

Jonathan's PhD examination - a most peculiar practice?

I. Before the viva

I suspect that many students when recalling their views of the standard of their PhD work begin with an assertion that they always believed it to be to the requisite standard, whether or not it were true. I too had such positive perceptions, but I also felt that I had what appeared to be tangible proof. Each year I had been given annual 'successful' reports from my supervisor, Dr Matthew Coleman, which were passed on to my Advisor, Professor Cath Leyland, whom I would then meet to review progress. Every year they said they were pleased how my research was developing, and this seemed to be confirmed by an e-mail sent between them towards the end of my studies about my progress (which was copied to me in error). This reconfirmed that I was to the required standard, if progressing a little slowly because of work/time commitments. Adding to this was the unswerving confidence of my supervisor. As I had produced what he felt were two ground-breaking studies, he believed that just one should be sufficient to pass, and used what was later to be a much recalled phrase - that he would 'fall off his chair' if the examiners failed me.

I therefore had every reason to be confident coming into the viva, but there were some difficulties appointing the external examiner, as he (Dr Paul Brown), took quite a time to agree. Apparently he was not happy with his fee, the hotel accommodation he was to be given for the required overnight stay in London, and only wanted to attend the College when it coincided with one of his jazz meetings. This had irritated my supervisor (I was only told of this later), but eventually an agreed date was set 3 months to the day from the thesis' submission (the last possible date available to comply with the University guidelines).

Sometime prior to the viva, my supervisor and I had spoken about whether a difficulty I faced in dealing with perceived 'enclosed' environments should be raised with examiners. We decided to do so because it has been a chronic problem, tempered by medication to suppress blackout phases, which can affect my concentration and ability to articulate. Dr Coleman therefore sent a brief explanatory e-mail to both examiners some weeks beforehand. These mails were later acknowledged by both examiners, but no enquiry was made by them as to what difficulties I might face and/or how the viva might be conducted more satisfactorily. They merely remarked that all would be fair. When I raised further concerns to my supervisor, he said that I should remember that these men are psychologists. He seemed to assume that the title alone would be enough to guarantee they would behave correctly and fairly.

Q1 List the issues that have arisen so far

Q2 How should examiners and candidates prepare for a viva?

2. The viva

The original viva, when it finally arrived, I can only describe as pre-determined, aggressive, and unfair. On the day itself, following two and a half weeks of preparation, I was initially kept waiting by Dr Lane's late arrival. This was irritating, particularly as he was using the same train service as myself to get to the College, and there were no delays. There then followed some lengthy prior discussion, which further put the start time back, and forced me over to the College's library to wait. I believe this was when the initial thesis reports were completed, though I have no direct evidence of this except that I later found both had conveniently been signed the day before. Eventually Dr Coleman and I were joined by the examiners in his office for the viva, which I felt was particularly small accommodation for four people.

We were sat close together on a muggy day, so it was far from being the most helpful of venues for me. I remember well Dr Brown, whose unbuttoned shirt I felt may have worried a female examinee(!), which was much in contrast to the dress of the other attendees, opening the viva with the question "how would you define 'priming'?" He then responded to my answer by saying that it was too narrow a definition, but added that if I had defined it wider it would have been beyond the scope of what could have been covered in a thesis. This was something of an unnerving beginning.

The questioning following was along the lines of 'you should have done your review this way, do you understand!' He appeared particularly critical of me citing the work of one psychologist, saying I hadn't challenged her views. I felt I had written a balanced account, but could not be expected to discuss every citation in the detail he wanted. This argument was not accepted. From a very macro and disparaging view of the literature review, with few actual questions, he moved on to the studies. There he incorrectly concluded that nothing had been found in the first two of the series, and of the penultimate study, he was overly critical of the samples I necessarily had to draw from in the Psychology Department. Like many Universities today, Psychology degrees often have more female students, and this 'disadvantage' for research samples was therefore addressed in the narrative, but Dr Brown said the study was of no value. Finally he skipped over the final study, which was the most interesting with little comment.

Dr Lane, the internal examiner, seemed preoccupied with statistical minutiae. This probably was pre-arranged. He wanted to know why 'power analysis' was not utilised, and subsequently laboured the point that I didn't know what this was in his report (and in the Appeal). I didn't, but my supervisor said he had never heard of power analysis being raised in a viva, and that most students would not come across it. He also had to intervene at one point to correct the premise of another statistical question when Dr Lane had misread the thesis' narrative.

And so it went on for two hours or so, a lesson more in instruction than questioning, where almost every answer was dismissed and used as more evidence for a failing thesis. This may seem a biased perception, but I can assure you it is not. There were few positive remarks, and no counter-arguments were accepted, indeed in the notes of the later Appeal hearing, Dr Lane said that a lack of questions on the

literature review were made because they had formed the opinion that the thesis was not to PhD standard and therefore broader questions were not felt to be necessary.

Q1 List the main criteria for a successful doctoral thesis

Q2 What should a candidate expect of a viva?

3. The deliberation

Eventually we were led to the staffroom to await the outcome. I spoke with my supervisor at this time and told him of my fears for failure, but he dismissed them saying that examiners can give good candidates a hard time - he was still confident of a pass. I did feel this to be optimistic, but took comfort from this view.

A while later the examiners summoned my supervisor for a conversation, the contents of which were subject of dispute from then onwards. The examiners had apparently told my supervisor that they didn't like any of the thesis and asked something to the effect of how much time could be given over to reworking it. My supervisor told me (and then later the Appeal Board), that he was shocked and said something ambiguous along the lines of if you want that many amendments it simply cannot be done in 18 months (bearing in mind I was a part-time student). The examiners said the supervisor was 'at the end of his tether' and that the thesis constituted 'the extent of (my) intellectual ability etc', but my supervisor strenuously denied using such terms and said he never would have ruled out an 18-month referral if that were achievable. The truth of what was actually said will probably never be known.

Q1 What options are available to examiners in your institution(s)?

Q2 What part does a supervisor play in the doctoral examination process?

4. The decision

We were subsequently led back into the supervisor's office for the result, where I was offered an M.Phil with no amendments.

Little was said, and I left with no comment. I clearly remember though leaving with two feelings. Firstly that my work had not been fully read - perhaps as it was particularly long (c 100k words) or because of the reticence (alluded to above) of the external examiner, and secondly that the viva was a forgone conclusion. It seemed to me that minds were made up before entering the room and were not amenable to change, considering the style of the questioning adopted. Later evidence, as alluded to above, supported this view.

Additionally, and although largely irrelevant for the purpose of this account, a sense of foreboding, of having to tell work colleagues, sponsors, family and friends, that (seemingly unlike everyone else) you failed a viva is very difficult. This feeling is exacerbated by the format of the examination, where everyone knows the result is given on the day - consequently I did not wish to speak to my supervisor who had run after me after I left.

Q1 Discuss the examiners' decision

Q2 What would you advise Jonathan to do now?

5. The appeal

The Appeal process was initially a difficult affair, but as time progressed I appeared to gain support. The first recollection I have was of a sea change in view by my supervisor and my Advisor, who surprisingly suggested that an M.Phil pass was in fact still a good achievement and that an Appeal could lead to that award too being rescinded, my supervisor additionally pointing out the difficulties I would face challenging the decision with my condition and the extra work that might follow. I had to remind them both that an M.Phil was not what we set out to achieve, and not the result either had expected. Emails became a little terse as it appeared to me that my supervisor was trying to absolve himself of any responsibility for the failure.

I therefore decided to approach education negligence lawyers in London. I was advised I had a case, but that I should exhaust all avenues of Appeal first, however improbable or difficult. This led me to Josie Fellows at the Students Union, and together we sought opinions, including your own, and began putting together an Appeal. From concluding that presenting evidence that an unfair viva had occurred would not help my case, we decided to concentrate on the health issue, as this appeared to give us sufficient grounds to appeal. We were backed in that view by the the College Welfare Office, and the views of my supervisor, who thankfully had attended the viva. It did concern me, however, that other students who did not have health problems would have had little redress, and examiners such as Brown and Lane would have walked away without sanction.

Once we had incorporated the Welfare Officer's views with Dr Upman (my IT collaborator), my GP, and letters of support from my increasingly supportive supervisor and Advisor, I felt we had a fair chance of securing a hearing. The only downside was in asking Dr Upman for a completely impartial view: he provided it! However, although some of his paragraphs were later used by the examiners for their defence, his overall assessment (an 18 month referral), was also useful for our contention that this was the kind of result we originally had expected.

Q1 Comment on Jonathan's course of action

Q2 Did he have other grounds for appeal?

6. The hearing

Subsequently gaining the right to a hearing was pleasing, though we knew it would be difficult to convince the Appeal Board of our case. Josie Fellows and I worked well together however, we were in regular contact, and we met a few times before the hearing to discuss our approach. This was later conveyed to the Welfare Officer, and my supervisor, whom we also met beforehand. Considering what was at stake I, unlike my supervisor, was not particularly nervous once in the large room especially designated for the day. We firstly called in Welfare Officer whom Josie steered towards giving information as to the possible effects of the problems I had, and the courses of action that should have been employed to make the viva less stressful. We then brought in Dr Coleman and I questioned him on the course of the viva. We sought to contrast what should have happened, with what actually happened. Dr Lane representing the Examiners (Dr Brown did not attend) then went on at some length, for perhaps half an hour, and we both felt that he was given something of an 'easy ride'. I sought to question him after he had spoken, which appeared to irritate him, and found my questions cut short. Finally, Josie summed up our case. At the close Dr Lane departed quickly, brushing past Josie whom I recall took this as a positive sign.

Q1 Discuss the conduct of the hearing

Q2 Would it have helped Jonathan, if there had been an independent Chair for the viva?

7. The appeal decision

I heard the result of the hearing from my supervisor over the telephone. I subsequently received a lengthy document that was quite strange. Throughout I was referred to as 'Robert'. Disappointingly the Board concluded that the correct examination procedures had been undertaken, that Dr Lane's reputation was intact and so on. Yet somewhat incongruously I felt, the appeal was upheld apparently because I had been unaware/had not had undertaken counselling assistance that may have helped me in the viva.

Obviously this was a great result, somewhat against the odds, but moreover I was very disappointed that our evidence regarding the examiners' conduct in the viva had been discounted. I sometimes wonder whether the Board was persuaded that something unfair had occurred in the viva, but as succour to the examiners, found a technicality to uphold the appeal? Maybe this is just wishful thinking.

It then took time to put two new examiners in place, both of who were eventually chosen by Prof. Leyland, and then more time still to agree a new viva date. The Graduate School, who were to be arranging this were also slow in progressing matters and Dr Coleman and I had to push hard to get a date confirmed 9 months after the Appeal. Unlike the original set of examiners however, these two designees, Dr's Leans and Browning, actually contacted us to propose ways they could make the examination as comfortable as possible. It was good to have received such a positive initiative.

Q1 Comment on the grounds on which the appeal was upheld and the outcome

Q2 How long is it reasonable for a candidate to wait for a re-examination?

8. The second viva

The second viva when it eventually arrived could not have been more different from the first. The questioning followed a preamble where the examiners gave strong hints that they were satisfied with the work. The initial session ran for an hour, when a break was felt appropriate (something not considered in the last viva). The manner of questioning was positive, almost apologetic. Areas which were previously seen as 'failings' were not covered, except again the question of male/female participant make-up, but here both examiners accepted that this was beyond my control, and noted that I had qualified my findings accordingly. Otherwise, the questioning was fair, and I was given time to consider and answer. To my surprise, and to that of my supervisor, I was told in the break that I had passed with no amendments. This was unexpected, as we all had geared ourselves up from the Appeal to aim for an '18 month' referral. Clearly the examiners had read the thesis, as I had found that commas and punctuation had been added to my manuscript, including the reference section, but I was suspicious of this excellent result.

However, later I was sent the preliminary reports from the examiners, one of whom described the research as in 'the forefront of the field', both proposing an outright pass with only minor presentational amendments. All very perplexing in the light of what went before.

Q1 What information should the new examiners have had about the reasons for the re-examination?

Q2 Comment on the outcome

9. My conclusions

This whole experience, I suppose, can be seen in one of two ways. That the original examiners got the decision right, but, as I started at the College before counsellors contacted all students outlining the assistance they could provide, I fortunately qualified for a second chance. That enabled my Advisor to contact some colleagues, pull a few favours, and get me passed and away from the College without further ado. Or, was it two examiners, one eminent in non-verbal behaviour, influencing the other, semi-retired and not too bothered to read the thesis, and from wanting an easy life, took the only route that allowed him to walk away with no further input? An attitude then saved by two new examiners behaving as my supervisor thought they should in a viva when examining a person with 'claustrophobic' difficulties.

For what it's worth, I believe that my supervisor was negligent. He had never dealt with a part-time student before, and didn't appear to appreciate the difficulties that conflicts of work and study can bring. He was rarely contactable, usually taking 6 to 8 weeks to reply to my emails, and seldom available to call. Something perhaps he could not get a way with when dealing with full-time students on campus. In short, he gave little guidance as to how I should proceed, and took no blame for the slow progress or direction (or lack of direction, depending on your view) of the research. Consequently, the thesis was most likely substandard. The possibility for it being improved, however, was then removed by the first set of examiners, probably pre-viva, as Dr Brown objected to its structure, and turned the viva more into a lecture and an opportunity to obviate himself for further work. The Appeal Committee, concerned about their image as an inclusive establishment, and possible further (including legal) action, upheld the appeal. My Advisor found two new examiners, who were colleagues in this field of research, perhaps whom she knew to be 'soft touches', or whom she instructed to pass me without amendment to get me off of College's books to spare my supervisor from further work.

Whatever the truth, I think the important point to take away from this is that there are two extremes here. One set of examiners concluding that the thesis merited an M.Phil, the other that it merited a PhD, both with no amendments. This polarisation of views will no doubt concern future viva candidates; particularly as both may be some distance away from the more plausible result floated by my IT adviser, of a PhD with an 18-month referral? Can there be an examination, anywhere in academia, where a candidate's performance has so little actual impact on the result? And where examiners judge by subjective criteria drawing inconsistent conclusions that cannot then be questioned however fallaciously they are arrived at?

Team task

On the acetate provided

1. list the main elements of a code of practice for the examination of doctorates
2. what feedback should candidates, supervisors, institutions and examiners receive on the examination process?