

FAQs – Failed PhD

My PhD failure was in 2008; since then I've received the questions below (some may seem obvious, but people still ask). Also, since my PhD program was in the U.K., people in the U.S. have lots of questions about how the British system is different, so I covered those too. Feel free to contact me (see footer) to share questions, comments, or dialog.

I don't understand academia's levels / programs / degrees. Which ones did you pursue? Why is the PhD a big deal?

"Academic" degrees imply a path of "book learning" within a traditional college or university setting, as opposed to skilled trades (say, mechanic or electrician) or specific professional degrees (say, medicine or law). The traditional academic path has three main levels of degree programs. I'll list them in order, as well as the name of the degree I got at each level:

1. Bachelor's—typically a bachelor of arts (BA) or, in my case, bachelor of science (BS) from a traditional four-year college or university. Note: There are lower degrees—say, an associate of arts (AA) from a two-year community college—which may stand alone, or in some cases may be accepted by a four-year college or university toward a bachelor's degree.
2. Master's—typically a master of arts (MA) or a master of science (MS), earned after a bachelor's; mine was a three-year master of divinity (MDiv) in theology. There are master's degrees in many other fields too—say, nursing or teaching.
3. Doctoral, or doctorate—typically a doctor of philosophy (PhD), earned after a master's; my doctoral program was in religious studies. Note: The PhD is recognized as the highest degree, though some pursue post-doctoral work after it.

I pursued #1 and #2 successfully in the U.S., and #3 unsuccessfully in the U.K. That last one—doctoral, or PhD—is meant to represent the most intensive study, and greatest level of achievement and expertise, of all degrees. Without a PhD, it is very hard to build a full-time career, or to get tenure (a permanent position), as a college or university teacher. For more on terms, see <https://studyusa.com/en/a/107/what-is-the-difference-between-a-school-college-and-university-in-the-usa>.

What do you mean when you say you "failed the PhD"?

I mean I finished seven years of reading, writing, and field research for the PhD and worked on my final paper (thesis or dissertation) until my two advisors approved it as "ready to submit." But in the final oral examination my two examiners came to a different conclusion, so they did not grant me a PhD or let me rewrite my paper and try again for that degree.

So an advisor is a different person / different role from an examiner? Is that typical in the British system?

Right. My two advisors advised me as I went through my reading, research, and writing. My two examiners conducted my final oral examination. (One advisor and one examiner were from the British university; the other advisor and examiner were from other schools.) The advisors guided me for seven years; the examiners met me only for my final examination. By intention, in the name of objectivity, the examiners chosen were people who were unfamiliar with me or my work.

Didn't your advisors see any warnings that your work might be considered "off the mark" in the final examination?

Apparently not. They both had been successful university professors for years, providing guidance for many other doctoral dissertations which passed, and they both approved mine. The problem is systemic: the student works toward the "mark" set by the advisors, but the examiners' "mark" may be different. The examiners can "move the goalposts," so to speak.

But your advisors approved your work. Didn't their "yes" votes cancel the examiners' "no" votes, or count at all?

No, because the final examination is conducted by the examiners alone. In the name of objectivity, the advisors cannot be present at the final examination, nor can they discuss it with the examiners beforehand. Only the examiners decide the outcome; the advisors do not have a "vote" in the matter.

Couldn't you rewrite and resubmit your work to try again for a PhD?

No, in my case the examiners did not let me rewrite and resubmit for a PhD. They did say I could try again for a lower (master's) degree, but I already had a master's; I needed the PhD for my desired profession of teaching college. Also, since the examiners rejected my key concepts so soundly the first time, I felt that even if I tried for a master's it was likely they'd reject those concepts again the second time.

Since the university's own advisor and examiner gave conflicting feedback, couldn't the university help you?

From friends who are still in touch with the university, I've caught hints that the university was sobered by what happened to me and does not want it happen to others. But the whole university system in the U.K. (and in other places that use the same methodology) follows this model—so only top leaders in that system, or in an individual university, can change it. I know of at least one formerly British-model university, in Canada, which has done so; perhaps others might follow.

Could you file an appeal somewhere, to get a review of your case?

No. An appeal is allowed only under very specific conditions, none of which were considered applicable to me. And I know of no higher body that has jurisdiction to review this type of academic decision.

Could you transfer the credits for your work to some other university?

No. The program was pure independent research, with guided supervision (advising); there were no traditional classroom credit hours. So I had no credits to transfer. If I went to another university, I'd have to start all over and redo my work under their supervision—and pay their tuition too; this reality was confirmed in all of my contacts with other universities.

Would you consider doing that? Starting all over at another university?

It's hard to imagine doing so at this point. The first effort took all my resources, and I haven't felt God's leading to go back.

Wasn't there any way to get some kind of PhD credit for the work you did?

If you find a way, let me know.

Why did you choose this British program and university?

This university, this program, and this advisor (from the British university) all had good reputations and had helped several of my friends earn PhDs in my field (theology / religious studies), so my choice made sense. Also, the initial cost was less than for similar programs in the U.S. (though it ended up costing more in the long run), and the program allowed me to stay in the U.S. for most of the year so I could be at home and keep my teaching job during the school year.

So you lived in the U.S. during most of your program?

Right. The model is a pure research program with no classroom-based coursework; instead, students do all of the reading and research on their own, under advisors' supervision. So this model let me keep doing my reading and field research in the U.S. and then do some reading and writing in England for a few weeks each summer to fulfill a residency requirement.

Do you have bad memories of England or your experiences there?

I have a special place in my heart for England; I'd go back in a minute. But my final examination was a bad memory. I recall being in that room, imagining the sound of a prison door clanging shut—realizing I'd have to return home alone, flush everything I had worked for, and (to extend the metaphor) rebuild from crap. There's been much healing since.

Would you ever disclose the content of your PhD dissertation, or the name of the university which rejected it?

I might if I felt it could do some good (e.g., if I were invited to participate in a serious university forum in the U.K. about changing their PhD system). For now, though, I believe such disclosures would distract from my main point—which is that the failure happened and it was beyond my control, but not beyond God's; God simply used it to redirect me, albeit through great pain. I don't want to smear the university or start a debate about why they failed me—those are side issues.

I'm considering a PhD program outside the U.S. What's your advice?

Three things:

- Most programs in other locations, including Canada, use the British model. Although my outcome was uncommon, if you select such a program you could end up where I am. I see benefits in U.S. programs, which typically offer two things mine didn't: credit hours for coursework, and the inclusion of the student's advisors in the examining process.
- If you still opt to go outside the U.S., remember the main thing is to *pass*—so I recommend avoiding study topics that could trigger controversy since you don't know what your examiners' opinions or positions will be. Such topics can be studied later—*after* you get the PhD.
- Above all, no matter where you go, don't borrow. I borrowed a lot of money for my two earlier degree programs, but this one I did "pay as you go." So at least I did not have to pay off loans and interest for a degree I never received.

Would you be willing to share more of your story with me / my group / church / organization?

Yes, absolutely. My focus is on God's healing and redemption. For more information, please contact me (see footer).