

An Analysis of Doctoral Thesis Examination Reports in Kenya: Its Implication on Supervision Process

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Abstract

Thesis examination is a widely utilized assessment method in academic institutions globally, aimed at evaluating whether specified learning outcomes have been achieved. Examiners are tasked with determining the extent to which these outcomes are met, providing both formative and summative assessments. This study sought to investigate the coherence and adherence to established assessment criteria in thesis examination reports. Additionally, the research aimed to explore the characteristics of examiners' feedback on doctoral research theses. The paper presents findings from an empirical study analyzing twelve doctoral thesis reports from four departments within a School of Education. Thematic analysis was employed to gain insights into how informative these reports are for both doctoral candidates and their supervisors. The results revealed inconsistencies in the coherence of thesis evaluation reports, with some examiners failing to follow prescribed assessment guidelines. Further, both summative and formative assessments indicated that many candidates faced challenges in research methodology. The paper recommends targeted training for supervisors and examiners on producing coherent thesis evaluation reports. Additionally, a review of grading tools is necessary to ensure consistency, and structured supervision practices should be implemented to guarantee the effective transfer of thesis-writing skills.

Key words: *Doctoral Thesis, Formative Assessments, Summative Assessments, Supervision, Thesis Examination.*

1.0 Introduction

The demand for quality researchers globally has in recent years led to several transformations in higher education in the world which have also impacted on higher education in Africa. The main driver of today's knowledge in the society is doctoral training which is pivotal for research and knowledge production (Jowi, 2021). With the growing numbers of doctoral students Universities have come up with regulations and guidelines to produce competent researchers. Some of the regulations and guidelines emanates from the various regulatory bodies set up by various governments to manage higher education in African countries. The focus has been on supervision and examination process for doctoral theses. Lee (2008), in her study discussed five approaches to supervision which impacts on the theses output. The approaches address such questions as what is the underlying conceptual framework and what are the arguments for and against the supervision approach. These are some of the critical areas that thesis feedback reports focus. According to Kumar and Stracke (2011), examiner reports play a very important role in postgraduate examinations especially at the Master's and doctoral level as it depicts the output of the quality of the supervision. This observation implies that supervision process has an impact on the kind of the theses that are being produced by the doctoral students.

According to Joyner (2003) as cited by Kumar and Stracke (2011) examiners may consider the examination as a 'gate keeping' task as well as an opportunity to provide developmental experiences to the postgraduate candidates. In most universities examiners are usually required to make a summative assessment and also provide developmental experiences in the form of feedback. In other words, the examiner reports give a summative assessment where examiners state whether the thesis has met the standards established by the discipline and the university for the award of the degree. The report further provides developmental and formative feedback to assist the candidate in revising the thesis (Kumar and Stracke, 2011).

The Commission of University Education (CUE) in Kenya have set up Universities Standards and Guidelines in Kenya. The guidelines provide that a doctoral and masters thesis shall be supervised by at least two senior academic staff members who shall have appropriate qualifications in the discipline and its methodology. The thesis shall be internally and externally examined. The selected university has postgraduate regulations that guides appointment of the Supervisors and the examiners. Thesis examiners are given clear guidelines on what is expected in the report. The report should basically give summative judgement and also developmental experiences related to form and content; methodology and contribution to knowledge. This paper therefore examines how the thesis feedback reports inform the supervision practice at the university

1.1 Problem statement

There is a major concern on the growing number for doctoral training and the quality of supervision. The growth in numbers of doctoral students has not been in tandem with the capacity for doctoral supervision which strain the existing academic staff. Many studies done in Africa by Jowi, (2017); Barasa & Omulando, (2017); Alabi & Mohammed (2017), found out that the very few qualified academic staff end up being overloaded with a high number of students to supervise. They further found that there were no proper supervision frameworks, poor working environment and low remuneration for supervisors which compromise the quality of supervision. The output arising from the strained existing capacity can be manifested in the feedback reports from thesis examiners. This study analyzes the reports with a focus on examiners feedback on background of the study, theoretical framework, methodology, analysis and conclusion.

1.2 Objectives

The study's objective is to establish whether there was coherence in the examiner's reports. The study further aimed at identifying the nature of examiners' reports on research theses in the selected University in Kenya.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Doctoral Degree and Supervision

The baseline of what every doctoral thesis must demonstrate usually brings uncertainty about the doctoral examination process (Erwee & Perry, 2017). Various institutions of higher learning have come up with what is expected of a doctoral degree. For example, in Kenya, the Universities Standards and Guidelines (2014) provides that a doctoral degree shall;

Enhance knowledge at the most advanced frontier of the discipline or field of study; Provide the learner with the most advanced and specialized skills and techniques required to solve critical problems in research and/or innovation; Extend and redefine existing knowledge; Entail demonstration of substantial authority, innovation, autonomy, scholarly and professional integrity and sustained commitment to the development of new ideas or processes at the forefront of a discipline or field of study (pp 48)

With these provisions, Kenyan Universities have two kinds of doctoral level programmes, notably; Doctor of Philosophy degrees and other doctoral degrees. There is a clear distinction between the Doctor of Philosophy degree programmes and other doctoral degrees. Thus in the context of the Universities Standards and Guidelines (2014) in Kenya;

Doctor of Philosophy degree programme shall focus on producing scientist practitioners who are mainly engaged in generating knowledge through research and teaching while Other doctoral degree programmes shall be practice-oriented and shall focus on producing practitioner scholars who are engaged mainly in consuming knowledge, practice and active research.

One consequence of these two different emphases is that Doctor of Philosophy thesis should explicitly describe its contribution to knowledge in a discipline while noting its lesser contributions to professional. In contrast, Other doctoral thesis should explicitly detail its contributions to knowledge about the professional practice of the candidate and the development of their organization or community of practice. It is evident that the two types of theses have different emphases (Erwee & Perry, 2017).

The aims of doctoral education and doctorateness process can be realized with effective doctoral supervision (Fulgence, 2019). The doctorateness process comprise of the student, the supervisor and the institution offering the degree, with the emphasis being on the role of the doctoral supervisor (Reguero, Carvajal, García, & Valverde (2017). The role of the supervisor is to oversee the overall research project for the benefit of all the stakeholders who include the student, the university and the global community ((Grant, 2005; Reguero et al., 2017). This makes it imperative for institutions of higher learning to continuously ensure that doctoral supervision is in line with institutional postgraduate policies and are managed professionally.

Institutions in Africa have serious deficiencies in supervision of PhD candidates due to growing enrolments (Barasa & Omulando 2017). This has led to overloading of the few qualified staff. Fulgence (2019) observed that this has brought changes in doctoral education process and supervision assignment (Jackson, Darbyshire, Luck, & Peters, 2009), “changes in technology”

(Cruz, Costa, Martins, Gonçalves, & Barroso, 2015), “changes in doctoral programme modalities, research and Professional thesis as well as changes in practice and supervision styles, ranging from pastoral, contractual and laissez-faire (low support and low self-direction) to directional (low support and high self-direction and other related co-supervision modes” (Boehe, 2016). Bogelund (2015) further argues that “doctoral supervision has become complex in the contemporary world”. “This is because a lot of high-quality research is needed that is globally competitive, viable and efficient, which dominates the understanding and practice of supervisors. Likewise, the increased number of doctoral students per supervisor leads to the students spending less time with their supervisors, resulting in a limited transfer of adequate skills for thesis writing” (Blitzer, Albertyn, Frick, Grant, & Kelly, 2014). This scenario will have an impact on the quality of theses generated in the universities.

2.2 Thesis examination

The appointment of examiners should be based on the University’s postgraduate guidelines developed in adherence to laid down regulations. In Kenya, Universities Standards and Guidelines (2014) stipulates that the examiner: shall have a proven track record of research and scholarship in a field of study relevant to the subject matter on which the thesis to be examined is based; shall have knowledge of the methodology (sympathy to the methodology); Examiners independent and hold a degree at the level that they are examining or higher, unless there are exceptional circumstances that are approved by the appropriate institution’s committee.

Examination of thesis is a form of an assessment based on set criteria by the learning institution. It should be noted that in postgraduate education at the Master’s and doctoral levels the institutions awarding the degree usually prepare assessment criteria. Examiners are asked to decide if certain learning outcomes have been met. When assessing thesis, the examiners give both formative and summative assessments. Kumar & Stracke (2011) observes that “in summative assessment, a final grade is given in a thesis, it is usually a pass with several degrees of acceptance criteria, which could range from the thesis being accepted, accepted with minor modifications, accepted with major modifications, to a resubmission or even a fail”. They further argue that “in contrast formative assessment concerns itself with improvements to outputs that are developmental in nature. This seems to be pertinent at the postgraduate level, as writing multiple drafts of chapters and engaging in formative assessment is a norm. Formative assessment is said to incorporate three main components: diagnosing student difficulties, measuring improvement over time, and, finally, providing information to improve. Contrary to the passive nature of summative assessment, formative assessment is active in the sense that it triggers and provides a sense of direction to achieve learning goals”. The role of the supervisor is heavily felt at this formative stage of assessment. If supervision goes wrong, the summative assessment will negatively be affected. The University guidelines prescribes that the appointed examiners shall indicate within his/her detailed report;

whether or not the thesis is adequate in form and content as indicated in the guidelines for writing thesis; the extent of the contribution to knowledge made by the thesis, and in particular its contribution to the understanding of the subject with

which it deals and in consequence; whether or not the thesis needs revision or corrections; and the proposed period of correction; the mark to be assigned to the thesis and justification for the same in a prescribed mark/grading form.

The report will therefore give both summative and formative assessment. A study by Butler (1988) noted that when students receive summative assessment, they hardly attend to formative feedback. However, postgraduate doctoral students cannot ignore their examiners' developmental and formative assessment reports. The institutional guidelines require candidates to utilize examiners theses assessment reports to attend to suggestions and comments. The feedback informs both the supervisor and the supervisee on the strengths and the weakness of the thesis.

3.0 Methodology

Twelve examiners' reports were analyzed with the aim of establishing whether there was coherence in the reports. The study further aimed at identifying the nature of examiners' reports on research theses. The reports were drawn from four departments in the school of Education in a selected public university in Kenya. The departments and the number of thesis analyzed are as indicated in table 1. It should be noted that examination of doctoral students in the school is done by two internal examiners and one external examiner.

Table 1: Departments and Number of Thesis Reports

S/NO	Name of Department	Number of Thesis Reports
1	Educational Management	3
2	Curriculum, Instruction, Education & Media	3
3	Educational Foundations	3
4	Educational Psychology	3
Total		12

The print copies of the examiners' reports were available. These reports were analyzed one at a time based on the reporting format as provided by the school of graduate criteria. To enable comparison of the examiners reports three reports belonging to the same student were analyzed from each department. The study was descriptive in nature and it focused on each report; on whether the examiner provided mainly formative assessment or summative assessment. The questions that guided collection of data were: Is there coherence in the examiner's reports? Do the reports comply with the examination guidelines issued to the thesis examiners? Do the formative assessment and summative assessment provided inform the supervisee and supervisor on areas of strength and weakness of the theses. These questions gave rise to various themes that enabled the researcher to come up with various codes for purpose of analyzing the data from the reports. For coherence, it was coded (C), Comply coded (A), formative assessment being informative was code (FAI), summative assessment being informative was code (SAI), both formative and summative assessment being informative was code (SFI).

4.0 Findings and discussion

4.1 Coherence in the examiner's reports

Three Examination reports for one doctoral candidate were analyzed from Educational Department. All examiners made similar judgement on the study's background. On theoretical framework while examiner 1 and 3 were comfortable with the framework, examiner 2 found the theory not appropriate for the study by indicating that;

A relevant cognitive anthropology culture theory applied to address culture that influences Performance, however there was need to have a second theory or model to address the issue of performance

The three examiners made similar observations under methodology and data analysis. Judgement on the study's conclusion by two examiners agreed. However, Examiner 3 observed that some of the conclusions made were not based on the objectives.

On the question as do the reports comply with the examination guidelines issued to the thesis examiners? Analysis of the reports revealed that examiner 3 did not comply with the instructions. The examiner gave a mark without stating as to whether or not the thesis is adequate in form and content as indicated in the guidelines for writing thesis; the extent of the contribution to knowledge made by the thesis, and in particular its contribution to the understanding of the subject with which it deals and in consequence; whether or not the thesis needs revision or corrections; and the proposed period of correction as required by the appointment letter.

When the score sheet was analyzed for the three examiners, there was a big range in scores assigned to the thesis. The lowest awarded was 65% and highest was 75%. Thesis reports from the department of Curriculum, Instruction, Education & Media (CIEM) were analyzed based on the themes identified. All the three examiners were in agreement that the thesis title be revised to make it more precise. And that the study's background was succinct and clear. However, on the theoretical framework, examiners 1 and 2 found it suitable for the study but Examiner 3 noted *"This section is too long such that the link of the theory with the present study is not clearly seen"* (C)

On research design there's an agreement by examiner 1 and 3 that the methodology was fault. Examiner 1 noted that "how do you use descriptions only where quantitative analysis is required" while examiner 3 on research design and research instruments observed that;

...the discussion here is not focused on the design...you need to describe and justify the appropriateness of the design. The instrument you piloted is a questionnaire, why did you determine the item difficulties and discrimination? (C).

While 2 examiners agree that data analysis and conclusion were well presented, one examiner (Examiner 3) noted that the sections be re-written. Which indicate lack coherence among the examiners.

On overall score on the thesis there was a wide range observed. Lowest awarded was 45% and the highest score was 67%. This again shows a wide disparity in the assessment of the thesis in the school despite having the same scoring sheet.

Three thesis examiners reports were obtained for one doctoral candidate from the department of Educational Foundations and analyzed. Examiner 1 and 2 agreed on the statement of the problem that it was not clear. They observed that:

“...the problem statement was not clearly stated since extraneous issues which were not closely linked to problem of the study were introduced and brought to the fore” (C)

This clearly contradicts with examiner 3 who noted that the statement of problem was articulated and clearly stated.

There was coherence in the judgement of most parts of the thesis by the examiners and overall assessment. The range in marks awarded was small. The lowest awarded mark was 65% and highest was 70%.

On the question as whether the reports comply (A) with the examination guidelines issued to the thesis examiners? Analysis of the reports revealed that 2 examiners did not comply with the instructions. One of the examiners did not state as to whether or not the thesis is adequate in form and content and the extent of the contribution to knowledge made by the thesis. The other examiner did not state whether or not the thesis needs revision or corrections; and the proposed period of correction as required by the appointment letter.

Finally, reports from the department of psychology were analyzed with a view of establishing coherence and adherence by examiners to the established guidelines on thesis examination. The three examiners agreed on the lack of a problem being investigated. Examiner1 categorically stated that:

... there is no succinct conception of the problem and its attendant theoretical underpinnings demonstrated in the report and therefore it is self-evident that there is inadequate grasp of the issues on the subject (C)

The analysis further revealed a disparity in the award of marks. The lowest awarded mark was 24% and the highest was 55%. Which shows inconsistency of the marks scored using the same tool.

The analyzed reports show lack of coherence and compliance of examination criteria among the examiners. Kenyan Universities Standards and Guidelines (2014) stipulates that examiners shall have a proven track record of research and scholarship in a field of study relevant to the subject matter on which the thesis to be examined is based and shall have knowledge of the methodology. The lack of coherence in the reports may also be attributed to the supervision process. Some examiners noted serious methodology issues in the thesis. Barasa and Omulando (2017) and Fulgence (2019) in their studies found that Institutions in Africa have serious deficiencies in supervision of PhD candidates due to overloading of the few qualified staff. Lee (2008), in her study discussed five approaches to supervision which impacts on the theses output that can be adopted to improve the quality of thesis outputs.

4.2 Nature of Examiners Reports

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The three reports from the educational management department carried out both formative and formative assessments. However, one of the examiners made a formative assessment on research design that was contradictory. The examiner stated that;

The research design adopted was appropriate and explained. You however need to state specifically the research design. (FAI)

This judgement is not clear what the examiner wants and does makes it difficult for the candidate and the supervisor to make revisions. Just like in the department of educational management, the three reports analyzed for the candidate from Curriculum department showed that both formative and formative assessments were done. The reports were comprehensive and communicated the areas of concern. Some of the summative assessments were very informative and clear. For example, examiner 1 stated that;

The findings of the study are not valid since the research instrument used is not appropriate to obtain data to address the research objectives. The researcher does not have a grasp of research methodology. I'm awarding a grade of 45% (SFI)

This judgement made by the examiner is very critical and has an implication on the supervision process.

From the analysis of the 3 examiners report in the department of Educational Foundations, it was found that all the examiners gave a summative and formative assessment that were understood. These could easily be utilized by the candidates for the revision of the thesis. Despite awarding a high grade, Examiner 1 made a conclusion that the thesis requires correction for a period of four months which contravenes university policy.

Both summative and formative assessment were carried out in the department psychology thesis examination. In making summative assessment examiner1 observed that “unfortunately the thesis lacks originality as far as knowledge contribution is concerned”. On same construct Examiner 2 noted that, “on the basis of the issues raised, I find concrete evidence that the thesis has made a contribution to research in the field of motivation”.

From the study’s findings it is clear that some of the examiners’ reports are not informative enough to the candidates. It is imperative that Summative and formative assessments inform both the supervisor and the supervisee on the strengths and the weakness of the thesis (Butler, 1988).

The findings further reveals that the examiners gave both formative and summative assessments that agree with Kumar & Stracke (2011) who observed that in summative assessment, a final grade is given in a thesis and formative assessment concerns itself with improvements to outputs that are developmental in nature.

5.0 Conclusion and recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

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The aim of this study was to establish whether there was coherence and compliance to set criteria in the examiners thesis reports. The study further aimed at identifying the nature of examiners' reports on research theses. The findings revealed that there was lack of coherence in thesis examination. The judgement made on the same constructs differed from one examiner to another. In some instances, it was observed that an examiner makes a positive observation on a construct and a second examiner makes a negative observation on the same construct. This makes it difficult for the candidate to make corrections on the thesis.

The University guidelines prescribe to the examiners what is expected of them when writing thesis report. The study found that not all examiners adhere to the criteria set. Some examiners submitted their reports without indicating whether or not the thesis is adequate in form and content as indicated in the guidelines for writing thesis; the extent of the contribution to knowledge made by the thesis, and in particular its contribution to the understanding of the subject with which it deals and in consequence; whether or not the thesis needs revision or corrections; and the proposed period of correction; the mark to be awarded to the thesis and recommending whether or not the degree should be awarded subject to the candidate fulfilling the other requirements in respect of course work.

Summative and formative assessments reports indicated that some candidates had difficulties in the methodology. This may be attributed to the supervision process. Unavailability and in adequacy of supervisors leads to the students spending less time with them, resulting in a limited transfer of adequate skills for thesis writing.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions, the study presents the following recommendations

1. Since examiners' judgments are often subjective, there is a need for training sessions for both supervisors and examiners on how to write clear and consistent thesis examination reports.
2. Review of assessment guidelines and grading tools for consistency
3. Supervisors should have a structured way of meeting their supervisees and records be kept in order to ensure there is transfer of adequate skills for thesis writing. Formative assessment feedback records be kept and tracked.

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