

Extracts from: “Doing Research in Business and Management” by Dan Remenyi...

15.9 Evaluating the Doctorate Degree

For a doctorate degree the examiners require a deeper treatment of the subject material and the research issues. The central issue in evaluating a doctoral dissertation is whether or not the work has added something of value to the body of knowledge. Expressed slightly differently, the doctoral candidate needs to make a theoretical contribution to the subject that will hold up under the detailed scrutiny of the internal and external examiners. This usually requires an analysis and interpretation of theoretical concepts, the collection of evidence and the creative synthesis of evidence and theory.

Unless a valuable contribution to the body of knowledge can be demonstrated it is unlikely that the candidate will be awarded a doctorate.⁴ In the context of business and management research to contribution should also be of practical relevance to business organisations. However, although adding to the body of knowledge is a necessary condition, it is not in its own right sufficient. There are several other criteria that are quite central to the evaluation.

The dissertation of a doctoral candidate should show evidence that he or she is familiar with all the literature and all the arguments relating to the issues being researched. The doctoral dissertation needs to focus on relevant material and synthesise the more important issues.

The candidate should know as much about the topic as anyone else, including the examiners. Thus the candidate's reading needs to be fully up to date. In addition, the candidate must show a distinctly critical faculty in discussing the strengths and weakness of this body of literature.

A doctoral dissertation needs to express clearly a distinct point of view, which some scholars refer to as new insights or a new vision of the subject matter being studied or researched. The researcher should be able to demonstrate convincingly why this point of view should be regarded as important as well as being able to argue for its validity.

A doctoral dissertation in the business and management studies area should directly address the implications of the research for management. It needs to establish that the findings of the research are relevant to current management problems or opportunities.

15.10 Quality versus Quantity

Some doctoral candidates show concern over what constitutes an appropriate length or number of pages for a dissertation. This type of question does not have a simple answer. In some circumstances quite short dissertations are acceptable, while in other circumstances the subject will require a lengthier dissertation to do justice to the subject matter. In general, however, most students will find it challenging to produce a document that is adequately comprehensive and free standing in under 200 pages. On the other hand, documents in excess of 500 pages are generally regarded as being too lengthy and probably verbose. Some students produce dissertations running to 1,000 pages but

there is now a tendency to return these documents for shortening as the factor of overwhelming importance is to produce a concise, convincing and well-reasoned argument.

15.11 Details that Examiners Inspect Closely

Besides evaluating holistically, as has been discussed above, examiners also look for a considerable amount of detail in each chapter of a dissertation. Although the detail may be regarded in some institutions as less important than the holistic criteria, it is essential if the candidate is to obtain the degree. The following sections look at each chapter of a dissertation separately and highlight the most important issues.

15.11.1 Introduction

It is important that the introduction captures the imagination of the reader by showing why the subject is important and thus worthy of the award of a degree, be it a masters or a doctorate. Examiners will look for a comprehensive presentation of the background to the problem, which should include a clear and convincing argument that the subject of the research is topical, relevant and important. In business and management research this implies that the work will lead to the development of guidelines which will be of direct use in business and management situations. The introduction should include key definitions, a brief description of the research tasks, indicating the steps to be followed through the dissertation, and an outline of the main conclusions.

15.11.2 Literature Review

The literature review is of considerable importance and needs to be thorough and exhaustive. The references should be taken primarily from the leading academic journals and not from general textbooks. References to relevant textbooks or even to articles in the popular press are acceptable, but these should be kept to a minimum. References should be made to both theoretical and empirical issues pertaining to the research topic. All references cited should be complete and should comply with the convention accepted by the university concerned.

The candidate should not simply regurgitate the ideas from the literature but is expected to evaluate and comment on them critically but constructively. There should not be too many direct quotes from referenced works. This is a central requirement, especially for a doctoral degree.

By the end of the literature review the candidate will probably have prepared a conceptual model which describes the key variables relating to the phenomenon being researched and how these variables are linked to one another. This model could be presented as either a narrative or graphical presentation, or both.

15.11.3 Research Questions

The research questions need to be directly related to the conceptual model developed from the literature review referred to above. They should be couched in a clear way and be easily operationalised (Hubermann and Miles, 1994). Only a limited number of research questions are required and examiners will usually be critical if too many issues are covered; in some circumstances one research question may be perfectly adequate.

Research questions should be focused so they will have to lead to a theoretical conjecture or to hypotheses or empirical generalisations.

15.11.4 Methodology

The question of methodology is complex and there are many different views. The traditional approach to business and management studies was to employ methodologies borrowed from the natural sciences and thus much of the work performed in this field relied on the positivist research paradigm. In recent years qualitative research approaches (Patton, 1990) have grown in popularity and today play an important role in research in this field.

It is critical to spell out the philosophical approach being used to underpin the research (Remenyi, 1995). This dictates the research strategy and it is important that it is consistent. The two main philosophical stances used in academic research are positivism and phenomenology and within these there are a number of different research strategies (Galliers, 1992). If an eclectic approach is used this should be carefully justified as many examiners are critical of this approach.

This chapter should include a full description of the process used to gather both primary and secondary evidence, which will normally be both qualitative and quantitative in nature. The methods of evidence collection and proposed analyses should be defined, together with a statement of the limitations of the approach that has been adopted.

15.11.5 Evidence Collection and Analysis

This is one of the most challenging parts of a research degree. The examiners look to see if an appropriate approach has been taken to the actual evidence collection. The questions asked here frequently relate to sampling procedures and instrumentation. Where case studies have been used it is important to state why the particular organisations were chosen to be studied (Yin, 1989). Examiners will consider the rigour⁵ with which this has been done. The techniques used to analyse the evidence collected will be closely scrutinised and they need to comply with accepted practice in the discipline being researched. If established practices have not been followed the candidate needs to explain why convincingly.

The results of the interpretation or the analysis need to be presented using traditional presentation techniques, such as tables, graphs etc. The departure point for the analysis is the provision of a profile of the sample that form the basis for subsequent deeper analysis and generalisations and this needs to be explicitly stated. This aspect of the study is key to assessing the validity of the findings from the research.

Any problems encountered in dealing with the above issues should be stated, together with an explanation as to how they were overcome.

15.11.6 Interpretation

This chapter will discuss the finding in a general way as well as focusing on some specific interpretations of the results.

It is essential that the interpretation or the findings are consistent with the analysis. There needs to be a clear logical path from the original conceptual model, to the evidence, to the

analysis, and then to the findings. Examiners look to see if the findings constitute a clear addition to the body of knowledge. The question ‘Has the work made a clear contribution to the field of study?’ will be asked. In establishing this, the examiners will need to decide if the candidate has made a convincing argument (Collins, 1994). In the business and management field one of the most important criteria is whether the results of the research may be put to some practical use. Thus the question, ‘Are the findings useful?’, is frequently asked. The question of validity, bias and generalisability have also to be addressed in this chapter irrespective of whether a quantitative or qualitative approach has been taken. It is not essential that the results are generalisable, but this issue needs to be fully discussed.

Sometimes the evidence collected by the research and the analysis thereof does not support the original conceptual model. This does not mean that the candidate’s research has been a failure. Failing to confirm a theory or hypothesis can be just as valuable as confirmation, and it could lead to the development of a new theory. Senior degrees may be awarded even where the candidate has not confirmed his or her hypothesis, provided a contribution has been made to the body of knowledge.

15.11.7 Summary and Conclusion of the Dissertation

The conclusion provides an opportunity to tie up the loose ends, to state the limitations of the research and to suggest where research in the subject should now proceed. The implications of the research for the management and business community in general should also be stated here. If any part of the work of the candidate has already been published then this should be pointed out in support of the findings.

The conclusions should finish with a statement of the positive aspects of the research work, even if the research did not support the original model or beliefs.

15.11.8 The Limitations of the Research

In this final chapter in a dissertation there is the opportunity to reflect on the research and to discuss its strengths and weaknesses. It is sometimes said that this is the place for reflectivity, meaning that the researcher can reflect on the work in a holistic way and make an evaluation of the dissertation him or herself. This is an important chapter and even a relatively weak dissertation can be substantially strengthened by an insightful account of the research at this stage.

15.11.9 Management Guidelines or Recommendations

In this final chapter of a dissertation the findings are restructured in terms of practical guidelines which can be used by managers in order to improve their performance in working situations.

15.2 The Grading of Masters and Doctorates

Some universities only distinguish between dissertations that have earned a pass grade and those which have not. Thus the candidate can either pass or not pass. In the case of the latter, the candidate is frequently encouraged to do more work. However, some other universities do award masters and doctorates cum laude, or with distinction. It is difficult

to define the requirements for these awards and perhaps all that can be said of a general nature is that outstanding work is required to achieve these accolades.

15.13 A Checklist for Doctoral and Masters Degree Candidates

The following is a checklist of 23 questions which will be directly useful to doctoral candidates but will also have some relevance to masters students, especially those hoping to achieve a distinction, and which they should consult before finally submitting their dissertation. The checklist is broken into two parts: general or holistic issues and detailed issues.

15.13.1 General or Holistic Issues

- 1 Is the problem identified specified, structured and articulated clearly?
- 2 Does the work make a valuable contribution to the body of knowledge?
- 3 Is the argument in the dissertation convincing?
- 4 Does the supervisor agree that the work is ready for examination?
- 5 Is the document about the right length?
- 6 Is the dissertation ready to be placed in the public domain, i.e. university library?
- 7 Are all the university requirements relating to the format of the dissertation complied with?
- 8 Does the introduction demonstrate that the subject of the research is important?
- 9 Is the literature review complete and is it sufficiently critical?
- 10 Has a new conceptual model been developed from the literature review?
- 11 Is the research question clear and is it directly derived from either personal experience⁶ or the literature review?
- 12 Do the research questions lend themselves to empirical generalisations or hypotheses?
- 13 Has the philosophical underpinning of the research methodology been stated?
- 14 Have the details of the research method been explained?
- 15 Has a sound approach to sampling procedures and evidence collection been demonstrated?
- 16 Have the analytical techniques used on the evidence, whether they be qualitative or quantitative, been fully justified?
- 17 Is there a clear logical path from the original conceptual model to the evidence to the analysis and then to the findings?
- 18 Are the findings generalisable and, if not, what is their importance?
- 19 Have the issues of validity, reliability or credibility, transferability and bias been adequately addressed?
- 20 Are the final conclusions sufficiently convincing?
- 21 Have the limitations of the research been adequately addressed?
- 22 Have the findings of the research been translated into management guidelines?
- 23 Does the 'Summary and Conclusions' chapter finish on a positive note?

Only when all of these questions have been satisfactorily answered should the candidate present his or her work for examination.

15.14 Summary and Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed the range of research degrees offered by universities. It has considered masters and doctoral degrees, including those offered by dissertation only and those obtained through a combination of course work and research. It will be noticed that there is a range of degrees available with a substantial diversity in the amount of research required from a candidate in order to qualify. Thus candidates who have a relatively low inclination to research and select degree options where there is a substantial amount of course work.

The principal issues on which examiners focus for the evaluation of the research work have been outlined, both holistically and in the detail required for typical chapters of a dissertation.

Research degree candidates are offered advice as to what is required in their written output in terms of both academic content and technical presentation. A checklist has been provided which, if used to ensure the dissertation is complete, can assist candidates obtain approval for their work.

Although research for masters and doctoral degrees is demanding, many graduates report that the research process has been one of the most satisfactory periods of their career.

Suggested Further Reading

Arbnor, I. And Bjerke, B. (1996), *Methodology for Creating Business Knowledge*, 2nd ed., Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Black, T. R. (1993), *Evaluating Social Science Research: An Introduction*. Sage Publications, London.

Hansen, K.J. and Waterman, R.C. (1966), 'Evaluation of research in business education', *National business Education Quarterly*, no. 35, pp. 81–4.

Jankowicz, A. (1995), *Business Research Projects*, 2nd ed., Chapman and Hall, London

Mowday, R. (1997), 'Reaffirming our scholarly values', *Academy of Management Review*, vol. 22, no. 2, April, pp. 335–45.

Notes

¹The procedure by which degrees are awarded differs enormously from university to university. However, in almost all cases the university senate awards the degree, but in some cases it may take advice directly from the examiners without going through a board of examiners or a higher degrees committee.

²The scope of the masters degree may be relatively narrow and the candidate is usually not required to have the same depth or breadth of knowledge of related fields as would be required for a doctorate.

³Most universities have standing rules and regulations that specify the length of research reports as well as masters and doctoral dissertations. These are usually laid down in terms of the maximum number of words. A minimum number is usually not stated as it is generally agreed that quantity cannot be substituted for quality. There have been instances, particularly in the computational sciences, where masters and doctoral degrees have been obtained on the basis of a dissertation of no more than a dozen or so pages.

⁴If a candidate presents a lesser piece of work he or she may be offered another degree such as an MPhil.

⁵The concept of rigour in research is not an easy one. Rigour relates to thoroughness, to attention to detail, to consistency or to conformation with the chosen research strategy. It will not be easy to find fault with a research dissertation that has rigorously complied with the generally accepted rules of research.

⁶If the research question has been derived from personal experience then it also needs to be, at least to some extent, supported by the literature.