

Debbie's referral

I had already published some of my thesis arguments in peer-refereed journals and had several papers accepted for presentation at international conferences. I had also been awarded a post-doctoral fellowship to develop the critical approach to employment statistics used in the thesis, in a UK wide competition (that funds just 20% of submitted proposals). So neither my supervisors (who had read and approved the whole thesis) nor any one else believed that my PhD examiners would require anything more than minor corrections.

Yet, my experience shows that rather than testing the students' knowledge, the examination process can become a matter of 'luck' in which the student is only as 'good' or 'bad' as the examiners' notion of what is considered acceptable.

For me, it was the examiners' dismissal of the critical statistical approach to calculate and process 'raw' (i.e. unpublished) data that proved to be the major downfall.

One examiner showed a lack of knowledge around the UK statistical dataset, I used, by querying its relevance to employment and assuming that I could obtain interviewees from it.

Both were unaware of key differences in employment statistics. Those with a basic awareness of employment statistics know that figures relating to individuals in paid work are always lower than those relating to individuals who are economically active. But my examiners seemed oblivious to this, in spite of it being clearly explained at several points in the thesis, and argued more than once at the viva. The examiners simply dismissed three chapters of figures as wrong, and were adamant that my figures were low because I had not produced figures on individuals of working-age.

After the viva I obtained written confirmation from the Office of National Statistics that the variable and processes I used to obtain the figures were correct and included *only* those of working age.

The examiners' made other unjustified criticisms, and even departed from the university regulations in the summary of reasons for referral by criticizing what *they* claimed was the 'overall research question', yet, this question did not appear anywhere in the submitted thesis.

My postdoctoral award was withdrawn because of the examiners' decision, and I was constantly told that I would get nowhere by appealing against their academic judgement, whatever the rights or wrongs of it.

Team exercise:

On the acetate provided list any grounds Debbie has for an appeal

The outcome

I have no option but to try to rescue the four years of PhD work by attempting to meet the examiners' recommendations, but I also feel that the potential inadequacies of the viva system need to be publicised. This will remain the case until the entire system is overhauled and effectively monitored. At present, academic institutions place prime importance on avoiding litigation, regardless of the personal costs to their students - whatever the rights and wrongs of it.