

Society for Research into Higher Education

Annual Research Conference 7-8, December, 2011

POSITIVE FUTURES FOR HIGHER EDUCATION: CONNECTIONS, COMMUNITIES AND CRITICALITY

Paper Outline

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Title: Demystifying the Doctoral Viva
Research domain: Student experience / Learning, teaching and assessment
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It has been stated that “*the Ph.D. viva, which is a compulsory component of the examination process in Britain, is a private affair that takes place ‘behind closed doors’*” (Tinkler and Jackson, 2002). Consequently, the viva has been shrouded in secrecy. Indeed, Burnham suggests that:

THE VIVA IS one of the best kept secrets in British Higher education. To all but the initiated what occurs in the lengthy judgely huddle from which nervous postgraduates emerge either victorious or distraught is a mystery (Burnham, 1994: 30).

Although institutional procedures explain the regulations and processes for doctoral study, most stages of the doctoral process involve only essential individuals. Supervisor-candidate meetings, nomination and appointment of examiners, requesting and processing examiners’ independent reports of theses, participating in vivas, producing and handling consolidated reports from vivas are relatively closed processes. These circumstances are compounded by the fleeting appearances of examiners, candidates and supervisors for the viva who afterwards return to their respective professional roles. Thus, knowledge and understanding of the doctoral viva is limited to a small group of individuals and for others it represents a mystery (Park, 2003). This has consequences upon the manner in which candidates are examined (Morley, Leonard and David, 2002; Denicolo, 2003) plus how they view, and are able to prepare for, their viva (Murray, 2003, a; Trafford and Leshem, 2008: 202-203).

Against this background, Huddersfield University established a project to “*significantly de-mystify the viva examination experience for future doctoral candidates and to provide a resource that will support researchers who are approaching the viva stage of their research*”. Its purpose is to examine internal practices to discover the reality of practice. Thus, it draws on the experience of doctoral candidates and supervisors, during the academic years 2008-2011, to show how differing levels of knowledge about the doctoral process affects an individual’s performance in their respective responsibilities.

Furthermore, such insights will determine how policy and practice can be altered to improve the learning and developmental experiences of candidates, supervisors and appropriate infrastructure systems. Meeting this will contribute to the University's strategic policy to improve further the quality of doctoral education.

This internally-funded project has a steering group, a part-time researcher and an external consultant/adviser. The methodological approach is inductive following Geertz's view that the primary data from those directly involved in a process, follows "...looking at what the practitioners of it do" (Geertz, 1973:5). The research adopts an 'insider' perspective, which as Hewitt-Taylor (2002: 35) notes has "a potential to gather a greater depth of data and the possible availability of more contextual detail". While Griffiths asserts that:

Where the researcher enters the research site as an Insider – someone whose biography (gender, race, class, sexual orientation and so on) gives her a lived familiarity with the group being researched – that tacit knowledge informs her research producing a different knowledge than that available to the Outsider. (Griffiths, 1998: 362)

This concept is apparent in the researcher herself whose own postgraduate experience underpins the design and conduct of this project.

Figure 1 portrays the interaction of sources that will be explored by the research via an explanatory conceptual framework (Leshem and Trafford, 2009).

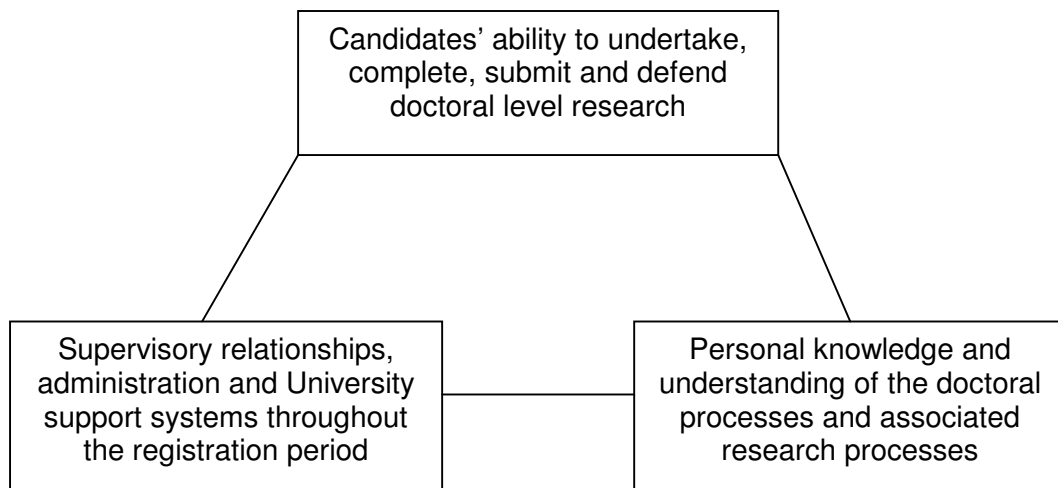


Figure 1: Explanatory conceptual framework

The research was designed as a two-stage sequential data-collection process that will cross-check within and between these three components that directly influence the doctoral process.

Stage one involved documentary analysis of a random sample of internal and external examiners' interim and post-viva reports for the 136 vivas held

between 2008 and 2011. Analysis of 62 sets of reports identified issues of significance for each viva corresponding with those previously indicated by Pearce (2005: 60-64, 98-99). Initial findings show a high correlation between conclusions in examiners' independent and consolidated reports. This corresponds with the findings of Jackson and Tinkler (2000) and Tinkler and Jackson (2004). It identified emergent issues (Gray, 2009) in examiner's reports which are being explored further in the surveys. Furthermore, analysis yielded information about the outcomes of vivas in each of the schools highlighting the range of experiences by candidates. This includes the outcome of a full resubmission and re-viva. In the majority of the cases the outcome has been minor revisions, with a minority receiving major revisions. An outright pass was achieved by two out of 62 candidates. Four cases were excluded from categorisation as they received the award of Ph.D. by Publication.

These findings form the basis of the second phase of data collection, via an on-line survey, from candidates and supervisors in the seven schools who have participated in vivas. However, candidates' professional and social mobility since graduation, plus that of supervisors, is likely to produce some non-response to the survey (Oppenheim, 1992: 106-107). This instrument also combines the notions of blockage (Woodcock and Francis, 1989) with open/closed questions and Likert scaled responses (Likert, 1932). Interviews with a stratified sample of respondents will explore their experiences in greater detail (Murray, 2002; Murray 2003, b). Currently, only the candidate survey is a 'live' method of data collection.

The supervisor survey is being reviewed internally and awaiting ethical approval. Subject to agreement the survey will be available online at the beginning of November 2011. The sample population will be comprised of all members of staff who have acted in a supervisory capacity during 2008-2011. The fieldwork phase of the project will be completed by the end of December, 2011.

This project represents a positive research-based strategy to generate evidence about doctoral experiences and related University practices. It will illuminate those doctoral processes which are taken-for-granted and/or unrecognized. This will, in turn, 'create new understandings of existing issues' (Trafford and Leshem, 2008: 17) so that University doctoral policy and administration can be reviewed. Thus, insider research is being used to establish facts that will improve understanding and so reduce the mystery of the doctoral viva.

963 words

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