Preparing for the UWA Viva Voce

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Graduate Education Officer
Workshop objectives

1) Outline the rules, processes and assessment criteria for PhD examination with viva
2) Preparing academically for the viva
3) Preparing emotionally for the viva

Graduate Education Officers

The Graduate Education Officers provide a range of academic writing support to Higher Degree by Research students at UWA, including workshops, writing spaces and writing retreats.

Read more here: http://www.postgraduate.uwa.edu.au/students/resources
Find writing event dates here: http://www.postgraduate.uwa.edu.au/students/resources/events

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Acknowledgement of country

The University of Western Australia acknowledges that its campus is situated on Noongar land, and that Noongar people remain the spiritual and cultural custodians of their land, and continue to practise their values, languages, beliefs and knowledge.
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**PhD examination at UWA – thesis & viva**

What questions or concerns do you have about the UWA Viva Voce?

Viva voce is Latin for ‘live voice’ and this is the name that UWA have chosen for the oral component of PhD examination.

While there is a long tradition of the PhD oral defence in many countries, in Australia the viva has only recently been introduced.

UWA had its first viva in 2017.

**What is the function of the viva?**

- Test understanding. Confirm the student is able to defend their choice of study, their choice of research methods, their findings and their conclusions.
- Clarify any examiner concerns. The examiners can ask any questions they may have.
- Quality control. Confirm the thesis is the work of the student.

**Viva process**

Internationally, the viva has many different forms and names. They can be purely ceremonial or form part of the examination of the student, they can be public and include family and friends in the audience or closed to everyone other than the student and examiners, supervisors can be included in the examination panel or as support for the student or not, they can be far-reaching in scope or largely restricted to examination of the research described in the thesis, and they can last for hours or only a short time.

As there is considerable variation in the oral component of doctoral examination internationally, it is important to understand the rules and processes regarding the UWA viva voce.

**UWA examination rules & guidelines**

- [Doctor of Philosophy Rules](#)
- [Graduate Research Training Policy](#)
- [Examination of Higher Degree by Research Candidates Policy](#)
- [Examination of Higher Degree by Research Candidates Including Viva Voce](#)
At UWA, the viva is private, independent of your supervisors, short (1-2h), and largely restricted to examination of the research described in the thesis.

The viva is compulsory for PhD students who first enrolled in their course after JAN 2018. The viva is voluntary for PhD students who first enrolled in their course prior to JAN 2018.

1. Two examiners are nominated to examine the written thesis.
2. The examiners mark the thesis and their reports are sent to the GRS Board.
3. GRS Board considers the reports and approves progress to the viva (if reports favourable).
4. Supervisors are provided with a copy of the examiner’s reports for discussion with student in preparation for their viva.
5. All vivas are currently conducted by video conference, usually by Zoom, approximately 12-14 weeks after submission. The viva is booked by the GRS Examinations Team. The viva includes two examiners, the student, and a Chair. The Chair is appointed to ensure that the viva is conducted rigorously, fairly and respectfully and to provide guidance about policy and process where relevant.
6. The Chair introduces the examiners to the candidate, explains their roles, the purpose of the viva, and the possible outcomes. The candidate is given the opportunity to ask any questions relating to the procedures and conduct of the viva.
7. The Chair invites the candidate to provide a short (~10 minute) overview of the thesis. Powerpoint slides are not permitted but the student can refer to their notes and a marked up copy of their thesis.
8. After the viva, the student is sent to a breakout room while the examiners confer about classification of the thesis.
   - If the examiners choose to classify the thesis as pass without corrections, pass with minor typographical corrections or pass with revisions as detailed in the viva report, the student is told they have passed their examination.
   - If the examiners choose to classify the thesis as resubmission, award Master, or fail, the outcome will be considered by the GRS Board before classification.
Preparing academically for your viva

   a. After thesis submission, relax for a few weeks then re-read your thesis.
   b. Mark important sections in your thesis.
   c. Make a note of any mistakes or typos for correction in the final version of the thesis.
   d. Do not over-prepare as you risk pre-viva burnout or may become overly anxious.
   e. Do not under-prepare.

2. Prepare your responses.
   a. Draft your introduction.
   b. Consider how to respond to questions and issues raised by the examiners in their report. Work with your supervisors on your responses to your examiner reports.
   c. Look through the latest literature in your field to understand if there have been any new major developments since thesis submission.
   d. Look through your examiners’ most recent journal articles. Consider their academic interests and perspectives and how your work intersects with theirs. What questions will you ask your examiners?

3. Practice your viva.
   a. Stage a ‘mock’ viva voce with your supervisors.
   b. Practice with other academics, students, friends and family as they will give you fresh perspectives on your presentation.
   c. Practice using Zoom in the room where you will be undertaking your viva.

Thesis Defence Checklist https://www.vitae.ac.uk/doing-research/doing-a-doctorate/completing-your-doctorate/your-viva/viva-checklist
Summarise the background to your research.

Rationalise your choice of topic. Why is this topic important?

Describe your key findings.

Discuss the originality of your research. What is your contribution to knowledge? What is the significance of your work? How is your work different to anything else in your research area?

Describe where your research may go in the future. What is the next step?
Common practice questions

General
Why did you decide on this particular research question?
What have you found the most interesting aspect of your research?
How did your thinking about this topic develop as you went through this research process?
Were there any surprises along the way?
How did doing this research change you as a researcher?
In five years, which part of your work do you think will be most cited and why?

Research
You refer to X as a key influence on your research. Can you summarise the particular relevance of their work?
What developments have there been in this field since you began your doctorate? How have these changed the research context in which you are working?
You make only passing reference to the field of X. Why do you think that field is less relevant than the others you have given more space to?
You do not say much about the theory X in your thesis. Can you explain why you have not focused more on this theory?

Methods
How well did the study design work in practise?
Did you have any problems with the data collection process?
You used an existing research method and developed it further. Can you tell us why this further development was needed?
What were the main ethical issues of conducting this research?
How did you establish the limits around the scope of your data collection?

Analysis and findings
Can you talk us through your methods of analysis and explain the decisions made along the way?
Did you encounter any problems with applying this method of analysis?
Do you think the data you collected were the most appropriate to answer your research question or are there any other data you would have liked to have collected?
Can you describe your main findings in a few sentences?

Discussion
If you were starting your research again now, would you make any changes?
You interpret these findings as X. Do you think there could be an argument for interpreting them as Y instead?
You said X in your thesis. Can you expand on X?
In what way do you consider your thesis to be original?
What are the empirical, practical, and theoretical implications of your findings?
How would you hope your research could be followed up and taken further?
Preparing for difficult questions

What are your most dreaded questions? Address them in your practice sessions so you are prepared if they arise in your viva.

Bring your thesis with you. You can refer to particular sections in your marked-up thesis and/or any notes you have prepared for the viva.

You can acknowledge the weaknesses of your study

“It will not look good if you appear not to know the difference between the strong and weak parts of your research or thesis” - Murray. 2006. How to write a thesis. p262.

If examiners raise weaknesses in your thesis, you can use a ‘define-defend’ strategy to address these real or perceived weaknesses:

*What I did was* ............................................... *I did this because* .................................................................

*I did not do* ......................................................... *because* ..................................................

Take your time when responding to difficult questions

Take time when responding to questions – you do not need to answer immediately. Pause to consider your thoughts. What you feel is an awkward silence may not be awkward to your examiners. You can buy yourself some time using phrases such as:

*That’s a good question.*

*That’s an interesting question. I’ll need to think about that for a moment.*

Read more about uncomfortable pauses in conversation here: https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20170718-the-subtle-power-of-uncomfortable-silences
Avoid the temptation to repeat your point or over-elaborate your answer
Answer clearly and stop – avoid repeating yourself or excessively elaborating a point. You can say:

* Sorry, I’m repeating myself.

* Does that answer the question?

* Would you like me to elaborate?

Ask for clarification if you do not understand the question
It is likely you may not understand a question asked by an examiner. The question may not be entirely clear or lost in the discourse. In this case you should ask for clarification before responding. If an examiner asks a question and you are not sure whether the question is asking for a response based on your research or your opinion, you can also ask for clarification:

* Could you repeat your question, please? I am not sure exactly what you are asking me.

* Could you clarify your question please? Are you asking for my opinion or a response based on the results of my research?

You can admit you do not know the answer
“Some examiners see it as their job to probe your knowledge to its limit.” - Murray. 2006. How to write a thesis. p262.

You may be asked a question that you do not have an answer for. You could express your willingness to consider the question, drawing on your knowledge to make an educated guess. Or you may need to acknowledge that you do not know the answer. If the question is beyond the scope of your study, you may also wish to acknowledge this. You can say:

* I’m not sure, but as I observed …………… in my research, I think……………………

* I did not focus on that area in my study, but it is possible that ………………………

* If I were to speculate, I would say that ………………………………………………………

* I haven’t considered that question before, and I am not sure I have the answer. What do you think?

* That it is an interesting question and would make an excellent topic for a follow-up.
### Table 3: Typical Errors in Responding to Viva Questions

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<th>Possible Error</th>
<th>Suggested Response</th>
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<td>Lacking Clarification</td>
<td>If a question is unclear, it is advisable to ask for a clarification of what is meant.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Missing Knowledge</td>
<td>If a question is posed for which the candidate does not have an answer, it is advisable to be honest by saying “I don't know.”</td>
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<td>Becoming Defensive</td>
<td>If asked a question that seems to be a veiled attack, respond calmly rather than counter-attacking or becoming emotional.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making Excuses</td>
<td>If an error, flaw or serious problem is pointed out, listen, acknowledge the merits of the observation, and be appreciative of the assistance.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Blaming Others</td>
<td>It may be that the chair or the supervisor(s) have given poor advice. However the view is not the time to make it known.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overstating Contribution</td>
<td>Even if the contribution to the field is distinguished, let others indicate it, as modesty is appreciated.</td>
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Preparing emotionally for your viva

Which of the following images best describes your emotional response to your viva?


Remember you are the expert. You know your thesis inside out. You have likely practiced presenting your research at meetings, seminars and conferences. You know everything you need to know.

Be prepared and confident but not dogmatic or robotic.

“On the day a robust performance is required but be careful to avoid dogmatism. Examiners are impressed by thoughtful, reflective candidates who give consideration to constructive criticism and are able to modify their arguments accordingly” Burnham, 1994. Surviving the viva: unravelling the mystery of the PHD oral. J. Graduate Education. (1):30)

Practice but avoid memorising your answers. You cannot guarantee the exact way your examiner will ask a question and you will need to respond appropriately. Also, you do not want to appear as if you have rote learnt your responses.

If you become rattled during the viva, take time to breathe, think, take a drink of water, and/or refer to the thesis. You can ask for a short break to regroup your thoughts if you become distressed.
Prepare for different types of examiners

According to Fisher (https://www.imperial.ac.uk/media/imperial-college/medicine/sph/current-student-forms/Preparing-a-Viva.pdf) examiners fall broadly into 3 categories:

1. Friendly & Interested - will make you feel at ease.
2. Adversarial - will challenge your views in order to hear your argument.
3. Detailed – will inspect every word and phrase. “Please explain your comment on page X”

On the day of the viva

Arrive early and meditate beforehand. Reflect on your previous successful presentation experiences and/or repeat some affirmations. Tell yourself you are confident and passionate about your topic and findings.

Set up your materials and your video conferencing settings.

When the viva begins, sit up straight and smile into the camera. Greet each committee member.

Take some deep breaths and begin.
# Viva planner

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<th>Time Frame</th>
<th>Activities</th>
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| One month before | Re-read your thesis  
Correct typos and other minor errors  
Read recent literature  
Prepare a summary of your thesis, that includes strengths and highlights  
Think of possible questions and rehearse answers |
| Two weeks before | Read examiners written reports and prepare answers to any questions  
Use post-it-notes to mark relevant sections of your thesis  
Revise and practise the oral summary of your thesis  
Practice articulating the contribution of your thesis |
| One week before  | Prepare a ‘viva kit’ (copy of marked up thesis, paper and pens for note-taking, your own pre-prepared notes, water etc)  
Decide what to wear and get it ready  
Prepare your video conference environment and settings  
Visualise a calm and confident entry to the viva  
Relax, exercise, eat and sleep well |
| One day before   | Eat and sleep well  
Spend time with positive supportive people  
Focus on the strengths of your research  
Visualise yourself as calm and confident |
| On the day       | Eat breakfast  
Check you have your ‘viva kit’  
Be ready for the online meeting in good time |
| 30 minutes before| Relax and ground your body (check your posture, distribute your weight evenly, stamp your feet, relax your face)  
Think positive – your examiners have already passed your thesis |
| Begin            | Make eye contact with examiners and greet them as colleagues  
Connect your answers to specific pages  
Make sure your mention the highlights and originality of your research.  
Write down questions if necessary.  
Nod, smile, refer to your thesis and notes.  
Ask for clarification if you’re unsure of what’s been asked  
Ask for exact definitions of corrections or revisions |
| After            | Celebrate! |
| Not so long after... | **Completing Corrections**  
There tends to be a significant letdown for students at the conclusion of successful defending their dissertations. Often this emotional letdown includes not wanting to see the dissertation ever again (Rustadum and Newton, 2001, p. 195). |
|                  | Celebrate again! |
Self-reflection

How do you plan to prepare for your viva?
Online resources

Is it a PhD...or not a PhD. Unpacking the viva

https://ddubdrahcir.wordpress.com/2014/09/15/is-it-a-phd-or-not-a-phd-unpacking-the-viva/

How to survive a PhD viva: 17 top tips

https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/2015/jan/08/how-to-survive-a-phd-viva-17-top-tips

Defending your doctoral thesis: the PhD viva

https://www.vitae.ac.uk/doing-research/doing-a-doctorate/completing-your-doctorate/your-viva

PhD Viva Guide

https://www.nuigalway.ie/media/graduatestudies/files/phdvivaguide/phd_viva_guide.pdf

Insider’s Guide to Viva


https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0307507022000011507


https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02602938.2013.859230


Hugh Kearns The Imposter Syndrome


How to look your best on a video call

Online Resources: GRS & STUDYSmarter

GRS viva advice page for students

https://www.postgraduate.uwa.edu.au/students/oral-examination

Examination Guidelines & Recommendation Forms

https://www.postgraduate.uwa.edu.au/staff/examiners

Thesis advice pages: Style and format, Thesis as a series of papers, Editorial assistance, Turnitin, Submission, Examination, Revisions and Graduation

https://www.postgraduate.uwa.edu.au/students/thesis

STUDYSmarter online support, workshops and drop-in sessions

https://www.uwa.edu.au/students/study-success/studysmarter