

# Surviving the Viva !

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[www.shintonconsulting.com/viva](http://www.shintonconsulting.com/viva)

# Introductions



- Me
  - PhD Chemistry 1996 then two short post-docs
  - Careers Adviser (Newcastle) 3 years
  - Postgraduate training and consultancy
- You (in pairs...)
  - Your subject area and stage of research
  - Concerns or questions
  - Hopes for this session

# Outline of session



- The viva in context of a PhD
- The role of your supervisor and examiners
- What to expect on the day
  - Typical questions / topics
  - Possible outcomes
  - Common concerns answered
- Summary of good preparation

# The Viva in context

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The nature of academic research

Your research project – the BIG picture

Dissemination and defence of results



# A question... what is a PhD ?



- original work
- a contribution to knowledge
- displays understanding of the field
- displays the skills of critical thinking
- **a period of training to be a professional researcher...**

independent  
thought

managing  
projects

giving  
opinions

networking  
collaborating

instructing  
others

# The University View – PhD...

...thesis is an original work making a significant contribution to knowledge in, or understanding of, a field of study and normally containing material worthy of publication.

The thesis shall demonstrate that the candidate has adequate knowledge of the field of study and the relevant literature and shall show the exercise of critical judgement.

The literary presentation shall be lucid and scholarly and there shall be a satisfactory abstract.

The period of full-time study is three years and the thesis is 70,000-100,000 words, **including** references, bibliography and appendices.

# PhD in Creative Writing

A PhD thesis in Creative Writing will be a substantial, original creative work, which includes a critical and / or self-reflective element.

The total thesis, of both elements is 70,000–100,000 words, including references, bibliography and appendices. Poetry or crossover forms may have slightly lower word counts.

For any research degree, the research work must be communicated coherently in a thesis presented in a critical and orderly way and, where appropriate, must show evidence of appropriate analysis and discussion of results.

# So why do we have a viva..?



- Establish that you have actually done the work and written the thesis
- Test your ability to defend your thesis
- Establish that you have a satisfactory knowledge of the wider field surrounding your research topic



# Where do we start? Think Big...



- Context
- Contribution to field
- Originality
- Critical judgement and testing of ideas
- Defending results
  
- You need to be clear about these...

# Context – your work



- You need to know WHY your project was important / relevant at the outset...
- ...so you should be able to EXPLAIN the key work that has already been done by others in your area...
- ...and how this relates to your research aim



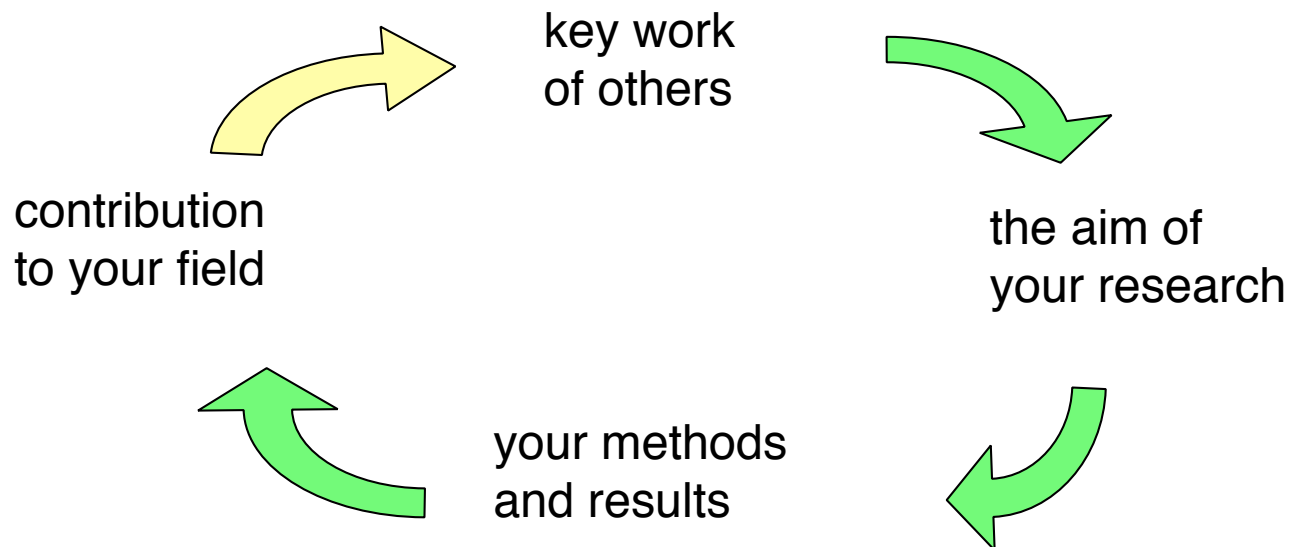
# Mini Viva - Part 1

- Find a partner – someone you do NOT know
- Discuss for a few minutes how your research project was devised, focusing on
  - Problem / Aims
  - Motivation
  - Approach
- Both of your projects must be discussed

# Context – your work



- Then you should be able to explain what you have actually done during your research...
- ...how and what this contributes to your field.



# Mini Viva - Part 2



- With the same partner
- Discuss for a few minutes what your research contributes to your field, and where it might go in the future
  - What would you do with 10 more years?
- Both of your projects must be discussed

# Originality

- New work
- New interpretation
- New application
- New way of testing knowledge
- New connections



# Mini Viva - Part 3



- Discuss with your partner
  - The ways in which your work is original
  
- Then
  - The ways in which your work is NOT original

# Critical judgement in thesis...



- Refer to the key papers
- Critical engagement
  - Comparing other researchers' approaches and conclusions
  - Understanding academic lineage
  - Recognising quality – identify value of others work
  - Noting potential conflicts of interest





# Testing your own work

- Why did you use this method/approach
  - Be clear on its advantages and limitations
- Is your interpretation the only possible explanation ?
  - Support from literature
  - Confirmation from further work
- What are the implications of your work ?

# Some experiences so far ?



- Published papers
- Conference contributions
- Group meetings
- Informal discussions
  
- Into groups of around 4 people...

# In your groups



- Reflect on your experience
- What preparation did you do ?
- What questions were you asked ?
- How was your work received ?
- What was the audiences' perspective ?
- What new leads were suggested ?

# Final thought on 'Big ideas'

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For both thesis and viva preparation,  
worth thinking about...



# How will you demonstrate...



- Originality
- Significance of your contribution
- Understanding of context
- Knowledge of the field and critical thinking
- Innovative ideas
- Publishable outcomes

# The Supervisors Role

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# Your supervisor



- Is likely to be familiar with the role of external examiner
- Should choose an external examiner with an appropriate background
- Shouldn't allow you to submit until you are ready
- Is as committed to your success as you are!

# Your supervisor



- Is an individual (as are you)
- Is not a mind reader !
  - So you may need to ask for feedback on performance
- Will respond to enthusiasm and challenge
  
- But plays little or no role in the final viva



# What to Expect

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# Back into your groups



- Lets reflect on...
- What are the biggest concerns you have about the actual viva process?

# Frequently Asked Questions



- What format will the viva take ?
- What can I take with me ?
- When do I find out the outcome ?
- Who will be there ?
- What are they there to do ?
- What if they disagree with each other ?

# Who and what



- **Convener**
  - administrative and advisory
- **External Examiner**
  - test knowledge and understanding
  - ensure thesis and candidate deserves PhD
  - may advise on deficiencies
- **Internal Examiner**
  - arranges viva and contributes to decision on award
  - also tests knowledge and understanding in the viva
- **Supervisor\***
  - Should not play any part

# More on the examiner's role



- Check that you wrote the thesis by tackling you on the detail
  - so may check understanding of *anything* you wrote
- ask questions designed to see if you really understand your own argument
- see if you can justify a position which the examiner has a problem with
- point out problems with the thesis and give you the opportunity to think through ways to rectify them

# External examiner's checklist



- Research aims clear?
- Literature adequately reviewed/critiqued?
- Key papers included?
- Theoretical basis sound?
- Conjectures consistent with theory?
- Appropriate methodology?
- Evidence collected ethically?
- Sufficient evidence?
- Convinced of reliability and validity?
- Findings assessed against literature?
- Findings make significant contribution to the field?
- Any inconsistencies?
- Conclusions?

IS THIS PERSON AN EXPERT?

# Typical questions / topics



- what are your main findings ?
- what is original about your research ?
- describe your methodology and why you decided to use it
- can you highlight the contribution that you have made ?
- how do your findings relate to this particular literature ?
- why was this problem worth investigating ?
  
- but also - anything from your undergraduate years

# Typical examiners' reports



## The thesis:

- contains evidence of sufficient experience in methods of research;
- demonstrates the purpose of the investigation and a critical discussion of the results;
- represents a significant contribution to the relevant field of learning

## Recommendations including comments on:

- the scope, character and quality of the work submitted
- the performance of the candidate at the oral examination

Overall, whether the thesis and viva performance merits PhD



# Possible outcomes



- PhD awarded
- PhD awarded, subject to corrections
  - these could be minor editorial or more significant corrections
  - generally checked by the internal examiner
- PhD not awarded, as thesis or oral defence deficient in specified aspects
  - candidate able to re-submit for PhD after significant revisions
  - further examination required
- Masters level awarded
  - corrections may still be required
- No degree awarded and candidate judged to have failed

# Good preparation

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Onto practical advice !





# During the thesis writing

- Always remember the viva is coming !
- Keep a file or folder of notes and references that do not make it into your thesis
- Think of possible questions, and make a note (especially if you don't know the answer)

# After thesis submission



- Take a short break if possible
- Read your thesis afresh, know it's structure and think about the BIG picture
- Look for any weak areas in your knowledge
- Then look back to your folders of related notes, references and possible questions



# After thesis submission

- Read some of your external examiners output, in order to be familiar with their interests
- Remember the wider field, and also basic fundamental material
- Continue to read the relevant literature!

# How should you prepare?



Read your thesis and try to admit to yourself what's wrong with it or determine what could be criticized.

Work out what you are going to defend and justify and what you are happy to concede might need more thought or would look different after another year's work - maybe do some work to come up with an improvement on a weak part of your submitted thesis.

Dr Jon Hesk  
St Andrews University

# Some practical revision tips



- Take breaks
- Discuss problems with others
- Make a list of any outstanding questions to discuss with supervisor
- Prepare condensed notes for night before
- Keep 'in touch' with the group / department

# The night before



- Try to relax
- Avoid caffeine and alcohol
- Don't start any new topics
- Skim condensed notes
- Try to get a good nights sleep



# On the day



- Be smart, but comfortable
- Sober (!) and pleasant – first impressions count
- React to atmosphere and style of panel
- Be confident, you know more than think !
- Be positive and motivated – it will come across
- Remember the purpose of the viva...

# When answering questions...



- Speak clearly, make eye contact
- Give straight but full answers
- Request clarification if a question is not understood
- Perhaps challenge a question if you know it is based on a poor premise
  - the debate will probably come naturally...
  - ...so you can be assertive but not aggressive !
- Don't exaggerate or be falsely modest

# Afterwards



- Wait for recommendation
- Implement corrections (often surprisingly quick to do)
- Make sure the paperwork is all in place for the final submission of hardbound copies
  
- Celebrate !

# Summary of preparation



- Practice speaking and dealing with questions
- Ask people to read sections and ask questions
- Summarise your thesis and know its structure
- Ask survivors for advice !
- Understand the BIG picture of your work – context, aims, main findings and the main contribution
- Read new material as it is published

Do you have any other advice ?



- Back to the concerns we identified earlier
- Any other questions ?



# Resources

- List of web-sites & books (website)
- University / School Regulations
  - <http://www.gla.ac.uk/colleges/arts/graduateschool/currentstudents/policyprocedure/formsandguidelines/>
  - <http://www.gla.ac.uk/services/postgraduateresearch/pgrcodeofpractice/>
- Conferences
- Other researchers
- Supervisor

# Thank you

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[www.shintonconsulting.com](http://www.shintonconsulting.com)



- <http://alekskrotoski.com/post/phd-viva-answers-to-a-few-questions>
- <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=411311&c=1>
- <http://pgrdocblog.wordpress.com/2009/11/06/how-to-survive-your-viva/>
- <http://viva-survivors.com/> (see episodes 3, 8 & 9 in particular)