

Ron's PhD viva

I. The examiners

Major problems with my PhD began prior to my viva. The first related to the number of external examiners that the Academic Registry advised my director of studies that I required.

Over the four-year period between my initial registration and submission of my PhD thesis, I was a research student for three and for the final year worked as a member of support staff (setting up practical classes supporting units on the BSc offered in the department where I was registered - the job title was Experimental Officer). As Experimental Officer, I was employed on a three year fixed-term contract (full-time post). With my new status as a staff member in mind, my director of studies approached the academic registry to take advice about the number of external examiners that I required. He was told I would need two, as I was a member of staff in the University. So, after discussions with my second supervisor, three examiners - two external and one internal - were appointed and the viva took place.

After the viva I was checking the regulations and I noticed that the specific regulation that gave details about the number of external examiners a PhD candidate required said "where the candidate is on the *permanent* staff of the University or of an affiliated or associated institution, a second external examiner shall be appointed". My contract was temporary and hence my staff status could not be described as permanent. Secondly, I emailed the member of staff in the academic registry who deals with research degrees and asked her to define the phrase "permanent staff of the University" that appears in the regulation quoted above. She replied that "it usually covers an academic member of staff with a permanent contract". As I was employed as a temporary support staff member, in my mind, it is clear that the academic registry made an error when they advised my director of studies about the number of external examiners I required.

But, in numerous letters between the academic registrar and myself and the academic registrar and my director of studies he has failed to address this issue and has constantly attempted to "throw a smokescreen" over the academic registry's error by focussing on other issues. For instance, he initially claimed that the appointment of two external examiners was because one of them did not have any experience of examining PhDs in the UK. When it was pointed out to him that this could not be the case (as the examiner in question was not even mentioned to the academic registry until at least 6 months after the decision was made that I needed to have two external examiners) he retracted this and wrote a letter claiming the problems I was experiencing subsequent to my viva were due to a dispute between the internal and external examiners! All of this information is documented and easily provable should this matter go to litigation.

Q1 Should Ron pursue this matter further?

Q2 If so, how should he proceed?

2. The viva

The viva was a difficult affair. From what I was told before the viva by my supervisors about the content of the preliminary reports, one of the two external examiners was very positive about my work and made no criticism of anything whatsoever, but the other one was not so happy with it. This was confirmed when I read the full reports afterwards. (It has also subsequently been revealed by one of my PhD supervisors that this examiner may have been trying to get some kind of revenge over him as he acted as examiner for one of her PhD students some years before in an examination process that did not go to well – possibly politics with a small ‘p’?)

However, on the advice of my PhD supervisors I read up on certain key areas so that I would be able to defend myself against criticisms of the latter examiner during my viva. Also, at this point there seemed to be no real reason for concern as my second supervisor, who is a senior professor in the research area of my thesis and who had successfully supervised over twenty PhD students and examined more than fifty) felt my work easily met the standard for a PhD.

Just prior to the viva, something happened to change the first examiner’s attitude to my work. Perhaps there had been discussions between the examiners. But, as a result, at the viva I was subjected (primarily by the initially positive external examiner who is a very senior professor in the research area of my thesis) to a somewhat detailed and relentless attack on the work in my thesis from theoretical and methodological angles that I had not previously considered. Consequently, I was unable to defend myself against a lot of the criticisms that were first mentioned on the day of my viva. I could not comment on theory and methodology of which I had no knowledge and had never covered because, in my mind, it had no bearing on the work that I carried out for my PhD.

The ‘icing on the cake’ was the fact that I was criticised for not including in my literature review a key paper that was published *after* I handed my thesis in!

Q1 What is the purpose of a viva?

Q2 What should a candidate know about the content of the examiners’ reports, and when?

Q3 How should Ron respond?

3. The outcome

The outcome of the viva was that I should resubmit my thesis in a “considerably revised” fashion that involved a complete re-coding and reanalysis of almost all of my data, new analyses, new chapters and a substantial re-framing in terms of theory. The new “key paper” was to make ‘a good starting point’ for reference to methodologies that I was required to make.

Initially I had just one year to do this. The final examiners report for my thesis did not arrive until four months after my viva. During this time negotiations were going on between my internal and external examiners over exactly what should be required of me. This was taking some time due to a combination of factors. Firstly, my internal examiner was not an expert in the field of my thesis and consequently had to keep checking his negotiations with my supervisors who also lacked expertise in the specific revisions I was being asked to do and subsequently had to keep checking back with me! Secondly, my external examiners seemed to be getting quite angry over the negotiations and, at times, failed to reply to emails from my internal examiner for weeks at a time (over 6 weeks in one case!). When the negotiations were finally brought to an end and the final report was drafted by my internal examiner. Relations between my internal examiner and my external examiners were not too good.

In addition, many of the revisions were not technically possible on the equipment that I had available to me (though subsequently my external examiners did accept this and compromised over some of what they were asking me to do).

I requested that the deadline be delayed until the examiners’ final report was available. The Academic Registry subsequently got hold of a number of the recommendations in the form of the emails between my internal examiner and external examiners and sent me copies by post together with an official letter telling me that I had one year from this date to submit my thesis.

Q1 Comment on the issues raised by this process

4. The rewriting

To bring things up to date, I have recently resubmitted my thesis in an almost completely revised form. I have dealt with all of the external examiners' recommendations for how the thesis should be revised and hope that the revisions I have made meet with their satisfaction.

However, I am not confident that this will be the case. Over the last year, as I have become more expert in revising my thesis in terms of the theory and methodology suggested by my external examiners I have realised there are a lot of things in my thesis that could be better but time was running short (despite my working every weekend and week day evening on my revisions). As a result, the thesis represents very much a draft of my first attempt at a range of brand new (to me) methodologies and theoretical interpretations. In short, I could have convincingly revised my thesis using the methods and theory recommended by my external examiners but to do this would have taken more time. As it stands the version of my thesis that I have resubmitted represents a late (but not final) iteration towards this.

Q1 Comment on Ron's strategy

Q2 What are the possible outcomes?

5. Reflection

Overall, I have mixed feelings about the period prior to my viva.

On a positive note, through my own hard work, I feel I have learned a lot about my subject and developed a lot of skills that will make me a good and competent researcher. For instance, I now feel confident about using some advanced and specialised statistical techniques and also feel very confident about my writing skills. On a less positive note, I never really felt a tremendous sense of ownership of my PhD and have, to a large extent, simply been forced to act as research assistant to my second supervisor (the starting point for the studies in my thesis was series of studies he carried out in the early seventies). It was difficult to see this coming as, when I was accepted as a research student, my first and second supervisors informed me I would be doing a series of studies that was very different to those that I had been interviewed for. All through my PhD, at the request of my director of studies, I have put my 100% trust in my supervision team's experience (particularly my second supervisor) and, to a large extent, allowed them to dictate the direction of my research. Based on the outcome of my thesis, I'm now not sure whether this was a good idea.....

Q1 Discuss Ron's experience.

Q2 What factors should the examiners take into account in making their decision?

Team task:

if the examiners still consider that the thesis is not up to PhD standard and are unwilling to recommend the award, indicate briefly on the acetate provided the main issues Ron could include in an appeal.

