

UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX
DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY

WHAT IS A DPhil?

After a recent DPhil viva, when the candidate was presented with the outcome (a recommendation that “major corrections” were needed), he claimed that nothing we had asked him to do was more than a “minor correction”. I was taken aback because it is not the candidate’s job to determine what the outcome of the viva should be. The candidate’s comments also indicated a lack of understanding of the terms “major” and “minor” as applied to corrections to a submitted thesis. The important contrasts lie around the nature of the corrections and the need for the external examiner to be involved in the processes of checking that they have been carried out satisfactorily, not around the extent of the corrections. That said, minor corrections are usually less extensive and almost always take less effort to complete.

[Note that the University no longer uses the terms “major” and “minor” in its official documents. The distinction is between whether the corrections can be OK’d by the internal examiner only, or whether the external examiner needs to be involved. Nevertheless, the terms “major” and “minor” are still used informally, particularly among DPhil students]

On further reflection, and after discussing this matter with others, I came to the conclusion that there was a deeper “problem” underlying my candidate’s comments. There seems to be a feeling among at least some postgraduates that if a DPhil candidate carries out a reasonable amount of empirical work and writes a 150-250 page thesis about that work, then a pass with minor corrections is the natural and just outcome.

Obviously, I am very pleased that “minor corrections” is the most common outcome for DPhil candidates in Psychology. But it has to be realised that this outcome is not simply the result of serving one’s time as a DPhil student, and that any other outcome for someone who has put in a reasonable amount of work is unfair.

I cannot pretend that the British DPhil examination system is ideal, or that the outcome may not depend, to some extent, on which two particular individuals are the examiners. Rare problematic cases sometimes appear in the press. However, in my period of association with Psychology at Sussex (most of the last 30 years) I have not been aware of any case in which the outcome of a DPhil submission has been unfair to the candidate.

So why do some DPhil candidates feel they have been unfairly treated when they are asked for “major corrections”? What I believe may have happened is that people have lost sight of the fact that the primary criterion for the award of a DPhil is that the thesis should be a proper report of work that makes an original contribution to its field. Unfortunately, there’s no clear answer to the question: “How original?” What is clear, however, is that in order to present an original contribution in such a way as to merit a DPhil certain criteria must be met:

- the way that the contribution relates to previous original work in the field must be made clear
- its nature as (wholly or partly) exploratory work or as the testing of specific hypotheses must be recognised, explained and justified
- its conclusions, both for theory and for previous work should be drawn out.

Failings on any of these counts are likely to lead examiners to ask for “major corrections”.

Theses with literature reviews based mainly on secondary sources (review articles, textbooks) are likely to be unsatisfactory. Candidates who do not present a clear rationale for their studies are likely to be asked to make “major corrections” to provide one. Rushed and perfunctory final chapters will have to be expanded (possibly as “major corrections”).

It is important that DPhil candidates take these considerations into account when writing their theses and that supervisors provide feedback on thesis drafts that indicates whether the candidate has succeeded in addressing these issues.

Finally, and returning to the issue of serving one’s time as a DPhil student, it is tempting but dangerous for a candidate to compare their work pattern to that of other candidates (“I worked harder than X, so why did X get ‘minor corrections’ when I was asked for ‘major corrections’?”). A DPhil requires hard work, but more important for a successful outcome is a keen interest in, if not a burning passion for, the questions you are addressing in your thesis research. The amount of time a person spends in their office or on campus is not necessarily a good index of the time they spend working on or thinking seriously about their research. How can you tell what other students are doing and thinking? You can often see what they are doing, but the best way to find out what they are thinking is to talk to them about their work. People who are interested in what they are doing are usually prepared to talk about it. And from such discussions you should get some feel for whether you think about your work in the same way that other graduate students do.

Alan Garnham, January 2003

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