

Diana's question

Dear John

First I'd like to say thank you for your work on highlighting what can and does go wrong in the research student/supervisor/viva process system in the traditional PhD.

It is in this context that I am writing to you (in confidence) as a referred PhD candidate. I know that you must be very busy, but would appreciate any advice that you could offer, (positive or negative).

In my case the referral of my PhD following my viva is a major blow because I also have a post-doctoral award, which I am now likely to lose because of the examiners' decision. I also have existing publications in mainstream peer referred journals, and have had several abstracts and papers accepted for high profile international conferences- it may be a cliché but neither my supervisors, nor any one else in the department foresaw anything other than minor corrections given the status of previous work and the perceived status of the thesis itself.

Very briefly, the thesis concerns an argument based mainly on quantitative data sources. The quantitative chapters form the basis of the main argument of the thesis. They consist of comparative labour force statistics. Figures came from a leading UK survey source on employment. The research process involved the calculation and processing of 'raw' (i.e. unpublished data). Brief main problems are below.

1. One examiner showed a lack of knowledge of this particular survey in his assumption that I was able to obtain interviewees from it, and at several other points when he queried the survey source in addressing issues of employment.

2. Both examiners insisted that the statistics were wrong. Their conclusions seemed to be based on their awareness of generic figures for economic activity, rather than on figures dealing with those actually in paid work. I had used the variable: 'paid work'. The use of this variable produces lower overall numbers than the more generic economic activity variable. This is because it excludes those seeking work but not actually in work, those who are unpaid family workers, those on government schemes and those available for work, but not actually in work. The differences were explained in the thesis at several points and again at the viva. However, the examiners refused to accept this explanation, simply saying that the figures were too low because they did not include those of working age. After the viva I wrote to the Office of National Statistics and obtained written confirmation that the variable and processes I used to obtain the figures were correct and did include those of working age.

3. Criticisms were made of evidence presented in tables in the examiner's guidance notes, which did not hold true when compared with the thesis.

4. The examiners criticized the choice of the 'overall research question' in the guidance notes, and the thesis for not adhering to it in the summary of reasons for referral. However, the question stated was not in the thesis text. I have double-checked the examiners' copies of the thesis at the main office and this overall research question does not appear anywhere in their copies.

I find all this quite difficult to accept. If you could offer any advice or suggest any routes to pursue I would be very grateful to you. I realise that you cannot give specific comments on individual cases; my problem is that I have been told that I will get nowhere by challenging the examiners' decision, whatever the rights or wrongs of it. I remain unconvinced that I have no recourse to challenge it, but am unsure what to do next.

I am shocked by the whole episode and wish I had known of the fundamental lack of rights and accountability in relation to the PhD examination process. Both regarding internal procedure mechanisms and in taking legal action through mechanisms external to 'old' universities. It is highly unlikely that I'd have chosen to spend 4 years doing a PhD if I had envisaged this situation.

Hopefully the new route PhD will overcome some of the potentially devastating aspects of the traditional PhD assessment for future students'. I sincerely hope that this will be the case. At present, my experience indicates that academic institutions are more intent on defending outdated processes of examination, fraught with inherent weaknesses, and the potential for abuse, than they are at pursuing any form of academic justice for their students. Unfortunately, the same criticism must be applied to some supervisors and academics. Whatever, the future outcome for me, I have decided that, although I will try and meet the examiners' recommendations, this is a profession that I no longer have any desire to be part of.

Thank you in anticipation,

Diana

Team task

On the acetate provided indicate the main elements of your reply to Diana's plea for advice.