

## Preparing for the viva

### Part 1 – What's it for?

#### How will my thesis be examined?

The final hurdle for all doctoral students in the UK is the viva voce - Latin for 'live voice' and commonly known as the viva. It is the oral defence by a candidate of their thesis where the candidate faces examiners, at least one of whom is external to the institution.

If you are studying for a Masters research degree, you will find that practice varies between institutions. In some cases only the written thesis is examined and you will not have a viva. In others the viva is compulsory.

#### What is being examined in the viva?

The viva assesses your ability:

- to place your research in the broader context
- to understand the strengths and limitations of your thesis
- to identify its contribution to knowledge
- to show detailed knowledge of the thesis
- to prove that it is your own work.

Examiners will expect you to defend your methodology and findings of the thesis, as well as to be aware of their limitations.

#### What is not being examined in the viva

If you feel that the viva will present obstacles to you because, for example, you work with a BSL/English interpreter, you have short term memory difficulties, you are blind and use assistive software, you work through a lip speaker, you have Asperger's syndrome and have social communication difficulties, then it is helpful to look at what is **not** assessed in the viva. The viva does not assess:

- the power of your memory to recall accurately all details of your thesis;
- your fluency – although clearly it is essential to speak about your work with interest, understanding of subject language and knowledge;
- your ability to endure a lengthy ordeal;
- your capacity for reading non-verbal signals and esoteric humour;
- your lack of fear.

#### Planning for your viva

There are a lot of guidelines and advice on preparing for the viva. You are signposted to some of these below. It would be to your advantage to read widely and follow the guidance offered in the literature.

This section of the Premia materials will assume that you are going to do that reading. Instead of giving detailed information and advice relevant to all students, it will concentrate on the impact that the viva may have on you as a disabled candidate; the reasonable adjustments which you can expect if you would be significantly disadvantaged in the viva; what form those reasonable adjustments might take.

## Further information

### On-line

Sheffield University's School of Nursing and Midwifery - [guidance on preparation for the viva](#)

University of Wales in Cardiff's Research Student Handbook has a section on [viva voce examinations](#) – purpose, examiners, preparing, the process and the possible outcomes.

### Other literature

Cryer, P (2000) *The research student's guide to success* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Buckingham, Open University Press

Murray, R (2003) *How to survive your viva* (2003) Buckingham, Open University Press

Phillips, E and Pugh, D (2005) , *How to get a PhD* 4<sup>th</sup> edition Buckingham, Open University Press

Tinkler, P and Jackson, C (2004) *The Doctoral Examination Process: A handbook for students, examiners and supervisors*. Buckingham, Society for Research into Higher Education, Open University Press

Wisker, G *The Postgraduate Research Handbook* (2001) Palgrave Macmillan pp 299 – 305

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## Part 2 – Identifying disability-related issues and adjustments

It's a good idea to talk with your main supervisor about your viva and the issues which might arise for you. About 12 months before your viva is likely to be held, ask your supervisor for a discussion about it in which you can raise any concerns you have.

There are no absolutes when it comes to making reasonable adjustments. However, the examples below may give you some ideas for discussing with your supervisor and/or disability adviser. The [disability legislation](#) gives you an

entitlement to equity in education. That entitlement covers all aspects of your education – access to the curriculum, the facilities, the admissions process, supervision, teaching and learning and assessment. The viva is part of the assessment process.

Below you will find some scenarios. If any are relevant to you, think through what the issues would be in the viva and some possible adjustments which you think would create a level playing field. You will find some suggestions below.

### **1. You are deaf and lip read.**

The room will need arranging so that there is ease of communication. Additionally external examiners will need to be briefed about how to communicate effectively with someone who lip reads and the need for a break or breaks during the viva.

### **2. You are a blind candidate and the room, the panel of examiners and your thesis will need to be accessible to you.**

To facilitate the viva process, the panel conducting the viva will need advance notice of your requirements and guidelines on how to make adjustments. Discuss your requirements with your supervisor and/or disability adviser who will then be able to draw up guidelines for the panel.

You may need to have your CCTV/laptop with assistive software in the room so that you can locate and read relevant passages of your thesis.

### **3. You have dyslexia and have used a laptop with assistive software for reading during your PhD.**

It could be necessary for you to have access to this technology during the viva. Examiners need to know in advance so that they are aware of the implications – the viva may take longer; you may take time to locate your answers.

### **4. You have mental health difficulties and the viva is likely to create high levels of anxiety for you.**

You would like the examiners to know the circumstances. You will possibly need additional practice in managing your viva to increase your confidence and give you a realistic idea of what to expect.

### **5. You have Asperger's syndrome and would like the viva panel to understand the issues that will arise for you in a viva.**

You need questions to be asked in clear and plain English without use of imagery; you may not interpret humour as the speaker intends; you would like to

have some practice vivas so that you know what to expect.

Try to collect examples of questions phrased in different ways so that you can practise answering varied questions.

### **6. You have short term memory difficulties and feel that these difficulties may raise issues in the viva.**

You might have difficulty in remembering where the information relevant to examiners' questions is in your thesis. If possible, you would like to have questions in written form before the viva so that you can work with and annotate your thesis. You would also like panel members to ask you single-stranded questions rather than two or three part questions.

### **7. You are deaf and a BSL/English user.**

You may like the viva organiser to ensure that all examiners know how to work with an interpreter and will understand how to communicate effectively with you. There are also requirements for a suitable room and arrangement of furniture. Because of the length of the viva, you will probably require 2 interpreters. The interpreters would need to have some subject knowledge.

### **8. You have a speech impairment and are concerned that the examiners will not understand your answers.**

You may need an 'interpreter' who knows your speech patterns well to be present at the viva. That person could speak your answers if the examiners would have a problem comprehending you. You may also need breaks during the viva if speaking takes a great deal of your energy and concentration.

### **9. You have mobility impairment and have high levels of pain when you sit for long periods.**

You feel that your performance in the viva could be adversely affected if you are in pain. Occasional breaks and moving your position and/or standing for parts of the viva will aid your concentration and you would like to sort out ground rules with the panel in advance of the viva.

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## **Part 3 – Preparing for the viva**

If you are apprehensive about the viva – and it would be unusual if you did not approach it with some trepidation – turn the situation inside out.

- The viva presents a shining opportunity to talk about the subject(s) in which you hold the expertise.

- No-one is as much of an expert as you in this subject.
- The viva gives you the chance to exchange ideas and insights with specialists in your field who want to hear what you think and have discovered.
- The viva is the chance for those who have writing difficulties to talk. Seize the opportunity.
- At best it is a dialogue between equals.

To ensure that you maximise the opportunity, there are some things you can do. Just thinking about your thesis will not help you to perform better. You need to anticipate the likely questions and your answers, know your thesis very thoroughly and practise until you are more at ease with the process. If there are disability issues, it is a good idea to deal with those at a very early stage so that you are free to concentrate on the substance of the viva.

### Know your thesis

- Re-read your thesis as if it were a new document. Although it can be difficult, try to read it as if someone else has written it and you are examining it critically.
- Work out a good method of annotating your thesis. If you work better with visual symbols, colour-coding by theme may work well. Be consistent with the coding. You may need to use it in your viva to locate relevant passages.
- If you locate weaknesses in your thesis, prepare suitable responses to questions about them. Remember your thesis does not have to be perfect.
- [Summarise your thesis](#) in smaller blocks. Here is a method used and recommended by David Twigg of the University of Sussex.

#### Consider:

What have you done?

Why have you done it?

How did you do it?

What have you found?

What are the implications of these findings?

For each question, write down 3 - 5 bullet points.

Secondly look at your methodology – how far do you think you can generalise from your work? How valid? Write bullet points as above.

Next what is/are your major contribution(s) to your field? Write in bullet points.

- You are allowed to take into the room on the day your thesis with annotations, notes, key research results, data. Make sure you have prepared what will be most useful for you. Discuss it with your learning support tutor, if

you have one, and your supervisor. They may have useful ideas and examples of what has worked for other students.

- Don't take more paperwork than you can use into the viva. If you have reading difficulties, too much material may be confusing rather than helpful.

### Anticipate questions

Some questions you might expect are:

- What did you most enjoy about doing your research?
- How did your topic emerge? What made you interested in doing it? Why do you think it's important?
- What did you find out that surprised you?
- In retrospect, what would you have done/might you have done differently?
- What problems did you meet and how did you address them?
- What contribution to knowledge does your thesis make?
- Summarise the key results/findings of your thesis.
- Who are the main people who influenced your thinking? Why?
- What studies helped you to best understand the issues?
- How did you select the literature? Is there anything missing from your literature review? Why didn't you include to work of Y?
- What conflicts are there in the field?
- Why did you choose the methodology you used?
- Did you consider alternative methods? Which?
- What are the key strengths of your thesis?
- What are the limits of the thesis?
- How would you take your work forward if you were to do so?
- What did you learn during your PhD research?

### Further information

Mullins, G and Kiley, M (2002) *It's a PhD, not a Nobel Prize: how experienced examiners assess research degrees*. *Studies in Higher Education* 27 (4): 369 – 386

Trafford, V.N. (2003) *Questions in doctoral vivas: views from the inside*. *Quality Assurance in Education*, 11 (2): 114 – 122

Murray, R (2003) *How to Survive your Viva* Buckingham, Open University Press

Dr David Twigg's paper on [managing the viva](#).

### Practise for your viva

1. As a starting point, prepare answers to all the above questions. Then expand your answers to two minutes. See how you can build on initial answers, give examples, relate it to the literature and then back to your own research.

2. Practise giving your answers to your peers, family, friends. Encourage them to be critical, to ask you to expand on what you say. Also ask them to interrupt you so that you can find effective ways of handling interruptions
3. Practise with lay people who know nothing of your work. Try to explain your methodology and findings to them.
4. Practise keeping eye contact with those who are questioning you, varying your tone and gestures.
5. Ask your supervisors to organise mock vivas for you. Tell them any fears you have about the process.
6. Take up as many opportunities as possible to present your work within your department, institution and at conferences.
7. Go to skills development sessions offered in your institution and by UK GRAD. All these opportunities will help you to build up confidence in talking about your research.
8. If, after practising, you are unsure about whether the viva will present barriers to you, talk with your disability adviser and supervisors about possible adjustments and approaches.

The key issue is that on the day you feel prepared for the viva – you have reflected on your research, your thesis, constructed answers to possible questions, practised, know that adjustments are in place if they are necessary and that the examiners are aware of any requirements you have. Then go and enjoy the opportunity the viva offers you.

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