The Experience of 'Defending' the Doctoral Dissertation

International Comparative Studies of the Final Oral Examination

Edited by Michael Byram and Maria Stoicheva

First published 2025

ISBN: 978-1-032-79632-1 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-032-80013-4 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-1-003-49500-0 (ebk)

Chapter 1 Introduction

DOI: 10.4324/9781003495000-1

The funder for this chapter is Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski.

This study is financed by the European Union-NextGenerationEU, National Recovery and Resilience Plan of the Republic of Bulgaria, project No BGRRP-2.004-000, coordinated by Sofia University St Kliment Ohridski.

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

1 Introduction

Michael Byram and Maria Stoicheva

This chapter introduces the whole book, its content and structure, and includes a review and analysis of relevant literature. The book presents in-depth descriptions of 11 case studies of the final oral examination – or 'defence' – of the PhD in 11 universities in ten countries. A case study is of a specific defence and consists of analysis of the regulatory framework, interviews with candidate, supervisor(s), and examiners before the defence and after, together with a detailed description of the defence itself by an external observer. The cases thus follow ethnographic observer principles and provide an emic account of the event from the different perspectives of those involved. The analysis of previous research reveals little research interest in the defence. There are studies which categorize different kinds of defence in different countries. There are scarcely any studies which include observations. The book includes, in addition to the case studies, comparative analyses of several themes across the cases: the role of supervisors, the regulatory frameworks and formats for the defence, the purposes of the defence, and the relationships among participants.

> If you compare being a PhD candidate – with four years of work, or three years of work, or whatever – to an athlete. . . . When an athlete gets to the finishing line, he gets his medal. There are people offering flowers. There's champagne being opened. There's even the National Anthem. And I think you can compare it to getting to the finishing line. It's the only time in your life. Because when you do your master's, you have a graduation ceremony, but you're one of many. But with a PhD, it's the only time when you actually get to be celebrated for the long. . . . It's like a marathon, and you finally got to the finish line. I think it's important that you get the acclaim that you deserve.

This is how one of our interviewees described the 'defence' and its significance,[1] and others have used sporting metaphors too. Day (2009) refers to athletics and 'the final hurdle' before the finishing line, and Wallace (2003) analyses the use of sporting and other metaphors used by candidates to describe their experience. These UK-based authors are talking about the UK viva. Our interviewee was talking about the public defence, which is the

DOI: 10.4324/9781003495000-1

dominant form, when seen internationally. She was also thinking about the event as it takes place in Denmark, where the translation of the original word is indeed 'defence' (*forsvar*). What she says would not apply so readily to the British 'viva' held in private, but the viva is just one of the many examinations which take place every year in Europe and beyond. Furthermore, public defences vary in practice and purpose from one country to another and even from one university to another. It is difficult to make generalizations, but this reference to the marathon, the finishing line, and the celebration by the public is something which many candidates and examiners recognize whatever the differences and specificities of their own university and country.

In a previous book, *The Experience of Examining the PhD*, we talked to examiners in 13 countries and universities around the world about their practices, and their feelings and thoughts about the whole process of examining. That inevitably included discussion of the defence, but for examiners the defence is only one part of the process, with much to do both before and after. For the candidate, it is a final moment, which usually takes place some weeks or months after completing and submitting the thesis. During this time – while examiners are fully involved in the process – they are still 'running', preparing for the defence, with the finishing line in view.

In this book, therefore, we introduce the candidate's and supervisor's perspective as well as that of examiners and focus very much on the defence itself and how it is experienced by all involved.[2] We present in depth a number of case studies and draw out and consider a number of transversal themes. The case studies are based on observation of a defence and interviews with the participants both before and after. The cases which we study are in particular universities and are defences in social sciences and humanities. We want to give rich descriptions and a sense of the event from the different perspectives. We do not claim that these events are representative or typical, but we do intend them to be 'telling cases' (Andrews, 2017) which are 'good at raising new questions' (de Saint-Georges, 2018, p. 101).

We have 11 cases, mainly from Europe but including one from China and one from the USA. Our focus on Europe is not only partly a matter of convenience and opportunity but also a matter of contributing to an understanding of the European educational space, the European Higher Education Area. Our non-European cases serve partly to contextualize and relativize, but we hope too that they will stimulate further research on this topic outside Europe.

Some of our participants have asked us if we will say which is 'the best' kind of defence. This is not our intention. Every context is different, and what is 'best' for one is unlikely to be best for another. Our intention is to provide a view into 'the secret garden' of the defence in ways which have not been available hitherto and then to allow our readers to consider how these views across the fence into 'another garden' can help them best cultivate their own.[3] In this introduction, we shall first review and analyse existing publications on the defence, a topic which has attracted much less attention that might

be expected, given the explosion in research on the doctorate internationally. One reason may well be the difficulty of access and data collection, and the practical problems of observers travelling to various countries. In our case, this was to some extent facilitated by financial support from the University of Sofia, as we said in our preface. We shall then explain in more detail our research methodology, including the selection of cases, and the collection and analysis of data.

The book will then begin with our transversal chapters which are in a sense conclusions from the case studies. Readers may then choose to delve into specific chapters which interest them, or to look at specific aspects of a number of chapters which correspond to a transversal theme.

Terminology and translation

Matters of translation are familiar in ethnographic reporting and well analysed by Usunier and Sbizzera (2013), for example. We have so far used the word 'defence' as a generic term which sometimes corresponds directly to the word in another language, as in Danish or Portuguese for example, but sometimes does not. In French, the term *soutenance* implies 'supporting' one's thesis. In our German cases, the Latin word Disputatio is used. Charlton and Smith (2022) suggest that the use of 'defence' in England 'can strike fear in the minds of research students' but eventually conclude that 'it does seem that for the majority of candidates the viva is a pleasurable experience and not a "defence" to be feared' (p. 303). Lantsoght (2023, p. 344) agrees that the term 'invokes associations of candidates having to defend themselves against the committee members' and suggests that 'viva' – abbreviation of 'viva voce' – is therefore preferred by some academics. She says she will use 'defence' since it is used internationally, but without the 'gladiatorial connotations', and we follow her in that. Neither Charlton and Smith (2022) nor Lantsoght (2023) speculate on the connotations the Latin word 'viva' may have among candidates, but whichever word is used in whichever language, it inevitably has connotations which will be to some degree lost in translation. We might use the convention of DEFENCE as a neutral umbrella term, but this looks clumsy in our text, and we have decided to use 'defence' with the caveat that it is intended as a neutral term unless explained differently. (Using the British English spelling, and not the American 'defense' may also ensure that in the American context, it remains a neutral term too.)

As for the term for the document which is submitted for the defence, we use 'thesis' or 'dissertation' with the same caveats about translation but with probably fewer problems about connotations.

Similar issues arise with other terms, most obviously with 'examiner' as a translation of, for example, German 'Gutachter'. One German examiner said that she was aware that she is a *Gutachter* and not *Schlechtachter* coining a term to show that she saw her role as giving a positive appreciation of the thesis she was reporting on (gut = 'good' and *schlecht* = 'bad'). Others have said that they

do not see the defence as an 'examination', that is, a means of checking on a student's acquired knowledge as might happen at undergraduate or master's level, which makes the use of this word problematic even as a generic term. This raises another point: in some cases, as in Saarland, the official term is one word (*Berichterstatter* – 'producer of a report'), whereas in casual talk another the word is used (*Gutachter* – 'evaluator').

Analysis of previous research

We agree with Dobson (2018, p. 23) that there has been very little research based on observation of 'what is actually taking place in the viva or examiner meetings' and though there have been some publications since his statement (Houston, 2021; Izadi, 2017; Mežek, 2018; Jalifar & Mayahi, 2023), most studies have continued to use questionnaires and/or interviews to collect data or have analysed documents. Studies based on observations are not always focused on the role of the defence in the doctoral candidate's trajectory. Some use the data to analyse communication, phenomena of 'face' (Izadi, 2017) or 'humour' (Mežek, 2018); Swales (2012) also analyses the use of humour but with stronger emphasis on its role in the defence.

Here, we focus on the research which is similar to our own interest in the experience of the defence, as perceived and told by observers and participants. Before doing so, however, we consider ways in which researchers have attempted to categorize the defence with respect to its nature and function, in different countries and universities.

Categorizing the defence

Kumar et al. (2023, pp. 192–193) analyse by purpose:

- first, the distinction between closed defences where only candidate and examiners are present, perhaps with the supervisor observing, and open or public defences
- second, the cases where candidates are notified in advance about the views of examiners and their decision to recommend a thesis should go forward to the defence, and those where this is not the case and candidates do not see reports in advance
- third, the distinction between 'judgmental' and 'ceremonial' functions, then dividing the former into 'pure judgmental' where a candidate may pass or fail, 'hybrid' where failure is theoretically possible but unlikely, and the ceremonial where it is known that the candidate has passed and the event is simply to celebrate the achievement. Let it be said in passing, however, that our data show that candidates may experience even the 'ceremonial' as 'judgmental' with the accompanying anxiety and stress.

Lantsoght (2023) categorizes by 'format', based on analysis of the research literature and as reported by students. There is some overlap with Kumar et al. in

that she makes a broad distinction between defences in private and in public, but she places this in third place in her list of characteristics:

- timing: the defence may take place before the thesis is made public or after. The latter case is associated with defences which are largely formality or 'ceremonial' to use Kumar et al. The former case is likely to be a 'judgmental' or 'hybrid' event, and may lead to examiners requiring revisions. However, Lantsoght's account needs further refinement as our data show. In France, the thesis is made public before the defence and recommended for defence, with scarcely any chance of failure: a 'ceremonial' event. Our interviewees knew of no cases of failure and could only envisage this happening where, for example, plagiarism might be discovered. After the defence, however, examiners may still require some revisions and, whether or not this happens, candidates invariably correct typographical and similar minor errors before full publication by depositing their thesis on the national database.
- number of steps in the defence: Lantsoght refers here to locations where a candidate may have a private defence with feedback and a subsequent public defence in front of friends and family. She also mentions cases in the USA where there is a formal, public defence 'in caps and gowns' and then an examination in private, after which a decision is announced. In general, however, two-step defences are the exception. There may nonetheless be variations on this. Our data show, for example, that, at Sofia University, candidates must pass an internal 'preliminary discussion', informally referred to as an 'internal defence', in front of their colleagues in their department – sometimes with colleagues invited from other departments, depending on the topic – before being allowed to go forward and submit their thesis to the examining committee.
- public or private: Lantsoght follows Kumar et al. and refers particularly to the UK as the origin of the private defence. She points out that there are also variations in public defences but does not have the nuanced distinctions of Kumar et al.
- timeline: Lantsoght uses this term to refer to the duration of the defence. Some defences are strictly limited in time by university regulations. There are examples in our data, and this tends to mean defences last about two hours. In other cases, there is no limit[4] and, in Lantsoght's data, there are examples of longer periods although only 5% of defences lasted more than three hours.

Stephenson et al. (2023), though not offering a categorization, have conducted a systematic review of research on the private defence or viva and identified significant characteristics which, we surmise, may also be relevant to public defences. They refer to literature which deals with:

- emotional response, that is, studies which analyse the emotions of candidates
- psychological impact, that is, studies of longer-term consequences such as reduction of self-esteem

- power relations between candidates and examiners or among examiners
- examiner conduct in terms of (a) examination techniques, for example, modes of questioning and (b) examiner interpersonal style, including reports of examiners being supportive or aggressive or even bullying
- fairness, being a matter of whether candidates felt they had been treated fairly
- practical and procedural factors, including duration of the defence, with examples of 45 minutes to four hours.

A similar systematic review of literature on public defences would be a useful contribution to the field.

Use of theory

Only a minority of studies have explicit theoretical frameworks. Many (e.g. Charlton & Smith, 2022; Denlico, 2003; Kumar, Kaur, & Sanderson, 2022; Kumar, Kaur, Sharmini, & Noman, 2022; Lantsoght, 2021a, 2021b) simply describe their data, which are often answers to questionnaires or interviews, or use their conceptual analysis to propose categorizations.

On the other hand, Wisker et al. (2022) introduce concepts of liminality and academic capital to analyse the online defence experience and refer to Maslow's pyramid of needs in analysing the feelings that participants have. Equally, Chen (2012) has a well-developed review of identity theory on which she bases her analysis of how candidates reflect on their experience 'to establish a link between doctoral candidates' defense experiences and the doctoral study' (p. 5). Dobson is perhaps the most articulate about the need for theory, saying, 'My motivation for this book is a desire to argue for a more theoretically and empirically founded understanding of the academic viva and thus to rely less upon anecdotal reflections' (p. xiii). He not only takes his core concepts from 'social practice, narratology, judgments and constructs' but also says there are some concepts, in particular, 'the institutional framework', which he cannot capture in his model (p. 159). Others call on 'face theory' (Izadi, 2017) and 'genre theory' (Jalifar & Mayahi, 2023; Swales, 2012).

Research methods

The methods used by the minority of researchers who actually attend defences as part of their data collection vary. Dobson (2018) reports that he filmed and transcribed defences in Norway, but this was only for undergraduate and master's defences. His one doctorate-level example is from when he was himself an examiner and therefore contrasts with our data from observers who had no function in the event.

Chen (2012) observed and analysed 11 public defences in a Canadian university and attended more than 20 others 'to familiarise myself with the defence culture in the faculty and to triangulate, to some extent, my findings'

(p. 40). She also collected institutional documents and carried out interviews before and after the defence, as we did. Her analysis is however different. She focuses only on candidates and their experience and on 'what these experiences reveal about their sense of being and becoming researchers', with identity theories as her framework. We include the experiences of all participants.

Houston's (2018) observed ten defences in the UK and conducted interviews with 45 participants with a focus on 'How the PhD examination enables examiners to make judgements about the candidate and their work and if it is still fit for purpose'. Access was difficult because of the private nature of the viva – an issue which we also had to contend with – and this had an effect on the sample she could establish.

In the literature which is based on other research methods, notably questionnaires (e.g. Charlton & Smith, 2022; Kumar, Kaur, & Sanderson, 2022; Kumar, Kaur, Sharmini, & Noman, 2022; Lantsoght, 2021a, 2021b) and interviews (Houston, 2021; Lovat et al., 2022; Tan, 2022) also combined with observations (Houston, 2018), but also discourse and conversation analysis (e.g. Mežek, 2018; Izadi, 2017; Jalifar & Mayahi, 2023) and auto-ethnography (Wisker et al., 2022), some findings are of relevance to our particular focus on experience.

Findings relevant to our work

There are two major participants in defences: the candidate and the examiners. Sometimes one of the examiners will be the formal chair of the event, but in some cases an additional person is present as chair who does not take part in the examining or in the decision-making. Kumar, Kaur, and Sanderson (2022) have examined the role of the chairperson in defences in New Zealand and have also analysed the behaviour of supervisors when present (Kumar, Kaur, Sharmini, & Noman, 2022). Their overview is focused on anglophone countries where they discover a range of practices. In our project, which includes two anglophone countries, the variation is increased because we have cases from a wider range of educational traditions.

There is little research on the selection and composition of examining committees and relationships among participants which is the focus of one of our transversal analysis chapters. One article in France (Bes et al., 2019) analyses the 'forge of peers', that is, how examining committees were composed in three disciplines in a French university and the role of academic social networks. The authors showed that the committees are composed from a relatively well-known stock of interpersonal relationships already consolidated by co-publications. Based 'largely on personal experience', Joyner discusses how external examiners from other universities are chosen in UK universities and suggests that 'there are two main characteristics that should be required of any potential external examiner': be aware of the intellectual frontiers of their subject; and 'be mature adults, of enough humanity to ensure that the examination process is a worthwhile and developmental experience for the candidate'

(Joyner, 2003, p. 123). A study which involved interviews with experienced supervisors in Australia also revealed both dimensions: professional/academic considerations and personality issues (Kiley, 2009). Compliance with the first dimension can be achieved in the UK through institutional examination regulations and scrutiny (Joyner, 2003), as is the case in the Australian higher education context. Kiley (2009, p. 891) analyses conflict of interest and the issue of a supervisor using the same examiner or same research group for their students on a 'regular basis'. An analysis in Turkey of examining committees in social studies based on a survey of supervisors ($n = 91$) revealed that they had a strong tendency to repeatedly choose the same examiners (Şenel et al., 2020).

Turning to the examiners themselves, in 2007 Lovitts said that, in the USA, there was virtually no research on examiners' standards, 'most likely because dissertation assessment is viewed as a private affair conducted by a committee of experts, and the issue of quality and standards has not attracted the attention of policy makers' (2007, p. 4). There was at about the same time in the UK a growing concern about standards and criteria from a quality assurance perspective (e.g. Denlico, 2003).

More recently, a number of articles and books which deal with the question of examiners' expectations and judgements, although there is little or nothing on the process through which they come to their conclusions in a particular case, that is, on what happens in the meetings of examiners, which we have included in our project.

Houston (2021) develops her observations of defences in the UK with subsequent interviews, and it is from the interview data that she generates a typology of criteria with four major elements. 'Originality', she says, is a prominent feature mentioned in all interviews, but the interpretations were varied and 'most examiners were influenced by its interpretation in their discipline or field'. 'Publishability' is often used as a proxy for originality but is considered important for those who might be entering an academic career; she indicates in passing how this is no longer seen as the only purpose for doctoral work. 'Research competence' is subdivided into methodology and methods, data analysis, coherence and argument, knowledge and understanding of the field, and research integrity. 'Intellectual rigour' is a final category which includes 'characteristics that enable the candidate to conduct their research thoroughly and with independence'. Her discussion includes a useful summary and comparison of her findings with those of other researchers from which she concludes that correlation with other studies suggests that 'examiners across disciplines and fields have some common understanding of the attributes possessed by successful candidates'.

Jalifar and Mayahi (2023) base their analysis on audio-recordings of what they call the 'disputation' sections of (only) two defences in universities in Iran. They list the research components which were discussed in the defences: conceptual framework, research questions, sampling, treatment, data collection and instruments, research design, findings and conceptual conclusions, and contribution to knowledge. They analyse interactions and turn-taking and also discuss examiners' attributes as described by examiners themselves. They

suggest that there is a continuum from 'strictness' to 'leniency' which may have a significant impact on outcomes for the candidate. They conclude that 'examiners' attributes and their standards are the main factors determining the outcomes of a defence session' but do so on a basis of just two cases, as they acknowledge.

Tan (2022) too seeks to establish the expectations of examiners. He begins with an anecdote about an international student in a Malaysian university who failed the defence despite having written a good thesis and three publications, because she was perceived as not having defended her thesis well enough orally. Tan therefore analyses examiners' expectations of 'oral performance', saying that 'a PhD viva is a private event', as if this were always the case, thus betraying a lack of awareness of other traditions. The data are from interviews and were analysed using a 'narrative approach'. Three aspects of examiners' expectations are identified. 'Candidate behaviour' is a matter of demonstrating confidence in interaction, without being overly defensive. 'Responses to questions' should be 'credible' and 'convincing', meaning they are supported by demonstrating expertise and ability to argue. 'Doctoralness' means demonstrating the originality and significance in its implications of a thesis. The author says that his research is limited in generalizability, but it is a valuable contribution from another, Asian, tradition albeit one which appears to be much influenced by the anglophone tradition and the UK in particular.

Finally, our own work (Byram & Stoicheva, 2023), based on interviews in many countries and continents, is focused on examiners' experiences and includes analysis of their expectations, and discusses the case for international comparability in criteria and standards (Byram, 2023).

Other research on examiners' expectations makes little or no reference to explicit criteria and it seems, indeed, that explicit criteria are seldom given by universities, which was also true in the majority of our cases. The question then arises whether this is problematic. Stigmar (2019), referring only to data from Sweden, in a small-scale questionnaire study with 19 respondents, says that there is little appetite for explicit criteria and concludes that 'the responsibility of senior researchers is central – based on experience and tacit knowledge from participation in examining committees, progressively approving dissertation manuscripts' (2019, p. 1043). Explanation for this lack of interest in explicit criteria is that criteria 'risk becoming too general and thus standardized' and 'risk becoming outdated and inhibiting innovation, originality and creativity'. On the other hand, explicit criteria are common if not universal in UK universities and have been so for some time. Tinkler and Jackson (2000) analysed documents in 20 universities saying that there was consistency in terms of 'key criteria' but divergence in 'peripheral criteria'. One specification only was common to all universities: that the candidate's work 'must provide a general contribution to knowledge to be worthy of the award of PhD' (p.169). This work was done more than two decades ago and does not appear to have been renewed despite many changes in doctoral education in the UK at the time (Morley et al., 2002) and since.

On the question of originality, Nerad et al. have a list of recommendations for doctoral education which include: 'The pivotal goal of doctoral education must be and remain the development of original, responsible and ethical thinkers and the generation of new and original ideas and knowledge' (2022, p. 54), but this is only a recommendation from a research project. Morley et al. (2002) argued two decades ago that more attention should be paid to quality assurance, and this is an issue which has been addressed in various ways since, particularly at European level (European University Association, 2010).

There is also interesting work on how examiners write their reports in France (Dardy et al. (2002)), and Lorimier (2001) writes in some detail about being a member of an examining committee ('jury') in France. There seems to be no comparable research in other countries perhaps because, unlike France, where the report accompanies the candidate well into the future as they make applications for university posts, in other countries the report is not used further and may even remain confidential to the university, not seen even by the candidate.

Although none of our cases was wholly online, some included participation by one or more examiners online. The COVID-19 pandemic created a situation where online examining was the norm and even the only option, and this has led to increasing use of online examining even post-COVID-19. Wisker et al. (2022) have begun what may become a specific line of research with their auto-ethnography of the online experience.

Research on the candidate's perspective on the defence, a major theme for us, is relatively rare in contrast to the research on examiners. Our own earlier work on supervisors and students' experience (Byram & Stoicheva, 2020) had some accounts of how candidates thought about the defence. Wisker et al. (2022) include a candidate in their group of auto-ethnographers, the other three being examiners. Lantsoght (2021a) carried out an international survey of candidates' views (n = 296). She concludes that some factors have positive impact on candidates' perceptions: whether the thesis is made public before the defence or not, whether candidates receive feedback from examiners before the defence, and knowing the recommendations of examiners before the defence. Other factors are less important: the composition of the examining group and the order of questioning, the presence or absence of the supervisor, a formal dress code, and a final public statement or praise or 'laudatio'.

Lantsoght (2021b) also analyses the correlations among sociodemographic factors and candidates' perceptions of the defence they have experienced. The major factor is gender and another may be ethnicity, but the data on this are limited. Female candidates report 'a more negative perception of their doctoral defense and experience higher levels of nervousness'. They also say that they have 'more issues with their committee, and have more negative long-term impacts of their defense' (p. 32). Using data from the same survey, Lantsoght (2022) analysed how candidates prepare for their defence – an issue we also include in our case study chapters – drawing conclusions about which methods are most effective: a mock defence or some kind of preparatory

activity. Watts (2012) also argues that a mock defence is a good preparation. Share (2016) surveyed candidates in three Irish universities, using questionnaires to ask candidates about their experiences of the viva, saying that only 25% had the opportunity for a mock viva which is low if Lantsoght is right that it is the most effective way to prepare.

Remenyi (2019) describes the experience of one candidate who failed the viva defence, an unusual outcome. A number of factors are identified as significant: whether the candidate was ready for the viva and had sufficient preparation, whether there was enough 'goodwill' in the examiners, and whether the chairperson should have acted differently. As a detailed description of a failed viva, this is a rare study and the author comes to the not surprising conclusion that the viva as a process should have been 'overhauled some years ago' (p. 73).

Manidis and Addo (2017) analyse the ways in which one candidate develops her presentation of her work, but this is not for the defence since the context is Australia where there are almost no defences. It is at the point of 'Confirmation of Candidature' at the end of the first year of doctoral studies. The absence of a defence is currently being reviewed, and Kiley et al. (2018) consider matters of principle and also what the procedures might include.

Methodology

This book comprises a multiple-case study and reports on 11 cases (de Saint-Georges, 2018; Gomm et al., 2000; Yin, 2009) in ten different countries. It is tempting to infer that the cases are representative of the countries in which they are located, but we are not tempted to 'generalize' from cases and the evidence from two cases in the same country, Germany, reinforces our position not to equate a case with a country in either Germany or elsewhere. Instead, we focus on a comparative analysis of the cases.

Comparative analysis of educational institutions, policies, and practices is well established with theory and methods (cf., e.g., Bray et al., 2007; Phillips & Schweisfurth, 2014) and can take numerous forms and purposes. Comparison may involve seeking for 'better' approaches to policy and practice, or for deeper insights into what *we* do through understanding of what *others* do. We have this second purpose as one of our pedagogical purposes for the book. We eschew any search for 'the best' defence.

Comparison leads to noticing both similarities and differences. We assume doctorates are similar everywhere – in different universities in different countries – for otherwise we would have no starting point. We also assume that there are differences; for otherwise there would be no interest in comparing. Holding both assumptions simultaneously helps us avoid universalism and relativism and achieve our purpose, for ourselves and our readers, of gaining more insight into our own and other ways of experiencing 'the defence'.

The cases are a 'purposeful sample' (Emmel, 2013), because access to cases was complex and often dependent on personal relationships. Ethical permission for the research was obtained at the University of Sofia. In a minority of

cases, we had to ask for further ethical permissions in the case-study university. The assurance of anonymity was a crucial element, but anonymity is a matter of degree since all the participants in a case study are of course aware of the details and will remember what happened, including who was present and, especially, who was the candidate.

This makes it easier to write about a case where the thesis and the defence are of good quality because any unintended inclusion of comments on the thesis – even if anonymity of the examiners is carefully preserved – will not cause offence to the candidate. Where the thesis might be no more than satisfactory, the inclusion of comments from examiners or even supervisors could cause offence. In general, our gatekeepers found cases which were anticipated to be good and this eased our situation, but we have been very careful in omitting any comments – whether of praise or criticism – and asked all participants to read and amend the description of their case. This led to corrections of facts and misunderstandings as well as occasional changes made to our accounts of what participants said or did.

Understanding what others do – an interpretative *Verstehen* approach (von Wright, 1971) – and the values, knowledge, and attitudes which underpin their behaviour, can be achieved in many ways. In this project, we have followed an ethnographic, emic approach in which we seek to describe and analyse by collecting data from within each case. We have tried to do this by acting as ethnographic strangers (Agar, 1980; Spradley, 1979, 1980) who observe an event – the 'defence' of a doctoral thesis – and ask participants to explain what we have seen (Spradley, 1979).

Data were collected in 2023 and are of two kinds: documents of regulations and data from interviews and observations. The second took place in three phases: interviews conducted online before the defence with candidate, supervisor(s), and examiners; an observer present at the defence took notes, usually as a member of the public but in some cases they were also allowed to observe examiners' private meetings; interviews were again conducted with all participants.

In some of our 11 cases, observers have been complete strangers, who have never seen a defence in the university or the country in question. In other cases, because obtaining access is often difficult, we compromised and asked someone, for example, a master's or doctoral student in the university, to observe a defence, knowing that they have never done so before, and are ethnographic strangers.

There is no doubt that the presence of an observer impacts on the situation. In a public defence, it is likely to be less since the observer is just one of the audience. Audiences are, however, often small, and participants know in advance that an observer will be there, since they have been informed to obtain their consent, and it is often mentioned during the pre-defence interviews. In private defences, the presence of an observer is particularly evident. There is no perfect solution to the 'observer's paradox' and, in the report from the Beijing case, the comment that 'so today, we will do things properly',

though the point was made with humour, doubtless applies to all situations to some degree.

Language is an important factor. Observers and interviewers in most cases used the language of the case. Ethnographer strangers from other countries thus use a second or foreign language and are conscious not only of their own limitations in the language but also of language nuance, such as local terminology. Ethnographic strangers from the same university use their first language but may not be as sensitive to the specificity of local terminology, which they take for granted.

Two defences were held in English, though not the first language of the participants (Primorska, Slovenia, and South Denmark (Kolding)). Reasons included the fact that English is the most widely used language of science and publication, and also that the candidate had read and worked on their thesis in English and felt more at ease in the topic in English as a consequence. The Primorska candidate, who had been asked to have the defence in English, said in response to the interviewer's remark that this was perhaps an extra pressure: 'No, it's like a challenge for me'. He was very competent and a mature and confident person.

In other cases, despite the principle of using the first language of participants for interviews, English was sometimes used. Interviewees had high competence in English but sometimes explicitly revealed their problem. For example, a highly competent Danish speaker of English said when speaking of the purposes of a defence:

> And the only time where you have an opportunity to kind of show off as a . . . not, not me, but the PhD candidate, to show off their knowledge. It's not a, you know, we do not have this expression. It's called the the . . . how should I translate this? It's often it's the the charmer's leg, the last leg, which is like, you know, we're going to charm everybody into . . . and everybody's going to clap for you.

In one of the German cases, a participant insisted on using English, despite the interviewer's competence in German, so that other researchers in the project would be able to understand the interview. However, another German participant with high competence in English wrote in reply to an email offering a choice of English or German:

> Of course, we can have the conversation in English too but three arguments would support the use of German: many scientific terms are not easily translatable; mother tongue leads to more openness and honesty; in English conversation a feeling of inferiority in the presence of a 'native speaker' [*our translation*].

As is often said, in reality, research is 'messy', not following the prescriptions of methodology textbooks, and this was also our experience.

Structure of the book

We place first the chapters which look across the case studies and analyse, compare, and contrast practices in the case studies. The themes 'chose themselves' as they emerged from the analysis as significant issues. Other themes were also possible, for example, a study of time spent in preparing for an examination and how examiners rate the importance of this work in their busy professional lives or how examiners 'learn the trade' of being an examiner. Space limitations inevitably obliged us to decide on the four we have: purposes of the defence, formats and scripts of the defence, relationships among participants in the PhD defence, and a question of familiarity and supervisor roles, before, during, and after the defence.

The case studies are placed in alphabetical order by the name of the university to emphasize that we focus on universities and, within universities, cases in the social and human sciences. We do not see the case studies as representative of countries although there are often national factors involved. The structure for these chapters was decided after the first two or three cases had been written – and re-written – and was then used for subsequent chapters. It falls into several broad sections: an analysis of the regulations governing the PhD and the defence, a section based on interviews before the defence, a description of the defence, and a retrospective section based on interviews after the defence.

Case chapters are of different lengths for a number of reasons. In some cases, there are more members of the examining committee than others – the range is from two to seven. When a foreign or second language is used for interviews, they tend to be shorter and therefore the corpus of data is smaller. Some regulations are more complex and need more space for analysis.

Readers can thus use the book according to their needs and interests. They can look at a thematic chapter and then follow up in detail in case-study chapters. They can look at a particular case study first and then at one or more thematic chapters to see how the cases may be seen comparatively. Students in a particular university may find it helpful to know what goes on in the 'secret garden'. Other readers may have been invited to examine in a university in another country and then look at a case but in doing so they must proceed with caution and not assume the case is representative – it can stimulate reflection on what might happen. And so on.

Acknowledgement

This study is part of a research project coordinated by Sofia University St Kliment Ohridski, financed by the European Union-NextGenerationEU, through the National Recovery and Resilience Plan of the Republic of Bulgaria, project No BG-RRP-2.004-0008.

Thanks

We are very grateful to our colleague Stan Taylor (University of Durham) for help in searching the literature. Stan's resources and knowledge are incomparable.

Notes

1 It is customary to refer to the doctorate and the defence as the highest level of university qualification and 'the epitome of our higher education institutions' (Dobson, 2018, p. 53). There is, however, in some countries the *habilitation*, a further qualification needed to teach and research – and in some cases supervise PhD students – with which some of our interviews compare the PhD.

2 Wierzbicka (2010) makes a powerful argument for her position that 'experience' is a peculiarly English keyword and cultural theme:

> The word experience plays a vital role in English speakers' ways of thinking and provides a prism through which they interpret the world. While its range of use is broad and includes a number of distinct senses, several of these senses have a common theme that reflects a characteristically Anglo perspective on the world and on human life. This is why the word experience is often untranslatable (without distortion) into other languages, even European languages. (p. 31)

We have therefore to accept that, apart from other issues in translation which we address later, there is a distinctly English dimension to our project, or more precisely to the reporting of it. We hope to remain conscious of this throughout.

3 Lest our readers infer an allusion to Pangloss, we quote here the use of this metaphor by Michael Sadler, one of the founders of Comparative Education:

> We cannot wander at pleasure among the educational systems of the world, like a child strolling through a garden and pick a off a flower from one bush and some leaves from another, and then expect that if we stick what we have gathered into the soil at home, we shall have a living plant. (Sadler, 1979, p. 49)

4 We do not have an example in our sample, but we know that in Brazil, defences are very long and people may eat and drink during the defence.

References

Agar, M. H. (1980). *The professional stranger: An informal introduction to ethnography.* Academic Press.

Andrews, P. (2017). Is the 'telling case' a methodological myth? *International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 20,* 455–467.

Bes, M-P. R., Lamy, J., & Maisonobe, M. (2019). *La forge des pairs: la fabrique des jurys de thèses en France dans trois disciplines scientifiques. hal-02551202.* https://hal.science/hal-02551202

Bray, M., Adamson, B., & Mason, M. (2007). *Comparative education research. Approaches and methods.* Comparative Education Research Centre.

Byram, M. (2023). Standards and criteria: Is there a case for international comparability? In M. Byram & M. Stoicheva (Eds.), *The experience of examining the PhD: An international comparative study of processes and standards of doctoral examination* (pp. 21–33). Routledge.

Byram, M., & Stoicheva, M. (Eds.). (2020). *The doctorate as experience in Europe and beyond. Supervision, languages, identities.* Routledge.

Byram, M., & Stoicheva, M. (Eds.). (2023). *The experience of examining the PhD: An international comparative study of processes and standards of doctoral examination.* Routledge.

Charlton, F., & Smith, P. (2022). The doctoral viva: Defence or celebration? In D. L. Mulligan, N. Ryan, & P. A. Danaher (Eds.), *Deconstructing doctoral discourses. Palgrave studies in education research methods* (pp. 291–304). Palgrave Macmillan.

Chen, S. (2012). *Making sense of the public PhD dissertation defense: A qualitative multi-case study of education students' experiences* [Doctoral thesis, McGill University. eScholarship – McGill University's institutional digital repository]. https://escholarship.mcgill.ca/concern/theses/q811kp22m

Dardy, C., Ducart, D., & Maungeneau, D. (2002). *Un genre universitaire: le rapport de soutenance de these*. Presses universitaires du Septentrion.
Day, M. (2009). Clearing the final hurdle: The PhD viva. *Sport & Exercise Psychology Review*, *5*, 54–56.
de Saint-Georges, I. (2018). Generalizing from case studies: A commentary. *Integrative Psychological Behavior*, *52*, 94–103.
Denlico, P. (2003). Assessing the PhD: A constructive view of criteria. *Quality Assurance in Education*, *11,* 84–91.
Dobson, S. (2018). *Assessing the viva in higher education: Chasing moments of truth*. Springer.
Emmel, N. (2013). *Sampling and choosing cases in qualitative research: A realist approach*. Sage.
European University Association. (2010). *Salzburg ii recommendations*. EUA.
Gomm, R., Hammersley, M., & Foster, P. (2000). *Case study method: Key issues, key texts*. Sage.
Houston, G. (2018). *A study of the PhD examination: Process, attributes and outcomes* [Doctoral thesis, University of Oxford].
Houston, G. (2021). Doctoral examiners' judgments. Do examiners agree on doctoral attributes and how important are professional and personal characteristics? In A. Lee & R. Bongaardt (Eds.), *The future of doctoral research. Challenges and opportunities* (pp. 264–276). Routledge.
Izadi, A. (2017). Culture-generality and culture-specificity of face. *Pragmatics and Society*, *8*, 208–230.
Jalifar, A., & Mayahi, N. (2023). Referral for re-submission: Scholarly expectations of EFL applied linguistics doctoral defense sessions. *European Journal of Applied Linguistics*, *11*, 160–189.
Joyner, R. W. (2003). The selection of external examiners for research degrees. *Quality Assurance in Education*, *11*, 123–127.
Kiley, M. (2009). 'You don't want a smart Alec': Selecting examiners to assess doctoral dissertations. *Studies in Higher Education*, *34*(8), 889–903. http://doi.org/10.1080/03075070802713112
Kiley, M., Holbrook, A., Lovat, T., Fairbairn, H., Starfield, S., & Paltridge, B. (2018). An oral component in PhD. *Australian Universities' Review*, *60*, 25–34.
Kumar, V., Kaur, A., & Sanderson, L. J. (2022). PhD orals from the convenors' perspective: Implications for academics and candidates. *International Journal for Academic Development*, *29*, 62–74.
Kumar, V., Kaur, A., Sharmini, S., & Noman, M. (2022). 'Smile and nod' or more? Reassessing the role of the silent supervisor in the doctoral viva. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, *17*, 263–277.
Kumar, V., Taylor, S., & Sharmini, S. (2023). Conclusions. In V. Kumar, S. Taylor, & S. Sharmini (Eds.), *Doctoral examination: Exploring practice across the globe* (pp. 187–196). Taylor and Francis.
Lantsoght, E. O. L. (2021a). Students' perceptions of doctoral defense formats. *Education Sciences*, *11*, 519–548.
Lantsoght, E. O. L. (2021b). Students' perceptions of doctoral defense in relation to sociodemographic characteristics. *Education Sciences*, *11*, 463–509.
Lantsoght, E. O. L. (2022). Effectiveness of doctoral defense preparation methods. *Education Sciences*, *12,* 473–493.
Lantsoght, E. O. L. (2023). Doctoral defence formats. *Studies in Higher Education*, *48*(2), 343–355.
Lorimier, J. (2001). Participer à un jury de these. *La Revue administrative*, *54*(319), 86–93.
Lovat, T., Dally, K., Holbrook, A., & Fairbairn, H. (2022). Oral defence as a feedback mechanism in doctoral development and examination. *Australian Educational Researcher*, *49*, 845–860.

Lovitts, B. E. (2007). Making the implicit explicit: Creating performance expectations for the dissertation. Taylor and Francis.
Manidis, M., & Addo, R. (2017). Learning a practice through practise: Presenting knowledge in doctoral spoken presentations. *Studies in Continuing Education*, *39*, 235–250.
Mežek, Š. (2018). Laughter and humour in high-stakes academic ELF interactions: An analysis of laughter episodes in PhD defences/vivas. *Journal of English as a Lingua Franca*, *7*, 261–284.
Morley, L., Leonard, D., & David, M. (2002). Variations in vivas: Quality and equality in British PhD assessments. *Studies in Higher Education*, *27*, 263–273.
Nerad, M., Bogle, D., Kohl Conor O'Carroll, U., Peters, C., & Scholz, B. (2022). *Towards a global core value system in doctoral education*. UCL Press.
Phillips, D., & Schweisfurth, M. (2014). *Comparative and international education. An introduction to theory, method and practice* (2nd ed.). Bloomsbury.
Remenyi, D. (2019). Never smile at a crocodile: A bad viva voce by the rule book. *The Electronic Journal of Business Research Methods*, *17*, 67–73.
Sadler, M. (1979). How far can we learn anything of practical value from the study of foreign systems of education? Address given at the Guildford educational conference on Saturday 20 October 1900. In J. H. Higginson (Ed.), *Selections from Michael Sadler: Studies in world citizenship* (pp. 48–51). Dejall & Meyorre.
Şenel, T., Keskin, S. C., & Uğur, A. (2020). Tez Savunma Jürileri Üzerine Etik Bağlamında Bir İnceleme: Sosyal Bilgiler Eğitimi Alanı Örneği [An ethical review of thesis defense juries: Case study of social studies education]. *Turkish Studies-Educational Sciences*, *15*(1), 359–373.
Share, M. (2016). The PhD viva: A space for academic development. *International Journal for Academic Development*, *21*, 178–193.
Spradley, J. P. (1979). *The ethnographic interview*. Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
Spradley, J. P. (1980). *Participant observation*. Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
Stephenson, Z., Jackson, A., & Wilkes, V. (2023). Student experiences of the 'closed-door' PhD and doctorate level viva voce: A systematic review of the literature. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, *49*, 601–615.
Stigmar, M. (2019). Learning from reasons given for rejected doctorates: Drawing on some Swedish cases from 1984 to 2017. *Higher Education*, *77*, 1031–1045.
Swales, J. M. (2012). The Ph.D. defense. In J. M. Swales (Ed.), *Research genres* (pp. 145–172). Cambridge University Press.
Tan, W. C. (2022). Speaking the language of defence: Narratives of doctoral examiners on the PhD viva. *Qualitative Research Journal*, *22*, 478–488.
Tinkler, S. P., & Jackson, C. (2000). Examining the doctorate: Institutional policy and the PhD examination process in Britain. *Studies in Higher Education*, *25,* 167–180.
Usunier, J-C., & Sbizzera, S. (2013). Comparative thick description. Articulating similarities and differences in local consumer experience. *International Marketing Review*, *30*(1), 42–55. http://doi.org/10.1108/02651331311298564
Von Wright, G. H. (1971). *Explanation and understanding*. Routledge and Kegan Paul.
Wallace, S. (2003). Figuratively speaking: Six accounts of the PhD viva. *Quality Assurance in Education*, *11*, 100–108.
Watts, J. H. (2012). Preparing doctoral candidates for the viva: Issues for students and supervisors. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, *36,* 371–381.
Wierzbicka, A. (2010). *Experience: An English keyword and a key cultural theme*. Oxford University Press.
Wisker, G., Highman, L., Spronken-Smith, R., & Waghorne, J. (2022). Across time and space: Examiner and candidate experiences of online doctoral vivas. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International, 59*, 131–141.
Yin, R. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods* (4th ed.). Sage.