

## Courage

This piece has three aims: first, to expose the problematic aspects of the examination process for doctorates; second, to signpost survival; and third, to advocate the need for change, at this level of study.

A review of literature concerning the viva by Leonard et al. (2006) identifies: the need to raise the quality and consistency of the examination process; that training is needed for examiners; and, that the current process is too subjective. Tinkler and Jackson (2002) report a 'widespread feeling of lack of regulation and feelings of powerlessness among PhD candidates in relation to the viva'. These findings are consistent with my experience.

My professional life in business and education provides a context which allows me to reflect critically on the doctoral experience. As programme manager, of a Higher Education course within a Further Education institution, I understand how students are assessed fairly. Undergraduate programmes are rigorously scrutinised with: internal moderation processes; external examiners; programme monitoring and committee meetings; and, award and appeal boards. This insight allows me to question inconsistencies and contradictions, to comment on the lack of transparency, and the unpredictable nature of doctorate examinations, making study at this level an expensive risk.

## Policy model

Ball and Bowe's (1992) policy model proposes that policy analysis requires distinctions between: intended policy; actual policy; and 'policy-in-use' or 'policy enactments' (Maguire et al., 2014, p.2). Each educational institution represents a different policy arena or micro-political world within which a policy text is re-contextualised. The micro-political room of the doctoral oral examination is where the Post Graduate Research handbook is re-enacted. Conduct guidelines for examiners of doctorates are 'only effective if accompanied by mechanisms to ensure that they are adhered to' (Tinkler and Jackson 2002); it is not the doctorate examination policy, but how this is implemented, which is critical.

## What are the success descriptors for a PhD?

The descriptors for the qualification at doctoral level, taken from The Graduate School Research Degree Handbook relevant to my examination are summarised as: the creation and interpretation of new knowledge,

through original research; a systematic acquisition and understanding of a substantial body of knowledge; the general ability to conceptualise, design and implement a project for the generation of new knowledge, and to adjust the project design in the light of unforeseen problems, a detailed understanding of applicable techniques for research and advanced academic enquiry.

The handbook stipulates that holders of the qualification will be able to: make informed judgements on complex issues in specialist fields, and be able to communicate their ideas and conclusions clearly and effectively to specialist and non-specialist audiences. And will have: the qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and largely autonomous initiative in complex and unpredictable situations, in professional or equivalent environments.

The descriptors identify the importance of originality as 'new knowledge', and how conceptualisation of a project, potentially demonstrates qualities and skills transferable to the workplace. They are the measures or filters for the thesis and viva voce; academic judgements are made against them; and, consequently, feedback should refer to descriptors.

### **Transfer from MPhil**

The transfer interview is marked in memory by a bad-tempered interviewer; I wonder if he has been issued a parking fine, as there is yellow plastic wrapping sticking out of his folder. The discussion is vague, without a structure or frame of reference: arbitrary and open to his subjective view. Towards the end my supervisor requests that he ticks boxes on a form, which he resists. There is awkwardness as she stands, leans in, until he ticks. On the return train, I reflect on how the 'lean in' moment rescued two years of research.

### **The viva voce**

The viva is challenging because: it is a verbalisation of a complex and lengthy piece of work under pressure; to address the descriptor concerning originality it is necessary to convey the crafting of new knowledge; and, then there is what Tinkler and Jackson (2002) refer to as, the greatest and least regulated variable, managing the dynamics of interaction.

The examiner's view of the standard of the thesis will dictate the texture of the viva. I am unsettled about this meeting: the outcome of the viva is

unknown and so the agenda hidden; the time frame is undefined (an open return ticket advised); despite access to digital technology, the meeting is unrecorded; because the discussion is behind closed doors without an accurate record, the possibility of scrutiny afterwards is limited. The variability of the viva is widely accepted. I recall being struck by the expectation to accept this unpredictability, as this is how it is.

### **Pre-viva rehearsal**

Talking about the doing and thinking of the research project is different to writing the thesis. Some components of the viva cannot be prepared for, however the ability to present myself adequately during the viva is addressed. Expecting to be challenged on a deep level, I seek out questions, reread the thesis, summarise content and contributions to the field by my examiners, create diagrams to assist recall, prepare visuals, sequence photographs, rehearse with a well-informed friend before a mock viva with the supervisory team. The feedback from the mock is positive: the likely outcome predicted: pass with minor changes.

### **The first viva voce**

Weather can be unpredictable; data considered carefully before sailing, hiking or climbing. One beautiful sunny day, I set out with my brother to climb the highest mountain in Ireland, Corrán Tuathail, in County Kerry. Michael, warning me that people die climbing this mountain, sends me to change into winter clothes; wise, given the severe change in conditions at the top. It is difficult to imagine from the pleasantness at base, the unexpected change on my PhD climb.

The examiners each write a preliminary report prior to the viva. At the time I am not aware of the content but by using a Freedom of Information enquiry at a later stage I find that their reports include the comments: 'I believe this is her own work'; 'convincing arguments'; 'Good reflexive criticality in methods'; and, 'Well written and clearly structured'. Then a thorny comment, 'However, there is a need for more criticality'. The internal examiner's preliminary report states: 'Otherwise for me there are largely minor points to discuss'; and 'Overall, I am content that it's a pass with possibly minor amends'.

A chairperson is appointed due to the limited experience of the internal examiner. The Director of Studies is allowed to sit in on the exam on the

proviso that she will not contribute; she is positioned behind me, which I find disconcerting.

There are five females including myself in the room. Negative memories mount from the outset. A very hostile, biased and pedantic tone, as the first question is asked. My confidence dissipates as the sense of lack of appreciation of the work is apparent. Viva examinations should be held in conditions which allow candidates to perform to the best of their ability (Leonard et al., 2006); this is not the case for me. There is lack of respect to a fellow professional; the Director of Studies describes later how the external examiner rolls her eyes, when I ask her to clarify a point.

The meeting goes beyond two hours; the chairperson fails to step up to the mark and intervene. My brain is drained from the delicate act of defending without being defensive. And then there is the hanging around, waiting to be called back for the verdict, which I know I have been cheated of.

There are moments when disarmed, I regret not speaking out, but that my voice is lost; I am senseless. They throw up the red flag: a pass with major changes. Standing up they wave their arms for congratulatory embraces. Alert, my brain races ahead: this physical expression is unfitting; major changes should not be the outcome and will not satisfy these beasts. I refuse to be hugged; weird I think. The golden ticket held out of my reach; you are not on my side and do not want me in your club, not yet and probably not ever. After hugging each other they sit; words they utter are incomprehensible to me. My clarificatory questions are met with refusal; they have trains to catch, places to be. The external examiner insists on a handshake; I say goodbye to my career in academia, not wanting to be in her club.

### **The aftermath**

The most unpleasant event of my career, self-perceived academic confidence trampled over, I travel back by train to whence I came. Rattled and traumatised by the experience, nothing brings me round.

The next morning, there is some crystallisation of my thinking, the conduct of the examiners towards the candidate, indefensible. If I were to treat an undergraduate student in this way I would be fired. The internal examiner has been unduly influenced by the external examiner; the chair did not intervene. Power relations play out behind the closed doors of an unregulated examination process. The decision to diminish six years of work

is serious. A professor friend frames it as 'academic jealousy'; the external examiner jealous of the candidate's published texts. Before I go to work, I send an email to my supervisors, expressing my dismay, asking what can be done.

Misguided by the supervisory team, I am told to wait for the written feedback, and to make the major changes. This advice later becomes the grounds for a complaint. The written requirements from the examiners are unintelligible; no one can make sense of what they want. I travel to the university to meet with my supervisors to try to fathom the content. Questions are sent to the external examiner to seek clarification; what I consider insulting comments returned.

The power of examiners to undermine the integrity of research by imposing meaningless changes is realised. The examiner feedback is contradictory. It acknowledges that as a candidate I was well prepared and defended myself well. The requirement for a descriptive chapter raises concern in my mind; a description is not in keeping with the tone of a thesis.

Nevertheless, major changes are made, the thesis weakened, the outcome waited on. The examiners reject these changes, re-categorising the work as a Master of Philosophy, MPhil. That I 'defended the thesis well', is irrelevant now; that the decision was made prior to the oral exam, clear.

The major changes are rejected on the grounds of insufficient critical analysis. That the work is failed due to a lack of 'critical analysis' is interesting to note for several reasons. First, the qualification descriptors do not refer to critical analysis which the internal examiner brings to the attention of the graduate school in an internal email exchange. Second, as one of my supervisors argues: a critique is always directed towards a purpose in a line of argument and that unless this is clear it is impossible to satisfy this requirement. The internal examiner changes her original assessment of the thesis: 'There is too much describing rather than analysing of complex issues in the sort of depth expected at level 8'.

### **The complaint/appeal**

What follows is a lengthy ordeal. There is a new complaint and appeal process to navigate. I pursue the feckless cause, searching for procedural or material irregularities as these are the only acceptable challenge.

There is a ten-day deadline within which the appeal needs to be submitted. Working full time, with a young child, whilst constructing an appeal statement, is difficult. The injustice of the academic judgement combined with the way I was treated in the viva, fuel an intense energy.

I make the decision to seek legal expertise. The tick-tock clock talk of solicitors leaves me cold; I discuss the case with a barrister, someone trained to get under the skin of a situation and see it dimensionally. He shreds my verbal defence with, 'so what'. My chances of succeeding he gauges are very low. I decide to take the risk. He tells me that the most useful piece of evidence is the 08:21 email sent the day after the viva, expressing my dismay and asking what can be done. He directs me to get statements from my supervisors; to request that the freedom of information department send all reports concerning the exam.

Biting the hand that is feeding me; I am asking these professionals to support a complaint about their supervision and understand their resistance to implicate themselves. I make the point that the barrister is asking this; they both write substantial statements.

After submitting the appeal, an envelope arrives from the freedom of information team, with the examination related reports and documents. I go through the contents of the envelope, finding procedural irregularities, galore. Using a similar format to the original legal appeal structure, the numerous inconsistencies and inefficiencies are submitted as an additional appeal statement. The thrust of the content is that due care was not taken by examiners in providing clear guidance about what they required.

Unexplained delays follow. It takes nerve for me to telephone and speak to the complaints and appeal manager. After months of waiting, I instigate a meeting with the then Director of Student Services, travel by train with my purple file of evidence, for a difficult meeting; the purpose for me, to shift the stagnated process.

The complaint is upheld, and then needs to be dealt with as an appeal; the process takes months. The appeal is upheld; the letter ambiguously worded, 'you may have been disadvantaged'. There is no doubt that as a candidate I was dis-advantaged. The door slides open for a re-examination with a different team of examiners.

### **The re-examination**

The inherent unpredictability of a viva haunts me for the second examination. Power play between student, supervisor and examiners, remains a threat to a positive outcome. A second viva with the same procedures for, selecting examiners, and protocol for examiner conduct towards students, offers no protection. I would not have invested in this qualification if I had understood that the 're-enactment' (Ball and Bowe 1992) of doctoral examination policy is unregulated.

The process of choosing an external examiner, is crucial to rescuing this situation, and is fraught with tension. The selection of an examiner who grasps the research paradigm and who has academic integrity is crucial. I let go of re-examination issues concerning: gender imbalance; protection from bias; and the threat of time to the perishable nature of my data. The ensuing lapse of time threatens the originality of my research with each passing day, week, month and by now, a year. The time delay between the first and the second viva, is two years and two months.

A mock viva is proposed. Off I go on the train; mock viva voce, becoming an expensive habit. One of the interview panel says she is glad that I had the courage to appeal. Given the option to submit either the original or revised thesis, I have no doubt about submitting the original thesis.

### **The second viva voce**

The viva is chaired by a professor who has the inside story about the complaint and appeal. The Director of Studies has left the institution by then; the second supervisor, away on other business, leaves a colleague who offers to sit in on the oral exam. I take the decision to go it alone, risking not having a witness.

Fearful that the new examiners may not be fair, puts me in my own shadow. Of fear Edmund Burke (1729–1797) says, 'No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its power of acting and reasoning as fear'. Examiners decide on different things depending on their agenda; the chair tries to give me a clue as to the position of the decision, but this is lost on me as I try to establish the nature of their scepticism.

The second viva follows the same formulaic steps as the first; there are aspects that leave a bad taste. I feel powerless; because of the history, it cannot be a positive experience. I wonder how much of the history is known

to the examiners; it is an odd situation which I cannot trust. There is no question about the research design or methodology; there is no doubt about the originality of the contribution the work makes to the field. I needed to be informed of this at the outset of the exam, so that I could step out of the darkness and enjoy some light.

The outcome is pass, the words 'minor changes' like a bell sounding in the distance. I am ready for the congratulatory moment; pre-empting any hugging, by saying a handshake will do. The minor changes submitted, the waiting begins, and after the expected outcome date passes, I telephone the university: another unexplained delay. I think of the consequences as a student of not meeting the appeal deadline. The minor changes are accepted.

### **The second complaint**

Accountability at a senior level for the way post graduate research is examined is lacking. I muster the mental energy to write a letter to the vice chancellor. In the letter I offer to contribute to a review of how doctorates are examined at the university; I ask for my expenses to be reimbursed, three additional copies of the thesis had to be printed and posted, along with travel for a mock viva and second examination. Via internal email the vice chancellor redirects the matter, asking that someone 'deal with this person'.

I am directed to follow the process for formal complaints, filling in the same forms as previously. They inform me that since my experience the Post Graduate Research Handbook has been revised: revisions to the handbook align with much of the content of my appeal. However, my complaint is deemed to be 'out of time'.

### **The graduation ceremony**

I have no regret attending the award ceremony. I find myself on the end of a row, and to my left, the MPhil transfer interviewer. So, at the time of the transfer interview, he did not hold this level of qualification. He pretends he does not remember me: I remind him. I ask him about his original contribution to the field; he explains his doctorate award is based on a portfolio of published material. He tells me that it has taken him ten years, as he has been busy. I reflect on how I worked full time in a similar role to his, in the more challenging context of further education, with three of nine



years taken up challenging unethical examiner behaviour and an inefficient appeal process.

### **Review of the PhD in Social Sciences**

The consultation on the future of the PhD in the Social Sciences conducted by Centre for Enterprise Research (CFE) and University of York, for the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) questions: the relevance of skills for future careers; preparation for non-academic career pathways; and, safeguarding student health and wellbeing. Unless reviews go beyond confirming the contradictions, inconsistencies and irregularities, the endeavour will be futile.

### **Conclusion**

There can be no confidence in the internal architecture of the level 8 examination process when the same thesis, examined by two teams of examiners, results in two different outcomes, an MPhil and a PhD.

My first viva is an example of poor examiner conduct; a private affair behind closed doors, which without accurate records is protected from full scrutiny. A clear rationale for making academic judgements is an examiner responsibility; feedback should refer to the qualification descriptors.

United Kingdom doctorates are unfit for purpose: first, the re-contextualisation of examination policy is open to abuse; second, the connection to employers and employability, is not optimised.

Though policy for examination of doctorates is clearly documented by Quality Assurance Agency (QAA, 2014;2018) and university handbooks, these codes of practice are not consistently implemented in ways that safeguard candidates. Policy for re-examination is even less defined with unanswered questions concerning the protection of the candidate against examiner bias. Without assurance that policy guidelines are adhered to, the viva procedure brings disrepute to the business of the doctorate examination.

Setting out as a postgraduate research student is under a contractual arrangement and should not become such an emotive experience. That postgraduate study is an unstable situation requiring that students protect themselves against subjectivity; arbitrariness; academic jealousy; and, other unpredictable variables, is unacceptable.



Surviving an additional three years of trauma, anxiety, and expense, relies on courage.