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PhD Viva survival story

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Time to write about how my PhD viva went. It was a while ago, but I wanted all corrections to be acknowledged before writing this and to get the letter confirming my PhD award. Simple reason for writing this is: there are so many horror PhD viva stories and so little positive ones, even thought most of the PhD Vivas end up positive. Just people can't be bothered to write about it. We like much more negative stores, that's why the news portals look as they look.

Thesis

Anyway, I have started my PhD in January 2014. at the University of Manchester, School of Computer Science. The topic I was doing my research on was Information extraction from tables in biomedical documents. The project was funded by [EPSRC](#) and [AstraZeneca](#). The funding lasted for 3.5 years and my final deadline for submission was January 2018. I was planning to finish it in 3 years, max 3.5, but things usually don't work out as planned, especially if you have to rely on some other people and institutions. My first draft was, however, written by March 2017. This draft went through quite heavy changes after my supervisor, [prof. Goran Nenadic](#) read it. Second draft was I believe ready in July/August. This is also a time when I got a job, a post-doc position at the same university I was doing PhD at. However, more changes were needed, which took until late November, early December 2017. I was going on my Christmas holidays back home at 19th December, so I was determined to submit it before that. I would spent a number of hours in the coffee shop next to my flat, called [Grano](#), ordering Mocca coffee, and reading my thesis. Then I would go home and do the corrections and do a bit more reading. It was really helpful to change the environment. During these about 20 days, I have printed my thesis about 8 times, each time after going through whole thesis and correcting found mistakes. On the 18th finally I have submitted, went to print shop and printed it and submitted as well hard copies. Now it was to go have a holiday and wait for the Viva to be scheduled.

The PhD Viva

The Viva was scheduled for 27th February 2018. I did not play a great role in selecting my examiners. I knew couple of people I was warned not to have, so I stated those to my supervisor. However, the most of the selection was done by him. At the end my internal examiner was [Dr Tingting Mu](#), while my external was [professor Anne De Roeck](#), professor emeritus from the Open University.

While preparing for my Viva, I started reading on the internet stories about PhD vivas of other people. Most of the stories were quite scary and it seems like all the people who wrote about their viva on the internet got either major correction and about year to do extra research or just failed. However, most of the people I knew were finishing with minor corrections. This was quite good way to scare yourself before the event.

A day before my Viva it started snowing in Manchester and practically all over the England. And quite heavily. Manchester has usually one snowy day a year, but this year it was whole week. When it snows in England, the whole country becomes paralyzed, and therefore I got email from my supervisor that we may need to delay my Viva in case prof. Anne De Roeck would not be able to come by train from Milton Keynes and that he will update me. This some strange eruption of feeling as once you are prepared, the last thing you want is to delay it for other day. In the morning, day of the Viva, I got SMS from my supervisor that everything seems alright and that Anne is on the train. Examiners usually have a discussion about the work and about what questions will they ask before the Viva. The room was booked from 11am, and Viva was supposed to start at 13:00, however, it turned out that Anne's train got stuck somewhere and she arrived around 12, so a bit later than planned. I bumped into them as arriving to the School, they were about to have lunch. I greeted with them and then I was asked to go into the room and prepare.

I was asked to kick of with the short presentation, for about 10 minutes, as introduction to the Viva. Then we sat and I was asked a number of question and parts of my thesis were commented. The main comment that started from the first question was that I tried to present my methodology as general, while it is bonded to biomedical domain. My way of thoughts were that even thought I did it for biomedicine, and that there are a number of available resources such as vocabularies or ontologies, the methodology would not change, apart from the resources used. However, I was not testing on other domains, at least not in the thesis and therefore that claim was too strong. There were some other comments that in some chapters I mixed methodology description with the results and that I should not do it, however, it ended up with quite pleasant 2 hour discussion. The strangest point of the discussion was when I was asked whether I have any questions for them. I was absolutely not prepared for that and I was not even expecting that question because I thought the whole point is to question me and my work. In the speed, the best I could come up with was "How did you like it?" - on which everyone started laughing. Then prof Anne De Roeck explained that it is a great work, but there are some things that should have been done differently. I got a bit relaxed about the whole event, since saying that it is great work, probably meant that I have passed.

After the discussion I was asked to leave the room, and wait of about 15 minutes. When I returned I was said that I have passed with minor correction that I will be given 3 months to do the corrections.

Aftermath

After the Viva, I was given the report with what have to be changed. On a first glance, some things were unclear, but I got some clarifications from Dr Tingting Mu (my internal). Also, the first version of the response document I sent was not clear (I have written it as a log of changes with exact copy-paste text of changed paragraphs), so I had to change it, so it is more readable and has some context. On 24th May, I finally got the letter that my PhD award was confirmed and telling me about graduation ceremony, to which I look forward.

Final version of my thesis: [A multi-layered approach to information extraction from tables in biomedical documents](#)

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