

Stuart's submission

I
August 2005

Dear John

I've been approached by Stuart, one of the PhD students at the research centre, for some advice concerning some difficulties he's experiencing over corrections to what to all intents and purposes was a successful viva but one which left him feeling he had failed.

Although the internal examiner was particularly aggressive, the external ended up defending Stuart. There were "issues" with the thesis but the external felt he had performed very well in the viva and this was probably what swung the decision to award the D.Phil without formal re-submission or re-examination.

Basically the problem is now that during the viva Stuart was asked to do some additional experiments as well as the usual typographical corrections but was not required to resubmit or be re-examined.

Part of the complications have arisen because Stuart's supervisor had left the University prior to the Viva which meant a delay in Stuart being able to obtain the materials to carry out these extra experiments (It is also a problem as Stuart is now a post-doc in another lab in the Centre and is under pressure from his new boss to get things sorted). Stuart then ran into technical difficulties and has been getting help and reagents from the external examiner.

The problem he now has is the Internal Examiner who is not an expert on the organism or the subject of the thesis will only sign off the corrections and new data if he gets the ok from Stuart's ex-supervisor who is no longer an employee of the University. Stuart is also concerned because the Internal has told him he is not allowed any contact with the External (who has been helpful and is the one who suggested the extra experiments and the relative importance of each one).

Unfortunately relations between Stuart and his supervisor or the internal are not good. Basically Stuart and his supervisor do not get along and after the aggressiveness of the internal during the viva there is tension between Stuart and the Internal examiner. Stuart is a tad concerned that he is not on good terms with the people who will be making what will be very subjective decisions on the experimental work he is doing.

The Internal has also said that he is the only person that can approve the corrections.

So what Stuart wants to know is:

- a. Can his ex-supervisor have any standing as far as decisions on his corrections go?

b. If the Internal does not feel he has sufficient expertise in the field to pass judgement on the experimental work (ie.) wants the ok from Stuart's supervisor. Can Stuart ask that the corrections be checked by the External Examiner who seems to be helpful and the most reasonable as well as the expert.

c. Is it a problem that he has been in contact and receiving help from the External?

As far as I understand the regulations. Stuart's supervisor cannot have a say in whether the corrections are completed to a sufficient standard.

And as far as I can tell it's only in the case of re-examination that the candidate should have no contact with the examiners.

There doesn't seem to be anything concerning approval of corrections except that they are carried out by the Internal: i.e. in the case of a dispute the external can be called upon?

This is all a bit of a grey area as it must be quite unusual to request extra lab work without re-submission/examination and people don't usually appeal about Viva's what are essentially successful. The other issue is that This is the Internal's first British Viva (He is from Spain) and of the two examiners was by far the most aggressive and wanted to fail Stuart. Stuart was also his supervisor's first (and only) PhD student.

This was actually my motivation for suggesting aggressive internal examiners as a topic for discussion on the course.

Apparently there is a saying "never be someone's first student or first viva". Poor old Stuart got both Barrels.

My advice to Stuart so far has been to get the experiments finished and try and stay on the right side of his supervisor. But I think he would like to know where he stands if things turn sour.

Hope you can help

Cheers

H

Q1 List the issues that have arisen in this case

Q2 How would you advise Stuart?

2

Dear H,

Not an easy situation. Three points to clarify at this stage:

1. I think we need to know exactly what the decision of the examiners was. This should define the role of the internal examiner. If he has been charged with the responsibility of deciding whether the corrections etc have been carried out to the standard required, he has to do this, taking into account advice if necessary. I am not sure the extent to which he can seek advice from those not included as examiners. If he is not qualified to do so, he and the University have a problem which they must resolve.

2. Do the University regulations define 'minor corrections' to include extra lab work etc? If not, the decision was not legitimate.

3. If the external offers advice to the candidate, I don't think that is a problem.

I look forward to clarification on these. Could a short version be available to me for discussion with examiners? If so, I could send supplementary fee.

Best

John

Q1 Discuss this reply

Q2 Have you any further suggestions for Stuart?

3

Dear John

I've spoken to Stuart about any official correspondence from the University concerning the outcome of his viva.

His Viva was on May 20th 2005 and as yet he still hasn't had any notification from the University about the outcome. All he got was a list of correction and additional experiments scribbled on a piece of paper. Stuart seems to think that he (the internal) has not completed the official report which was not signed by the external examiner at the time of the viva.

I've advised Stuart to contact the postgraduate office to see why he still (after over 2 months) has yet to get the official notification about his viva.

Update: Stuart has just heard from the postgraduate office that they have sent 3-4 letters to the internal examiner requesting the completed report...they are still waiting!!!!

I'll check the other points that you mentioned and get back to you.

Cheers

H

Q1 How soon should a candidate receive the result of a viva?

Q2 What should H or Stuart do in this case?

4

H,

I think he should keep pressing the Postgraduate Office, with a formal communication if necessary. I seem to remember that your university handbook indicates time limits and it is the University's problem not Stuart's if their examiners are not keeping to the rules.

This is also a case where the Postgrad rep in the Students' Union could be called in.

Again, he should keep copies of all communications in case of an appeal etc.

John

Dear John

Thanks for the e-mail.

Now that Stuart has contacted the postgraduate office through the Bio Sciences Graduate School, I've suggested he gives it a week before making the next move. It seems the internal has just gone on holiday for a couple of weeks so not much chance of any real progress.

Stuart will be sending a formal communication to the University to coincide with the internal's return. Luckily he has the support of the Director of the Centre who will also be contacting the Postgraduate office. Apparently a similar situation occurred in the organisation of the Viva itself and Stuart had to get a "date" from his supervisor/internal via the postgraduate office. If the viva had been organised earlier then Stuart's lab would have still been running and the extra experimental work would have been that much easier to set up.

Stuart thinks he now has sufficient extra data for the thesis so it would seem it is only a matter of time - but it looks like he could be submitting his thesis before receiving official notification of the result of his viva!!!

Thanks for the advice

H

Later in August

Dear John

Just thought I'd update you on Stuart's situation.

Finally after 3 months Stuart got official notification of the outcome of his viva, that subject to completing the necessary corrections he will be awarded his PhD.

He thinks he now has the additional data to satisfy the examiners. It's just a question of getting it past his "supervisor" who is no longer in post.
Stuart is keeping his fingers crossed and his mouth shut (at least until after graduation). Hopefully things will be resolved shortly though the Postgraduate Office have given Stuart until April 2006 to do the corrections.

Best wishes
H

September

Dear John
Sorry for the delay in getting back to you. I've been away and returned to a "dead" harddisk which caused more than a few problems with answering mail etc...

Stuart has recently returned his thesis with the corrections and additional data and is awaiting the green light from the Postgraduate office that he will be able to formally graduate this winter.

Stuart and I are happy for you to use his experience as I've described it and hope it will be useful in future workshops.

Cheers
H

One week later

Dear John

Stuart has just had word that his corrections have been accepted and that he can submit his bound copies and graduate in Feb 2006.

Best wishes

H

Team task

On the acetate provided list the lessons here for

- 1. supervisors**
- 2. examiners**
- 3. institutions**