

Paula's story

The years leading up to completion of my PhD had been uneventful. I had developed a productive and good relationship with my supervisor and the project itself had gone well. At the time my study, a randomi

Immediately, the external examiner began an onslaught on my work, firing questions at me without giving me any opportunity to respond. Even when I did get the opportunity to try and explain something, she was scathing and dismissive of my attempts. I did not know what had hit me. The internal examiner appeared more sympathetic and reassuring, but the external even dismissed his questions and continued to tear me to shreds.

Finally, the cross-examination ended and I was asked to leave accompanied by my supervisor. After about half an hour we were asked to return and the chair informed me that I had been unsuccessful for the degree of PhD but that, if I amended the thesis, I could resubmit for an MPhil.

I was stunned, not really understanding what was happening and filled with all sorts of emotions. I just looked at my supervisor who also appeared stunned. All the time that the chair was speaking, I was aware that the external examiner was staring at me, but she did not show any emotion, just a cold blank stare. Eventually, the chair asked the examiners to leave and they just got up and walked out without a word. At this stage, I did not cry, I was still too shocked. There was nothing to be said, so I started off on my long journey home.

Ten days later, I returned to the University for an appointment with my supervisor. The external had left a lengthy list of amendments which ranged from spelling and grammatical errors to major structural rewrites. The supervisor explained that the chair had been so concerned about the onslaught that he had wanted to stop the viva but had decided not to. The internal examiner would not discuss the conduct of the viva with him at all.

By this time I had decided that I wanted to appeal against the conduct of the external examiner. I had also at the time been suffering from mental health problems. This had meant that I had been unable to respond to such a vicious attack.

Two weeks later, I received the letter stating that I had been unsuccessful for the degree of PhD, but I w

