

Jamie's examination

I wonder if there is any advice that might help me resolve a difficulty with the examining team who recently assessed my submission for PhD (Practice based work supported by thesis). The Viva went way off track, and I'm left, without much warning, with a virtual rewrite of the thesis in its entirety – including title, abstract, conclusions, methodology i.e. the whole thing. I haven't actually been failed, just referred – however in practical terms it might as well be the same thing – for example the revised title isn't actually a research question now, just a broad generalisation of a topic which is impossible to research – I know because I already tested out this title very early on in the process and know where it leads – much too big! It seems to me that the title should stay fixed and the thesis be assessed regarding how well it answers the title or not. The current system allows the title to be changed by the examiners at the Viva with the candidate then left trying to corner the subject all over again.

Up until now there have been no issues with my approach, and in fact positive, intelligent and responsive feedback from a variety of peer sources, with some valid challenges in the mix. In addition the examining team praised both the practical work as being of a high standard, and have no issues with questions of originality of the research – just seem to take particular exception to the route by which I have arrived there, since it doesn't conform to the narrow and singular model of research they, or probably more specifically one examiner in particular, recognise. They seem to want the information presented in a form which is inappropriate to the research. Some of their observations are valid and can be addressed or amended but the bulk of it still seems nonsensical. I always assumed the model for the research was the prerogative of the researcher and would also echo, in form, the specific needs and findings of the research topic. I'm coming in at quite an advanced level in my own practice and feel that I know my subject sufficiently to give it the most appropriate shape. The end result is that I've fulfilled all the obvious requirements of the PhD but am presumably going to end up failing anyway since the amendments dismantle the thesis and therefore the methodology and are just not achievable, whether in two weeks or a year. My own personal circumstances will not support further work on this in any case – health, financial and family.

In my own opinion a model which is qualitative, evidence based and linear in form has been arbitrarily superimposed onto my research which is essentially qualitative, philosophical and theory based, it's overall pattern being circular, overlapping and complex – the issue of complexity being particularly key to the whole research question. This significantly alters the way the thesis can be assessed and certainly if treated as a quasi-scientific piece of research would fail miserably since it requires a different kind of data and methodology! My research hasn't generated this kind of data so impossible to provide it. Although I will try and disentangle this quite basic difference in my meeting with supervisors tomorrow the main issue for me is that now being post Viva there doesn't seem to be a way out of this other than by appeal or accept the impossible rewrite.

There is some basis for an appeal since of the three examiners eventually involved two, (who each have a specialist knowledge of one of the two main practice areas I seek to combine in the research) are unfortunately not considered sufficiently experienced by the research committee to be allowed to examine the research independently. Therefore a third examiner (internal) has been brought in specifically to cover this gap since s/he has a lot of experience in examining PhD's in general. Unfortunately this examiner, although from

the same school, has no demonstrable knowledge of the broad subject areas I address let alone the highly specialist knowledge of the processes and issues affecting the two specific subjects and in turn how these might then be integrated. That all examiners have at least knowledge of the broad subject area is stated quite clearly as a requirement in the University's own regulations. However in terms of status in the team this examiner appears to have been given, by the research school at least, a rather greater authority in which way the research is assessed, hence an inappropriate model seems to have become involved, unlikely to have come from the original team. So now I have three examiners who are all inappropriate for different reasons and rather than solve any problem it's just compounded it further. The university is also now prepared to redefine the broad subject area so broadly as to be meaningless i.e. can encompass anything in Art and Design even though it's stated perfectly clearly and simply in the title of my research which two areas are being researched, followed by a sub heading which locates the much more specific questions being considered.

If this isn't difficult, the third examiner actually comes from one of the very few subject areas which have no connection with the practice I'm researching. This would not be apparent to the research committee that no doubt see it all as contained within Art and Design, but this is not the case. I actually quote this issue at least four times in the thesis in support of my main argument – never intending it to be interpreted as a particular challenge or cross into another discipline, merely as a way of clarifying what the research is by clarifying what it is not.

Either way this was sufficient of an issue to make me object directly to the inclusion of anyone (i.e. it's not a personal issue) from this other subject area when this was first suggested, a concern which was initially accommodated by my supervision team. They were subsequently overruled very late in the process by the research school, post submission of thesis if I'm correct, at which point it became an issue which wasn't seen as being very important – mainly because it was impossible to arrange anything else - so my objection was effectively ignored.

I realised early in the process the particular importance and also difficulty of finding the right examining team and have regularly put forward a variety of names for the external – none of which were followed up or explored further, including my main choice of specialist in the field who was perceived as too challenging, although not by me. I wouldn't of course have enjoyed being referred by someone whose knowledge in the field is respected had this been the same conclusion but rather better to be referred this way than what's actually happened and would at least have told me something about my own research findings. This is probably the only real complaint I would ever have against my supervision team who have been great to work with and otherwise wholly supportive – I'm unwilling to cite it as an appeal issue but it is unfortunately quite a significant reason things have gone so badly from my perspective. I'm now being told it's just my opinion as regards my broad subject areas.

I've received AHRC funding in addition, so feel a big responsibility to finish on this count alone but starting to understand why there are such big failure rates. Unfortunately without the actual qualification I'm unable to generate new income so very much a catch twenty-two situation. I had just started to be given academic interviews prior to this latest event but of course am now not in a position to apply for anything similar and beginning to fall behind. I also have concerns regarding having released my research into a more public domain – some of the information is very good – who has ownership of it, and also can I recall the

thesis from the examiners etc. if I withdraw my research from the University? These things are also very unclear and the University doesn't seem to know.

Therefore I wondered if it would be possible to ask if there is any advice or guidance available regarding the best and most sensible course of action here ? Whilst I don't want to prove anything, other than the validity of my research, I do have a strong sense of self-preservation in the face of quite a major inequality of resources and am genuinely concerned about the direction this could take from here. As you will notice I haven't identified the University in question – at the moment I feel that's the best option, and hope this is alright.

Many thanks for providing a route by which this can be discussed; it's clearly an area that needs substantial research in its own right !

Yours sincerely
Jamie

Team tasks:

First, agree how you would respond to Jamie's question, then

On the acetate provided list the main lessons here for

- 1. Doctoral candidates**
 - 2. Supervisors**
 - 3. Institutions**
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