

WHAT IDENTIFIES WORK AS BEING AT DOCTORAL LEVEL?

Wellington (2013) studied the regulations of fifteen different universities. This is an amended abstract of the key phrases he found (the subheadings are mine):

Publishable

- Worthy of publication
- Takes account of previously published work on the subject

Original

- Original work which forms an addition to knowledge
- Presents a significant contribution to learning, for example through the discovery of new knowledge, the connection of previously unrelated facts, the development of new theory or the revision of older views.
- Authentic – the student's own work

Systematic knowledge of the field of study

- Shows evidence of systematic study and the ability to relate the results of such a study to the general body of knowledge in the subject
- A coherent body of work

Presentable

- The dissertation is clearly written
- Demonstrates ability in style and presentation

What can 'originality' mean at doctoral level?

1. Building new knowledge eg by extending previous work or 'putting a new brick in the wall'
2. Using original processes or approaches to an existing area of study
3. Creating new syntheses
4. Exploring new implications for either practitioners, policy makers or theory and theorists
5. Revising a recurrent issue or debate by offering new evidence, new thinking or new theory
6. Replicating or reproducing earlier work eg from a different place or time with a different sample
7. Presenting research in a novel way eg new ways of writing, presenting, disseminating

Clark and Lunt (2014) interviewed, surveyed and observed examiners and candidates and argue that 'originality' and 'a contribution to knowledge' need to be disentangled, and may mean different things in different disciplines. They also introduce two additional issues for assessment: the concept of integrity as a researcher; and the ability to communicate and defend results.

Trafford and Leshem (2008) suggest that we can start to answer the question of what is 'doctorateness' by looking at the types of questions asked in the viva and categorising them. Most of them can be put into one of four quadrants:

Quadrant A deals with the technology of the thesis and includes such issues as structure, presentation, content of the thesis and resolving administrative and technical aspects of doing the research. These features represent non-academic considerations as a thesis is prepared for submission and includes structure, presentation, formatting, pagination and compliance with protocols.

Quadrant B deals with the theoretical perspectives and includes such issues as identifying the research paradigms, awareness of the wider literature, theoretical perspectives and the implications of the findings. These features demonstrate understanding of the academic context in which the research is located and on which it depends for its conceptual insights and frameworks.

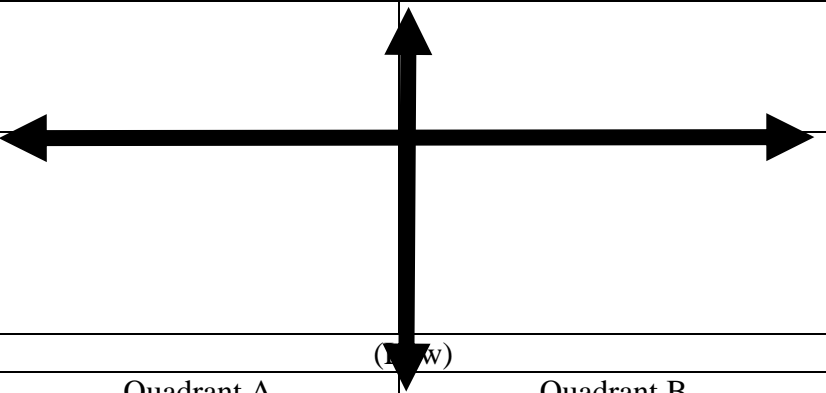
Quadrant C deals with the practice of research such as the emergence and use of the research questions, choice of topic, access to field data and explanations surrounding the gap in knowledge. These features demonstrate understanding of research as a process and an ability to undertake complex research in a critical and appropriate manner.

Quadrant D deals with demonstrating doctorateness such as establishing conceptual links between findings, sythesising evidence into conceptual conclusions, critiquing the research process, advancing contributions to knowledge and defending doctorateness in the thesis and throughout the viva itself. These features are the critical prerequisites of scholarly merit in doctoral level research.

	Innovation and Development	
	Quadrant C	Quadrant D
Scholarship and Interpretation	<i>Practice of research</i>	<i>Demonstrating doctorateness</i>
	<i>Technology of the thesis</i>	<i>Theoretical perspectives</i>
	Quadrant A	Quadrant B

Place the following types of questions in the quadrants below:

1. Research questions
2. Defending doctorateness
3. Resolving research problems
4. Identifying the research approach and the paradigms
5. Implications of research findings
6. Content of thesis
7. Choice of topic
8. Critiquing and analysing
9. Conceptualising findings
10. Location of study
11. Structure of the thesis
12. Awareness of the wider literature
13. Developing conceptual frameworks
14. Synthesising concepts
15. Establishing links/concepts
16. Being familiar with relevant literature
17. Research design and operational fieldwork issues

	Innovation and Development (High)		
	Quadrant C	Quadrant D	
Scholarship and Interpretation (Low)			(High)
	Quadrant A	Quadrant B	

Adapted from: Trafford V and Leshem S (2008) Stepping Stones to Achieving your Doctorate: by focussing on your viva from the start. Maidenhead. McGraw Hill/Open University Press

The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA 2011) states that doctoral candidates must demonstrate:

1. A deep knowledge and understanding of the field of study
2. Originality of thought either in the creation of new knowledge or in the novel application of existing knowledge

The QAA, in its Code of Practice (2012) states that institutions must:

1. Provide clearly communicated regulations
2. Provide up to date codes of practice
3. Monitor their provision against other internal and external indicators
4. Have an excellent research environment
5. Demonstrate equal opportunity
6. Train admissions staff in selection
7. Make the student's responsibilities and entitlements clear to them
8. Have a good induction programme
9. Appoint supervisors with appropriate skills and knowledge
10. Give each student a supervisory team
11. Communicate responsibilities of students and supervisors to both parties
12. Ensure supervisors have sufficient time to supervise
13. Have clearly defined mechanisms for monitoring and supporting progress
14. Offer opportunities for developing research, personal and professional skills
15. Collect, review and respond to evaluations from students and others
16. Have clear assessment criteria
17. Have rigorous and fair assessment criteria including input from an external examiner
18. Have an appeals procedure for dealing with complaints

The QAA (2007) stated that doctorates should only be awarded to students who have demonstrated the following in a viva (oral examination) with an external examiner:

- The creation and interpretation of new knowledge, through on-going research or other advanced scholarship, of a quality to satisfy peer review, extend the forefront of the discipline and merit publication
- A systematic acquisition and understanding of a substantial body of knowledge that is at the forefront of an academic discipline or area of professional practice
- The general ability to conceptualise, design and implement a project for the generation of new knowledge, applications or understanding at the forefront of the discipline and to adjust the project design in the light of unforeseen problems;
- A detailed understanding of applicable techniques for research and advanced academic enquiry

References

- Clarke G and Lunt I (2014) The concept of 'originality' in the PhD.: how is it interpreted by examiners? *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*. 39:7 803-820
- Trafford V and Leshem S (2008) *Stepping Stones to Achieving your Doctorate: by focussing on your viva from the start*. Maidenhead. McGraw Hill/Open University Press
- QAA (2012) Quality Code Chapter B11 <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=175#.VHMxATsX4s> and
- QAA (2011) Doctoral Characteristics http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/Doctoral_Characteristics.pdf
- Wellington (2013) Searching for 'Doctorateness' *Studies in Higher Education*. 13.10

See also: Kyvik S (2013) Assessment procedures of Norwegian PhD theses as viewed by examiners from the USA, the UK and Sweden, *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 39:2, 105-153