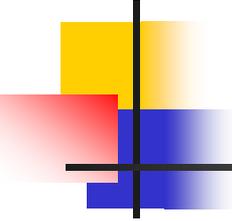


Examiners' Reports on Theses and Dissertations (2007 & 2008): Some Insights and Observations

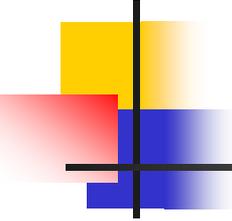
R. Subramaniam
Associate Professor
Natural Sciences & Science Education AG
National Institute of Education
Nanyang Technological University



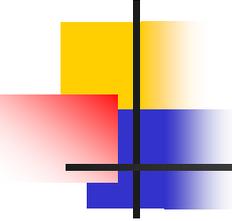
Role of examiners

- Act as quality control inspectors for the university in respect of research done by graduate students
- Gatekeepers of academic standards
- Provide an avenue for rigorous peer appraisal of research done by graduate students

Number and type of examiners

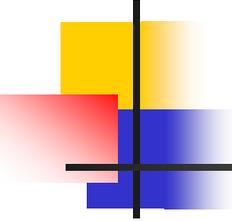


- Master's thesis: one internal examiner and another examiner, who could either be internal or external
- Doctoral thesis: two external examiners and one internal examiner
- Master's dissertation: two internal examiners, one of whom can be the supervisor



How do examiners approach their work?

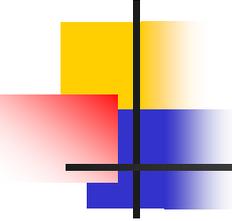
- They are not out to find fault with a thesis or dissertation!
- Often they approach the task with a sense of curiosity and hoping to learn something from the exercise
- They take their role seriously
- Reports are often comprehensive and detailed: typically 2 to 10 pages
- Thesis or dissertation are often annotated with editorial comments and/or remarks seeking clarifications



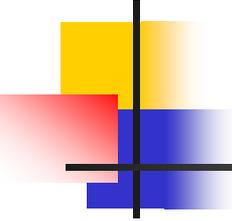
Supervisors and examiners

- It has been noted that there is often some apprehension on the part of supervisors and students when awaiting examiners' reports!
- External examiners' reports are especially seen as a report on not only the student but also on the supervisor and the university!

Usefulness of examiners' reports

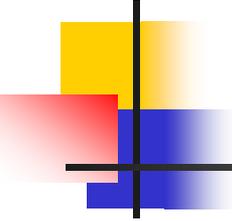


- Comments can help to improve the thesis or dissertation
- Review of examiners' reports can provide useful pointers to potential supervisors on what to look out for and pitfalls to avoid
- Let us look at the distribution of examiners' decisions on theses and dissertations - this is based on a review of their reports on about 100 theses and dissertations in **2007 & 2008**



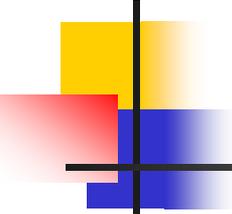
Examiners' decision (MSc by Research)

Examiner's decision	%
No corrections + Minor corrections	50.0
Minor corrections + Minor corrections	50.0



Examiners' decision (MA by Research)

Examiner's decision	%
No corrections + Minor corrections	16.0
Minor corrections + Minor corrections	52.0
Minor corrections + Major corrections	24.0
Major corrections + Major corrections	8.0



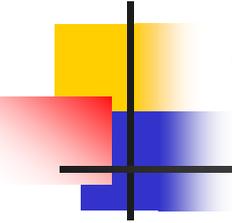
Examiners' decision (MA/MSc by Coursework & Dissertation)

Examiner's decision	%
No corrections + Minor corrections	16.4
Minor corrections + Minor corrections	59.0
No corrections + Major corrections	3.2
Minor corrections + Major corrections	14.8
Major corrections + Major corrections	6.6

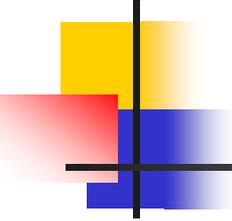
Examiners' decision (MEd by Coursework & Dissertation)

Examiner's decision	%
No corrections + No corrections	1.4
No corrections + Minor corrections	17.6
Minor corrections + Minor corrections	40.5
No corrections + Major corrections	2.7
Minor corrections + Major corrections	24.3
Major corrections + Major corrections	8.1
Minor corrections + Resubmission	4.1
Resubmission + Resubmission	1.3

Examiners' decision (PhD)

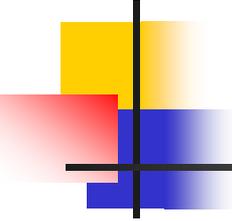


Examiner's decision	%
No corrections + No corrections + Minor corrections	10.5
No corrections + Minor corrections + Minor corrections	15.8
Minor corrections + Minor corrections+ Minor corrections	42.1
Minor corrections + Minor corrections+ Major corrections	21.1
Minor corrections + Major corrections+ Major corrections	5.25
Minor corrections + Major corrections + Not awarded the degree	5.25



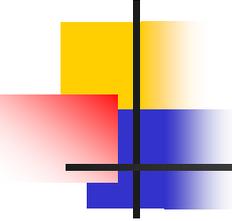
Observation 1: Typos and grammos

- Syntactical and typographical errors abound in about 99% of theses and dissertations
- Perception among examiners that they are also being used as proof readers, spell checkers and copy editors of theses and dissertations!
- It is imperative that student (and supervisor) carefully comb through thesis or dissertation and correct these mistakes before it is sent for examination



Excerpts from examiners' reports on typos and grammos

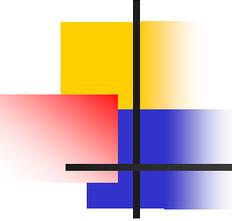
- **Examiner A:** I strongly recommend the candidate to proofread or get a friend to proofread before submission
- **Examiner B:** The thesis seems to be completed in a hurry with little proofreading!
- **Examiner C:** It is a rather 'cheap' thing to do for an examiner to meticulously check all the writing style and formatting errors!
- **Examiner D:** The dissertation should have been proofread more carefully before submission and it looks like a draft than a finished document!
- **Examiner E:** The dissertation has been poorly proofread or perhaps not at all!



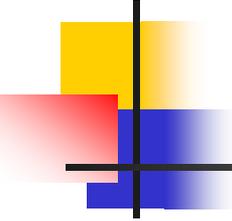
Observation 2: Overall organization of thesis or dissertation

- Some sections are mis-numbered
- A few tables and figures are not in running order
- Formatting not uniform - difficult to justify since there are tools in the computer to take care of this

Observation 3: Recency of literature review

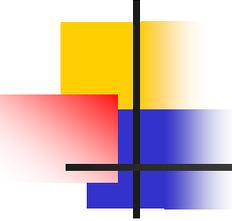


- Literature review is often not up to date
- Main reason could be that student did the literature review at the start of the study
- When doctoral thesis is submitted about 3-4 years later, there has not been adequate updating of the literature review
- Typically, a lag of 6 months for recency of literature review is tolerable



Observation 4: Inadequate critique of literature review

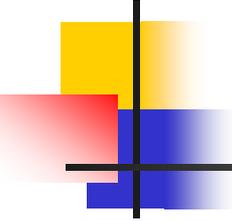
- Tendency for literature review to be just a summary of what others have done
- Little attempt to critique the studies and contextually situate the study in a proper framework



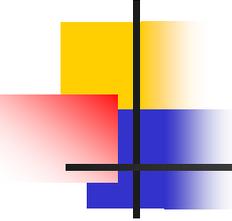
Excerpts from examiners' reports on literature review

- **Examiner F:** Each section (of the literature review) seems to be independent and without a reflection on the review work for a persuasive argument – for example, on p7-11, a review of literature is merely a summary or abstract of articles
- **Examiner G:** The literature review consists of brief clusters of concepts with multiple headings and subheadings. This content should be synthesized better with fewer headings and a clear conceptual thread

Observation 5: Incomplete reference list

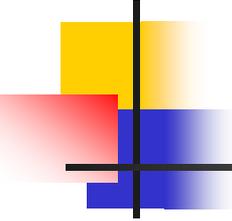


- Important references in research area missing
- References not cited properly in text and in bibliography
- References used in text but not cited in bibliography
- References used in bibliography but not cited in text



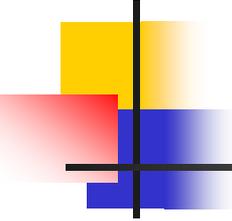
Excerpts from examiners' reports on references

- **Examiner H:** Sloppy references are a sign of academic tardiness and cannot be tolerated at this level of study and have to be fixed



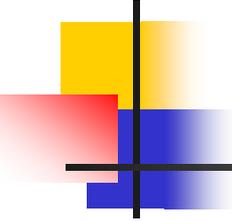
Observation 6: Lack of journal publications at time of submission

- About 95% of Master's dissertations have not fetched peer-reviewed papers in international journals
- About 90% of Master's theses have not fetched peer-reviewed papers in international journals
- About 75% of doctoral theses have not fetched peer-reviewed papers in international journals



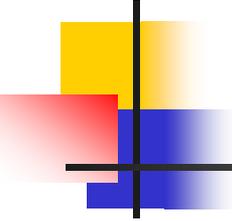
Observation 7: Less than optimal research design

- Difficulty in answering research questions is often due to the fact that research design has not been properly thought out before start of study
- It would be useful for supervisor and student to get feedback on research design from a few knowledgeable colleagues before student embarks on study proper



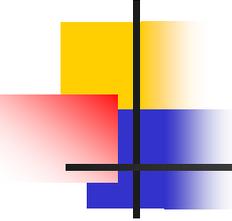
Excerpts from examiners' reports on design of study

- **Examiner J:** A more rigorous methodological design would have better addressed the questions raised in this dissertation
- **Examiner K:** The research design appears to be the result of mere convenience or impromptu (work). As such, it is a pity that it lacks conceptual rigor
- **Examiner M:** There was lots of theorizing on research methodologies, but candidate did not translate these theories into operational frameworks for analyzing data in his study



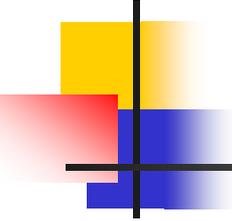
Observation 8: Discussion section written in isolation

- In several dissertations, discussion section is confined to just an exposition of the results obtained
- There is little or no attempt to situate the findings in the context of what other researchers have done
- Consequently, the value of the research done by the student is not clear



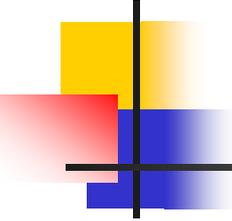
Excerpts from examiners' reports on discussion done in isolation

- **Examiner N:** The dissertation can be more fully appreciated if the candidate were to position and situate her study within the field and other prior research more explicitly
- **Examiner P:** I find that the findings are not discussed in the light of the literature review
- **Examiner Q:** It would be needful for the candidate to help the reader understand the meaningfulness of the results by drawing back on the literature for linkages
- **Examiner R:** There is very little discussion on the comparison of the data collected in this work with other works in the literature



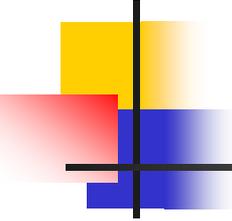
Excerpts from examiners' reports on discussion done in isolation (cont'd)

- **Examiner T:** There were no references made to previous studies or other relevant literature in your discussion chapter. How does your study compare with others? How does it contribute to our pool of knowledge in the area of technology-supported language learning?
- **Examiner V:** The discussion section was devoid of references to the work of other studies. How does this study compare with other studies?



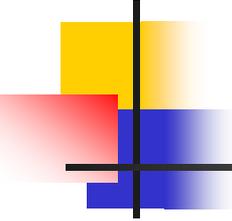
Observation 9: Repetition of information

- There is a tendency for candidates to repeat themselves in the thesis
- Repetition tends to pad up the number of pages
- Not easy even for supervisors to spot this trend if students submit their thesis or dissertation in parts over a period of time



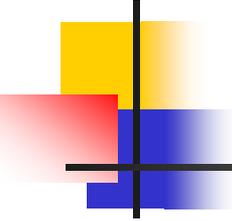
Excerpts from examiners' reports on repetition

- **Examiner W:** To satisfy the need for parsimony and economy, it would have been advisable to avoid the repetition of information
- **Examiner X:** There are redundant sentences, statements and paragraphs throughout the dissertation. For example, research questions appear a number of times, which is not necessary



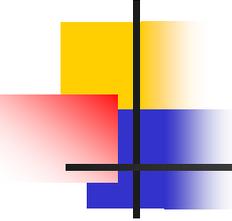
Observation 10: Rigor in developing arguments

- Quite often, discussions on some important findings are not developed to a high level of rigor



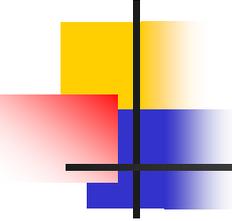
Excerpts from examiners' reports on rigor in arguments

- **Examiner Y:** Many sweeping statements are made without appropriate substantiation from the candidate's reading of research, reference to the background and context of study
- **Examiner Z:** The distinct lack of appropriate referencing for ideas used in different parts of the dissertation need to be corrected
- **Examiner P:** ... further interpretation of the analysis results are necessary for a substantial contribution to the current knowledge in the field



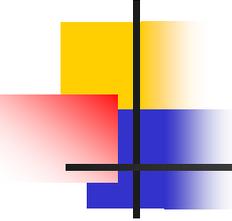
A few negative remarks from examiners on the standard of the thesis or dissertation

- 'This is a very poor dissertation. The candidate has no idea of how results should be presented, how the materials and methods should be reported, and how data should be interpreted'
- 'The author fails to demonstrate appropriate research skills for investigating a problem and should be given the opportunity to re-conceptualize the study and submit the dissertation again for examination'



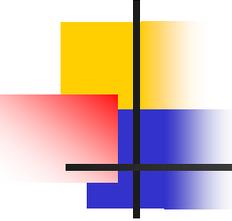
Some positive remarks from examiners on the standard of the thesis or dissertation

- 'Overall, the candidate and her supervisor are to be congratulated for the quality of this thesis'
- 'I am happy to say that the thesis is solid and rigorous, which is exemplary of doctoral theses'
- 'I congratulate the candidate on a well structured research project and have no hesitation in recommending this thesis be passed'
- 'The thesis is well written and contains many interesting results. I have no hesitation in recommending the award of the PhD degree based on the thesis'
- 'This is an outstanding dissertation'



What do examiners look for in a thesis or dissertation?

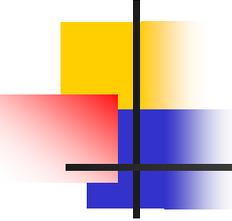
- Originality of research
- Good coverage and critique of the literature
- Sound research design
- Results making significant contribution to the field
- Discussion showing critical thinking and scholarly arguments
- Recognition of limitations of research – there should be no stretching of the interpretation beyond what can be reasonably inferred



What do examiners look for in a thesis or dissertation?

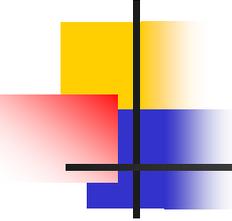
- Conclusion section summarizing key aspects of study and highlighting why the study is unique and how it advances knowledge
- Attention to editorial matters
- Proper citations of references in text and gathered in bibliography section under APA format

Implications for supervisors



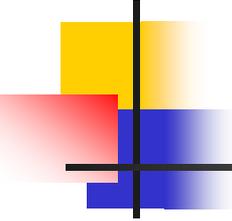
- Do not expect examiners to be uniform in their appraisal of a thesis or dissertation – each examiner approaches the work from the lens of his/her experience or specialization
- Essential for supervisors to go through the complete thesis or dissertation a few times and provide detailed comments – very important to keep track of comments in each draft and ensure that students have addressed these in next draft
- Supervisor's comments on thesis or dissertation is a valuable aspect of a graduate student's training in research – both positive and critical comments are essential

Implications for supervisors

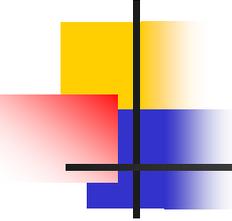


- Supervision of graduate students in research is a very effective way to build up publications output
- Important to provide graduate students an opportunity to present their research findings in conferences or seminars – constitutes part of the training of graduate students
- Important to acquire experience as examiner of other graduate students' thesis or dissertation, where possible
- To bear in mind that when a thesis is sent for external examination, the university's standing is also at stake

Implications for graduate students

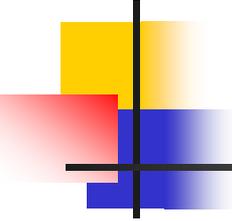


- Supervisors' comments on various drafts of thesis or dissertation need to be taken seriously and addressed effectively
- Successive drafts must be better in quality
- Carefully proofread your work and attend to editorial matters before submitting draft to your supervisor
- Note that supervisors need some time to go through a thesis or dissertation



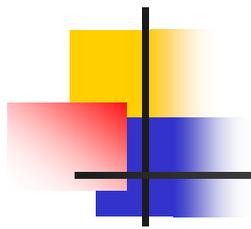
Some suggestions

- Focus on publishable research – break the research into a few publishable portions, if possible!
- Ensure that doctoral thesis fetches at least 1-2 publications in peer-reviewed international journals before it is sent for examination
- Focus on publications even for dissertations or theses submitted for Master's degrees



Some suggestions

- Even if paper sent to a journal is rejected, referees' comments can provide additional insights for improving thesis before examination
- Examiners are likely to be less critical of thesis if it has fetched journal papers
- Supervisors need to work more closely with students – it benefits both parties!



THANK YOU