

The Experience of ‘Defending’ the Doctoral Dissertation

International Comparative Studies of the
Final Oral Examination

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Chapter 10 A case study of the PhD defence at the Durham University, UK

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10 A case study of the PhD defence at the Durham University, UK

Michael Byram

The regulatory framework

Unlike some of our cases (e.g. Versailles, Southern Danish), there is no national-level regulation of the doctorate.¹ There are advisory publications from the Quality Assurance Agency such as *Higher Education Credit Framework for England: Advice on Academic Credit Arrangements* and a further document which describes the characteristics of doctoral degrees.² Nonetheless, each university has autonomous power to set its own criteria and standards and regulate the doctorate.

Durham University has two key documents for the doctorate: a section in the *Learning and Teaching Handbook*³ and the *Core Regulations*⁴ for professional doctorates, PhD with integrated studies, and research degrees by thesis or composition. The case studied here comes under the third of these.⁵

The *Learning and Teaching Handbook* describes the processes of admission, supervision, and examination of doctoral students. It also describes the induction programmes students are required to attend, provided by the University and each department. Students are expected to complete supervised study in three years and to submit their thesis as soon as possible, but no more than 12 months, thereafter. Students who do not comply will normally be withdrawn.

Examiners are appointed on the basis of a recommendation from the department in question, and there shall be at least one examiner from another university, the ‘external examiner’.⁶ A chair of the examiners may be appointed if the candidate is an employee of the University, but otherwise the examination is chaired by the internal examiner. Examiners are expected to complete the examination within three months of submission of the thesis ‘if at all possible’ and their responsibilities as examiners are made explicit:

- considering the written work submitted by the candidate;
- arriving at an independent evaluation of whether the work submitted meets the criteria for the award and, if not, in which aspects it is deficient;
- writing an initial independent report and sending it to the Curriculum, Learning, and Assessment Service;
- consulting with the other examiner and comparing initial reports;

- following examination of all written and, where appropriate, oral evidence, deciding whether the candidate has met the standards for the award;
- deciding upon an appropriate recommendation to the University;
- writing a final report with the other examiner on the candidate's performance and submitting it to the Curriculum, Learning, and Assessment Service;
- in all cases where the recommendation is that the degree be revised and resubmitted for the original or a lesser degree, agreeing with the other examiner a full list of the changes to be made and the work to be undertaken. A copy of this should be attached to the final report.

The *Core Regulations* state that a PhD thesis shall have a maximum length of 100,000 words and the criteria for assessment are as follows:

Candidate are required to demonstrate the ability to conduct original investigations, to test or explore ideas/hypotheses (whether their own or those of others), and to understand the relationship of the theme of their investigations to a wider field of knowledge. The thesis should include an original and significant contribution to knowledge, for example through the discovery of new knowledge, the connection of previously unrelated facts, the development of new theory, or a new analysis of older views. It should also include substantial matter worthy of publication, though it need not be submitted in a form suitable for publication.

These criteria are repeated in the documentation which examiners receive and are expected to use by agreeing or not whether a thesis has met these criteria. (Other criteria are specified for theses by composition, performance, or creative writing.)

Before the defence

Submitting the thesis

All doctoral students in Durham have two supervisors who may agree to work with equally shared responsibilities, or they may agree a different proportion depending on expertise and student need. In this case, both were equally involved and discussed deadlines with the candidate about a year before the expected submission date. Normally, a PhD student is expected to complete in three or four years, and there are three stages of review leading up to the submission. In this case, the candidate had submitted in her fifth year due to delays in data collection during the COVID-19 pandemic. The two supervisors have similar perspectives on when a thesis is ready for submission. It is important that the student 'has met the criteria for progression through the process, that she is not going to be knocked back because the thesis has too many weaknesses' (supervisor 1). A thesis has to have moved 'beyond a kind

of descriptive report of findings' (supervisor 2) and reach a doctorate level of analysis; there should be alignment across the chapters and clear contributions and recommendations. There is, however, also a 'saturation point' when supervisors think 'it's the best possible thesis that (a student) can do at the time' (supervisor 2). There is a need to balance deadlines and expectations of submission against what is feasible for the student.

The candidate also wanted to submit by a specific date to avoid further university fees, and this meant that the supervisors read final chapters quickly and felt that they would have liked a little more time. The candidate discussed this with supervisors who had reassured her that the thesis was ready and that spending two more weeks and paying for a whole year would not be necessary or worthwhile. After the defence, she said that she was surprised the examiners did not focus on the final chapter which she had written in a hurry and felt might be seen as weak.

Preparation for the defence

Supervisors

In preparation for the defence, the first supervisor sent to the candidate a story written by a former student about her experience of the defence and a set of questions which are likely to be asked. There is also guidance in a handbook which had been sent. The supervisors met the candidate some ten days before the defence and explained the procedure, taking her through the process of the defence: the likely length, the option of a break, what questions the candidate might ask at the end, the procedure of supervisors and candidate leaving and returning for the examiners' final decision. They asked some typical questions, how the candidate would answer. (The second supervisor said that she will sometimes give a candidate a more formal mock viva.)

Candidate

The purpose of the defence for the candidate would be a 'check that I know what I'm talking about' and that she had indeed done the thesis herself. It was also an opportunity to develop points in the thesis and gain advice on weaker points and what might be developed for future articles and postdoc work. It would be 'a useful conversation' because she intends to work in academia.

In preparation, she had attended an online workshop offered by the university to all doctoral students. She too reported the discussion with her supervisors a week or so before the defence. They had planned a 'a mock viva', but it became in fact a discussion of points to think about, and one supervisor said that the internal examiner in the past has asked about positionality. In both online workshop and discussion with supervisors, the emphasis had been on seeing the defence as 'an opportunity to talk to two people who have actually read your work' and who would see it 'in a critical but not negative way, more a way of probing you to develop your work more'. On the other hand, she said:

I don't know if that's the right way of thinking, because I do know that it is still an exam at the end of the day. But I think my supervisors tried to tell me to think about it more positively.

She had re-read her work and would read it again in the week preceding the defence. She was preparing 'cue cards' on which she had written points she might have to comment on. She used the document with possible questions her supervisor had sent and added her own. She had also read online examples of how to prepare and seen that there is 'a handful of questions that come up frequently'.

She knew what the procedure and possible outcomes would be. She was to meet her supervisor half an hour before, and they would go to the room together.

Examiners

Examiners receive several documents, which include, in addition to administration of fees, etc.: Guidance for the Oral Examination, an Initial Independent Report form, and Examiners' Joint Report form.

The purpose of the defence

The Guidance for the Oral Examination explains the purpose of the defence:

The purpose of the viva is to gather further evidence from the candidate about their suitability for the award, in particular:

- to ask the candidate to clarify issues relating to meeting criteria relating to specific parts of the thesis, to the thesis as a whole, and to the award;
- to ascertain that the thesis is the candidate's own work, that he or she has developed research skills at this level, and that he or she understands the relationship of the thesis to the wider field of knowledge;
- in cases where the thesis and/or the candidate does not meet the criteria for the award, to ascertain whether resubmission for re-examination is feasible, and ensure that clear feedback can be provided to the candidate.

For the internal examiner, the purpose is above all to explore the 'original contribution', to see that it is indeed original and well argued and the candidate's own. The candidate should articulate with confidence what the examiner has so far read. The keywords are therefore originality, rigour, and significance.

The external examiner explained that this was her first experience of examining and described herself as 'a novice to the process'. She sees the purpose as an opportunity to clarify questions she has about the thesis. She also referred to the Durham criteria, saying, 'it is not unlike examining any other essay – to

some extent'. She described the defence as an initiation for the student into 'a research identity of a different kind'; 'as in any ritual', there will be a certain amount of anxiety and tendency to be defensive whereas it is important to learn to 'be in a conversation more than in a defensive position', a valuable lesson for a future career.

In the interview after the defence, the internal examiner reflected on the problems of this kind of defence. She has some anxiety about whether it is the best approach. 'The pairing of the examiners is everything' because this is a very real examination with high expectations that the candidate will perform well, 'it's such a summative high stakes examination'. There is a risk involved because 'the power that those examiners hold is very great', and there is always the possibility that examiners are 'less interested in the student's work and more interested in their own work being reflected, or their own perspective'. It is therefore the concern of any supervisor to make the right choice and not to put the student in a 'vulnerable position'.

In the interview after the defence, the external examiner who is familiar with German universities reflected on difference between defences which are celebratory and a ritual, saying that her own defence in a British university had been 'quite anti-climatic, it was a nice conversation, but because it wasn't a public defence, I didn't really feel I had transitioned into a different state of mind, and the graduation itself is quite a long way off'. (She here refers to the formal ceremony in which degrees are awarded.)

Reading the thesis

The internal examiner likes to use a printed version of the thesis and prints out a hard copy of everything including appendices. She then writes on the hard copy and uses a highlighting system and post-its so that she can find again important elements of the thesis. She first skims the document looking at the abstract, the introduction and conclusion in order to have a feeling for the whole. The first reading is very slow, 'line by line', and is completed within a week by blocking out time, of four or five hours, often evenings and weekends. Her notes include questions and comments on points for which she might want to ask for clarification. She prefers to complete this in a week in order to become immersed in it a bit like 'when you're reading a great novel, you just read it in a couple of sittings'. She does not begrudge this time 'because this is years of someone's life'. She really values doing this work because it is also formative for examiners themselves, and because her own defence was so positive. 'It's one of for me the highlights of the job . . . it's fascinating work'.

The external examiner also prefers a paper copy and asked for one though this was not mentioned in the documentation. She waited until she had whole days to read since otherwise she would 'not get the whole impression' and read the first time 'like I would read a book', making occasional notes. She then read again, making notes and using post-its with questions and comments. This also served to identify possible questions for the defence. The whole process took about a week.

Criteria

Criteria for the defence are specified by the university regulations, and examiners are required to address these directly in their report (see later). Both examiners refer explicitly to these criteria when they talk about how they write their initial pre-defence report. The internal examiner said it is implied in the criteria that one needs to say ‘yes’ to all of them for otherwise one is in ‘dangerous territory’.

The external examiner explained how she used the criteria. She read the thesis without consulting the criteria, then ‘mapped [her notes] onto the criteria later, rather than explicitly working towards the criteria from the start’. She recognized that her own internal criteria were similar to those of the university and that is perhaps why in other countries criteria are not specified. In other words, she approached the thesis in the way she would read any other piece of academic writing. There was therefore nothing surprising in the Durham criteria.

Writing the pre-defence report and preparing questions

The internal examiner writes her initial report straight after ‘immersive reading’ when she has a list of points that she wants to address. First, there is the list of criteria to which one has to answer yes or no, and then the rest of the report is a matter of ‘teasing out’ the detail for those criteria. As a result of her conversations with other examiners, she sees the defence as having ‘a lot of weight’ and so she writes her commentary in an open ‘inquiry-based mode’ which will allow her to reach a final judgement through the defence, rather than pre-empting the judgement. The defence is not the final stage; it is possible for examiners to require further work which can have disadvantages if an examiner wants work to be done which might ‘pander to their own interests’.

The external examiner explained that she wrote her report as if she were addressing the internal examiner. This meant a style which was ‘more conversational’. She began by giving a whole impression of the thesis and what was working well in it, more or less reflecting the Durham criteria. She then went into more detail with questions about the methodology on the way the data were presented, including references to page numbers and concrete examples from the thesis. Finally, she included a section with possible questions. Including a lot of detail in her report meant that she would not need to re-read the thesis in detail immediately prior to the defence.

The examiners exchanged reports, and the external examiner, on seeing that they were of a similar opinion, was ‘more confident’ about the way the process of examining was developing as they shared views and, in further email exchanges, discussed the points that they could focus on. They also discussed specific examples from the thesis including the use of particular theory and how this was translated into the research process and analysis. This process lasted for about a week.

The internal examiner said she based her question preparation on the notes she had made and the post-its that she has inserted in the hard copy of the thesis. The key part is to talk with the other examiner and agree on the procedure so that everything will be covered and that the defence will be supportive and 'formative' and a good experience for the candidate. It is useful to have a meeting with the other examiner in order to have a sense of them as a person; examiners having a good awareness of each other through having a conversation is helpful in ensuring that the experience is positive for the candidate.

The Guidance for the Oral Examination says that examiners should meet 'normally a couple of hours before' to exchange and discuss their initial reports and decide on 'the key issues to be raised with the candidate, the order within which they are to be raised, who will "lead" on each issue'. It also gives detailed advice on preparing the room, welcoming the candidate, explaining the process and purpose of the examination and different ways of asking questions. It then discusses 'poor practice', describing different types of examiner: inquisitor, proofreader, committee person, hobby-horse rider, kite flyer, and reminiscer.

Relationships among participants

The examiners did not already know each other. The internal examiner had seen in the thesis considerable reference to the work of the external examiner.

In general, the supervisor says that we all know the people working in a research area and in some cases they are like friends, people who can be trusted, being confident that 'they are a reasonable human being'. She would, however, never discuss the candidate's work with potential examiners.

The candidate described the process of finding examiners as a matter of discussion with her supervisors. The people who were their first choice had accepted. The internal examiner was had been involved in her progression review and, having worked with the internal on student supervision, one supervisor also knew her well. The external examiner suggested by supervisors was cited a lot in her thesis, and one of the supervisors knew her from a research project. She had looked at some of the examiners' work; she did not want to 'go down a rabbit hole' but wanted to look at how they use certain terms.

The external examiner said that the supervisor had first invited her informally and, since she did not know the procedure, she had met with an experienced colleague in her university to ask him about who would be involved in the organization of the defence, how much time he usually spent on examining a PhD and whether he would examine themes that he might not be entirely up to date with. She then accepted the invitation.

The defence

The regulatory framework

Examiners submit an initial independent report to the University before the defence and then compare their reports as part of the preparation for the defence.

The Initial Independent Report forms which examiners have to complete include the list of criteria mentioned earlier, to which the examiner should answer ‘Yes’ or ‘No’

1. Has the candidate shown that he or she is able to conduct original investigations?
2. Has the candidate shown that he or she is able to test his or her own ideas and those of others?
3. Has the candidate shown that he or she understands how the special theme is related to a wider field of knowledge?
4. Does the thesis contain an original contribution to knowledge? (The thesis should include matter worthy of publication though it need not be submitted in a form suitable for publication.)
5. Is the style of the thesis satisfactory?
6. Is the presentation and general arrangement of the thesis satisfactory?

Each examiner shall then write a ‘general report’ which shall be returned to the University before conferral with the other examiner.

After the defence examiners have to submit a Joint Report which indicates their ‘recommendation’, in effect a decision. There are several options within the recommendation that the degree be awarded:

A: unconditionally

B: after minor corrections have been made to the thesis as specified by the Examiners and subsequently approved by the Internal Examiner. Candidate will normally be given three months to complete minor corrections.

C: after major corrections have been made to the thesis as specified by the Examiners and subsequently approved by the Internal Examiner. Candidate will normally be given six months to complete major corrections.

There is also a specification of what is meant by ‘minor’ and ‘major’ corrections and we shall see later that the decision is not always easy:

Minor corrections . . . should not require the candidate to conduct further research or undertake substantial further work [e.g. typographical errors, clarifying points, re phrasing, editing/adding paragraphs, correcting references etc].

Major corrections . . . may require the candidate to undertake further work of greater substance [e.g. more extensive editorial changes, the addition of more substantial material, rewriting of larger passages etc].

Candidates who have not satisfied the examiners may resubmit their thesis within one year, and then the examiners may decide whether or not there should be a second defence. It is also stated that a candidate whose thesis is considered satisfactory but ‘fails to satisfy the examiners in an oral

examination' may have a second oral examination or a written examination within six months.

The University has an explicitly stated view on publications in a thesis.⁷ A thesis which includes published work is assessed on the same criteria as any other. 'The University's approach is deliberately flexible': different kinds of published works may be woven into a text or presented as individual papers. There are no rules about the number of such works, but they must have been completed during the candidate's period of study for the doctorate.

Examiners in British universities receive a fee. This varies from university to university, but the University of Durham is probably similar in respect of this to others and at the time of writing an external examiner would receive approximately £150 and an internal examiner £35.

Observation of the defence

The defence is scheduled to begin at 14:00, and the first supervisor has met the candidate at 13:30.

At 13:55, the internal examiner and an administrator are already in the room (see Figure 10.1) and in contact through the Internet with the external examiner. They are adjusting the technology and in particular the camera to focus on the candidate's place and the internal examiner. The external examiner has not travelled because she does not want to infect everyone with flu, but is happy to continue the defence.

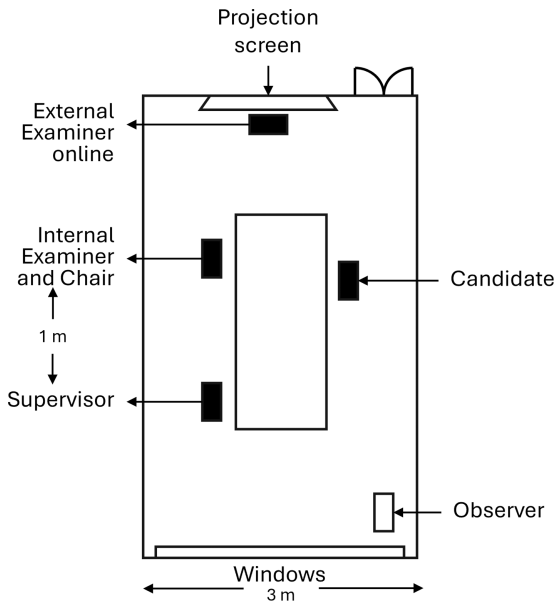


Figure 10.1 Layout of the examination room. ↵

At 14:00, the candidate enters, accompanied by her first supervisor, and they take their place at the table. The candidate opens her laptop and places paper and notes on the table. The candidate is dressed formally. The examiners and supervisors are dressed in an everyday fashion as they probably do when at work.

The internal examiner introduces herself and invites the external examiner to do likewise, the latter explaining why she has not come in person to the defence. The internal examiner then explains the procedure and emphasizes that if the candidate has problems with the technology then she must say so. The examiners will ask questions and start a conversation, and there will be opportunity for a break during the defence.

At 14:03, the internal examiner begins with questions which involve asking the candidate to talk about her interest in the topic and her positionality. The candidate explains that the thesis is a continuation of her master's coursework, that she wanted to investigate a topic involving work with children. She then discusses with the external examiner what is meant by positionality.

During this time, the supervisor begins to make notes and does so throughout the defence.

The candidate says she is nervous and says that she is losing her 'train of thought' in responding. The external examiner says that she also felt nervous in her own defence. The supervisor asks the candidate if she wants a glass of water.

At 14:10, external examiner takes over the questions and asks about how the candidate chose her method. During this time and throughout the defence, the internal examiner is making notes which she said she would do when she explain the procedure, but the candidate should not worry about this; it is to keep a record.

The candidate begins to answer more fluently and describes her work and methodology. After her answer, the external examiner repeats and summarizes what the candidate has said and asks if she has understood. This is confirmed by the candidate who adds some more detail. There is a momentary break in the connection and the external asks the candidate to repeat her last sentence.

At 14:20, the external passes back to the internal examiner who asks about a particular author used in the methodology, and the candidate explains why this author was important. The external examiner is also writing notes as the candidate responds and does so throughout the defence.

The candidate asks if she may make notes as the examiners ask questions and is encouraged to do so. The internal examiner offers to explain her question in more detail. The candidate has her laptop open and refers to her thesis as she gives answers, saying, for example, 'I talk about that in Chapter 7'.

At 14:29, external picks up the theme from the internal examiner and refers to a specific page in the thesis asking how a particular theory impacted on the planning of the project. The candidate makes her notes and begins to speak more confidently as she describes her data collection. The external examiner

refers to another specific page and asks for more detail. The candidate says that she had not thought of this point and asks the external to rephrase her question. There is again a momentary break in contact, and the internal examiner asks the external to repeat her last sentence.

As the candidate speaks, the internal looks at her and nods, and then writes her notes. In answering the external examiner's question, the candidate uses her first name 'what you are saying, [name], about'.

At 14:37, the conversation continues on the same theme concerning the conceptualization of the methodology and the use of theory, as the candidate explains how the theory helped her to understand her data.

[It is noticeable that the technology prevents proper eye contact since each person can look only at the screen rather directly at a person's eyes.]

At 14:45, the external examiner returns the floor to the internal and says that they will return to the issues later when they talk about the analysis of data. The internal examiner says that the next question is about the candidate role as researcher and discusses her concept of 'participation' as part of the methodology.

At 14:50, the internal examiner picks up the questioning and says in response to the candidate, 'That's a very helpful answer' and 'that is the last point on that before moving to the next question'.

The examiners appear to have decided on a list of questions before examination began, and later the internal examiner says they spent three hours in the morning preparing the defence.

After further explanation of the methodology by the candidate who refers to her thesis on her laptop, the internal examiner agrees with her and then asks the external if she is 'happy to move on'.

The external examiner asks about the time and whether the candidate wants a break. She says she is happy to go on and the external says that they will have a break soon. The external examiner quotes from the thesis and then asks the candidate to say a 'bit more about' the issue in question to which the candidate answers 'that paragraph says' and then develops the theme saying 'I think I talk a bit about' and looks at the text on her laptop.

The external responds that the answer was long and she would like to pick up on two points, and this leads to a discussion about the usefulness of the research. Again the candidate asks the external to repeat the question and the candidate makes notes and then says 'oh I see' and replies. Again the external repeats and summarizes the candidate's answer and asks if she has understood correctly. The candidate confirms that she has. She appears more confident now and smiles and laughs briefly, and this is more like a dialogue than question and answer.

At 15:12, the external suggests a break and the internal agrees that they should take 10 minutes.

The supervisor leaves with the candidate and meets the second supervisor who is waiting outside the room; she has been listening to the defence online. They go to a staff room and then return to the examination room.

At 15:22, the examination begins again with the examiners saying they have had a cup of tea and a snack and then the external examiner picks up the questioning by saying she is curious about what is written on a particular page, asking the candidate to clarify. The candidate answers with increasing confidence and the conversation continues as a dialogue in which the examiners repeat and ask for confirmation that they have understood, which the candidate confirms.

The candidate explains that she wrote certain parts of the text to ensure that the examiners have understood. This now becomes a discussion of the interpretation of the data, and the examiners suggest other ways of interpreting. This includes the external examiner repeating what the candidate said and asking her to confirm, which she does, and then the external asks further questions about what the candidate means when she says. The external makes a suggestion and the candidate says 'Yes I think that's a good point'.

At 15:37, the external says 'Shall we move on' and the internal explains that they are now going to focus on the analysis: 'That is so much, we focus on', she says also 'I enjoyed enormously. . . . There are these lovely examples'. The discussion continues with the candidate explaining her interpretation and referring to a specific page in the thesis.

During this exchange, the candidate uses the internal examiner's first name and also interrupts to ask 'Do you think?'. The internal examiner talks about her own view of the data which are 'interesting and a beautiful set of data'. The candidate replies and says it is 'really interesting . . . maybe that could be teased out more, there is so much to say'.

There is some smiling and quiet laughter about the exchange and what is being said and the external examiner gives her own view of the data, so that the conversation becomes more like a seminar, rather than question and answer.

At 16:00, the discussion of data is continuing and then the external says 'Shall we move on'.

The focus is now on the concept of capital and social capital and the internal says 'we are pulling out examples and asking about'. The examiner refers to a particular page.

The candidate refers to the use of the concept of social capital and says 'As I say there'. and as she speaks the internal examiner looks at the candidate and then makes agreeing noises before writing notes.

The conversation continues and the internal says 'We are inviting you to see the richness of your data' and how it can be interpreted differently, and the internal explains how the examiners think that the data could be interpreted using Foucault. The candidate replies by saying 'Do you think I addressed that by?'. The external intervenes and expands what is being said and the candidate also interrupts and becomes more visibly excited and enthusiastic in her response.

At 16:10, the external suggests that they should move on to the reflections on methodology in the final chapter. The internal quotes from the thesis and asks the candidate to explain what she means by. As the candidate responds the

internal looks at her copy of the thesis and asks how the candidate understands a particular concept to which the candidate replies that she has different interpretations and finishes by saying 'I enjoyed writing that chapter'.

At 16:20, the external examiner asks for more detail about a particular point, and there is more discussion about data collection

At 16:22, external examiner says to the internal 'We could skip' and the internal examiner picks up the questions asking for more detail about. After this, the external asks if there could have been other ways of capturing data and the candidate speculates by saying 'That could have been'.

At 16:30, the external says 'Shall we move on to our very last question?' and there is some laughter. The external again quotes from the text and the recommendations made in the thesis, to which the candidate says 'Yes that's a great point. What I was trying to get at there'.

The external asks if there could be other possible recommendations and the candidate answers speculatively 'Maybe that could be'.

The internal examiner has a follow-up question 'We were wondering about'. To which the candidate responds and the internal agrees with her response enthusiastically.

The internal invites the external to sum up and the latter lists the points they have talked about and finishes by saying 'I enjoyed the dialogue' and there is some laughter and the candidate expresses her thanks.

At 16:40, the internal says 'We will now confer', and invites the candidate and supervisor to leave the room. The supervisor explains where they will be waiting.

At 16:45, the discussion between the examiners focuses initially on how the candidate went beyond the text of the thesis in her responses as she began to relax and was able to think more and be open to different perspectives. This meant that the responses were better and the external says that 'She did a good job in replying about' and that 'I would have liked a bit more about'. The internal says that there was more in the discussion than in the text and there might be a need to move closer to the theory in the analysis and create more coherence.

The internal makes notes and then summarizes their discussion which 'could make the thesis really strong' and that they would be able to 'help to improve the recommendations'

At 17:03, the internal examiner asks 'What should the outcome be?' and reads from the regulations about levels of correction: for three months or six months or re-examination. There is then further discussion of the content of the data and how the data are interpreted which includes a remark by the internal examiner that they could encourage the candidate to publish because there is considerable originality in the data.

The external lists the points that they might ask the candidate to address and mentions two points connected with the analysis of the data. The internal adds a third point about the possibility of further recommendations as discussed during the defence.

There is further discussion of whether this amounts to minor or major corrections and the internal again reads aloud the regulations. They discuss what needs to be done saying that they will point out that the data is rich and it merits further analysis.

At 17:20, the examiners decide that the internal will announce the decision to ensure that the candidate receives a positive communication face to face rather than through the screen.

The internal goes out to fetch the candidate and supervisors who return and take their seats, the second supervisor standing as there are not enough chairs.

At 17:25, the internal says to the candidate ‘You have passed’ and there is applause from all and then the internal gives further feedback including phrases such as ‘this was such great work’. She then says there are four things which will develop the work so that the examiners can encourage the candidate to publish, to which the candidate replies that she has submitted a book proposal. The internal then lists the four areas, and the candidate receives these positively and engages in conversation with the examiners.

The supervisor has been taking notes of the four areas as does the candidate herself.

The internal asks if there are any questions and says that the report will be completed within five days. The supervisor asks for clarification of one point, and the external examiner says that they will help with the development of the text.

The supervisor then thanks the examiners and the external examiner leaves the online meeting.

The examination is over at 17:40.

The defence in retrospect

The procedure

The candidate was initially nervous, more than most people in the supervisors’ experience, and supervisors had indeed expected that she might be ‘lost for words’. In retrospect, the candidate said she felt nervous but her supervisors had talked to her immediately before the defence in a supportive way and she also found the examiners ‘approachable’. The beginning of the defence had not gone ‘as I had planned because I was stumbling on my words and that was frustrating’. The first question about ‘positionality’ – predicted by a supervisor as we saw earlier – was one she had prepared well and had a lot to say but ‘it almost went the opposite way, because I just didn’t know where to start’, and then the reaction of the examiner suggested that it was not what she expected her to say. ‘It was a big question to start with, and it felt quite open-ended’ although looking back she thought it was a good question which she could now answer well. At the time, she did not know if she should repeat things which were already in the thesis ‘because it was all there’.

In general, two things were striking for her: the length of time and, although she did not look at the clock, she had felt that the defence was going on for a long time; second, that at the last minute she was told that the external examiner would be online, which was a surprise but it worked well and the examiners 'were very conscious that the visual and the audio was okay'.

From the supervisors' perspective, the defence had proceeded in general as expected. The questioning seemed to reflect the research interests of the examiners, in particular, the external, which led to 'probing and digging' into detail of the data. The striking aspect of the defence was the length, this being the longest the first supervisor has experienced in a defence in the UK, as one to one and a half hours is the norm. During the break, supervisor and candidate talked about the defence and how it was going and encouraged the candidate who was 'overwhelmed', praising her for answering the questions well. They suggested that she stop referring to the thesis itself, on her laptop, which she had done more than most candidates.

The internal examiner who was also the chair of the defence agreed that it had taken longer than usual and attributed this in part to the very thorough approach to the text which the external examiner had taken. She had thought about whether she should move the defence on more quickly but the external had done a lot of preparation and she felt it necessary to let the defence go on. It was towards the end that she reigned in the proceedings. The external examiner also commented upon the length and had not been sure what a normal length would be, although they had discussed this.

The internal examiner thought that the candidate's writing notes was useful, and something she had seen in other defences, 'particularly because she was so nervous, I was almost relieved, she was doing something potentially to help her give her some time help her to manage what she might need to get to, to start to answer'.

The questions and discussion

The candidate described the process as 'a mixture of direct questioning and then also elements of conversation' although the conversation was more about clarification of points and sometimes she 'struggled to follow their questioning' and had to ask them to repeat on several occasions. One supervisor said she was somewhat surprised how often this happened. The candidate had the impression the examiners expected to hear certain responses and then had follow-up questions. The questions were nuanced, dealing with detail and asking her if she saw 'links between certain things'. She thought the examiners were interested in certain aspects but there was a lot which was not touched on. There was not much of questions people say one should prepare.

The two examiners had different ways of asking questions. One asked short questions and the other's questioning 'felt quite long'. She wrote notes as the questions were asked because she had spoken to other students who had already done their defences and who recommended this. Supervisors too said

they had recommended this, as a means of taking time for thought. In fact at the time, the candidate thought this was not very helpful and she wrote just odd words, and then the result sometimes was that the examiner asked a follow-up question ‘as though she thought I was maybe struggling to answer’. Not wanting to give this impression she began to ‘just put my pen down and speak’ in order to break the silence.

Overall, the examiners had not focused on what she thought were the weaknesses, as she re-read the thesis and ‘the parts I thought were the strongest in some senses were the parts that they actually put as corrections’ – although this was framed more in terms of what she could develop further – and had ‘undervalued’ in her work.

As for supervisors, they were a little surprised how specific and ‘deep’ the questions were, with ‘lots of detailed follow-up questions’ which one supervisor characterized as ‘quite unusual’ and not what she had expected. It was ‘very meticulous’, and this made the defence long.

The first supervisor was present in the room and made notes throughout the defence. She usually takes notes on the questions asked and what the candidate replies. In this case, she focused on the questions as the answers were long. The notes might then be useful to the candidate when she considers publications.

The internal reflected on questioning and the range of approaches from one where there is no preamble or framing, to one where there is some reflection which gives an indication of the way the examiner is thinking, and she tried to use the second approach to help the candidate and alleviate her anxiety. The external examiner had tended more to the former approach at least initially.

The external described how she and the internal had discussed the process of questioning and that there were no ‘hard and fast rules’. She knew from talking to colleagues at her university that often ‘it’s the external examiner exclusively running the viva and asking questions’. In this case, they had decided to alternate questions and therefore be more ‘conversational’ which would also allow the examiners to make their notes while the other was speaking. She had considered and discussed with the internal whether it was appropriate to make notes because that might alienate the candidate and prevent a working conversation with her, and in the event, the use of zoom might have been doubly alienating, although the internal had said afterwards that there was no problem in this respect. The notes would help in remembering the candidate’s answers for the final report. The two examiners had decided who would be asking which questions and they had the same agreed script where she had left space to write notes after each question, thus making the note-taking more structured. This had taken some three hours preparation in the morning before the defence, and had been particularly helpful because of having to use zoom.

The external examiner also explained that she had taken part in a professional development seminar on conducting a viva. It was here that she had been advised about different kinds of question and, for example, not to ask

too many justification questions which might lead the candidate to become defensive. Questions which are about understanding and clarification were the ones she focused on, and she had also taken from the seminar the suggestion that it is good to listen to the candidate and then feed back to them what they have said to ensure understanding.

She thought, overall, that the approach had worked and she had enjoyed it herself and hoped that the candidate had had a better experience than just having one person asking questions.

The post-examination discussion

The internal examiner described the conversation after the candidate and supervisor had left the room as 'very collaborative and dialogic', in comparison to other experiences where the external examiner had been 'in charge'. In such cases, an internal examiner has to think about how much they are deferring to the external and to what extent they should hold their own ground. In most cases, however, there is real broad agreement from the moment of reading and exchanging reports, and then there is no need for discussion about substantive issues in the post-examination discussion. The question is then – as in this case – how examiners agree required corrections should be 'translated' into one of the levels of 'minor' or 'major' corrections. The internal said that at another university she knows the distinction is not made. 'Major' is a problematic term: 'It is not great for student to carry major corrections out of their viva'. It is better to be able to say to a candidate, as in the other university, that they have passed with corrections and then the examiners to give guidance about the time needed to complete corrections. In this case, however, the decision had to be made as 'major'.

Having had no previous experience, the external was aware of the importance of the internal as chair. She had helped with the regulations because she had 'read them before but it's in some sense just words on the page, but to map that onto a lived experience of an examination is a different question'. It was relatively easy because they had corresponded about their reports in the preparation for the defence and all they had to do was to think about 'how much the candidate had spoken to the questions and how much we wanted her to revise what she had written in her thesis in accordance with some of the things she had actually herself discovered during the examination'. The major/minor distinction was new to her, but the decision for major corrections and six months in which to complete them was appropriate: 'I think if I had been in the candidate's shoes, I would have wanted six months as well to have the time to think that through and come back to the work afresh'.

The report

The external examiner drafted the final joint report by combining the initial reports and the document they had prepared to structure the questions for

the defence, including the notes they had taken concerning the candidate's responses. That was followed by an account of the changes required. There is no recommendation or advice in the documentation about the length of this report but the internal examiner advised that this document was too long, and therefore she extracted only the required changes and created a shorter document for the joint report.

Next steps

Both supervisors explained they had already planned to meet the candidate soon after receiving the report to ensure the candidate understood the required work and to reassure her. The report highlights the substantive points to be addressed where the candidate is asked to develop her thinking and elaborate on findings. There is a standard way in which corrections are done, not just in Durham. Examiners are expected to be specific about corrections – giving page numbers in the thesis – and not include anything which has not been mentioned in the defence. The candidate must make it easy for the internal examiner to check by preparing a list of corrections required and an indication of where they have been addressed in the new text of the thesis.

The candidate was rather surprised at the required changes since these were 'revisions' – she used this term rather than 'corrections' – which she did not really see as revisions. She had been given six months to carry out revisions but she and her supervisors thought the revisions/corrections could be done in three months at the most. She would have liked 'minor' rather than 'major' corrections because this means less work and the distinction made in the documents is not very helpful because people might think badly of major revisions, "It's terrible!" But it's just the term. Major is perhaps a bit unfortunately framed' and she is 'not too disheartened by it'. She would be able to graduate in June at the public event – the 'congregation' – in which degrees are awarded to undergraduates and postgraduates, all wearing ceremonial dress.

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Notes

- 1 The defence is called a 'viva voce' (Latin: by live voice) which is often talked about as 'the viva'.
- 2 <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/the-quality-code/higher-education-credit-framework-for-england> https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/quality-code/doctoral-degree-characteristics-statement-2020.pdf?sfvrsn=a3c5ca81_14
- 3 <https://durhamuniversity.sharepoint.com/teams/LTH/SitePages/Section8.aspx>

- 4 <https://www.dur.ac.uk/about-us/governance/governance-documentation/programme-regulations/postgraduate-programmes/>
- 5 <https://www.dur.ac.uk/media/durham-university/governance/programme-regulations/postgraduate/coreregsrdtc.pdf>
- 6 <https://durhamuniversity.sharepoint.com/teams/LTH/SitePages/8.6.1.aspx>
- 7 <https://durhamuniversity.sharepoint.com/teams/LTH/SitePages/8.6.7.aspx>