

Results of Examiner Survey

Inclusion of oral component into UWA PhD thesis examination process

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1. Email sent to Examiners of UWA Theses in 2016

Dear XXXX

Last year you acted as an examiner for a Higher Degree by Research thesis at the University of Western Australia.

UWA is currently exploring the possibility of adding an oral component (Viva Voce) to its examination process to bring it in line with much of the rest of the world.

One issue that has been raised by supervisors is the difficulty we might face in recruiting examiners to physically attend the oral in Perth.

Therefore we would like to get your feedback on the following questions:

If UWA had had an oral examination requirement, would you still have accepted the invitation to examine the thesis where:

a) You were required to be present for the oral on the Perth Campus, assuming that a convenient date could have been arranged and UWA would have covered your expenses;

or

b) You were required to take part in the oral through teleconferencing at a time that minimised inconvenience for both you and the candidate.

Your response, a simple yes or no to a) and b), would be greatly appreciated and will assist us in planning for future examinations.

If you have any further comments on your experience as a UWA thesis examiner we would also be pleased to have these.

Best wishes
Kate

Summary of survey responses

930 examiners contacted

652 responses

~70% response rate

a) attend in person

72% YES
23% NO
5% MAYBE

b) attend by teleconference

89% YES
9% NO
2% MAYBE

Respondents who answered NO to both: 16 (2.5%)

Responses by country

Country	Total	Q	Yes	No	Maybe
Australia	176	a) in person	176	45	9
		b) by teleconference	194	32	4
USA	117	a) in person	85	31	5
		b) by teleconference	112	5	2
UK	62	a) in person	46	14	2
		b) by teleconference	57	5	2
NZ	30	a) in person	23	4	3
		b) by teleconference	30	0	0
Canada	41	a) in person	25	11	5
		b) by teleconference	38	2	1
Europe	62	a) in person	42	16	4
		b) by teleconference	58	3	1
Other	32	a) in person	27	5	0
		b) by teleconference	24	7	1
Unknown	52	a) in person	32	16	4
		b) by teleconference	47	2	3

Supportive of oral component

My answer to both a) and b) would be yes, although my preference (in spite of logistical challenges and cost) would be option a). There is no substitute for being physically present in the room during a dissertation defense, and I believe this option actually would provide UWA an opportunity to advertise its strengths to academics globally. - *Examiner, USA*.

Yes [I would attend an oral examination in person] if I could combine with other research reasons to visit UWA, of which there'd be a good possibility. However I could imagine that mutually convenient scheduling would be difficult...This is an issue I am sympathetic to. When I was a postdoc at Swinburne University I always felt that PhD students in Australia missed out in a variety of ways by not experiencing the viva voce. I think it's great that UWA is exploring means by which this could be addressed. - *Examiner, UK*.

Perth is by far the longest flight time that I have encountered, but it's always been enjoyable after re-acclimation. [Teleconference] would seem to be the most economical both in terms of price and time.

I think the addition of a viva would be excellent. I worked at HKU between 2009 and 2014 and all PhD's have Viva's there. The way we managed the international examiners was to use Skype and sometimes the candidates were also Skyped in (because they had returned to their home country by the time all reports had come back in). Since leaving HKU I have served as an "internal" examiner for HKU vivas in my role as Honorary Professor there and this has always been done by Skype. - *Examiner, HK*.

It would certainly be very expensive to fly people to UWA (in my case, from Canada) for the examination - much more practical and economical would be to set up a teleconference. We frequently here dial in external examiners for the final examination, and this allows good interaction with the candidate. - *Examiner, Canada*.

I am glad that UWA is looking at having appropriate viva voce for all its PhD candidate. I think there is merit in both the cases. I am examiner for many institutions throughout the world. The option (b) is very commonly used in South Africa - they use SKYPE for teleconferencing and I have had numerous issues with the telephone link, whereas option (a) is the norm in UK and other places of Europe - although costly, but this is the fairest way of assessing the student and one can make a fair assessment of the candidate's work. - *Examiner, Australia*.

I've never been to Perth and would like to visit a couple of UWA colleagues while there (plus give a seminar if requested), but I probably couldn't justify the time on a round trip from NZ again if there were future requests. Definitely yes to the videoconference option. At the University of Auckland we leave it up to the examiner - they're encouraged to attend in person but via video is fine if they can't make it. Many or even most of our international students have left the country by the time the oral comes around, and often cannot be present in person themselves, so there

doesn't seem much point in flying the examiner in if they're going to be talking to a TV screen anyway.- *Examiner, NZ*

I believe this would be a great outcome for PhD examinations in Australia and would hope UWA might kick off what we should have in place anyway. Therefore, I would be more than happy to be part of a face to face in Perth or a teleconference oral defence. The former is preferable as you get to examine the body language as well, and the candidate can see your body language, leaving no ambiguities that can arise when talking down a telephone. Face to face meetings are always preferable, but I do understand the tyranny of distance and can see why teleconferencing could be a suitable option. I have been on panels in Germany and France (face to face) and they work well. I have also participated in defences where I have provided questions for the panel to ask. This is not as good as I didn't get to hear the responses. HOWEVER, I believe UWA are going down the right track here and support your move. - *Examiner, Australia.*

Critical of oral component

Travel time UK to Australia too great to facilitate a visit given my family commitments. –
Examiner, UK

In my experience the good supervision of students and the requirement to publish some work in peer reviewed journals prior to submitting a thesis has meant that award of degrees by thesis examination alone is sufficient...I do not regard an oral exam as a useful addition to a well-conducted examination by thesis presentation alone.If there are questions raised by examiners, the candidate can be asked to respond in writing. If there are interpretations/questions that cannot be responded to by the student and supervisor, can an examiner help by attending an oral exam where the examiner is confronted by both candidate and supervisor. - *Examiner, Australia.*