

## **Sheila's appeal: The story of a PhD gone wrong**

I started studying for a PhD in 1994. At that time I was approaching my fifties and knew that completing a PhD would not be a passport to major career advancement but I wanted to continue my personal and professional development and stretch myself. In addition I enjoyed this type of work and liked to have a project 'on the go'.

Primarily this was personal challenge but I was also rather wary. In some ways it seemed presumptuous for a nurse to be taking this path at a time when graduate status was only just becoming accepted and at a time when there was still considerable ambiguity towards the academic status of nursing. Even in nursing education teachers like myself with a PhD were rare.

Having completed my first degree part time with the University I was very aware of the constraints of studying part time whilst maintaining a strong presence at work. Therefore I chose an institution which was local, accessible and sponsored by the University together with an experienced supervisor whom I both liked and respected.

In retrospect I think this was a mistake as the institution (a higher education/further education college) did not have a strong post graduate community particularly in the arena of health care. In addition I realised that this institution did not attract the kudos of other institutions and the respect that is often associated with them. I think this had an impact on the perceptions of others.

However studies progressed smoothly despite disruptions in supervision. My first supervisor changed to another institution and my second supervisor took early retirement. Her replacement took sometime to 'get up to speed' often taking months to return my work with comments or completely forgetting about it. She seldom had much criticism to offer. I completed and submitted my thesis in early 2000.

The viva took place in April 2000. Although it had been discussed with my supervisor, the choice of examiners had been rather ad hoc. I did not have any particular contacts that I recognised as being appropriate examiners and neither did my supervisor. As a result the external examiner was someone I had once met at an interview and thought we were on the 'same wave length'. The other had proposed herself when my supervisor had made enquiries about someone else who happened to be away on leave. They were both unknown quantities to us although the external was a very prominent nursing academic with a reputation for being hard but fair.

On the day of the viva having travelled to London I was kept waiting for at least an hour before the viva commenced. It was a hot April day; there was evidence that the examiners had enjoyed refreshment. I had a bottle of water by my side, which I

badly needed but felt embarrassed to drink from within that particular social context.

The viva was exceptionally adversarial and lasted for three and a half hours.

My supervisors - who both attended - were shocked at the nature of the viva and my more experienced supervisor said she had never experienced anything like this before. However I managed it well. And at the end I was praised for giving a robust defence of the thesis and told that although major amendments were needed to the structure of the thesis I would not have to have another viva.

Following this I received no formal communications from the University but only some e-mailed comments that came via my supervisor. These suggested that the examiners were fairly confident that once it was recast the thesis would be awarded a PhD.

After some months I asked the University if a more formal notification should have been sent but there was no record available only the e-mailed comments. I later discovered that a formal letter should have been sent by the sponsoring establishment.

In view of the comments both written and verbal I had received I felt sufficiently optimistic to address the issues raised by the examiners and therefore resubmitted the thesis in July 2001.

A few months later I received a notification that the University regulations required me to attend another viva. Either the regulations had been changed and applied to me retrospectively or the examiners had been mistaken in advising me that another viva would not be necessary. I was very angry with this and despite representations from my supervisor the university insisted that the viva went ahead. I of course had no written record of what had been said or agreed

In late December 2001 on the day of the second viva I was recovering from a very heavy cold and had been teaching all morning. I arrived on time for the appointment at 2pm and finally met my examiners at 4pm. During my two hour wait I had seriously considered walking out. In my view keeping someone waiting for that length of time is quite unacceptable.

Whilst I waited with my supervisors they were invited by the examiners to discuss my academic development and ability. I waited outside (I think at the age of 56 I could cope with an honest discussion of my academic strengths and weaknesses) My supervisors then returned and on speaking to me were ushered out of the waiting room by an examiner in case they made some kind of inappropriate comments. I could not believe it. We were being treated like children.

When I finally met my examiners at 4pm they informed that they were still not sure if the thesis could be awarded a PhD but that I might be able to rectify the situation if I performed well in the viva-did I want to go ahead?

A no win situation? I was exceptionally angry about the position I had been placed in but tried to control it. I remember noticing my own body language and recognising that I was putting on a casual front. I was appalled at the way I was being treated and furious at the way these people were exploiting their power. After eight years of study my choices were limited. So we went ahead with the viva.

Needless to say in these circumstances the viva collapsed. I just stopped wanting to take part. It seemed like a ridiculous game where the rules were being made up as we went along and with a totally weighted power relationship. I felt powerless and started behaving like a peevish child and this of course reinforced the examiners' sense of their own righteousness!

During the first viva I had been disconcerted by the approach taken by both the examiners who seemed to think that an adversarial approach to examination was an appropriate way to examine my thesis. It was almost as if they were competing to show each other how sharp and clever they could be. In my view this was self defeating. It did not help them get to the truth, if that was what they were interested in.

I was also distressed to realise that they did not understand the paradigm they were examining in any real depth. The questions they asked revealed their own lack of knowledge and left me in difficulty with how to answer. The thesis concerned a qualitative study and the examiners revealed a clear bias towards quantitative research. For example, they required the thesis to be set out in a structure that is more commonly used in quantitative research design and used concepts to assess its rigour which are clearly more relevant to quantitative design. Whilst superficially they appeared to understand qualitative research it was clear that they did not conceptualise in a qualitative way.

( Note: one of the subjects I teach is research methods. I had written and had validated courses in research methodology and a successful record of supervising undergraduate and post graduate dissertations. So I felt that I had a reasonably sound knowledge of the research process overall and understood basic concepts quite well, whilst recognising my limitations in specific areas. This is probably quite a lot more than most PHD students, some supervisors and their examiners who may only know about the particular approaches that they have used. This perhaps raises questions about the expertise and knowledge of examiners. I think as a student I made the assumption that the examiners knew more than I did and they also made that assumption. These assumptions created difficulty in establishing meaningful communication.)

In the second viva the questions were often very badly asked and there was little consistency so that it was difficult for me to address them properly. For example, after some discussion of the literature review and the theory included within it I was suddenly asked the question: 'Where's the theory?'. This I later realised referred to the underpinning philosophy of the research design but the question made no sense in the context in which it was presented. In my view so much more could have been demonstrated if the viva had taken a more discursive approach.

In some cases the examination became personal with comments that I was biased (aren't we all?) linked to assumptions based on inadequate information about my role. These comments were all made in a very aggressive way and I remember thinking I now know how the police obtain false confessions they just beat people down until they will say anything.

It seemed that the goalposts had moved and new criticisms were made particularly related to the literature review which had hardly been discussed at the first viva and which had been only briefly mentioned in the feedback.

The whole thing was quite disastrous and, whilst I accept that my own performance at the second viva was poor, this situation could have been avoided.

Ultimately I was offered an MPhil and struggled to keep a sense of my own identity. One of my supervisors wrote to me and said she felt the decision was not justified.