The Quality of the Dissertation

The extract below is from:

Lovitts, B.E. (2007) *Making the implicit explicit: creating performance expectations for the dissertation*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing. (pp34-35)

"As the final product of doctoral education the thesis embodies much of the performance goals and objectives of doctoral training. What those goals are and how well they are achieved are incorporated in faculty's implicit standards for judging dissertations of different quality" (pp34-35).

Table 3.4 illustrates how the 270 academics in this study characterized outstanding, very good, acceptable and unacceptable theses.

TABLE 3.4.
The Characteristics of Different Quality Dissertations

Quality	Characteristics
Outstanding	• Original and significant, and also ambitious, brilliant, clear, clever, coherent, compelling, concise, creative, elegant, engaging, exciting, interesting, insightful, persuasive, sophisticated, surprising, and thoughtful • Very well written and very well organized • Synthetic and interdisciplinary • Components are connected in a seamless way • Exhibits mature, independent thinking • Has a point of view and a strong, confident, independent, and authoritative voice • Asks new questions or addresses an important question or problem • Clearly states the problem and why it is important • Displays a deep understanding of a massive amount of complicated literature • Exhibits command and authority over the material • Argument is focused, logical, rigorous, and sustained • Is theoretically sophisticated and shows a deep understanding of theory • Has a brilliant research design • Uses or develops new tools, methods, approaches, or new types of analyses • Is thoroughly researched • Data are rich and come from multiple sources • Analysis is comprehensive, complete, sophisticated, and convincing • Results are significant • Conclusion ties the whole thing together • Is publishable in top-tier journals • Is of interest to a larger community and changes the way people think • Pushes the discipline's boundaries and opens new areas for research

Quality	Characteristics
Very good	• Solid • Well written and well organized • Has some original ideas, insights, and observations, but is less original, significant, ambitious, interesting, and exciting than outstanding • Has a good question or problem that tends to be small and traditional • Is the next step in a research program (good normal science) • Shows understanding and mastery of the subject matter • Argument is strong, comprehensive, and coherent • Research is well executed • Demonstrates (technical) competence • Uses appropriate, standard theory, methods, and techniques • Obtains solid, expected results/answers • Misses opportunities to completely explore interesting issues and connections • Makes a modest contribution to the field but does not open it up
Acceptable	• Workmanlike • Demonstrates (technical) competence • Shows the ability to do research • Is not very original or significant • Is not interesting, exciting, or surprising • Displays little creativity, imagination, or insight • Writing is pedestrian and plodding • Structure and organization are weak • Project is narrow in scope • Question or problem is not exciting - is often highly derivative or an extension of advisor's work • Displays a narrow understanding of the field • Literature review is adequate—knows the literature but is not critical of it or does not discuss what is important • Can sustain an argument, but argument is not imaginative, complex, or convincing . • Theory is understood at a simple level and is minimally to competently applied to the problem • Uses standard methods • Analysis is unsophisticated - does not explore all possibilities and misses connections • Results are predictable and not exciting • Makes a small contribution

Quality	Characteristics
Unacceptable	- Is poorly written - Has spelling and grammatical errors - Presentation is sloppy - Contains errors or mistakes - Plagiarizes or deliberately misreads or misuses sources - Does not understand basic concepts, processes, or conventions of the discipline - Lacks careful thought - Question or problem trivial, weak, unoriginal, or already solved - Does not understand or misses relevant literature - Argument is weak, inconsistent, self-contradictory, unconvincing, or invalid - Theory is missing, wrong, or not handled well - Methods are inappropriate or incorrect - Data are flawed, wrong, false, fudged, or misinterpreted - Analysis is wrong, inappropriate, incoherent, or confused - Results are obvious, already known, unexplained, or misinterpreted - Interpretation is unsupported or exaggerated - Does not make a contribution