

Veronica's appeal

My first viva took place nearly four and a half years ago when I was eight and a half months pregnant with my first child. Prior to that I had spent four years completing my PhD research and was employed as a research associate in the department where I was registered as a postgraduate student. At the time of the examination I had recently been appointed to a lectureship at a different university. My performance in the viva was impaired by my physical and mental health due to late pregnancy. I found the viva hugely traumatic as I was informed at the outset that the thesis was not to be passed and then had three hours to try to defend my work which I was unable to do due to my emotional distress. In addition I found comments by the examiners to be excessively personal in nature, for example 'you're not obsessive enough to do a PhD', the examiners also laughed amongst themselves at several points during the viva which I found upsetting and undermining. At no point did the chair of the viva intervene.

I gave birth to my daughter only 4 days later and felt unable to do anything about the outcome of the viva as I was consumed with caring for my child. I expressed my concerns about the viva and its outcome at a meeting with Prof Kim Murray, the division's director of graduate studies. I was at that time very emotional, coping with a young baby and serious marital problems. My husband had been unwell with mental health problems for the previous 12 months and his health and behaviour deteriorated subsequently, leading to him being hospitalised around the same time of the meeting with Prof Murray. I was finding it very difficult to cope with this and look after a young child. All my family live in Canada so were unable to provide practical support or respite and I felt very isolated.

At a meeting around 6 months later with Dr Cliff Marks (my supervisor), Prof Kim Murray and Prof Cherie Morris (a newly appointed co-supervisor), I asked whether different examiners could be appointed but was informed that this was not possible. I was anxious about this as I did not feel that I was treated fairly at the first viva, in fact I don't think I should have had a viva at all given my late pregnancy. I also feared that the second viva would be traumatic for me.

In the meantime my marriage broke down irretrievably and my husband left me with sole care of a 6 month old baby. At the same time I returned to work as a lecturer for 30 hours per week. Although he had left the marital home, my husband continued to harass me for some months afterwards and I had to involve the police. I then sought help from the counselling service at the University where I worked. I was reluctant to share my personal difficulties with anyone else due to their sensitive and confidential nature.

I found the stress of completing PhD revisions, which involved regular trips to a university in a different city, working in a demanding academic post (now full time), having sole care of a young child and coping with my divorce almost intolerable. Although my current employer was supportive, I have felt under great pressure to successfully complete my PhD at a time when my confidence was at an all-time low, after all, I was employed on the assumption that I was soon to be awarded a PhD. I

have also experienced ongoing trauma related to the first viva, including regular flashbacks which I find very upsetting.

At my request I had a mock viva a few months before the second examination with Prof Morris, Prof Orwell (chair, and head of department where I completed the research for my PhD) and Dr Marks. Although the experience was stressful I received positive feedback and this gave me some reassurance. In the weeks leading up to the second viva I felt increasingly anxious and had difficulty sleeping and concentrating. I found it hard to free myself of intrusive negative thoughts about the process and outcome of the first viva. I was advised by Prof Murray (chair) as I went into the viva that there were still concerns about the thesis. After that, I found it impossible to defend myself adequately as I had lost all confidence. I was further distressed and confused when the examiners questioned me on parts of my thesis which they had not highlighted as problematic in the first examination. Indeed I had been told by my supervisors (Dr Marks and Prof Morris) that the examiners could only focus on their recommended revisions which was evidently not the case. The examiners recommended major revisions again- for award of MPhil only.

Six months after the second unsuccessful viva, the University's Primary Appeals Committee, which Prof Murray also attended, supported my appeal against the viva outcome. They accepted that I had serious mitigating circumstances and had adequate reason for not having brought these to the attention of the examiners. The examiners were invited to reconsider their recommendations on that basis and six weeks later I was advised by letter that the thesis should be revised and resubmitted in a 12 month period and then re-examined with a further viva- by those same examiners.