

May 2004

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Recommended Citation

Loumansky, Amanda and Jackson, Sue (2004). Out of the Frying Pan into the Viva. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 5(3), 22-32.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol5/iss3/3>

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Out of the frying pan into the viva

By Amanda Loumansky and Sue Jackson¹

Abstract

Women today are making clear inroads into the academy and, at undergraduate level at least, are engaging in greater numbers than men. However, at postgraduate level the picture changes, especially at doctoral level, and fewer women than men undertake research degrees. However, little is known about women's experiences of doctoral research, including the viva. The authors seek to address the lack of research about women's experience of the PhD viva. The research carried out by the authors emphasises both the lack of power felt by women in the current examination process and the lack of consistency in practice across universities. The authors argue that if the viva is to be more than just a process which reinforces existing patterns of power, it cannot continue to be a ritual where only certain voices are allowed to be heard. They conclude by suggesting reforms that they believe would make the system fairer to all.

Key words: viva, powerlessness, quality assurance

Introduction

Women have made, and continue to make, critical inroads into the academy, and there is a lot that is known about our experiences and opportunities. We know, for example, that women are now entering university – at undergraduate level at least – in at least equal numbers to men (Whaley, 2000), and that we are performing equally well with regard to classification of final degree, although there are still differences in the subjects chosen for degree level study. Despite this apparent success, we also know that fewer women than men undertake research degrees and are less likely to apply for research funding after they have a PhD. Less women than men opt for an academic career, either as researchers or as lecturers in the academy.

Women (and men) have to find ways to negotiate and cross the boundaries between taught and research degrees; and between their PhD and post-doctoral research. However, there is currently very little knowledge about the PhD viva or its affect on women's careers. There is some anecdotal evidence, but little else to tell us of the affect of a viva voce examination on the women who participate. There has been very little systematic research about what goes on in viva voce examinations and how people feel about them (Leonard, 2001: 249).

In the UK, the viva is uniquely positioned in the academy as a private affair and within many institutions little is known about the interaction that occurs behind closed doors. All too often, those who are powerless (and this might include both the examined and the examiners) become silenced in an academy that is steeped in patriarchal traditions and ways of knowing. There is little opportunity for our voices to be heard, when 'speaking out' leaves us open to accusations of just not being good enough.

In this article we shall examine the PhD viva as a defining boundary from pre- to post-doctoral engagement in and with the academy. Following an outline discussion of the examination and its assessment processes, we shall go on to discuss some of the results of our preliminary empirical research. We shall then show why

the viva is a feminist issue, and end by offering some strategies for crossing and for challenging the boundaries.

The research

The initial stage of this research was conducted by distributing questionnaires to women who had experienced, or were about to experience, a viva voce examination, as well as to supervisors and examiners. Of course, these are not entirely discrete groups, and some women who responded had completed their own viva voce, and were now or had also been supervisors and examiners. The questionnaire was initially distributed at a women's studies conference in the summer of 2003, and was followed up with a series of qualitative questions on-line to email discussion groups for postgraduate and postdoctoral women.

In all seventeen questionnaires were returned together with a number of on-line responses. Whilst the number of questionnaires returned was not large this did not pose a problem for us as we always intended to carry out a fairly small pilot project initially. Later stages of the research will see greater distribution of questionnaires together with follow-up interviews. However the views of those who did take part confirmed our suspicions that this has been and continues to be a largely neglected area of research and further work needs to be done. In response to a question asking them to describe their ethnicity fourteen people answered white, two said Indian, and one person did not respond to this question. Six said that they were or had been supervisors and five said that they were or had been examiners. Five respondents answered questions from their positions both as (past or current) students and as (past or current) examiners and/or supervisors.

Considering assessment and monitoring

In UK universities, doctoral degrees are examined through the submission of a written thesis, which has to be 'defended' to examiners in a private viva voce examination. Although at undergraduate level, oral examinations have been abandoned as "too costly, unreliable and potential for sex, race and other stereotyping and discrimination" (David, 2003: 7) they still remain as the determining factor in the examination of PhD research. According to Diana Leonard (2001), this form of assessment was a familiar one in medieval universities, an academic world completely dominated by upper-class men of the ruling elite. Today the power structures may be less obvious, but the majority of senior academic posts are still held by men, including at professorial level, where they occupy around 90% of the posts. Supervisors and examiners of PhDs are more likely to be selected from senior rather than junior academic staff. More prestigiously, they are likely to be professors. Therefore it is highly likely that the supervision and assessment of research degrees will be determined at every stage of the process by senior men in the academy.

Choices of examiners are often determined via an 'old boys' network and are at times haphazard. When asked about institutional policy on the appointment of examiners one supervisor replied "it's predominantly informal – and if I am honest – it's a 'mates' thing managed by inside men doing trade with their male friends". Of concern to those students awaiting their viva was the lack of information available to them about the examiners. One respondent was worried that the occasion would be used "to score off the student or to advance their [the examiners] own position." This tendency was also mentioned by two of the examiners.

Becher et al (1994: 137) say the viva is not a lottery, nor is it overgenerous, but it is fair - but how do we know? There is little (and variable) guidance on criteria, or on what is meant by contribution to the field of knowledge (see Leonard, 2001: 240). Students who have developed their work around feminist epistemologies and methodologies, for example, might find an unsympathetic reception to their research. For students engaged in multi-disciplinary work, it might be difficult to find examiners with knowledge of both (or all) disciplinary bases. Should the examiners come from one subject or the other? How does the student ensure that the work is appreciated by both disciplines? One respondent stated that she was told by her examiner that he knew nothing of one of her subject areas, and therefore had not read a complete section. Another respondent told us

One of the examiners...said as he did not know (one of my subject areas) he would not comment on the largest part of my work...I thought this to be unfair as my subject, if unique at all, is unique only for this area...

The issues become particularly difficult to define for those engaged in cutting edge interdisciplinary work where it becomes more difficult to find 'experts' to determine that contribution.

Additionally, work which acknowledges the subject positioning of the author can find itself contested in an academy which locates itself in an apparently scientific objectivity and supposed neutrality (see Jackson, 2002a). There is an assumption that examiners will know what constitutes both good research and contribution to the field of knowledge but, as Foucault and others have shown, 'knowledge' is partial and determined by those who have the power to define the boundaries (see eg Foucault, 1972; Harding, 1987). Whilst the determination of 'good research' *appears* to be neutral or unbiased, it is clear that this is far from the case and can be biased against women. In particular, students can find themselves hindered if they focus on qualitative research, particularly favoured by women, and there is a "continual need for researchers to justify qualitative methods to the gatekeepers of the research" (Quinn, 2003: 10). For those engaged in interdisciplinary work or feminist research, the process might be particularly damaging.

Standards are ensured by having peer examiners who are *assumed* to know the thresholds, but there is little (if anything) to determine whether this is actually the case, and practically nothing is known about what goes on inside the private domain of the PhD viva voce examination. Whilst the Quality Assurance Agency responsible for Higher Education in the UK published a Code of Practice for Postgraduate Research Programmes in 1999, it did not "deal with the ticklish issue of *who* is selected to be the examiners for a doctorate, nor how the viva itself should be conducted. It merely states that 'research assessment processes should be clear and operated rigorously, fairly, reliably and consistently'" (Leonard, 2001: 255). But, as we have shown above, there are real issues about who determines what is meant by clarity, equity, reliability or consistency.

When we asked our respondents to suggest two changes to current practice that would make the viva more transparent, six replied that the lack of official information added to the difficulties in this area. There was a consensus of opinion that institutions should provide more in-depth written guidelines both to regulate the exam process itself and to provide an explicit framework upon which candidates could base their expectations. Four examiners highlighted the lack of advance guidelines they received from institutions providing clear advice on how to respond to

unsuccessful and/or problematic candidates. One examiner said that “More clarity would provide a fairer environment to all the parties involved in the process and would also make the experience a more constructive one.” A student suggested the need for

Some process, some transparency! Some clarity about the entire process of examining, about the role of the examiners ... Some evaluation and quality assurance – it’s just so bizarre, I just don’t understand how most of the rest of the education system is quality assured to within an inch of its life, and there is just so little regulation of the PhD process, from beginning to end, obviously the viva is just the end result of a lot of other fuck ups along the way. And maybe even some standardisation, as clearly the examination process happens differently in different places...so if some places can get it right, why can’t they all...

Two supervisors recommended that the viva become a public occasion but both appreciated that this could be potentially more stressful for the candidate. High stress levels were also blamed by supervisors for hindering the type and level of discussion that took place and it was noted that it was often difficult to “get a critical discussion going” because of the candidate being so nervous. However one examiner also commented that she would welcome “examiners being more focused on students rather than their own status”, within a system which becomes embedded with “complex power relations and manipulative practices” (Nixon et al, 1998:283). Indeed, it has been claimed that the viva “both humiliates the examinee and diminishes the credibility of those who examine” (Burnham, 1994:30).

HEFCE’s consultation exercise

The Higher Education Funding Council for England are currently (2003) undertaking formal consultation with higher education institutions, in an exercise to consider “Improving standards in research degree programmes”. In setting the terms for the consultation, the Council states that:

Research degree graduates are key to developing the UK as an innovative knowledge economy. With the increasing sophistication of research and other activity in higher education, the public sector and industry, successful leadership demands the specialised knowledge and wider skills gained by research degree students in a wide variety of disciplines. As the UK continues to invest more heavily in research and development, towards a European Union target of 3 per cent of GDP by 2010, we may expect the demand for these skills to rise still further.

(http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2003/03_23.htm).

The linking of research degrees with the knowledge economy and industry, and moves towards a skills based agenda, means there is already an assumption of a hierarchy of certain types of postgraduate research, with a clear prioritising of the benefits to industry. The document calls for support which will benefit the UK economy, and yet industry and the economy are highly gendered (and ‘classed’ and ‘raced’) and such an agenda is unlikely to benefit women research students – indeed it is more likely to maintain existing gender inequalities.

In addition, the recommendations are for each institution to continue to have a large degree of autonomy with regard to implementation of the guidelines. For example, although the document outlines threshold standards and good practice guidelines, it has little to say about assessment, proposing

light-touch assessment arrangements, whereby institutions maintain responsibility for implementing threshold standards in ways that suit individual university regulations or codes of practice.

The priority here, then, is to find a system that suits individual universities, not one that will necessarily work to the benefit of students. The consultation document does suggest that

systematic and transparent monitoring and assessment mechanisms ... be in place to ensure the student's progress is reviewed independently and the final examination is rigorous, fair and consistent.

However, it does not suggest any guidelines for good practice, let alone minimum threshold standards. It does discuss the viva voce examination, albeit briefly. Under its recommended guidelines for minimum threshold standards, the document call for the

final examination to be by a viva with an independent panel of at least two examiners who are demonstrably research active, at least one of whom is an external examiner.

Nevertheless, although there are calls for supervisors to receive appropriate training, there is currently no such recommendation with regard to examiners, and no recommended practices with regard to the viva itself. The recommended guidelines for a framework of good practice suggest that "each examiner (should) provide an independent report on the thesis before the viva", and it is apparent from our research that this process is one that would benefit from clear criteria. One woman who responded to our questionnaire stated that there was a need for examiners to agree a clearer delineation of requirements well before the viva. She added that when examiners were appointed they should face "institutional scrutiny" to avoid supervisors choosing "pals who may be inappropriate."

One of the questions that we asked examiners and supervisors was whether they were aware if institutions carried out any monitoring processes with regards to equality of opportunity. Those that answered the question were unaware of any formal monitoring process that took place, although one supervisor said that she questioned the process if there was not a gender balance of examiners for students that she put forward. However, she did not say with whom she questioned this (herself? the institution?), nor whether any changes arose from her questioning.

The document suggests that completion rates should be monitored, but does not indicate what such monitoring might involve. There is currently no requirement for a record to be kept of category of 'pass' (pass/pass with minor amendments/pass with major amendments), and no recommendation that this should be the case in the future. There is, then, nothing to show whether these categories vary by gender (or indeed by 'race' or other categories). We know that this can make a significant difference to our academic experiences, both as students and as lecturers (see eg

Jackson, 2004, forthcoming), yet currently there is little or no systematic research into the effects of gender, race or class within viva examinations

It is worrying that a document entitled 'Improving standards in postgraduate research degree programmes' fails to make any mention of equality of opportunity. It is worrying, too, that in developing the guidelines for a framework of good practice consultants worked with the academic community and those who fund postgraduate study but did not include students - either past and current - in their research. In the light of the research that we have carried out these are glaring omissions which at best shows a misplaced complacency in the system that they oversee and at worst highlights a lack of will to address some of the issues that students face when they jump out of the frying pan and into the viva. Unlike any other examination, in a viva voce the examiner and examined meet in *private*, and the potential for abuse has been described as 'awesome' (see Noble, 1994: 69). We will go on to consider issues of abuse below.

Behind closed doors

On the whole it was clear that supervisors understood how fraught the viva was for many students and most of their recommendations for change to current practice that would make the viva more transparent were made in the light of how to make the occasion less stressful. For example four supervisors replied that if the examiners had already decided to recommend the award of a PhD this news should be shared at the beginning of the viva so that the candidate could be in a more relaxed frame of mind. It has to be acknowledged that whilst the benefits of adopting such an approach are obvious to the successful candidate one can only imagine what the impact would be for a candidate who does not receive such good news at the beginning of the viva.

Several respondents described feelings of powerlessness during the viva:

They launched into questions, and I think I just agreed with all their critiques. In retrospect I guess I wished I had stuck up for myself a bit more, argued back a bit, rather than just rolling over, and agreeing it was shit. Afterwards I talked to a number of people who were also told they had failed and who argued back, and managed to get their examiners to change their minds ... So I kinda regret not trying that.

For others, powerlessness was linked to feelings of being abused. One academic, who was a mature student wrote:

I left the examination room feeling that I had been abused. The examiners were both so rude and aggressive. They kept interrupting me as I tried to answer questions and started the process by criticising my supervisor for keeping them waiting a couple of minutes. Neither examiner made any effort to discuss the contents of my research and I came away feeling that they hadn't even read it properly. The viva turned out to be the start of a dreadful process. After waiting nearly three months for the written report, which was originally promised for the next day, I was stunned to read its contents. The examiners said that my research 'did nothing to convey anything more than a nodding acquaintance with book titles rather than their contents.' The report was nothing more than a rant - as I read through the three pages it was impossible to find one positive comment about a piece of work that was

78,000 words long. What had I done to deserve this? I had complained to the Academic Registrar about the length of time it was taking for the report to be written. Now I was being punished.

She spent months feeling paralysed by the comments made about her. Every time she began the task of making the alterations suggested by the examiners she would sit down and read the report. Her lack of confidence in her academic judgement slowly began to return after she burnt the report, a course of action suggested by her supervisor. She concluded her questionnaire by stating that

Anyone who believes that equality of opportunity exists in the viva system is deluding herself. When are women going to stand up for fair treatment in what is probably the 'final frontier' as far as academic study is concerned?

It is not just our respondents who have faced such issues. In response to a recent article about the viva examination, students stated:

"Clearly, the entire viva was some sort of power game, in which the external used his power to show me who was in charge...For the next three months, I did no research work of consequence, so deeply affected was I by this experience...an awful lot also depends on what side of the bed the external got out of, and whether or not you hit on one of the external's 'pet hates' ... No one accompanied me into the viva so no one was there to witness what went on in the room ... (Wakeford, 2002)

One of the problems is that lack of any policy regarding equal opportunities in viva examinations mean that it is difficult, if not impossible, to stand up for fair treatment. One of our respondents, who had to re-submit her thesis, told us:

... there are a few things (about the resubmission) that really pissed me off – that the viva took six months to set up: and that when I re-submitted they took eight months to re-read the thesis. That quite outraged me ...

She continued:

I submitted in January and should have been examined by about March really, in lots of time for applying for jobs; and instead it took until mid-August; I was applying frantically for everything, and not quite getting anywhere, and it felt like having the PhD sorted can make a difference, given how competitive the application process is these days. So I was so angry, and getting depressed about the thought of having to spend another year working part-time ... I couldn't quite believe that they really were taking 8 months to examine the thing; and I did finally make official complaints, but of course 'they' (senior admin people) couldn't really do very much, except encourage the external to do it asap, as its such a grace and favour system, there wasn't anything they could really do ...

From the responses we received, both examiners and students appeared uncertain of processes, and grounds for appeal were often limited. In most cases, appeals do not seem to be an option as they could appear to be grounded in a

challenge to the examiners' knowledge and judgement – not admissible for an appeal. As one student states, "I was left in the position of failing but having nothing to appeal against" (Wakeford, 2002).

Supervisors who responded to our questionnaire lacked any knowledge of what, if any, options were open to them if they believed that a student had been treated unfairly during a viva. Although knowledge of procedures leading up to the examination process were high, there was little if any advice available to those supervisors and their students where there was a general feeling that things had gone badly wrong.

Further issues were raised in the responses about the examiners' report:

The other major thing that pissed me off, apart from the time it took to be examined, was the examiners' report. In the viva, having told me I had failed ... I asked if I would get extensive notes on what they had to say, and they were very clear that I didn't need to take notes, that the report would give a detailed account of our conversation, and what needed to be done The report, when it turned up after a month of waiting, was less than one page. There (were) ... two paras of what was needed for a PhD, one consisting of about six bullet points, and the second, clearly written by the internal, on her specialism, detailing a whole range of things I could do, and some refs, on something that was really a small part of the thesis. And the bullet points were just useless ... It was just so vague, when we had quite a precise, focused discussion in the viva, and I guess I was also slightly concerned that that could be an endless task, that they could turn around when I had re-written it, and say that I had not done enough ... so I was really disappointed with that, well, not just disappointed, angry and frustrated, I felt that all I had to guide me were these six bullet points ...

It is not unusual for there to be lack of clarity in what examiners are asking for with amendments, yet - as our research and that of others has shown - one bad report can have serious repercussions (see e.g. Leonard: 2001, 238-254).

Another respondent, too, described her feelings of anger, frustration and powerlessness during her viva, when "one of the examiners turned rude and was quite angry for reasons I still don't understand". This student was subsequently told she could not continue at the institution, either for an MPhil or a PhD:

I found this strange as (my supervisor) had said ... that my work was very good ... To me this sounds very strange and unfair. I just cannot think of any reason, especially as she herself had said and they too kept saying that my work was good and that I was not a failure. I did not get an adequate explanation for their decision that I could not continue.

The respondent went on to describe how she eventually "left the place very discouraged and confused. It seemed to be some sort of personal animosity on the part of one of the examiners ...". This student is Indian and an older learner, and she is concerned that she has suffered double discrimination here. She tried to take this up with the university, but she has so far received no response "to my comments on the viva and the unfair manner in which I had been treated".

An academic, who described herself as white and from a working-class background, told us:

I found the whole experience of the viva extremely distressing and undermining: in fact nearly three years later I still think of it as a nightmare. I know I was there to defend my work, but I really felt under attack. One of the examiners in particular stated that the work had no proper theoretical base, and that the research was flawed. She criticised just about every aspect of the work that she could. I knew sitting there that I had failed miserably, and that there would be at least another year or more of work to do, assuming I would be able to resubmit. My world felt like it was falling apart.

The shock that she experienced on being told that she had in fact passed with minor amendments was immense. She felt little cause for celebration and has remained convinced that by some fluke the work was let through, but that it was undeserving of a PhD. This feeling has remained with her and has led to a great deal of insecurity about making any applications for research funding. Whilst this research has not explored the link between women's experiences of their PhD and their subsequent feelings about submitting publications or research funding applications, there is likely to be a correlation. We do know that women are less likely than men to do PhDs, and that of those who do women are also less likely to apply for research funding (Wotjas, 1999).

Whilst many women are keen to transcend the boundaries of more traditional academic research, the gatekeepers of the academy ensure that the work of some women remains undervalued, with severe effects on their career opportunities and development (see Jackson, 2002b). Women suffer discrimination in an academy in which the odds are stacked up against us. Perhaps experiences like those of this academic might start to account for why. However, it is difficult to know this, as it is not an experience that she has shared with many people, afraid that if she does "real" researchers and academics will see her work as "less worthy".

Conclusions

We have argued here that if the viva is to be more than just a process which reinforces existing patterns of power it cannot continue to be a ritual where only certain voices are allowed to be heard. Universities and funding bodies must engage much more actively with PhD students and listen to what they are saying. Although it was clear from the responses to our questionnaire that some universities do have regulations for the conduct of postgraduate examinations, and indeed some respondents even supplied copies of their own university's documentation, there was a complete lack of any reference to policies of equality of opportunity within the viva. However, this silence does not mean that women are not being discriminated against in viva voce examinations and it does not mean that change is unnecessary. A lack of equal opportunity measures has done much to sustain patterns of domination in academic institutions and a clearly defined equal opportunities policy, carried out in practice, may help to end some of the worst practices. One important step forward could be an equal opportunity monitoring representative to be present at all examinations. We are in little doubt that the inclusion of clear criteria regarding equal opportunities would impede certain types of behaviour within the examination.

However, equal opportunities policies and practices alone are not enough. For many women undertaking PhD research, the most exciting opportunities are those which enable boundaries to be crossed or even transcended: boundaries of interdisciplinary research; of a central focus on women's lives and experiences; and boundaries of constructions of 'academic' (see Jackson, 2004, forthcoming). Yet for many women in the academy, the processes of the PhD viva examination means that such boundaries are difficult – sometimes impossible – to cross. Whilst the gatekeepers who determine access through the closed doors of the secret world of the PhD viva continue in the main to be the white, middle-class men who dominate the academy, the male culture of the university (supported by some women) will continue dominant, and many women will find themselves powerless to make the challenges to bring about change.

The current climate of lifelong learning in the academy suggests that students should take responsibility for their own learning. Such individualism enables advice to research students to continue to be that it is for them to face the horrors of the viva and try to deal with them (Murray, 2003). Such advice takes no heed of patterns of inequality, nor does it call institutions to account. And yet the academy is currently imbued within a culture of accountability and quality assurance. It seems inevitable that in the end the PhD viva voce examination will fall prey to this. However, 'quality assurance', without challenging the power structures inherent in definitions of 'quality', is not enough. Institutions and individuals are still able to deny that PhD 'horror stories' exist. As one senior academic recently stated:

I am not sure they exist in the way people want us to believe ... This is always the argument of bureaucrats. They will point vaguely to alleged widespread abuse so they can get their hands on a problem and do a lot of vandalism (Bunting, 2003).

However, without adequate monitoring, the individual voices who are brave enough to speak out will always risk such accusations. We recognise the limits of our current research: it could be, for example, that people with more positive experiences of the viva chose not to respond to our questionnaires. However, the experiences of those who did respond are real, and it is our hope that some of the voices in this article *will* start to 'vandalise' the processes. Until institutions recognise the vandalism that is done to the lives of individuals through the viva voce examination, and acknowledge that their responsibilities extend far beyond current practices, the structural inequalities of the academy may continue to find a safe haven behind the closed doors of viva voce examinations.

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