

Good Practice Guidance on the Conduct of Oral Examinations (Vivas) for Postgraduate Research Degrees

1. Purpose of the viva examination

The purpose of the viva is to gather further evidence from the candidate about their suitability for the award, in particular:

- to ask the candidate to clarify issues relating to meeting criteria relating to specific parts of the thesis, to the thesis as a whole, and to the award;
- to ascertain that the thesis is the candidate's own work, that he or she has developed research skills at this level, and that he or she understands the
- relationship of the thesis to the wider field of knowledge;
- in cases where the thesis and/or the candidate clearly does not meet the criteria for the award, to try to determine the possible reasons. These may include the abilities of the candidate and/or other factors affecting the research such as the quality of research training, the availability of resources, disruptions to the research process, or personal circumstances

2. Before the viva examination

The Internal and External Examiners are required independently to assess the thesis and each prepares an individual independent report on the work. Prior to the commencement of the viva the examiners should arrange to exchange and discuss their individual independent reports and to agree the key issues to be raised with the candidate. It is also helpful to agree the order in which issues will be raised and who will lead on each issue.

An independent chairperson may be appointed to take responsibility for the viva proceedings, but in the absence of an independent chair the viva will be chaired by the internal examiner. The viva is a formal occasion, and the room should be laid out appropriately.

3. At the viva examination

Explaining the purpose and process

After welcoming the candidate and introducing the examiners, the chair should explain that the viva provides an opportunity for the candidate to defend their thesis in high-level debate with experts drawn from the relevant research community.

As many candidates will not have previously undertaken a viva, it can be helpful to explain the process to them. The chair should make it clear that the examiners have a duty to thoroughly explore both the work presented and the candidate's knowledge and understanding of both it and the wider field and that persistent questioning is a normal and necessary part of the process. The candidate should also be told that he or she may, if they wish, consult with their copy of the thesis throughout the viva.

If a supervisor is present at the viva he/she is there in a supportive capacity and will not ask any questions. However he/she may act as a note-taker which may be useful for the student after the viva.

Constructive questioning

Candidates can be extremely nervous, and it is important to try and settle them down at the start of the viva by saying something commendatory but non-committal, e.g. 'We found your thesis very interesting, we particularly enjoyed ...'.

It is helpful to begin with questions which the candidate should be able to answer without undue difficulty, e.g. 'Why did you decide to do this topic? What aspect of the work have you

most enjoyed?' Further questions should then be asked covering the key issues and in the order previously identified. In questioning the candidate, examiners should:

Ask questions in a constructive and positive way

Examiners should try to ask questions in ways that are constructive and positive rather than destructive and negative, e.g. 'why did you try to solve the problem using method X rather than method Y?' rather than 'Didn't you realize that you could have avoided these difficulties with method Y?'

Use an appropriate range of questioning techniques.

Questions may be general (e.g. 'how did you come to study this topic?'), open ('tell me about your methodology?') or closed ('why did you think that the confidence limits were unimportant in this case?').

General or open ones are useful in encouraging the candidate to reflect upon their work, while closed ones lead to specific answers. Examiners should try to tailor the type of question to the type of answer required and, if possible, aim for a mix of general and open questions (which are harder to answer but can reveal much more about the candidate) and closed ones (which may reveal less but are easier for the candidate to answer).

Recognize that candidates may need time to answer

Candidates may need some time to gather their thoughts together and produce a coherent answer. Examiners need to recognize this and encourage candidates to take time to think.

Commend a good answer

When candidates give a particularly incisive or interesting answer, it can be helpful to their morale to acknowledge this.

Give candidates a chance to recover from a poor answer

When candidates give a poor answer, this may be through misunderstanding or nervousness. Rephrasing a question and asking it again gives the able candidate the opportunity to recover the position or may confirm limitations in a weaker one.

4. *At the conclusion of the viva*

When the examiners are satisfied that sufficient, relevant evidence has been gathered, the candidate should be thanked for answering the questions and asked whether there are any concluding comments which they wish to make. The chair should explain again that the examiners will now consult about the outcome, and make clear how the recommendation will be communicated to candidate. While this may be done informally after the viva, candidates should be informed that formal notification of the result will be given by the Faculty Student Office.

After conducting the viva, examiners have to decide upon a recommendation, write a joint report within one working week on the examination, and decide what information should be given to the candidate (including clear guidance if there is a requirement to amend or re-submit the thesis).

5. *Poor practice in conducting the viva*

Some examples of poor practice by examiners (Partington et al 1993)

An inquisitor

This examiner behaves like a TV interviewer quizzing a politician during an election campaign, rapidly shooting out hostile questions, interrupting the answers and generally trying to score points. Such an approach may intimidate the candidate so that he or she is unable to respond, or anger them to the extent that the viva becomes an adversarial confrontation.

A proof reader

This examiner takes candidates line by line through their theses asking questions about errors of spelling, punctuation and grammar. If these are exceptionally poor, instead of

proof reading in the viva, examiners can make it a requirement that the thesis is re-typed or hand the candidate a list of corrections after the viva.

A committee person

The committee person takes the candidate through the thesis page by page questioning each matter as it arises rather than synthesising points into key issues relating to the trigger for the study, the methodology, the design, etc. However, it is also recognized that such very close scrutiny may be necessary for some disciplines.

A hobby horse rider

This examiner has strong feelings or prejudices about one area of the thesis and keeps returning to questions on this while neglecting other aspects of the research.

A kite flyer

The kite-flyer has identified a – usually fairly tenuous – link between the thesis and another subject and persists in exploring this to the detriment of the examination of the topic as defined by the candidate, i.e. effectively examines a thesis which the student did not write.

A reminiscer

This examiner continually regales the candidate with stories of their own research career to the detriment of the examination of the candidate's work.

Document Information	
Author	Research Student Administration Functional Network
Owner (committee)	AQSC
Approved Date	June 2007, August 2016 [Chair's Action]
Last Revision	August 2016
Type of Document	Guidance