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Understanding doctoral progress assessment in the arts and humanities

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Abstract
This study examines the early-stage progress assessment for doctoral candidates at a British university through the perceptions of academic staff who acted as assessors. It was conducted in response to staff concerns about changes to the process that shortened the timescale for candidates to prepare and present their research for peer review. As well as having an impact on doctoral supervisors, there were implications for researcher developers and 'third space' professionals who supported candidates with research skills training. The findings of four in-depth interviews with assessors in the arts and humanities are discussed in the form of a reflective, 'structured debriefing'. The results of these reflections form recommendations for practice that highlight the importance of conceptual frameworks for doctoral assessment, and the interpretations of criteria at institutional, disciplinary and individual levels. These could be emphasised by academic supervisors and third space professionals supporting doctoral candidates through this milestone.

Keywords
Reflective practice, doctoral education, assessment, academic development, humanities

Introduction

Assessment in the UK doctorate is most often associated with the final examination: the viva voce (Powell and Green, 2007). The event itself is not held in public, and although proceedings are documented, studies exploring the judgements of examiners have emerged relatively recently (Houston, 2018, 2021). There are several terms that can be

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used to describe the first assessment milestone encountered by research students at a UK university. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for Higher Education in the UK (QAA, 2015) makes provision for initial registration on a Masters-level qualification and 'transfer to doctoral status' and in its *The UK Doctorate: a guide for current and prospective doctoral candidates* also attempts to make a distinction between 'student' and 'candidate' for the doctorate 'depending on whether the individual has completed some kind of transfer of status stage' (QAA, 2011). The organisation considers this further under the term 'upgrade', noting '[i]n cases where doctoral candidates are registered initially on a probationary basis or for an MPhil, progress will be monitored through a formal upgrade or confirmation of doctoral status process' (QAA, 2011).

A manual analysis of 80 universities in the United Kingdom, belonging to the 10 Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs) reveals a variety of terms in current policy documentation. Descriptions were placed in 11 categories, comprising 'annual monitoring' (1); 'progression' (30); 'annual review' (3); 'confirmation' (9); 'formal review' (1); 'initial review' (1); 'interim assessment' (1); 'probation' (4); 'transfer' (3), and 'upgrade' (17). In 10 institutions, the process was either unclear or inaccessible on the public webpages, so unknown.

The purpose of progress assessment

Ultimately, the QAA (2018) views the transfer as a form of 'progression monitoring', and as such does not define assessment criteria. Beyond a guiding principle, there is no common approach implemented by UK universities, despite the presence of statements detailing research degree characteristics and criteria for assessing doctoral candidates for the award of the degree. Therefore, students and supervisors need to rely heavily on the guidance literature and their internal policies and regulations. In this study I consider the review of progress at my own institution as a form of assessment for two reasons. Firstly, there are internal criteria for judging performance and the outcome of the process has a bearing on the student's final qualification, such as confirmation of PhD candidacy or the option to change to MPhil registration. Secondly, the individuals involved in the review panel have the official designation 'assessor'. When progress assessment is discussed in doctoral guidance literature (Cryer, 2006; Matthiesen and Binder, 2009; Potter, 2006; Rugg and Petre, 2004; Trafford and Leshem, 2008; Wisker, 2008) it tends to manifest in three ways: the first is as a form of institutional quality control; the second is in its connection with the PhD thesis itself, and the third as a form of preparation for the viva voce examination.

Institutional quality control

For Rugg and Petre (2004) there are two assessment milestones: one which is 'somewhere between the end of your first year and halfway through the PhD', and one which they term the 'lesser transfer' that occurs within the second half of the first year. Wisker (2008) states that there will be a point when candidates are ready to transfer from MPhil to PhD

candidacy, but this is determined by the research student's supervisors. Cryer (2006) notes that the transfer takes place after a year.

Rugg and Petre (2004) are unusual in guidance literature on the PhD in using the term 'probation', which for them is partly a mechanism for limiting the number of students who are likely to fail the final examination continuing to full candidacy. There are indeed sanctions in the arts and humanities that are imposed on higher education institutions for non-submissions of theses within 4 years (full time) or equivalent (AHRC, 2020). A student who withdraws within the first year, or changes to a lower degree, will not be included in this metric, which means that formal assessments for full-time students after that point in the research degree are now rare in the UK, and similar funder restrictions are mirrored in other countries (Taylor et al., 2018). The largest single group of DTPs examined above (30) make reference to a progress review, typically conducted within 12 months, with a further 4 explicitly connecting this with an 'annual' review.

Relation to the PhD thesis

Progress assessment is also discussed in terms of both written work and performance in oral presentation (Rugg and Petre, 2004). As regards the documentation, several authors provide an idea of what a candidate would need to submit to internal assessors at their home institution. Cryer's (2006) conception of the transfer documentation as a 'mini-thesis' suggests that it indicates to assessors what the final written output of the research might look like, even if at an early stage. The author notes that the document should include the research topic or problem, research methodology, collected data, the current literature, considering problems or constraints, progress through the project, as well as the issues of scope and depth (Cryer, 2006).

Potter (2006) signals the importance of the literature review and 'a detailed work plan…', noting that the documentation for the assessors might take the form of 'an initial review of the subject', the research problem and a 'research plan'. Wisker's (2008) interpretation is more concerned with the idea of progress. She discusses two types of documentation: the proposal and transfer. In relation to the first, the proposal, she identifies many elements of the PhD thesis identified in this study including 'theoretical perspectives/literature survey'; 'methodology and methods' and 'bibliography of major sources'. The proposal is assumed to be required as part of a confirmation of registration within a three-to 12-month period. In this sense, then, the proposal and the 'transfer document' are practically one and the same. Matthiesen and Binder (2009), however, characterise the transfer documentation as a 'the qualifying report, which is an extended version of your initial research proposal, informed by a year of study at the institution'. For Wisker, any transfer material needs to 'act as proof or documentary evidence that you have been carrying out doctoral research' (2008), and it is possibly in this sense that there is a difference to the PhD thesis, where the emphasis is on assessing the characteristics of the document against doctoral criteria under an assumption that it is not a work at an early stage, but a final document.

In summary, these authors provide several interpretations that are variously prospective (what research is planned) and retrospective (how much research has been

undertaken) and identify different types of written work which could inform these perspectives. An example of these prospective texts could be an application for ethical approval, which is mandated prior to the collection of research data through UK Research and Innovation's (UKRI) policies and guidance. A retrospective text might take the form of a literature review conducted in the first year of study.

Relation to the viva voce examination

As noted above, progress assessments are also likely to involve oral presentations, which has led to comparisons with a 'mock viva' (Trafford and Leshem, 2008). Rugg and Petre (2004) state that PhD candidates may expect 'a viva or a department seminar, at which you present your work and demonstrate many of the same things as with the document, except that the skills here involve spoken presentation'. Cryer (2006) advises that institutions 'may also require the student to make an oral presentation and/or be examined orally, to enable assessors to clarify any ambiguities and to satisfy themselves that the work is the student's own'; likewise Potter (2006) observes that in 'a number of universities, students are expected to give a presentation as part of the transfer process, and be questioned on their research plan'. This discursive element is also noted by Wisker (2008). There are, then, similarities to the viva voce examination, particularly in relation to formative feedback (Carter and Kumar, 2016; Crossouard and Pryor, 2009; Holbrook et al., 2014; Holbrook et al., 2015; Houston, 2018; Kumar and Stracke, 2007; Matthiesen and Binder, 2009; Prins et al., 2017).

Despite the valuable contribution of such studies to demystifying assessment practices, there are few that have considered assessment practices or transition points before the final examination (Creely and Laletas, 2019), and none at the time of writing that has focused on the UK, much less in disciplines in the arts and humanities. This presents a problem for researcher developers and 'third space' professionals. These staff members may hold a range of academic or non-academic positions within a university and support doctoral candidates as they prepare for the first formal review of their research projects (Denicolo et al., 2020; Whitchurch, 2008). The following section outlines the methodology for a case study based at my own institution. Although specific to one university environment, the findings highlighted through my reflective summary provide insights into the interpretation of assessment criteria for both disciplines and individuals working in the arts and humanities.

Materials and methods

The design for this study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the School of Education and Lifelong Learning at the University of East Anglia. As it was impractical to gain access to the face-to-face panel meetings of assessors and candidates, data collection was based around responses that individual assessors had to the core progress report, called the Statement of Intent. A question framework was used to guide the interview, but the format remained semi-structured, allowing participants to expand on previous responses or introduce topics that they felt relevant. The conversations were audio recorded,

transcribed in full and reviewed by the participants for accuracy. All four participants (P1-4) are colleagues and responses have been anonymised in this paper to reduce the risk of identification of individual assessors. The participants were made aware of possible de-anonymisation due to references to their disciplines or subject interests and written consent was provided in all cases.

The probationary review at the University of East Anglia is a significant milestone for research students in their first year of study. It consists of both process (a panel meeting) and product (the probationary documentation). It is conducted six to 9 months from registration for full-time students or 12–18 months for those registered part-time. It involves a panel of two academic staff members and may also include a member of the student's supervisory team. Although the probationary review was introduced in autumn 2015, it replaced a former 'upgrade' or 'transfer' process from MPhil to PhD registration that took place around 12 months from registration. The assessment criteria remained largely the same as under the previous system. These are:

- Is the work presented the candidate's own, giving appropriate acknowledgement of the work of others where there is an element of collaboration?
- Has the candidate shown appropriate industry?
- Is the candidate competent to fulfil the research and to keep to the proposed schedule of work?
- Does the candidate show the level of knowledge and understanding of the field in which they are working that would normally be expected after 6–9 months of research (pro rata for part-time candidates)?
- Is the candidate able to show how their work relates to this wider field and that they have developed a command of presentational and scholarly conventions and methodology?
- Is there evidence that the work has a reasonable prospect of generating a significant contribution to the development of understanding, for example, through the discovery of new knowledge, the connection of previously unrelated facts, and the development of a new theory or the revision of older views?
- [PhD/MD/EdD only] Is the topic viable as doctoral research in its originality, intellectual level and scope (for execution within the planned timeframe)?

(UEA, 2019)

However, immediately after its introduction, some supervisors and students expressed concern about the requirements and the timing of the review. The two most common issues were (1) that students were not familiar with the documentation formats and (2) that the point at which review of progress was made was too early in the student's research for effective judgements on quality and future performance to be made.

Although no evidence was cited to support this view on timing of assessment, the demographic of research degree candidates in arts and humanities disciplines in the UK tends to include more part-time study than in Science, Technology, Engineering, Medicine and Mathematics (STEMM) disciplines. Of the 17,330 research degree enrolments in arts and humanities subjects (Common Aggregation Hierarchy Level 1) in the

UK in 2020/21, 5995 are part-time; 34.5% of the sector, which compares with only 15.1%, in STEMM subjects (HESA, 2022). This may mean that individuals work full-time or have additional care responsibilities that limit time spent on a project, despite a pro-rata timescale for formal review of progress (Hooley et al., 2009; Woldegiyorgis et al., 2021). More important is the student-driven, rather than project-driven, model of doctoral research. The latter favours a directive approach to planning and task allocation from the principal investigator (PI)/supervisor found in many STEMM subjects but is much rarer in the arts and humanities (Carter and Gunn, 2019). This may result in candidates taking longer to refine their research questions and methodology.

This holds implications for the support I, and other colleagues, provided for research students. It became clear that ever greater attention was being paid by students to this first milestone. As a result, modules such as that on research methodology needed to respond to a reorientation of learning priorities. At the same time, as a researcher developer based in a faculty of arts and humanities, I was also involved in designing and delivering supervisor workshops, primarily around processes and policies, with the aid of scenarios to explore the challenges that students and staff face through the doctorate. However, it was clear that these sessions did not provide scope for investigating in detail *how* supervisors facilitated the research conducted by their students; in short, the intellectual components that went into the product: the PhD thesis.

Description

This study aimed to develop understanding of the probationary review at an organisational level. To do so, it was necessary to engage internal assessors in the arts and humanities in interviews to understand their perspectives on the probationary process, encapsulated in the Statement of Intent, which:

> '…is the document in which the ambitions of the research and its overall methodology can be most clearly seen. The statement of intent is therefore expected to be up to 3,000 words and to cover the research context (i.e. the established scholarship to which the research is meant to provide an intervention), the major research questions (what the research will aim to find out) and the methodological and conceptual frameworks applied.' (UEA, 2019)

Three research questions were devised for the project, which related to three levels of understanding: institutional, individual and disciplinary:

- What do supervisors understand as the requirements of the Statement of Intent?
- Do these understandings match the expectations of supervisors of what they view as progress in a research project?
- Do supervisors have particular disciplinary perspectives on the requirements of the probationary review?

Because data collection has been undertaken in my workplace, I have chosen a reflective approach in the analysis of the interviews, with consideration of the assumptions

behind my questions and my own position as a researcher developer. The results are presented in the form of a structured debriefing, based on the reflective cycle published by Graham Gibbs in 1988 (Bassot, 2016; Gibbs, 2013) comprising six stages:

(1) the description of the situation
(2) the feelings in advance of and during the interviews, an evaluation of issues raised by the encounters
(3) an analysis of these in terms of my own learning and secondary literature
(4) the conclusions that can be drawn from the experience
(5) an action plan for future practice.

The description is provided in this section, and subsequent stages of the reflective cycle are summarised below.

Results

Feelings

In approaching this project, I experienced a sense of both excitement and trepidation. Firstly, because I genuinely believed that supervisors and internal assessors were unhappy with the new probationary review system, and I was intent on discovering their reasons for this. However, as I help to run postgraduate research supervisor workshops, and work closely with the Postgraduate Research Service, I was worried that I may be viewed as representative of the establishment, and either be accused of being responsible for new probationary requirements or be expected to intervene in the system and change them.

- How would you explain the requirements of the Statement of Intent to a post-graduate research student?
- Are there elements of the Statement of Intent that you feel are particularly important for postgraduate research students?

In my interactions with participants, I showed the University's requirements for the Statement of Intent and asked them to read it. I was interested here in understanding how supervisors might explain these to a student who is unfamiliar with the format. The motivation for my question was probably vicarious at the time because I am not privy to the conversations that supervisors and students have behind closed doors. My initial feeling was that supervisors and internal assessors would focus to a greater or lesser degree on certain elements. In a way, I felt slightly uneasy about this, as though I were testing their knowledge of the University's regulations and policies, which is a diagnostic component of supervisor workshops that I run.

- How do you think the requirements of the Statement of Intent relate to an individual student's progression with their research project?

- How would you describe your expectations of students' overall progression at the probationary review stage?

The idea of progress is central to this study, and in asking these questions I wanted to know if the requirements reflected what academics considered to be progress in a project, but I was also asking, indirectly, whether they thought that the new probationary review timescale was sufficient. I was quite anxious about the second question as it appeared to be searching for a personal rather than a professional opinion. I realised during the interviews that I needed to clarify this as the participant may assume different roles, so I found myself asking participants to consider their expectations as a supervisor and as an internal assessor instead.

- How do you think the requirements of the Statement of Intent relate to your discipline or field?

I wanted to know from my participants where the connections were on a disciplinary level. At the time of the interview, I was very concerned about this, as I suspected that much of the Statement of Intent had been developed from models and processes of research that are not common in the arts and humanities, which would make advising and supporting research students all the more difficult, even if, personally, I feel that a more standardised model is helpful.

Evaluation

Participants 1 and 2 both responded that the Statement of Intent was a development of the initial research proposal. They also noted that this was because the student was already familiar with that document (P1), and that this had to be purposeful, 'that it is not something that is a completely different document that is taking time away' (P2). Other conceptualisations included seeing the Statement of Intent as an 'introduction to the thesis' (P2) or as an 'overall summary of your study' (P4).

Participants also mentioned the provisional nature of the document: 'there is a plan implied; this is work in progress. It's not set in stone' (P1) and 'even though [the Statement of Intent] may be going to change…' (P4). It was also understood functionally as a means of generating discussion in the probationary review: 'ideally it's a way of, um, elucidating how the work's going, so that the students can also take it as an opportunity to ask for clarification, to express any uncertainties that they have themselves about the direction of their work' (P3), and inspiring reflection, allowing students 'to go back to their original proposal after a few months and see how already… see how much they have progressed' (P2) and establishing direction: 'it's a way of… of getting people to think big. So, where is their study going?' (P4).

Three participants stated explicitly or through discussion of several elements of the document, implicitly, that all had an important role to play (P1, P2, P4), or were dependent on one another (P4). Feasibility in research design, methodology and research questions were considered vital (P1). What I had not appreciated in this participant's case was how

supervisors might build up an idea of these standards from observing research students from other institutions: 'So, there are, um, quality control procedures, if you like, or... or gentle peer review that takes them outside of their own institution, into a national field, which is good for them, and also good for supervisors'.

One participant queried the term 'methodology', explaining that this may not fully reflect the experimental nature of creative work, and that students might 'think that necessarily implies an a priori, fixed... framework of enquiry along the scientific model' (P3). Similar challenges around terminology were also reported in relation to methodology and the 'conceptual framework'. In one supervisor's view, these 'are quite different processes and in fact in the thesis, they are very clearly separate chapters...' suggesting that language of the Statement of Intent might lead to confusion (P2).

Participants noted that the Statement of Intent's requirements related to scope (P1) and ensuring that a method was in place at this stage (P1, P2), as one participant noted, 'the method has to be clear. It's very hard to swerve mid-way through a PhD without creating an awful lot of additional work' (P1). It was also important that the student understood his or her intervention in the field (P1). As noted above, there was also a view that there are certain 'mini-components' of thesis that are in progress, ultimately forming key parts of the final thesis: the introduction and subsequent chapters (P2).

There were different conceptualisations of what constituted progress in the project. These included refocusing of questions (P2), but for another participant, a distinction was made between progress and teleology (an inevitable direction), and they argued instead for 'a more open notion of progress where, you know, i... increasing depth is being pursued, increasing ground is emerging...' (P3).

The idea of depth was also noted in relation to a more formal educational progress, namely from Masters to doctoral level: '[assessors will] be looking for something a lot deeper and a lot more sophisticated than they would if you asked a Masters student to do the same kind of thing' (P4). The notion of quality was raised here, and that candidates should be able to demonstrate improvement. However, I had not recognised the importance of prior knowledge that supervisors may have of a student's previous academic career. As supervisors are allowed to join the probationary panels, their view of progress would be different from that of the internal assessors, who may not be as familiar with the student (P2): '[As an internal assessor] I've tried to see elements that give me confidence of the methodology. Whereas, from a supervisor's perspective... that... may remain more implicit.'

I partly expected some of the terms and requirements to be unrecognisable to some disciplines, but instead found that meanings were present, and that academic colleagues had found ways of communicating them to their students. The Statement of Intent overall was likened by one participant to a critical PhD in English Literature, adding that 'if we think of them as instructions here - then the probationary review almost gets you to the stage of writing a book proposal for an academic research monograph' (P1). As this participant saw the monograph as an outcome of the doctoral research, there was an alignment of these probationary requirements with practices of the discipline. With another colleague, whose discipline was language and linguistics, the requirements also seemed to map well (P2).

As anticipated, there was some ambiguity reported. This related primarily to two colleagues who worked in Literature, and specifically to the creative-critical doctoral programme. I had not appreciated before that the model in which students produce a creative work (a novel, play or collection of poems) and a parallel critical work was quite rare in academia (P1). This prompted questions about how creative work could be assessed using criteria for assessment that only seemed designed for critical projects (P1).

In the course of our discussions, I also asked if there was a way to think of creative terminology informing the critical requirements of the Statement of Intent. The response was quite revealing:

> 'Um, well, it would lend itself... I think the term "narrative" would lend itself to, um, being applied more widely. What kind of narrative does your thesis present? You know, what kind of story do you want to tell? Imagine somebody wants to analyse a limited aspect of the 30 Years War and you're doing a PhD in History, you know, what kind of character do you need in this story? Where do you start to tell the story? Where do you end?' (P1)

Also from Literature, there was a recognition that the idea of 'intervention' of the Statement of Intent may send the wrong signal to students who were tackling the history of ideas, and the legacies of previous scholars, noting that this:

> 'slightly has the feeling of a strong insertion into existing debate, and that may or may not be the case for the finished thesis. Um, again, I wonder whether a slightly, um, milder term, like contribution would do the same work' (P3).

Another participant from a background closer to the social sciences observed that the disciplinary expectations of the process of research are quite clear, namely 'introduction, review, methods, results, discussion, conclusion' and they provide much of the probationary requirements before conducting 'fieldwork in year two', acknowledging that in other disciplines that structure might not work, and speculated that someone outside a particular discipline may not recognise a Statement of Intent as reflecting 6 months of research work (P4).

Discussion

Analysis

When I was listening to the participants, I found myself quite surprised at how much supervisors and internal assessors reported helping students appreciate that the Statement of Intent was not just an administrative exercise but related back to previous learning experiences (the research proposal) and anticipated future challenges (uncertainty, lack of clarity in complexity, loss of direction). I had not recognised how much these linkages were essential in communicating requirements to students. This certainly reflects the findings of researchers who consider the importance of internal connections in a thesis for doctoral examiners (Trafford and Leshem, 2008).

This has forced reconsideration of what these terms mean to me. Conceptual frameworks, although sometimes ill-defined for doctoral students, are nevertheless important as they form 'a bridge between paradigms which explain the research issue and the practice of investigating that issue' (Leshem and Trafford, 2007). A grasp of them as a tool for abstract thinking and a shared language for students, supervisors and examiners has been convincingly demonstrated (Berman and Smyth, 2015). I have dedicated considerable time in my practice to teaching students about methodology but had overlooked the role of the conceptual framework. As a critical incident, this observation by one of the participants has opened up new priorities for researcher development workshops.

Although this study was prompted by anxieties about the shorter timescale for assessment, most of the participants who mentioned it seemed to have accepted the change, and this surprised me. I also believe I have underestimated different disciplinary views of progress, and that some disciplines take longer to reach a certain standard (P4). Perhaps a standard policy on the timescale of six to 9 months after registration fails to address these disciplinary conventions. This seems to be an example of managing 'academicity', where supervisors and students have to determine progression not just in terms of productivity, but in the formation of identity within a community (Bendix Petersen, 2007; McKenna, 2016).

Conclusion

Although based on a limited number of interviews, I have begun to appreciate how much communicative work is done by academic colleagues, particularly around crafting the thesis. For example, the idea of narrative in relation to the doctorate has been noted by several researchers in recent years, including seeing students as authors (Aitchison and Guerin, 2014; Kamler and Thomson, 2014; Murray, 2011; Thomson and Kamler, 2016), but also recognising the way that the experience of the doctorate takes the form of a 'journey' (Janson et al., 2004) or 'story' (Kelly, 2017), in which researchers become characters who both encounter and overcome crisis.

I have also encountered considerable empathy on the part of supervisors who take care to 'translate' or moderate some of the language of the Statement of Intent for students, thinking not simply in terms of relevance of assessment, but also the student's reaction to the language. This might be an attempt to anticipate emotional stressors of the kind identified and examined at advanced degree level in North America, where doctoral programmes tend to be more structured (Devine and Hunter, 2016). This may well have implications internationally as many countries are now modelling assessment and review practices on those of the United States, which may include completion of coursework or entrance examinations (Woldegiyorgis et al., 2021).

Action plan

From the reflective response to this study, I have begun to appreciate that academic colleagues who have direct contact with research students as their supervisors and internal assessors exercise discretion around the Statement of Intent, in which explicit

requirements play only a part. Progression has to be interpreted within the worldview of both the individual, but also the wider disciplinary community, and as a researcher developer working with supervisors, I will need to listen more carefully to how they reconcile these University requirements and more intuitive research practices and standards. Furthermore, I should consider the elements of the Statement of Intent in light of conceptual frameworks and explore the disciplinary nuances or terminologies that supervisors need to navigate when interpreting for their research students.

These personal reflections also provide recommendations for action involving supervisors, researcher developers and doctoral candidates in the arts and humanities. Institutional probationary criteria are important as they exist in the absence of national guidelines, but as this study demonstrates, they must be interpreted by supervisors and assessors through their own disciplinary culture and their student's own frame of reference and vocabulary. Academic development activities should take account of these nuances of understanding, which might be explored through research training within departmental communities or in small group supervision meetings.

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