Transcript: Bice Maiguashca on reflection ahead of the viva and the 'four questions'

Edward Mills
So jumping forward slightly, then, let's just imagine you sat down with your cup of tea and the thesis (which is a lovely image, by the way). What would you advise a student to be to be doing in that time, those kind of awkward 70-odd days? I mean, it can be it can be a significant amount of time between the viva - between the submission and viva, rather, so what would you how would you recommend a student spend that time?

Bice Maiguashca
Well, I think you normally have about, am I right, three months between submission and the actual viva.

Edward Mills
That was certainly the case for me. I think it can be slightly more than that, but also often slightly less.

Bice Maiguashca
But also, yes, it can be more. But regardless of how long you have, I think the first thing you should do is actually take a rest. You probably have been working very intensely on your project until submission point, and you're probably saturated by it. And I think - I say that you should take a rest not just because you should take care of yourself and for well-being reasons, but also because while you're taking a rest, you are gaining critical distance from your thesis. And I think that's very important before you go into the viva: that you develop some critical distance from it, so that when you return to the thesis, which you must do in order to prepare for the viva, - which is worth doing - you know, it's not that you've forgotten what you've written, but that you can somehow see it through clearer, more self-critical eyes, and I think that perspective is crucial. So after you've taken perhaps two or three weeks off, perhaps even a month, if you can, it could involve a holiday, but it also could involve just doing other work. What you want to do is turn your mind away from the project, think about other things, and then come back to it afresh and you will see it with different eyes. And that experience of coming back to your project after leaving it for a little while is both exhilarating and exciting, also a little scary and sometimes a little frustrating because you, of course, reread it and realise the strength of the thesis as well as its limitations. But I think that's very important that you go into a knowing its strengths, because you might even be asked this question by a cheeky external: what are the strengths of the thesis and what do

you think the limitations of your work are? So once you've, if you like, undertaken the moves to put you in that perspective or to acquire that perspective, and you need to prepare to answer four questions. There is no way you're going to have a viva without being asked all four of these questions. And of course, they're not going to be surprising because they pertain to the four pillars, if you like, of the the storyline of the theis. The first question you're going to be asked, and sometimes it comes up at the very beginning of your viva, is your research question, your puzzle, your problem. They may ask they may ask the question in different ways: 'why did you choose this topic? What brought you to this question? Why did you think it was so important?' But they will ask you to explain your 'puzzle': In other words, the aims of your thesis. Second of all, they will ask you what your argument is. So, in fact, I have been in a viva once where I think the external (I wouldn't have done it this way), but the external, the first question she asked was: 'so, tell me in two sentences what your thesis is'. But you need to practise articulating the argument of your thesis in one or two sentences, just in case you're put on the spot. Third, you're going to be asked questions around the rationale of the thesis; why you thought it was an important project to pursue in academic terms, and what do you think the contribution to knowledge is. And finally, they're going to ask you about how you did your research. So in other words, your methodology, the entire viva, will be structured around those four broad questions. And depending on your answers, you will get subsequent questions pushing you to illuminate the work that you've done. So I would prepare for the viva in the interim; I would not believe what I've heard from some students and some colleagues that the viva doesn't really matter. Some people would argue that in the end, what really matters is the thesis itself: in other words, what you've written, that is what's being tested, and that what you actually say in the viva is neither here nor there, apart from the fact that one of the purposes, one of the functions of a viva is to actually establish that you're the author of the thesis. So that's one function. But I would argue that preparing for the viva is incredibly important for the outcome in two ways: one, emotionally and psychologically. In other words, you're more likely to have a good experience in the viva - in other words, a good conversation with your internal and external - if you know your thesis well and you're prepared to answer questions around those four pillars. And I think, second of all, if by any chance there is a difference of opinion between the internal and external about what the outcome should be, let's say minor revision versus major revision, your answers to those four very broad questions can help them decide whether it's going to be minor or major. So I strongly advise students to prepare for the viva both so that they have fun and also so that the outcome is as good as it can be.