

# Should Australian AR theses be examined using a developmental approach adopted by US universities?

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*In Australia PhD theses are examined by three external examiners who look at a written thesis submitted by the student after he/she has completed it. Generally universities want the examiners to be external. Therefore when the student thesis is read by the external examiner it is probably the first time the examiner looks at the thesis. Although this is meant to be an objective process it poses problems in practice. The three authors, all action researchers and members of the Action Learning, Action Research and Process Management Association of Australia (ALARPM), were concerned about the issues arising out of examining action research theses. As they considered writing a paper together on the issue they realised that there were issues even with any doctoral theses, not just AR theses. So they collaborated and wrote two papers about issues in examining doctoral theses. One of the authors, Sankaran, visited the US for his sabbatical and interviewed four prominent action researchers and academics about issues they faced with examining action research theses. It became evident that while the model used for examining doctoral theses in the US and Australia is different there are common issues in examining these theses. However the authors feel that the developmental approach used in the US, where the student and the examiner are in communication from the beginning of the thesis, might resolve some of the issues faced by Australian doctoral supervisors. This article presents issues faced by supervisors in Australia with regards to examining action research theses and how a developmental approach may address some of these issues.*

## **Introduction**

The authors are colleagues within the 'community of practice' (Wenger & Synder, 2000) of the Action Research, Action Learning, and Process Management Association Inc. (ALARPM) and have been doctoral students who used action research, supervisors of action researchers and examiners of action research theses in Australia. Over time they became aware of each other's experiences and concerns with examining action research theses. As they began to talk informally about their concerns they came to recognise that these might apply equally to any research thesis, action research or otherwise.

The general process for theses examination in Australia is that they are examined by two or three examiners, external to the candidate's university. While the principal supervisor through the School's Director of Postgraduate Studies and Research suggests potential examiners to the Higher Degrees Committee (this is the name of the committee at Southern Cross University; it may be called by other names in other universities), it is the Committee that makes the final decision. The names of the examiners chosen are not made known to the candidate. But the candidate would know the identity of their examiners after the examination process if the examiners agree to it. Some Australian universities also require an oral defence. Several studies have been conducted on the process of thesis examination. This literature appears to focus on improving the quality of the thesis rather than illuminating the examination processes and examiner practices.

Nightingale (1984) reviewed examiner reports and university regulations pertaining to the various degrees. She concluded that the examination practices that existed at the time of her research were dis-empowering in that they did not clarify the criteria by which a thesis would be evaluated. Simpkins

(1987) similarly examined the practice of thesis examination by undertaking an analysis of examiner reports to determine whether examiners subscribed to common thinking about theses and research. The study revealed that overall there was a common construct of critical evaluation. Simpkins suggested that examiners expected a research thesis to draw on established methods of investigation, and that there was also a willingness, at least of the examiners in his study, to accept some of the assumptions expressed in the new research traditions.

Hansford and Maxwell (1993) replicated the Nightingale (1984) study and focussed on the examination of Master's theses. Their study identified the range of reasons that examiners provide for a thesis not meeting the standard, and thus inferred the indicators of a quality thesis.

Nightingale (1984), Simpkins (1987), and Hansford and Maxwell (1993) used examiner reports as their primary data. Mullins and Kiley (2002) critiqued the use of examiner reports for investigations into thesis examination, suggesting that by the time the report was written, the examiner had already gone through several processes of reading and examination, and hence these studies failed to capture the immediacy that is the experience of the examiner, novice or otherwise.

While several papers could be found in the literature of examination of doctoral theses in Australia we could not find any paper about issues of examination processes with action research theses. A paper that discusses the academic qualities of practice-based PhDs (Winter, Griffiths and Green, 2000) reflects on some of the issues faced by action researchers and their supervisors. Winter *et al* (2000: 25) state that 'our starting point is that an important practical problem facing students and tutors in higher education is how to

produce and judge practice-based PhDs.' The paper describes three viewpoints on preparing and judging a practice-based thesis but does not say much about the process of examination.

### **Is the scientific method relevant for practice –based research?**

Generally Australian universities expect their students to adopt a traditional structure for their theses based on the scientific method and an objective way of examining the thesis based on a blind peer review. However with the increasing number of doctorates in the social sciences, education and professional disciplines such as management adopting new methods of conducting their investigation to link theory to practice, students are adopting new ways of preparing and submitting their theses. But the examination processes have essentially remained the same. One of the issues faced by supervisors is the uncertainty associated with the 'objective' examination process. While supervisors may recommend examiners based on the content area of a student's thesis the examiner may examine the thesis not only for the content but also for the methodology as well as style of writing. Sometimes examiners rooted in the positivist tradition may not favour new ways of writing or presenting a thesis.

Winter *et al* (2000) point out several reasons why practice-based research is increasing in numbers. They say that higher education is now linking with a variety of workplaces and is willing to accept more practice oriented research. The public funding of higher education is closely tied to the economy, and academic qualifications are being brought closer to work-based learning. Organizations are also encouraging their workforce to get more academic qualifications. Some organizations have gone a step further and are setting up universities within their own

organizations, for example, General Electric's Leadership Centre at Crotonville to develop their managers (online, 2007). Organizations such as Flight Centre in Australia are collaborating with the International Management Centres Association (IMCA) in the UK to train their managers using an 'action learning' approach and award qualifications similar to those awarded by universities (online, 2007).

With the demand for linkage between theory and practice in academic research methodologies such as action research have come into prominence (e.g. a PhD program using action research has been established by the University of South Australia in Asia since 1994 and Southern Cross in Singapore since 1999. Monash University has partnered with industry to engage researchers in doctoral programs using action research in Australia. Several Doctors of Business Administration (DBA) have successfully completed their theses using action research from Southern Cross University and Edith Cowan University where academics who practice action research have been promoting the use of action research as a suitable method to do practitioner research). However, supervising and examining action research theses from a traditional point of view is proving to be difficult. First of all there is no standard definition of action research even though the various schools of action research use some common principles. Since action research is flexible in its approach it is often critiqued for not having scientific rigour. Action researchers also face problems with ethics committees in universities who expect researchers to submit their ethics applications based on using the scientific method of conducting research. Often action researchers do not start off with a specific plan as data might drive the research in different ways.

## **The US model of theses supervision and examination**

In 2004 one of the authors of this paper interviewed some prominent scholars in action research in the US during a special study leave from his University. A purposeful sample of scholars was chosen from those who were editors, or on the editorial or advisory boards of the journal *Action Research*. To render the sample diverse the scholars were also chosen from different disciplines to see if their expectations of an action research thesis were different. Six of them were contacted and four were available during the period when the author was able to visit the US. It was only possible to meet four scholars within the time and budget that the special study leave allowed.

While interviewing these scholars in the US about issues with supervising and examining action research it became clear that even though the systems of supervision and examination in the US are different from the Australian practices some of the problems faced by the supervisors are the same. However the US examination system allowed face-to-face contact between candidates and their examiners through the dissertation and hence researchers are able to understand what is required of them in submitting their dissertations.

Information about doctoral programs was collected from Boston College, University of Cincinnati, Case Western Reserve University and Cornell University, where the scholars were located, through the University websites and while interviewing them. Although other US universities may have slightly different models we can arrive at some conclusions about some of the common features of doctoral programs in the US.

1. Most doctoral programs have course work requirements prior to becoming eligible for candidacy.

Some have residential requirements. Some expect students to teach as well. The number of courses you have to complete to reach candidacy depends on your previous education.

2. In most cases students along with responsible authorities get to select their dissertation advisors and also the committee that will examine them. Regular reviews are held with the student, their advisors and the committee responsible for examination.
3. Some of the universities expect students to conduct research that contributes to knowledge through qualifying courses or projects.
4. The thesis is always defended orally and people from other parts of the university are welcome to attend the defence and ask questions within the permitted time. The committee responsible for examining the theses makes the final decision collectively.

In the Australian system most PhDs do not require course work but the student has to have honours equivalence to demonstrate that he/she is capable of doing research. In social sciences where mature-aged people with work experience undertake a PhD program, they may have a Bachelor's degree without honours. They will be asked to undertake a qualifier program to learn research skills after which they can be admitted into the doctoral program. Some practitioner doctorates require course work. Students usually work with a single supervisor although associate supervisors can be appointed for multidisciplinary research. The supervisor recommends the examiner to a school research director who has responsibility to look after research activities within a school and then a committee will approve the examiners. The examiners are sent the thesis on completion for examination and they are not permitted to discuss the thesis with the students. The examiners can also opt not to reveal their identity after examination. In some

universities such as Southern Cross University the examiners know each other's identity and can discuss the thesis. Some universities in Australia have an oral exam for PhDs.

In terms of peer review universities try to do this through doctoral symposia or progress workshops during their research. Students are also encouraged to present papers at conferences (universities assist them financially to do so), or publish papers in journals and the peer reviews help them to improve their research.

### **Problems with examining action research theses**

In the preface to the *Handbook of Action Research*, Reason and Bradbury (2001: xxii) state that action research could be thought of

*...as forms of inquiry which are participative, experiential and action oriented. We see this as a "family" of action research approaches – a family which sometimes argues and falls out, may sometime ignore some of its members, has certain members who wish to dominate, yet a family which sees itself as different from other forms of research, and is certainly willing to put together in the face of criticism or hostility from supposedly "objective" ways of doing research.*

This creates several problems for supervisors of action research theses when selecting examiners in the Australian context:

- α) Would an examiner they recommended as a specialist in the 'content' area of their student view action research as not an objective 'methodology'? Where does he/she find a clear definition of action research if they are not familiar with it?
- β) If they did choose examiners who are familiar with action research how would they find out which flavour of action research they favour?



To understand how the examination processes in the US differ from the Australian processes we will first look at how the four scholars we interviewed define action research:

*There is no "short answer" to the question "What is action research?" But... a working definition... [is] that action research is a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview which we believe is emerging at this historical moment. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of pressing concerns to people, and more generally flourishing of individual persons and their communities (Reason and Bradbury 2001:1).*

*AR refers to the conjunction of three elements: research, action and participation. Unless all three elements are present, the process cannot be called AR. Put another way AR is a form of research that generates knowledge claims for the express purpose of taking action to promote social change and social analysis (Greenwood and Levin 1998: 6-7).*

Greenwood and Levin also add that the social change is linked to empowerment.

*Participatory action research ...is an explicitly political, socially engaged approach to knowledge generation. By combining popular education, community organizing, and issue-based research, this practice demands that the researcher play simultaneous roles as scholar and activist. PAR operates within communities that have traditionally been oppressed or marginalized and through a process of democratic dialogue and action provides members of those communities with the opportunity to identify issues of concern to them, gather relevant information and explore and implement possible solutions (Brydon-Miller 2002: SPSSI convention speech).*

Torbert (online, n.d.) prefers to use the term 'action inquiry' and says that he is always concerned about 'how to practice social science in everyday life, that is, about how I (or you) can engage, in the midst of daily practice'. He further explains action inquiry in terms of three forms of research (online, para: 7):

*in first-person research (e.g. observing what I am doing and the effects I and my environment are having on one another, what I am thinking and feeling, and what I really want)*

*in second-person research (e.g. encouraging mutual testing of attributions and assessments in real-time conversations and meetings, along with transformations toward increasingly mutual control of our collective vision, strategies, performance, and assessment) and*

*in third-person research (e.g. publicly testing propositions with persons not present through measures and publications, as well as through creating learning organizations that interweave first-, second-, and third-person research).*

We can see similarities in what the scholars think that action research should look like while at the same time we see some differences in approach. While Greenwood and Brydon-Miller feel strongly about liberating communities from their current situations to take more control of themselves, Torbert leans more towards personal development as the starting point before embarking into testing the findings in conversations with others and publicly testing the propositions. Reason and Bradbury's views encompass both the pursuit of pressing concerns as well as individual and group development.

Another issue with defining action research is that some researchers combine other forms of participative processes into their research. For example management researchers tend to mix action research with action learning and seem to be bothered less about emancipation and focus more on learning and organizational improvement. Raelin (1999: 115-125) compares several methods used by organizational researchers in a special issue in *Management Learning* devoted to action-oriented methods. These are action research, participatory research, action learning, action science, developmental action inquiry and cooperative inquiry. He states that action research involves 'iterative

cycles of problem definition, data collection or implementing a solution, followed by further testing' (p.119).

Action researchers also tend to write their theses in different ways. The authors of this paper have observed that often action research theses are written in the first person, do not have a lengthy literature review to identify gaps in the literature, combine data collection and analysis chapters in the form of descriptive action research cycles and usually include a personal learning chapter. This does not fit in with the standard forms of writing a thesis favoured by universities. An action research thesis received recently by one of the authors for examination used multimedia effects like colourful pictures, was printed out like a coffee table book and another had a DVD as a major part of the thesis showing the facilitation work done by the researcher. This raises concerns about how much variety would an examiner, used to conventional theses, tolerate?

### **Themes from the interviews of the four US scholars**

During the interviews with the four scholars in the US it became quite clear that they do not face many of the issues that Australian supervisors face with the examination system. All their universities use committees and the student usually has a voice in selecting their examiners (committee) along with his/her thesis advisors. While there were some general rules about examinations the criteria for the final defence is developed as the thesis develops with the advisor and at the regular reviews with the examining committee and so there are no major surprises at the end. One of the scholars pointed out that the student is encouraged to communicate individually with all the members of the committee before the defence. Another scholar mentioned that the student would be told in advance about the emphasis on certain areas during the examination to prepare adequately. But there were also concerns that while the

committee system might be better than a blind examination there was also a risk that an incompetent committee may approve a poor dissertation. While two of the scholars interviewed had been external examiners for other universities all of them did not feel comfortable about being a 'blind' examiner of a thesis.

But some issues such as getting human research ethics (or getting Institutional Review Board approvals in the US) were fraught with difficulties when granting approvals for action research theses. Herr and Anderson (2005) who wrote a book about action research dissertations devote one chapter to ethical issues relating to action research and the difficulties faced by researchers to secure ethics approvals. They state that a 'primary concern of would-be action researchers is that their proposals are reviewed using guidelines and questions designed with traditional scientific experiments in mind rather than action research' (2005: 124). Australian action researchers and their supervisors face similar issues. In fact one of the authors of this paper had to delay collecting data for his own doctoral research using action research for nearly six months awaiting human research ethics approval.

The four scholars were asked about what they would expect of an action research thesis and their expectations are in general agreement with their own definitions of action research that was quoted earlier in this paper.

Bradbury said that she wants to see some clarity about the research question – how it is going to contribute to the world of practice and the world of theory

*... I want to see that the student has done something successful in the practice site, which implies that they have developed good relationships. The third criterion is developing infrastructure by which I mean that the work can go on even after the student leaves the site. I am interested in making more use of multimedia not just*

*the words that you find in the dissertation. I am also interested in the values dimension - in what way are you contributing to a better world? This matches closely with the five criteria for quality that we articulated in the Handbook of Action Research.*

Greenwood stated that:

*In an action research thesis I expect more narrative as an AR thesis may change as the research develops and I want to know about the struggles faced by the student. If the student lacks a disciplinary paradigm for the dissertation the narrative of the thesis had to work by itself. I think the process discussions about the (action research) projects and dilemmas in the projects and failures which are never reported are some things I want to know about.... dissertations should not be all about your triumphs, it should also be honest about your struggles not in a heroic way but in a more realistic way.*

He also said during the interview that he thinks the value of knowledge is probably found in breaking rules to move into new directions.

Brydon-Miller wanted to see a practical outcome and evidence of collaboration:

*I expect to see an explicit discussion of who has contributed what – I do not necessarily expect that there will be any ethical dilemmas – even though ideally in an action research project it is not all your own work...and there has to be some indication of how it was negotiated... I would see the collaborative effort contributing to the research. I also expect my students to talk about ethics ....they have to write about ethical issues they confronted or had to deal with in the context of doing their research... how it was negotiated and what happened as a result of it.*

Both Brydon-Miller and Greenwood also raised concerns about the ownership of the 'intellectual property' from an action research thesis due to a collaborative effort.

Torbert said that:

*the particular questions I would like to push forward with an action research thesis would be*

- *to what degree you have studied yourself during the process of the thesis?*
- *to what degree do you understand the effect of your own actions have had on the [research] site and on people's responses?...*
- *to what extent have you gone through a feedback process already and obtained feedback from the participants of your research?*
- *your data may show that you have helped the participants to achieve a particular practical outcome but to what degree is your thinking influencing them as well? In other words to what degree the theory is influencing the practitioners?*
- *how do the first person, second person and third person research interweave with one another?*

Torbert also raised concerns about how ethics approvals are handled with action research. He felt that the emphasis on informed consent in the scientific way with action research is counterproductive as action research has an ethically defensible relationship due to its own collaborative nature. The authors of the paper also feel that the way human research ethics approval is dealt with in Australia does not suit the nature of action research.

Torbert felt that he would expect some of the things that he said about expectations from an action research thesis to be true for other types of theses. Greenwood also had a similar opinion about expectations from any thesis but he would like to see something more with action research theses.

From what was stated in the interviews almost all the scholars were interested in the details of what went on during the action research, what issues came up and how the

researcher struggled to overcome problems that occurred, the negotiations that had to be done to move forward and the nature of collaboration during the research. It was also clear that ethics approval for action research was a major concern.

## **Discussion**

The first issue that arises out of the experiences of the authors which is also confirmed by the literature is that different people define action research differently. Although the definitions have some common threads how does an examiner who may not be familiar with the various schools of action research judge it? The lack of contact between the examiners, the supervisor and the student makes this even more difficult.

The second issue is that the guidelines provided by universities in Australia to doctoral examiners is the same irrespective of the methodology used. These guidelines are based on a typical thesis that is written using the scientific model using a structured approach. Action research theses may not fit this model as sometimes they are written in different ways. For example, some may not have a detailed literature review to find a gap in the literature, some may be written using the first person, and in some the data collection and data analysis may be written up as action research cycles.

The third issue often arises due to the practitioner nature of action research. Action research may be used to solve a particular problem that may be relevant only to the context where the problem originated. Examiners familiar with traditional thesis may look for some generalisation in the thesis to be considered as a contribution to knowledge.

From what has been presented in the paper so far it seems that the examination model for Australian action research theses needs some improvement. The first question is when would examiners be invited to engage with the student so that their expectations are clearly known to the student and the supervisor? Second what developmental role would examiners play in ensuring that the student learns from the process of supervision as well as examination? And third how will the university distinguish between the roles of the supervisor and the examiner?

The authors of this paper used action research methodology for their own doctoral theses before becoming supervisors and examiners. In an earlier paper (Sankaran, Swepson and Hill 2005: 830-831) they highlighted the following issues about thesis examinations in Australia.

- We think that candidates do not understand or are prepared for the examination process
- We think that candidates and examiners are not informed about the criteria/process for choosing examiners by all Universities while the supervisors recommend examiners based on certain criteria (for example content or methodology), the examiners are not told by the Higher Degrees Committee why they have been selected as examiners.
- We think that candidates, universities and other examiners do not know the criteria examiners use. Universities give broad guidelines, which are open to interpretation.
- We think that problems can be avoided by engaging the examiner prior to the examination process in conversations with other examiners or with supervisors/candidates.

The above issues are also relevant to the concerns raised in this paper.



At a recent conference dealing with postgraduate research in Australia, Professor Margaret Kiley from the Australian National University, who has written several papers about doctoral theses examinations in Australian universities, pointed out some issues with the current examination practices for PhDs in Australia. She suggested that an oral examination with one external examiner and public seminars within the department or school could be introduced to overcome the issue related to the time taken for the examination process using three external examiners located across the globe. It looks as though in the near future the Australian examination systems will adopt some practices of the US system.

While the examination processes in social sciences, education and management seem to follow the scientific method, doctoral examination of creative arts theses follow a developmental approach where the artist demonstrates his/her research through various shows that he/she puts on for the public and the examiners to show his/her progress step by step. Although there is also a written component it is only a minor portion of the examination. It seems as though action research theses may benefit by taking on some aspect of the US model as well as those used in Australia for doctorates in creative arts.

## **Conclusions**

The current system of examining action research theses (dissertations) in Australia is fraught with problems and uncertainty due to the hegemony of the scientific method. The use of action research in Australia is increasing in doctoral programs such as the Doctor of Business Administration program where managers are finding the approach useful to link their research to their practice as well as economically collect data from their own organizations while implementing organizational change. Some Australian

Universities such as the University of South Australia and Southern Cross University are asking their PhD students doing business research to use action research. If action researchers were to be judged in accordance with scientific ways of conducting and writing up research the value of using a participative and flexible research methodology that links theory to practice is lost. The developmental model used in the US for examining doctoral theses (dissertations) would be fairer for examining action research theses in Australia. While the Australian system is planning to introduce changes to the current examination system for PhD research these changes will not go far enough to help action researchers and their supervisors.

In an earlier paper (Sankaran, Swepson and Hill 2005: 832-834) about research theses examinations the authors recommended a set of assessment criteria for practitioner-based theses that could be applicable to action research theses. These are summarised in the following paragraphs. For more details about these recommendations refer to Sankaran, Swepson and Hill (2005).

1. There is a clearly framed practice that is being investigated.
2. There is a well-argued approach to investigating the practice.
3. There is convergence between what the thesis says you will do and what you actually did.
4. There is a statement of conclusions drawn and evidenced to show that there has been an attempt to communicate the findings with other practitioners.
5. There is evidence of rigor throughout the report.
6. The theses make a contribution to knowledge (including the contribution to the practice and the field of practitioner investigation).

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