The PhD Examination in Balance and Imbalance

Allyson Holbrook, Sid Bourke, Terry Lovat, Hedy Fairbairn

University of Newcastle, Newcastle, NSW, Australia

This paper draws on the findings of a national study of PhD examination (comprising the text analysis of 2121 PhD examination reports and examiner recommendations) in conjunction with three bodies of literature (on doctoral supervision, academic scholarship and doctoral examination) to elaborate a model of doctoral examination ‘in balance’. The model represents the interaction of examiner roles (stewardship, membership and relationship), examiner focus (duty, territory and empathy) and conditions that determine quality (standards, disciplinary experience and supervisory experience). The examination process in Australia has been shown to be particularly robust, insofar as examiner expectations are strongly aligned to the same standards, and this is also evident in examiner reports on the same thesis, but there are situations where an examiner is an outlier. Typically in such cases the situation is out of balance. This paper explores how this occurs and provides data from examiner reports to illustrate balance and imbalance.