



The Viva

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The Viva

Penny Tinkler and Carolyn Jackson

The viva, or oral examination, is a compulsory part of doctoral examinations in Britain (albeit with some exceptions where an alternative examination is arranged alongside the assessment of the thesis). The fact that many institutions stipulate that one cannot fail a doctorate outright without undertaking a viva or alternative examination is evidence that the viva is an important part of the assessment process. But what are vivas for and how can research students prepare for them? These are the key questions that we tackle in this chapter. The answers, however, are far from straightforward. To understand vivas we need to know what purposes they can serve and the ways they work; knowing these things is essential for effective viva preparation.

In this chapter we start by exploring the purposes of the viva, dividing these into examination, development and ritual. We then take a look at the key components of the viva, and the factors that shape them. The rest of the chapter considers viva preparation strategies that can be undertaken at various points of the doctoral process. Our discussion is underpinned and informed by the empirical research that we have undertaken over the last six years; this involved policy analysis, questionnaire surveys to academics and doctoral candidates, pre- and post-viva interviews with doctoral candidates and interviews with a variety of experts on PhD examining. This research has spanned a range of disciplines, and interested readers can find out more about it by consulting our other publications (Tinkler and Jackson, 2000 and 2002; Jackson and Tinkler, 2000 and 2001). In particular, we direct readers to our book *'The Doctoral Examination Process: A Handbook for Students, Examiners and Supervisors'* (2004) in which we explore all aspects of the examination process. We discuss in detail points presented in this chapter and offer a wider range of examples, exercises and tips on preparing for the viva using long-term, short-term and final-stage strategies.

THE PURPOSES OF A VIVA

Institutions vary in terms of the criteria candidates must meet in order to satisfy examiners in the viva. It is very important, therefore, that you check the criteria of the institution where your examination will take place. However, whilst this is an essential first stage, institutional guidance about the viva is usually very brief, and so you are unlikely to have all your questions about vivas answered by consulting these policy documents. In practice, the examiners are most important in determining the purposes of a viva, and for this reason we focus largely on their perspectives in this section.

According to the academics in our questionnaire survey, the viva serves a range of purposes. There is no consensus about the key purposes of a viva: no single purpose was mentioned by more than 36% of academics. Overall, the purposes divide into three categories: i) examination, ii) development of the candidate and her/his work, and iii) ritual. We now look briefly at each of these in turn.

i) Examination.

There are a variety of viva purposes that fall under the 'examination umbrella'. These purposes, along with brief illustrations of what they mean, are listed below.

Authentication - the viva should always be a site for authenticating the thesis; that is, ensuring that the candidate is the author of the thesis and has undertaken the work presented in it. This role is especially important when the candidate has been working as part of a team, which is common in the natural sciences.

Locating the research in the broader context – a senior lecturer from Music explained, this means: ‘To allow the examiners to question issues arising from the submission and for the candidate to support the thesis in a broader context than is normally possible within the submission (ie. to discuss and respond to questions and the relevant work of others in the same field)’. However, the ‘broader context’ is difficult to define, and can be conceptualised very differently by different people.

Check understanding - vivas are used to check that candidates understand what they have written. As Dan (Chemistry) recalled about his viva: ‘Well, pretty much it [the viva] was all to show that I understood, that I had a clear understanding of what my research was about, where it could potentially go, rather than just getting examined on things which I could have looked up in a library book.’ Checking understanding is, however, a two-way process. It is important to remember that the viva also serves as an opportunity for you to check that the examiners have understood your intended meanings.

Defend the thesis - the viva provides examiners with an opportunity to question, probe and explore the candidate’s thesis. The notion that students should ‘defend’ their thesis suggests that it will be ‘attacked’; this is not always the case and many examiners (although not all) try very hard to make the viva as non-confrontational as possible. As the following examples demonstrate, examiners often equate the ‘defence’ with being able to respond to criticism and justifying the decisions made in the course of the research.

To provide the student with an opportunity to defend his or her thesis; to respond to criticism; and to discuss what he or she sees as ‘problems’ with interested experts. (Senior Lecturer, Social Policy and Social Work)

To clarify problems arising in the text; to test the student’s ability to justify (where there was any doubt in the text) arguments. To vindicate/salvage the thesis if in doubt in the text. To defend the thesis presented in the text, in general and particular. (Lecturer, Religions and Theology)

Many candidates in our research found the opportunity to ‘defend’ and discuss their work extremely beneficial. Indeed, after investing so much time and effort in the thesis, some candidates were frustrated and disappointed if they were not required to defend their work. The examiners’ conduct and tone is, however, crucial to whether questions are experienced as acceptably demanding or unacceptably confrontational.

Site of final decision making in borderline cases – our research suggests that in the majority of cases (74% amongst our sample) a viva serves to confirm an examiner’s decision about the outcome of the examination process that was made (provisionally) on the basis of reading the thesis. However, in cases where the thesis is judged to be borderline - for example, it may sit on the borderline between being referred and being awarded a MPhil - the viva has a very important examination role. A Professor in Arts and Humanities summed this up: ‘in one case where the

thesis was referred a good performance helped convince the examiners that the candidate was indeed capable of achieving doctorate standard through [thesis] revisions’.

ii) **Development**

Vivas can serve two developmental roles: basic and advanced.

Basic development - in cases where the thesis is *not* judged to be at doctoral standard, but where the examiners feel that it could be raised to the required standard by extra work, the viva can have a very important role in working out and discussing how the thesis can be improved.

Advanced development - when examiners judge a thesis to meet PhD standards, advanced developmental roles often come to the fore. These include guidance on publications, future research and careers. A number of candidates in our research referred to the value of this advanced developmental discussion: I think it’s good ‘cause it can give you good ideas about future development and future work. (Silvo, Economics)

iii) **Ritual**

Doctoral examination, including the viva, is one of the most formal and explicit gatekeeping processes operating within academia. It can keep aspiring academics out of the academy, or it can welcome them in. While academics mentioned the celebratory or ‘reward’ aspects of the viva as a rite of passage, candidates occasionally experienced the viva as a more painful ritual.

An individual examiner’s views about purposes will shape the way that s/he approaches a viva. Whilst in *general*, examiners see vivas as serving a blend of examination, development and ritual purposes, the purposes that *predominate in any individual viva* will be determined by five main factors:

- 1) the examiners’ assessment of the thesis – whether it is judged to be strong, borderline, or weak/failed;
- 2) the examiners’ knowledge expectations - the depth and breadth of knowledge examiners expect candidates to demonstrate about their research topic and its context;
- 3) the examining style - the type of academic exchange examiners expect candidates to manage. For example, some examiners aim to promote relaxed discussion, others aim for fierce, fiery debate.
- 4) the examiners’ personal/political agendas including discriminatory beliefs, personal grudges, favouritism, self promotion and jealousy;
- 5) the interpersonal dynamics between the participants in the oral examination.

In combination, these five factors shape the *components* of the viva.

Viva components

Vivas have 3 main components: skills, content and conduct. To be successful in vivas candidates need to match their training and preparation to the different viva components, rather like the way in which a triathlete trains for the particular elements of a triathlon. If triathletes do not identify correctly and understand the different elements involved (running, swimming and cycling), they may train inappropriately and so find themselves unprepared for the specific demands on the day.

The same applies to the viva. We will introduce each of the viva components briefly before suggesting how you can use this information to plan your viva preparation.

The *'skills'* element is determined largely by the structural requirements of the viva and is probably the least variable element of it. By structural requirements, we mean that the viva is always an oral examination. As such, your verbal skills are explicitly or implicitly crucial to the examiners' assessments of you. Fundamentally, in a viva you must be able to understand the examiners' questions and points, and be able to communicate your answers clearly in spoken English. The *'skills'* component also requires you to: *'think on your feet'*; perform/communicate clearly whilst under pressure; explain and justify/defend your work, interpretations and ideas during the viva.

The *'content'* component of the viva is shaped by the examiners' assessment of the thesis and their knowledge expectations. The *'content'* component of the viva is likely to require you to: authenticate your thesis; locate your research in the broader context; clarify aspects of your thesis; develop ideas; justify/defend aspects of the thesis; reflect critically on your work.

'Conduct' refers to how the examiners behave in the viva and how the group - examiners, candidate and possibly other participants - interact. The conduct of the viva is potentially the most variable aspect; it is also the least regulated. There are three sets of factors that shape the conduct of the viva, these are examining styles; examiners' personal/political agendas; and interpersonal dynamics.

VIVA PREPARATION

Although many students assume that viva preparation is covered by rereading the thesis prior to the viva, this is misguided. Preparation for the different components of the viva is a long-term process and needs to be planned in the early stages of your research degree. A long-term preparation strategy will maximize your chances of: being successful in the viva; feeling positive about your performance and, as a result, more confident about your research and future prospects; impressing your examiners who, as a result, may be enthusiastic sponsors of your career.

The first step in viva preparation involves identification of your strengths and weaknesses in relation to each of the viva components, see Box 1. This information can then be used to plan a (long-term) strategy for improvement, ideally in consultation with your supervisor.

[Box 1 here]

Long-term preparation

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PhD training with presentations at conferences is the best way [to prepare for the viva], to talk to academics in your field as well as outside. (candidate, Biology)

Access to academic research cultures is a key way in which you can prepare for the different components of the viva. According to Deem and Brehony (2000: 158) academic research cultures include *'disciplinary and interdisciplinary ideas and values, particular kinds of expert knowledge and knowledge production, cultural practices and narratives (for instance, how research is done, and how peer review is exercised), departmental sociability, other internal and external intellectual networks and learned societies'*. Access to academic research cultures can enable you to acquire discipline-specific

proficiencies that may equip you to handle the skills, content and conduct requirements of the viva. In other words, academic research cultures facilitate the build-up of department and discipline 'know-how' that can be crucial for the viva and, for those who want one, an academic career after it. For example, through access to academic research cultures you can acquire discipline-appropriate ways of speaking, experience of engaging in different types of academic verbal exchanges, and confidence to present and defend your ideas with different groups of established academics.

A range of activities make up academic research cultures such as teaching, attending and presenting at conferences, upgradings and publishing. Each activity can contribute to viva preparation, but they do this in different ways. In order to assess the value of different activities for your long-term preparation strategy it is helpful to think of what they offer in terms of the skills, content and conduct components of the viva. In this section we will consider the value of attending and presenting at conferences as a form of viva preparation (for discussion of a range of other examples see Tinkler and Jackson, 2004).

Conference attendance and presentation

In retrospect, further experience of fielding questions following the oral delivery of a paper would have helped my viva performance. (Candidate, English and American Studies)

There are many benefits attached to presenting your work at, and attending, conferences – networking, publicity and so on. In this section we focus on how conferences may be useful long-term viva preparation in terms of skills, content, and finally, conduct. There are different benefits attached to attending *and* presenting at conferences than are attached to attending only. As such, the discussion below makes the distinction explicit.

Presenting at a conference is an excellent way to rehearse and develop the types of *skills* required for the viva. There are a number of different presentation formats at conferences. For example, verbal presentation followed by questions from the audience; poster presentations with questions from the audience; roundtable discussions. However, all of the different presentation formats require you to:

- explain and present ideas clearly;
- think on your feet – particularly when responding to questions;
- perform under pressure – presenting to an audience of peers always adds a certain amount of pressure;
- justify and defend your work and ideas verbally.

Other aspects of conference attendance can also be useful for the skills component of the viva. Simply by attending and taking part in the conference as a non-presenter you can:

- be exposed to a range of different presentation styles and consider which are the most effective and why. This reflection is helpful when preparing your own presentations;
- see how a range of people react and respond to questions;
- ask questions at other people's papers. This can be daunting initially; working out and asking clear questions takes practice;
- engage in discussions with people about your own and their work. Sometimes, you might need to provide a quick summary of key aspects of your work – clear, succinct responses can be difficult, so again, this sort of practice is very useful viva preparation;

- justify and defend your work in casual conversation – many of the best discussions at conferences take place in the bar or over coffee!

Presenting your work at a conference can also be useful preparation for the *content* component of the viva. It is interesting and useful to get feedback on work-in-progress and to be prompted to reflect critically on your work by more experienced colleagues. Presenting work and getting feedback on it can also help you to develop your ideas. In terms of preparation for the content component of the viva then, presenting work at conferences has many advantages. It does, however, also have limitations. The main limitation is that you will only be able to present, and hence be questioned on, a small part of your research at a conference, whereas in the viva the examiners will have access to the whole thesis. Because of this key difference and, of course, the different audiences, you cannot predict the content of the viva on the basis of questions that you are asked at conferences. It can be useful though, to make a note of the questions that you are asked in conferences, seminars and other presentations and to use some of these in your final-stage preparation.

Regardless of whether you present or just attend, being at a conference and listening to other people's papers can be very useful for getting to know the work in your field. It can take a long time for work presented at conferences to get published in journals or books, and so conference attendance is the best way of keeping up-to-date with work that is at the 'cutting-edge'. The value of this aspect of conference attendance should not be underestimated – it can be very important in the viva when demonstrating knowledge of your field and locating your work within the broader context.

Presenting a paper at a conference and fielding questions from the audience can be excellent preparation for the *conduct* component of the viva. Your audience is likely to contain academics (and non-academics) with a wide spectrum of questioning styles, and it is good to get used to these different styles – although it can be daunting. The questions asked at conferences sometimes reflect the questioner's personal/political agendas – these questions are sometimes way beyond the scope of your paper but are asked because they relate to the questioner's individual interest. Getting used to handling these sorts of questions is useful, because examiners can also have individual interests that extend beyond the scope of your thesis. There can also be interesting interpersonal dynamics amongst the audience – all good preparation for the viva! If attending only rather than presenting, you can still observe the different styles of academic conduct in the sessions that you attend, although it is not nearly the same as being on the receiving end of it.

Overall, presenting your work at conferences is excellent preparation for the viva, particularly the skills and conduct components. However, presenting at conferences can be daunting, and so below are some suggestions to help those who feel they need 'breaking in gently'.

- Start off by presenting your work in your department, first to other research students and then to staff. Sometimes, there are research student conferences attached to main conferences, these can be a good venue for first time presenters.
- Try asking questions at conferences even if you are not presenting a paper. Just getting used to speaking in conference sessions is an important first step.
- If you want to present work at a main conference, but don't want to do it alone, ask your supervisor or another student if you can present together. Presenting part of a paper is less daunting than presenting a whole one; there is then also someone else to share the questions with.

- First-time presenters may find poster presentations less threatening than oral deliveries. Usually, this format involves presenting your work on a poster and being available at a set time to answer questions about it.

Short-term preparation: 'Mock' vivas

Some academics use mock vivas as a means of preparing students for their oral examination. Mock vivas take a variety of forms depending on: who is being given the mock examination; what text is being examined; who the 'examiners' are; the audience; the timing of the mock relative to submission of the thesis and the actual viva (a range of types of mock viva, including public vivas, is discussed in Tinkler and Jackson, 2004). If you want a mock viva, ask yourself why? What do you want it to do? What do you need to practice? Re-do the exercise in Box 1 – what are you least confident about? For example, do you need experience of different styles of questioning? Do you want practice engaging with questions on a particular topic? Do you need general practice of 'thinking on your feet'? The format of your mock viva should be determined by what you most need to practice. Once you have worked out your objectives you can work out a package with your supervisor that will most readily meet them - use Table 1 to help you do this.

[Table 1 here]¹

While mocks can be useful they have many limitations. In this section we consider the advantages and limitations of mock vivas by reflecting on some of the main questions that students and supervisors ask about them. Answers to these questions are not straightforward. In our discussion we adopt a question and answer format. The answers highlight the positive features – the 'YES' features – as well as the important 'BUT' features. We urge you to heed both sets of responses.

Does participation in, or observation of, a mock viva help to demystify the oral examination?

YES - candidates usually approach their viva with a certain amount of trepidation. Mock vivas can be an important way for you to see, and sometimes experience, what is regarded as usual and/or professional examining practice in your department. A mock viva modeled on the format of an actual viva also provides you with information about the usual procedures and roles of participants.

BUT - in order for a mock viva to fulfil these purposes it must be organised in accordance with the policy on research degree examining in place at the institution where your viva will take place. Further, unless there is someone in the actual viva to monitor it, perhaps an independent chair, it cannot be assumed that the conduct of the actual viva will conform to institutional guidelines.

When candidates receive a mock viva that addresses their thesis (whole or part) does this prepare them to answer questions about their work in the actual oral examination?

¹ Acknowledgement

We are grateful to Open University Press, and in particular to Shona Mullen, for permission to reproduce Table 1 and Box 1.

YES - opportunities to talk about your thesis and to explain and justify your approach are valuable preparation for the viva. A mock viva can also alert you to different, and unexpected, perspectives on your work, particularly if the mock examiners are not your supervisors: 'The mock viva was . . . a good experience to discuss the work in detail with an "outsider", i.e., not my supervisor, who had a different take on the issues raised.' (Hartley and Fox, 2004: 733) If the supervisor acts the part of 'examiner' s/he may be able, if s/he is familiar with the approaches of the actual examiners, to ask questions that are similar to those that may be asked in the actual viva, but this cannot be taken for granted.

BUT – mock vivas are not a good substitute for long-term preparation. Further, and most importantly, you should not regard a mock viva that examines the whole, or part, of the thesis as a trial run for the content of the actual oral examination. The specific questions asked in mock vivas and actual vivas are frequently very different (see also Hartley and Fox, 2004; Wallace and Marsh, 2001). Vivas can also have diverse content depending on the examiners' views of the standard of the thesis being examined, and about what types of knowledge a candidate should possess. So, for example, a candidate whose thesis is judged to be borderline may receive a very different type of viva in terms of content to a candidate whose thesis is judged as strong. Further, a candidate who has submitted an excellent thesis may be examined very differently by two examiners depending on the ideas that they each have about what contextual knowledge the candidate should possess; this is, of course, linked to the examiners' different approaches and interests.

When candidates are given, or observe, a mock viva apparently modelled on the structure of the actual examination, does this provide them with insight into the way that examiners behave and give them practice at managing conduct?

YES - when you are the 'candidate' a mock viva can contribute to your experience of managing different kinds of academic exchange. This type of experience is always valuable in preparing for the viva. Similarly, observing a public performance of a mock viva does contribute to your knowledge of how academics engage in intellectual exchange. Also, where supervisors are familiar with the examining styles of the actual examiners, they may be able to conduct a mock viva that is similar in conduct to the 'real thing', but this cannot be taken for granted.

BUT - this aspect of mock vivas is only valuable if you regard it as *an example* of an academic exchange; it does not provide illustration of the way that your actual examiners will behave. A History student recalled how 'My supervisor's mock viva was rather intense and made me unnecessarily defensive'. Whereas he expected his actual viva to be 'a grilling', 'formal', 'exhaustive' and preoccupied with 'specifics', it was actually 'relaxed', and focused on themes. Viva conduct varies according to examiners' personal/political agendas and interpersonal dynamics. It also varies depending on the examiners' views about what candidates should be able to cope with (their examining style).

Does a mock viva, in which the candidate is examined, offer an opportunity to rehearse skills that are key to the viva performance?

Yes - irrespective of the content and conduct of a mock viva, experience of undergoing a mock viva can provide an important contribution to the development of skills required in the actual

viva – being able to think under pressure, managing demanding questions, debating a point, communicating clearly, asking for clarification and so on. As one respondent in Hartley and Fox’s study commented: ‘It was a good preparation as this was the first time that I had “spoken” the answers. This allowed me to listen to myself and to see the effect of my answer on someone else’ (personal communication). This type of mock viva is most useful if you receive feedback on your performance. Feedback can help you to see ways of communicating your ideas more clearly, think of ways of handling difficult questions or situations, and confront aspects of preparation that you have previously avoided.

BUT – one mock viva is no substitute for longer-term preparation. You can equip yourself best for the skills demands of the viva by regular practice of talking about, and debating aspects of, your work. Conference and seminar presentations, upgrading and conversion panels, as well as mock-viva-style exchanges, are all ways in which you can develop crucial skills and confidence. Mock vivas are the cherry on the icing on the cake.

Mock vivas can make an important contribution to viva preparation, although their limitations must be kept in mind and discussed with your supervisor. You should not think of your mock viva as a trial run for the real thing. A mock viva will not, indeed cannot, be the same as the actual viva in terms of content or conduct. Vivas are like interviews and driving tests – you can have a pretty good idea of what is likely to happen, but neither the content or conduct of the examination can be guaranteed in advance.

Final-stage preparation

Re-reading the thesis is a vital form of final-stage preparation for all doctoral candidates. But though re-reading is valuable it is *not* advisable to keep re-reading your thesis – once, possibly twice, should be sufficient. It is also *not* usually advisable to re-read the thesis a day or two before the viva. Re-reading should not be a last minute activity because: it can lead to overload; it does not allow you time to reflect on how to manage questions; it can lead to panic.

The main purpose of re-reading the thesis is to ‘know your thesis’. But what does this mean? What should you be able to do at the end of the final stage of academic preparation? We have identified seven objectives that you should work towards when re-reading your thesis (see Tinkler and Jackson, 2004, for re-reading exercises).

- Know what is written in the thesis.
- Know the layout of the thesis.
- Understand what is presented in the thesis.
- Justify and ‘defend’ the thesis.
- Identify, and be prepared to discuss, weak areas, gaps and mistakes.
- Identify the originality, contribution to knowledge and implications of the thesis.
- Reflect on what could be done differently if starting again.

You can (and should) take your thesis into the viva so you do not need to learn your thesis ‘off by heart’. But you do need to know what you have written, and be able to locate specific sections of your thesis quickly in the viva. ‘Knowing your thesis’ is not the same as knowing what the examiners will make of it because people read in different ways and for different purposes. Moreover, the content of the viva can vary considerably. Nevertheless, it is sensible to consider how your work relates to your examiners’ interests and relevant literature written by them. Ideally this literature should be cited in the thesis because, as Delamont et al. (1997: 145) point

out, ‘if the external is relevant enough to the thesis to examine it, then his or her work should probably be cited’.

Alongside getting to ‘know your thesis’, re-reading often involves predicting the questions that examiners will ask and preparing to respond to them. It is likely that examiners’ will address key topics in a viva: originality; contribution to knowledge; methods chosen; theoretical framework; results, conclusions, implications, weaknesses. However, it is *not* possible to: *predict the specific detail or angle* of questions, the *importance* the examiners’ attach to different questions, nor *how far the examiners will probe* on particular points. This unpredictability at the level of specific questions is because of several factors (mentioned earlier). Most importantly, the questions examiners will pose will depend on: what they think of your thesis and this, of course, cannot be assumed; their own intellectual preoccupations; and their views about the breadth and depth of knowledge a candidate for this particular research degree should possess. Additionally, questions can feel very different depending on how the viva is conducted. Answering a series of questions posed in a relaxed discussion is very different from answering the same set of questions fired off like a round of bullets.

Reflecting on the thesis from different perspectives, gaining practice at answering questions, rehearsing ways of answering demanding and/or unexpected questions are all excellent forms of viva preparation. It is also a good idea to ask yourself the questions you most fear an examiner asking you, and to work through responses to these. Second-guessing the specific interests of your examiners provides good practice at answering questions, but this strategy is not a reliable guide to the questions you will be asked in the viva. Whilst it is extremely useful to think about the questions examiners may ask, it is advisable *not* to allow your re-reading of the thesis to be constrained by this.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have considered the key purposes of the viva, the components of vivas and viva preparation. By breaking down the viva we have shown how you can identify what aspects of it you are likely to find most challenging, and how you can use this information to tailor your viva preparation. Overall, good preparation should mean that by the time you approach your viva you are experienced at engaging in various forms of academic exchange, flexible, and confident that in the exam you can ‘think on your feet’ and draw on your knowledge of your thesis and the broader field to address the examiners’ questions. Long-term preparation, in combination with tailored short-term and final-stage strategies, will give you the best chance of performing well in the viva. Such preparations are an investment both for your viva and your future career.

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

The most comprehensive guide to the doctoral examination process, including the viva, is by Penny Tinkler and Carolyn Jackson (2004) *The Doctoral Examination Process: A Handbook for Students, Examiners and Supervisors*, Maidenhead: Open University Press. Based on extensive research, and illustrated with accounts from PhD candidates, their supervisors and examiners, the book guides students through all stages of the examination process including: what the viva is for and how it works; selecting examiners; viva preparation; the viva; and the post-viva period.

Guidebooks written exclusively for supervisors and examiners also offer students interesting insights into research degree examining. See, Sara Delamont, Paul Atkinson. Odette Parry (1997) *Supervising the PhD: A guide to success*, Buckingham: Open University Press, also, Lynne Pearce (2005) *How To Examine A Thesis*, Maidenhead: Open University Press.

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SOURCES OF SUPPORT

Useful websites:

Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE), especially the Postgraduate Issues Network – www.srhe.ac.uk

UK Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE) – www.ukcge.ac.uk

UK Grad - is supported by the Research Councils and has regional 'hubs' that support a range of local postgraduate initiatives – www.grad.ac.uk

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Box 1

TASK – Star Ratings

Identify your strengths and weaknesses in terms of:

- thinking on your feet;
- performing and communicating clearly whilst under pressure;
- explaining, justifying and defending your PhD work with different audiences;
- knowing the ‘broader context’ of your thesis;
- coping with different styles of academic exchange;
- dealing with complex interpersonal dynamics.

Try using the following scale:

- 4 – I’m very strong on this
- 3 – I’m quite strong on this
- 2 – I’m not strong on this
- 1 – I’m very weak on this

For all areas where you score below 4, plan a strategy for improvement, ideally, in consultation with your supervisor.

You should revisit this activity at different stages of your PhD - at the beginning, middle, and towards the end.

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Table 1 - The relationship between specific objectives and the organisation of a mock viva

Objectives of a mock viva with student as 'candidate'	Organisation of mock viva
Refine aspects of the thesis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Schedule – before submission. ▪ Text – whole, or key parts of, thesis. ▪ 'Examiners' – academic staff other than supervisor(s); peer group.
Foster skills useful in the viva – <i>viva basic skills</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Schedule – before or after submission. ▪ Text – whole, or part of, thesis; published piece not written by 'candidate'. ▪ 'Examiners' – ideally other academic staff, although members of the peer group can also be very effective. Supervisor(s) can be very helpful but they may be too familiar and/or 'safe' so that the 'candidate' does not gain experience of working under stress.
Provide experience of thinking deeply about, focussing upon and answering different types of questions about the thesis – <i>viva content</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Schedule – before or after submission. ▪ Text – ideally whole of thesis, although using part(s) of the thesis is still very useful. ▪ 'Examiners' – ideally academic staff other than supervisor(s); members of peer group can also be very effective; supervisor(s) may be too predictable, and/or reinforce a particular approach to the candidate's work.
Provide experience of managing different types of behaviour - <i>viva conduct</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Schedule – before or after submission. ▪ Text – thesis or other published piece. However, this objective is most likely to be achieved if the 'candidate' is examined on their thesis, or aspects of it, because the exam is experienced as far more personal (this is, of course, an important feature of the actual viva which encourages some candidates to be defensive – see Chapter 11). ▪ 'Examiners' – some supervisors can be very adept at playing a different character in a mock viva, but not all supervisors are born thespians. To foster a student's skills at managing viva conduct it is best to expose them to the different styles of questioning and behaviour of other academic staff and peer group members.

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