

Paula's story

The years leading up to completion of my PhD had been uneventful. I had developed a productive and good relationship with my supervisor and the project itself had gone well. At the time my study, a randomized controlled trial, was unique in nursing as the discipline does not easily lend itself to such methodologies. Nevertheless, in writing up the thesis, I felt fairly confident that my chosen intervention could contribute to the "body of knowledge".

The external examiner was known to me. Working in a small field of healthcare, there were few options, but she was selected by both my supervisors and I believed that her own PhD highlighted the important contribution to care that could be made by nurses. And her approach seemed to be consistent with my own work. Also I had known her for some years. She seemed to me to be fair and sensible and I anticipated that she would provide an honest and fair assessment of my study.

There was nothing to suggest, therefore, that the conduct of the viva would be anything other than satisfactory. Although, I was prepared for fairly extensive questioning and the need to defend my work, I was sure that the final outcome would be positive and that the main issue would relate to the amount of amendments requested by the examiners.

Prior to the viva, I met with my supervisor and he questioned me in a manner that he believed would be adopted by the examiners. I could not help feeling a little nervous, but he was reassuring that things should go well. The internal examiner had not indicated any major concerns to him.

The viva began. Present were an internal and external examiner, a chairperson and my supervisor.

Immediately, the external examiner began an onslaught on my work, firing questions at me without giving me any opportunity to respond. Even when I did get the opportunity to try and explain something, she was scathing and dismissive of my attempts. I did not know what had hit me. The internal examiner appeared more sympathetic and reassuring, but the external even dismissed his questions and continued to tear me to shreds.

Finally, the cross-examination ended and I was asked to leave accompanied by my supervisor. After about half an hour we were asked to return and the chair informed me that I had been unsuccessful for the degree of PhD but that, if I amended the thesis, I could resubmit for an MPhil.

I was stunned, not really understanding what was happening and filled with all sorts of emotions. I just looked at my supervisor who also appeared stunned. All the time that the chair was speaking, I was aware that the external examiner was staring at me, but she did not show any emotion, just a cold blank stare. Eventually, the chair asked the examiners to leave and they just got up and walked out without a word. At this stage, I did not cry, I was still too shocked. There was nothing to be said, so I started off on my long journey home.

Ten days later, I returned to the University for an appointment with my supervisor. The external had left a lengthy list of amendments which ranged from spelling and grammatical errors to major structural rewrites. The supervisor explained that the chair had been so concerned about the onslaught that he had wanted to stop the viva but had decided not to. The internal examiner would not discuss the conduct of the viva with him at all.

By this time I had decided that I wanted to appeal against the conduct of the external examiner. I had also at the time been suffering from mental health problems. This had meant that I had been unable to respond to such a vicious attack.

The appeal was submitted. I wanted to have the opportunity to rewrite for a PhD. My main grounds were: procedural error, extenuating circumstances (my health) and the conduct of the external examiner in the viva. I attached supporting letters from various colleagues who had heard me present my study at seminars, and I was able to demonstrate with a long list of publications that the work had been peer reviewed extensively.

The appeal panel was convened three months later. They were friendly but firm in their questioning, asking me to clarify the grounds on which I had appealed. My supervisor was allowed to attend and could attest to my ability.

They informed me that the decision would be sent in a few days by post.

The letter arrived. The decision was that my appeal had been upheld on health grounds and that I would be allowed to amend the thesis and resubmit to the original examiners for the degree of PhD. I was given 12 months to complete the work. I was pleased but a little cautious of the likely response of the external when she was told that her original decision would have to be reconsidered.

The amendments were carried out adhering closely to the suggestions made by both examiners and – with my supervisor’s encouragement - the thesis was resubmitted 10 months later.

Then I waited and waited. As the months passed, I became worried that something was not right.

Eventually, ten months later, I contacted the university registrar asking if there was any news. He knew of my case and was very sympathetic that I was still awaiting an outcome, assuring me that he would chase things up.

Two weeks later, I received the letter stating that I had been unsuccessful for the degree of PhD, but I would be awarded the MPhil.

This time my response was anger. After all this time, the outcome was still negative. I immediately contacted the students' union for advice. They were excellent and advised me to appeal again and ask for new examiners or I would be prepared to call for the "visitor".

My supervisor was also amazed, but he explained how the external examiner had written to him, outlining the fact that she was unhappy with my thesis. She based her final report upon recommendations of a friend to whom she had given my thesis for advice.

The report from her friend was enclosed and totally matched the comments of the external. I could not believe that this examiner had defaced my thesis by removing my name and passed it to a colleague to read and comment upon.

This was the grounds for my second appeal. Two other independent professors offered to read my thesis to see if it really was this bad and they supported me with testimonies stating that the work was worthy of a PhD and that I had an international reputation for my work in the field.

The outcome for Paula

The appeal panel members were again sympathetic, but firm.

A few days later, I received the letter stating that the decision would be set aside and new examiners would be appointed. Six months later, I attended a new viva. The internal and external examiners were this time probing but fair. This was a totally different experience.

The outcome was that I should merely make some amendments to the thesis that would just need to be approved by the internal examiner, which I was able to do within two months. Nearly three years after the first viva, I was awarded my PhD.

Even now, I occasionally reflect how different my career could have been had I been awarded the PhD originally. I would have been the first PhD within my department and maybe would have been promoted by now. But what is more sad is the fact that had I not had the strength to appeal and had the support of my supervisor and colleagues to go through the whole process, twice, I would have never obtained my doctorate and my career could have been ruined by an external examiner who, for reasons I will never know, did not like my work.

I did actually meet her subsequently at a professional meeting. She apologized. I was so gobsmacked! But I just said 'I do not want to discuss it' and walked away. Part of me wishes that I had, because I would still like to know why...