Gaining knowledge – creating art. Examination of theses at an art university and the quality assessment through examination reports

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The discussion group will focus on the examination procedures of doctoral dissertations, the increasing diversity of forms of dissertations and the criteria chosen for assessing them.

As a process, the examination of doctoral dissertations in an art university differs somewhat from that in other universities. Even the latter, however, increasingly need to deal with visual or practice-based argumentation. By way of introduction, the emergence of doctoral education in Finnish art universities is discussed briefly, as are the degree requirements for both traditional and artistically oriented doctoral projects. The pre-examination process including artistic or design projects differs from the process of a written thesis. The examination process may for example take many years, because the art or design productions are often exhibited before the written thesis is completed. Finally, all dissertations in Finland have to be published as a book or in an electronic form, which also means different procedures in the final examination process.

The introductory paper is based on an analysis of 55 examination reports at the University of Art and Design Helsinki during 1991-2006. The analysis brings forth the criteria the examiners use in their assessment of the dissertations. The University only gives general guidelines to the evaluators. The multiplicity of research areas, the inclusion of artistic projects and argumentation with visual material also pose special problems to the examiners.

Following Dally & al. (2004) and Holbrook & al. (2005) while reading these reports, we chose the following parameters for discussion: 1) the transparency of research, 2) the use of visual material in argumentation, 3) the required dialogical and analytic relationship between the artistic or design projects and the written part, 4) the level of conceptualisation, 5) the methodology used. And, of course, the work has to meet the general requirement of demonstrating originality.

Keywords: examination of dissertation, art university, assessment criteria