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Examining the British PhD viva: opening new doors or scarring for life?

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Introduction

“Doctoral assessment, as a social practice, is fraught with risks and uncertainties” (Morley, 2004 p91).

The viva is, almost always, an obligatory element of the examination of the British PhD. Conducted behind ‘closed doors’ it has variously been described as “an anachronism” (Noble, 1994 p67), “mysterious” (Morley et al., 2003 p66), the “ backbone of the system” (Grabbe, 2003 p128), as “something secretive and inaccessible” and as an “academic blind spot” (Tinkler and Jackson, 2000 p167). Other more colourful personal narratives are readily shared by people reflecting on their own doctoral viva experiences, regardless of whether or not their role was as the student, the examiner or the supervisor. Grabbe (2003 p128) captures this when he notes that “research examining seems to attract anecdotes like a magnet”. Not all of these anecdotes reflect constructive, life- and research-enhancing experiences. Many reflect dispiriting, negative experiences analogous to train crashes, disasters and fighting through fog; these experiences result in much soul-searching and loss of confidence regardless of the outcome of the examination itself. Wallace’s (2003) study of the figurative language used by successful candidates to describe their vivas is illuminating; students who felt negative about their experience used imagery such as interrogation and imprisonment whereas those who felt a sense of achievement talked in terms of sporting competitions or debate.

One of the authors found that her own PhD examination was challenging, enjoyable and somewhat bizarre; since her examiners (neither of whom were nurses) spent very little time focusing on the nuts and bolts of her thesis but took her on a new journey of unexpected ideas that somehow started in her thesis but moved beyond and away from it. Reflecting on how she (and her thesis) had performed— prior to the feedback session – she felt that her examiners had found her thesis so dire that they simply were not able to find anything worthwhile in it to question her about. Although she had enjoyed the roller coaster ride of ideas shared during the two hours she was ‘trapped’ with her examiners, she was sure she had failed. It came as a revelation to her that they had enjoyed reading her thesis, had few specific, content-oriented questions and were more interested in exploring the ideas that fitted with their own disciplinary backgrounds. It came as something of a cosmic shock to her to be told that she had passed and she momentarily questioned their judgement. Importantly, some of the ideas that were discussed within her viva shaped her future thinking and, whilst she would not wish to have to repeat the process (once is enough), it was a crucial turning point for her as a would-be-academic. Her viva had allowed her research to fly and she knows she was privileged (maybe lucky) to have had this gifted to her by her examiners. Not every student has such a life-affirming experience and it was not until she became an examiner that she started to appreciate the

stressors associated with examining PhDs and the uncertain and somewhat swampy ground of being an examiner.

For a colleague, her viva was an assault course of challenging hurdles that instead of opening up a sense of mastery left her feeling debilitated and utterly sure she had failed. This sense of failure was so complete that she was unable, at the time, to acknowledge the final positive message of “congratulations, we feel happy that the thesis does meet the required standard for PhD”. For her the prior tortuous verbal encounter (lasting over 2 hours) meant that the sense of achievement was totally lost. Her aspirations for a research and career enhancing experience had been dashed and it took considerable time and support before she was able to put the viva in some sort of context.

In this paper, we intend to explore and critique some aspects of the British viva and consider it alongside the Australian examination system and draw conclusions about the merits and challenges of each system.

Looking inwards, looking forwards

Interestingly, although the PhD has morphed in recent years with the introduction of Professional Doctorates, PhD by Publication and Taught Doctorates (Burton et al., 2008), the process of examining the British PhD has arguably changed little in the past 30-50 years or more (Powell and Green, 2003; Joyner, 2003). Indeed there has been a general “lack of systematic attention to the complexities of [British] doctoral assessment” (Morley et al., 2003 p65). It is curious that, prior to the interest stimulated by the British research funding bodies in the past ten years or so, processes underpinning the British PhD such as the student-supervisor relationships, research culture and, in particular, the doctoral examination have escaped both critical academic scrutiny (Tinkler and Jackson, 2000) and the wider “customer care revolution” (Morley et al., 2003 p68). This is surprising considering the perceived importance of and finality of the viva voce (oral examination) which is often seen as the “final hurdle” (Jack, 2002 p66) and the “final culmination of years of effort” (Denicolo, 2003 p84).

Critics of the British viva system raise questions which tend to focus upon the need for “increased transparency of procedures, and the provision of greater guidance for candidates, supervisors and examiners about PhD examining” (Jackson and Tinkler, 2001 p356). Despite recent moves to address these issues there is still a sense of uneasiness about the process, albeit that this uneasiness is not particularly openly discussed. In the same way that the examination occurs in private, much of the uneasiness occurs as corridor conversations and discussions over coffee where experiences are

shared and where advice and solace is sought and received. Whilst it might be expected that this uneasiness would be primarily confined to students who have, apparently, the most at stake, it is also evident in directors of studies/supervisors and examiners who likewise have much invested, albeit for different reasons, within the process. Morley (2004 p92) alludes to this uneasiness when she notes that there are “irrationalities and discontinuities—between judgements and criteria, between new and old disciplines, between experienced and inexperienced examiners and between content and final recommendations of examiners’ reports”.

The newer PhDs (such as the professional and taught doctorates) which are quickly becoming more established within nursing, pose new challenges and perhaps even more uncertain ground for the examiners who become responsible for interpreting the intention of the validation documents and weighing the newer type of doctoral thesis against their expectations of the semi-known quantity of the established research PhD. Personal experience of this indicates that it is no easy task particularly when examining the first student(s) completing a particular programme of doctoral study. The enactment of regulations – particularly within the closed doors pre-viva meeting – is not effortless.

However, although there is clearly a sense of ambiguity and subjectivity about the multiplicity of processes, institutional policies and practices underpinning the British PhD viva, other doctoral examination systems also suffer with uncertainties. Similar questions have been raised about the transparency and quality control within the Australian system where, unlike the British system, “the ‘blind refereeing’ format of the examination constitute the entire evaluation of doctorate quality and worth” (Lovat et al., 2008 p66). Recent work published by Lovat et al. (2008 p73) proposes that the Australian PhD examination report may be a “particular type of text, a virtual literary genre, born of assumptions about the nature of the task and its incumbent duties, as well as about the relationship between the examiner and the student”. The same, we would argue could be said of the reports submitted pre and post viva by examiners in the UK. It would seem then, that neither system is unproblematic. Indeed some of this end-point uncertainty and reflects the general ambiguity about the purpose of the assessment. Whilst in some senses it would seem to be a self-evident truth (albeit that epistemologically that is a statement that can be argued with) that the examiner is assessing the PhD, there is actually a good deal of diversity of opinion within this. A core question that arises is what is the purpose of the viva?

Purpose of the viva

Again, it might seem that there would be consensus about the purpose of the viva but this is clearly not the case and a number of different, not necessarily competing, agendas are often in play. Morley

(2003 p69) suggests that there can be “subterranean agendas of values and ideologies in doctoral assessment”. From our own experience these subterranean agendas do exist for examiners and there is value in trying to clarify what the other examiner’s agenda is in relation to the purpose and style of the viva. Reaching a common understanding about what we are jointly aiming to achieve within the viva is an important starting point that can help to secure a clear path for the questions that will be asked, the intent, emphasis and importance of these questions and their answers. For example, in one pre-viva meeting a co-examiner wanted to “see how the candidate stood up to quick fire questioning under pressure”. Arguably being able to engage in challenging academic debate under pressure may be a useful skill to acquire but whether this should be tested during the viva is less clear. The viva is a sufficiently stressful event for the student without the additional stress of rapid fire questions. Whilst it might seem strange that academics have divergent and implicit understandings of the purpose of the viva, research supports the fact that this is so. The findings from Jackson and Tinkler’s (2001 p360) study demonstrate a lack of consensus and identify a range of roles for the viva which included:

“ensures authenticity (31%); checks the candidate’s understanding and ability to produce and present research to PhD standard (36%); clarifies areas of weakness (32%); tests the candidate on their knowledge of the broader literature (the relevant sub-discipline field and how they are placed within it) (22%); tests oral skills (11%); checks that the candidate can ‘defend’ her/his thesis (24%); decides between borderline cases (11%). Related to these monitoring and examination activities, a few respondents (2%) also mentioned that the viva served to ensure standardisation across institutions and quality of supervision: “an opportunity for the external to meet and ‘check’ on the candidate (*and the supervisor as well*)”.

Part of this lack of consensus about the role of the PhD viva lies in the ambiguity and diversity that surrounds how individual examiners view the PhD itself and therefore what the viva is expected to achieve. As Powell and McCauley (2003 p81) note that academics “differ fundamentally in what they think that candidates need to have done during their research programmes, how they may prove that they are worthy of the award in question and finally, therefore, what the examiners’ roles are in the process of judging that proof”. In Denicolo’s (2003 p89) study a consensus view was that the purpose of the assessment was to assess “contributions to the body of knowledge” which she describes as being “redolent of the rubric of institutional documents”. However, being able to repeat the mantra of ‘original contribution to knowledge’ is easier than actually examining whether or not the student’s contribution was original. Examiners can agonise over whether or not a particular

thesis does genuinely meet the requirements of originality and contribution to knowledge; particularly since there is no “cosmic accrediting agency” (Kwiram, 2006) to provide guidance.

The viva can therefore be viewed as something which examines the end point of a *process* which has produced a competent and independent researcher (as well as a thesis) and/or more *product* oriented where the examination focuses primarily on the written word, that is, the thesis in which the original contribution to knowledge is articulated. It would seem that the British viva lends itself to being able to examine both process and product whereas non-viva systems allow only the examination of the product which can be “examined in the absence of its author” (Powell and McCauley, 2002 p105). A core reason often cited for having a viva is “a verification of authenticity” (Powell and McCauley, 2002 p106) by the examiners on behalf of the awarding institution. This verification acts as a means of ensuring that only genuine candidates – those who have made contributions to the body of knowledge and have actually demonstrated ownership of the ideas in the written thesis - gain entry to the community of post-doctoral scholars.

Perhaps on a more sanguine note, Morley (2003 p65) proposes that “... vivas probably continue at doctoral level because they allow follow-up questioning and probing in a way denied to other forms of assessment”. Personally speaking, this opportunity for follow-up questioning, providing it is handled appropriately, provides an invaluable chance for the student to express and explore ideas in greater depth and to illuminate aspects of the written thesis that were previously less than completely clear. The viva can promote the student’s thinking, can validate their work and shed light on aspects of the student’s contribution to knowledge. Colleagues have commented that through the viva they gained permission/license to expand on themes they might have held back on when writing their thesis. Equally the invitation to engage in critical debate that was both respectful and challenging provided the opportunity to demonstrate knowledge and reach a sense of closure. Trafford (2003 p119) suggests that questions which engage the students and give them the chance to expound on their research have “features of social bonding”. From experience with both the British and Australian systems, the opportunity for face-to-face dialogue with the student available through the viva seems to be a way of additionally respecting the student’s work and providing a chance of exploring aspects of their work that may have been missed, despite a very careful and conscientious reading of the thesis. The viva, when properly conducted, promotes the opportunity for the student to bring aspects of their research alive. The distanced review that occurs when a written thesis is examined through the medium of a written assessment creates less opportunity for such dialogic and diagnostic (Trafford, 2003) aspects. Experience of examination solely by report (as in the Australian system), feels less respectful in some ways for those of us who have ‘grown up’ as

students and examiners within the British system since the face-to-face element creates a genuinely dialogic occasion. Examining solely by written report misses out on some of the ceremonial aspects that are inherent in the well conducted British viva – such as telling the student that you are recommending the award along with the celebrations that go along with that recommendation. Being able to directly inform a student that you are recommending ‘award of the PhD’ has got to be a life-enhancing experience for the examiner and makes up for the more difficult feedback sessions when the student has to be informed that they still have work to do. However, despite these potential benefits research suggests that often the viva simply confirms the decision (recorded in the pre-viva report) that the examiner has already made based on having read the thesis.

Murray’s (2003 p111) work on students’ frequently asked questions shows how students’ position the viva as a “new communication event” and she notes that the external examiner “represents a new audience for the student’s thesis and the viva represents a new purpose for the discussion of the student’s work and writing”. The examiners’ careful and close reading of a student’s thesis followed up by judicious, constructive questions delivered in a supportive manner should, in theory at least, provide an appreciative, albeit challenging audience and a new “rhetorical context” (Murray, 2003 p110). Whilst Murray is correct in determining the viva to be a new rhetorical context, it is clearly also a context in which power is evident. As Morley (2004 p95) acknowledges “assessment is fundamentally about power. The power to determine what counts as received and indeed original knowledge and the power associated with academic authority and hierarchy”. However, although the differences in power may be explicit between the student and the examiners, there is often a not so subtle power relationship between the examiners, where less senior/experienced/powerful examiners may be ‘encouraged’ to align their views to those of the examiner with stronger ideas, more stubborn views or entrenched ideologies. The pre-viva meeting can be an interesting contest in which examiners can seemingly examine each other. However, although the potential for power to be misused is recognised within the British viva system, power is also exercised within other systems and often in arguably insidious and unexpected ways. For example, Lovat et al., (2008 p74) note that their analysis of reports from inexperienced examiners within the Australian system “indicate that the process of doctoral examination can be as much an examination of the supervisor’s expertise as of the ability of the candidate and the quality of the thesis”. Maybe, this is less true within the British PhD system although we sense that British supervisors may feel similarly exposed. Arguably, then the viva perhaps represents an assessment of the supervisor, the process undertaken by the student, the students verbal skills and ability to articulate their ideas and respond to questions, the thesis as product as well as the University’s

procedures. So, there likely to be a number of different agendas in play at any one time, and these get further complicated by another area of diversity: the processes that underpin the actual event.

The anatomy of the British PhD viva

The most consistent aspect about the *process* of British PhD viva is its inconsistency or, perhaps, more fairly, its diversity in terms of what actually occurs in the run up to, during and post viva. Whilst there is some degree of consensus across the UK about the viva, there is a good deal of diversity within and across the system (for more details, see Powell and McCauley, 2002; Powell and Green, 2003). Broadly though the following processes occur:

- Prior to the submission of the thesis, examiners (internal and external to the student's institution) are confirmed, usually this is done by a committee. The internal examiner normally acts as both an examiner as well as an interpreter of local procedure and rules. Where an independent chair is present, they generally act as the local interpreter of rules and note taker.
- The thesis is sent to the examiners for their consideration and a viva date is confirmed (good practice suggests that this should be within 6-12 weeks of receipt of the thesis).
- Reports may or may not be required to be submitted prior to the viva and may or may not be shared between the examiners.
- A pre-viva, private meeting occurs between the examiners, generally directly before the viva itself, during which the examiners reveal their thoughts on the thesis, discuss issues relating to the thesis such as the likely outcome of the viva, clarify issues (for example about the regulations), and determine the agenda for the viva which is likely to include the range, extent, order and nature of the questions that will be asked including those deemed to be pivotal to the final decision, who will ask them, what approach will be adopted (whether it will be thematic, process oriented or sequentially ordered through the chapters), and how long the viva might take.
- The viva occurs behind closed doors and is a private meeting (albeit that the institutions that record the viva now have a record that can be made public in a limited sense).
- The viva typically lasts between 1-2 hours and the student may be accompanied by a member of their supervisory team although again variance between institutions. At the end of the viva the student (and their supervisor if present) is invited to withdraw.
- The post viva meeting is the session during which the examiners discuss the viva and decide upon the recommendation they will make. The range of recommendations differs between institutions and the nuances of meaning underpinning recommendations can be interesting to

unpick and translate/interpret. Semantic discussions about how minor a minor amendment is can, on occasions, become heated as not only is the student affected by the decision but so is the University.

- The feedback session during which the examiners feedback the recommendation they have decided upon to the student (and supervisor). A central University committee usually has responsibility for ratifying (or not) the recommendation and making the award.

This might seem to be a simple enough process – identify examiners –read the thesis - examine the student – make a decision - feedback the result. However, although the process can be effective and can be positively life enhancing for all involved, it can also be fraught and requires considerable skill to negotiate not least because the viva “has developed its own custom and practice and mystique...” (Powell and McCauley, 2002 p105). Whilst we would argue that a homogenised system would not necessarily be helpful, the variations and diversity in the system between institutions in the UK does create additional stress for the examiner.

Variations and diversity

The variations in practice between different institutions is sometimes unnerving for the examiner, particularly for the novice examiner whose experience of the PhD viva may be limited to their own viva and the regulations underpinning their own institution. However, regardless of experience, it is incumbent on the external examiner to not only read the student’s thesis but it is also fairly crucial to read the specific regulations for that institution to understand the context and rules within which a particular examination will occur. Arriving at an institution without appreciating the rules and regulations that guide their approach to doctoral examination can leave the examiner feeling unsettled as to their particular role. These differences can relate to aspects of the role, the documentation and recording of what occurred and who is eligible to be an external.

A number of different ‘innovations’ have been introduced to try and increase the amount of transparency and fairness within the system. For example, some institutions now have Independent Chairs who may/may not be required to read the thesis but whose role is to ensure ‘fair play’; often providing support to a less experienced, but appropriately qualified, examining team. The regulations from our own institution state that:

“In the case of doctoral examinations: PhD and MD (including Professional Doctorates, PhDs [by Published Work] and Professional MD awards) and where the internal examiner has no previous research degree examining experience, an independent chair

would also attend the oral examination. The Head of School should nominate an independent chair. The nominee would need to have examined at least 3 PhD examinations previously”.

Experience of examining both with and without independent chairs suggests that role of independent chair is tricky; it appears to be inherently awkward to be distant and detached in a forum where other participants are active and engaged in discussion.

Some institutions may require the viva to be digitally recorded to provide a ‘record of events’ whereas others would not allow this to occur. These decisions are not lightly made and are the final result of fierce debate.

The rules about who can be appointed as an examiner again vary between institutions and reflect decisions relating to the degree of collaboration or existing relationships permissible between the proposed examiner and the institution/supervisor/student and the expertise they have in their subject area. Joyner (2003 p124) notes that one of the main characteristics that should be required of examiners is that they should be “sufficiently aware of the intellectual frontiers in the subject”. This principle is pretty much universally accepted. However, the amount of examining experience required varies between institutions with some accepting expertise in the specific topic/disciplinary area but not necessarily requiring evidence of examination experience whilst others, such as our institution, having clear and fairly detailed criteria about examination experience above and beyond the clear subject expertise. The regulations from our institution state that:

“For the awards of MD (Res), MPhil and PhD (including by Published Work and the research component of Professional awards in the field of medicine and dentistry or Taught/Professional doctorates), the examining team must hold collectively a minimum of three or more previous examinations at the level of award for examination and one external examiner must have experience of at least two examinations at the level of award. For candidates with two external examiners, the second external examiner must also have extensive experience as a specialist in the research topic”.

This regulation is fairly typical of many other institutions but what this fails to recognise is the nature of that experience. Simply having previously examined on at least two previous occasions does not necessarily make the would-be examiner a better bet than someone with no experience. Indeed the experienced examiner could have left a trail of terror and destruction behind them but their experience on paper, in the absence of information from former examining teams, supervisors or students, may make them look like a ‘good person’ to appoint. The rationale behind

the appointment of the experienced examiner is a mix of wanting to get someone with a clear sense of the doctoral viva, someone worthy of the trust that the institution, the student and the supervisory team is placing in them as well as someone whose credibility, authenticity and robustness will ensure that the process is handled well. This is also important as institutions, aware of increasing litigiousness and the need to manage risk, are now also keeping an eye on the robustness and quality of their systems so that any appeals against or criticisms of the viva can be (as appropriate) defended. Although the regulations within institutions are clear about the specific and objective aspects of the examiner such as their match with the topic of the student's thesis other factors are also considered in relation to their research activity, publication output, and other esteem factors. This information is elicited through the submission of short CVs which are then reviewed by committee. However, these CVs are not references and as such fail to determine the degree of 'niceness', approachability, integrity, and sense of fair play of the individual – all of which will have been or should have been considered to a greater or lesser degree by the supervisory team who proposed the examiner. Joyner (2003 p125) makes this point when he proposes that the second characteristic needed in an external examiner is that they should be "a mature adult of sufficient wisdom and humanity that the examination process is a worthwhile and developmental experience for the candidate, irrespective of the outcome".

Having examined a goodly number of theses (20 PhDs, 5 MPhils, 1 DEd, and 1 DClinPrac) as well as having been in the position of Director of Studies approaching potential examiners we are aware of the discussions that occur before the first approach is made and also of the subtlety of questions that are sometimes asked of a would-be examiner, for example their flexibility in considering an approach to 'their' topic that is in opposition to their own stance. Whilst the closeness of any relationship between the examiner and the institution/supervisory team is something which requires careful consideration it is often impossible to identify an examiner who knows nothing of the student or supervisory team. This seems to be particularly true within nursing, especially within the distinct disciplinary areas such as health visiting, children's nursing or within specialities such as pain whereby students are often experienced practitioners at the leading edge of clinical practice, and who are well known to the examiner from conferences, professional meetings and so on. Certainly personal experience means facing the somewhat unenviable role of examining a colleague whose work I know well and who I have met up with on many occasions at conferences. Whilst the appointment of an external who has appropriate distance from the student and supervisory team is pretty much taken-for-granted, Morley (2003 p69) notes how paradoxical this would be within other PhD examination systems, for example in the USA where there is "certainly no "external", previously unknown to the candidate, all-powerful voice suddenly appearing".

One way of trying to reduce the mystique associated with the viva lies in preparing students and examiners for the experience. The need for training programmes and the provision of structured experiences to provide support to supervisors and would-be examiners (see for example, Cryer and Mertens, 2003; Powell and McCauley, 2003) has gained momentum and many institutions offer this internally. Students are now much more likely to be offered the opportunity for structured preparation for their viva including the use of a mock viva. However, as Hartley and Fox (2004) report there are disparities across and within institutions about what constitutes a mock viva. They also note differences in the students' responses to their 'mock', and how helpful they found it in preparing them for their real viva. In the past examiners have been socialised rather than prepared for examining and this can be inherently problematic particularly if we accept that doctoral examination is a "social practice" Morley (2004 p91). This would seem to be the same regardless of whether or not the examination is solely by written report, as in Australia, or by viva as in the UK. Lovat et al., (2008 p75) recognise how "even when faced with a very good thesis, examiners appear to be heavily influenced by a culture, implicit if not explicit, that is disposed towards the technical and, more often than not, negative aspects of assessment". The formative instruction evident in examiners' written reports on 'low-quality' theses would seem to be similar to the content based questioning seen in Trafford's (2003) study of the questions asked in doctoral vivas. Trafford (2003 p120) found evidence of clear sequential phases of iterative clarification and exploration of issues with "discernable patterns of linked questions" with newer examiners focussing "less on conceptual issues" but examiners generally seeking "confident and appreciative discussions by candidates on the critical aspects of doctorateness in their theses".

Conclusion

So is the British PhD viva what Bassnett (2002) describes as the "last bastion of opacity and elitism" or does it serve a useful purpose as a scholarly forum? Is it valuable to do more than just examine the evidence of the written word and to scrutinise the student and the skills that they can demonstrate? The physiological (Van Broekhoven et al., 2002) and psychological stress of the viva could be justified if it promotes a constructive, developmental opportunity for the student. The viva has the potential to be a rite of passage for the student who even if they still have some corrections and amendments to make should feel affirmed in their future role as a researcher.

For those who believe that the viva does have value and wish to retain it, the "massification of research student population" (Morley et al., 2003 p64) may well mean that the time, effort and expense of senior academics travelling to distant places to have face-to-face dialogue with the

student is no longer a viable option. Certainly, the resources needed by the British system predicate against its use in other contexts such as Australia where the time and expense of travelling much greater distances make it prohibitive. The potential of conducting a viva using video or web based technology already exists, although this may create more problems than it solves with the constructive relationship element being negated by technology.

Holbrook et al., (2008) note that “thesis examination is as subjective as each thesis is unique” in their report on the consistency between examiners and the stability within the system of PhD examination in Australia. Despite the critique of the British PhD examination system, there is evidence of a shared culture and agreement between examiners. In fact, the dialogue between the examiners that occurs in their meetings before and after the actual viva provides an arena for agreement and consensus. Both the British and Australian systems have strengths and each has something to learn from the other. Used without care and integrity, either system can harm the student, their supervisors and the examiners, creating scars that can take a long time to heal. Yet, when either system is undertaken conscientiously and with wisdom and humanity they can open the door to allow the student to pass through into the community of post-doctoral scholars whereby they become what Golde (2006) describes as a “steward of the discipline”; a moral, knowledgeable and skilled person. It would seem that in the absence of what Kwiram (2006) calls a “cosmic accrediting agency” that would ensure complete consistency between and across examiners, those of us who are examiners need to be sure that we are exemplary stewards.

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