

## **Levelling the playing field: towards best practice in the doctoral viva**

Chris Park

---

*The viva is a critically important element in the examination of research degrees, yet there is considerable variability of practice within and between institutions. This paper identifies important dimensions of the viva experience in the published literature, and it explores key areas of variability that compromise the fairness, transparency and consistency this tool of assessment. This analysis informs the development of a framework of best practice in a research-intensive English university, and the paper includes reflections on staff attitudes towards some novel aspects of the proposed framework.*

---

### **Introduction**

All institutions require and all students deserve academic procedures that are fair (on everyone), transparent (to everyone), and consistent (both in practice and outcome). This applies at the postgraduate research level as much as it does lower down the academic qualifications ladder. The current system for examining research degrees appears to work quite well most of the time in most universities across the UK, but sometimes it can go badly wrong and the process is not transparent. With little consistency in process within and between institutions, equity of treatment and assurance of quality cannot be guaranteed.

A critical element in the examination of doctoral degrees in the UK is the viva. A viva, in the sense used here, is an oral examination of a written thesis. The term viva (shortened from the Latin *viva voce*, meaning literally “living voice”) was first used to refer to an examination conducted orally in 1842, although the etymology of the word can be traced back to 1563 (Merriam Webster 2003).

The research degree viva is one of the most problematic and potentially contentious areas of postgraduate activity, so there is much to be gained from developing a framework of best practice that will strengthen quality assurance and enhance the student experience by making the assessment of research degrees more fair, transparent and consistent. This paper explains why practice in this area need to be radically improved, and outlines the framework of best practice developed at a leading research-intensive (pre-92) university in England, in response to concerns about academic quality assurance and about the quality of the doctoral student experience (both there and elsewhere).

### **Situating the viva**

A viva involving an examiner internal to the institution and at least one examiner external to the institution is required as an integral part of the assessment of all research degrees in the UK. Much more than merely a symbol or a ritual, the viva is a real hurdle that the student must negotiate, on other people’s (the examiners’) terms. If the hurdle is negotiated successfully the student receives the doctoral degree, otherwise revisions are usually required to the thesis (which can usually take between four and twelve months,

depending on the nature and scale of the revisions). In extreme cases, either no award is made, or a Masters degree is awarded because the threshold level of a doctorate is not reached. The stakes are high, particularly for the student.

The experience of a doctoral viva can be, and often is, a very unsatisfactory one for the student – something they endure rather than enjoy, and something for which they are often quite unprepared. Surveys have shown that many students' viva experiences are difficult, distressing and demoralising, even if the examiners ultimately recommend that the degree should be awarded. Thirty-nine percent of the psychology graduate students interviewed by Hartley and Jory (2000) described their viva as a negative experience. Hartley and Fox (2002) re-analysed the same data and found that, even when both internal and external examiners were judged positively by the students, the viva experience was still sometimes described as negative. Many of the successful doctoral candidates interviewed by Wallace and Marsh (2001) emerged from the viva embittered by the experience, mainly because of the behaviour of the examiners.

The whole theme of examining doctoral work is coming under close scrutiny, evidenced in recent studies of the purpose of the PhD viva (Jackson and Tinkler 2001), of variations in institutional policy and practices in Britain (Tinkler and Jackson 2000), and of the processes that examiners go through and the criteria they employ (Mullins and Kiley 2002). Comparative studies are complemented by micro-scale analyses of the anatomy of individual vivas, viewed from the perspectives of different participants (Trafford and Leshem 2002b), and detailed analysis of the nature and focus of questions that commonly arise during the viva (Trafford and Leshem 2002a).

### **Framing the viva**

Four criteria are normally used to judge academic quality assurance of procedures – are they appropriate, fair, transparent and applied consistently? In most if not all UK higher education institutions compliance with some or all of the last three criteria can usually not be guaranteed in the context of the doctoral viva. There are two main reasons for this. One is the common lack of clearly defined 'rules of engagement' for any of the participants in the viva process, which make it impossible to define if/when any particular viva strayed into inappropriate territory, included inappropriate procedures, or was less-than-fair to the student. The second reason is that tradition and practice in the viva have usually grown up locally at department or faculty level, they usually reflect the experiences and assumptions of the examiners involved, and they are generally not transparent to the student.

#### *Drivers of change*

There are powerful external drivers for remedying this situation, the most obvious of which are Government, HEFCE and QAA requirements for greater accountability in the use of public funds, greater transparency in academic decision-making, and more robust quality assurance mechanisms (Thorne and Francis 2001, Morley, Leonard and David 2002, Shaw 2002). The QAA Code of Practice on Postgraduate Research Programmes (Quality Assurance Agency 2002), for example, requires that processes for assessing postgraduate research "should be communicated clearly and fully to research students and supervisors" (Precept 10A), and that they "should be clear and operated rigorously, fairly, reliably and consistently" (Precept 10B).

But there are significant internal drivers, too, within each institution. These include the need for greater transparency in the viva process (both for quality assurance purposes, and for the benefit of students), the need for great consistency in the viva process both within and between faculties, and the need to provide appropriate opportunities for staff development and to reduce the risk of things going wrong in the viva (both procedurally, but also in terms of fairness to the student). There is also the need to protect the interests of every participant in the viva process (eg from allegations of inappropriate or unfair behaviour, inconsistency of treatment or outcome, etc).

#### *Key problem areas*

There are four key problem areas surrounding most current practices relating to doctoral vivas – lack of transparency, the socially constructed nature of the process, the multiple roles expected of the viva, and variability of practice within and between institutions.

Lack of transparency is often a major concern for students preparing for their viva. Tinkler and Jackson (2002 p.167) insist that the PhD examination process is “arguably far less transparent than those at other levels of British higher education” and, as a result, students are often left “in the dark” about the whole process. More than one observer (Burnham 1994, Grix 2001) has commented how the typical viva is shrouded in mystery, certainly for the student but often also for the examiners. Hartley and Jory (2000) speak of “lifting the veil on the viva”, Baldacchino (1994) describes the doctoral viva as a “lottery”, and Wallace and Marsh (2001) refer to it as “trial by ordeal” or a “chummy game”. Although questions will inevitably arise about any oral examination conducted in private (Morley, Leonard and David 2002), students can learn some lessons about what is expected of them in the viva by looking at the experiences of their peers (Newberry 1995), by deconstructing the anatomy of individual doctoral vivas (Trafford and Leshem 2002b), and by consulting ‘how-to’ guides on postgraduate research published for the students themselves (eg Phillips and Pugh 1987) and for their supervisors (eg Delamont, Atkinson and Parry 1998).

Some of the lack of transparency arises because, as a socially-constructed and contingent activity, the viva is a process of engagement in which multiple agendas are at work and the rules are more implicit than explicit and are only vaguely defined (Boulter and Denicolo 2002). The process is negotiated between the participants (the examiners and the student) but with unequal power, authority and ability to influence the process and outcomes (Baldacchino 1994, Trafford and Lesham 2002b). Tinkler and Jackson (2002) note that variability is common in examiners’ academic agenda (different examiners behave towards candidates in different ways according to their view of what types of academic exchanges a doctoral candidate should be able to cope with), and in examiners’ personal agendas (self-promotion and aggrandisement; desire to establish their intellectual superiority).

Jackson and Tinkler (2000) explore some of the tensions between the multiple roles expected of the viva, such as whether the primary role is academic community-building or gate-keeping. Elsewhere (Jackson and Tinkler 2001) they reflect on the multiple roles of the viva, which often remain unquestioned and unvoiced. These include authentication of authorship of the thesis, checking the student’s understanding and ability to produce and present work of the appropriate standard, monitoring academic standards, providing advice and guidance, and acting as a rite of passage.

Variability of practice within and between institutions compounds the problem further. Tinkler and Jackson (2002 p.167) found, amongst twenty British universities, “a large degree of inter-institutional consistency regarding key criteria for the award of a PhD, [but] close inspection of institutional policy suggests that the PhD examination is in fact conceptualised and operationalised in diverse ways”. They could find no consensus regarding the role of the viva in the PhD examination process, and uncovered inconsistencies and contradictions between universities concerning the purposes of vivas (Jackson and Tinkler 2001). Morley, Leonard and David (2002 p.263) note that “there still seems to be considerable variation, and some mystification, in how doctoral assessment is conducted and experienced.” Bassnett (2003, p.16) rather graphically describes the viva process (“at least in the humanities”) as “something of a dog’s breakfast” because the present system is so muddled and inconsistent.

### **Codifying the viva**

Against the background of the weaknesses inherent in most current institutional procedures relating to the doctoral viva, and informed by experience of doctoral examinations in recent years in this particular research-intensive UK university, a working party was established within the institution to define best practice in the research degree viva.

Creation of the working party was directly inspired by a symposium on ‘Research degree examining’ organised by the UK Council on Graduate Education (29 April 2002). Evidence presented there (eg Murray 2002) revealed wide-ranging differences in the format and conduct of the viva, general ignorance amongst candidates about what the viva represented or what its purpose was, and a significant discrepancy between students’ expectations and their experiences. Overall it was clear that the viva experience for both the student and the examiners could be improved significantly if more cohesive and robust procedural guidelines were established as a means of improving and standardising the examination (viva) process, particularly to tackle the gap between students’ expectations of the viva and what institutions understand its role to be.

#### *Developing a framework*

The framework described here was designed to meet four particular objectives –

1. to address the lack of codified rules of engagement, because the ‘received wisdom’ about doctoral vivas is poorly defined and highly variable because each examiner brings their own different experiences to the process
2. to give students a better opportunity to defend their thesis, by helping them to better prepare for their viva, and to perform better within it
3. to establish an agreed benchmark of best practice, which all participants knew in advance, to make it easier for the Postgraduate Review Panel to evaluate students’ claims that the procedures followed might have denied them a sense of a fair hearing in their viva
4. to assist in the induction and development of academic staff by developing a well-documented framework, because the viva process is best learned directly by experience within the agreed framework.

Membership of the working party was designed to allow representation of the different stakeholders in the doctoral examination process. It was chaired by a senior academic manager (Dean), and it included a senior academic with experience as an external and an

internal examiner, an academic with research expertise in the viva process, a senior administrator with particular responsibility for postgraduate examinations, a post-doctoral research fellow with recent experience of a doctoral viva (as a student), and a Student's Union officer with responsibility for graduate welfare matters.

The group held four meetings over a six month period, but transacted much of its business by email as a virtual discussion group. Resources available to it included results from recent academic research on the doctoral viva, anonymised summaries of recent institutional experience with the examination of doctoral students, feedback from a focus group of research students based at the university, and inputs and perspectives from the individual members of the group.

The group's agenda was informed by known weaknesses in current institutional procedures for the examination of doctoral students, which are consistent with procedures in many UK universities that have a tradition of postgraduate research. These weaknesses include –

1. Lack of transparency of how a viva should work, and thus what role each participant should expect to play within it
2. Lack of a record of the viva proceedings themselves, which would be extremely useful if things go wrong, should there be a subsequent appeal by the student, if there is a challenge to the outcome or if questions are subsequently raised about procedural matters
3. Uneven power relations between the examiners and the student
4. Diversity of practice within and between faculties (for example, on the question of whether or not the student's supervisor should have a right to attend the viva)
5. Lack of training and induction for examiners, and lack of training for the student

#### *Consultation and reactions*

It was recognised from the outset that institutional ownership of the proposed framework would be critical to successful and effective implementation and adoption, so an early draft of the proposals was circulated to academic colleagues in faculties, for consultation. Wide-ranging feedback was received, which greatly assisted the Working Party in identifying major areas of contention, ambiguity or potential practical difficulty, and areas where the rationale underlying proposals needed to be spelled out more fully. Feedback on the proposed framework was also sought from colleagues with responsibility for equal opportunity issues, disability-related matters and institutional regulations. The draft framework was subsequently revised in the light of feedback received. The revised framework is given in full in Appendix 1.

Perhaps not surprisingly, views received in the feedback were polarised, although the total amount of feedback received was relatively small. It is difficult to know whether this silent majority are content with, or at least prepared to accept, the proposed framework. Quotations included below are from staff speaking in their own voices.

Some academic colleagues openly welcomed the proposed new framework. Typical comments were - "I've always felt we needed something like this and am glad that we'll finally have a document to which we can all refer, especially new staff" and "we welcome the move to make the viva process more transparent, and to protect students in this process". A colleague with particular responsibility for equal opportunities commented that "the most important point to make about the proposed framework is its

very existence. The issue of transparency and clarity for students about university processes has been the one which has arisen most frequently in discussions over equal opportunities in learning and teaching. The framework is very helpful in this regard.”

Much of the feedback was negative, and expressed forcefully. The sometimes intemperate language used reveals deep-rooted concerns voiced by academics who felt that their personal integrity was being questioned or doubted, or that their personal experiences were being discounted or overlooked. For example, colleagues responded that “I find myself feeling both incredulous and dismayed. Thoughts of sledgehammers and nuts come to mind.”, “this appears to be another case of codification gone mad”, and “I don’t see vivas nearly as confrontational, and as potentially litigious, as this document implies.” One member of the Working Party, with experience as both an internal and external examiner, commented on seeing the feedback that “most of what I’ve seen simply confirms why reform is necessary! Most colleagues (who have never had to deal with the consequences) seem to have no idea at all of the problems/dangers of the present, idiosyncratic approach.” Another Working Party member commented in a rather understated way that “these clauses have ruffled a few feathers”.

#### *Issues of concern*

Seven issues emerged during the consultation process as matters of concern amongst academic colleagues – not being convinced of the need for change, extra workload implications, changing the nature of the viva experience, the need for an independent chair (items 3c and 5b), the need for an audio-record (item 6), the role and responsibilities of the supervisor (items 3e and 5a), and whether or not it is appropriate for the examiners to give the student an indication of the likely outcome at the start of a viva (item 10e).

**The need for change:** a small but vocal minority of academic colleagues did not understand why change is needed. One insisted that “the vast majority of vivas proceed satisfactorily with the current system ... [so] ‘if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.’” Another, who has extensive experience as both internal and external examining of PhD theses, said “none of the PhD students I have supervised ... who submitted a thesis have failed, and none of the theses I have examined as an internal have failed. None of my students have queried or even commented on the process, and after several years of experience as postgraduate tutor in the department I know of only one student ... who complained about the way the viva was conducted ... [so] from my perspective, the current system seems to work and it’s not obvious why changes are needed”. Both had either been lucky in their past experience, had not spotted problems or weaknesses in the process, or had failed to appreciate how much the viva is a socially-constructed encounter heavily influenced by the implicit ‘received wisdom’ that the examiners bring to the process.

**Workload implications:** a common concern voiced was the likely increase in workload and cost in staff time of implementing the proposed framework. Some commented on the likely difficulty of arranging convenient day/time with more people involved, and on the staffing implications (particularly in small departments) of having an independent viva chair (item 5b).

**Changing the nature of the viva experience:** some academic staff had concerns, too, about the risk of adversely changing the nature of the viva experience, particularly via the use of an audio record (item 6). One felt particularly strongly that “having a viva would

be more like being interviewed by the police with a tape, video camera and solicitor present! ... defending a thesis in a room of four or more people, let alone a tape machine, would really change the feel of the event, and I am against that". Others expressed reservations about having more participants in the process, which might (at least in theory) compromise the student's ability to defend their work affectively.

**Need for an independent chair:** this proposal (clauses 3c and 5b) was questioned by a number of colleagues, who offered views such as "another baffling recommendation", "it is an examination and not a kind of court", and "I suspect that in the vast majority of cases the chair will have nothing to do". Part of this discourse reflected an inability or an unwillingness to appreciate the particular role that an independent chair could bring to the viva encounter, with views like "an independent chair only has a role if the examiners are not doing their job properly", and "my understanding as an internal is that one of my jobs is to ensure fair play and to 'protect' the student from hostile and unreasonable questioning. Why is an adjudicator necessary?" This latter perspective is a fairly familiar one, which wrongly equates being an internal examiner with being the equivalent of 'the prisoner's friend', rather than an equal member of the examining team who is expected to be impartial and objective throughout the process.

**Audio record of the viva proceedings:** there were mixed reactions to the proposal that an audio record should be made and kept of the viva event (section 6). One respondent felt that "recording a viva is to be encouraged", one conceded that "I think it is intrusive but I quite understand the need for it", and a third recognised that it would be "an unwelcome but effective way of allowing one to reconstruct events during the vivas if these were even called into question". As one senior academic reported, many in her department "simply found the idea objectionable and an affront to their competence and professionalism". Unflattering analogies were drawn with police-station interviews. Critical comments include "it seems to me it will actually add to the tension of the student (indeed the tension of the whole event) and is likely to be most intimidating precisely to the weaker students. Recording is not a neutral process: it changes the event." and "this proposal is way over the top and difficult to justify. This whole proposal sounds like bureaucracy gone mad and is totally unnecessary."

**Presence of supervisor at viva:** in its original draft the proposed framework favoured having the student's supervisor present during the viva as of right, as the default. Many strongly opposing views were offered in the feedback – there was, in fact, greater consensus over this than over any other part of the framework. This caused the Working Party to revise the proposal and maintain the status quo, which is to allow the supervisor to attend but only with the permission of the examiners (clauses 3e and 5a). Most respondents felt that the presence of the supervisor could compromise the ability of the student to defend the thesis to the best of their ability. One captured multiple reasons for excluding the supervisor from the viva, including "the student should be capable of an independent defence of their work; the presence of the supervisor might inhibit some lines of questioning or alternative interpretations being pursued; and poor supervision as a mitigating circumstance might not come to light." To expand on the latter point, someone else noted that "sometimes the supervisor himself [sic] might be at fault so having their presence might actually inhibit some of the discussions between the internal and external and between the examiners and the student." One experienced supervisor recalled attending a viva as a silent witness - "my research student (Taiwanese) told me afterwards that he found it even more stressful for me to be there because as my student

he did not want to let me down (Chinese respect for scholars, etc) and could not judge how I was responding to his answers”.

Nonetheless, there are advantages in the supervisor being present throughout the viva, including the ability to effectively debrief and advise the student after the viva (no matter what the outcome), and to offer more detailed guidance on corrections and revisions required by the examiners. Participation can also be a learning experience for the supervisor and thereby benefit subsequent students supervised by that person, as well as being an element in staff development.

**Indication of likely outcome of viva:** it is common practice in doctoral vivas for the examiners (particularly the external examiner) to offer the student advice about the likely outcome at the start of the viva, and the proposal in the framework that “no information about outcomes [should] be provided until the end of the examination (viva)” (clause 10e) was questioned by some academics. There are logical reasons for the common practice. For example, one colleague wrote that “as an external examiner I reserve the right to tell students at the outset of a viva that I think they have done good work (ie give a hint of the outcome). This is my normal practice in situations where the student has presented a good thesis and significantly relieves the stress on the student.” Another insisted “I don’t see any problem in giving students a hint of likely outcomes, especially if the examiners have in principal no objections to the award of the degree. This may relax the candidate and enhance the quality of the discussion.” However, another experienced examiner reported that “I have, elsewhere, sometimes indicated that the thesis is of PhD standard, as I could not conceive of how the viva might alter my view. However, I think [the reasons given] are all valid and I shall modify my practice!”

## Conclusions

The literature review, institutional and personal experience, and the feedback from colleagues invited to comment on the draft framework all underline the significant variations in practice in doctoral vivas within and between institutions. The viva has traditionally been viewed as a rite of passage into the academy, which is carried out behind closed doors by a small group of consenting adults. But the evidence clearly supports the contention that a viva is a socially-constructed engagement, with only vaguely defined rules of engagement, involving uneven power relationships, and quite often with multiple agendas at work, not all of them overt or even appropriate to the examination itself. Surely the time has come for institutions to take steps to redress this situation, both from a quality assurance point of view but also to optimise the quality of the doctoral student experience.

Against this background, the framework of best practice described here was developed. It has received unofficial endorsement from the National Postgraduate Committee, through its General Secretary James Groves, who wrote “I believe this document represents a major step forward for the university, in terms of an increased transparency of procedures for all parties concerned, a statement of minimum standards of assessment which the student can expect, and, should things go wrong, a set of clear criteria which the Postgraduate Review Panel can assess the examination against.” (James Groves, personal communication, 12 February 2003).

Whilst it was developed within the context of a particular institution, the framework of best practice is generic, and not confined to or constrained by the particular discipline-



mix, academic history or culture, institutional setting or management style of the particular institution. The principles embodied within it are designed to produce a more level playing field on which to run the doctoral viva, for the benefit of all participants in the process. They are principles to which all higher education institutions in the UK could and should aspire. Every institution should want to protect the integrity of the examination process, protect the interests of all participants in it, protect and enhance their academic reputation, and be assured about quality and robustness of their academic procedures.

## Note

Dr Chris Park is Director of the Graduate School at Lancaster University, Lancaster LA1 4YB. He would welcome comments on this paper (email: [c.park@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:c.park@lancaster.ac.uk)).

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful to my colleagues Dr Caroline Jackson, Professor Lynne Pearce, Dr Michael Seymour, Dr Stuart Turnbull and Ms Kath Twaddell for their valuable contributions to the Working Party that developed the framework of principles of best practice described in this paper.

## References

- Baldacchino, G (1994) 'Reflections on the status of a doctoral defence', *Journal of Graduate Education*, 1, 3, 71-76.
- Bassnett, S (2003) 'End doctoral dog's breakfast', *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, 1571 (10 January), 16
- Boulter, C and Denicolo, P (2002) 'Assessing the PhD: A constructive view of criteria', paper presented at the UK Council on Graduate Education Symposium on Research Degree Examining (29 April 2002). London: UKCGE
- Burnham, P (1994) 'Surviving the doctoral viva: unravelling the mystery of the PhD oral', *Journal of Graduate Education*, 1, 1, 30-34.
- Delamont, S, Atkinson, P and Parry, O (1998) *Supervising the PhD: A Guide to Success*, London: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.
- Grix, J. (2001) *Demystifying Postgraduate Research: From MA to PhD*, Birmingham: University of Birmingham Press.
- Hartley, J and Fox, C (2002) 'The viva experience: examining the examiners', *Higher Education Review* 35, 1, 24-30.
- Hartley, J and Jory, S (2000) 'Lifting the veil on the viva: the experiences of psychology PhD candidates in the viva', *Psychology Teaching Review*, 9, 2, 76-90.
- Jackson, C and Tinkler, P (2000) 'The PhD examination: an exercise in community-building and gatekeeping?' pp. 38-50 in McNay, I (Ed) *Higher Education and its Communities*, Buckingham: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.
- Jackson, C and Tinkler, P (2001) 'Back to basics: A consideration of the purposes of the PhD viva', *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 26, 355-366.
- Merriam Webster (2003) *Merriam Webster OnLine Dictionary*, <http://www.m-w.com/cgi-bin/dictionary>.
- Morley, L, Leonard, D and David, M (2002) 'Variations in Vivas: quality and equality in British PhD assessments', *Studies in Higher Education*, 27, 3, 263-273.

- Park, C. (2003) Levelling the playing field: towards best practice in the doctoral viva. *Higher Education Review* 36 (1); 47-67
- Mullins, G and Kiley, M (2002) 'It's a PhD, not a Nobel Prize: how experienced examiners assess research theses', *Studies in Higher Education*, 26, 4, 369-386.
- Murray, R (2002) 'What the students want to know: Frequently asked questions and their implications for the viva', paper presented at the UK Council on Graduate Education Symposium on Research Degree Examining (29 April 2002). London: UKCGE
- Newberry, D (1995) 'A journey in research from research assistant to Doctor of Philosophy', *Journal of Graduate Education*, 2, 53-59.
- Phillips, E M and Pugh, D S (1987) *How to get a PhD*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Quality Assurance Agency (2002) *Code of Practice for the Assurance of Academic Quality and Standards in Higher Education: Postgraduate Research Programmes*, available online at [http://www.qaa.ac.uk/public/cop/cop/guid7\\_12.htm#assess](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/public/cop/cop/guid7_12.htm#assess)
- Shaw, M (2002) 'Benchmarking standards in research degrees', paper presented at the UK Council on Graduate Education Symposium on Research Degree Examining (29 April 2002). London: UKCGE
- Thorne, L E and Francis, J C (2001) 'PhD and Professional Doctorate experience: the problematics of the National Framework', *Higher Education Review*, 33, 3, 13-29.
- Tinkler, P and Jackson, C (2000) 'Examining the Doctorate: institutional policy and the PhD examination process in Britain', *Studies in Higher Education*, 25, 2, 167-180.
- Tinkler, P and Jackson, C (2002) 'In the dark? Preparing for the PhD viva', *Quality Assurance in Education*, 10, 2, 86-97.
- Trafford, V and Leshem, S (2002a) 'Starting at the end to undertake doctoral research: predictable questions as stepping stones', *Higher Education Review*, 35, 1, 31-49.
- Trafford, V and Lesham, S (2002b) 'Anatomy of a doctoral viva', *Journal of Graduate Education*, 3, 33-41.
- Wallace, S and Marsh, C (2001) 'Trial by ordeal or the chummy game? Six case studies in the conduct of the British PhD viva examination', *International Higher Education Review*, 34, 1, 35-59.

## **Appendix 1. The framework of best practice in the doctoral viva**

Tradition and practice in examining research degrees has often varied within and between faculties, and one objective of this framework is to bring together existing best practice into one cohesive package, designed to best protect the interests of all participants in the process. This framework should be adopted for any research degree examination for an award of this university (ie even when a viva is held away from the university).

### **1. Definition of viva**

A viva is an oral examination of a research degree thesis, and of the student who wrote it, which is normally conducted in person, at the university, by an internal and one or sometimes two external examiners.

### **2. Status of viva**

- a. The viva is a compulsory part of all research degree examinations (MPhil and doctoral degrees), however excellent or poor the thesis may be. The student must always have the right to defend his/her work to the examiners
- b. It is not possible (under current regulations) for a student to fail a research degree outright without undertaking a viva

### **3. Role of each participant in the viva**

- a. The External Examiner(s): the role of the External Examiner(s) is to assess the quality of the submission and help to uphold the quality of the degree in the UK
- b. The Internal Examiner(s): the role of the Internal Examiner(s) is to assess the quality of the submission and help to uphold the quality of the degree in the university. The role is similar to that of the External Examiner(s), and it has equal status and standing. It is not the role of the Internal to protect the student, to be the student's "friend", and/or to defend the supervisor, department or institution against criticism from the External(s), nor to act as chair in the viva. The Internal Examiner must be and be seen to be independent; and thus wherever practicable he/she should not have played any significant role in either the supervision of the student or the assessment of the student during his/her studies (eg annual progress review, upgrade panel)
- c. The Independent Chair: the role of the chair is to be an observer and manager of the meeting, and to ensure that procedures are followed properly. The chair does not need to be a subject specialist, does not need to have read the thesis, and is not directly involved in examining it.
- d. The Student: the role of the student is to discuss, explain and defend their work as represented in the thesis being examined, to be open to critical appraisal by the examiners, and to be prepared and willing to engage in a dialogue with the examiners about the substance and field of enquiry of the thesis
- e. The Supervisor(s): whether the supervisor is present throughout the viva (with the approval of the examiners), or simply attends at the end when the examiners report to the student their decision about the outcome of the examination, his/her role is to be a silent witness to the proceedings, and through that to be able to provide feedback to and advise the student after the viva is completed.

### **4. Student preparation for the viva**

- a. All students should be allowed and encouraged to acquire relevant experience in “defending their thesis”, in advance of the viva, including –
  - i. By robust interrogation of their work and progress during each annual appraisal and at the Upgrade Panel
  - ii. By being given special training for the viva (including a mock viva); this is probably best done by their faculty (eg through faculty training programmes)
- b. It would be inappropriate for the Viva Chair and/or Internal Examiner(s) to be directly involved in the student’s training for the viva
- c. The Postgraduate Studies Office should send a “Guide to the Viva” to each student when they submit a thesis for examination

## **5. Membership**

### **a. Supervisor**

- i. The student’s supervisor(s) may attend the viva at the discretion of the examiners
- ii. If not present throughout the viva, the supervisor(s) should normally be invited to attend the final stage of the viva when the examiners report their decision to the student, unless the student advises the Viva Chair, before the Viva, that they would prefer the supervisor not to attend
- iii. If present, the supervisor(s) must remain silent and impassive, unless specifically invited to comment on specific points, by the examiners, through the chair

### **b. Independent chair**

- i. There should always be an independent chair present throughout the viva. The chair should normally be a member of academic staff, who is neither an examiner nor a supervisor of the student being examined.
- ii. The Viva Chair should be selected by the Head of Department or his/her nominee
- iii. The Viva Chair must be familiar with this Framework of Best Practice, and with the Postgraduate Regulations of the university
- iv. The Viva Chair would normally be expected to have experience of conducting at least 3 research degree vivas as an examiner
- v. No member of staff should normally be expected to chair more than one viva per term (3 per year), to share the workload

## **6. Record keeping**

- a. A reliable record of the viva proceedings must be kept (additional to any notes made during the viva by the Viva Chair, the examiners, and/or the student), because this would –
  - i. protect the interests of all participants in the viva
  - ii. help in resolving differences of interpretation and recall
  - iii. provide useful evidence for subsequent review/appeal hearings
- b. Each viva should normally be recorded on audio tape or minidisk
- c. The Viva Chair should ensure that the audio record is made and lodged with the Postgraduate Studies Office.
- d. Nothing will be done with the audio record (no one will listen to it) unless it has to be used as evidence in the event of an appeal/complaint

- e. The audio record should normally be kept in the Postgraduate Studies Office for no longer than twelve months after the viva, unless the student made an appeal/complaint against the decision of the examiners (in which case the audio record should be kept until the end of the appeal/complaint process).

#### **7. Timing and arrangements**

- a. The maximum period of time between submission of thesis by student and the date of viva should normally be 4 months
- b. The Postgraduate Director in the student's department is responsible for making arrangements for the viva (including day, time, location and name of the Viva Chair), and for communicating this information to the examiners, the student, the Chair and the supervisor
- c. Appropriate arrangements should be made available for disabled students, on the same basis as for other forms of university assessments, in order to provide an equal opportunity to defend the thesis.
- d. The examiners, chair and student should be given as much notice as possible about the day/time of the viva, and this should normally be not less than two weeks
- e. The Viva Chair is responsible for making sure that seating arrangements in the viva room are appropriate for dialogue
- f. The Internal Examiner should collate written guidance from all examiners on required changes to the thesis, within a reasonable period of time after the viva. For 'minor corrections' (3 months) this should normally be no longer than two weeks. For 'major revisions' (6 or 12 months) this should normally be no longer than one month.
- g. The Internal Examiner should forward the written guidance from the examiners to the student, and send a copy to the Postgraduate Studies Office, without delay.
- h. The period of corrections (3 months) or revisions (6 or 12 months) should commence on the day written guidance from examiners on required changes is sent to the student (and Postgraduate Studies Office) by the Internal Examiner

#### **8. Pre-Viva Reports**

- a. Examiners are required to provide reports on the thesis before the viva, to establish that they have read the thesis before the viva, and to record their initial judgements formed on the basis of reading the thesis
- b. Examiners are required to write separate Pre-Viva Reports that are independent of each other, and send them to the Postgraduate Studies Office, before they exchange views and compare notes with each other
- c. Examiners should be given the opportunity (but not be required) in their Pre-Viva Reports to give a provisional decision about the outcome of the examination
- d. The Pre-Viva Reports should only be seen before the viva by administrative staff who have no vested interest in the outcome of the examination
- e. Under the Data Protection legislation, the student has no right of access to the Pre-Viva Report before the examination process is complete

#### **9. What is being examined in the viva?**

- a. The viva is an opportunity for the student to 'defend' the thesis

- b. It is not a purpose of the viva to test the student's command of spoken English in what is often a stressful situation. This is particularly important for students whose first language is not English, and for some disabled students.
- c. The viva should normally include the assessment of the student's ability to -
  - i. locate his/her research in the broader context
  - ii. display detailed knowledge of the thesis
  - iii. authenticate the work (ie to prove that it is the student's own work)
- d. Criterion i should be explicitly commented on in the Pre-Viva Reports
- e. Criteria i to iii should be explicitly evaluated during the viva
- f. It is appropriate in the viva to ask questions about the originality of the thesis, and about the contribution the thesis makes to knowledge
- g. The student should also be able to defend the methodology and conclusions of the thesis, and display awareness of the limitations of the thesis, in the viva
- h. For the viva to be regarded as successful, the student should satisfy the examiners that s/he is worthy of the research degree, which will always be ultimately a matter of academic judgement by the examiners

#### **10. Conduct of the viva**

- a. Existing university regulations cover procedures for dealing with disagreements between examiners
- b. Examiners should not normally be able to fail or refer a thesis on grounds that are not considered with the student in the viva. The decision should be based on what is discussed in the viva (otherwise the viva would serve no role in the examination process).
- c. The audio record would be helpful in reconstructing what was discussed in the viva, and how it was discussed, should it be claimed that the student was invited to discuss certain things but failed to do so or failed to understand their significance.
- d. The viva should give the student an opportunity to "defend" anything the examiners regard as problematic. It will normally be expected to touch upon the issues that the examiners regard as important in reaching their decision about the award of the degree in question.
- e. The student should be told by the Viva Chair, at the beginning of the viva, that no information about outcomes will be provided until the end of the examination (viva), and that no conclusions should be drawn from this. This is because to indicate or hint at outcomes could -
  - o partly negate the value of the viva in the assessment process
  - o compromise the ability of the examiners to change their mind during the course of the viva
  - o have a significant impact on how the student feels and responds to questioning during the viva.
- f. A typical viva should normally last for not less than one hour and not more than four hours, although it is recognised that in some disciplines (eg sciences) vivas typically last longer than in others.
- g. If the chair and examiners anticipate that a viva is likely to last more than about two hours, the chair should give an opportunity for a break after two hours, provided that to do so does not disadvantage the student.
- h. The chair shall have final decision on when the viva should finish, taking into account the views of the examiners, and the need to uphold fair play and to give the student an opportunity to defend his/her work.

#### **11. Student contribution to the viva**

- a. Examiners are expected to be open-minded in their probing of the student's work, and to approach the task in a spirit of academic integrity.
- b. The chair should ensure that the student is given the opportunity to present a brief verbal summary of their work (15 minutes max), towards the start of the viva, if they wish to do so
- c. The chair should ensure that the student is given an appropriate "right of reply" to points raised by the examiners, during and at the end of the viva
- d. The chair should ensure that questions during the viva are fair and appropriate, for maintaining fair play, and for ensuring that proper procedures are followed
- e. If the student feels during the course of the viva that the questions are not fair or appropriate, that they are being denied the "right of reply", or that proper procedures are not being followed, s/he should be able to call for a break, and talk privately with the chair
- f. If the chair grants such a "time-out" during the viva, the conversation between student and chair should not be overheard by the examiners, but it should be recorded on the audio tape

#### **12. Outcome of the viva**

- a. Towards the end of the viva, the student (and supervisor(s) if present) should be asked to leave the room while the examiners decide what outcome they think appropriate (within university regulations)
- b. The chair should remain present throughout
- c. When the examiners have reached their decision, the student (normally accompanied by the supervisor(s)) should then be invited into the room, to be told (normally by the External Examiner) what the examiners will be recommending to the university
- d. The outcome given at the end of the viva is a recommendation, subject to approval by the Senate

#### **13. Post-Viva Reports**

- a. All examiners are required to submit a written report after the viva, which includes their judgement of the quality of the thesis and the student's performance in the viva, and contains their recommendation about the award of the degree
  - i. Examiners can submit a joint report if they agree on the outcome, and if producing a joint report is practical under the circumstances
  - ii. Examiners must submit separate reports if they disagree on the outcome
- b. Under the Data Protection legislation, students have a right of access to their Post-Viva Report after Senate approval of the examiners' recommendation is confirmed and the examination (including any revisions) has been completed
- c. Any examiner may indicate that part (to be highlighted explicitly) or all of his/her report should be disclosed to the student before the examiners' recommendations are approved by the Senate, if the examiner believes this would help the student to make appropriate corrections/revisions
- d. The Internal Examiner is responsible for making sure that the student is made fully aware of the examiners' expectations in respect of which corrections/revisions are felt necessary (see 7f)

**14. Second Viva**

- a. Under existing university regulations, the examiners can require a student to attend a second viva as part of the examination of a resubmitted thesis, but not for ‘minor corrections’

**15. Student’s right of appeal**

- a. Under existing university regulations a student has no right of appeal about the academic judgement of the examiners.
- b. Under existing university regulations a student has no right of appeal against alleged procedural irregularities in relating to the viva, unless the examiners recommend the award of a degree lower than that for which the student is registered, in which eventuality the student’s case is automatically referred to the Postgraduate Review Panel
- c. All students of the university have the right to file a complaint under Statute 21

**16. Transparency**

These guidelines and criteria will be published - in printed form, on the university web site, and on request in other alternative formats (large print, braille and audio) - as a “Guide to the Viva”, which will also be –

- a. Included as an Appendix in the Postgraduate Handbook
- b. Given to each research degree student when submitting the thesis
- c. Given to the examiners on appointment, to the Viva Chair on designation, and to the supervisor on submission of the thesis