

INFUSING EXTERNAL EXAMINERS' REPORTS IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING POSTGRADUATE SUPERVISION

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—Abstract —

In postgraduate studies an examiner's report serves as a quality index of the supervision process and its output – the dissertation or thesis. This article reports selected findings of a qualitative interpretive analysis of examiners' reports of Masters' dissertations in one College at the University of South Africa. The purpose of this study was to ascertain, through a literature study and document analysis, the scholarly attributes expected by external examiners with a view to infusing these expectations in postgraduate supervision guidelines. The analysis uncovered a pattern in examiners' quality expectations, concerns and commendations. Undergirded by social constructivism and principles of andragogy, the paper argues that supervisors should make these expectations known to students by incorporating them into the goals of postgraduate supervision. This can help minimise postgraduate supervision challenges encountered by students in Open and Distance Learning.

Key Words: adult learners, examination, Open and Distance Learning, postgraduate supervision

JEL Classification: I23

1. INTRODUCTION

Quality research students delivered through effective supervision add to universities' envisaged higher throughput, and are a source of funding and scholarship (Nyika, 2014; De Beer & Masona, 2009). They also contribute to the institutions' intellectual output (Popescu & Popescu, 2017) and positive image (Ismail *et al.*, 2014; Kritzinger & Loock, 2012). For these reasons, universities invest a fortune in measures to enhance postgraduate student supervision. Holbrook, Bourke, Fairbain and Lovat (2007), however, caution that scholarly supervision is of little value if the dissertation is not peer reviewed and assessed as warranting a pass. It is the examiners' perspective or expectations that serve as indices of the quality of the dissertation (Kyvik & Thune, 2015; Tinkler & Jackson, 2004) to the extent that examiners perceive themselves as gate keepers who uphold standards (Golding *et al.*, 2014). Ironically, research suggests that this critical quality assurance role of external examiners is not free from controversy. In their reflections on their practices as external examiners, Sankaran, Swempson and Hill (2005) concede to having examined a thesis in unfamiliar areas and being uncertain about the examination criteria. Holbrook, Bourke, Lovat and Dally (2004) further note that examiners often fail to be objective because of personal agendas that extend beyond the examined work, like their preferences of specific methods or theories, or protection of academic territory. Similarly, Kyvik and Thune (2015) maintain that characteristics of examiners influence how they assess. Since these inadequacies and personal preferences find expression in the examiners' reports as comments about the quality of the supervision process and its outcome, they are not easy to shrug off. Rather, they point to the need for supervisors to know the trends with regard to external examiners' preferences.

The study on which this article is based aimed at answering the following questions:

1. What is suggested in extant literature as aspects that an examiner should take into account in the examination of a dissertation and to which the supervisor should attend in supervision?
2. What emerges from the analysis of the examiners' reports of selected dissertations as the scholarly attributes expected by external examiners from dissertations?

In addition to providing answers to these research questions, this article argues for supervisors to communicate examiners' expectations to students and infusing the expectations into the goals of postgraduate supervision. The argument is framed within social constructivism and principles of andragogy and a consideration of the ODL postgraduate supervision context.

1.1. Study Context

This article was drawn from a bigger study which was conducted in the College of Education at the University of South Africa (Unisa). In the study, which is reported elsewhere (Mafora & Lessing, 2014), my co-researcher and I examined several examiners' reports on masters' dissertations of our students who had graduated from 2010 to 2012. The students were based in South Africa and abroad. None was enrolled fulltime at Unisa and their supervision was mediated through electronic media and limited in-person consultation sessions. This article is restricted to examiners' reports on the first four dissertations supervised solely by the author. Data from the examiners' reports on the co-researcher's students is excluded.

All the students were employed in the field of Education: two were school principals, one a college lecturer and the fourth was a university lecturer. Their research projects were drawn from topical issues in their respective areas of practice. Each dissertation was examined independently by two external examiners as prescribed (Unisa, 2008). Beyond suggesting a number of possible examiners, the supervisor does not participate in the examination process or know the names of the final examiners appointed. Examiners' reports, which serve both a formative and summative purpose, are consolidated and summarised into a decision by a senior colleague designated as the Non-Examining Chairperson of the examining panel. The supervisor is given copies of the reports to assist the student to effect the changes and improvements suggested by the examiners, if their recommendation is not a fail.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This article is grounded in andragogy and social constructivism theories. Andragogy maintains that compared to children and adolescents, adults have different needs, perceptions and preferred styles regarding learning (Malone, 2014; Russell, 2006). Key attributes of adult learners which should be considered when deciding on appropriate teaching strategies are that they are active, independent and self-directing; internally and externally motivated; task and problem-centred; real life and experience-grounded; solution-driven and, have some expertise of their own (Merriam & Bierema, 2014; Malone, 2014; Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2011; Sweeny, 2008). While acknowledging the various limitations highlighted elsewhere about andragogy (Cercone, 2008), I share the view that characteristics of adult learners call for a learning environment and learning facilitation strategies that differ from those deemed appropriate for children. A learning environment that is suitable for adult learners would be characterised, among others, by:

- tasks that are relatively more challenging but do not frustrate the learner;
- relating new concepts that are being learnt to students' existing knowledge, experience and skill-base;
- respect, collaboration, participation, and openness; and
- clearly articulated goals that are in sync with what and why adult learners wish to learn (Knowles *et al.*, 2011; Cercone, 2008; Russell, 2006; James & Baldwin, 1999).

Since students registered for postgraduate programmes at Unisa are adults, the considerations that underpin teaching strategies for adult learners should also inform postgraduate supervision. That is, why adults learn and how they learn should be considered and incorporated into postgraduate supervision practices. This implies that the supervision of adult learners should not be characterised by negative practices uncovered by different researchers, like the indifference or disinterest of supervisors (Heydenrych, 2009); supervisors who are too busy and difficult to get hold of (Chiome *et al.*, 2012); neglecting students or coercing them to adopt supervisor-determined topics or methods (Schulze, 2012). Rather, students should be accorded respect as scholars and colleagues in research (Chiome *et al.*, 2012) and their diversity in terms of preferences, expectations, and their background-embedded approaches to learning should be respected (Merriam

& Bierema, 2014; James & Baldwin, 1999). The latter is consistent with assumptions of social constructivism.

To social constructivists the context in which learning occurs and the social context that learners bring to the learning environment are important (Santrock in Schulze, 2012). Knowledge and meaning are viewed as fluid human constructions derived from interactions between people and their social context. In their support for a social constructivist approach to postgraduate supervision, Quan-Baffour and Vambe (2008) maintain that students should constantly subject themselves to self-evaluation. In this vein, it can be argued that examiners' expectations can serve as additional criteria to be considered for this self-evaluation. In social constructivist terms, the examiners would, through their comments, be part of the social group – student, supervisor and examiner - that interacts in the process of knowledge construction. The assessment criteria and examiners' expectations would form part of the learning context and content, instead of being relegated to the end of the supervision process. In this regard, James and Baldwin (1999) aver that expectations should be articulated before they can be reconciled. However, in as much as the supervisor is not seen as the sole purveyor of knowledge, the examiners' expectations should also be questioned. The framework for questioning would be other guidelines for research scholarship like university guidelines for dissertations, views from peers, the supervisor, extant literature and, the student's experience and knowledge base. A social constructivist approach accommodates perceiving students as capable of questioning dominant views (Schulze, 2012). Basing students' self-evaluation on critically-questioned trends in examiners' comments would be consistent with the view that adult learners are practical and prefer focusing on what they have reasons to learn, and what they perceive as important for them (Knowles *et al.*, 2011, Cercone, 2008). A social constructivist approach to postgraduate supervision in ODL is supported by other scholars (Schulze, 2012; Quan-Baffour & Vambe, 2008).

According to Lieb (in Russell, 2006), adult learners have responsibilities that may become barriers to effective learning. These include lack of time, lack of confidence, lack of motivation, lack of information about opportunities, scheduling problems, and bureaucracy. In addition, the ODL context poses unique challenges to effective student supervision. These challenges include, among others, the absence of support from a virtual community of researchers and collaborative peers (Butcher & Sieminski, 2006); lack of sustained support from supervisor who are distant in place and time (Butcher & Sieminski, 2006; Mafa &

Mapolisa, 2012; Schulze, 2011) and ICT accessibility, affordability and network connectivity problems (Mafa & Mapolisa, 2012).

These barriers and challenges should be considered by supervisors when guiding their students. They are, however, unlikely to be considered by examiners who enter the supervision relationship at the end-phase, and base their evaluation on the product than on the process that generated it. The requirements for appointing examiners at Unisa, for instance, do not require a consideration of the unique circumstances of adult learners. A key consideration is whether the examiner possesses a senior qualification and experience in the examined discipline. No formal training in assessment is required and familiarity with the ODL context or challenges it poses to the supervision relationship is also not a requirement. Similarly, contrary to what university policy states (Unisa, 2008), experience in postgraduate studies as either a supervisor or an examiner is not strictly required from examiners. It is, therefore, an uncomfortable possibility that one might be appointed as an examiner with no prior experience in postgraduate supervision or examination. Credence to this claim is given by Sankaran, Swempson and Hill (2005) who, referring to their experiences in residential universities, concede to having examined theses in unfamiliar areas and being uncertain about the examination criteria. It must be emphasised, however, that experience in itself does not guarantee the envisaged rigorous, fair, reliable and consistent assessment. Some studies cited by Holbrook *et al.*, (2004) and Kyvik & Thune (2015) found that inexperienced examiners were stricter, while others found that it was more experienced examiners who made less positive comments. This suggests that selecting external examiners can easily become a hit-or-miss exercise.

Holbrook *et al.*, (2004) maintain that examiners are often not objective because of personal agendas that extend beyond the examined work, like protection of academic territory or preferences of some theories or methods. Being aware of such dynamics would be useful to supervisors when they recommend examiners or guide their students to make sense of examiners' comments and suggestions. In this regard, Sankaran *et al.*, (2005) argue that it is important for students to know about the examiners and the framework from which they examine. Unisa policy precludes supervisors and students from knowing who the appointed examiners are. This does not mean supervisors cannot know and make known to their students the emergent frameworks of possible examiners they consider recommending. To be in the position to do so, requires supervisors to first know about developments in their disciplines. They need to know who the leading

scholars are; what the current debates are; who the proponents of different views are; and what their preferred research methods are. With such insight, supervisors would be best positioned to provide contextualised guidance and appropriately match their students' research to the examiners (Joyner, 2003), in terms of expertise, experience and general scholarship inclinations. This would be consistent with principles of adult learning (Russell, 2006; Sweeny, 2008). In apparent support of matching students to supervisors, Tinkler and Jackson (2000) aver that supervisors should ensure that examiners are knowledgeable and sympathetic to the approach taken in the study. Examiners should, according to Tinkler and Jackson (2004), have an interest in the empirical subject matter and use the same broad theory and research methods as the student.

Although Unisa provides guidelines for writing a dissertation, students are not provided with guidelines regarding how the dissertation will be examined, or details regarding the examination process. This is considered disempowering and is contrary to recommended practice (Denicolo, 2003; Lessing, 2009). It is a plausible explanation why some students do not easily accept examiners' negative comments over work which they argue was approved by their supervisors. In this regard, Wallace (2003) found that PhD students questioned why they had to effect minor changes to their work and align it to the examiner's current thinking – which they did not know of beforehand. Similarly, students were unhappy that examiners focused more on some aspect of their work, not on others (Trafford, 2003). It appears that the discontentment in both cases emanated from the perceived disjuncture between students' and examiners' expectations. Such disjuncture is inevitable because on the one hand, the guidelines which universities give are said to be broad and open to interpretation (Lessing, 2009; Sankaran *et al.*, 2005), noted but not followed by examiners (Mullins & Kiley, 2002), or simply unknown (Sankaran *et al.*, 2005). On the other hand, conceptions of examiners' reports have undertones of scepticism. What examiners proffer as quality standards is perceived as their own idiosyncratic preferences (Cantwell & Scevak, 2004), untested assumptions and understandings that are not open for discussion, quality control or scrutiny (Johnston, 1997) and, their own criteria (Mullins & Kiley, 2002). These conceptions point to a level of subjectivity that can undermine the supervision process. Since examiners' expectations cannot be wished away, my contention is that supervisors cannot rely solely on their own understanding of research quality and their interpretation of university guidelines when providing guidance to students. Rather, they should critically consider emerging trends and common threads in examiners'

expectations and interpretation of guidelines. They should make students aware of these expectations. This might add to the knowledge and experience base which students bring to the learning situation. The new insight may also provide students with a context and insight into reasons behind the supervisor's guidance. The practice would be consistent with principles of adult learning and social constructivism.

Findings from a number of studies suggest that examiners are subjective and attach different weight to different aspects in their examination (Mafora & Lessing, 2014; Carter, 2008; Denicolo, 2003; Holbrook *et al.*, 2007). Mullins and Kiley (2002) found that examiners evaluated research reports that displayed the following qualities positively:

- the original use of conceptual framework;
- ability to reflect on own work;
- a well-structured argument; and
- sufficient quality and quantity of work.

Characteristics of research reports that examiners considered poor and which elicited negative comments include:

- lack of coherence;
- not understanding theory;
- researching the wrong problem;
- mixed or confused theoretical and methodological perspectives;
- work that is not original; and
- inability to synthesise the argument that is advanced (Golding, 2017; Golding *et al.*, 2014; Mullins & Kiley, 2002).

It was against this background of examiners' being custodians of quality and standards in postgraduate supervision, and their perceived subjectivity and inconsistency that the aims of the study were conceived.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to ascertain scholarly attributes which examiners expect from masters' dissertations they assess. To this end, a qualitative

interpretive research inquiry was employed to gather data from multiple case studies on examiners reports. The reports were drawn from the College of Education at Unisa.

3.1. Sampling

A purposive sample was drawn in this research. Only examination reports pertaining to the first batch of students who completed their postgraduate studies under my supervision as a novice were selected. Given the purpose of the study, this sampling was deemed appropriate as the examiners were all experienced and their reports were perceived as sources of valuable information.

3.2. Data collection and analysis

Data were collected through a literature study and analysis of examiners' reports. The analysis of the reports was based on the scholarly expectations for a dissertation, as determined from extant literature and Unisa guidelines to external examiners. Inferences about examiners' expectations regarding scholarly attributes were based on their comments in the reports.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the qualitative findings, the following measures from Guba's model for trustworthiness (Shenton, 2004) were adopted:

- an appropriate research method was adopted and a thick description of the phenomenon being studied was provided;
- a triangulation of methods – a literature study and document analysis – was used;
- uncertainties were clarified with the external examiners;
- sampling decisions were made carefully;
- raw data was analysed independently and the findings were discussed in order to reach consensus; and
- the researchers remained objective and did not include personal views during data analysis, in spite of their insider role.

3.3. Ethical considerations

The researchers followed the prescribed ethical measures when drawing data from the sampled examiners' reports. Ethical clearance and permission for the study was sought from relevant structures at Unisa. Permission to use the reports for research purposes was also obtained from all affected parties – students and

external examiners – and they were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality. A conscious attempt was made to describe the findings as accurately as possible.

4. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

4.1. Biographical data

The eight examiners' reports that are the focus of this article – two reports per dissertation - were written by seven examiners drawn from four higher education institutions in South Africa. Only one examiner assessed two dissertations. The examiners comprised of males and females with varied post levels and experience in higher education. They all had experience of supervising masters' degree students and examining dissertations. Their overall recommendation and allocated marks per dissertation did not vary. It was with regard to only one dissertation that the marks differed by ten percent. The table below summarise the examiners' profiles in relation to assessed dissertations.

Comments in these reports suggest that examiners' focus was on the product – the examined manuscript - and this was held to be indicative of the quality of the supervision process and the extent to which the candidate has developed as an independent researcher. In the main, their comments highlight what they commend and what falls short of their expectations. Interestingly, none of the examiners indicated what informed their comments, or referred to the ODL context in which the dissertation was completed. The analysed reports varied in length, style and format. They, however, all followed topics suggested in Unisa's guidelines as headings. For ease of analysis, the following discussion of findings is also structured around these topics.

Table 1. Profile of external examiners

Dissertation	Examiner	Employing University/ Institution	Years in Higher Education	Post level	Masters' students supervised	Masters' degrees Examined
A	A.1 75 %	Pretoria	5	Lecturer	1	7
	A.2 78%	Venda	4	Lecturer	3	2
B	B.1 70%	Pretoria	8	Senior Lecturer	2	8
	B.2 67%	North-West	9	Associate Professor	14	20
C	C.1 68%	Venda	22	Senior Lecturer	29	60
	C.2 78%	Palama	6	Director	3	12
D	D.1 75%	Venda	*	*	*	*
	D.2 75%	Palama	6	Director	3	12

* Declined to provide information

4.2 Scientific and academic standards of the research

The reports suggest that the examiners considered the assessed dissertations to meet expected standards of postgraduate research and that students displayed the necessary skills and attitudes to become independent researchers. The overall recommendation in the four dissertations was that they should be accepted subject

to the supervisor ensuring that suggested changes were effected. A pass with distinction was recommended by both examiners for two dissertations.

Students were commended for demonstrating the ability to conceptualise, design and implement a research study (Lee, 2010). Examiners expressed satisfaction that the research topic was clearly motivated, meaningful, researchable and relevant. The nature and depth they expected in the exposition of the topic is suggested by the following comments:

The candidate demonstrates competency in presenting the problem and giving a meaningful account (A: 2)

The research problem and aims are clearly stated and are consistent with the research questions (B: 1).

Although the examiners were satisfied with the exposition of the topic, they also expressed concern that the research assumptions were omitted, the theoretical framework lacked rigour and, that the rationale for the choice of research paradigm was not provided.

Consistent with the contention that the researcher should ensure that the goals of the study are reached (Mullins & Kiley, 2002), examiners' comments suggested that examiners placed value in research aims and questions as the pivot for other aspects of the research process and report. Their comments suggested that the literature review, sample selection and, conclusion and recommendations should be in line with the research aims and questions of the study. Comments confirming this view were:

I am pleased with the fact that you have presented your conclusions bearing in mind the research questions (A: 1).

The recommendations made are based on the findings and are consistent with the aim and focus of the study (B: 1).

This candidate generate[d] empirical evidence to answer the research question of the study (D: 2).

In addition, examiners included general remarks that pointed to their acknowledgement of the quality of the work and its contribution to the subject field. Although Unisa policy does not require publications from masters' dissertations, this was suggested by examiners with regard to dissertations they considered to be of high quality. Some comments were:

Both the candidate and the supervisor should be congratulated on producing such accepted dissertation (C: 1).

The candidate has shown the ability to conduct scientific research and the project can make a significant contribution towards addressing the problem (D: 2).

The concerns and comments raised by examiners are in synch with the view that the examination process should assess the extent to which the concept of research and how it should be conducted is understood, making research methodology the most important aspect of research which postgraduate students should understand (Nyika, 2014).

4.3 Scientific and academic quality of processing and presentation

The analysis of the examiners' comments point to their emphasis on the significance of a thorough, informative, extensive and detailed review of recent and relevant literature. A key requirement was that the student should provide a synthesised discussion of the literature. This is consistent with the view that postgraduate students should display a grasp of literature in their field (Mudavanhu, 2017; Delamont, Parry & Atkinson, 2004)

The examiners expected the arguments raised in students' discussions to reflect the essence of their research and to provide a framework for the empirical investigation. They had to be logical, critical and systematic. The nature and depth expected by examiners can be inferred from the following phrases they used in their comments about the quality of the theory of assessed dissertations: informative, appropriate sources, detailed literature review, relevant primary and secondary sources. Informative quotes that were indicative of examiners' satisfaction were:

There is a good coordination of ideas and concepts, and these links with the conceptual framework selected (A: 1).

He, however, demonstrates the ability to work independently as is evident in his manner of processing information from the literature review to the analysis and interpretation of results (B: 2)

Comments that pointed to examiners' dissatisfaction with the quality of the dissertation in this regard, related to discussions that were considered unnecessary

and irrelevant to the research questions and aims of the study or, based on a confusion of concepts. Illustrative comments were:

Distinction has to be drawn between the theoretical framework and conceptual framework...you seem to be confusing them (A: 1)

Instead of expending energy on explaining what literature review is about, the candidate could briefly introduce this section by briefly alluding to the research problem and then continue with the current debate in the field (D: 1)

With regard to the theoretical framework, examiners' comments are consistent with the view that a research report should be well written, show mature independent thinking and understanding of the literature, and that the argument must be logical and focused (Lovitts, 2005). They confirm the assertion that while examiners appreciate well-written, interesting and logical arguments, they feel distracted and irritated by poorly presented work (Golding *et al.*, 2014; Johnston, 1997).

Examiners emphasised the following aspects in their comments on the empirical investigation: whether the methods were appropriate, how representative and information-rich was the sample, the justification of findings with applicable verbatim quotes, the soundness of ethical procedures and, suitable cross referencing findings to literature. They commended studies that were well conceptualised, thoroughly analysed and, reflected students' insight and comprehensive knowledge of literature. Aspects that examiners were impressed with are highlighted in these extracts:

The study was ethically conducted; the population was clearly defined and scientifically sampled (A: 2).

[The student] has presented the essential aspects of the research design in a way that indicates knowledge of and understanding of aspects relating to research (B: 1).

Limitations with regard to the empirical investigation which examiners noted are highlighted in the following suggestions that they made:

More could have been done by way of using data presentation measures such as charts and pictures to report on findings and analysis in order to enhance the document (C: 2).

The section relating to the researcher as an instrument could be included in the section dealing with qualitative ethical matters (B: 2).

I suggest the demographic information of the participants be revealed, for example how many were males/females in each category (D: 1)

4.4 Language, editing and technical presentation

Unlike studies that found that examiners paid little attention to writing and editorial presentation (Carter, 2008; Lovat, Holbrook & Hazel, 2002) the analysis of examiners' comments in this study suggests that this was one of their key concerns. Suggestions on corrections to be brought to the attention of the students were mainly about the writing and editorial presentation. While the examiners did not make any negative comments with regard to this aspect the number of errors they highlighted suggests that they share the view that a dissertation should be well written and organised (Golding *et al*, 2014; Lovitts, 2005) with special attention being given to typographical correctness, spelling, referencing and footnotes (Mullins & Kiley, 2002). Errors highlighted can be broadly categorised as punctuation, formatting, tense, citations, italicisation, and paragraph structure.

5. ASPECTS TO INFUSE IN POSTGRADUATE SUPERVISION

In addition to seeking answers to the research questions, this article sought to make a case for communicating examiners' scholarly expectations to students. The key points emanating from these expectations are outlined next. Their significance lies in that they can serve as specific criteria for the themes emphasised in Unisa policy, which can be used by students as the basis for self-evaluation, if known in advance.

5.1. The research topic, study background and aims

- The topic should be carefully selected and clearly motivated.
- The topic should be relevant to the education context and be researchable.
- The research problem and aims should be clearly formulated and be consistent with research questions.

- The context of the problem should be explained and point to a gap in knowledge.
- Research assumptions should be outlined.

5.2. Theoretical framework

- A distinction must be made between a theoretical and conceptual framework
- The literature review must be thorough, informative, extensive and detailed.
- The review of literature must serve as a framework for empirical investigation.
- The discussion of literature should reflect the ability to interpret, evaluate and synthesise.
- Cited sources should be recent, appropriate and authoritative.
- The arguments advanced should be plausible, critical, systematic and logical.
- Discussions should be around research questions and aims of the study.

5.3. Empirical investigation

- The selected methods should match the research problem.
- The research paradigm used should be described.
- Adequately describe the population, the sample and sampling procedures.
- Support empirical findings with quotes from transcripts and suitable literature cross-referencing.
- Describe measures taken regarding ethical compliance, trustworthiness, validity and reliability in detail.
- Provide an interview schedule as appendix when interviews were used in qualitative research.

5.4. Format, language and editing

- The chapters should be arranged in a logical sequence and be balanced in terms of length and scope.
- The rules of grammar and syntax should be adhered to.
- Technical editing should be meticulous and consistent (tables, font type and size, line spacing, heading levels)

5.5. Conclusion and recommendations

- The conclusion should be aligned to the research question and aims of the study.
- The conclusion should feature cross-referencing to applicable findings.
- Recommendations should be based on findings and be consistent with the research aims and study focus.
- Guidelines that are suggested should be practical and implementable.

6. CONCLUSION

In line with the social constructivist view that knowledge is a social construct to which students can contribute, and andragogy that maintains that adults need to know why they need to learn something before undertaking to learn it, this study sought to establish scholarly attributes which external examiners expect from masters' dissertations. Additionally, it sought to advance the argument that these expectations should be infused in the guidelines on postgraduate supervision.

The article has outlined the concerns regarding the subjectivity and lack of consistency in examiners' reports. Notwithstanding these concerns, but because of the centrality of these reports as the basis of determining quality and scholarship in dissertations, the article has argued for a critical usage of these reports in postgraduate supervision. That is, supervisors should ground their guidance to students not only on the basis of their expertise and a consideration of university guidelines. Rather, they should also consider the attributes considered important by examiners. These should expressly be communicated to students without seeking to nullify the experiences and expectations which they bring to the supervision relationship, long before the examination process begins. The discussions around examiners' expectations would facilitate students' abilities to test knowledge, synthesise ideas of others, and broaden their insights. Such a measure would benefit ODL students who face unique challenges usually unheard of in contact universities. The article has identified the key aspects that should be

emphasised throughout the supervision process, and argues that these can be used by students as criteria for self-evaluation.

Given the significance of examiners' expectations about scholarship, they can serve as the basis for workshops and seminars on postgraduate supervision and research competence for students. Some common ground in examiners' evaluation practices can be established through mentorship programmes and communities of practice initiatives. These could help minimise extreme cases of subjectivity that often border on oppositional stances regarding the examination of the same dissertation. It would also be helpful if familiarity with the ODL context and attendance of workshops on the evaluation of postgraduate research could be a pre-appointment recommendation for examiners.

What still needs to be investigated is what informs examiners' judgement during the examination of dissertations. This could help explain their subjectivity and inconsistency. It could also serve as a relevant index when supervisors seek to match their students to examiners.

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