whether this pressure is administrative, social or scientific in origin.

In the past it was probably broadly acceptable for the outcome of the PhD examination to be a foregone conclusion: by convention, a work was not submitted unless it was ready. Standards were determined by a combination of acceptable scientific practice and tradition from past PhDs, and candidates who were not capable of writing an acceptable thesis never made it to the examination room. As we have argued here, this is no longer the case.

There have, of course, been momentous changes to the research environment in recent years. For example, in our field, disaster studies, two of the leading peer-reviewed journals, Natural Hazards and Natural Hazards and Earth System Sciences, have increased their publication rate 10-fold in the past decade or so. Hence, there are more articles to read, more advances in research that must be taken into account, and greater competition in the whole academic process.

On the other hand, since the arrival of the internet literature searches have become vastly easier; word processing has revolutionised the production of the thesis itself; and advances in information technology have done likewise to the calculations and computations in the analysis on which the candidate reports.

Whatever the pressures of modern life, we need to revert to older standards. We will continue to examine theses, if requested, and will carry on striving to be fair, impartial and reasonable in our judgements. But at the same time we will be rigorous.

In our view, two changes would raise the standards of PhD research. First, however tempting in times of financial pressure, no university research committee or individual should permit PhD students to be accepted unless there are acknowledged, internationally recognised experts among their staff who can supervise. It is not acceptable simply to rely on supervisors who understand research methods and have a passing understanding of a given field. This is particularly important in the case of overseas students, who may not be familiar with a university’s strengths when applying.

Second, there is one change we will be making when we are asked to examine PhDs: we will not accept the task of examining any thesis without having looked at it, at least in the form of a late draft, to ascertain whether it is worth examining at all.

For the good of science, we urge all those involved in the production and examination of PhD work to do the same and to ensure that the “gold standard” of the PhD is upheld.

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