The Experience of Examining the PhD

An International Comparative Study of Processes and Standards of Doctoral Examination

Edited by Michael Byram and Maria Stoicheva

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Chapter 2

Standards and criteria: Is there a case for international comparability?

MICHAEL BYRAM

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2 Standards and criteria

Is there a case for international comparability?

Michael Byram[1]

It has become a commonplace to refer to internationalisation as a crucial if not mould-breaking change in higher education, and to the globalisation of economies as the background, and perhaps the cause. Student flow is an important element of internationalisation and the global statistics are impressive.[2] With millions of students on the move taking their qualifications with them and hoping they will be recognised and accepted wherever they go, the question of how such recognition can be or should be formalised becomes extremely important for students, universities, and employers.

Before addressing the questions directly from our data, let us look at the statistics for the countries in which our case studies are located (Table 2.1). They mirror the general trend, but it is important to note the range and difference between outbound and inbound mobility ratios.

On the one hand, Australia has very little outbound mobility, but very large inbound, and the UK is similar. On the other hand, Brazil has little of either, with more outbound than inbound, and Argentina has the opposite situation. However, these are general statistics and our study focuses on doctoral education, in specific universities within these countries. It is notable that, in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, to which six of our case studies belong, there is a clear bias towards doctoral students:

> The proportion of international students among total enrolments tends to be much larger at the most advanced levels of tertiary education. Within OECD countries, 27% of students enrolled in doctoral or equivalent programmes and 12% of those enrolled in master's or equivalent programmes are international students, against an average of 6% in all levels of tertiary education.
>
> (OECD, 2017, p. 11)

This is all the more striking when, of the 36% expected to graduate from tertiary education in OECD countries, only 2% are expected to graduate from a doctoral programme (ibid. p.10) The effect of Covid-19 has in the meantime been significant and was an important presence in our research. It remains to be seen what the longer-term effects might be.[3]

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Table 2.1 Ratios of outbound and inbound students

	Ratio outbound	*Ratio inbound*	*OECD country*
Argentina	0.3	3.5	
Australia	0.7	28.4	x
Brazil	0.9	0.3	
Bulgaria	10.8	7.2	
China	2.3	0.5	
India	1.3	0.1	
Japan	0.8	5.2	x
Poland	1.8	3.9	x
Portugal	5.6	9.7	x
Thailand	No information		
UK	1.5	18.7	x
USA	0.5	5.2	x

Source: http://uis.unesco.org/en/uis-student-flow.

Notes

Outbound mobility = Total number of tertiary students from the country studying abroad, expressed as a percentage of total tertiary enrolment in that country.

Inbound mobility = Total number of tertiary students from abroad studying in the country, expressed as a studying percentage of total tertiary enrolment in that country.

What happens when students graduate from PhD programmes? Information is limited but it is reported that in European countries 15–30% of doctorate holders have experienced mobility abroad. Much of this is accounted for by inter-European flows whereas data from the USA says that the numbers of graduates planning to stay grew steadily in the 1990s and 2000s and then began to level off. Most of those who stayed were from China and India (Auriol, 2010, pp. 20–21).

Against this background of mobility, a call for establishing comparability of university qualifications across countries has been particularly notable in Europe, as part of a wish to develop a European Higher Education Area. This has also been connected to the aims of the European Union's 'European Qualifications Framework' (ELF) which are to support 'international transparency, recognition, and mobility' (European Higher Education Area, 2005, p. 57). The description of 'third cycle' qualifications, including PhD, in the framework reads as follows:

Qualifications that signify completion of the third cycle are awarded to students who:

- have demonstrated a systematic understanding of a field of study and mastery of the skills and methods of research associated with that field;
- have demonstrated the ability to conceive, design, implement, and adapt a substantial process of research with scholarly integrity;
- have made a contribution through original research that extends the frontier of knowledge by developing a substantial body of work, some of which merits national or international refereed publication;

- are capable of critical analysis, evaluation, and synthesis of new and complex ideas;
- can communicate with their peers, the larger scholarly community and with society in general about their areas of expertise;
- can be expected to be able to promote, within academic and professional contexts, technological, social, or cultural advancement in a knowledge-based society.

European Qualifications Framework[4]
Source: Bologna Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks (2018) Appendix of EHEA Paris communiqué of 2018.

We shall find many echoes of these words and phrases in later parts of this chapter, where we discuss how these formulations can be used to compare, formally or informally, the qualifications of doctoral students in different countries. To do so, however, we are not simply concerned with documents produced by international or national bodies. We are concerned with the documents – where they exist – which are produced by our case study universities, and especially with the views of the people who might use them in practice, our interviewees.

We begin with the specification of criteria, whether formalised in documents or articulated by interviewees as something which they have 'in their heads' (TT Sofia University, Bulgaria), for it is on the basis of criteria that comparability might be constructed.

Criteria and standards – Explicit and implicit

Although in five of our case studies (Beijing Language and Culture University – BLCU – (China), Durham (UK), Japan, Macquarie (Australia), Makerere (Uganda)), there are explicitly stated criteria for examining, the examiners and the students are not necessarily aware of that fact. The criteria are all very similar, and the one from Macquarie can stand as an example here.

Examiners are asked whether [Yes/No/Marginal] the thesis fulfils the following criteria:

a. makes a distinct contribution to knowledge in the area with which it deals;
b. affords evidence of originality shown either by the discovery of new facts or by the exercise of independent critical power;
c. is satisfactory as regards its literary presentation; and
d. contains a substantial amount of material suitable for publication.

In comparison to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) statement above, the emphasis on originality and publication is striking but also common in many of our cases, and because it is seen as crucial, it is a point to which we return below. In the Japanese university, the criteria are made publicly available and used throughout the university, but can be augmented by specific criteria,

as is the case in the Education department where the interviews took place. At BLCU, interviewees had little awareness of the criteria relying on their own experience. However, what they described as their own criteria corresponded very much with the published criteria, suggesting perhaps that they had internalised them earlier, and interviewees said 'The grading chart is helpful for the new doctoral supervisor' (P3) and 'senior examiners just grade according to their experience and the criteria in their head/mind (P5).

In the majority of our cases, however, there were no explicit criteria, and it is noteworthy that at Aveiro, one such case, one interviewee asked that our project should develop criteria. Where there are no explicit criteria, there was much common ground when interviewees were asked to formulate the criteria they use in their own practice. In three cases, this was done at some length: Sao Paolo (Brazil), Eduardo Mondlane (Mozambique), and Thammasat (Thailand). At Sao Paolo, the interviewees stressed the importance of frequent interactions with colleagues in other Brazilian universities and in North America and Europe in the creation of a convergence around standards:

> I do not feel much difference in expectations from institution to institution. The expectations, for example about what is expected from a doctoral thesis, are almost the same in all institutions.
>
> (Roberto – Sao Paolo)

and there are four conditions for success identified by Sao Paolo interviewees, which mirror the explicit criteria of other cases. A thesis must:

- deal with an original research problem
- add value through, and to, the theoretical framework used
- present original empirical research and
- present rigorous analysis of the data that clearly shows the consistency between the research problem, the data, and the contribution in the form of conclusions.

There thus seems to be similarity in criteria whether explicit or not. On the other hand, interviewees at Sao Paolo also pointed out that there were differences in the ways in which these criteria are understood and used in different disciplines and the issue of how criteria are interpreted is a thread running through the cases studied:

> Criteria are weasel words, for example, 'good', 'exceptional'. According to whom? What circumstance?
>
> (Paul U – Durham)

We note, however, that this is a difficulty with all criterion-referencing, which is best overcome by users of criteria sharing their understanding of them, since 'criteria are not merely technical artefacts; they are socially constructed guidelines which are implemented in different ways' (Carless, 2015, p. 166, cited in

Chetcuti et al., 2022, p. 14). A shared understanding of standards or criteria, described by Ajjawi et al. (2021) as 'assessment as sociocultural practice', can be created in formalised training, where participants consider examples of work they are to assess and discuss the criteria they think appropriate. Such a process can also lead to refining the criteria themselves. It is evident that none of our interviewees in any case study had been engaged in such formal training. On the other hand, it was also evident that examiners share their understanding of criteria in the discussions they have when meeting in an examining committee or 'jury'. One interviewee from our Japan case-study says that 'no matter who you work with, the assessments usually converge or are similar' and that this is helped by experience of reviewing all kinds of work – journal articles and books and so – and not just theses. He describes this in some detail:

> (The other examiner is) someone we've never met before, and he's from a different background, but he's been teaching students at the University E for over ten years, and we can trust him. That kind of respect is a prerequisite, isn't it? It's a kind of respect. That's the way it is with all the evaluations in the regular exams. It's the same way when we give grades. Depending on who you're working with, you get a second marker. Then, I'd look at 'oh, you evaluate this', and then discuss. There are so many opportunities to evaluate various things, and we have discussions in the midst of them.
>
> (Prof J-07)

He concludes that 'relativising' one's assessments in this way, is not 'objectification' but 'subjectification', a process of internalising shared understandings, This is then one of the less noticed functions of the oral examining process but it does not happen in situations where only written reports are produced (Chetcuti et al., 2022), as in our case-study of Macquarie, and other Australian universities.

The use of the term 'standards' – often used interchangeably with 'criteria' – might imply that there are degrees or levels within criteria, different levels of satisfaction, in the judgement of examiners. This leads to the question of whether a thesis should be judged simply as 'pass' or 'fail', or whether examiners should decide how well the thesis passed, expressed either in words such as 'with distinction' or 'summa cum laude', or by the use of a numerical grading system.

A system of numerical marking was reported in three cases: Makerere (Uganda), Eduardo Mondlane (Mozambique) and La Plata (Argentina). In La Plata, there are no explicit criteria, just the usual development of a consensus, but there is a system of marks 1–10. There is agreement that the top mark 10/10 is awarded for work of publishable quality but thereafter there is no straightforward agreement about the award of lower marks, although high marks are awarded because 'it is a shame to award someone a low mark after so much work' (Angelita – La Plata). At Eduardo Mondlane, the university regulations require a decision of pass or fail but allow academic units/departments to use a system of marks (scale: 0–20) if they wish, and the consensus is that a passing thesis is given a mark of 14, which is deemed to be 'good' in the university's general use

of this scale. In addition, examiners can give an appreciation of 'Approved with distinction' irrespective of the use of the quantitative scale. At Makerere, examiners are asked to respond to 10 questions about the thesis and are told what maximum mark may be given for each; the total is 100%. This, together with a comment, is the basis for deciding if the thesis can go forward to a public oral examination or 'defence'; students need a minimum of 60% to go forward to the oral defence. The oral examination is then marked out of 10 and, with any mark below 6, students are required to prepare to defend again, and in this sense, there is little difference in practice whether marks are used or not.

The views of interviewees on the desirability of giving a grade or mark were mixed, both within and across case studies. Where no such system exists, it may not be missed, as for example, one interviewee in Sofia (Bulgaria) said she had not thought about the question before but on the spur of the moment would not be in favour, whereas one of her colleagues said she was in favour as it allowed the good thesis to be visibly distinguished from others, not least because, once arrived at the final oral examination, it is very rare for a thesis to be rejected. Where a grading system exists, on the other hand, as in Makerere with its ten questions examiners must answer, one interviewee saw it as a limitation:

> the guidelines are limiting and they do not evaluate the Ph.D. thesis. With the Ph.D. the candidate is supposed to come up with ground-breaking perspectives and they freeze that into quantitative marks. That adds little value to the Ph.D. theses. Some examiners ignore the guidelines and make a write-up. (Ug6)

As noted above, one interviewee from Aveiro suggested we should produce criteria as a consequence of our project, revealing a need in their view but also a lack of their familiarity with other practices and European documents cited above. The contrast with another view at the same university is striking:

> I have never been given assessment criteria and I would not even accept it because I think that is an attack on examiners' freedom, isn't it? That is why there are several examiners on juries and each one brings their own criteria, which is obviously subjective (…) this is a way to balance assessment and reach an intersubjectivity. (I5)

It can be assumed that this person would reject even more strongly the imposition of a grading system.

Originality

Poole (2015, p. 1513) argues that 'Given the polysemous nature of the word "original" it is perhaps not surprising that there is evidence that individual academics differ markedly in their interpretation of the notion of "originality" as it

applies to doctoral theses'. However, since in the formulations of criteria, whether explicit or implicit, the term 'originality' was universally present, it cannot be ignored or dismissed simply as a matter of semantics. It was a crucial focus in the interviews, and *inter alia*, as a strategy for eliciting interviewees' conceptualisations of a PhD thesis, we asked them to talk about the difference between a master's thesis/dissertation and a PhD thesis/dissertation. At Macquarie (Australia) two people said that there may not be much difference in terms of insight and originality, that in some cases, 'in terms of the depth and the sort of insight on the originality, they're not necessarily better' (Peter). Others at the same university disagreed and one said for example that a PhD thesis is 'minimally twice as good' as a master's (Catherine). In all case studies, the word 'originality' usually appeared as the most important distinguishing feature of a PhD thesis and sometimes the question of length and scope or 'depth' was mentioned.

However, there is again the question of how 'originality' is interpreted. Our findings mirror those of a study by Houston (2018) which has the merit of combining interviews with observations of oral examinations: 'While most examiners consulted in this study did not find the concept of originality problematic, the extent of its importance varied and multiple interpretations were apparent' (p. 149). One Sofia University (Bulgaria) interviewee (TT) suggested that it may be seen differently in different disciplines and that, in philosophy, the principal point is to analyse what has been done in Bulgaria, and not necessarily in the wider world, whereas in the natural sciences there is an obsession with international impact, which can also be found in the humanities. At BLCU (China), too, interviewees did not agree on how to interpret the concept and one said that it may be too difficult to achieve for many students. In the Thammasat study, a close analysis of how interviewees talked about originality revealed several facets:

- fundamental is the student's ability to apply new theories to explain phenomena of society
- at a more advanced level students should bring a fresh insight to a phenomenon/problem and new knowledge, 'a leap in knowledge' that could make an important breakthrough for real-world practices and/or a significant contribution to professional practice
- even more demanding is to develop a new body of knowledge since, as most interviewees said, it is difficult to build new knowledge in the social sciences and humanities and in most cases, students should 'only' demonstrate their ability to challenge and/or modify existing theories and how they are used to explain social phenomena or problems. We have to agree with Houston (2018, p. 158) that the range of interpretations of originality would be difficult to capture in a formal definition of originality as an explicit criterion and that it is perhaps inevitable that, where such criteria exist, they do not attempt more than a general and simply requirement of 'originality'.

A crucial test of originality comes when work is truly innovative, perhaps as a consequence of interdisciplinary study. One Japanese interviewee sees the

process as a balance between the 'conservative' and the innovative, maintaining an academic area and creating new ones:

> Social re-examination of the nature of academic knowledge, especially in the humanities is now happening. This is not happening without reason. Academic disciplines and borders between disciplines exist as if they are something natural. However, we are now questioning whether they are inevitable or not. For example, philosophy and sociology, philosophy and political science, educational science and political science, and so on. It is necessary to disrupt the various borders, and unless new possibilities are created in the process, I believe that we are now in a situation where humanities studies itself will collapse. Even within the system of awarding degrees, I think it is necessary to actively encourage research that will renew the discipline itself.
>
> (Prof. J-01)

Doctoral research has a role to play here too 'even within the system of awarding degrees' and even if there is a difficult balance to strike between conservation and disruption of disciplinary borders.

Originality may also be understood in terms of work which is 'publishable'. Where there are explicit criteria, the formulation does not require that work should be already published but, in the wording at Macquarie (Australia), the thesis must contain 'a substantial amount of material suitable for publication'. At Durham (UK), examiners are asked:

> Does the thesis contain an original contribution to knowledge? (The thesis should include matter worthy of publication though it need not be submitted in a form suitable for publication.)

As ever, the interpretation of 'worthy of publication' and 'a substantial amount' is a matter for examiners and part of the creation of a shared understanding of criteria through discussions, as mentioned above.

Neither at Durham nor at Macquarie is there a requirement – or perhaps even an expectation – that a thesis should contain material which has already been published, but in our Japan case, it is the norm, and one interviewee explicitly contrasted the practice in Japan with that in other countries. In Japan, students publish some articles and then combine them into a thesis. This can create problems of cohesion in the text, the interviewee said, but serves as an indicator of quality and whether the student understands their discipline since disciplinary knowledge is not tested by examination during the period of study as is the case in some other countries (J-04). In La Plata (Argentina), as we saw above, the top mark is given to work which is publishable, which implies that not all theses have publishable material but in the absence of explicit criteria, this remains unclear. However, there is a common practice in examination boards to give feedback to those with lower marks to help them prepare for publication.

In Sofia (Bulgaria), there is an expectation but not an obligation that students will have published part of their thesis in some form (DD) and this has the corollary effect that examiners are not totally surprised by what they read in the thesis text. In Connecticut (USA) too, there is some expectation that students will have published before completion of the thesis. Although this is not obligatory, students who envisage a career in a research-intensive university will certainly be expected to have published, and interviewees emphasised the fact that a student should show in a thesis/dissertation that they can do independent work. The thesis/dissertation is 'not just an exercise in learning how, but it's used as their first foray into the whole publication process'.

The presence of published material in some form is thus seen in some case studies as a strong indication of quality and of originality. At Makerere (Uganda), a slightly different view was taken in that the process of peer-reviewing certainly suggested quality but this left the examiner with little to do, not adding much value to the process, and the oral examination then becomes all the more a celebration of the work rather than an assessment. At BLCU (China), the point was also made that there are predatory journals looking for doctoral student work which scarcely guarantee quality simply as a consequence of publication.

The standard way of preparing a thesis in the Japan university – based on publications – is becoming more common in other places, and at Aveiro, interviewees talked about this relatively new phenomenon of the thesis consisting of published articles. They said this can cause disagreements for lack of experience, and one interviewee said that for this kind of thesis new criteria are needed, in particular to deal with expectations about the theoretical framework which encompasses the articles.

Other criteria

In some case-study universities, but not all, we also found an emphasis on other criteria. This is perhaps not entirely surprising given that we focused on the social sciences. In several of our cases, a unique use of methodology or analysis could be an important criterion. Krakow (Poland) interviewees, for example, emphasised the importance of methodology and conceptual analysis and ability to synthesise and critique the literature, although solving an original research problem is also included in the criteria mentioned.

We noted in the introduction above that the European Qualifications Framework criteria included reference to the ability to communicate research to peers or to society in general, and the significance of promoting 'technological, social or cultural advancement in a knowledge-based society'. Similar statements were made in our case studies. In the Japanese university, the interviewees were all from a department of education and they tended to agree that educational students cannot be separated from educational practice, one interviewee said explicitly that they find it important to consider how much a thesis contributes to the field of practice. Furthermore, this view is also made explicit in the

additional criteria that the education department has added to the university regulations, namely that a doctoral student should 'possess excellent professional knowledge, high sense of morality and social responsibility, and self-awareness of leading the field related with education'.

The analysis of interviewees' accounts of their criteria at Eduardo Mondlane University (Mozambique) revealed six sub-categories including 'social relevance' i.e., that a thesis should help solve a social problem. One interviewee juxtaposed this with the notion of commitment to research: it should be 'on an object that is relevant to society in general' and should show 'commitment to research that the doctoral student himself has employed in carrying out his research'.

At Thammasat University (Thailand), too, the interviewees emphasised the significance of work which makes an important contribution to real-world practices and knowledge of specific social issues; an example was given of an analysis of ideology and politics in the furthest provinces of the country and another interviewee said he always encourages his students to do research that 'addresses solving social problems of criminal justice in Thailand'. The sign of a good thesis is not necessarily that it builds a new theory or body of knowledge – which is difficult in the social sciences – but that it demonstrates 'an ability to disprove the insensitivity or inaccuracy of existing theories to explain phenomena or social problems in the modern world' and to show how existing theories can be used in new ways to explain social phenomena.

Two ends of the spectrum: The failing and the outstanding

Criteria for deciding that a thesis is satisfactory are also criteria for deciding failure, but there was little discussion about failure in the interviews. This suggests that failure at the end of the whole process, in the oral examination, is unusual, and in most case-studies, there are several hurdles to jump over before a student can present their thesis in a final examination. They may have examinations which test their knowledge of their subject area and methodology and/or, more importantly, they are required to present their work to a panel made up of members of their department or faculty. The degree of formality of such events may vary but their main function is to decide if the student can go forward to the next stage and then to the final oral examination. In Connecticut (USA), for example, there is a presentation to a panel of at least five faculty members who will offer critique and recommendations for improvement in theory and design. Furthermore, as is stressed in the Connecticut case, few theses fail because there is close interaction between the student and the committee which oversees their work, assisting them throughout and trying to ensure that no student defends a thesis which is not expected to meet the criteria. Where the work is poor, the student will leave the programme before they arrive at the point of oral examination. Makerere (Uganda) interviewees on the other hand had had experience on a number of occasions of a thesis failing. The reasons given included plagiarism – which would no doubt be a reason for failure in any

of our cases – and not following the advice of supervisors. Here too however the process of deciding in advance if a thesis is ready for defence is a means of reducing failure.

The other extreme is the outstanding thesis. Here the criteria might seem to our interviewees to be inadequate to the task of making quality clear, and yet it is evident: 'They just shine. I can't describe it any other way', as one Connecticut interviewee said. One Sofia (Bulgaria) interviewee managed to identify some characteristics more closely:

> there are people who are exceptionally suitable for doing this kind of work to put it in that way. Somehow. They, their thinking is logical. They, they have this consistency, coherence of the text that they've produced. They are very convincing, Even if you think differently, somehow, you, you are convinced at the end that this is the way to analyze understand whatever it will be, the subject that they are dealing with. So, and somehow they even make you start thinking about things that you do in a slightly different way, because of what they've done. I mean, they somehow opened some kind of window even now for you. So that would be exceptional.
>
> (DD)

Again we see here the word 'independent' and the originality not just of being publishable, but of 'making you start thinking …in a different way' whereas others do what is expected and meet the criteria but 'it's not at all inspiring'.

National and international comparisons

National standards exist in Australia with an 'Australian Quality Framework' and in England there is a 'Characteristics Statement. Doctoral Degree' which is linked to a 'Higher Education Credit Framework'. Similar documents were not mentioned by our interviewees in other countries, but there were references to experience of examining in other universities and therefore a sense of whether there is a national standard. In Bulgaria, a relatively small country with few universities where examiners often meet each other in examining juries, it was noted by some interviewees that there is variation among universities whereas in Durham, one of many universities in Britain, interviewees said that they found little difference among universities in approaches and criteria but in their accounts of the detailed processes they found considerable variation. Given the existence of national standardisation documents, this finding is cause for reflection on how such documents influence actual practice. At Aveiro (Portugal), interviewees distinguished between 'classic' and 'recent' universities and suggested that theses and criteria differ between the two. It seems, then that, with a caveat about generalisation, there is much variation in views about national standards or similarities in processes in different universities even in a case such as England, where national-level recommendations exist, and we might wonder how effective such documents are.

We have also seen in our introduction that documents describing international standards exist in Europe, but we wondered if there is some kind of *de facto* international comparison process working already in the way examiners think about their task and make their judgements. At Macquarie (Australia), there was a range of views among interviewees. One felt that standards in Australia are 'not as rigorous as in other countries' whereas another said that the absence of an oral examination in Australia meant that the thesis itself was better than in other countries because there is no opportunity for compensating for any deficiencies in the text. A third spoke of the impact of international networks and the opportunities examiners have to compare standards, and that this internationalisation is having an influence on universities in developing countries which have to meet international expectations of quality. This same point about the significance in creating common standards through experience of working with colleagues from other countries, whether in their own research projects or as doctoral examiners and supervisors was made at Sao Paolo (Brazil). Makerere University was seen by interviewees there as a pace-setter in Uganda and comparable in standards to other universities interviewees had experienced, in both African and European universities.

The range of views found at Macquarie was mirrored in the case of Aveiro. Interviewees tended to say that the implicit criteria examiners use are homogeneous and consistent across universities and countries. Some were of a different opinion but this may have been because they had little or no experience of universities with explicit criteria and were therefore thinking of how criteria remain implicit and subjective and therefore may vary. A contrast to this is found at Krakow where interviewees openly admitted that there is variation from one university to another in Poland but had very little international experience.

The situation thus appears very varied both at national and international levels as seen through the experience of our interviewees. Documents attempting standardisation may have limited effect, although Australia seems to offer a counter-example in this respect.

Conclusion

We have seen that there is much consensus on criteria, on which elements of a thesis/dissertation are considered essential and/or desirable. The differences lie in how the standards for criteria are defined. The setting of standards – whether national or international – is not and should not be a matter of standardisation. Harmonisation should not become homogeneity, even if this were a practical eventuality, a point made by Carter et al. (2010) with reference to the 'Bologna process' in Europe which is the only attempt so far to address the standards-setting question for the doctorate at an international level. What we have found from talking to people who are engaged in the practice of examination, is that there is some agreement about what a PhD should be and yet the variation in interpretation of the crucial concept of originality suggests that homogenisation is certainly not possible and harmonisation is extremely difficult.

Nonetheless, it seems self-evident that there should be publicly available criteria and that, in addition to any harmonisation through the production of national or international statements of standards, the actual practice benefits from examiners having a wide range of experience of reading theses in their own and other countries. Such experience benefits particularly from opportunities to talk to other examiners during the process of oral examining. Examining always has an element of 'subjectivity' but this should not be seen as a problem. It is, rather, a fund of knowledge on which examiners, singly or in groups, can draw to make trustworthy decisions even in the most complex of cases.

Notes

1 I am grateful to Silvana Barboni, Edith Barrett and Michael Stubbs for their comments and improvements on this text, and to Nilza Costa for helping with the initial planning.
2 http://uis.unesco.org/en/uis-student-flow
3 https://en.unesco.org/news/new-unesco-global-survey-reveals-impact-covid-19-higher-education
4 http://ehea.info/page-qualification-frameworks

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