Surviving the Viva!

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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

But first: 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...
  problem solving
  managing projects...
  giving opinions
  networking
  instructing others
  collaborating

Examiners are asked to assess:

Is the thesis an original work that makes a significant contribution to knowledge in or understanding of the field?

Does the thesis contain material worthy of publication?

Does the thesis demonstrate adequate knowledge of the field of study and relevant literature?

Does the thesis show the exercise of critical judgement with regard to both the student’s work and that of other scholars in the same general field?

Is the presentation and style of the thesis satisfactory:
  full and adequate references
  coherent structure
  clear intentions, background, method, conclusions
  understandable to a scholar in the same field?


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...

Mini Viva - Part 1

- With a partner – someone you do NOT know
- Discuss for a few minutes how your research project was devised, focusing on
  - problem
  - motivation
  - approach
- Both of your projects must be discussed

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

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

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

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 the thesis...

• Refer to the key papers
• Demonstrate critical engagement
  • Comparing approaches and conclusions of others
  • Understanding academic lineage
  • Recognising quality – identify value in work
  • Noting potential conflicts of interest

Critical judgment in viva

• 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 ?

Defending Your Results

Experiences so far...?

• Published papers
• Conference contributions
• Group meetings
• Informal discussions

• Into groups of around 4 or 5 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’

Where will you demonstrate...

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

... and is it obvious?
What to Expect...

Do you have any specific concerns about the day itself?

Frequently Asked Questions

- What format will the viva take?
- What should I take in 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

- **Chairperson**
  - 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 they have a problem with
- point out problems with the thesis and give you the opportunity to think through ways to rectify them

One 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?

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?
- what do you think of your thesis?
- but also – anything!
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
  - checked by the internal examiner
- PhD not awarded, as candidates oral defence deficient in specified aspects
  - further examination required
- Additional research work required in thesis
  - either up to 6 months work with no further oral examination
  - or work could be more substantial, up to 12 months, with second oral
- MPhil awarded
  - for which corrections may still be required
- Degree not awarded and candidate judged to have failed

Good preparation

Planning...

During the thesis writing...

- Always remember the viva is coming!
- Keep a file or folder of notes and references that did 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 current interests
- Remember the wider field, and also basic fundamental material
- Continue to read the relevant key literature!
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 those 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 own work – context, aims, main findings and contribution
- Read new material as it is published