WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF SUITABLE EXAMINERS?

by Simon Moss

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 to this decision. Therefore, supervisors and candidates 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

**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.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 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 |
| For PhD candidates, 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” |  |

## 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.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 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 |

## Inviting examiners

In general, to organize examiners, candidates and principal supervisors should complete five phases. They 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**

Candidates and supervisors should develop a list of examiners who demonstrate the relevant characteristics. To identify these individuals,

* supervisors should identify relevant individuals—but individuals with whom they have not worked for five or more years
* candidates and supervisors could ask close friends or colleagues in the field whether they can identify relevant individuals they trust
* identify the researchers cited 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 candidates submit their thesis, to assess whether potential examiners are responsive and receptive to your perspectives, ask these individuals some questions, perhaps over email. Here are some templates you could use to write these emails.

|  |
| --- |
| 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 |

|  |
| --- |
| 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 |

|  |
| --- |
| 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.

**Final phases**

Principal supervisors must then contact the examiners. For more information on how to contact examiners and ask the right questions, read [this document](https://www.cdu.edu.au/files/2021-01/How%20to%20contact%20examiners.docx).