

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

context, nature of research, big picture ideas, defence

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 giving opinions instructing others
managing projects... networking collaborating

CODE OF PRACTICE FOR SUPERVISORS AND RESEARCH STUDENTS



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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?

<http://www.ed.ac.uk/files/atoms/files/copsupervisorsresearchstudents.pdf>

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

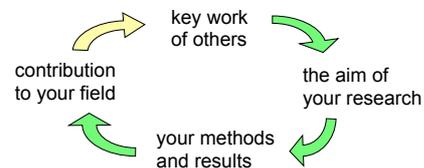


- With a partner – someone you do NOT know
- Discuss for a few minutes how your research project was devised, focusing on
 - problem
 - motivation
 - approach
- Both of your projects must be discussed

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 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 ?

Potential mini viva part 4... What do you think... or What could be better...

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

When and where...

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?

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 ?
- 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