



Access to Doctoral Examiners' Reports

UK Council for Graduate Education



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Access to Doctoral Examiners' Reports

The UK Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE) represents the Higher Education sector in the UK in all issues concerning graduate education. It was established in 1994 and its current membership (125 institutional members) includes all HE institutions in the UK actively involved in delivering graduate programmes.

This report on current practice(s) in the sector on access to examiners' reports for doctoral students was prepared through the analysis of responses received to a questionnaire sent out to members. It was prompted by indications that considerable variation in current practice existed amongst Council members and the report provides authoritative information confirming that this is indeed the case. I believe that the recommendations contained in the report provide a good basis for member institutions to move forward towards harmonising practice across the sector in this important and on occasions highly emotive issue.

The drawing up of the questionnaire, analysis of responses received and writing of the subsequent report were all carried out by Professor Stuart Powell, current Honorary Secretary of the Council, and Ms Kathryn Brown, a member of the Executive Committee with able assistance from Ms Nikki Crouch,

the Council's Administrator. I would like to express my thanks to them on behalf of our members for their sustained effort in completing this report. The Council would also like to thank all those in its member institutions who responded to the survey and completed the questionnaire.

Professor Malcolm McCrae
Chair, UK Council for Graduate Education

The UK Council for Graduate Education is an organisation established to promote the interests of graduate education in all disciplines in higher education institutions. The Council was established in 1994 and has over 125 institutional members.

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A survey by questionnaire of 125 UKCGE member institutions was undertaken, focusing on their regulations and operational procedures in respect of access to doctoral examiners' reports. A response rate of 58% (72 respondents) was achieved.

Responses revealed considerable variation within the detail of practices across the sector but in general indicated that access to reports is often subject to restrictions of one kind or another; for example access may be restricted to certain post-holders within institutions and to the members of the examining panel, with candidates and/or supervisors gaining access only under limited circumstances. Ready access to reports for doctoral candidates and their supervisors is not commonplace across the sector. 'Preliminary and Final' reports are often afforded differential treatment in terms of any access given.

Many of the variations in practice have arisen over time and reflect, in some cases, legitimate differences of view with regard to the place and purpose of reports within the overall examination process but they do also result in quite different experiences of that process for candidates across the UK sector.

The report concludes with some recommendations, which relate to (i) the usefulness of reviewing practices regarding access in the light of the intended purposes of the reports themselves, (ii) the possibilities arising when access to preliminary reports is given to candidates prior to the viva, (iii) seeming contradictions that arise when a candidate has responsibility for submission of a thesis yet his/her supervisor has a preferential right of access to reports on that thesis, and (iv) the possibilities of reviewing low up-take by candidates of any right to see examiners' reports. Finally, areas where national guidelines might be helpful are considered.

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&

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This report contains analysis and discussion of the responses to a questionnaire distributed on the issue of access given to doctoral examiners' reports. The questionnaire¹ was sent out to 125 institutions (all members of UKCGE); there were 72 responses making a return rate of 58%.

It should be noted at the outset that most, if not all, universities in our sample operate a system of asking examiners for a preliminary report prior to the viva and then asking for a [joint where possible] final report following that viva. At the outset of the questionnaire it was specified that the questions related to both preliminary and final reports yet clearly, by the nature of the questions themselves, some questions related to the preliminary reports only. Where respondents commented on differences in approach according to status (preliminary/final) in the boxes set down 'for clarification', these comments are reflected in our discussions below.

1. Differing Approaches taken to Preliminary and Final Reports

1.1 Questions 1 to 3

The first part of this report relates to the first three questions on the questionnaire and essentially looks at the different approaches taken to the treatment of preliminary and final reports, the degree of automatic access given, the timing of any access and differences in terms of access in relation to candidates and supervisors. Responses to the first three questions of the questionnaire are considered together in part for convenience of the reader and in part because some institutions clarified their procedures in comments added to one or more of these questions and therefore these questions are best considered as a group.

1.2 Two Kinds of Examiners' Report

A number of institutions operate systems that produce two kinds of 'report' at separate time periods within the overall examination process, each of which is intended to serve different purposes.

1.2.1 Preliminary Reports

Institutions regularly require reports from individual examiners that are written independently and on the basis of the written submission alone – prior to the viva.

1 The questionnaire can be found in Appendix 1

These reports are variously described as 'independent', 'initial' or 'preliminary'. For convenience we have adopted the last of these terms.

1.2.2 Final Reports

Institutions regularly require reports subsequent to the viva which summarise outcomes and give conclusions. The degree to which these reports are intended to relate specifically to issues raised in the preliminary reports varies across institutions as does their required length and detail; some may be no more than a two or three line conclusion and the indication on a pro-forma of outcome, while others are more detailed. Despite the variations these reports typically include, or relate to, any amendments that are required (many respondents noted that research degree awards in their institutions are often made 'subject to' amendments). These reports are referred to in various ways, e.g. as 'post-viva' or 'final' or 'recommendation'. For convenience here we have used the term 'final'.

1.3 Four Dimensions to Consider

One clear dimension when considering availability of reports is the different approaches that may be taken to giving access to reports that are written prior to, and again following, the viva. A second dimension is whether institutions automatically² make reports available or do so only following a request from one or more of the parties concerned. A third dimension relates to the timing of the access – after the viva or after completion of the process of examination and award (i.e. typically after the awarding board has approved the award or after the award has been made). A fourth dimension relates to the parties to whom access is given (i.e. to candidate and/or to supervisor).

Therefore, in the context of these dimensions we have noted in the sections and sub-sections in Appendix 2, different approaches in terms of:

- (a) access to preliminary and/or final reports;
- (b) automatic access to reports or access only following request;
- (c) timing of access;
- (d) access given to candidates and/or supervisors.

The responses noted in Appendix 2 may be summarised as follows.³

1.3.1 Preliminary Reports (and Final where appropriate) automatically sent out

In 21 institutions preliminary reports (and final reports where appropriate) are automatically sent out at some point in the examination process.

Of these 21 institutions:

- Six send the reports out automatically *after the viva*;
- One sends the reports out automatically *after the viva* but only to referral candidates;
- Nine send the reports out automatically *after completion* and a further two follow this procedure but also send out earlier in the case of referrals;
- Three institutions send reports automatically *immediately prior or during the viva (where the supervisor is present)*, in each case to the supervisor only.

1.3.2 Preliminary Reports (and Final where appropriate) sent out on request only

In 24 institutions preliminary reports (and final where appropriate) are sent out but only following a request.

2 We are using 'automatically' here to indicate that the institution has a system in operation that automatically triggers the release of reports to specified parties at given points in the overall process of examination (i.e. a system that is not dependent on request from one party or another).

3 Please note that, for the most part we have not given detail in this main body of text relating to the difference between recipients of access (i.e. candidates or supervisors); this detail is given in Appendix 2. We have italicised the timing dimension for convenience only.

Of these institutions:

- 21 will send out reports but only on request – *after the viva* (note that there are a further four institutions who are effectively in this category but that are included in 1.3.3 below because they automatically send out the final report);
- Three will send out reports but only on request – *after completion*.

1.3.3 Final Reports Only (i.e. but not Preliminaries) are automatically sent out

In 12 institutions final reports only are automatically sent out.

Of these institutions:

- Four send out final reports automatically *after the viva*, with a further four also sending out the preliminary on request;
- Three send out final reports automatically *on completion*, with a further one also sending out the preliminary on request.

1.3.4 Final Reports Only (i.e. but not Preliminary Reports) are sent out following request⁴

In two institutions final reports only are sent out following request and in both cases it is after the viva.

1.3.5 No Access is given to Reports unless following an application under the Freedom of Information / Data Protection Legislation⁵ or during an appeal.

In 13 institutions no access is given to any reports unless an application under Freedom of Information / Data Protection legislation is received or during an appeal.

All of the information given in the above sections is presented more fully and in tabular form in Appendix 2.

1.4 Access to Reports for the Independent Chair (Question 1c refers)

Overwhelmingly, where an independent chair has a role in the examination process then

he/she has access to reports:

- 43 institutions gave independent chairs access;
- Three institutions did not give access to independent chairs;
- 23 respondents did not respond to the question and a further three responded 'don't know'.

1.5 Access to Reports to a person other than Supervisors and Candidates and/or to Committees outside of the Awarding Committee (Question 1d refers)

- 32 institutions gave access to reports to a person other than supervisors and candidates and/or to committees outside of the awarding committee;
- 36 institutions did not give any such access;
- Two institutions left the question blank and two responded 'don't know'.

In respondents' comments there was extensive clarification given of who has access as defined in Question 1d. For the most part the person given access (outside of supervisors/students and awarding committee) was a senior academic – most typically the relevant head of department or school or faculty. Others mentioned included: director of the graduate school, dean of postgraduate study, director of research, local PhD co-ordinator. A minority of respondents indicated that administrators were given access (e.g. Assistant Registrar (Academic Quality)). There were some instances where senior figures would circulate preliminary reports further if those reports indicated potential problems at the viva stage (in some instances this might lead to the appointment of an independent chair).

4 A number of institutions noted that they acknowledged that they would have to give access to preliminaries under the Freedom of Information Act or Data Protection Act.

5 The authors note that whilst the Freedom of Information Act is made reference to in the initial questionnaire and by several institutions in their responses, the Data Protection Act also allows information to be released on request. Given that both pieces of legislation are referred to by respondents, in some cases apparently interchangeably, we include both here in this report.

1.6 Lack of Clarity as to 'Automatic' Nature of Access (Question 2 refers)

Though it was possible to allocate institutions to one of the categories in relation to whether or not automatic access is given, there were instances where practices were more complex than such a categorisation might indicate. By way of example we paraphrase some comments (all of the below were mentioned more than once):

- where a supervisor attends the viva they automatically receive a copy of all reports;
- available where further work is deemed necessary (significant amendments/referrals);
- automatic but only if agreed at the viva;
- different custom and practice in this respect across different parts of the university;
- routinely made available but only through the supervisor (hence 'automatic' in respect of the student depends on the inclination of the supervisor).

1.7 Rationale for Timing of any Release of Reports (Question 3 refers)

A number of institutions make the reports available after the viva and on completion of the process under different individual circumstances (thus questions 3b and 3c are not mutually exclusive). The most common differentiation related to the nature of the outcome of the viva. In a number of institutions, reports were made available to a candidate following the viva where he/she was required to make substantial amendments. By contrast, where a candidate had been required to make only minor amendments the reports were made available only after the completion of the examination process.

The comments indicated that the specific purpose for this was to assist candidates with [substantial] amendments in understanding what was required. By way of example, we can paraphrase one institution: 'if the thesis is referred for 18 months then reports are sent to the candidate and the supervisor after the viva, however if the thesis is referred for three months for minor corrections then reports are sent after the examination process is complete'. Another institution spelt out the rationale for this approach and that was to 'aid revision'. Where institutional practice varies in this way we have categorised them, for the purposes of this report, in terms of the earliest point of access being given.

2. Distinctions made between External and Internal Examiners' Reports

2.1 Question 4

Question 4 sought to determine whether or not institutions made any distinction, when deciding on access to reports, between the reports of external and internal examiners.

2.2 Responses to Question 4

Table 1

Question 4: Distinctions made between External and Internal Examiners' Reports. In terms of access, do you distinguish between external and internal examiners' reports?	Yes	7
	No	58
	Don't Know	0
	Blank	7
	Total	72

2.3 Distinctions made between External and Internal Examiners' Reports (Question 4 refers)

The majority of institutions (58 against 7) made no distinction between the reports of internal and external examiners when considering matters of access. That is 89% of those responding to this question made no distinction (i.e. 58 of 65).

In their comments a number of institutions noted that, according to their regulations examiners are of equal status and thus reports are treated similarly, in

short, if one was made available then both (or all) would be made available.

A number of institutions (6) noted in the optional comments section that, according to their regulations, examiners were required to produce a joint final report, following the viva. Where it is this report only that is made available then clearly no distinction can be made.

Similarly a small number of institutions (3) operated some form of system whereby preliminary reports from internal and external examiners were completed on the same form (or produced on an amalgamated form) in which case, again, no distinction could be drawn even if it was desired.

Of the seven institutions that responded in the affirmative, with regard to the question about whether or not the reports of externals and internals are treated differently in respect of availability, none gave any indication in the optional comments box of either the operational procedures followed regarding different treatments, or any rationale for those differences.

3. Transparency of the Process

3.1 Question 5

Question 5 related to transparency, for examiners, of the processes for making their reports available. Respondents were asked whether or not examiners were informed of any procedures for making their reports available beyond the awarding committee to which they report.

3.2 Responses to Question 5

Table 2

Question 5: Transparency of the Process. Are the examiners informed of any procedures for making their reports available beyond the awarding committee to which they report?	Yes	52
	No	9
	Don't Know	4
	Blank	7
	Total	72

3.3 Transparency of Procedures to Examiners

The majority of respondents indicated that they did inform examiners of their procedures in respect of availability of reports (52 against 9). That is 85% of those responding (yes or no) to this question did inform examiners. There were 11 respondents who either did not know the answer or who did not complete the question (clearly, some of these can be accounted for in those who make no provision for availability).

There were a large number (27) of optional comments made in relation to this question. These comments are summarised below with paraphrased examples (the numbers in brackets indicate those comments that approximate to the example). Some respondents made comments that overlapped the eleven groupings below and hence their comments are split between groupings.

Not every respondent made an optional comment and therefore these comments should not be treated as necessarily representative of the sample as a whole.

- (i) Examiners are informed of the possibilities of access in the context of the Data Protection Act, e.g.
 - *'Examiners are advised that, under the terms of the Data Protection Act (1988), candidates have the right to request access to any comments made about them in any reports relating to the examination (reports made prior, or subsequent, to the viva)'* (6).
 - *'Examiners are warned that under the Data Protection Act their reports may be disclosed if requested by a candidate. However, they are also told that in such an instance both examiners would be contacted and asked if there are specific sections of their reports that they would wish not to be disclosed. If they reply in the affirmative, then a senior academic makes a decision to honour this or not, normally any references to any other third parties would be removed before disclosure (e.g. comments about supervision)'* (2).

- (ii) Examiners are informed that preliminary reports will not be shown to candidates prior to the viva but they will be made available after it has taken place, e.g.
- *'Examiners are informed that, although their preliminary reports will not be shown to candidates prior to the viva, they will be available to candidates after the examination'* (1).
- (iii) Information regarding accessibility of reports is made on the report form itself, e.g.
- *'The coversheet/report form spells out the open nature of the reports just above where the signature is required'* (4).
- (iv) Examiners are told that preliminary reports are not made available (unless a data request is made) although final [joint] reports will be made available, e.g.
- *'Examiners are told that the preliminary report will not be forwarded to the student unless a data access request is made. They are told that the joint report after the viva will be forwarded to student and supervisor'* (4).
- (v) Examiners are explicitly informed that the whole report (preliminary and final) will be made available after the viva, e.g.
- *'The examiners are informed that the whole of their report will be made available to the candidate and the supervisor (and on occasions to the head of department)'* (3).
- (vi) Examiners are briefed prior to the viva, e.g.
- *'Examiners are briefed prior to the viva voce examination'* (1).
- (vii) A handbook of regulations gives the information, e.g.
- *'Examiners are informed of our position vis a vis access to all reports in the Handbooks of Regulations and Procedures, which is circulated to all examiners on appointment. This information is also available on the web'* (4).
- (viii) The letter of appointment informs, e.g.
- *'The letter appointing them Examiners tells them that their reports will be sent to the candidates with the award letter'* (2).
- (ix) The option of making reports available rests with the individual examiners themselves, e.g.
- *'Examiners may opt to provide their preliminary report (hence they drive the availability so it is necessarily transparent)'* (2).
- (x) Informed in relation to the possibility of appeals, e.g.
- *'We inform examiners that, although their initial reports will be treated in confidence, those reports will be made available in the event of appeal'* (3).
- (xi) Examiners' permission would be sought before accessibility granted, e.g.
- *'The examiners are informed that the reports will not be made available except with their permission and are otherwise confidential to the Examiners and Committee'* (2).
- Finally, two respondents noted that the process of filling in the questionnaire had provoked them to reconsider their procedures.
- *'Responding to this survey highlights an omission in our procedures - we do not explicitly tell External Examiners that issues raised in their reports will be considered by the Committee/Group (name of committee/group not given to maintain anonymity).'*
 - *'We do not inform examiners at present, although it has been noted by senior colleagues in the University that instructions to examiners should include advice that the reports may be made available as part of a Freedom of Information request. Having been reminded of this by this survey we will change our procedures.'*

4. Changes to Procedures

4.1 Question 6

Question 6 sought information relating to any changes that institutions were planning to their regulations and/or their practices and procedures in respect of accessibility of reports.

4.2 Responses to Question 6

Table 3

Question 6: Changes to Procedures. Are there any changes to your examination regulations or practices, in relation to the access to and availability of examiners' reports, that are imminent or under discussion?	Yes	16
	No	51
	Don't Know	3
	Blank	2
	Total	72

4.3 Changes Imminent or Under Discussion

The majority of institutions were not planning any significant changes to their regulations or procedures in relation to availability (51 as against 16). That is: of those responding to this particular question, 76% were not envisaging change in the near future. Individual comments are paraphrased (where necessary to preserve anonymity) below.

- *'We are currently discussing the most efficient way to make examiners' reports available to all PhD candidates automatically after the examination. This will apply to all candidates, those that are successful and those that are not (a significant difference to our current procedure).'*
- *'We are currently debating whether or not, in the case of referred theses and where an examiner(s) of the revised work is new - should that new examiner(s) see the original examiners' reports?'*
- *'We see ourselves as aligned to the QAA Code of Practice and we are further developing our own examination procedures, the likely outcome of which will be further transparency.'*
- *'A review of current regulations and procedures is underway, primarily focussing on the stage at which examiners reports are made available to*

candidates who lodge appeals against decisions.'

- *'We are going to have to think through this carefully and to check that what the regulations say is actually happening on the ground.'*
- *'The outcome of this survey may influence a further look at the situation.'*
- *'The above [the responses made] reflects the current position but there is ongoing discussion.'*
- *'We'll need to think about adding a line to our Guidance indicating that a summary of issues raised in External Examiners reports is considered by one of our [quality] committees.'*

5. Any Other Comments

5.1 Question 7

Question 7 allowed respondents to make any other points that they wished.

There were a number of points made; among them the following (paraphrased extracts):

- *'this is a timely questionnaire; it has made us look more closely at the level of transparency of our research degree examinations';*
- *'in a recent case, where both examiners did not feel that the oral examination should take place, the preliminary reports were, exceptionally, shared with the supervisory team, but not with the student';*
- *'personally I would have examiners' reports used to help candidates prepare for the viva, but this is not realistic at present and so we are trying to maintain a consistent procedure which keeps the reports confidential until after the viva, and even then they would only be disclosed after a Freedom of Information request';*
- *'we hardly ever get requests to see the reports - the few that we have received in recent years have been from appeal candidates only';*
- *'the process of automatically releasing examiners reports to research degree candidates is a new one for us this year - we will need to review how it works in practice next academic year.'*

The remaining comments made in Question 7 of the survey are included elsewhere in this report.

6. Discussion

6.1 General availability

A clear majority of institutions made reports of examiners available to candidates and supervisors in one form or another. However this overall accessibility is qualified in many ways throughout the report. A significant qualification is that much accessibility only occurs following a request from [usually] the candidate.

In short, a minority of institutions have in place a process that includes making reports available to candidates as a matter of course whereas a majority make such reports available only following a specific request from the candidate.

6.2 Availability to Candidates / Supervisors

There was very little distinction made between availability in respect of candidates on the one hand and supervisors on the other. Where reports were made available to one of these groups then (with two exceptions) they were made to both. It is worth noting however that the three institutions that make reports available immediately prior to or as part of the viva do so in respect of the supervisors rather than the candidate. The expectation in these cases is (according to comment), that supervisors will be better placed to guide the candidate if they have sight of the preliminary reports.

6.3 General availability of Preliminary and Final Reports

There is clearly an important distinction between reports that are written independently prior to the oral examination and those written following that examination. Many institutions noted in their comments that preliminary reports were, of necessity, written on the basis

of the thesis alone and without benefit of the interchange of questions and answers made possible in the viva. Views expressed in the preliminary reports are therefore subject to change as issues are clarified and queries resolved. On this basis some respondents noted a reluctance to make preliminary reports available outside of the examination team (including on occasions to senior academics with a monitoring role) because comments in those reports are made without the benefit of interrogation and therefore do not necessarily reflect the true quality of the work or the likely outcome in terms of an award. Other institutions clearly take a different view, namely that broadly speaking that the preliminary reports contain valid comment that may benefit the candidate and his/her supervisor in terms of giving feedback and guidance on what may be required by way of amendment. Perhaps those institutions that make preliminary reports available to candidates/supervisors specifically when a submission is referred or requires major amendments exemplify the spirit of this latter approach.

In terms of numbers, 45 institutions make preliminary reports available either automatically or on request (some of these 45 also make the final report available) whereas 14 institutions make the final report available either automatically or on request but not the preliminary reports. A further 13 institutions allow no access (apart from after a Freedom of Information / Data Protection request or following an appeal). Therefore a majority of respondent make the preliminary reports available, although more than half of these (24) only do so 'on request', usually from the candidate. It is also worth noting that in their comments a number of institutions remarked that such requests were rarely, if ever, made. The questionnaire had not asked how, or indeed if, candidates were made aware that they might make such a request in this respect (this issue is revisited below).

6.4 The Timing of any Access Given

Where preliminary reports are given out then the majority of institutions (28 out of 42) do so after the viva and before the final award is considered and/or conferred by the relevant university board or committee. Consequently 14 institutions only

give out the preliminary reports after completion of the examination process (though some of these may alter their practice in the case of referrals). It may be assumed that institutions who are releasing reports after the viva are operating upon the basis of different intentions from those doing so on completion. After the viva there may be some amending of the submission that will be guided by the information contained in the reports, this is not possible after completion and so here the reports are, in a sense, 'for information only'.

6.5 The Degree to which Access is Given Automatically

There would seem to be a qualitative difference between situations where access to reports occurs automatically at some point or another in the process and where it is only triggered when one of the interested parties (usually the candidate) requests it. Typically, those institutions that make access automatic noted in their comments that such access was triggered by an event within the administrative cycle of research degree examination, e.g. following the viva or after the relevant university board had accepted the recommendations of the examining panel.

33 institutions operated a system whereby such automatic triggering took place and 26 institutions operated a system that reacted to requests only. The final 13 institutions responded that they did not operate either an automatic or reactive system, though clearly they would need to respond in instances where a request was made under Freedom of Information / Data Protection legislation.

6.6 Involvement of those Outside the Examining Team and the Awarding Committee

As is noted in earlier sections, 32 institutions gave access to a named post-holder outside of the examining team and the awarding committee while 36 institutions did not (two left the question blank and a further two recorded 'don't know'). The rationale usually given for this kind of access in comments

implied it to be for a monitoring role (e.g. from a Head of Department) or to advise in advance of the viva; where negative preliminary comments were present. In at least one case this advice dealt with whether or not the viva should go ahead.

In the case of access for an independent chair who might be part of an examination procedure, 43 institutions indicated that they gave access to preliminary reports while three did not. A further 23 did not respond and three responded 'don't know'; clearly some of these non-respondents may not operate systems that involve an independent chair. In the majority of instances where an independent chair exists, then, it is clear that this person is given access to preliminary reports prior to the viva. The comments relating to this question indicated a general view that the chair needed to see the reports in order to carry out his/her role effectively in the same way as a chair of any meeting might be expected to read the papers prior to that meeting.

6.7 The Reports of External and Internal Examiners

A clear majority of respondents (85% of those responding to this particular question; that is 58 out of 65) treat the reports of external and internal examiners equally when it comes to giving access to students and candidates. The minority that treated reports differently did not offer any rationale for their practice. The only comments that were made indicated that for those treating reports in the same way the basis for this was that all examiners are seen as equal within the examination process, though clearly some may have felt, despite technical equality within the regulations, that additional weight may be accorded the views of the external in as much as he/she brings external peer review.

6.8 Transparency with Regard to Examiners (with Reference to Access to Reports)

A majority of institutions (52 out of the 61 who answered the question) inform examiners in one

way or another about any access to reports that they give to candidates and/or supervisors. There is variation, as noted in the earlier section, with regard to how the examiners are informed, e.g. from information provided on the report form itself to a specific letter in which the information is highlighted. Comments indicated that this transparency is something that universities have recently come to take more seriously. Some institutions commented that the question has provoked them to look again at their procedures in this respect with a view to possible revision. Many of the comments were couched in terms of Freedom of Information / Data Protection legislation.

6.9 A Changing Situation?

Approximately 25% of those answering the question about imminent change noted that discussions were on-going or that reviews were taking place. Though it cannot be described as a trend across the sector, nevertheless the indications are from our sample that the discussions underway and the changes envisaged are in the direction of more openness with reports (both preliminary and final). The direction of this change is clearly towards greater accessibility and more transparency with regard to procedures.

7. Final Conclusions and Recommendations

7.1 Conclusions

The survey has allowed the conclusion that in general terms access to doctoral examination reports in the UK remains an inclusive process for the institution and internal and external examiners but continues to exclude the

research student and supervisor. The majority of institutions do make available the examiners' reports but only as a result of either a specific request made either through Freedom of Information legislation or under the Data Protection Act or because of an appeal against the Institution's decision regarding examination outcome. Only in a very few cases are these reports sent out as a matter of routine. For those institutions that do give access, the specifics of access varied and in some cases it was given to the supervisors rather than the student. Overall the evidence from the survey suggests that the current purpose of the examiners' reports is to a varying degree to record the initial observations of the examiners prior to the viva and then to confirm the outcome of the process and not to aid or prepare the student during the doctoral examination process.

7.2 Recommendations

7.2.1 Reviewing the Purpose of Reports

Some respondents noted that they felt their regulations with respect to access to examiners' reports had arisen incrementally over time and were in some senses the result of reactions to issues of confidentiality and defence against the possibility of appeal and a general desire to control the examination process more tightly. What may be helpful therefore is a reflective review of institutional regulations in terms of the purposes of the different kinds of reports. There are clearly different dimensions in respect of purpose that come through in the responses to the survey.

- (i) First, reports are seen as a part of the assessment process that is integral to its proper, fair and transparent conduct (hence the need, for example, for independent and unbiased reports on the content of the submission 'blind' of any prior contact with the candidate regarding the specifics of the submitted work).
- (ii) Second, reports may have a useful function in terms of giving feedback to candidates and their supervisors on the initial assessment of the submitted work.
- (iii) Third, reports may have a function in enabling a wider monitoring of the quality of research

degree submissions by interested parties (people or committees) who are essentially outside of the immediate examination process of an individual candidate but who have an interest in the general standards of qualifications awarded and the conduct of research degree study and examination.

The way, in which institutions give access in varying ways according to level of result following the viva and/or again following completion, throw light on the view they are implicitly taking of these dimensions (e.g. the weight they are giving to reports as a way of accessing feedback or enabling monitoring). Institutions might therefore wish to develop a view on their stance with regard to the relative weight of these purposes and the way in which they become operationalised within regulations and through custom and practice – in short, do regulations achieve what is intended in terms of these kinds of dimensions?

7.2.2 Access to Preliminary Reports prior to the Viva

Very few institutions reported giving access to examiners' reports prior to the viva. Yet it is arguable that there is some merit in, at the very least, giving students an insight into the kinds of issues that are likely to arise at the viva and conversely, perhaps, little merit in keeping those issues secret until the viva itself. The question of what information should be passed to students prior to their oral examination must be answered in the context of the institutional view of the purposes of the viva as part of the entire examination process and particularly the way in which it acts as an opportunity to defend an intellectual position (a thesis). It may be reasonable to suggest that defending something that has taken at least three years of full-time research study to develop might profitably be set in a reflective context rather than in a rather 'abrupt' question and answer session with no chance for preparation. In short, institutions might wish to discuss if their primary aim in setting the style of the viva is to test candidates' abilities to defend their work in an immediate and to some degree spontaneous way – in short by being put on the spot? If the

answer is yes then clearly a system that gives no prior information regarding issues to be discussed is appropriate; however, if the answer is no (or is less equivocal) then a rethinking of what is to be made available prior to the viva may be appropriate.

7.2.3 Access for Candidates and/or Supervisors

In a situation where the responsibility for submitting work rests with the student⁶, and the responsibility for answering the questions at a viva likewise, then the question may arise as to why the supervisor should be given access to reports on that submitted work in precedence to the candidate. It might be argued that the kinds of responsibility often afforded to students in institutional regulations should perhaps be carried forward into 'right' to access.

7.2.4 Requests from Students for Access to Reports

In an institution that offers access to reports but only on demand from students then it may be helpful to consider the rate at which those requests are made (in relation to overall awards made) and, where those rates are judged to be low, to consider whether students are sufficiently aware of their rights in this respect. If they are aware in this sense but requests persist to be made at a low rate then there may be issues to consider in relation to why they do not take up the possibility of seeing what examiners have written about their work.

7.2.5 The Usefulness of National Guidelines

We are hesitant to recommend national guidelines because we are aware of how easily such things may become reified into regulatory strictures. Nevertheless there are some areas where debate at national level, with subsequent indication of what may be considered good practice, might be useful. We list these areas in brief below.

6 Such responsibility is not a universal given but commonplace among many institutions.

- The usefulness or otherwise of making examiners' preliminary reports available to candidates prior to the viva. (This is important in terms of ensuring equality of treatment of students across the sector).
- Where access to reports is given then some uniformity of practice for the sector might usefully be developed regarding who gets access and at what point in the examination process. (The existing practice of granting access to students in some cases and supervisors in others militates against equality of treatment).
- Where access is granted but only following a request, then guidance would be useful regarding the way in which candidates should be advised of this process and the need to review up-take.
- The kind of procedures that need to be developed with regard to making examiners aware of institutional policy regarding access to their reports.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank Nikki Crouch and Suzanne Hayward, at the UK Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE) for their invaluable contributions to the production of this Report and to Professor Malcolm McCrae for his helpful advice and comment upon the initial draft.

Furthermore, we would like to thank the institutions for their contributions and for taking the time to respond to the questionnaire.

The Questionnaire



UK Council for Graduate Education

Access to Doctoral Examiners' Reports, March 2007

Background

UKCGE wants to survey the level of access to examiners' reports (preliminary and final) that may be given to doctoral candidates and their supervisors by university authorities⁷. At a number of Council events differing approaches to this topic have been identified among attendees and subsequently requests have been made for a survey of members to determine common practices across the sector.

Introduction to the Questionnaire

Please would you complete this short questionnaire? We have tried to make the questions readily answerable by a member of staff familiar with research degree practices and procedures. The questionnaire should take no more than 5 minutes to complete.

Responses should be sent to Nikki Crouch at UKCGE (contact details are at the end of the questionnaire) by **Friday 30th March 2007**.

Publication of Results

As is usual practice within the Council, the results will be published in a short report that will be made available on the Council's website and a paper copy sent to all members. However, where in the past Council reports have often contained an appendix giving responses from individual institutions (e.g. in the uses of differing nomenclature for professional doctorates) in this case *all responses will be treated in confidence* and only summary tables will appear in the report. All primary data will be kept securely.

Kathryn Brown & Stuart Powell
(UKCGE Executive Committee Members)

⁷ The survey is directed at common custom and practice – it does not ask respondents directly about the way in which their institution addresses the issue in terms of the Freedom of Information Act, though clearly the latter may feature in comments.

The Questionnaire

Notes on electronic completion of the questionnaire

Open & Save

- Double-click on the template – it opens as a word document.
- To save, please include the name of your institution as part of the file name (for office use only – confidentiality will be maintained) and save to your pc.
- To return the questionnaire, email UKCGE (N.G.Crouch@ukcge.ac.uk) and add the saved document as an attachment.

Navigating the Form

- Use Tab button or the mouse to move around the form.
- You need to click on a box/shaded area in order to enter your answer or activate the drop-down menu.
- Boxes with an arrow on the left have predetermined answers from which to choose an answer.
- Shaded areas are for free text. The box will expand as you type. You may find that the spell checker will not work in these areas.
- Save your changes.

Q1. Availability of examiners' reports to Supervisors and/or Candidates

(delete as appropriate)

(a) Are examiners' reports made available to doctoral candidates?	Yes	No	Don't know
(b) Are examiners' reports made available to doctoral supervisors?	Yes	No	Don't know
(c) Where an Independent Chair is involved does he/she have access to the reports?	Yes	No	Don't know
(d) Are examiners' reports made available to any persons other than those noted above or to committees outside of the awarding committee?	Yes	No	Don't know

(If answered yes to (d) please identify persons and/or committees in the comment box below)

Further comments (e.g. where clarification is necessary)

If you have answered 'no' to all the questions in 1 above then please go to the end of the Questionnaire.

Q2. Automatic Nature of any Availability

If reports are requested, are they:

- (delete as appropriate)*
- | | | | | |
|-----|---|-----|----|------------|
| (a) | Automatically sent to candidates at any point in the examination process? | Yes | No | Don't know |
| (b) | Made available only following a specific request from the candidate? | Yes | No | Don't know |

Are reports:

- (delete as appropriate)*
- | | | | | |
|-----|--|-----|----|------------|
| (a) | Automatically sent to supervisors at any point in the examination process? | Yes | No | Don't know |
| (b) | Made available only following a specific request from the supervisor? | Yes | No | Don't know |

Further comments

Q3. Point in the Examination Process when Availability Occurs

Are reports made available:

- (delete as appropriate)*
- | | | | | |
|-----|--|-----|----|------------|
| (a) | Before the Viva | Yes | No | Don't know |
| (b) | After the Viva | Yes | No | Don't know |
| (c) | After the examination process is complete (i.e. after the award is conferred or denied)? | Yes | No | Don't know |

Further comments

Q4. Distinctions made between External and Internal Examiners' Reports

- (delete as appropriate)*
- | | | | | |
|-----|--|-----|----|------------|
| (a) | In terms of access, do you distinguish between external and internal examiners' reports? | Yes | No | Don't know |
|-----|--|-----|----|------------|

Further comments

Q5. Transparency of the Process

- (a) Are the examiners informed of any procedures for making their reports available beyond the awarding committee to which they report?

(delete as appropriate)

Yes No Don't know

Further comments

Q6. Changes to Procedures

- (a) Are there any changes to your examination regulations or practices, in relation to the access to and availability of examiners' reports, that are imminent or under discussion?

(delete as appropriate)

Yes No Don't know

Further comments

Q7. Any Other Comments

Further comments

Thank you for taking time to complete this questionnaire.

Please return it electronically to Nikki Crouch at: N.G.Crouch@ukcge.ac.uk

The deadline for responses is **Friday 30th March 2007**

Detail of Responses to Questions 1 to 3

1. Preliminary Reports (and Final where appropriate) automatically sent out

	To Candidate only	To Supervisor only	To Candidate and Supervisor
Preliminary Reports automatically sent out after the viva	0	2	4
Preliminary Reports automatically sent out after the viva to referral candidates	1	0	0
Preliminary Reports automatically sent out after completion	3	0	6
Preliminary Reports automatically sent out after completion or earlier upon referral	0	0	2
Preliminary Reports automatically sent out/circulated prior to/during the viva	0	3	0

2. Preliminary Reports (and Final where appropriate) sent out on request only

	To Candidate only	To Supervisor only	To Candidate and Supervisor
Preliminary Reports sent out on request after the viva	1	1	19
Preliminary Reports sent out on request after completion ⁸	0	0	3

⁸ By completion here we mean after the examination process is complete and the award is approved/conferred (usually by committee/board).

3. Final Reports (but not Preliminaries) automatically sent out

	To Candidate only	To Supervisor only	To Candidate and Supervisor
Final Reports only sent out automatically after the viva ⁹	1	0	3
Final Reports only sent out automatically after viva and prelim on request	1	0	3
Final Reports only sent out automatically on completion	0	0	3
Final Reports only sent out automatically after completion and prelim on request	1	0	0

4. Final Reports (but not Preliminaries) sent out only following request¹⁰

	To Candidate only	To Supervisor only	To Candidate and Supervisor
Final Reports only sent out on request after the viva	0	0	2
Final Reports only, sent out on request after completion	0	0	0

5. No Access to Reports unless following an application under the Freedom of Information Act or during an appeal

	To Candidate only	To Supervisor only	To Candidate and Supervisor
	0	0	13

9 In these cases no mention was made of the Freedom of Information Act nor of requests being required.

10 A number of institutions noted that they acknowledged that they would have to give access to preliminaries under the Freedom of Information Act.

Institutions contributing to this Report

University of Abertay Dundee
Aberystwyth University
Anglia Ruskin University
Bath Spa University
University of Bedfordshire
University of Bolton
Bournemouth University
Buckinghamshire New University
University of Cambridge
Cardiff University
University of Chester
University of Chichester
Coventry University
University of Cumbria
De Montfort University
University of Derby
University of Dundee
University of Durham
University of East Anglia
University of Essex
University of Exeter
University of Glamorgan
Glasgow School of Art
University of Gloucestershire
University of Greenwich
Heriot-Watt University
University of Hertfordshire
University of Huddersfield
University of Hull
Imperial College London
Institute of Education
Keele University
King's College London
Lancaster University
University of Leeds
Leeds Metropolitan University
University of Leicester
Liverpool John Moores
London Metropolitan University
London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine
London School of Economics and Political Science
Loughborough University
The University of Manchester
Napier University
University of Newcastle upon Tyne
North East Wales Institute of Higher Education
University of Northampton
University of Nottingham
Nottingham Trent University
University of Oxford
University of Plymouth
University of Reading
The Robert Gordon University
Roehampton University
Royal Holloway, University of London
The Royal Veterinary College
University of Salford
University of Sheffield
Sheffield Hallam University
University of Southampton
University of St Andrews
University of Surrey
University of Sussex
Swansea University
University of Teesside
University of Ulster
University College London
University of Wales, Bangor
University of Wales, Newport
University of Warwick
University of West of England
University of Wolverhampton
University of York

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0-9543915-4-3	Professional Doctorate Awards in the UK (2005)
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