

Transcript: Bice Maiguashca on examiners' roles

Edward Mills

The last question I want to ask was a specific one about the the role of the chair, if that's OK. So, increasingly at Exeter, and certainly in light of coronavirus, we're seeing a lot of PhDs being examined with this mysterious extra person on the panel who shouldn't arguably make a huge amount of difference to the outcomes of the viva, but whose role is very important. So could I ask you to say a bit more about that role, this Non-Examining Independent Chair position, which I understand you've done yourself?

Bice Maiguashca

Yes, although I have to say that I would I would question the idea that the independent chair plays any role in determining the outcome of the viva, and that's not their role. The role of the of the independent chair, the Non-Examining (that's the key) Non-Examining Independent Chair, is simply to to assess if you like, and to monitor the viva, and make sure that it is conducted according to the regulations. So they will not have read the thesis; they will have no view on on the content of it; they will have not have been asked for their view on the outcome. The only thing that they are responsible for is the conduct of the viva itself, and that it is conducted according to the rules.

Edward Mills

Can I ask a related question to that? This is something I've always wondered myself what once the candidate is asked to step out of the room or in my case, to temporarily leave the Teams meeting as it was (because I had, of course, a virtual viva): what kind of things are actually said between the examiners? This is just a personal question: I've always wondered. Is it kind of 'oh, phew', or is it kind of an 'OK', or does it very much depend on the viva?

Bice Maiguashca

It very much depends on the viva. And sometimes there is an 'oh, phew', especially if the student is either very nervous, in which case the conversation is stilted and that's felt by all concerned; or in the case where a student can be very defensive or just show no understanding of the weaknesses of the case. In all three cases or scenarios, vivas can be painful. And so the supervisors (sorry, not the supervisor; the internal and external) can sometimes be relieved at the end. Usually, however, in most of the vivas I've done, it's very rare that that happens, by the way. Most of the vivas I've done, the the internal and external look at each other, and most of the time we've enjoyed the conversation we've had with the student. And in my experience anyway, there's often an attempt to be as generous with the students as possible, generous and supportive of the student. And I think sometimes there's a misunderstanding that the job of the internal is to defend the students.

the job of the external is to be the critical interrogator. In my experience, that's not the case. In my experience, the role of the internal is really only to make sure again, especially if there's no independent chair, that the viva has been conducted in a way that is consistent with the regulations. Apart from that, both the internal and the external are expected to ask tough questions of the students. And it's not the role of the internal to so-called 'defend' the student, unless unless they feel that the viva is taking an uncomfortable turn and that the external is being overly critical or destructive in their manner. But apart from that, both internal and external have the same role. In other words, they're there to assess the scholarship of the student and to determine whether it meets the required standards.