

## A CRITICAL REFLECTION ON SUBJECTIVITY IN EXAMINATION OF HIGHER DEGREES

**Collins C Ngwakwe\***

### Abstract

This paper is a critical reflection on seemingly embedded subjectivity in external examination of higher degrees. The paper is significant given that education is a vital pillar of sustainable development; hence, identification of obscure obstacles to this goal is imperative for an equitable and sustainable education that is devoid of class, race and gender. Adopting a critical review approach, the paper rummaged some related researches that bemoan apparent subjectivity amongst some examiners of higher degrees. Findings show a regrettable and seemingly obscured subjectivity and/or misjudgement that constitute an impediment in higher degrees examination process. Thus the paper highlights that whilst it is understandable that misjudgement or error is innate in every human endeavour including higher degree examination, however an error caused by examiner's partisanship and/or maladroitness in the research focus may be avoidable. In conclusion, the paper stresses that prejudice or ineptitude in higher degree examination should be bridled by *inter alia* implementing the policy of alternative assessor; checking the pedigree of examiner's assessment experience and an opportunity for the supervisor/s to present a rebuttal in circumstances where one examiner's opinion is fraught with apparent subjectivity.

**Keywords:** Examination, Higher Degree, Subjectivity, Bias, Opinion, Examiners, Markers

\*Turfloop Graduate School of Leadership, Faculty of Management and Law, University of Limpopo South Africa

### 1 Introduction

How petrifying – the revered academic behemoth – the thesis marker, prowling behind the dark veil – with two-edged sword of ink, seeking to devour years of hard labour; Severed from companionable – the candidate bemoans in twitchy days of uncertainty

Research on higher degrees examination is embryonic (Bourke & Holbrook, 2013); whilst there are myriad of objective inclinations in each of these nascent researches, this paper takes a nuance perspective by concentrating on a critical reflection of seemingly embedded subjectivity in external examination of higher degrees (Carter, 2008). From time immemorial until the present, higher degree examinations have been shrouded in secrecy and the examiner's decision has largely been revered as sacrosanct (Carter, 2008). The outcome of this seemingly monarchical aura in higher degree examination has not all been rosy for higher institutions and the candidates. Albeit this, higher institutions and powerless candidates have remained docile with unalloyed obeisance to declarations of examiners even in instances when such decisions have been fraught with subjectivity (see example, Carter, 2008; Peters and Ceci, 1982) with attendant anguish and pain to the candidates. Thus the paper highlights that whilst it is understandable that misjudgement or error is innate in every human endeavour including higher degree examination, however an error caused

by examiner's partisanship and/or maladroitness in the research focus may be avoidable. Given apparent subjectivity in higher degrees examination, it is imperative to strengthen independence as a vital ingredient that may bring sanity and objectivity in the examination of higher degrees. Independence should not mean that examiner decisions are inviolable when the need arises such as in cases of subjectivity.

The following hypothetical opinions encapsulate the problem of this paper:

*First Assessor:* thesis makes an original contribution to knowledge, findings are publishable and should be accepted for the award of a higher degree...

*Second Assessor:* thesis has not contributed any additional knowledge; none of its findings is publishable and should be rejected (authour's creation).

It is in consideration of similar ubiquitous practical findings about divergent opinions in higher degree examiner reports that Carter (2008, p. 366) summarised that higher degree examiner opinions and reports are "idiosyncratic".

If left unresolved, the sharp contrast in the above opinions of two thesis/dissertation examiners may constitute a dilemma for higher degrees' committee decisions on the award of higher degree; or at least, it could delay the committee's timeous decisions and hence a delay to the candidate's well-timed graduation. However, the goal of every university is to

enhance quality and timeous graduation of its students, nevertheless this goal may be stalled by some examiners' errors and/or subjectivity if an effective policy on higher degree examination imbued with proper checks and balances is not in place.

Therefore, the objective of this paper is to use relevant literature to engage in a critical reflection of apparent subjectivity or ineptitude in examination of higher degrees. Accordingly, the question that underpins this paper is whether all higher degree examiners' opinions are sacrosanct. Accordingly, the main aim of this reflective paper is to lay a brief critical foundation that may bolster critical empirical research on subjective thesis examination; such future research may likely bring about a positive revolution to the somewhat current mysteriousness in higher degree examination.

The paper is arranged into a simple structure; the next section of the paper presents a critical reflection of the subject matter from extant literature, following this, the paper ends with a conclusion and recommendation.

## **2 A literature reflection on subjectivity in higher degree examination**

Whilst some mottled forms of chasm amongst assessors may occur in higher degree examinations (Holbrook et al. 2004), it becomes frazzling though if one assessor's report is extremely skew and thus an outlier from others. In some instances, it has been found that some assessors' opinion is extremely divergent from other assessors' opinions (see e.g. Lawson, Marsh & Tansley 2003) and at times with a subjective rejection recommendation, which stymies constructive assessment of a research degree and concomitantly constitutes an ostensive thwarting of constructivism and hence academic capacity building. Problems identified as causing extreme and often rejection opinions include *inter alia*, misinterpretation of knowledge production – popularly regarded as original contribution to knowledge, research methodology prowess and publishability of the thesis or dissertation findings. The subsequent paragraphs offer critical discussions on the above contested issues.

Some examiners' subjective comments and/or recommendation seem to emanate from a standpoint where an assessor is stuck within the traditional realm of knowledge production (or contribution to knowledge), which is static and discipline-specific (Gibbons et al. 1994). Hence, it might arise that a dissonance could subsist between an assessor's understanding of what a contribution to knowledge should be and scholarly views about the constituents of an original contribution to knowledge. However, experts believe that original contribution is not static (Gibbons et al. 1994); rather research contribution transcends from a single to an amalgam of a gamut of varied forms of recognised scholarly research

contributions (Gibbons et al. 1994). Some physiognomies of contributions include *inter alia*, a discovery of a gap in knowledge (Glassberg, 2001; Hughes & Hayhoe, 2009); addition of an insight into the knowledge gap (Arnold, 2005); "discovery of new facts or the exercise of independent critical thinking" (Johnston, 1997, p.335). Other evidence of contribution includes appropriateness of thesis material for publication (Johnston, 1997; Arnold, 2005); publication of parts of thesis in refereed journals or conference proceedings in advance of assessment (Petre, 2010); contradiction of current system, a critique of current system, validation or expansion of current system (Petre, 2010). An argument might also arise as to what girth of contribution is significant enough to warrant recognition of a thesis or dissertation. Petre stresses that contribution to knowledge must not be revolutionary to be recognised (Petre, 2010). Adding to Petre's study, other research found that contribution to knowledge is subject-specific, the discipline or subject that the candidate has researched has a profound influence on how the examiner elicits the originality (Clarke & Lunt, 2014);

There are also contestations amongst examiners about which research method is deemed superior, but researchers indicate that there is no single most superior research methodology for all research endeavour (Willer & Walker, 2007), a candidate's demonstration of use of research method depends on the particular research in question. Even from the standpoint of a single research, there may be many methods of investigating a single research. If the researcher demonstrates the ability to justify and follow methodically his/her chosen method (Sankaran, et al. 2005), the examiner should judge the thesis method by immersing himself/herself in the context of the thesis and not by assuming an intransigent posture – expecting the research method to incline in his/her preferred precinct (Sankaran, et al. 2005). A real-life expression of students' expectation from examiners by Sankara et al. (2005) is:

We felt that we had provided internal arguments for the methodological approaches we had taken, and we hoped that our examiners would "get inside" our theses rather than examine us from their own expectations about methods of investigation or their own ideas of what constituted a doctoral thesis. (Sankaran, et al. 2005, p. 825)

There are chances that examiners may read thesis/dissertation from different methodological school of thought – positivist, normative, practitioner etcetera. Under this circumstance, there may be methodological disagreements amongst examiners if one of the examiners is intransigent – hence Sankaran, et al. (2005) eloquently recommends an alternative examiner to read the thesis to save the student from being locked up in an unjustifiable methodological quagmire. There is also subjectivity amongst examiners in reporting whether a thesis or dissertation

is publishable, in the absence of an attached publications to the thesis under examination; this factor may be highly contentious and hence may attract subjective decision by some examiners. Mullins & Kiley (2002) highlight that a thesis containing a significant amount of material may be publishable; although materiality may be idiosyncratic, but one can infer that a thesis containing a number of objectives with corresponding literature and research analysis on these individual objectives is well prepared and suitable for publication.

Aside from other factors, personal idiosyncrasy seems to weigh heavily on subjectivity, as most examiners would expect the thesis method or focus to incline in examiner's preferred precinct (Sankaran et al, 2005; Carter, 2008) which is a detraction from the core objective of the thesis under examination (suggesting apparent intransigent posture). In consideration of apparent and potential intransigent posture of some assessors, the University of Johannesburg (UJ) (2014) prescribes that: "Acceptance of the assessment task does not give the assessor the right to insist on a drastic change of the goals, focus or methodology of the study" (UJ, 2014, p.1). In line with the UJ's stance, Mullins & Kiley, (2002) offers a pertinent narration of experienced assessors' approach to doctoral assessment as:

I try in my reading of theses to understand where the student is coming from. Even if I don't agree with the perspective they have, or if there are gaps, I try to see it from their eyes and whether they have been true to what they set out to do (Mullins & Kiley, 2002, p.375).

Accordingly, an expert cautions that, "*Nothing in knowledge production and exploration can be static*" (Arnold, 2005, p. 37). Whilst lamenting some assessors' subjectivity, Wellington et al. (2005) bemoans that "*some examiners seem to arrive with a bee, or several bees, in their bonnets.*" (Wellington et al., 2005, p. 13), it is thus disquieting that with a negative and/or parochial posture, an assessor's objectivity may be blurred (Johnston, 1997) to the detriment of the study and the university at large. Not surprising though, the disquiet subsisting in assessments has prompted eminent scholars to rummage the entire gamut of peer reviewing and/or assessments and has unravelled a preponderance of prejudice amongst some reviewers and assessors against some authors because of race or gender (see e.g. Armstrong, 1997; (Mumford, 1983; Wenneras and Wold, 2001; Huang, 2009)). Unfortunately, bias in peer reviews is hardly publicised (Hojat et al. 2004). Similarly, researchers have found an evidence of bias against authors from less prestigious universities (see e.g. Peters and Ceci, 1982). Other scholars discover that in many instances, assessment process "has been strongly biased against 'negative studies', i.e. studies that find an intervention does not work" (Smith, 2006, p. 180). Therefore, if a thesis falls into the hand of an examiner who is apathetic to a study that negatively

analyzes his/her invention, creation, intervention or having some affinity and sympathy with the system studied, it is likely that such a thesis will not receive an objective assessment by some examiners.

### 3 Conclusion and recommendation

This paper made a brief critical reflection on subjectivity in external examination of higher degrees. Given the acclaimed role of education as a vital pillar of sustainable development, identification of obscure obstacles to this goal is imperative. Using a critical review approach, the paper rummaged some related research that bemoans apparent subjectivity amongst some examiners of higher degrees. The paper finds that subjectivity constitutes an impediment in higher degree examination. Accordingly, the paper highlights that whilst it is understandable that misjudgement or error is innate in every human endeavour including higher degree examination, but an error caused by examiner's partisanship and/or maladroitness about the research may be avoidable. Therefore the paper recommends that subjectivity in higher degree examination should be bridled by inter alia implementing the policy of alternative assessors to replace subjective examiners; checking the pedigree of examiner's experience and an opportunity for the supervisor/s to present a rebuttal in circumstances where examiner's opinion is fraught with unprecedented subjectivity. Additionally, heads of departments should be wary of appointing examiners merely based on the consideration that his/her name echoes in some quarters. This reflective paper presents an avenue for future empirical study that may dwell uniquely on the subjectivity in external examination of higher degrees.

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