

Jennifer's decision

Dear John,

I hope you don't mind me contacting you regarding the article 'What Goalposts?' at <http://education.guardian.co.uk/higher/postgraduate/story/0,12848,890233,00.html>

It's quite a long time after the event, since your article was published in 2002, but it's still incredibly relevant and I'm glad I found it. Some of the quotes from students about their experiences in the viva could have almost been spoken by me; a slightly eerie feeling!

The paragraph that particularly resonated with me was "The majority attributed the failure to inadequacies in supervision - only to discover that this was specifically excluded as grounds for appeal. They should, they were told, have submitted a complaint about that at the time." In my case, a very dedicated supervisor, but what she considered to be of PhD standard was clearly very different from my examiners - a huge discrepancy which, of course, only became evident during the viva, so there was no way I could have complained about it previously.

Perhaps I shouldn't have found your article reassuring, since nothing in the system has apparently changed since 2002, but it shows me that at least other students have been in similar situations to me - it's not only me that has failed to achieve a PhD. There's a tendency to feel very isolated after the event; the way I can best describe it is that the university's "shutters come down".

Your article concludes that "the next generation of PhD candidates may be more prepared to take this risk". Unfortunately, in my case, I won't be taking the risk; having spent two agonizing months weighing up the pros and cons of appealing, I've decided the cons far outweigh the pros. This is perhaps one of the hardest decisions I'll ever have to make, and one which I know, despite logically being the right decision, I will question for years to come.

But thanks again for addressing this very important but overlooked issue (I certainly wasn't aware of how many students fail PhDs until I was put in that situation myself).

Best wishes,

Jennifer

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Dear John,
Thanks for replying so swiftly to my email - I didn't expect that!

I would definitely be willing to write an account of my experiences; in fact I've attached a (long!) account which was written mainly for my own sanity, so please feel free to edit as you will. I'm aware that it does ramble, but felt it necessary to include as much 'evidence' as possible: it was written when I was still considering an appeal, so wanted to retain as much information as possible to help me. My reasons for deciding not to appeal are contained within the document.

Unfortunately, the University hasn't extended their grounds for appeal to cover those who had no idea that their work wasn't up to standard until it was examined. If it had, it's difficult to say whether this would have swayed my decision regarding the appeal. Certainly, I would have felt the system was fairer; as it stands it does not take into account the fact that the viva is incredibly subjective, and that whilst one established academic (i.e. my supervisor) might feel one way, other academics might feel completely the opposite (my examiners). This is not my 'fault', but I've been punished for it. I also feel that, with hindsight, I should have had two supervisors - a rule that was introduced during my time at Judas College. I mention more about this in the attached document.

However, on balance, I feel that I still would not have appealed. I worked part-time throughout the five years in which I was studying for the PhD, and my job has now become full-time. It's the first time I've ever been on a full-time wage (at the age of 28!) and so the first time I have financial security, and I'm loathe to go back to part-time working, even though my administrative job is not where I see my future. So bearing this in mind, I can't bear the thought of spending up to eighteen months re-writing at weekends and evenings. I don't want to appear someone who gives up at the first hurdle, but my experience (and finding out about so many other similar - or even worse - experiences) has soured the idea of working in academia for me, so the PhD is no longer necessary to me as a professional qualification.

The letter officially informing me of the viva outcome gives me two months in which to either appeal or accept the MPhil, and this runs out on 12 June. This is another point I think it's worth making: for the first month or so after the viva, the candidate will quite obviously be devastated. For this period, researching into the appeal system, possible avenues of help, etc. was - in my case at least - almost too painful to consider. It's only now, as time runs out, that I'm starting to find contacts who might be able to offer advice. My earlier comment about the university's "shutters coming down" is particularly relevant in this capacity: two months is not a generous enough grace period to give someone who has just undergone a traumatic experience and needs time to recover and properly consider their options.

Just to give me some idea, I hope you wouldn't mind answering two brief questions based on estimations of the students who've contacted you. How many of them decide to appeal, and what percentage of these is successful? Plus, what is the most common outcome of the appeal - is it rewriting, and if so, how long does the average rewrite take?

Anyway, thanks once again for responding so quickly. I'm so glad someone out there is addressing this problem.

Best wishes,

Jennifer

The attachment

I've been studying 5 years part-time at Judas College for an interdisciplinary thesis on Victorian art and literature. I'd progressing steadily, passed the MPhil to PhD upgrade on the first attempt and on schedule, drafted and re-drafted the thesis, met regularly with my supervisor, taught undergrad classes, etc., and throughout all of this, the standard of my work as PhD quality was never questioned. In my annual research student progress reports, I always marked my progress as good; I was never made to feel at any point that my thesis was causing concern.

I submitted my thesis in December and had my viva in late March.... after which I was awarded an MPhil.

My supervisor was as shocked by the outcome as me. Just after I came out of the viva, I phoned her and she asked me to describe in detail what happened, then said it sounded like they were very harsh. She was also upset that they didn't tell me the result in the viva itself; instead they had told me to leave and that they would contact my supervisor. I waited for three hours before my supervisor phoned me. She said that one of the examiners had emailed her, which frustrated her because she had no chance of voicing her opinion as she could have done with a phone call. She said that from what I told her about the viva she was expecting, probably, a re-write, but was genuinely surprised that I'd been denied that opportunity.

My viva examination, attended only by the two examiners and me, took the form of a sort of 'bad cop and good cop' routine, where the purpose of the bad cop was to tell me in great detail everything that was wrong in an extremely stern manner. The good cop was slightly less intimidating, with qualified praise ('This was a good bit of research – but it gets lost' or 'This was interesting, but it passed too quickly, I wanted more') in between other criticisms.

At one point, the good cop was forced to turn to the bad cop and tell him, 'I think you've said enough, perhaps we should go on to something else now' – she seemed almost embarrassed by his rant. Although I was given the opportunity to answer some of the questions, many others were asked almost rhetorically, as if he'd composed a long list and just wanted to vent his spleen about how despicably bad my thesis was.

I appreciate that both examiners thought the thesis wasn't up to PhD standard and would naturally be disappointed that a student had not managed to come up to the required standard after five years of study, but I felt that I was somehow being morally judged. At one point the bad cop said, 'This is bad scholarship, it's not acceptable', and I felt I was being told off like a child at school. It was certainly not a dialogue or a conversation.

After an hour of being told everything that was wrong with the thesis, good cop said to me 'Right, I think we've both talked enough, is there anything you want to say about the thesis?' Although obviously by this stage I was highly demoralised and aware that there was nothing I could really say to change their opinion of the thesis, this small window was my only opportunity to actually explain what I was trying to do, so I gave an short account, perhaps only three minutes or so, outlining the reasons why my argument demanded a broad approach.

To my examiners, this probably cemented their view that the broadness was necessary to the argument, and therefore that the thesis couldn't realistically be rewritten. But if they had said to me something along the lines of – 'This is what we feel is wrong with it, do you realistically think you could address these issues?' - I could have made some suggestions. Basically, there was a lack of openness on the examiners' part. In their reports which I received after the viva (but were written prior to it), they have both explicitly stated that they do not think the thesis could be rewritten in eighteen months: 'For these reasons I do not feel that this thesis merits the award of PhD' and 'It would not in my view be possible easily to re-cast the current thesis in the ways suggested above as it would involve the candidate in going back to the drawing board and rethinking the whole project'. Importantly, they didn't tell me this in the viva itself. They did not make it clear what they actually wanted me to do to improve the thesis, which is, I believe, because they thought it was 'beyond help'. There is, after all, no point in constructive criticism if the student isn't going to be given the opportunity of rewriting. The impression was given, confirmed by the reports, that my examiners had made their decision before beginning the examination, and the purpose of the examination was simply to tell me all that was wrong with my thesis and how badly I'd failed. This lack of openness concluded in them not telling me the outcome whilst I was in the examination room, so I had no chance to counter and ask if there was any possibility of a re-write.

I went into the viva aware that it was by no means going to be easy, and that the purpose is for the candidate to defend their work against criticism and attempt to provide answers to difficult questions. The examiners picked up on many issues with which I agree and found very useful to have pointed out to me. But the majority of these could be changed by a rewrite. For example, they picked up on generalisations/ tautologies, which could obviously be changed. The main problem as they saw it, to which they kept returning, was the broadness of the thesis. This, they felt, didn't allow me to focus in on single subjects in sufficient depth to be of PhD standard. Interestingly, they had no problem with the argument – in fact 'good cop' said she thought it was an interesting subject which needed to be addressed, but in effect, this wasn't the thesis to do it.

I believe that the examiners did not want to concede, to any degree, to the reasoning behind my argument. There was no sense of, 'Well, we wouldn't have done it this way personally, but we appreciate that theses come in very different styles, and although it's currently too broad to be acceptable, we concede that it could be of PhD quality if one or two aspects of the scope

could be narrowed and focused’.

Off the record, my supervisor is very much on my side, saying ‘I think they were very harsh, broader theses than yours have passed’, and has admitted ‘it just depends on the examiners and what kind of work they prefer’. But on the record (i.e. email), she has been a lot more guarded, and understandably so, as she chose the examiners and obviously knows them as colleagues.

As to my reasons for not appealing, although an appeal makes sense in terms of achieving a sense of justice, there are (sadly) far more reasons against:

- a) The appeal itself is designed to be hugely intimidating: the examiners are invited into the appeal room with me and give their point of view.
- b) The most likely outcome if the appeal is successful (realistically, bearing in mind my supervisor’s comments), is up to eighteen months’ rewrite. Do I want to punish myself with eighteen more months of it, especially now I have a full time job, and when I no longer have a desire for a career in academia? It all depends on what the second set of examiners would ask me to change. I could definitely manage a six month rewrite, even (perhaps reluctantly) a year, but if they were asking me to change a large amount of the thesis, which would realistically take eighteen months ... well, this is a huge risk considering that if my appeal is successful I have to go with whatever outcome the second set of examiners choose. The moment an appeal is upheld, the outcome of the first viva becomes void, and the candidate is forced to accept the outcome of the second viva. So if the outcome was eighteen months of rewriting, I would be forced to do this or come out of it with nothing at all.
- c) Because the regulations specify I can only appeal against how the viva was conducted, and excludes anything prior to this, I’m prevented from discussing one of the most crucial facts: what my (very dedicated) supervisor considered to be of PhD standard was clearly very different from my examiners. Of course, this huge discrepancy only became evident during the viva, so there was no way I could have complained about it previously. If my supervisor had given me concern that my subject was too broad to be considered of PhD standard, I would have immediately re-considered my subject and reformulated it to fit the criteria. I have a natural tendency to ‘go wide’ in my research work, but this does not mean that I would have stubbornly ignored advice to narrow my field. I greatly respected my supervisor and trusted her judgement as an established academic. In June 2005, after reading through a draft of my entire thesis, she issued me with some notes. In these notes, the issue of the broadness of my thesis is mentioned, but is done so in conjunction with many other points – it certainly isn’t cited as a particular problem. She told me that it would probably be raised at the viva, because it was unusual for a thesis to be this broad, but at no point did she ever suggest that it didn’t meet the criteria for a PhD. As long as I was able to argue why I had chosen a broad field of research, and relate it directly to my argument, she felt that I would be able to effectively defend it in my viva.

I'm familiar with the guidelines for the award of PhD, but these do not refer anywhere to how broad/narrow/focused a PhD should be, so I could not be expected to know from these guidelines exactly whether my thesis was correct in this matter; instead, for this I had to rely on my supervisor. Obviously in the course of my research I've looked at other theses, but theses can differ immensely within the PhD structure, and it is often difficult to relate your own work to others.

I've given a number of well-received papers at conferences, so have had positive feedback from other students and academics (including a comment from one of the organisers of a conference I attended in 2005: 'If your paper is any indication of what your thesis is like, you'll have no trouble passing'. Oh, the irony!) But of course it's only the thesis in its entirety which is examined, and since late 2002, only my supervisor has read it. In hindsight, this seems an incredible risk to take: however respected an academic, her opinion about the scope of a thesis might well be that of a minority. When, after the viva, I suggested the risk inherent in having a single supervisor, she replied, 'Well, you could have approached another academic and asked them to look over it'. Even if I had found an academic who was willing, as a favour (or more likely a payment), to read a 94,000 word thesis that wasn't the work of one of their own PhD students, the chances are they would not be a specialist in my field. And why should I pay extra, on top of my fees, to receive advice that should be provided by my own college?

I notice that in the Judas College Research Student Handbook 2005-6 the Appointment of Supervisors section states that 'each postgraduate research student should have a main supervisor, who will normally be the first point of contact; and a second supervisor' (either academic co-supervisor, associate supervisor or reserve supervisor). When I began my studies in 2000, this rule was not in place, so my supervisor worked alone. I would be interested to find out why this ruling has been introduced – could it be because of the risks inherent in letting a single supervisor's opinion be the only one sought?