

## Lorna's surgery

1

Dear John,

I came across your emails and hope you don't mind me contacting you for advice. I am a part-time PhD student and have a viva due soon.

I am not happy with my thesis, but submitted it because my supervisor urged me "to just get it in to buy you more time".

However, yesterday I was told that the circumstances under which I submitted will not be mentioned to the examiners pre-viva, but my viva will be conducted on the merits of my thesis only.

I have had back problems for the past couple of years, and had surgery a couple of weeks after I handed my thesis in. This has had an effect on my academic performance.

Since I really do want an opportunity to rewrite and resubmit, should I insist that these circumstances are mentioned to the examiners or is my supervisor correct in saying that this is irrelevant (meaning I could potentially fail my viva)?

Any advice would be much appreciated.

Kind regards,  
Lorna

**Q: before turning the page discuss how you would respond to Lorna's question**

2

Dear Lorna,

This is a difficult problem.

First, look carefully about your university regulations.

1. Submission. I guess they say that it is your responsibility to decide what and when to submit, and supervisors have the responsibility merely to advise
2. The examination process: find out what you can about the instructions given to examiners - in particular whether they have to take into account special circumstances, your supervisors' views etc. You may find that they don't.
3. The grounds for appeal. Most universities allow an appeal if there are circumstances affecting your performance of which the examiners were not aware at the time of the viva. This would suggest that they should have been informed of such circumstances in advance.
4. The examination process will be organised under the auspices of some body like the Research Degrees Committee. You should consider alerting them to your circumstances, with medical certificates, dates etc. But it is unlikely that the examiners will be told to be lenient in their decision in the light of these circumstances, but you could ask that the examiners take your circumstances into account in allowing you extra time for resubmission if it comes to that. Assuming that your supervisor doesn't think it will fail, the most likely outcome is either corrections or resubmission. Very few actually fail.
5. You will probably have the opportunity to mention your circumstances at the viva. You might like to prepare a note of the details that you could leave with the examiners - although I can't predict how they would react to that.

Hope that helps a little. Let me know what you decide.

John

**Q: discuss John's response and consider alternative suggestions**

3

Dear John,

Thanks for replying.

I have had a close look at the university procedures. 1, 2 and 3 is as you suggest. I did have to obtain an extension to my studies and had to submit medical letters to my supervisory team. However, I am not sure whether the research degree committee has seen these as my supervisory team has never included what they call "personal information" with any of my bi-annual research reports.

My chair and supervisor said that they have not made the examiners aware of any medical issues and do not intend to. When I asked if I could mention medical issues at the viva, they suggested that I do not "play the sympathy card" as the thesis should be examined on its merits only. I wish this was made clear to me when I was given the advice to "just get it in" - I would have pushed for a further extension till after surgery.

My supervisor seems to think I will get a R&R, but said MPhil is also a possibility. I think if the examiners mention something about the delay in submitting my thesis or the fact that my final chapter is partially complete, I will mention it was due to health issues.

I will concentrate on preparing for the viva, and decide what to do after (depending on outcome i.e. fail).

Thanks for your time and advice!

Kind regards  
Lorna

John asks  
but what about my point 4?

Thanks John, it's good advice. I will follow this.

**Q: What outcome do you predict?**

4

Hi John,

I have been given 12 months to resubmit, but do not have to undergo another viva. I am very relieved! I was given this result to allow me more time for amendments. The viva itself went a lot better than I expected and the examiners made some good suggestions for improvements.

As you suggested, I contacted the research degrees committee prior to the viva, and also mentioned medical issues at the viva (although I did not go into any detail). This helped provide the context for a discussion on issues in the thesis e.g. incomplete final chapter, lack of signposting etc.

I am really pleased with the result and am meeting up with my supervisor next week to discuss amendments.

Thank you very much for your advice!

Kind regards,  
Lorna

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## Team exercise

What lessons are there here for

1. PhD candidates
  2. Supervisors
  3. Examiners, and
  4. Institutions?
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