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**THE DISCOURSE OF THESIS ASSESSMENT REPORTS IN A
DISCIPLINARY COMMUNITY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CAPE
COAST: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY**

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Abstract

Thesis assessment reports constitute an important review genre in postgraduate education, though they largely remain occluded. This paper investigates the discourse of thesis assessment reports, with the view to gaining insights into their form and content in a Ghanaian university. Thirty-four (34) written assessment reports of 19 Master's theses from the Department of English in the University of Cape Coast constituted the data set. A qualitative content analysis, supplemented with descriptive statistics, was adopted. Three key findings emerged from the analysis of the data. First, there were varying structural patterns adopted by assessors, thereby evincing individual preferences. Second, the least and most frequent comments in the assessment reports were on the methodology on one hand and literature review and analysis/discussion on the other hand. Third, these assessors largely adhered to institutional guidelines in terms of the evaluative criteria. These findings have implications for the scholarship on thesis assessment reports in postgraduate education, postgraduate pedagogy, and further research in higher education in Ghana and elsewhere.

Key Words: Discourse, thesis assessment reports, Ghana, postgraduate education

Introduction

During the last two decades, there has been considerable interest and attendant change within the higher education worldwide. Concerns regarding the quality of teaching, learning as well as examination and assessment practices within higher educational institutions, in particular, postgraduate education, has been increasing. As contended by Webster *et al.* (2000) not only within the UK, but internationally, there are initiatives that have focused the internal and external quality assurance of teaching on assessment, and particularly on the standards (or 'competencies') of graduating students to ensure that public and private investments in higher

education are both accountable and provide ‘value for money’. Indeed, many nations are mandating graduate assessment strategies and evidence of student accomplishment as a condition of state financial support (Webster *et al.*, p. 72). In this paper, ‘assessment’ is conceptualized as a measure of competence or any appraisal and judgment (Sadler 1989) that serves a summative purpose in place of higher learning.

The rigour of assessment standards not surprisingly have grown with the rapid growth in student numbers, class sizes and student-staff ratios in higher education in several countries, including Ghana. In the past when there were relatively few candidates destined for scholarly pursuits in Ghanaian universities, this was not a public or pressing issue. With the rapid ‘massification’ and ‘commodification’ of higher research degrees, there has emerged an awareness that not only is there an absence of benchmarks, but also an absence of information about master’s and doctoral degrees and their assessment (Morley, Leonard & David, 2002; Jackson & Tinkler, 2001; Tinkler & Jackson, 2004). One aspect of postgraduate education in Ghana that has attracted little sustained attention is the discourse of postgraduate thesis assessment reports. In this study, the terms ‘thesis’ and ‘dissertation’ are used synonymously to refer to research reports written at Master’s and PhD levels.

Aim of the Study

There is an emerging interest in the thesis examination and assessment processes in postgraduate education in English-medium universities worldwide. As is evident, much of the scholarship on the former is, however, found in various contexts, with the scholarship on the latter being largely spearheaded by Holbrook and others (e.g. Holbrook, 2002; Holbrook *et al.*, 2002) in Australia. The scholarship on thesis assessment, in general, and the discourse of thesis assessment reports have often not featured sub-Saharan Africa. The purpose of this work, therefore, is to fill the gap by exploring the form and content of written assessment reports of master’s theses in a Ghanaian university, focusing on one discipline, English Studies (which involves here both Applied Linguistics and Literary Studies).

Specifically, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What form do MPhil thesis assessment reports written by assessors in English Studies take?
2. What aspects of MPhil theses do assessors in English Studies emphasize in their assessment reports?

These questions are generally meant to address issues of form and content in the thesis assessment reports written by faculty in one Department.

Conceptual Background

The study adopts a two-pronged approach in sketching the conceptual terrain of this study. First, I highlight issues related to thesis assessment, followed by a discussion of content-based studies of assessment reports on both postgraduate (master’s and doctoral) theses in English-medium universities and other universities elsewhere.

Thesis Assessment

The necessity to ensure quality, consistency, and improved criteria of assessment in postgraduate education is greatly emphasized with modules or courses where assessment is ensured through one extended piece of work known popularly as a thesis or dissertation (Murray, 2011; Pearce, 2005).

From students' point of view, the thesis is the single most substantial, and independently worked upon piece of work they will have ever undertaken while at the university (Webster *et al.*, 2000). The thesis is a key genre in a genre set (Devitt, 1991), which students learn on the job, as it were, under the tutelage of an experienced faculty. Not only has the thesis been lately seen as a pedagogic genre but also viewed as a multi-genre, responding to multiple exigencies, functioning in multiple rhetorical situations, and addressing multiple readers. It is not surprising then that thesis writing is surrounded with anxiety, with postgraduate students looking for reliable support systems to guide them through the process. In response to this need, as Kamler and Thomson (2008) aver, numerous guides on the effective writing of master's and doctoral theses (e.g. Dunleavy, 2003; Allison & Race, 2004; Glatthorn & Joyner, 2005) have emerged. In some cases, graduate students are offered help in the form of one-on-one consultations with a language expert; in others, workshops are organized for those wishing to attend; in some universities, graduate students are required to attend a thesis/dissertation writing course.

To facilitate the postgraduate student's engagement with the thesis or dissertation, three groups of 'academic literacy brokers' (Lillis and Curry, 2010) in higher education are often identified. These are the supervisor, assessors, and proofreaders/editors/writing specialists. Due to lack of space, we highlight the role of the supervisors and assessors. One issue seems certain: when supervisors ventriloquate readers or perform various readers, rhetorical consciousness is raised, even without explicit explanations. As supervisors express confusion and bewilderment about issues such as citation practices, language use, academic writing conventions, organization and formatting, presentation, appropriateness of methodology; question claims; wonder aloud and ask for more information, students are alerted to possible mis-readings. Students go away and revise; and many do arrive at a text that 'actual readers (here, both internal and external assessors) find acceptable. It can be argued that supervisors provide a preliminary thesis assessment, albeit indirect.

The more explicit thesis assessment is provided by approved assessors by the School of Graduate Studies in most universities. From the assessors' perspective, the thesis is significant. Any inconsistencies in assessment will almost certainly be reflected in students' overall grade and ultimately the final degree classification (Saunders & Davis, 1998). Thesis writing modules or courses typically pose further problems in the consistency of assessment due to the large number of students and the need for large numbers of lecturers to participate in its assessment. As the size of the team expands, the difficulties associated with achieving and maintaining consistency of assessment between faculty become more apparent. The issue is that there are either very few or no programmes for formal assessor training in several universities, leading to Sankaran *et al.*, (2006) raising the issue of whether thesis assessors should not be offered formal training.

Given the role of thesis assessors as gatekeepers and quality assurance managers of research produced by postgraduate students, it is worth taking a close look at how the assessors present their reports in terms of both form and content. To studies on the discourse of thesis assessment reports we now turn our attention.

Empirical Studies on the Discourse of Thesis Assessment Reports

A number of studies conducted in Australia have subjected the PhD assessor reports to content analysis (e.g. Nightingale, 1984; Pitkethly & Prosser, 1995; Johnston, 1997). Sometimes thesis assessors (Johnston, 1997; Tinkler & Jackson, 2000; Mulins & Kiley, 2002) have approached their task in a positive light while others (e.g. Holbrook, Bourke, Lovat, & Dally, 2004a) have demonstrated disappointment, frustration, and sometimes anger if a thesis fails to meet their expectations. Hansford and Maxwell (1993) and Johnston (1997) further identified the

prevalence of certain types of comment and emphasis in assessor thesis reports. Pitkethly and Prosser (1995), in a phenomenological study within a single institution, noted little difference between the frequency of various types of comment by Australian and international assessors.

Holbrook and others in Australia have continued to explore various aspects of postgraduate thesis assessment reports. For instance, in one study Holbrook *et al.* (2004) highlighted the qualities and characteristics in the written reports of doctoral thesis assessors. In an earlier study, Holbrook and others (2003) identified the roles of the thesis supervisor and assessor and the interface between these two categories of gatekeepers in postgraduate education. While many of such studies (Holbrook *et al.*, 2001a, 2001b; Holbrook *et al.*, 2002a, 2002b) have concentrated on the thesis assessors' reports on the entire thesis, Holbrook *et al.* (2007) did focus on the comments related to the literature review in PhD theses, observing that thesis assessors identified 'working understanding', 'critical appraisal' of the body of literature', 'connection of the literature to findings', and 'disciplinary perspective' as key indicators of performance in the candidate's use of the literature.

Although a thesis assessor's report may principally have the candidate in mind, it has interestingly been noted that other 'stakeholders' such as the supervisor and the entire committee may also be addressed. In particular, Hansford and Maxwell (1993), in a study of master's degree submitted for examination, found references to supervisors in their data set of 225 examination reports. On the basis of assessors' comments, they wondered if those critical comments by examiners could not be considered as implied criticisms of supervisors. Similarly, in a study of 51 assessor reports from one institution, Johnston (1997) found some direct mentions, if not criticisms, directed at supervisors. These were often 'moderated' understandably because the 'circumstances' might be unknown and ostensibly there was the need to maintain a sense of collegiality while being mindful of the 'face' of colleague-supervisors.

Away from Australia or any Anglo-western context, Kumar's (2010) work sought to identify the nature of assessors' reports on master's and doctoral theses in Asia. It revealed that assessor's reports consist of summative and developmental or formative components. The study concludes with the implications that a stronger focus on feedback might have for all stakeholders involved in the thesis assessment process. This conclusion is in line with several studies that have been conducted as part of a bigger project in Australian universities, especially those conducted by Holbrook and her colleagues.

As is evident from the studies reviewed here, there is paucity of information about thesis assessment reports in postgraduate education in sub-Saharan African, in general, and Ghana, in particular., with the exceptions being Nkemleke (2014) and Adika (2015). While the former examined the evaluative lexis of what he describes as 'pre-viva reports' (or assessment reports) in educational institutions in Cameroon, the latter analyzed the examiners' comments on the literature review of the theses by both MPhil and PhD students in a Ghanaian public university and the literature review of some selected literature reviews. The present study involves direct and detailed examination of assessors' reports on master's theses as part of an intended wider study on the discourse of written assessment reports on master's theses in a Ghanaian university.

Context and Methodology

Educational Context

The educational context for the present study is University of Cape Coast (UCC), a public university in Ghana that lies along the coast of the Atlantic. In the last decade, as witnessed

generally in higher education worldwide, there has been an increase in the enrolment of postgraduate students at UCC, though the estimated 20% postgraduate population out of the total student population is yet to be attained. The Faculty of Education is the largest faculty in UCC and thus understandably produces the largest number of graduate students. However, I focus on the Department of English in the Faculty of Arts on account of my association with it, as I teach both undergraduate and postgraduate (master's and doctoral) students. My varying roles as an instructor, supervisor, and thesis assessor as well as my active involvement in postgraduate education in Ghana make me privy to such assessors' reports regarded in Swalesian terms as an 'occluded genre'.

At both the master's and doctoral levels, UCC through its School of Graduate Studies (SGS) engages two assessors (one external and one internal) for the assessment of theses. Thesis assessment reports are expected to be submitted to the university authorities independently by each assessor, without prior consultation between these two assessors. Guidelines regarding the assessable areas are indicated in the letter sent by SGS inviting faculty to assess a thesis. Within two months an assessor is required to submit his or her thesis assessment report. Beyond thesis assessment, at UCC the external assessor is required to be present (that is, a member of the examining panel) in the *viva voce* for the doctoral student.

Methodology and Data Set

The qualitative research design was chosen as the most appropriate, given that the interest of the research is to understand the way language is used to present a coherent thesis assessment report in terms of its content and form. Thirty-four assessment reports on 19 theses that had been submitted to the Department of English between July 2008 and February 2012 were obtained and photocopied. Although for each of the theses, two reports were expected to have been submitted, making it 38, I could only lay hands on the number mentioned.

Analytical Framework

Qualitative content analysis was used as the analytical framework. This meant close reading of the data set (that is, all 34 assessment reports) in order to interpret and understand the way the assessment reports have been written. Though the analysis was largely qualitative, descriptive statistics were tangentially utilized.

Having obtained the assessment reports, I coded them to distinguish each from the other. I took on average three (3) hours to prepare and code data for each assessor's report. The code *EAR* representing English Assessor's Report was used. This code was followed by a number such as 1 till 19. It was necessary to also add 'a' or 'b' to distinguish between the external assessors and internal assessors. Thus, for instance, *EAR2a* is meant to be understood as Assessor's (EAR) report of thesis numbered 2 written by an external assessor (a); whereas *EAR2b* will be understood as Assessor's (EAR) report of thesis numbered 2 written by an internal assessor (b). Further, since these reports have been written by faculty, their identities are hidden by using codes from *IE1-IE6* (names of six internal assessors) and *EE1-EE7* (names of seven external assessors) for ethical reasons.

In the rest of the paper, when references to the assessor's reports are made, the codes *EAR1a-EAR19b* are used while *IE1-IE6* and *EE1-EE7* are used respectively to refer to internal assessors and external assessors. It is worth noting that there were 6 professors out of the seven External Assessors while the number of professors as Internal Assessors was only two.

Findings and Discussion

This section delineates two discursive elements (form and content) out of Holbrook *et al.*'s (2004) five-category taxonomy (that is, report organization, assessor and process, assessable areas covered, dialogic elements, and evaluative comments).

Form of the Thesis Assessment Report

The form of the thesis assessment report is what has been labelled as the 'report organization' by Holbrook *et al.* (2004, p. 130). It concerns the structure, length, visual features, and personal features of the reports. In other words, this category dwells on how assessors organize their report.

In writing their reports, assessors in the present study choose different headings, as illustrated below:

<i>Assessment of Master of Philosophy Thesis</i>	(EAR2a)
<i>Report of External Assessment: MPhil Thesis</i>	(EAR4a)
<i>Detailed Report on the MPhil Dissertation of XXX</i>	(EAR8a)
<i>MPhil Assessment Report</i>	(EAR8b)
<i>External Assessor's Report: XXX</i>	(EAR9b)
<i>External Examination</i>	(EAR10a)
<i>Detailed Report on Examination of Dissertation</i>	(EAR12a)
<i>External Assessor's Report</i>	(EAR13a)
<i>Report on Assessment of MPhil Dissertation: XXX</i>	(EAR13b)
<i>XXX: MPhil Thesis Assessment</i>	(EAR14a)
<i>External Assessment of MPhil Thesis: A Report</i>	(EAR15a)
<i>Assessment Report Prepared by Dr. XXX</i>	(EAR15b)

Out of the 34 reports, there were 12 different headings used by the assessors. Nine of the headings included reference to the pedagogic genre being assessed: that is, 'dissertation' or 'thesis'. It, thus, appears that these two terms mentioned above are interchangeably used in reports submitted by assessors to UCC's SGS. The level of education, that is, 'MPhil' was sometimes included in the title of the report. Also, whereas it appears that a number of the reports included the candidate's name, in only one of the reports do we have the assessor's name. Also, 70% of the titles used the word 'report' as the head word in a nominal heading as in EAR8b, EAR12a, EAR15b or a 'colonic' or 'colon-ized' (Dunleavy, 2003) heading, as shown in EAR15a, EAR13b, EAR16b.

The above discussion reveals that most titles for a thesis assessment report submitted to the Department of English at UCC included reference to the pedagogic genre (that is 'thesis; or 'dissertation'), level of education ('MPhil'), and the review genre ('assessment report'). The name of the candidate and the assessor could be treated as optional, as these were required to be indicated in another sheet provided by the SGS at UCC. It is clear that for all the assessors it was necessary to make the communicative purpose of the report explicit through the formulation of the title.

The data set further revealed that thesis assessors used a variety of word processing features and page settings, ranging from standard to unconventional ones. In some cases, it was observed that some of the assessors are either technologically challenged or not keen in paying attention to the formatting of their report. This appears to reflect the assessors' skills (or lack of) in word processing, editing, formatting, and consistency of the use of bolding and other visual features. Some of the reports looked 'unprofessional', which was evident in uneven use of spacing and inconsistent use of bolding and italics. This may indicate the relative unimportance attached to such visual features. Also, the form of the assessors' reports tended to be individualistic, showing considerable variety in sequence, spacing, use of bullet, and sectioning particularly evident in use of sub-headings.

Three kinds of reports were identified in terms of their organization: 1) one that follows the evaluative criteria provided by UCC'S School of graduate Studies in an enumerated or non-enumerated form 2) chapter-by-chapter report enumerated or non-enumerated form and 3) a distinctly personal form following neither of the previous forms. The third format is atypical and unusually short for the average report in the corpus. This format represents less than 1 per cent of the pre-defence reports in the data. It took on average three (3) hours to prepare and code data for each examiner's report. The majority (28) of assessors' reports used the seven main evaluative criteria UCC SGS expects assessors to use, though only 5 in the data adhered doggedly to them. A few (e.g. IE3, EE3) decided, instead of the themes provided, to present the report as a chapter-by-chapter report. These few reports ended up following the more traditional thesis format, as indicated by Swales (2004): introduction, literature review, methodology, analysis and discussion, and conclusion. This chapter-by-chapter analysis predisposes assessors to the risk of ignoring some attributes and skills which are foregrounded in the areas indicated on the assessment report provided by UCC SGS.

It is clear that the interplay between individual preferences and the institutional requirements in the structure of the thesis report is played out in the text length. It must be noted that assessors are not given any word limit by UCC's SGS. Assessors are only enjoined: 'Please attach a detailed report on a separate sheet'. It is thus possible that the issue of 'detailed report' is interpreted individually by faculty. Table 1 presents the distribution of text length in terms of the number of words for each assessment report.

As can be seen from Table 1, the various reports demonstrated varying text length, with the shortest being 44 and the longest text being 1436 words. On average, the assessors used 440 words. It is interesting to note that the shortest text religiously followed the format provided by UCC, whereas the longest text did not.

Content of the Report

The content of the thesis assessment report typically, and generally, involved such assessable areas as found in the assessment and evaluation in higher education literature (e.g. Hansford & Maxwell, 1993; Johnston, 1997) and several writing guides targeted at postgraduate students. The assessable areas indicated by UCC School of Graduate Studies include the following:

- Problem specification/research objectives/questions/hypotheses
- Knowledge of relevant literature (Theoretical/conceptual framework)
- Design of the research/data collection methods
- Problem solving/logical reasoning/data analysis
- Major findings and soundness of discussion

- Quality of presentation

Assessors who accept to assess Master's theses from UCC are required to do two things; a) tick 'good', 'satisfactory', and 'poor' against the above-mentioned assessable areas and b) write an elaborate report on a separate sheet. Further, in this elaborate sheet assessors are enjoined explicitly to comment on the relevance and importance of the findings as well as the original contribution to knowledge made. The present study is interested in the second requirement (that is, writing an elaborate report).

Significance and Contribution of Study

The significance and contribution of a postgraduate study suggests its promotional value. It is what assessors say about the components of the thesis and their relative strengths that give an implicit sense of the contribution they identify. More explicitly, thesis assessors are required to comment on this evaluative criterion by highlighting contribution to knowledge, originality, and publishability (Johnston, 1997; Holbrook *et al.*, 2004; Golding, 2014).

Comments about the contribution and significance of studies were found in several reports, though they were typically brief and frequently restricted to simple statements using common evaluative lexis such as 'useful', 'interesting', 'important', 'timely', and 'worthwhile' (evidence). Moreover, such evaluative expressions as the verbal 'confirms' and the adjectival forms 'important', 'significant', 'new', 'viable', and 'sound' were used to indicate the assessors' characterization of the nature of the contribution, in confirmation of other comments on this section in other similar studies (e.g. Johnston, 1997). A few comments highlighting the quality (contribution to knowledge) in the data set are provided below:

- In principle, the work confirms existing knowledge about the impact of the use of metaphor as a rhetorical device especially in political discourse. (EAR3a)
- The thesis confirms some existing ideas about modality in contemporary English and discovers a Ghanaian flavour. (EAR6b)
- This is an important contribution to the discussion of Ghanaian English pronunciation.
- The strength of the work is in the careful experimental analysis of the acoustic material presented (ERA11a)

Unlike Holbrook *et al.* (2004), which reveals that assessors touched on the issue of publishability in their reports, no mention was made of this in the present data set. The reason may be that the present report dealt with master's thesis, whose contribution to knowledge construction may not have been considerable enough to merit publishing, although the researcher is convinced about the publishability of some of the theses as either monographs or some aspects of the theses being presented as journal articles. Ghanaian academics may not recognize this as an essential aspect at the master's level and so do not highlight it. However, as in Holbrook *et al.* (2004), the present data set indicates the international dimension of the work of the candidates; that is, some assessors made comments about the contribution of some theses to the international scholarly community.

The issue of originality was mentioned, although in a veiled manner, as though the assessors wanted to be non-committal. There were comments such as the following:

- This thesis proposes and defends an approach which can yield productive readings of contemporary African literature. The thesis, therefore, provides a new and viable approach to African and diasporic literature' (EAR1a)

- This work adds fresh perspectives to the existing literature on resistance to slavery in Northern Ghana. The work is a sound critical engagement with Bulsa song text. It also fills a critical lacuna: it is the first research on the slave experience and resistance in Bulsa. It is therefore a contribution to knowledge. (EAR4b)
- This work is no doubt a significant contribution to the existing literature on forensic literature. This study is also, perhaps, the first of its kind in Ghana’ (EAR16a)

The above comments indicated that some postgraduate students were capable of producing original work. The reluctance of the assessors to use the term ‘original’ could have been an exercise in caution, given the difficulty in defining the term ‘originality’, whether at master’s or doctoral levels.

In general, the relative paucity of elaborate comments on the significance and contribution of a study in the three identified senses did prove a surprise to me, given the emphasis on these characteristics in postgraduate studies. This finding raises questions as to whether examiners in the disciplinary community under study are expected to comment at length on this feature and whether they are used to doing so. It may be that elaborating on the significance of the work is not a common feature of research evaluation among Ghanaian academics at the master’s level.

Problem Specification/Research Objectives/Questions/Hypotheses

The importance of this category is underscored in other universities worldwide (Holbrook *et al.* 2004). The establishment of a focused framework and the determination of starting and end points are crucial aspects in this criterion.

It was usual for some assessors in the present data set to paraphrase or quote what the candidate claims to be the scope of the study. Few assessors elaborate on the questions and summarize what the study is about, as found in below comments:

- The thesis investigates the strategies suggested by Toni Morrison to enable the African regain mastery of himself or herself following the ravages of slavery and oppression. (EAR5a)
- She intends to investigate rhythm and stress in Ghanaian English. That is clear enough, but then she continues...to investigate rhythm and stress on Ghanaian English with emphasis on parliamentary discourse’ – by which she obviously means with a focus on parliamentary discourse (EAR 11a)

The first comment is largely neutral while the second contains some evaluative expressions. Comments about the scope of the study occurred in a few of the reports but, as indicated in the following example, they were generally brief:

- These have been clearly spelt out. Both the objectives and the research questions are lucid and tally with what the candidate succeeds in doing in the thesis. (EAR15a)
- The problem is succinctly, clearly and adequately set out. This has further been clarified in the research questions. I feel though that the research focus (that is, the research problem and research questions) should have been placed earlier. (EAR17b)
- The objectives and research questions have been very well articulated. (EAR18b)

The longest comment (207 words) on this aspect of the thesis in the data set is found in EAR19b, part of which reads:

The statement of the problem is, in general, well presented. The candidate attempts to clarify the problem through the purpose of the study and research questions. I thought though that the candidate could have been more concise. I also think that the second research question requires closer attention in order to foreground the two variables in question: transitivity and point of view (EAR 19b).

One assessor (EE3) pointed out that a particular thesis lacked clear focus and included many irrelevant sections... (and), with the title and problem statement not closely linked.

Knowledge of Relevant Literature, Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

The comments on literature reviews were in most cases elaborate and comprehensive. They addressed a wide range of related issues: scope, relevance, currency, exhaustiveness, criticality, comprehensiveness, as expected by specialists in higher education, postgraduate pedagogy, and advanced academic literacy such as Bruce (1994), Hart (1998), Cooper (1989,1998), Kwan (2006), and Holbrook (2007).

Some negative evaluations of the literature review sections of the theses assessed are presented below:

- The student also lists empirical studies without discussing them or indicating the relevance (p. 31-33). The studies should be discussed and the relevance to student's own work. (EAR18b)
- The candidate's presentation of the literature review will benefit greatly...if she considers the literature on parliamentary discourse in order to strengthen the justification for her study. (Further comments are presented in a separate sheet) (EAR17b)

Some of the positive comments on the literature review include the following:

- The literature review is detailed, comprehensive and relevant to the subject matter of the thesis. (EAR 19a)
- The candidate admirably shows deep understanding and knowledge of the extant literature regarding his topic. His knowledge of the linguistic framework he chooses to work in is appropriate and solid. He demonstrates not only wide reading but also a sense of criticality and consciously establishes the niche in the extant literature. (EAR 19b)

Often assessors evaluate the literature review section of the thesis by drawing attention to both positives and negatives as found below:

- The candidate has amply demonstrated extensive background knowledge to the area of study and did very informative literature review. There is marked over reliance on Hyland. The candidate has quoted as many as twenty or so works of Hyland. (EAR16b)
- Her knowledge of the theoretical framework is thorough but she did not mention which of the theoretical frameworks she reviewed, she was to use in her study. The literature review is too long, 43 pages (pp.11-64) out of 134 pages of work. A good review would

have shown the knowledge gap she is trying to address even if it is a descriptive study. (EAR 15b)

Assessors indicated that students tend to use descriptions of other work instead of appraising contributions critically. One assessor gave examples of extensive summarizing of a single author's work, and clearly said 'that this does, of course, not constitute a literature review... (and) I find no scholarly engagement with, and critique of any academic literature, such that one would expect in a literature review.' (EAR 11a). It was also said that that the literature study was not orderly, and was based on an unfolding model, but that the student 'went into a tangled web in her literature study and this led to unclear findings... that looked like a hotchpotch of ideas all crumbled into one' (EAR 14b).

Some assessors' reports were devoted to the literature; they provided details about coverage, types of errors, and the nature of use of the literature. It was the latter type of comment about coherent and substantive issues of the literature that provided much information about 'expectation'. Assessors identified 'working understanding', 'critical appraisal' of the body of literature, 'connection of the literature to findings' as key indicators of performance in the candidate's use of the literature. While assessors appeared to anticipate that all these elements should be present in scholarly work (and identified them in the best theses), they were prepared to accept less for a barely passable thesis, but pressed for, at least, some demonstration of critical appraisal.

Design of the Research/Data Collection Methods

Methodology encompasses how candidates approached the research, their methods and design. This category covers the nature of instruments, data collection, and mechanics of approaches to analysis (for example, computer software employed) through to reasons given for their use.

Given the importance attached to the methodology section in theses as well as related research genres such as research proposal (Punch, 2003) and grant proposal (Connor, 2000), I assumed that assessors will devote considerable textual space to the methodology section, but this was not the case. In fact, while it was mentioned in some reports, the proportion of each report devoted to methodology was very minimal. In a number of reports, I could identify either a one-sentence or two-sentence comment:

- The validity and reliability of data collected establish the usefulness of the methods used. The data is copious and justifies the claims made from them. (EAR 6a)
- The methods are sound and are found to be appropriate. (EAR 13a)
- There is adequate collection of data for the work which is satisfactorily described. (EAR 11a)
- The methodology is suited to the research and is well prosecuted. (EAR 10b)

When considered in the context of the reports as a whole, this finding raises the issue of the possibility that examiners enter the thesis examination at a point somewhere beyond the proposal stage; that is, they comment primarily on elements they feel they can influence. It may also be that some theses did not utilize much space for the methodology.

In spite of the above observations, a few assessors expressed serious concerns about various aspects that dealt with the handling of scientific methods and research techniques. It seemed that some theses lacked methodological sophistication; that students failed to handle methodological issues in a critical way and to provide substantiation for doing the research

within a particular research paradigm. It was also mentioned that some of the data did not serve any purpose, was not linked to the research problem, and did not unfold, per the research questions. In fact, in one report it was stated:

- The candidate needs to explain to the reader what he did in his study. For example, who was interviewed, how they were selected, where were the interviews conducted, how did he address the potential disadvantages, how did the interviews go, and so on (EAR 15b).

It was clear that this examiner questioned the ability of the candidate to apply theoretical information on methodological issues to his particular study. Find further comments from the data set on the research methodology component, which express both positive and negative views:

- Candidate explains the design as well as collection and coding information and sampling; though the choice of JOY FM doesn't seem to have been very effectively argued out. The candidate is mindful of ethical considerations. (EAR 9a)
- Quite well done; however, the candidate did not give any reason for combining the quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection and analysis. (EAR 13b)

The ethics of the research are barely mentioned, which is surprising, in the data set. The lack of attention to this issue may well be related to the same reason that relatively little comment is devoted to research approach, namely the 'entry point' of the examiner.

Problem Solving/Logical Reasoning/Data Analysis

This category captures all assessors' comments on candidates' findings and the results of analysis. That is, the assessors convey the way in which findings have been analysed and reported. Reporting of results and findings incorporates the clarity and adequacy of the reporting and presentation of findings.

On the analysis of data in the present study, for example, it was pointed out that in a particular case a candidate did not display any depth of analysis and that 'the data from the questionnaires and interviews revealed very little' (EAR 11a) or 'The researcher's selection of 'primary texts' for analysis (Nkrumah/King's speeches) seems to have come from other people's anthologies – which undermines originality, and the analysis of the metaphors as rhetorical device is generally very basic and elementary' (EAR 3A). Some illustrative comments are presented below:

- The researcher fails to take account of the fact that in *Two Seasons* most if not all the Arabs are presented as sexual perverts. Unfortunately, this dissertation is characterized by such simple-minded reasoning (EAR8a)
- The candidate's argument on European influence on the trans-Atlantic slave trade is delusive. If Africans were practicing slavery and slave trade before European intrusion into Africa, how could you challenge as 'erroneous' 'contentions that Africans willingly offered themselves to be enslaved or were sold by their own brothers (pp. 110,121) (EAR4a)

These comments concern the logical reasoning of claims made by the candidate, which contain flaws.

Major Findings and Soundness of Discussion

This section involves the interpretation of data and the cogency or persuasiveness of the discussion of the findings or results. Given that this section seeks to ascertain the candidates' understanding of his data in a bid to answer the research questions, most assessors devoted much space to it.

Some assessors expressed worry about the misinterpretation of some data, and about the fact that 'some interpretations were not aligned with what the data actually show' (EAR 11a). It was also observed that in some cases 'the interpretation of results was not discussed and seemed to be meaningless in its current format' (EAR 17b). In this regard, there seemed to be agreement among some assessors that the kind of problems investigated by students should have been done in a qualitative way rather than just doing quantitative analyses all the time. It was even said that 'interviews should include rich discussions and not any number at all' (EAR 15b).

Find some further comments such as the following:

- A seriously argued discussion of positive interracial relations in Armah's work would have been revealing and instructive, but to claim that Juana and Baako and Ast and Asar are examples of interracial couples is not convincing. (EAR 8a)

Rather surprisingly, a few times assessors presented their comments in a one-sentence form as seen below:

- His conclusions are justifiable and recommendations reasonable. (EAR6b)
- The discussions and conclusions represent a remarkable academic insight and the divisions and tables, etc. are very useful and illustrative. (EAR6a)

If such scanty comments represented a disinterest by the assessors that will be unfortunate. Given the implication the comments on this aspect of the thesis relate to the essence of research: making knowledge claims and thus contributing to knowledge construction.

Presentation or Communicative Competence

The above category deals with the extent to which assessors find candidates competent to communicate their findings. Indeed, communicative competence is a major topic in assessor reports on theses. Johnston (1997: 339) found that 'almost without exception examiners commented on the writing and presentation'. This involves, for purposes of this study three issues: language use (which includes spelling, punctuation, mechanics, and coherence), referencing, and visual effects (e.g. underlining, italics, spacing, bolding, tables and figures).

Concerning language issues, the assessors in the present data commented on such 'surface issues' as typographical and spelling errors, similar to Hansford and Maxwell (1993), who investigated coursework master's thesis assessors' reports. The present study revealed that some assessors simply alluded to matters of language use in a general sense. These comments ranged from positive to negative as indicated below:

- The candidate shows a good grasp of language, resulting in an admirable style of presentation that makes the thesis an interesting and easy-to-read document. (EAR 2a)
- Some changes in word use, expressions and constructions have, however, been suggested in the body of the work. (EAR 9a)

From the above, it is clear that assessor comments that capture ‘substantial issues’ about communication and presentation’ typically include holistic appraisal and/or summary of communication skills. The assessor may state that there is a major flaw, or many flaws, in communication or presentation, or conversely that there are none. They may convey frustration with weaknesses in communication or style throughout.

Some assessors seemed to be frustrated with specific language issues. Often a particular external assessor (EE1) will have a section of his report labelled ‘typographical errors’ or ‘editorial comments’. Such sections contain ‘fix it’ type comments and these are, by orientation, negative comments:

- ... his tense sequence needs attention. He must keep to one tense form, especially in the literature review. (EAR 2b)

Other assessors (e.g. EE3, EE5, IE3) either devote long sections of their report to editorial corrections or comments specifically on some grammatical issues. On average in the present study this occupies minimal textual space. These editorial matters include typographical, basic mechanical, clerical or technical errors. A typical minor point is to say ‘change this to that’ (relating to a word, label, sentence, etc). EE5a comments on a specific grammatical point in EAR 11a:

- Language expression in the work is generally good except this writer’s irritating lack of knowledge of the definite article ‘the’ throughout the work. I have noted its wrong use in at least the following pages....

The second major point concerns referencing. Referencing issues were commented on by few assessors (e.g. IE1, IE2, EE1, EE6), when compared to comments on language issues. Two external assessors (EE1, EE6) consistently referred to various forms of infelicities, drawing attention to references that are listed in the in-text citation but not found in the reference section and those found in the reference section but not indicated in the main text.

- Multiple authors are indicated as et al in in-text citation; in the References, the full range of authors is expected to be provided for the benefit of the reader. (EAR 4a)
- Listing anthologized essays: the details of works/essays listed should include the specific essay cited, the general title of the anthology or collection or the editor/editors. (EAR 4a)
- 30 works were found in the Reference list but they were not cited in the thesis itself. 11 works were cited in the text but were not listed. (EAR 9a)

There was one internal assessor (IE2) who generally would refer to this in general terms without providing the specific references. It did appear that this particular assessor drew on his expertise in rhetoric and composition in referring to the hallmarks of effective construction of the reference list: conciseness, economy, completeness, convention, and consistency. A few (EE4, EE1) also questioned the recency of some references. Some of the positive comments on referencing include the following:

- The References are adequate and properly set out. (EAR4b)
- In-text and out-text references have both been carefully set out. (EAR6a)

The last point on presentation relates to the assessors’ comments on visuals (use of tables, headings, and tables, and formatting). This, in comparison with comments on language and referencing, attracted very few comments:

- The thesis is in the overall quite well constructed or delineated, with sub-headings which help to make the organization easier for the writer as well as the reader.... Tables could have been employed to show the occurrence of theme and thematic progression patterns across the essays.... (EAR 10b)

Throughout the data set, I found that it was EE1 who made extensive comments on the tables that were used in EAR15a):

- I suggest that you reorganize the information in the tables so that within each table, you will adequately account for all variables.

IE5 also comments:

- Some abbreviations like RS followed by a number (RS1) and R1 are found in parts of the text and this was not explained anywhere in the text’.

Conclusion and Implications

The present study aimed to obtain understanding of two aspects (form and content) of the assessors’ written reports of master’s theses, focusing on 34 examiners’ reports on 19 master’s theses in the Department of English at the University of Cape Coast, a Ghanaian public institution of high repute.

Concerning the form of the thesis assessment reports, there was a great deal of variability in terms of individual text format, structure of title of the report, text length, visual features, and other personal idiosyncrasies. In general, the assessors followed the institutional evaluative criteria-format. Turning to the content of the thesis reports, I identified discrete emphases in the assessors’ reports. The overwhelming emphasis was on ‘literature review’, followed by ‘analysis and reporting’, and ‘statement of the problem’. Substantial comments were also made on presentation issues. The contribution of the thesis is surprisingly mentioned sparingly.

It is evident that much can be learned from the written assessment discourse of master’s assessors in one disciplinary community at UCC. Assessors go to great lengths to show how elements of a thesis or the research skills fall short of base-line standards, and this in turn highlights the employment of those standards and their mutability, and to some extent the priority some criteria are given over others. Moreover, we recognize the values and assumptions that underpin examination, which are less so in written assessment reports, especially in respect of the role of assessors (Mulins & Kiley, 2002; Tinkler & Jackson, 2004). In the study reported here, assessment reports capture the passion of assessors for instruction, for the protection of the standards in their discipline, and the need for robust supervision, consistent with the observations made by Holbrook *et al* (2004). The findings can be utilized by supervisors to provide direction to postgraduate students, enabling the students to improve on their research skills and research writing.

The findings and implications notwithstanding, the findings presented need to be treated with caution, as they emanate from one institution (and one department), and are limited by the fact that the assessors could not be asked directly what they meant in their reports. It remains a challenge to replicate the analysis here for more institutions and disciplines and probe more deeply into assessor comments on theses at both master’s and doctoral levels by engaging the assessors in interviews. Drawing on Holbrook *et al.* (2004), further research could be carried out into the other discursal categories of written assessment reports on both masters’ and doctoral theses in Ghanaian universities, in particular, and African universities, in general.

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Table 1: Distribution of text length across thesis assessment reports

<i>Number</i>	<i>Code for Thesis</i>	<i>Code for Examiner</i>	<i>Number of words</i>
1	EAR1a	EE3 External	145
2	EAR2a	EE4 External	580
	EAR2b	IE4 Internal	123
3	EAR3a	EE5 External	335
4	EAR4a	EE6 External	538
	EAR4b	IE4 Internal	155
5	EAR5a	EE3 External	504
	EAR5b	IE4 Internal	146
6	EAR6a	EE7 External	199
	EAR6b	IE4 Internal	180
7	EAR7a	EE3 External	159
	EAR7b	IE4 Internal	126
8	EAR8a	EE3 External	661
	EAR8b	IE6 Internal	437
9	EAR9a	EE1 External	432
	EAR9b	IE6 Internal	285
10	EAR10a	EE1 External	262
	EAR10b	IE6 Internal	435
11	EAR11a	EE5 External	412
	EAR11b	IE3 Internal	342
12	EAR12a	EE3 External	668
	EAR12b	IE4 Internal	287
13	EAR13a	EE1 External	444
	EAR13b	IE1 Internal	572
14	EAR14a	EE2 External	95
15	EAR15a	EE1 External	550
	EAR15b	IE5 Internal	649
16	EAR16a	EE2 External	44
	EAR16b	IE1 Internal	799
17	EAR17b	IE2 Internal	1436
18	EAR18a	EE1 External	342
	EAR18b	IE3 Internal	404
19	EAR19a	EE2 External	116
	EAR19b	IE2 Internal	996
			Total Average 440