**Achieving or examining PhDs by Publication: milestones on some learning journeys**

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**How different is a PhD by publication?**

PhD by publication is about examining synthesis, not scholarship which has already been shown and validated by published work, along lines QAA provides.

* coherence: particularly how the published articles are linked and discussed in the thesis.
* originality – for example in the analytical dimension of the work.
* contribution to knowledge: can be very broadly interpreted, significance, and impact (the comment was made that there was no difference in the PhD process regarding the impact accorded to publication in high-status journals, the destinations of the publications were not questioned).

**Preparing to examine**

* The process could include reading the key three themes, and composing questions on those themes.
* Some examiners could be very keen on rigour of the composition of the synthesis, (not on the substance of the papers or books themselves, which have been peer-reviewed already).
* Examiners could focus particularly on the ‘golden-thread’, coherence, and work out questions to ask about process of compiling the synthesis.
* Examiners might read all the abstracts of the published work concerned, pulling out key elements, and did not need to read every word of every article.
* An examiner was typically not nervous about their role regarding a PhD by publication, as was likely to have been examiner for traditional PhDs already, but needed to keep in mind the differences between the two contexts (particularly that the originality, value and scholarship of the published work had already succeeded, and was not up for debate).
* A tenuous part of the agenda might be for the candidate to demonstrate whether they were an active researcher hoping to take forward golden threads into future research.

**Some aspects of approaches to putting together the thesis**

* It could beimportant for the candidate to be able to identify things that examiners might have missed in the key articles.
* A candidate might feel it necessaryto explain and emphasise originality appropriately. As examiner, wasn’t nervous, as had done traditional ones quite often.
* Writing for PhD by publication was much more discursive, broad, allowing candidates to show off breadth of knowledge and journey.
* Developing the synthesis needed to be a usefully reflective process.
* ‘The pressure was off’ such things as sample size, appropriateness of research methodology and so on, which would already have been considered in the validation of the work for publication.

**Capstone articles**

* It could be very useful for one of the pieces of published work to be a capstone article which pulls together a lot of the key points, a thematic article, useful for examiners to read as a springboard for their questions at the viva. Such a capstone might summarise subject matter, and the synthesis in the thesis could then focus on summarising the coherence of everything in the thesis and taking it further.
* Such a final article could play the part of being ‘a statement of what I’m an expert on’, then allowing the synthesis of the thesis itself to be ‘what I’m claiming my PhD for’.

**Before the viva**

* Examiners were unlikely to talk to each other about the submitted work before the day of the viva.
* It was noted that externals were sometimes asked to report before the exam whether or not the exam should take place, in which case the exam could be postponed if there was any serious doubt.
* A pre-meeting might take place, where it might be agreed that the thesis was good enough to pass already, the pre-meeting then being used to discuss how questions will be divvyed up among regarding the key three facets, and where a few areas to probe with questions might be agreed.
* It was noted that it was always important to get from the registrar from any particular university the regulations for this type of award.

**Candidates’ initial feelings, and preparations for the viva**

* The candidate could feel nervous before going in, particularly about methodology.
* Candidates could use post-its on a copy of the thesis to aid their responses to questions where appropriate. It could be useful to have made up post-its on things relating to coherence, significance and originality, possibly colour-coded post-its.
* Candidates found it useful to have written out answers to likely questions as rehearsal, including questions suggested by colleagues/mentors.
* Candidates may wish to consider whether to prepare and take in (for example) a diagram, flowchart, or very brief handout, to use to elaborate parts of their responses to likely discussion questions.
* Sometimes the candidate may already know the examiners, and the ‘fear of being a pratt’ may arise, where ‘one’s whole life work’ was being considered.
* A candidate may be wondering ‘how can I show a much bigger impact than the thesis on its own can show?, where the publications and the thesis itself were only part of the impact of the work being put forward.
* Regarding impact, factors that might be useful to consider included evidence of impact of a book having been sold. Citation data counts as impact, as does being invited to give conference keynotes. Just presenting work at conferences does not really count as impact, unless there is feedback on the presentation.

**Some experiences**

* A candidate had the situation where an internal person had been disparaging about the work, and nearly caused cessation of work. At the event, the same internal was much more positive.
* It was possible to go in ‘confident as I’d done the prep work before going in, and could have done no more’
* It was common to have many ‘I wish I’d said so and so’ after the viva.

**What would you do differently next time?**

* I would do what I did, but work on the triple-whammies more strongly.
* I might consider more strongly ‘how does it hold together?’ and ‘how is this body of work equivalent to a traditional PhD than a jumble sale of evidence of achievement’.
* I might think more about innovation, and strive harder for coherence when jumping across disciplines – demonstrating resilience regarding linkages.
* In answer to the question ‘How did you go about planning this? a candidate may respond ‘this wasn’t how it was planned, the shape emerged during the composition. The coherence emerged half-way through, as opposed to a traditional PhD where the question and direction is more fixed from the outset’.

**What was the hardest bit?**

* Coherence, making sense of the bigger picture. Took months to get to little statement.
* Loss of impetus when having a knock-back, when DoS left. Maybe I can’t do it, ran away for a bit.
* Being an examiner: feel sense of responsibility to candidate, having done it oneself, want to make a good job of examining, and phrase questions in a way that isn’t personal, as the PhD itself will be personal.
* Total feeling of exposure and vulnerability asking people to make value judgements about what I’ve achieved. Job interview much less – better candidate. Here is my life’s work with PhD. Being an examiner I never feel I’ve read it well enough. It is important that the examiner knows how the PhD by publication route works.
* A supervisor who is ‘a waste of time’ and gives unhelpful feedback such as ‘lacks intellectual depth’ without any guidance.
* The differences between PhD by publication and professional doctorate by thesis; in the latter will be questioned about the content of thesis, methodology, literature review, analysis, and how you’ve done it.

**Tone and style: to what extent should the thesis be reflective, informal, 1st person?**

* It was possible for there to be a lack of reflective voice in the thesis, which was fine in the work itself. Sense of development over a lot of years may be a good thing. It was possible for the thesis to be thought of as ‘Still not shouting, still whispering about it’.
* It was suggested regarding references to the literature in the thesis not to just name-drop, but to use well-chosen quotes from key sources wisely.
* It was felt by the group that the tone of the PhD by publication submission should include reflective, relatively informal elements, with the traditional scholarship as evidenced in the cited papers/books standing on its own merit.