

Paulo's experience

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My PhD, scheduled to take six part-time years, went well enough for the first 4¹/₂ years. After that I found my relationship with my supervisor (whom I will call M) deteriorating quite sharply. Ten years younger than me, he was stressed since a job/house move, and suffered from a heavy administrative and teaching workload. I was always sympathetic concerning these problems, but his stressed state made him touchy and inflexible. I lived 250 miles away, and arranging contact time was a problem; I found myself envying other postgrad students who described much more accommodating attitudes than I was experiencing. The result was a steady decline in quantity of supervision:

Year 1: (approx) 11 hrs in 10 sessions

Year 2: 7 hrs in 6 sessions

Year 3: 8 hrs in 5 sessions

Year 4: 7 hrs in 4 sessions and 2 telephone calls

Year 5: 6 hrs in 4 sessions

Year 6: 6 hrs in 5 sessions

I don't think this remotely resembles the university's guidelines on quantity of supervision.

Before turning the page, discuss the issues raised

The supervision time I did have therefore had to be tightly focused on the detail of my work, not its general sweep nor the bigger picture of other work in this area. Aware that a PhD should extend beyond craft skills, I tried once or twice to broaden discussion, but with little success. I'm not only blaming M for this; it's a general malaise observable in many institutions and at all levels of education.

Before turning the page, discuss the issues raised

With hindsight, I would warn prospective PhD students to think carefully before embarking on studies at a distance. You will need to be self-sufficient, not depending on frequent contact or on the university's library facilities. Nor will you be able to network or interact with other staff or postgrads – and that I missed greatly.

Before turning the page, discuss the issues raised

Despite my worsening relationship with M, his experience and attention to detail meant that my submission would be of suitable standard; I felt confident of that. Having enjoyed the earlier part of my studies, I now felt that I'd had enough of it all, and looked forward to completing the process (I imagine many PhD students must experience this sensation!). I asked M whether the viva could be a problem: 'absolutely not,' he said, and this still appeared to be the case after my mock viva, which went easily and well (too easily, too well, as became apparent).

Before turning the page, discuss the issues raised

In the event, the viva came as a terrible shock. Essentially, two things went wrong, and I compounded these with a third: my failure to react and cope with this situation.

The first 'wrong' was the atmosphere. I thought it was appalling: grim and condemning. I had expected something essentially friendly, and buckled badly, going into my shell: not the right reaction!

Secondly, my submission was charged as inadequate in scale. This smelt of 'moving goalposts', for I had been careful to check the requirements (insofar as they exist – which is hardly at all in any formal sense).

Thirdly, given the hostile atmosphere and the accusation of inadequate scale, I failed to maintain a spirited defence. A better response may not have made much difference, but I weakened my own case.

Before turning the page, discuss the issues raised

The result: a further year's work and resubmission with another viva, and with only two supervisions permitted. I emailed a strong informal complaint to the internal examiner, and my relationship with M further deteriorated to the point where for a while he refused all communication, even though I hadn't in any way held him responsible for how things had gone at the viva.

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A year later I resubmitted, and was eventually informed that I had satisfied the examiners and that the second viva would be waived – a relief, though also something of an anticlimax. It's a relief to have passed, yet doesn't feel a satisfactory manner of outcome. Is it motivated by genuine kindly regard, or by expediency (the internal examiner retired recently, and probably the last thing he wants is to have to return for this duty)? – it's hard to know.

Earlier I had considered waiting for the result but then (if successful) making a formal complaint. However, my grounds for doing so lay on shifting sands. If I complained that the viva was too aggressive, it would be a subjective claim, not provable. If I said that the scale of my submission was demonstrably comparable with many others, they could say that was not the only reason for the result: my viva performance was poor. I could point to clear evidence that they had pre-determined that scale would be a decisive issue, but ultimately they could slide from one defence to another, and my complaint would be difficult to prove.

Finally, I could complain about aspects of my supervision, but I did not really wish to do this. M wasn't responsible for what happened at the viva; he had prepared me well enough, even if we finished on poor terms.

Perhaps the decisive factor in my not pursuing a complaint was the accounts I have since read elsewhere – for instance on John Wakeford's Missenden Centre website:

www.missendencentre.co.uk/johnw.htm

or at :

<http://imperial-phd-struggle.blogspot.com/2007/12/how-bad-can-phd-viva-actually-go.html>

At least I was given a second chance and ended up with a PhD. Others were not so lucky; their accounts are horrific, even if my viva felt like a terrible experience at the time.

I hadn't not prepared for my viva – I have pages of notes about possible questions and how to answer them – but I was over-confident. Subsequently I read Rowena Murray's excellent book *How to Survive your Viva* (Open University Press), and would commend every PhD student to do so – with a year to spare!

Several people I spoke to were unsurprised to hear about my experience. They were cynical about the various motives and internal forces, often unrelated to the candidate, that cause vivas to turn out in the peculiar ways that they sometimes do.

There were many good things about the department in which I was studying, but too much of the university process seems to be under severe strain, not quite giving the high-quality service one should expect. This was indicated some six months before my viva occurred, in a minor but frustrating incident. I was due to take part in a workshop in the department, and travelled from home. The performers failed to bring the materials I had provided. For me it was a complete waste of two days, plus associated expense, but I had a job even to reclaim my train fare, let alone obtain compensation, or funding for my attendance at the rearranged workshop. Yet, when you think what we pay to enrol for PhD studies ...

Team task

On the acetate provided list the lessons are there here for

1. PhD examiners
 2. Supervisors
 3. PhD candidates
 4. Institutions
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