

Transcript: Michelle Bolduc on listening during the viva

Edward Mills

So obviously that brings us quite neatly onto the viva itself. It's clearly a very stressful experience for the candidate when they're sitting there (or logged on there) with two experts in the field being being grilled, or at least being asked challenging questions. What do you hope to see from candidates during during that viva process?

Michelle Bolduc

I think one of the hardest things for candidates is listening. I think there's so much stress that sometimes candidates find it very difficult to properly listen to to what the examiner is asking, and if you can remove yourself slightly from the fact that this is your work and think about, as you're being asked questions, what's useful about that question? I mean, I think examiners are not trying to, again, trap you or trick you or anything. We're really there to improve the work. And so sometimes I've found that candidates are really, really stressed, and not always paying attention to what's going on. This isn't always the case. It certainly wasn't the case when you were doing your viva. But I think you need to be open to the conversation going in directions that you may not have anticipated. What I like to see as a student or a candidate who is responsive to what's being said and what's being asked, instead of kind of turning your wheels and rehearsing arguments. And I mean, in other words, if we're asking a question and you give the same answer that you gave in your thesis, you probably want to elaborate a little bit more, because if you're asking the question, it means that you haven't done quite enough in writing. And we want a little bit more in in your oral expression.

Edward Mills

And this presumably comes back to what you can do to do prepare for the viva as well: you can go through and you can annotate these points that you thought might be asked about in the viva and develop them further then, in preparation for that.

Michelle Bolduc

That's right. You it's good to think about, 'well, what kinds of ideas could I have elaborated on that maybe I didn't as as thoroughly as I might have?'

Edward Mills

And obviously the viva itself can go on for quite a length of time. Our one was was four hours, which I think is the maximum that Exeter allows. It's often said that the length of the viva does

not necessarily correspond to how well the candidate does, so a 90-minute viva doesn't mean an excellent candidate necessarily and a four-hour viva doesn't necessarily mean, you know, a candidate nearly failed. Would you say a little bit more about the length of vivas, because I know that from my experience, your vivas tend to be quite long ones, don't they?

Michelle Bolduc

I guess I'm always really interested in what I'm reading and I always have a lot of questions. I would agree that the length of the viva doesn't reflect at all the quality of the thesis or the quality of the viva. Again, I wouldn't assume that if your viva is over in an hour and a half that you've completely done a terrible job. Typically we give you some sense at the end of the viva of how we thought it went. So you get immediate feedback, at least informal feedback.

Edward Mills

I remember you telling me at the end of my viva I was 'a fighter', if I remember correctly, which was an interesting term to use. I think you were sort of - I think that was a compliment

Michelle Bolduc

It was.

Edward Mills

Yeah, in the sense that I was kind of I was able to defend my points, but it was - I think that's the kind of feedback that you're referring to, that when you say informal feedback, is that is that fair to say?

Michelle Bolduc

Yeah, that's right. And actually, that kind of you have to be really careful because what you did in your viva, and the way that you were a fighter, was that you answered the questions in in such a way as to be persuasive. You didn't rehash your thesis where there might have been weak points. You were actually you actually really broadened the perspective in a way that was effective.