**The constrained formative feedback in doctoral examiner reports**

Deborah Chetcuti, Joseph Cacciottolo, Nicholas Vella
University of Malta

## Abstract

The award of a PhD degree is based on a rigorous examination process which is unique in that examiners can recommend that the degree is awarded subject to minor or major amendments to the thesis. In their examiner reports, examiners also include formative feedback that is intended to help the doctoral researchers improve their work. Using data from examiner reports from two faculties at the University of Malta (Arts and Science) for the years 2017-2018, the study looks at the formative feedback comments provided by doctoral examiners. Results suggest that the feedback comments provided can be described as editorial, instructional and reflective, with the most common type of feedback comments being editorial and instructional. This indicates that the focus of doctoral examiner reports is on giving advice to doctoral researchers so that it reaches the expected doctoral standards. This study points to: the need for a rethinking of the way in which feedback is provided in doctoral examiner reports so that the focus is shifted to reflective comments that lead to in-depth learning; and for more professional development for doctoral examiners to that they can make this shift in their provision of formative feedback.

## Keywords:
Doctoral examination; formative feedback; doctoral examiner reports.

## Introduction

The award of a PhD degree is an important academic milestone for doctoral researchers, providing them with international recognition as independent scholars in their field, access to an academic career and certification that they have acquired skills and competencies to work in industry and other professions (Boud and Lee, 2009; Nerad, 2020). In most universities, the first step in being awarded a doctorate, is the rigorous examination of the doctoral thesis which is the product of a research journey in a specific area of expertise that extends over a number of years, followed in most universities by an oral examination or viva-voce (Trafford and Leshem, 2008). This examination is carried out by a board of examiners set up by the awarding institution and usually includes both internal as well as external examiners. The examiners are required to make a recommendation as to whether the PhD degree should be awarded or not, depending on whether the doctoral thesis has met a set of explicit criteria. Within European universities, these criteria are mostly adopted from the Framework for Qualifications of the European Education Area (EHEA) and are based on the expectation that doctoral researchers: make an original contribution to knowledge in their research field which can be published and have developed skills that allow them to conduct research independently (Denicolo, Duke, and Reeves, 2020).

For purposes of accountability and transparency, examiners are required to record this recommendation in a written individual report (Trafford and Leshem, 2008). In most universities, the recommendation is not final but subject to minor or major modifications (Kumar and Stracke, 2011). In their report examiners are therefore expected to include summative feedback or information regarding the quality of the doctoral work against expected criteria and standards and when modifications are required formative feedback about what still needs to be done to the thesis so that

## Citation

it meets the doctoral standards (Dally et al., 2019). In universities, that include a viva as part of the doctoral examination these individual reports are used by examiners to confirm their initial impressions of the work and to prepare their questions for the viva (Pearce, 2005). Following the viva, the individual reports are used to write a final negotiated report that includes both the recommendation for the award of the PhD degree and feedback regarding changes that is passed on to doctoral candidates and their supervisors (Denicolo, Duke, and Reeves, 2020). The individual examiner reports are therefore important documents that are expected to follow guidelines and protocol of the awarding institutions and can be reviewed by university panels and regulatory bodies, especially in cases of failure (Erwee and Perry, 2018). However, despite the attempts of universities to standardise doctoral examiner reports, in many cases, they are usually individualistic documents that are written in different styles and formats and draw on a mixture of official expectations of standards and the personal views and experiences of the examiners (Mullins and Kiley, 2002).

As examiners of doctoral work at the University of Malta we were aware of the huge responsibility in writing examiner reports. In a previous study (Chetcuti, Cacciottolo, and Vella, 2022) we explored the summative component of the doctoral examiner report, and how doctoral examiners used criteria to make a recommendation for the award of the PhD degree. In the current study we wanted to look at the type of formative feedback comments that examiners provide for doctoral researchers in their examiner reports. To try and explore this question we looked at examiner reports presented by examiners from two different faculties at the University of Malta. We are aware that the context in which the study was carried out is highly specific, and that any generalisations can only be made with due caution. However, we hoped that our study would enable us to gain a better understanding of the role of formative feedback in the doctoral examination process.

**Defining formative feedback in doctoral examiner reports**
The doctoral examiner report serves a dual function and addresses different audiences. The first function of the examiner report is a 'gatekeeping' one, in that examiners need to ensure that the standards of the discipline and the doctoral degree are maintained (Denicolo, Duke and Reeves, 2020). In their summative comments, examiners are accountable to the awarding institution that needs to ensure that examiners have followed institutional guidelines and assessment criteria (Erwee and Perry, 2018). In their formative comments, examiners address the doctoral candidates who are repositioned as learners. The comments are usually in the form of instructions and advice to help the doctoral candidates improve both their submitted thesis, as well as future publications (Golding et al., 2014). Research studies (Holbrook et al., 2004; Dally et al., 2020) suggest that examiners place a great deal of emphasis on the formative comments that they provide for students in their report. For doctoral examiners, the thesis is 'work-in-progress' and in their feedback they provide the necessary impetus for the doctoral candidates to continue to develop as scholars (Stracke and Kumar, 2010), and build their "capacities as autonomous self-regulating learners" (Carless, 2013, p. 113). This is especially important within the context of doctoral education, since one of the main aims of doctoral education is for doctoral researchers to develop the academic and research skills that enable them to become independent scholars, researchers, and professionals (Nerad, 2020).

**Types of formative feedback comments in doctoral examiner reports**
A number of research studies have been carried out to investigate the type of formative feedback information provided by doctoral examiners in their reports. In their study using doctoral examiner reports from Australian universities, Holbrook et al. (2014) suggest that the comments provided by doctoral examiners in their reports are mainly prescriptive and written in an authoritative voice that provide instructions and advice that are related to the editing and formatting of the text, to methodological issues and conceptual arguments. The comments focus on correcting the product of the research, the thesis, with little emphasis on learning and reflection. Similarly, in an attempt to classify feedback comments, Kumar & Stracke (2007) suggest that feedback in doctoral examiner

reports can be referential, directive or expressive. They describe referential comments as focusing on "editorial, organisational and content matter"; directive comments that include "suggestions, questions and instructions" and expressive comments that offer "praise, criticism or an opinion" (p. 467). Kumar and Stracke (2007) suggest that the majority of the comments made by the supervisors in their study were in fact referential, and fix-it type comments that focused on the technical aspect of the thesis. However, they also point out that it was the expressive comments that invited the doctoral researchers "to reflect upon the issues raised from a different perspective, which resulted in a process of further changes, and thus, more discoveries" (p. 467).

In another study, Pryor and Crossouard (2010), use examples of feedback from a professional doctoral context to develop a classification of feedback that is enacted by moving constantly through what they describe as "a concrete-procedural-reflective-discursive-existential continuum" (p. 274). In their classification concrete/procedural comments focused on the practical aspects of the task; reflective/discursive comments encouraged deeper reflections on conceptual arguments and methodological issues in the text; and discursive/existential comments motivated the doctoral researchers to identify with their work and give voice to their own views. Again, Pryor and Crossouard (2010), state that feedback comments given to the doctoral researchers were mainly of the concrete/procedural type with discursive/existential comments being very infrequent. However, they too suggest that, when possible, examiners should provide feedback that encourages the exploration of ideas and a reformulation of learner identity.

These research studies suggest that in practice within the context of the doctoral examination, formative feedback is still viewed by examiners as the giving of advice to the students (Ajjawi & Boud, 2018; Yang & Carless, 2013). While there is the expectation for action to be taken on the feedback comments provided by examiners, research suggests that there is very little dialogue between examiners and the doctoral researchers, who are expected to engage with the feedback comments on their own (Holbrook et al., 2004). This view of feedback focuses on the educator as the information giver and the student as a passive recipient of this information (Boud & Malloy, 2013).

**The study**
At the University of Malta, doctoral work is examined by a board of examiners, which usually includes two examiners from the University of Malta and an external examiner, all appointed by Senate, and chosen for their expertise in the research area. The examination of the doctoral work takes place in two stages. The first stage involves the assessment of the written thesis. Using criteria outlined in the UoM PhD regulations (2008), the examiners assess whether the doctoral thesis shows evidence of: a significant and original contribution to knowledge; an extensive review of existing knowledge in the field of study; appropriate research methods and a satisfactory literary presentation. Based on this initial summative assessment examiners make a recommendation as to whether they believe that the PhD should be awarded, subject to the outcome of the second stage of the examination, the oral defense or viva.

In most cases, the recommendation for the award of the PhD degree is made subject to minor or major modifications and in this case, the examiners also include in their individual report a list of feedback comments on specific amendments or modifications required to improve the work. This feedback is then discussed with the doctoral researchers during the viva. Following the viva, the chairperson of the board of examiners writes a joint report that is negotiated and is usually a collation of comments from the individual examiner reports and a list of requested changes. Doctoral researchers are expected to make these amendments prior to final submission of the doctoral thesis and the award of the PhD degree (see PhD regulations, University of Malta, 2008).

**Research methods: the data and data analysis**

The data that we used in our study was obtained from the examiner reports presented to two faculties at the University of Malta, the Faculty of Arts and the Faculty of Science. These two faculties were chosen since they are two of the largest and more traditional faculties, and represent two different areas of knowledge. Examiner reports were chosen as the main source of data since they provided detailed information and valuable insights about examiners' views and expectations of the quality of work at doctoral level and included feedback for the doctoral researchers (Holbrook et al, 2004). In a previous study, we looked at the summative aspect of the doctoral examiner reports, and the explicit and implicit criteria used by examiners to award a PhD degree (Chetcuti, Cacciotolo and Vella, 2022). In the current paper, we limit our focus to the formative feedback comments, since gaining a better understanding of formative feedback in the doctoral examination process was the main aim of our research.

We analysed a total of 95 individual examiner reports (50 from the Faculty of Arts and 45 from the Faculty of Science). These were presented to the University of Malta during the years 2017 and 2018. The reports were written by both internal examiners from the University of Malta as well as external examiners from various international universities. Since the examiner reports are not readily available to third parties due to data protection policies, permission to use the reports for our study was obtained from the ethics committee of the University of Malta (UREC). Throughout, the study, the examiner reports were anonymised and handled with strict confidentiality at all times. To ensure this confidentiality, prior to the analysis examiners were identified by a code name such as *Ex1 Arts UoM* or *Ex1 Sci Ext,* to indicate the faculty, and whether the examiner was an internal or external examiner. Care was also taken to ensure that in the subsequent write-up of the study quotations were screened and, in some cases, edited so that no individual, whether doctoral researcher or examiner, could be identified.

The examiner reports were analysed using a thematic analysis (Boyzatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). This involved reading and re-reading the examiner reports in order to "derive themes and concepts from the raw data through detailed reading and analysis" (Sharmini et al., 2015, p. 92). We focused on the formative feedback comments and used an inductive approach to our analysis. First, we identified feedback comments in the examiner reports as being formative if they were written in terms of specific advice or guidance for doctoral researchers to improve their work. We then looked at the formative feedback comments and classified them according to the specific purpose and tasks that the examiners wanted the doctoral candidates to address.

**The Results: Feedback in doctoral examiner reports**

The first thing that we observed when analysing the individual examiner reports was that out of the 22 doctoral candidates (11 from the Faculty of Arts and 11 from the Faculty of Science), who submitted their thesis for examination between 2017 and 2018, all were awarded the PhD degree, except for one student from the Faculty of Arts. This high success rate indicates that like what has been reported in international studies (Holbrook et al., 2014), doctoral examiners go into the doctoral examination, expecting the doctoral candidates to be awarded a Pass. However, in most cases, this Pass was awarded subject to minor modifications (for 17 out of the 22 doctoral candidates) or requiring major modifications (for 3 out of the 22 doctoral candidates). Only one doctoral candidate from the Faculty of Science was awarded the PhD degree without requiring any changes. Minor changes are usually considered to be editorial changes, or simple clarification of ideas, and are expected to be carried out within three months from the viva. Major changes involve significant re-writing and further development of conceptual ideas, that are expected to be carried out within six months from the viva. Since most of the examiners requested changes before the PhD could be awarded, most of them, 47 out of the 50 examiners (94%) in the Faculty of Arts and 41 out of the 45 examiners (91%) in the Faculty

of Science, included formative feedback comments in their report. These feedback comments can be described as formative since as stated by the examiners themselves, they were intended to help the doctoral candidates: "to improve the final version of the dissertation" (*Ex1 Sci UoM*); and lead to learning which would help the doctoral candidates "with writing up articles based on their study for publication in scientific journals" (*Ex5 Sci UoM*).

Our initial analysis of the feedback comments, suggested that the main purposes of the formative feedback comments could fit into three distinct categories that included:

1. **Editorial comments:** where the examiners give clear instructions about the editing of the main text such as spelling, grammar and organisation of chapters.
2. **Direct instructions:** where the examiners give clear prescriptive instructions about what the doctoral researchers need to do to improve their work.
3. **Reflective questions:** where the examiners ask questions that are intended to motivate the doctoral researchers to explore alternatives, and reflect in greater depth on the implications of their research work.

These three types of comments are captured by an examiner who in his report states that the changes he is asking for are:

> …mainly editorial in nature. Some deal with methodological and ethical issues and require the inclusion of short paragraphs to the work. Some of the changes are in the form of questions intended for the candidate to reflect on her work…                    (Ex35 Arts Ext).

The most common type of comments made by examiners in both faculties (Figure 1) were in fact, editorial comments to help the doctoral candidates clean up their work before final submission. Examiners in both faculties also gave clear instructions and made suggestions regarding various aspects of the research work such as the theoretical framework, methodology, results and discussions and conclusions. Similar to the comments made by examiners in the study by Kumar and Stracke (2007), these comments were: fix-it type comments that were mainly procedural. The least common form of feedback provided by the examiners were reflective questions, that encourage exploration of ideas and lead to learning. Although in theory and as reported in various research studies (Kumar and Stracke, 2011; Pryor and Crossouard, 2008; Dally et al., 2019) reflective questions are the most important form of feedback leading to learning and the development of an identity as a researcher, in practice reflective questions were less frequent in the examiner reports analysed in the study.
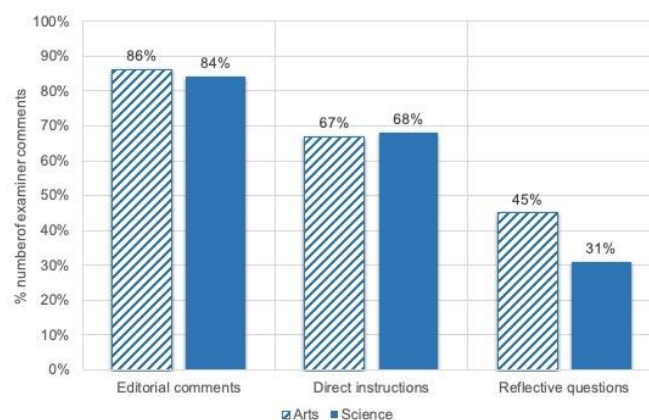


**Figure 1,** Categories of feedback comments.
*Note: Percentage number of comments were calculated from the total number of examiner reports (N=50 for Faculty of Arts and N=45 for Faculty of Science). Examiners made more than one type of comment.*

These categories consistent with existing theoretical frameworks and are very similar to the types of feedback comments outlined in previous studies such as those of Kumar and Stracke (2007) and Pryor and Crossouard (2008). On further analysis a few subtle differences emerged mainly in the category of direct instructions. While direct instructions are described in previous studies (Kumar and Stracke, 2007) as being mainly task-oriented and dealing with technical issues, in our analysis of the examiner reports, we also identified direct instructions which challenged the doctoral researchers and led to critical thinking.

**Editorial comments**

In the examiners' reports that we analysed, editorial comments were the most common type of feedback comments provided by the examiners (86% of examiners in the Faculty of Arts and 84% of examiners in the Faculty of Science). Editorial comments were either listed at the end of the individual examiner report, or in some cases they were in the form of "corrections, deletions and suggestions throughout the hard copy of the dissertation" (*Ex 19 Sci Ext)*, which was passed on to the doctoral candidates for their consideration. The examiners' reports (Figure 2) included editorial comments that referred to: language (mainly typographical and grammatical errors); formatting of the text (such as paragraph alignment and labelling of figures); and incorrect referencing (both in text citations and reference lists).
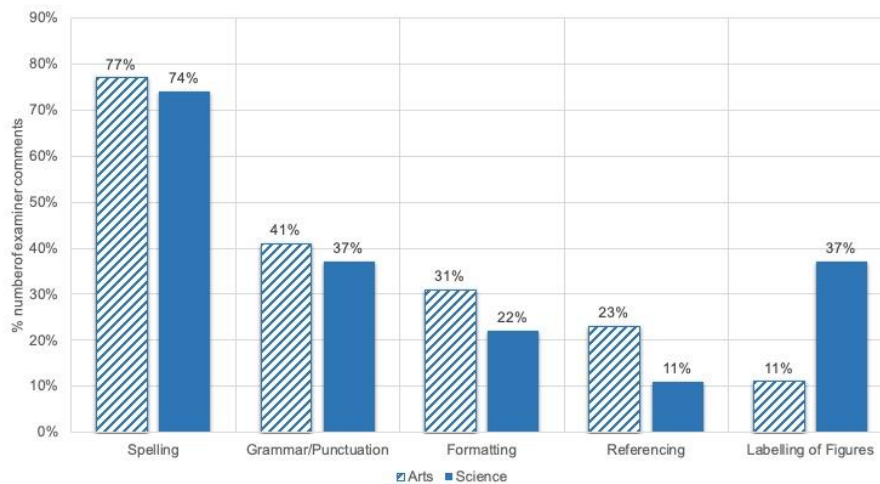


**Figure 2.** Types of editorial comments.

*Note:  Percentage number of comments were calculated from the total number of editorial comments made by examiners (N=50 in Faculty of Arts; N=45 in Faculty of Science).*

As shown in the work of Kumar and Stracke (2007), the feedback in the form of editorial comments is a very low-level type of feedback, what are described by Holbrook et al. (2004), as the "correction of mechanical, typographical or referencing errors" (p. 143). The feedback is in the form of what Carless (2019) describes as "a teacher monologue about performance" (p. 56), and does not involve any complex learning (Sadler, 2010). Examples of typical comments made by examiners are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Typical editorial comments made by examiners.

| | |
|---|---|
| Language | The presentation is satisfactory. There are however a number of typographical errors to be corrected. There are 100 minor stylistic errors marked in the text - mainly limited to missing punctuation, missing words or letters and the odd change in font size etc. (*Ex8 Arts Ext*) |
| Formatting of the text | … it is better if the figure is enlarged and extended to the whole page…the figure should also be moved closer to the point of its first reference in the text…the reference in the caption of the figure is different from the corresponding one in the main text… (*Ex 21 Sci Ext)* |
| Referencing | There are a number of inaccuracies in the references…It is also important to note that there is no section entitled References and instead there is only one section, Bibliography. *(Ex21 Arts UoM)* |

There is not much difference in the type of editorial comments provided by examiners in the Faculty of Arts and the Faculty of Science, although examiners in the Faculty of Arts commented slightly more about language and referencing, while examiners in the Faculty of Science were more concerned with presentation of figures and results. This can be related to the nature of the doctoral work where science theses focus on the presentation of numerical results usually in the form of figures and tables. Although editorial feedback comments are the most common type of corrective feedback in individual examiner reports, they are not necessarily formative in nature. Within the literature on formative feedback, feedback is described as formative, if it leads to improvement of the work and learning (Sadler, 2010; Carless and Boud, 2018). As noted by Holbrook et al. (2014), doctoral candidates can go through these lists of 'fix-it' corrections without any reflection or learning taking place.

*Direct Instructions*
Following editorial feedback, instructional feedback was the most common type of feedback provided by examiners in their reports. Instructional feedback is described by Holbrook et al. (2004), as formative feedback that is given when "examiners feel that there is a need to inform, instruct, question or extend a candidate's understanding of their topic or application of their methodology" (p. 113). In the examiner reports that we analysed, we observed that examiners very often gave direct instructions which as shown in Figure 3., asked for clarifications, made suggestions and gave direct instructions with regards to improving discussion and arguments in the text; appropriate referencing and presentation of figures and in some cases even made comments about rewriting of paragraphs to make the thesis more readable.
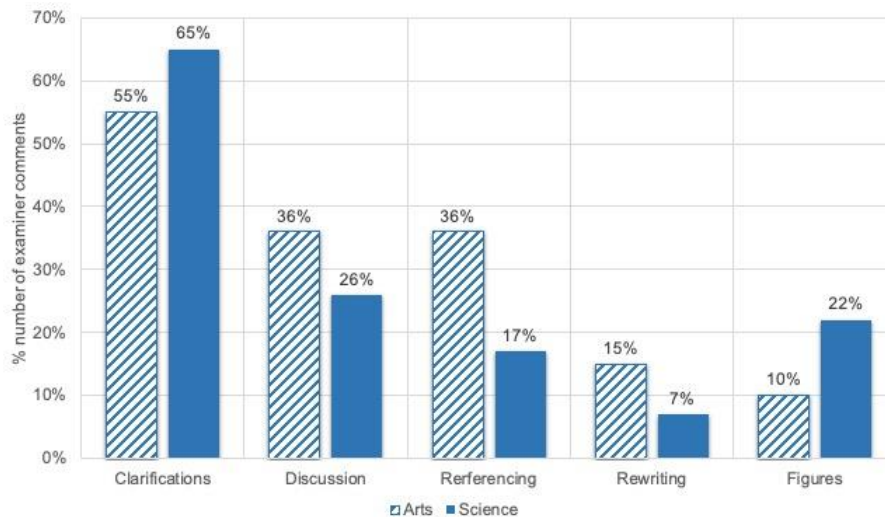
**Figure 3.** Types of direct instructions.

*Note:  Percentage number of comments were calculated from the total number of instructional comments made by examiners (N=50 in Faculty of Arts; N=45 in Faculty of Science).*

What we observed in our analysis of the instructional feedback provided by the examiners in their report, is that the instructions provided by the examiners seemed to lie on a continuum. At one end of the continuum the examiners gave direct instructions that were mainly task-specific and provided the doctoral researchers with detailed suggestions on what could be done to bridge what Sadler (1989) describes as the gap between the current performance and the desired achievement.  As shown in Table 2., the feedback is mainly fix-it comments and written in a prescriptive and authoritative voice. The focus is on getting the task finished in as linear a manner as possible and getting closure, that is the submission of a thesis that merits the award of a doctorate (Holbrook et al., 2014). In the Faculty of Arts the examiners gave more direct instructions in relation to the language of the written thesis and accurate referencing: "there needs to be some rewriting of the discussion to include some references from the literature to make the arguments clearer…referencing needs to follow the appropriate format" (*Ex16 Arts UoM*).  The science examiners on the other hand, gave more direct instructions asking the doctoral researchers to clarify research methods used and results: "You need to clarify certain methodologies used to analyse the data and discuss sources of error and bias…include figures to highlight your results" (*Ex5 Sci UoM*).

**Table 2.** Task-specific Instructional feedback (Examiner 1 Science UoM).

| |
|---|
| Include justifications for claims being made. |
| Include references to substantiate assertions made. |
| Include more detail on choices regarding research methods. |
| Give a better analysis of conclusions. |
| Make editorial changes. |
| Explain equations used. |
| Include all text citations in reference list. |

Yet at the same time, we observed that although the instructional comments were written in a top-down format, with examiners indicating what the doctoral candidates needed to do in specific terms, there was also a different type of instructional comment. These comments can be classified at the other end of the instructional feedback continuum. While they were written in a top-down format and very prescriptive, they were not simply technical and corrective but motivated the doctoral candidates to reflect on their work and think critically about it. Examples of such challenging instructional

feedback can be seen in Table 3. Although they challenge the doctoral candidates to engage in more depth with their academic work, these feedback comments are still considered to be mainly instructional since in most cases they reflect what Pryor and Crossouard (2010) describe as the doctoral examiner's own perspectives. While they can be formative in that they result in improvement of work and learning, they are still formulated within the disciplinary context of the examiner's expertise.

**Table 3.** Challenging Instructional feedback.

| |
|---|
| The candidate needs to include more recent literature and use this to elaborate on his theoretical framework. He then needs to use this literature to beef up his arguments and conclusions. |
| <div align="right">(Ex 16 Arts UoM)</div> |
| I would like to recommend that the candidate: <ul><li>Gives a better explanation of the research methods used.</li><li>Explains how equations were developed.</li><li>Discusses the variation of results.</li><li>Gives ideas for further research.</li></ul> |
| <div align="right">(Ex 1 Sci UoM)</div> |

The use of such instructional, prescriptive feedback comments has given rise to considerable debate within the context of the literature on feedback in doctoral education (Dally et al., 2019). Some educators suggest that instructional feedback does not lead to complex learning and they advocate for more process-oriented feedback that focuses on skill development, encourages dialogue and leads to more self-regulated learning (Sadler, 2010; Carless, 2015). However, at the same time other educators believe that when the feedback provided is not highly specific, it can result in the doctoral researchers becoming confused and unsure of how to respond to feedback that did not indicate very precisely what changes needed to be carried out (Dally et al., 2019). The ideal situation would be for examiners to find a balance between task-specific and process-oriented feedback (Sadler, 2010), so that doctoral researchers understand and engage with the feedback comments in a practical manner but at the same time are encouraged to think and reflect on their work. This will enable the doctoral candidates to develop new identities as scholars and researchers (Pryor and Crossouard, 2010).

*Reflective questions*
The final type of feedback comment that was identified in the examiner reports that were analysed is being described as reflective questions. The difference between challenging instructional feedback comments and reflective questions is mainly in the way in which the feedback comments are presented to the doctoral candidates. While challenging instructional comments encourage critical thinking from a top-down examiner perspective, reflective questions are more open-ended. Reflective questions are exploratory and try to actively involve the doctoral candidates in a dialogue (albeit through written comments) to prompt "further engagement rather than correcting mistakes" (Pryor and Crossouard, 2010, p. 4). They allow for the development of a researcher identity that does not necessarily reflect that of the examiner (Dally et al., 2019). Although most of the examiner reports that we analysed, included mostly comments that were corrective in nature, 45% of examiners in the Faculty of Arts and 31% of examiners in the Faculty of Science also included reflective questions in their report. Some examples of reflective questions include:

I am very surprised by this result and would like the [name of student] to think about how this result can be related to any previous studies. Would it be possible to think of comparisons?
<div align="right">(Ex24 Sci Ext).</div>

> I wish that [the candidate] thinks a bit more about how she interpreted the participants' views in her interviews? Can these views be open to a different interpretation? How did she reach her own conclusions? Can she make a stronger conclusion more in line with the work she has been doing? (Ex31 Arts Ext).

The main characteristic of reflective questions is that they do not include direct, ready-made instructions or fix-it comments, but rather this type of feedback focuses on "nurturing emerging ideas and does not attempt to be dictatorial" (Stracke and Kumar, 2010, p. 28). In posing questions that generate reflection, the examiners try to encourage a deeper engagement with the research work leading to changed understandings and the development of researchers capable of independent critical thinking (Holbrook et al., 2014).

In their reports, examiners also included indications of questions that they would like to ask the doctoral researchers in the viva. The reports that we analysed were written prior to the viva, but it was clear that the examiners in both faculties viewed the viva, as the place where they could interact with the doctoral researchers, and engage in dialogue with them about areas of the research that they thought were interesting and could be further developed by the doctoral researchers. As stated by two examiners:

> There are a number of areas I wish to explore further with the candidate in the oral viva... (Ex31 Arts Ext).

> In the viva, I will ask […] and clarity some details about how the final estimated corrections are applied to the data in practice. In the viva, I would like to discuss the relative benefits of […] as compared to other research (Ex10 Sci Ext).

The reflective questions are used by examiners to help the doctoral candidates engage more deeply with the issues and arguments raised in their research work, not only for the completion of their thesis but also as future learners, and for the writing of future publications. As stated by an examiner:

> In my report I have made a number of suggestions and raised some questions for [the candidate] with a view to assisting not only in finalising the thesis but also to help her when writing up articles for publication based on her study (Ex23 Arts Ext).

The reflective questions help to create what Golding, Sharmini and Lazarovitch (2014) describe as a learning opportunity for the doctoral researchers that contributes to the development of their identity as independent researchers. The use of reflective questions in examiner reports, suggests that examiners wish to engage in some form of dialogue with the doctoral candidates, which to some extent they can achieve during the viva. However, following the viva, in most universities, there is no further contact between the examiners and the doctoral candidates. There is very little information about how the doctoral researchers engaged with the feedback provided by the examiners, and whether any learning took place. This is an area which requires further research.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

This paper investigated the use of formative feedback comments in doctoral examiner reports presented by examiners in the Faculty of Arts and the Faculty of Science at the University of Malta. Although we only analysed a small sample of examiner reports, the results provided us with valuable insights into the doctoral examination process at the University of Malta. The study also helped us to identify areas which need to be researched in greater depth to make the doctoral examination a more meaningful assessment practice for both doctoral researchers and doctoral examiners.

We started out this study since as examiners of doctoral work at the University of Malta, the recommendation for the award of a PhD degree can be made subject to minor or major modifications. We wanted to gain a better understanding of the type of feedback comments provided by examiners to improve our own practice as doctoral examiners. What the results of our study have shown, is that within the context of the examiner reports presented to the Faculty of Arts and the Faculty of Science at the University of Malta and as reported in other research studies (Kumar and Stracke, 2007; Ajjawi and Boud, 2018), the feedback comments are still very prescriptive, instructional and of the fix-it type. Although some of the instructional feedback comments can be described as comments that challenge the doctoral candidates to think further about their work, the comments are written from an examiner perspective. The focus is on the transmission of information and advice by the doctoral examiner and the doctoral researcher passively receiving this information (Boud and Malloy, 2013). Some examiners in both faculties did include reflective questions, what Pryor and Crossouard (2010) describe as 'discursive/existential' (p. 266) intended to bring about changes in the researcher identity of the doctoral candidates. Some follow up of these reflective questions was carried out during the viva, but there is no further information about how doctoral researchers engage with this reflective feedback.

This raises the question of whether the feedback comments provided by doctoral examiners in their individual reports can be described as formative. According to Sadler (2010), for feedback to be considered formative, "it has to be both specific (referring, as it necessarily does to the work being appraised) and general (identifying a broader principle that could be applied to later works" (p. 538). In our view, most of the feedback comments provided by examiners is mostly specific and intended to provide the doctoral researchers with information that they can "use to improve the quality of their work" (Winstone et al., 2022, p. 224), to be awarded their doctorate, as mandated by the university. This prescriptive feedback appears to be "directed to what is known rather than what is new and focuses on closure and convergence – getting the task finished in known ways" (Holbrook et al., 2014, p. 997). The feedback is constrained formative feedback since it does lead to an improved dissertation but might not completely satisfy Sadler's (2010) condition that stipulates that formative feedback should be more general and aim to develop researchers who as described by Nerad (2020) are creative problem-solvers, critical thinkers, intellectual risk-takers, and autonomous professionals (Nerad, 2020). In our view, within the context of the doctoral examination process, this discursive formative feedback is more important, since such reflective feedback comments, encourage the doctoral researchers to explore their research from different perspectives, and help them develop an individual identity as independent researchers (Kumar and Stracke, 2011; Pryor and Crossouard, 2010). Reflective feedback comments also lead to in-depth learning that the doctoral researchers can carry forward in their future academic and professional roles. What the current study fails to identify is what happens in the timeframe between the passing on of the feedback information to the doctoral researchers and the re-submission of their final thesis. More information and research are needed about how the doctoral researchers engage with the feedback and use it as a learning tool.

We would therefore argue that the role of formative feedback in doctoral examiner reports needs to be re-examined both at the individual examiner level as well as at the institutional level. On an individual examiner level, there is the need for more professional development for examiners so that they can develop what Carless and Boud (2018) describe as 'feedback literacy', or a better understanding of the impact of the feedback that they provide in their examiner reports. On an institutional level, there needs to be a re-thinking of the way in which doctoral examiners and doctoral researchers interact, and space created in the doctoral examination process for doctoral examiners to be able to dialogue with the doctoral researchers to ensure that their feedback is being understood and leads to learning. In line, with changing purposes of doctoral education (Nerad, 2020), and the move towards a more learner-centered dialogic approach towards feedback in Higher Education (Carless, 2015), there is the need to review the way in which examiners provide formative feedback for doctoral researchers. This requires more dialogue between university administrators, doctoral

examiners, and doctoral researchers to allow for the emergence of a 'feedback literacy' that makes the doctoral examination process a truly learning experience that is the start of a new researcher's journey.

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