External Reviewer Report

Doctor in Philosophy in Applied Linguistics

(International Programme), 2017

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This report is based on the following:

1. The 16 page curriculum document of the PhD in Applied Linguistics (International Programme), 2017 (English Version)
2. The one page information flyer on the programme profile of the PhD in Applied Linguistics (International Programme)
3. Meeting with four PhD students in the PhD in Applied Linguistics programme on 20th October 2016
4. Meeting with Dean, SoLA and key faculty members of the PhD in Applied Linguistics programme on 20th October 2016

My review adopts a broad definition of "curriculum" and includes the written curricular document as well as the reported enactment of the curriculum by faculty and student learning experiences. The report is organized in the following sections:

- Programme Design, Content and Assessment

- Process and Experiences

- Closing Remarks

PROGRAMME DESIGN, CONTENT & ASSESSMENT

The PhD (Applied Linguistics) programme has been conceptualized based on the vision that it was critical to develop and nurture more researchers in applied linguistics who can have an impact at the national and international levels through original work and publications. It aims to

develop ethical academics/researchers with research competence, strong learning, thinking and problem-solving skills, advanced knowledge, effectiveness in communication and collaboration, and adaptability in the globalised world.

Programme Learning Outcomes (PLOs)

The objectives and programme learning outcomes (PLOs) are stated clearly in the curriculum document. There are some overlaps, in particular, the specific items related to the various main objectives on research. I would suggest that the department review and reorganize the items where necessary. Specifically, the various levels of learning outcomes pertaining to research need some reviewing and fine-tuning. In view of the importance of the affective domain in the development of ethical and competent researchers, I would also suggest that items 1.4.6 and 1.4.7 be elaborated so that the quality for research integrity is foregrounded. The concept of "interpersonal leader" may also require some explanation.

Study Plan

The programme offers two options in its study plan: Plan A and Plan B. Students under each of the study plan have to take the course "Advanced Research Methodology" while students in Plan B have to take three other courses. The core course is indeed important and should be continued as it can provide much needed training for students in the programme. It is my understanding that Plan B is typically the one recommended for students so that they can build up on their disciplinary content knowledge. A doctoral programme which requires some amount of coursework may in fact be more appropriate for doctoral studies in today's academic landscape because knowledge in the field is expanding rapidly and students can have the opportunity to "update" their knowledge.

The learning opportunities for students in Plan A and Plan B are rather different. Plan B students have to do compulsory courses. Plan A students may still choose to attend courses, thereby benefiting from these courses, but with no pressure of assessment and the need for accumulation of credits. The dissertation requirement for each Plan is also different with 48 Credit for Plan A (suggesting a more substantial piece of research work) and 36 Credit for Plan B.

The Department may want to review the number of graded courses Plan B students would need to take, especially when these students form the majority of the student population.

It may want to consider whether all four courses for Plan B students require letter grades or grade points. Reducing the number of graded courses (by simply awarding pass/fail to some) would reduce the pressure on students while allowing them to do more courses for the purpose of strengthening their content knowledge. This review is also an opportune time to visit issues of fairness and parity across the two plans and consider better ways of supporting all students in their studies.

Qualifying Exam and Proposal Examination

The qualifying exam, as explained to me at the meeting with faculty members, took the form of critiquing an article and linking it to the area of research that the student intended to undertake. Clearly, this is a useful academic task and can help the students focus on their topic and understand some issues related to it. It is an important part of academic training and should continue as an academic task, but perhaps done earlier in the students' candidature to help them begin their literature review for their proposal.

The proposal examination which takes place subsequently requires students to prepare a document of around five to eight pages, as I was also given to understand. This part of the examination process seems to me inadequate and does not compare well to the proposal or confirmation examination in systems in the UK and Singapore. I do not know how it compares with other Thai institutions of similar standing to KMUTT, but I would recommend that a more rigorous academic task be required for such an important milestone in a PhD programme.

As proposal examination is the first formal assessment of a PhD candidate's research by the university, it should be one in which the candidate is required to demonstrate that he/ she has done sufficient work of a quality that can be continued and completed as a PhD project. In many universities, this would typically consist of minimally the following sections or chapters: background to the study and research objectives, literature review and methodology. It should also include a plan of action for the next stage of work and that is achievable within the rest of the candidature. In this regard, a projected schedule for completion would also be necessary.

A more substantial proposal presentation would require the students, under the close guidance of the supervisor(s), to plan the PhD study after careful reading and discussion. Although some changes may still occur after the proposal examination, this academic exercise would give students the much needed stability, security and assurance to proceed with their study. This will be one way of addressing some of the uncertainties that the students have felt

because they thought (perhaps wrongly) that the evolving design of their study depended on the feedback of journal reviewers and other experts.

Put another way, the requirement of a fairly substantial proposal document and presentation would ensure that the student and his/her supervisor exercise joint intellectual ownership of the project from the start. The supervisor would need to exercise rigorous academic judgment in guiding his/her student in planning the study in a way that will be acceptable to the international academic community at large. The student, under the guidance of the supervisor(s), would learn to make and justify academic decisions and eventually develop greater independence as a researcher. Such an important academic milestone should be completed within a period stipulated by the School or University regardless of other matters such as journal publications and conference presentations.

The research proposal should be a fairly substantial piece of work that offers stability and direction in the students' research process. It will also prevent situations where some students may "lose the way" because of they felt obliged to consider various (sometimes complementary and other times conflicting) points of view along the way.

PROCESS & EXPERIENCES

In order to understand the PhD learning process from the students' perspectives, I had the opportunity to meet with four students at various stages of their candidature – between one and seven years. In our one and a half hour interview, I found the students articulate and sincere in wanting to share their views, in particular their challenges. They also made it clear that they were not speaking just for themselves but also for other students. In order to encourage them to be candid in their views, I told them that they should not mention particulars of any faculty members or students. They appreciated the opportunity provided by the School to elicit their views through this interview. That the School had provided an opportunity for the voices of students to be heard is also most commendable, as their insights can be valuable to this programme review.

I was also given to understand that the department had done away with meeting students every year to gather feedback about the programme. If this was indeed so, it would be useful to reinstate this practice as the students felt that they had been supported and listened to at these platforms.

Students' Aspirations

All the students expressed their deep gratitude on being selected for a PhD programme known for its rigour. They were proud to be affiliated to KMUTT and found that their skills and knowledge had been levelled up as a result of studying in this University. They said they had developed the use of a critical lens when considering other researchers' work. They were also highly appreciative of the well-qualified and dedicated faculty members whom they studied under as supervisees and course students. The relatively low tuition fee was also something that attracted them to this programme.

The students shared that their aspiration was to graduate as soon as they could because of personal and professional reasons and that their hope was for the School to recognise it and support them. Specifically, they pointed out that the publicity materials for this programme indicated that it was a three-year full-time programme, but in reality their graduation would take much longer because of the uncertainty of getting published. While they acknowledged that publishing was an attractive feature of this programme, they said that they only found out about the challenges in meeting this expectation after they had been enrolled in this programme.

While they appreciated the School's intention to get students to publish, they also reported that students experienced a great deal of anxiety because they were unable to plan when they would actually graduate. It was something they did not have any control over, as it depended almost entirely on the outcomes of the paper review process. They mentioned other PhD programmes in Thai universities that were of equal or higher standing and felt that the KMUTT programme could provide more structure with foreseeable deadlines for graduation. Many of the students were concerned that they had spent more time and money than they had originally planned. In one case, the student was concerned that his delay in graduation would have a direct impact on other colleagues waiting to undertake their PhD studies. They also alluded to possible negative perceptions of the programme as a result of these uncertainties for students.

The Graduate Learning Process

The students expressed their appreciation for one another in their graduate student community, often drawn together by common research interests and experiences. They generally found the Research Clusters meeting to be beneficial. They expressed the desire to have greater interaction with graduate students in other departments within the university as well as students in other universities, local and overseas. They also would like to be more engaged in student

collaborations within the department but there was some perception of a distinction between the discourse and the language teaching student researchers in their abilities and willingness to engage.   They would like a research culture that was more supportive and "less intimidating".

The main factor that contributed to what appeared to them to be a long and sometimes diffused learning process was the requirement to publish the said number of papers in journals and conference proceedings. Publication-related issues that the students highlighted are listed below:

a) Plan A students who did only one graded course could begin their research earlier and got a head start in working on their journal papers. Plan B students were disadvantaged as they could only begin later into their candidature with repercussions on the length of time they would take to graduate.

b) Because of the possibility of changing their research focus or methodology as a result of reviewers' comments, many students felt they could not proceed with writing their thesis even after they had collected and analysed their data. They felt that their time spent on writing their drafts and waiting for their paper to be published could have been better used in writing their thesis. They identified the problem that some students had when applying for extension due to a lack of success with publications – they had to show evidence of thesis writing.

c) The need to work on many drafts of a paper over a long period of time and the expectations of some supervisors to have something "perfect" before they were allowed to submit.

d) Supervisors' strong preference for Q1 and Q2 journals when some students felt that what they valued more was the process of learning to publish.

e) Trying for Q1 journals only to be rejected might take up unnecessary time to meeting their goals for publication. They would like the Department to recognise the differences in the abilities of the students and the quality of their research.

f) There should be fewer restrictions on conference attendance as the students valued the opportunity to present and receive feedback. In addition, the list of approved conferences by the CRS should be made explicit to them. (At my subsequent meeting with faculty members, I was informed that there were in fact email notifications by the CRS on these conferences.)

g) Students had to pay fees while waiting for their papers to be reviewed published. Many would take up part-time or full-time teaching to support themselves. While they valued

the experience to teach, they were also concerned that the work took their energy and attention away from focusing on and completing their thesis.

Supervision and Departmental Support

The students said that there appeared to be some unevenness in the quality of supervision. While some supervisors were quick in returning written drafts with comments, others were not. There also appeared to be a lack of shared understanding and expectations among supervisors on important matters, such as publication requirements and the insistence on Q1 and Q2 journals or certain conferences, as well as when students can be allowed to begin working on a draft of an article or chapters in their theses. Some students seemed to receive mixed signals and inconsistent messaging on a number of critical matters.

The Department could consider ways for expectations and timelines to be communicated more clearly. It could look into providing guidelines, models and checklists to support both students and supervisors. Enhancing the current learning and supervision process with greater structure will also encourage the students to see that they are being supported to achieve the success they are working towards. Since most students are able to engage in full-time studies in the first three years, the Department should also aim to help students focus on and consolidate their research and research thesis in the first three years.

One of the most important tasks for a PhD candidate is to plan and execute a piece of original research based on sound design principles and supported by substantial literature review. This ability to draw up a research proposal after critical review of the literature and the selection of a fitness-for-purpose methodology is an important part of PhD training. The Department can scaffold this process by offering a supportive timeline that prioritises the development of a sound research plan. This plan may be modified as the student progresses as a result of challenges (for example, research sites or research participants), the availability of new ways of analysing data (for example, new software), and the identification of a potential limitation (for example, the sample size is too small for a certain kind of statistical test). The literature review would also typically require updating after the findings have been presented and discussed. Nevertheless, an approved research proposal should provide a blueprint for the student and the supervisor(s) to progress from.

The progress review of PhD students is another important part of supporting PhD students. The Department should use this as an opportunity to monitor and support a student's progress in the research thesis. This is also an important time to check whether the student has

been able to achieve productive PhD work based on the research proposal agreed upon by the supervisor(s) and the student and approved at the proposal examination stage.

The Department/School may find it beneficial to review the current requirements to publish the said number of papers in journals/ conference proceedings before students can graduate. Unlike papers in Science and Technology, papers in language education and linguistics are typically longer and requires the reporting of substantial amounts of data (if they are qualitative) as well as in-depth discussions of the findings. Thus, it is no mean feat for students to publish good papers. It is indeed highly commendable that several KMUTT papers have appeared in well-established applied linguistics journals. In light of the students' concerns, however, it may be necessary to balance the aspiration of the School for all students to repeat such successes against the students' aspirations to receive a rigorous research experience and graduate within a more clearly defined time frame that they have some control over.

CLOSING REMARKS

I would like to thank the Dean of the School of Liberal Arts of KMUTT, Assoc Prof Dr Pornapit Darasawang, for this opportunity to contribute to the development of the PhD (Applied Linguistics) programme through this external review. I would also like to commend the Language Studies Department which delivers the PhD in Applied Linguistics programme. The department is staffed by a group of highly-qualified and experienced faculty members who can support such a programme. In my two-day visit I had the pleasure of interacting with faculty members who were deeply committed to improving the learning experiences of their students. The students I met at the programme review interview and my lecture were bright, competent and highly motivated. They clearly had the potential to succeed in their PhD studies.

The quality of original research demonstrated in a PhD research thesis and the successful defense of it are widely accepted to be the key academic criteria for the award of a PhD degree. The process of achieving these outcomes should therefore always remain the focus of all PhD programmes. A strong PhD programme also provides students with a variety of development opportunities during the programme. From my visit, I am convinced that these were also the emphasis of the PhD (Applied Linguistics) in KMUTT.

Overall, I see a well-intentioned programme that aims to provide PhD students with rich experiences in learning skills and developing dispositions for scholarly publications. My overall sense is that students can, however, get distracted from these key goals because of their overwhelming concern with writing journal papers and experiences with setbacks that are part

and parcel of the publication process. There remain opportunities for the School and the Department to approach these goals in ways that can support the students' aspirations for timely completion of their PhD studies as well as providing them with development opportunities that enrich their life experiences. I wish the School and Department the very best in this endeavour.

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