

How do Examiners Assess a Thesis? An Analysis of Examiners Reports

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A thesis

- Is considered to be a report on scholarly project based on, or manifested in, rigorous experimental, theoretical, creative, empirical and/or design inquiry

the·sis (thss) *n. pl. the ses* (-sz)

1. A proposition that is maintained by argument.
2. A dissertation advancing an original point of view as a result of research, especially as a requirement for an academic degree.



Thesis examination

- ▶ Part grade – part gauge of what still needs to be done
- ▶ Peer review
- ▶ Labour intensive!
- ▶ ?guidelines, just guidelines
- ▶ On average 2/5 pages of comments
- ▶ Choosing examiners is a very important task! (who is your audience)
- ▶ Feedback during candidature is essential
- ▶ More than 90% of Australian/NZ thesis are deemed “passable”
- ▶ Large essay for two/three people.....



The mystery..... of examination

Thesis examiners tend to:

- (1) be broadly consistent
- (2) expect a thesis to pass
- (3) judge a thesis by the end of the first or second chapter
- (4) read a thesis as an academic reader and as a normal reader
- (5) be irritated and distracted by presentation errors
- (6) favour a coherent thesis
- (7) favour a thesis that engages with the literature
- (8) favour a thesis with a convincing approach
- (9) favour a thesis that engages with the findings
- (10) require a thesis to be publishable
- (11) give summative and formative feedback

Clinton Golding, Sharon Sharmini & Ayelet Lazarovitch (2014) What examiners do: what thesis students should know, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 39:5, 563-576

Conventional examination criteria

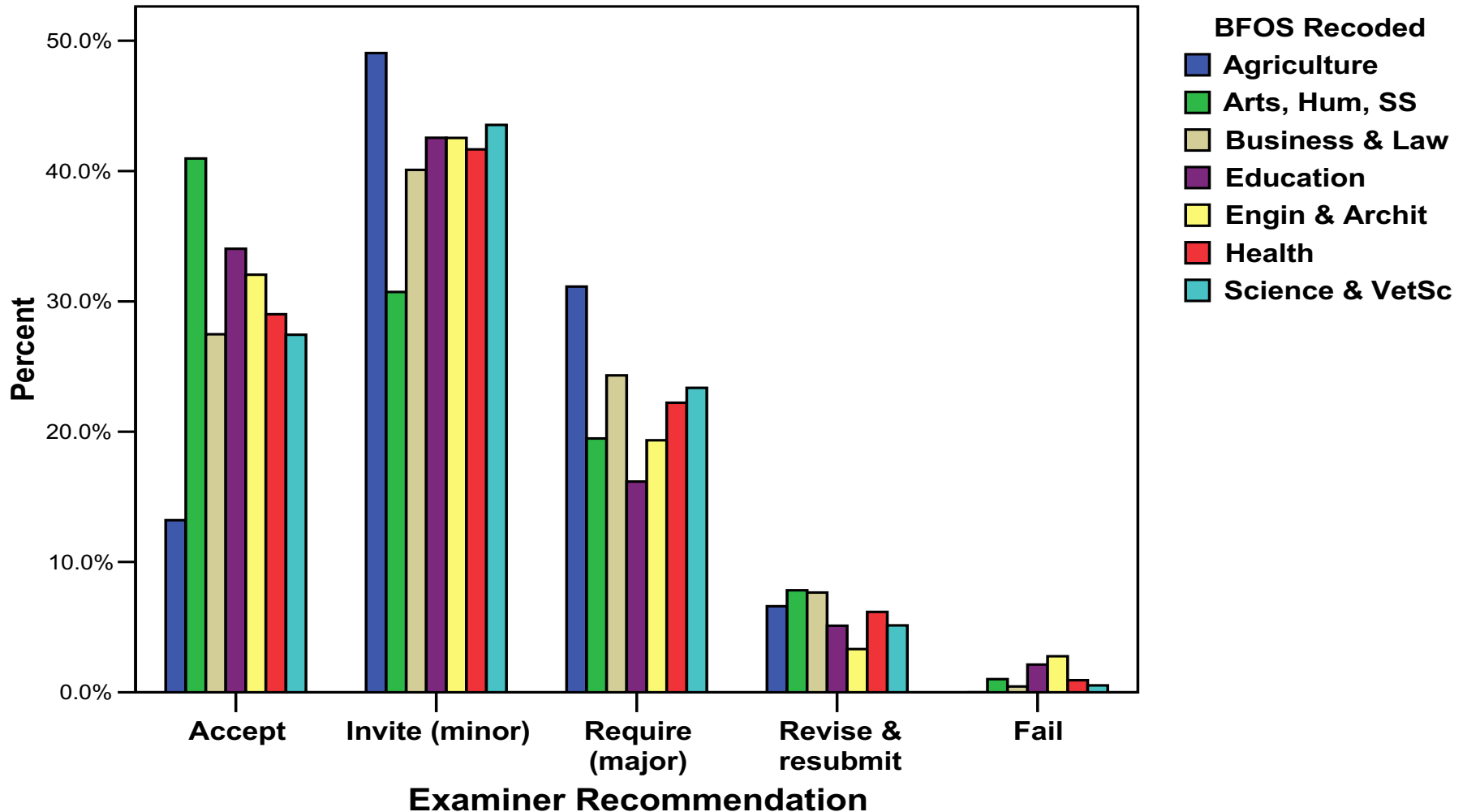
Doctor of Philosophy

- ▶ Does the thesis make an original and significant contribution to knowledge and understanding of the field of study with which it is concerned?
- ▶ Is the standard of literary presentation in the thesis satisfactory?
- ▶ Is the methodology applied in the candidate's research effective and appropriate for the thesis topic and the degree sought?
- ▶ Does the thesis reflect competence in the survey of literature and documentation of statements
- ▶ Is the thesis suitable for publication as a book or in a learned journal -
 - ▶ in the form submitted?
 - ▶ with modifications?

Examiners' Recommendations

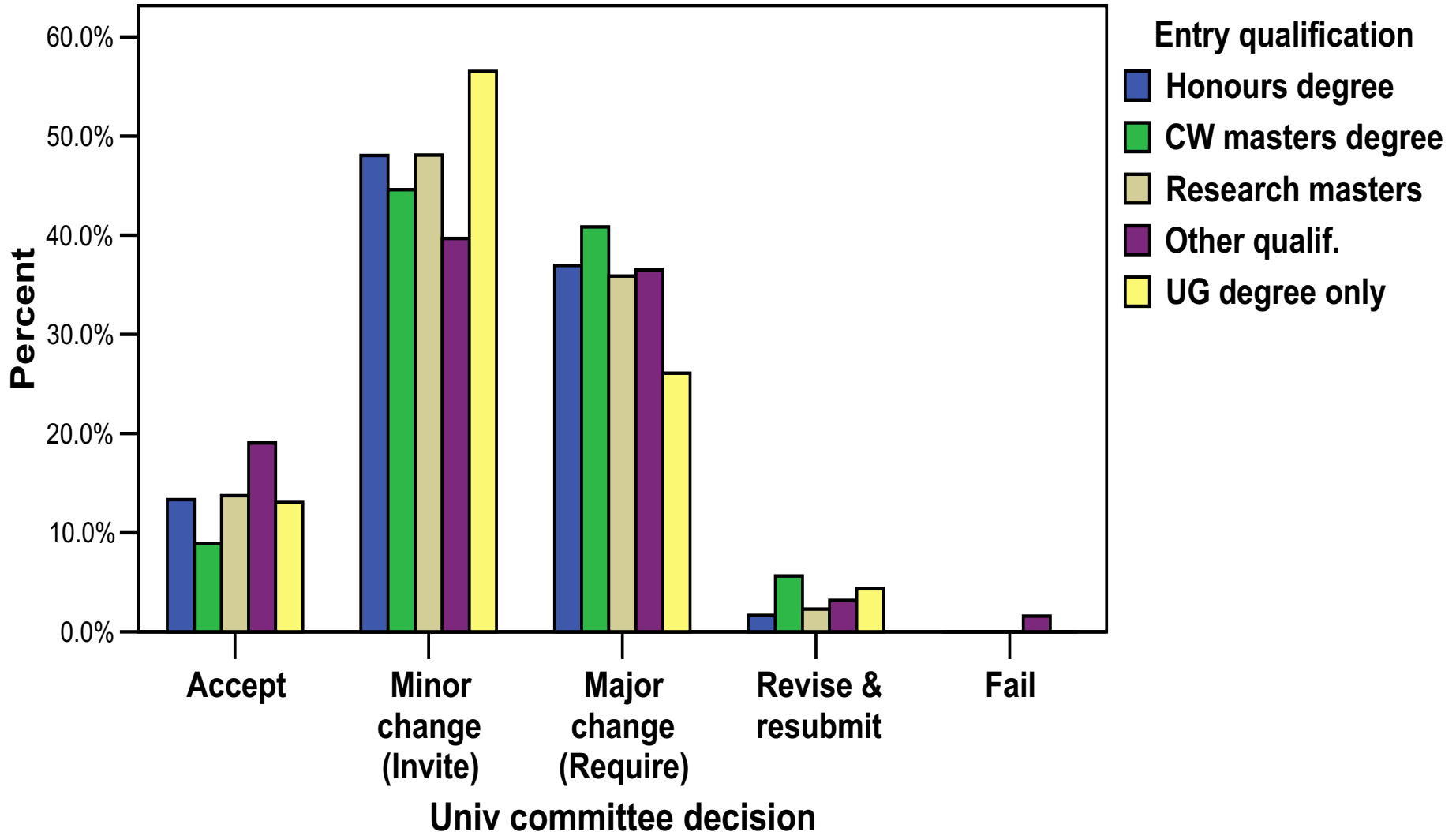
1. That the degree be awarded
2. The degree be awarded subject to minor amendments, including typographical errors
3. The candidate be required to submit to an oral or written defense of the thesis
4. Additional work to be undertaken, the thesis revised and then resubmitted
5. The candidate be considered for a masters degree
6. The degree not be awarded

EXAMINER RECOMMENDATION BY BROAD FIELD OF STUDY (N = 2134) (Holbrook, Bourke, Lovat, 2005)

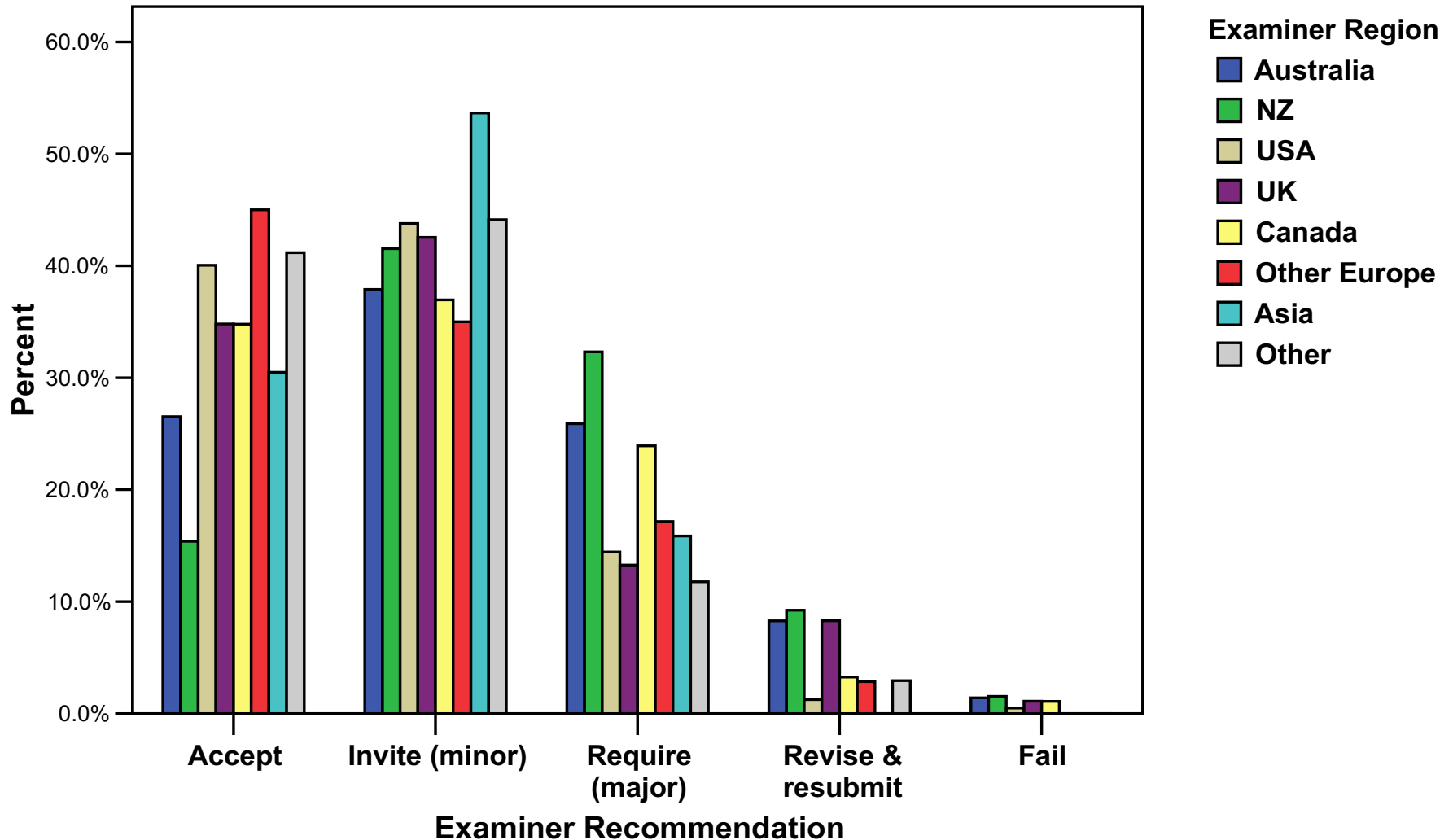


UNIVERSITY DECISION BY ENTRY QUALIFICATION

(Holbrook, Bourke, Lovat, 2005)



EXAMINER RECOMMENDATION BY COUNTRY/REGION (N = 2134)





Analysis of Examiners Reports

(Banerjee & Fitzgerald, 2008)

- ▶ 72 examiners reports analysed (2005-07)
- ▶ Length of each report ranged from half a page to 17 pages. Average length was about 1500 words.
- ▶ 23 examiners recommended 'A' (32%)
- ▶ 36 examiners recommended 'M' (50%)
- ▶ 12 examiners recommended 'R' (17%)
- ▶ 1 examiner recommended 'X' (1%)



Themes from Examiners' Reports

- ▶ Comments categorized as 'positive' or 'negative' on each criteria:
 - ▶ original contribution to knowledge
 - ▶ familiarity with and critical understanding of relevant literature
 - ▶ sufficiently comprehensive study of the topic
 - ▶ appropriate and proper application of methods
 - ▶ critical discussion of research findings
 - ▶ satisfactory quality of English and general presentation.



Contribution +ve



- ▶ Represents a very significant contribution to the expanding body of work in the area
- ▶ Comprehensive and complete study deserving of a Phd research work. Most impressive, methodologically sound, well organized. Lucid, comprehensively documented and analyzed and convincingly argues and concluded. Professional job so well done.


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Contribution -ve

- ▶ While the thesis has great promise overall it falls short of its potential.
- ▶ Thesis does not meet international standards.
- ▶ Contribution is questionable.



Literature and Theory +ve

- Logical and well structured critical review.
 - Research questions develop naturally from the preceding review and discussion.
 - The work is nicely connected to the literature. The review chapters are clear and exhibit high familiarity and critical understanding of the literature.
- 



Literature and Theory -ve

- Doesn't show direct linkage between the research questions and the literature.
- Major drawback is lack of any theoretical underpinning.
- Fails to capitalize on existing theories or use these theories to provide a means for interpreting and/or explaining results.
- Thesis is methodologically driven rather than theory driven. Lack of a clearly defined problem statement.



Methodology +ve

- Demonstrated his understanding of alternative research methods and his choice of research methodology.
- Candidate has properly demonstrated his competency in mastering this method.
- The choice of methodology was driven by the needs of the topic, rather than imposing a design onto the topic.



Methodology -ve



- ▶ Methodology section exhibited some disconnect between the literature reviewed and the model.
- ▶ Lack of self reflection and too etic a perspective. Quality of the empirical material is doubtful.
- ▶ Surprisingly low numbers of interviews. Insufficient data to make the claims.
- ▶ Unclear what the unit of analysis is.



Discussion +ve



- ▶ The presentation is of high quality and the analysis is appropriate.
- ▶ The experiments are well designed and implemented, the results are analyzed appropriately and some meaningful findings are shown.
- ▶ Key areas are clearly derived from the data analysis

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Discussion -ve

- It is not clear from the text how hypothesis are related to the framework.
- Alternate explanations of findings not discussed.
- Need to explain relationships found in the discussion section.
- Need a clear statement about the degree to which the work has realized the aims of the research.



Quality of English and Presentation +ve

- Quality of English is excellent and the presentation of the thesis makes it easier for the reader to understand.
- Writes beautifully, well chosen descriptive words, language and sentence construction.
- I am not a good judge of the English. It seems to be better than my English.

Quality of English and Presentation

-ve

- Requires proofreading.
- References are in text but not in bibliography.
- Vague statements, unsupported statements, loose statements.
- Need thorough edit.
- Most chapters are well written. However, this one chapter reads like being written by a different person who does not know English very well.



General Observations

- In general, comments were positive and criticisms were constructive.
- Most negative comments were about the readability of the thesis.
- Clearly state the theoretical contribution of the thesis.
- Clearly state the purpose of the research and problem statement.
- Relate the conclusion chapter to the introduction chapter by revisiting the research questions in the end.

Criteria that distinguish between high-quality and low-quality theses

General criteria	Specific criteria	
	<i>High quality thesis</i>	<i>Low quality thesis</i>
Thesis topic and approach	Significance and challenge of the topic	Lack of convincingness
	Fusion of originality of the approach with a realisation of significant contribution to the field	Questionable integrity of the approach of thesis or presentation of findings
Literature review	Expert use of literature in design of study and discussion of findings	Inadequate coverage or focus of the literature in relation to the study
	Thorough, clear and incisive reporting of the literature	Inadequacies and omission in referencing
Communication competence		Manifest editorial inadequacies
Publications arising	Recognised need for early publication of/from the study	



For more on thesis examination:

- ▶ Bourke, S, Holbrook, A & Lovat, T (2004) Investigating PhD theses examination reports. *International Journal of Educational Research*. Vol 41, issue 2, pp 98-120.
- ▶ Bourke, S, Holbrook, A & Lovat, T (2005) Using examiner reports to identify quality in PhD theses, paper presented to AARE Focus Conference 2005 Quality in Educational Research: Directions in policy and practice, Cairns
- ▶ <https://www.newcastle.edu.au/research/centre/sorti/publications/research-into-phd-examination>

Method Vs Methodology

- ▶ Methodology is the study of scientific methods, an analysis of the principles or procedures of inquiry in a particular field. A body of methods, rules, and postulates employed by a discipline along with the philosophical assumptions that inform a particular investigation. Methodology explains more than the methods used in research – it includes the ontological and epistemological assumptions of the research.
- ▶ Hypotheses testing, regression analysis, interviews, focus groups, etc. are *methods*, not methodologies.



Questions?

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