



# SIRC-NF Fellows Newsletter

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Main Story in this Issue: The 3rd SIRC-NF Alumni Event Took Place at the Llansantffraed Court Country House Hotel from June 16th to 18th, 2010

Nelson Turgo (Picture on the left) Has Successfully Defended His Thesis and Been Awarded a PhD. He Reflects upon His Viva Experience in This Issue

## The Third SIRC-NF Alumni Event

SIRC-NF fellows from different parts of the world came together once again for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Alumni Event from 16th to 18th June 2010. The event was hosted at the Llansantffraed Court Country House Hotel hidden in the green and tranquil valleys of the Usk and the Wye with a background of multi-layered picturesque hills. It provided a unique opportunity for fellows to share their experiences, widen their horizons, and bond together more tightly.



The two-day event was designed and organised around the theme of how to become successful maritime researchers. In the morning session of the 17<sup>th</sup>, Dr Nelson Turgo, who had just submitted his thesis, gave a talk on his story of success and offered useful tips about how to complete a thesis. In the afternoon session, three fellows from the first batch – Dr Syamantak Battacharya, Dr Victor Gekara, and Dr Lijun Tang – shared their experiences of early academic life. They updated other fellows on their recent research activities and achievements, and briefly talked about their future plans. These talks provided other fellows with a chance to look into their own future in academia, to see what lies ahead, and figure out what can be expected. Sandwiched in between the talks from the fellows, invited guest speakers touched upon other areas of maritime research. Mr Elgan Lloyd from the European Maritime Safety Agency (EMSA) introduced the organisation and its activities and functions. Professor David Walters talked about the history and development of the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) in the UK and its implications for maritime research. In addition to chairing the event, Professor Helen Sampson offered advice on job applications and insights into conducting funded research.

The focus of the following day was on writing academic papers for publication. As the editor of the *Policy and Practice in Health and Safety* journal, Professor David Walters started the day by explaining the expected quality of an acceptable paper in an editor's eyes. Following this, Professor Helen Sampson outlined and explained some crucial points that constitute a good paper from a reviewer's perspective. It was pointed out that collaboration is often more effective and productive

and stands a better chance for success than single authorship. Therefore, in the remaining time, fellows formed different groups according to their research interests and the compatibility of their research topics, exploring and discussing potential ideas for collaborating. The activity proved to be fruitful: by the end of the event, it had sparked many exciting and innovative ideas. By the next alumni event, hopefully, some of these ideas would be in print. Furthermore, this cross-fertilisation activity could widen fellows' research horizons and inspire in them new research possibilities.

To be sure, the perfect British early summer weather during the event was too good to be shut outside. The glorious and long summer days provided fellows with plenty of off-seminar opportunities to appreciate, and relax in, the natural beauty and tranquillity of the Welsh valleys. While some fellows were sitting in the hotel's spacious garden savouring the breathtaking scenery with a drink, other fellows were exploring further afield into the nearby river, farms, and hills, during breaks and after dinner.



Without doubt, fellows enjoyed each other's company in all respects: discussing maritime research, chatting about general life, as well as savouring the natural splendour in its finest season. This consolidated and substantiated the maritime research network that SIRC-NF fellows endeavour to establish.

Congratulations to Nelson Turgo, a SIRC-NF fellow from the third batch, who successfully defended his thesis and was awarded a PhD in June 2010. His thesis, titled *"Bugabug ang Dagat": Local Life in a Fishing Community in the Philippines*, is available online ([www.sirc.cf.ac.uk](http://www.sirc.cf.ac.uk)). Nelson reflects on his viva experience in this article.

I was dreading it, yet I was also very keen on getting it over. It must be done away with as fast as possible. This last academic exercise of my PhD life was killing me. But at the same time I was also very excited. The prospect of being quizzed by two prominent academics who were tremendously well-read and respected in their respective fields was just overwhelming. It was both elating and frightening. My PhD viva was the most nerve-wracking chapter in my adult academic life so far.

People say that no PhD viva is the same. Every viva is superbly distinctive from another although there is a structured format to be followed - like a flow of events that delineate what (question) comes first and the usual Big Bang question (presumably, the most difficult, usually about theory) that pops up before the viva comes to an end. So, while my viva could be different from someone's viva, some expected questions could be anticipated and therefore could be addressed (and put into script). Thus, questions about methodology and theoretical framework are just some of the common fixtures of the PhD viva.

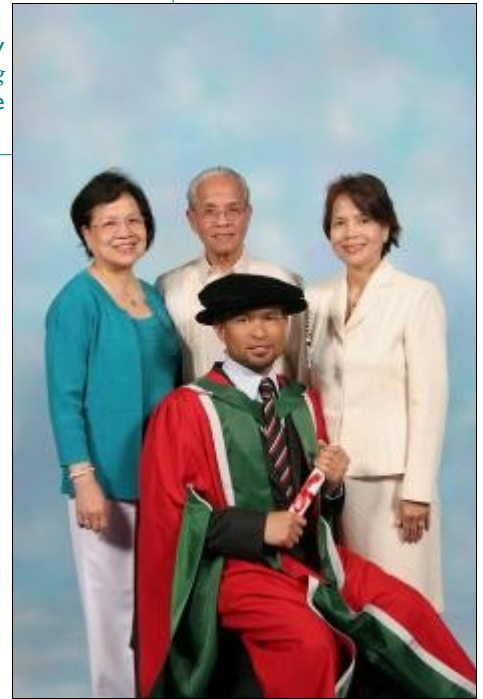
Now what did I do to prepare for my PhD viva?



Nelson with his examiners and supervisor in the viva

Some two weeks before my viva, I attended the annual alumni event of the SIRC-Nippon Fellowship and had the chance to get hold of our three alumni who were PhDs already. It was my best chance to ask them about their viva experience. The first one spoke about the importance of confidence and humility. According to him, it pays to be confident about one's thesis and at the same time humble enough to admit some perceived

pitfalls and weaknesses of the thesis. "Remember, you wrote your thesis yourself and you have to be proud of what you have accomplished," he told me. Having written something gives its author an authority (though not uncontested and absolute) about and over what he has written. While texts could be read in different ways depending on the framework employed, the author of any text should be confident enough to know what he is talking about and why it is important to be discussed. If one does not show confidence in his work, he should not expect others to show enthusiasm in discussing it. But in showing confidence and pride about one's finished output, humility should also be exercised. It's admitting that the thesis is not perfect and other ways of doing it are possible. Thus, the famous words of Margaret Thatcher loom large here (though in a different context): "There is no alternative!". She's dead wrong. There are many alternatives and we have to admit it to our examiners. Too much confidence and thus bordering on being cocky and proud is disastrous as much as too much admission of weaknesses in the thesis is tantamount to opening the floodgate for further revision, and thus nixing the possibility of a Category I Pass, the gold standard of any PhD viva exercise. But how does one make the balance? Is there a superb way to do it? Of course there is none and one gets to know how to do it once the viva gets underway. While having my viva, I always 'appeared' confident (even if at times I was not and here facial expression and tone are very important) but when my examiners spoke about some possible ways to 'improve' the thesis, I wholeheartedly embraced their suggestions but not without saying at the same time that I will incorporate their suggestions when I rewrite my chapters for future publication. The recognition and admittance that the thesis could still be improved in a lot of ways matter. But then again, it depends on the quality and nature of improvement that examiners demand. If the thesis as it stands is good enough, then any possible re-writing could be done in the future not because the thesis lacks what it takes to be a standard quality PhD thesis but because such revision will be needed to cater to a new kind of textual dynamics, like publishing in peer-reviewed journals, for instance.



Another SIRC-Nippon alumnus spoke about writing down all possible questions and drawing up all possible answers to them. It is of course difficult to draw a list of questions when the person responsible for answering them is yourself! It's self-flagellation time, folks! But then again I gave it a go. This is my last hurrah as a PhD student, I told myself. I drew up a list of most possible questions and answered them myself. What an ordeal! Confronting questions on theory, epistemology and whatnots made me realize my enormous task ahead. What if the questions I made up were asked? And my answers were naïve and flimsy, not sounding like a real PhD to-be? Now, you may ask, were the questions that I drew up made it to the viva? Yes, out of the 14 questions that I thought about, some good three of them came up though in different packaging. I was asked why I chose my topic, the framework that I used and why from a creative writing background I ended up doing a PhD in Sociology. Did my ready-made answers make it to the viva? That's the tragedy, no. Being in front of your examiners is a most intimidating experience especially if you notice your examiners looking over their prepared notes which run in pages. I vaguely remembered my ready-made answers and fired off with whatever idea first entered my mind. I had to think on my feet and think vigorously, suavely, and intelligently. But what about the questions that did not enter my pre-viva radar? Well, most of the questions were of this nature and trust me, once you are there, being questioned by your examiners with questions (continues on the next page)



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## Recent SIRC-NF Fellows Research Disseminating Activities

Acejo, I. (2010). 'Governance from Abroad: The Role of Transnational Linkages in the Politics of Decision-making among Temporary Migrants.' 49th Annual Meeting of the Southeast Conference for Asian Studies, Louisville, Kentucky, 15 - 17 January.

Lisbon 7-9 July

Bhattacharya S (2010) 'Dilemma in the Practice of Incident Reporting', 2010 Annual Conference of the International Association of Maritime Economists,

Dacanay, J. (2010) "Negotiating Rights, Legal Insights in the Seafaring Sector", International Journal of Arts and Sciences (IJAS) Conference, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, 31 May - 03 June.

Li, L. (2010) "Chinese Seafarers' Responses to International Religious Encounters", 9th Annual Hawaii International Conference on Social Sciences (HICOSS), Hawaii, USA, 2-5 June



Zhao, Z. (2009) 'The Management Strategies of Chinese State-Owned Crewing Agencies and the Impacts on Foreign Manning Business and Seafaring Labour', International PhD Seminar on Maritime Economics and Management, Svendborg International Maritime Academy (SIMAC) Denmark, 30 November - 2 December.

Zhao, Z (2010) 'The Perceptions of Chinese Seafarers about the New Market Economy and Their Dependence on the State-Owned Enterprises', International Symposium - 60 Years of China's Union Law and 15 Years of China's Labour Law: Review and Prospect. Beijing Normal University China, 18-19 August

(from the previous page) that you think are too sophisticated and sound better than your answer, you just answer them and wish for the ground beneath your feet to open up and devour you whole. End of embarrassment. I remember asking another alumnus about answering difficult questions and he told me that if you are not confident enough to answer it, let the examiners know it and tell them candidly that you have not thought about it before. Well and good. But then again, it's your moment of glory and you want to impress your examiners and get the highest pass possible! How did I conduct myself when difficult questions popped up? When I was asked about my epistemology which draws from two disciplines, sociology and geography, my mind went blank and I thought I just went on and on and on until I ran out of words and stopped. I entertained the idea of admitting some difficulties in answering many questions but I was afraid that it would become a habit and I would end up not answering any question at all! And then the last advice was getting a good night sleep. Forget it. You will not have it. I had my viva without a proper sleep and it's perfectly understandable. Having said that, I should say that a PhD viva only comes once in a lifetime (unless you love punishing yourself bigtime like a professor of mine in the Philippines who got two PhDs, one in physics and another one in creative writing) and therefore you have to savour every moment of it. I enjoyed my viva very much (my examiners were superbly engaging and to say the least brilliant but not intimidating, though). And remember

it's only once that two senior academics (aside from your supervisors, of course) get to GENUINELY read your PhD output and ask some really serious questions! Thus, it's understandable to be terrified, but please, enjoy the experience and yes, learn from it!

Other than writing this, I won't speak more about my PhD viva experience. I will spoil the broth. The beauty of the viva is its mystery (and the promise of redemption after it, well, almost). I already experienced mine and yours is waiting to be discovered. All the best!



Nelson with his thesis