The PhD Oral Examination – the New Zealand Experience

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The doctoral oral examination represents the culmination of the examination process which not only provides the ultimate test of quality assurance but also is educationally rewarding and personally satisfying. Although the work embodied in the thesis is normally the major basis for determining the award of the degree, the oral examination provides greater transparency to the overall examination process. The major objectives of the oral examination include:

• To provide the opportunity for the candidate to clarify points of principle or of detail in the thesis
• To assess the contribution made by the candidate to the content and presentation of the thesis
• To test the candidate’s comprehension of the broader context of the research

There is huge variation in the nature of the thesis oral examination process - ranging from pre-submission to post-evaluation oral examination. In all New Zealand universities, the oral examination is conducted after obtaining the written reports from the examiners. The oral examination is moderated by an independent convenor who is having extensive experience in the supervision of doctoral students and examination of thesis. This paper covers the senior author’s experiences as a doctoral oral examination convenor, and the issues addressed include: the composition of oral examination panel and the roles of individual examiners; the purpose and nature of the oral examination, the post-oral examination discussion and decision. The paper illustrates the value of the oral examination as an integral part of the examination process in relation to quality assurance.