

Courage: the pilgrim and the tourist

This is a story of my experience as a doctorate student. This reflective piece has three aims: first, to expose the problematic aspects of the examination process for doctorates; second, to signpost others away from a repetition of what I experienced; and third, to advocate the need for change.

Listening to a Sunday morning broadcast of *Something Understood* (2020), I am struck by how Satish Kumar distinguishes between pilgrim and tourist. Embarking on a doctorate, I feel like a pilgrim, 'a person who journeys to a special place for religious reasons' (Cambridge Dictionary); as I set out, a feeling of going somewhere special, where not many others go, tilts my ego a little.

Unfortunately, I am examined by a tourist, 'a person making a visit or tour as a holiday' (ibid), who mis-judges my thesis, costing me time and money.

Defining terms

A doctorate is 'the highest university degree in any faculty, sometimes honorary' (ibid, p.237); philosophy is 'advanced learning in general' and encompasses (Doctor of Philosophy) (ibid p.614). A thesis is 'a proposition to be maintained or proved, a dissertation (ibid, p.863). A viva voce means 'subject to an oral examination' (ibid, p.933). Jealousy is 'resentful of rivalry in love or affection' (ibid, p.432); academic is 'to do with learning' (ibid, p.19); and so, academic jealousy is considered as resentful of learning or of scholarly success.

Central to this story is courage; 'the ability to disregard one's fear; bravery' (ibid, p.190). Courage to challenge unfair examiner academic conduct and a malfunctioning complaints and appeal process, is at the core of this story.

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.

Before telling the story, I offer context by looking through the lens of my professional life in business and education. This context allows me to reflect critically, to question inconsistencies and contradictions.

The professional context

An autobiographical account tells something of my character and professional experience. Though I may come across as cautious, on closer analysis I am a risk taker. An early memory from primary school is of hiding in a rowing boat, as a friend and I decide to skip an afterschool French lesson. The rush of excitement, the fear of misjudging the lesson timeframe (we were without a watch), and the relief of returning

home and getting away with it, stay with me as an exciting experience of risk. The lack of transparency, and the unpredictable nature of doctorate examinations, makes study at this level an expensive risk.

I took higher level mathematics, chemistry and physics in a secondary comprehensive school which at the time were subjects not many girls studied, and in some schools were not even available options. I went on to take Analytical Science at Dublin City University, learning methods of analysis such as High Performance Liquid Chromatography (HPLC), spending long hours in the laboratory. In the fourth year an option of specialising in analytical biology was introduced. Initially I was the only student to take this up, though others followed once I made the transition. The decision to study higher level mathematics at secondary school paid off, as many students did not pass the second year, failing mathematics.

I left Dublin for London, facing the challenge of seeking employment without an address and an address without employment. I had an Analytical Science degree which I did not want to pursue as a career, finding myself drawn more to interactions with people rather than experiments in laboratories.

After nine months in a telephone sales position, I secured a driving licence and was offered a job as a medical representative in the pharmaceutical industry with GLAXO. This involved selling respiratory medicine to General Practitioners and Ear Nose and Throat hospital consultants in the South West of England. I was successful at this, and ambition drove me to promotion to a managerial role in a smaller company.

Following a skiing accident, which prevented me from driving for six weeks, I took the decision to redirect my career and retrain as a teacher, gaining a PGCE (Early Years) and Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) a year later. I worked as a Reception and Nursery Teacher in England and for the British Council in Spain. The decision to teach young children reveals something of my personality: an ability to seek out and adapt to new challenges. These changes in direction are an outcome of an attitude of versatility based on deep reflection. I have a natural tendency to analyse and interpret to arrive at a position of understanding, a quality valuable for postgraduate research.

My early years training established a belief in play as essential to children's learning. Motivation to leave primary teaching was due to tension between my play ethos and opposition from management in schools about the value of play.

I realise now that these tensions exemplify Ball and Bowe's (1992) policy model. These researchers propose that policy analysis requires distinctions between intended policy; actual policy; and 'policy-in-use' or 'policy enactments' (Maguire et al., 2014, p.2).

There seemed to be a divide between the content of the curriculum, 'actual policy' and what head teachers want to happen in schools, 'policy enactments'.

Each school or educational institution represents a different policy arena or micro-political world within which a policy text is re-contextualised. Similarly, 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); how the policy will be implemented, needs to be monitored.

A career as an early years lecturer in Further Education beckoned along with an interest in children's mathematical development. I see an opportunity to further my learning: Post Graduate Diploma in Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLD dyslexia), then a Masters and then a Doctorate. This is all to be part funded by my employer, bringing a moral responsibility on my part to achieve.

Principles for fair assessment

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. Careful consideration is given to student work; a robust and rigorous marking process means that a proportion of work is marked by a module leader, second marker and an external examiner. Indeed, when a submission is failed, feedback refers to assessment criteria, identifying clearly which criteria are not satisfied, and how shortcomings can be addressed. In the case of the research projects I assessed, there is a weighting given for the written component and for the oral presentation, for example 70% and 30%, each part having distinct assessment criteria. Presentations were an opportunity for the student to take flight; to shine as they share their enthusiasm for their chosen area of research. But clear criteria for written and oral assessment, quality feedback, and sound academic judgement, are not what I encounter as a doctorate student.

This background context tells something about my drive to take on challenges as a cautious risk taker and of my personal and professional experience of undergraduate and postgraduate study. So, working full time, in a further education college, I carry out research in a primary school, for a doctorate qualification, from a higher education institution. Key to my time management is integrating work-based opportunity and academic experience, capitalising on trips made to the university campus and optimising library partnerships between these two institutions.

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 expected to refer to descriptors.

Transfer from MPhil to PhD

The transfer interview is marked in my 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. Afterwards, going down in the lift, she spits out her fury.

I go to source the material recommended by the interviewer: a collection of inaccessible texts, from different fields on different floors of the library. On the return train, I think 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.

I know that the examiner's view of the standard of the thesis will dictate the texture of the viva. My experience in business and as an academic means I am unsettled about this meeting: the outcome of the thesis 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 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 and provides useful suggestions: the likely outcome, pass with minor changes.

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, how things can turn so severe. I do not anticipate how conditions are to change on my PhD climb.

The first viva voce

The report of the external examiner on the thesis is made available at a later stage via the freedom of information department. I then discover that the report 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 opinion of the thesis: '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. The external examiner acts like a tourist casually enjoying a day out at the sea: she is not searching out the landscape of concepts in a meaningful way.

Then the rush to the female toilets; the chatting grates for me. Walking down the corridor the chairperson puts her hand on my shoulder asking if I am alright; too late for concern now. 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, of which I know I have been cheated. Academic power holders prepare to bring the wounded bull back into their bloodied ring.

There are moments when disarmed, I regret not speaking out, but that my voice is lost, as I am in a state of senselessness. 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 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 plan in academia, not wanting to be in her club. The decision to diminish six years of work is serious; as a tourist the external examiner is not likely to return to this place, caring little for the view.

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 tumbled 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 incapable of intervening. Power relations play out behind the closed doors of an unregulated examination process. 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 is incorrect advice which 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 are 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 the thesis.

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

The external examiner rejects the major changes 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 highlights in an email exchange with the graduate school. 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, with 'glitches'. It is as if I am standing outside a factory with high metal oiled doors keeping me out. A snippet from an internet search gives me hope: a survivor of a similar situation. I pursue the futile 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, constructing an appeal statement, pushes me close to the edge. The PhD pilgrimage is no longer about journeying to somewhere special; as the lyrics convey, courage - is in harmony with something other than my ego (Villagers 2015). The injustice of the academic judgement and 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 who can get under the skin of it and see it dimensionally. A wild character: I have no choice but to go with him. 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. He directs me to get statements from my supervisors; to request that the freedom of information team send all reports concerning the exam.

One of my supervisors declines my request to write a supporting statement; the other writes from Bangkok airport. 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. Re-approaching them, I make the point that the barrister is asking this; they both write substantial statements.

After paying the barrister, a framework for an appeal appears. This is problematic as it is not my appeal content. The task to rework this is unexpected. There is no time to enter into battle with a barrister; I restructure, keeping the legal language and case reference he provides, adding my content. After submitting the appeal, an envelope arrives from the freedom of information team, with the examination related reports and documents. One sunny afternoon, 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 included and 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 some nerve for me to telephone and speak to the complaints and appeal manager. On one call she wishes me a happy bank holiday; another time, she goes off on holiday leaving the file unattended for weeks. 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 stagnant 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. There are so many procedural irregularities, which cannot be ignored. 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 examination policy is unregulated.

The process of choosing an external examiner, is fraught with tension, and is crucial to rescuing this situation. It is difficult to find a willing and suitable individual. The selection of an examiner who grasps the research paradigm and who has academic integrity is crucial. I am told that whether the examiner holds professor status or not, does not matter; it does to me, and I hold out on this. 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, year. The time delay between the first and the second viva, is two years and two months.

A mock viva is proposed. Hardly necessary is my inner thought, however, I agree in case a decision not to, comes back to bite. Off I go on the train; mock viva voce, becoming an expensive habit. One of the panel says she is glad that I had the courage to appeal; her words, a blessing for the journey ahead. 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 the sun.

On returning to the ring, after the interval, 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. I ask for specific guidance about what they want as changes, which texts they recommend. They are responsive and I source these books while on campus.

The minor changes submitted, the waiting begins, and after the expected outcome date has passed, I telephone the university. Another unexplained delay, an extension to the wait, of ten days. I think of the deadlines I had to meet as a student, and the consequences of not meeting these. The minor changes are accepted.

The second complaint

There should be some accountability at a senior level for the way post graduate research is examined, for the culture of doctorate study. 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 and fill in the forms; they tell me that the Post Graduate Research Handbook has been revised but that my complaint is 'out of time'. The revisions to the handbook align with much of the content of my appeal.

The graduation ceremony

I have no regret attending the award ceremony; the material of the hat and gown, exquisite. I find myself on the end of a row, and to my left, the man who interviewed me for the MPhil transfer. 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 with work. 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. I think about the lyrics: courage - is a feeling like no other (Villagers 2015).

Review of the PhD in Social Sciences

Following this experience, I contribute to 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). This review questions: the relevance of skills for future careers; preparation for non-academic career pathways; and safeguarding student health and wellbeing. I am sceptical of reviews, unless they go beyond confirming the contradictions, inconsistencies and irregularities, and drive a different culture for doctorate examination.

My conclusion

I have no confidence in the internal architecture of the level 8 examination process. Before making an investment, survey the structure: I would not knowingly buy a property, that might collapse as the key is turned in the door. My first viva is an example of poor examiner conduct; a private affair behind closed doors, without accurate records, protected from full scrutiny. The feedback fails to reference the qualification descriptors: a clear rationale for making academic judgements is an examiner responsibility. Without assurance that guidelines are adhered to, the viva brings disrepute to the business of the doctorate examination.

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) and university handbooks, these codes of practice are not necessarily implemented in ways that safeguard candidates. Policy for re-examination is even less defined with unanswered questions concerning the protection of an originally submitted thesis against bias. It is in these gaps that issues fester.

Setting out as a postgraduate research student is a business arrangement and should not be such an emotive experience. Doctoral study is an unstable situation against which students are expected to protect themselves: subjectivity; arbitrariness; and unpredictable variables. My survival of the additional three years of trauma, anxiety, and expense relies on risk taking and professional insight: no price can be put on the toll this journey takes on my well-being. This story about the same thesis, examined by two teams of examiners, resulting in two different outcomes, is one of personal resilience and courage.

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