**WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF SUITABLE EXAMINERS?**

**by Simon Moss**

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| **Introduction** |

Some candidates are concerned about whether or not they will pass their thesis. To offer some perspective, however, you merely need to locate three people around the globe, from a population of about 8 billion, to approve your thesis. That is, only .0000000125% of the population need to like your thesis.

Officially, the principal supervisor should invite and select the examiners. In practice, however, candidates tend to contribute extensively to this decision. Therefore, you should know the characteristics of suitable examiners. The aim of this document is to

* clarify the minimum criteria that examiners must fulfil
* delineate the characteristics of effective examiners
* supply some templates that you and your supervisor can use to invite examiners

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| **Minimum criteria** |

CDU policies clarify the criteria that examiners must fulfil. The first column in the following table outlines these criteria. The second column clarifies these criteria. The third column specifies alternatives that would need to be approved by the College, sometimes in consultation with the Dean or Assistant Dean of Graduate Studies.

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| Minimum criteria | Clarification | Exceptions |
| Examiners should have attained a degree that is at least equivalent to the candidate they are examining. | * PhD examiners should have attained a research doctorate. * Masters by Research examiners should have attained a Masters by Research or higher | * In some circumstances, the examiners might have published work that evidently fulfils the requirements of these degrees |
| Examiners should have attained a track record of research or scholarship in a field that overlaps with the thesis | * About four or more of their scholarly articles—or one or more scholarly books— should overlap with this field * They might have published work that is equivalent to this level of scholarship, such as written a relevant play | * They might be working in a scholarly role in which publications are uncommon—such as a think tank or editor |
| Examiners should be active in research or scholarship at this time | * They could be an employee or adjunct staff member of a university or research institution. * They could be a chief or associate investigator of a funded research project | * They might be working in another role in which they conduct research, such as a government position |
| At least one of the examiners should be an international researcher | * This examiner could be a resident of another nation * This examiner could be a citizen of another nation, but working in Australia | * This examiner could have worked extensively in another nation before |
| Examiners should not be biased by a conflict of interest | * For more information, see the document on conflict of interest in this CDU webpage on “Submission” |  |

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| **Characteristics of effective examiners** |

Some examiners might fulfil the minimum criteria but not be suitable. That is, some examiners are unduly critical or uninformed. The first column in the following table presents characteristics of effective examiners. The second column justifies these suggestions.

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| Characteristics of effective examiners | Justifications |
| They have examined many theses at the same level before | * Some evidence indicates that inexperienced examiners are often unfairly critical * Experienced examiners have read ordinary theses before—and, therefore, their expectations are not unrealistic |
| They have supervised many theses at the same level before | * Examiners who have supervised many theses before are more attuned to some of the complications that candidates might experience |
| Their appointment level—such as Associate Professor or Professor—has not increased rapidly in recent years | * Academics who scale the hierarchy very rapidly are sometimes very ambitious and could be ruthless rather than caring |
| They have utilized the methodologies that were used in the thesis | * For example, if the examiners do not publish qualitative research, they should not examine qualitative theses * Likewise, if the examiners do not publish quantitative research, they should not examine quantitative theses |
| They have published in diverse fields or utilized diverse methodologies | * Examiners who have confined themselves to one field and methodology sometimes do not accept other perspectives * This consideration is especially vital when the thesis corresponds to more than one discipline |
| They manage other inexperienced researchers | * Examiners who manage other inexperienced researchers may be helpful contacts in the future |

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| **Inviting examiners** |

In general, to organize examiners, you and your principal supervisor should complete five phases. You should

* identify potential examiners
* if possible, interact with potential examiners, informally, to evaluate their character
* ascertain whether these individuals are willing to examine a thesis and specify expectations
* seek the relevant information from individuals who are interested in examining
* complete the relevant paperwork.

**Identify potential examiners**

You and your supervisors should develop a list of examiners who demonstrate the relevant characteristics. To identify these individuals, you could

* ask your supervisors to identify relevant individuals—but individuals with whom they have not worked for five or more years
* ask close friends or colleagues in the field whether they can identify relevant individuals they trust
* prompt your supervisors to ask their close friends or colleagues in the field whether they can identify relevant individuals they trust
* identify the researchers you often cite in your research

**Interact with** **potential examiners informally**

Examiners cannot be friends, family, or colleagues of you or your supervisors, but can be people you have met briefly, either in person or online. Therefore, a year or so before you submit your thesis, to assess whether potential examiners are responsive and receptive to your perspectives, you could ask these individuals some questions, perhaps over email. Here are some templates you could use to write these emails.

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| Dear Professor Smith  I am a PhD candidate in Australia, conducting research on …. I am planning to use the method you utilized in your paper entitled …. I was wondering whether you experienced any complications with this method and whether you could advise me on whether I should … or …  Kind regards  Betty White |

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| Dear Professor Smith  I am a PhD candidate in Australia, conducting research on …. Because I know you have published in this field, I was wondering whether you know of anyone else who is conducting similar work and might be interested in collaborating or discussing this topic  Kind regards  Betty White |

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| Dear Professor Smith  I am a PhD candidate in Australia, conducting research on …. I am planning on replicating and extending your paper entitled … In particular, I would like to…. Let me know if you might be interested in the results or would like offer your opinions about this research  Kind regards  Betty White |

Obviously, anyone who does not respond—or responds curtly rather than eagerly—is not a suitable examiner. But, anyone who engages in a genuine conversation may be a suitable examiner.

**Ascertain whether these individuals are willing to examine a thesis**

Next, a few months before you plan to submit your thesis, one of your supervisors should determine whether these individuals may be willing to examine your research. During these interactions, they should also clarify the responsibility of examiners. In practice, if supervisors are busy, candidates often construct these emails, but supervisors will send these emails. Here is a template you could use to write these emails.

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| Dear Professor Smith  One of my PhD candidates, Betty White, is about to her submit her thesis in the field of … The aim of this thesis was to… From what I understand, she has emailed you before.  **Request and timeframe**  I would be delighted if you could be one of the examiners. She is likely to submit a thesis, comprising about 60 000 words, in … weeks. Examiners of PhD theses receive about $450 and examiners of Masters by Research theses receive about $250 Australian.  Ideally, we prefer examiners to be able to submit their evaluations within two months after they receive the thesis. However, we can be somewhat flexible in timelines to accommodate what I imagine is a very busy workload.  **Role**  You will be asked to read the thesis and provide comments, maybe between 1 and 5 pages worth—similar to reviewing a paper. At the end, you will be asked to provide a rating, such as "pass", "pass with minor amendments", and a few other options.  Kind regards  Donna Brown |

**Seek the relevant information**

If the person agrees to examine this thesis, your supervisor will need to request some information—information they need later to justify this choice. Here is a template they could use to write this email.

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| Dear Professor Smith  Thank you so much for agreeing to examine Betty’s thesis. For our paperwork, as soon as convenient, could you   * send me a recent CV * indicate the approximate number of theses, if any, you have examined at this level * indicate the approximate number of candidates, if any, you have supervised at this level   Kind regards  Donna Brown |

This information will help you and your supervisor complete the paperwork. To locate the relevant form, you could probably just search “recommendations of examiners form” in the CDU website.