

## Postscript: discussion with Alfredo

Dear John

..eventually - I succeeded to attain my PhD!!! Sorry if I did not inform you promptly, but - after resubmitting the thesis after minor corrections in December 2012, I only received the 'official' email that confirmed the award of the PhD last week. Although I was informally informed that the outcome was successful, I was looking forward to receiving the official email before spreading the news!

Let me briefly recapitulate the very last events within my 'PhD story'. In November 2011, I was notified that my appeal was successful, and that I would be then examined on the basis of the thesis that I had originally submitted in 2008. I objected that the 2008 thesis did not reflect my own thinking about the subject as it was in 2011, provided that - in good faith - I had worked on it for several months as a way to address the major revisions that I was required to do. I was allowed, then, to submit a revised thesis in December 2011. The viva (with new examiners) was held in May 2012, and I was required only minor revision. I submitted the revised thesis, then, in December 2012.

I am happy of my PhD experience at the university on the whole. However, upon reflection I can see some pitfalls in the PhD examination system - and possibly a few in the whole PhD programme design, somehow. Drawing from my experience, I am tempted to say that the examination process should include a kind of 'arbiter' that guarantees that the 'rules of the game' are clearly understood and that the game is played according to them. To me, the PhD examination is (and I agree that it should be) a 'social encounter' characterized by a strong power asymmetry, i.e., it is not a situation where 'peers' (examiners) assess the work done by one of their 'peers' (the research student) yet. To me, the research student is, first and foremost, (still) a student, whose work is exposed to the judgment of the examiners that cannot be overridden by any other authority. Playing by the rules is one of the few limitations posed to arbitrariness of such a judgment.

In my case, one of these rules was violated - i.e., examiners had made a resolute decision before the viva, communicated to me through the supervisor, and arranged the viva as a one-way communication of required corrections. In retrospect, I wish that I could complain about this conduct since soon after the failed viva. As a matter of fact, however, (a) it was not clear to me whom I should address my complaint to, and (b) the university regulations do not provide any possibility to review the conduct of the examiners until their final decision anyway. I may also add, then, that PhD regulations seem too rigid - in my case, maybe I could save a couple of years' time if I were allowed the possibility to voice against the conduct of the examiners rather than trying to fulfill their requirements for major revisions.

As a matter of the overall PhD programme design, however, I think that it should contain additional 'quality control' mechanisms. As I wrote, to me the research student is fundamentally a student, i.e., although PhD regulations provide that it is up to the student's responsibility to submit the thesis, as a matter of fact the research student typically strives for supervisor's appreciation and approval of the work done, and quite often trusts the supervisor's judgment and advice. Of course the approval of the supervisor is not and cannot be any guarantee that the examiners assess the thesis positively. If the supervisor is the only 'resource' that checks the quality of the thesis before submission, however, the research student practically has no other reliable support for double-checking the merit of the thesis. Provisions for a second supervisor, or for a supervisory committee, could maybe help in this respect.

John replies:

Congratulations. V good news.

Points from your email:

1. Arbiter? most universities now appoint a Chair for the viva who is supposed to ensure the rules are followed - and in your case would have done this.
2. It is invidious to treat referral as a kind of pass. Many universities would now allow a review of the process at this stage.
3. Quality control: as I think you know I suggest a pragmatic approach to the UK system where the supervisors have no part in the examination outcome: there should be frequent and thorough reviews, an upgrade by independent assessors, critique of past theses, conference papers, publications and systematic networking with others in the field. This should have ensured you were examined by supportive examiners - following the rules.

On the other hand, at a cost, you did not do badly out of the cock-up. You had time to revise the thesis and be examined by two new examiners. If they hadn't made such a serious mistake you probably would not have a PhD?

A system with no precise criteria run by a couple of amateurs paid a pittance is a disaster waiting to happen...

Can I anonymise and edit your email a little - for your approval - as I am going to share "Alfredo's appeal" with a group of supervisors in Wales on Friday? btw, what do you estimate the appeal and other expenses cost you in cash terms??

Hi John

thanks for sharing your reflections on this.

I agree with your points. Especially with respect to the role of the supervisor and the provision of additional resources for quality control. Just very briefly, I may add that, in my experience, I found myself in the condition that I had to be too much reliant on the supervisor only. I suspect that, without a serious and frequent exposure to other scholars' views (e.g., in department seminars, etc.), we may have been afflicted by a form of 'groupthink' and somehow we may have 'lost touch' with how 'outsiders' (including examiners) might react to the work.

I also strongly agree that I was lucky that there had been such a blatant breach of the rules, otherwise it would have been very difficult to get the result. I would surely advise any research student to be alert and keep track (evidence, possibly, or a diary) of all events within the PhD process.

About costs, I would count:

1. Legal Assistance:

Drafting of the appeal: £ 1,818

Assistance at appeal hearing: £ 1,804.56

2. Expenses related to the 'faulty' examination: roughly

Thesis binding: about £ 80.00

Travel expenses for attending the viva: about £ 400.00

Total direct costs: circa £4k.

3. About 2.5 years of time passed between the violation of the rules from the side of the examiners to the re-submission of the thesis to new examiners. The opportunity cost of this seems hard to estimate - as I had already a PhD (from a European university) and I was already working as lecturer at that time, it is not so evident to me whether there is any loss of income incurred because of the delayed examination. Anyway, this may be another factor to take into account.

Please feel free to anonymise, edit, and use these materials for your courses. If you like to let me know, I would be curious to know reactions of your audiences to Alfredo's story.

My Best Wishes,  
Alfredo