaching fellow and has honorary professorships at the University of Stellenbosch, South Africa and University of Bergen, Norway. She runs workshops on postgraduate supervision in the UK and internationally. Her books include *The Good Supervisor* (Palgrave Macmillan 2005, 2012) and the *Postgraduate Research Handbook* (2001, 2008).

Margaret Kiley joined CEDAM, ANU, in December 2004 from the University of Canberra and the University of Adelaide in the Advisory Centre for University Education (ACUE). She convenes the Graduate Research Field of Education and the ANU Educational Researcher Network. Recent publications have appeared in *Doctorates Downunder: Keys to Successful Doctoral Study in Australia and Aotearoa, New Zealand* (2nd ed.), and *Studies in Higher Education*.

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