

# VIVA Examination – Summary of best practice

---

## Examiner's role:

- To support the candidate to perform at the best of their ability to enable a fair assessment of the work contained within the thesis.
- Assessment of the quality of the work against the criteria set out by the examining institution.

## Before the viva:

- When responding to a request to examine ask yourself:
  - Do I have time to effectively examine this thesis?
  - Am I sufficiently expert in the topic to examine this thesis?
  - Are there any potential conflicts of interests which may interfere with my ability to examine the thesis (with the supervisor, other examiners)?
- Quickly read the thesis soon after you receive it to check for potential issues (which may need more time for detailed reading / discussions with the external examiner).
- Decide on the need for a non-examining chair. This is standard practice in some schools but if it is not, they can be helpful in the following cases:
  - Where there are issues identified with the thesis which may lead to a potentially challenging viva.
  - Where one of the examiners is inexperienced in the role (or not used to examining in a UK institution).
  - Where there may be a power dynamic between the internal and external (for example a relatively junior internal with a very senior academic as external)
- If you are internal examiner, ensure that you share appropriate regulations with the external examiner <https://www.ed.ac.uk/files/atoms/files/pgreternalexaminhandbook.pdf>
- If the external examiner has little experience of the UK Higher Education system, ensure that you make clear the role of the external examiner within UK viva examinations.
- Read the thesis in detail and annotate the thesis as you go with the aim of supporting the candidate understand corrections which might be required.
- When assessing the thesis ensure that you focus on the criteria of the examining institution (recognising that there may be differences between UK HEIs). Provide appropriate levels of detail to justify your assessment for each criteria in the pre-viva report.
- Get your independent report completed and submitted several days before the viva. If you are internal ensure the external also does likewise.
- Schedule a meeting with the other examiner before the viva and after submission of independent reports (ideally not on the day of the viva) to discuss:
  - Initial impressions of the thesis.
  - Agree areas requiring clarification during the viva.
  - If there is disagreement about the quality of the thesis agree what the candidate needs to demonstrate during the viva to support you find agreement.
  - Agree who is going to lead on aspects of the viva.
  - Agree on a structure of the viva so this can be communicated to the candidate at the start of the viva.

- Check with the candidate prior to the viva if there are any additional documents/resources they may want to share/use during the viva and ensure that these are appropriate.

#### During the viva:

- If you are having the viva in person, ensure that the room is set-up in a way which is conducive to discussion (ideally around a small table) and that resources such as a board to write on is available if required.
- Offer some words of encouragement at the start of the viva – where possible share a positive impression of the work/thesis **but do not** offer a preliminary outcome.
- At the start of the viva:
  - Share with the candidate how the viva will be structured.
  - Ensure that the candidate is aware that they can ask for breaks.
  - Make it clear that the viva is a space for discussion of ideas and that the candidate does not need to always agree with the examiners.
  - If the candidate is particularly nervous let them know that this is OK and that they are not being assessed on how well they deal with nerves.
- Ensure that you ask the candidate some "settling" questions so that they can get the exam off to a good start. Questions such as "talk us through the main ideas within your thesis" will be a question that the candidate is likely to have prepared an answer for.
- Demonstrate that you have really engaged with the work through the questions you ask.
- Ask a mix of questions – e.g. clarifying (How did you do X), justifying (What was the rationale, Why did you), broader context (How does this relate to X), understanding (Explain X), and reflective (If you had to do one thing differently). Try to avoid always asking justification questions as this will often take away from an engaged discussion and lead to defensiveness from the candidate.
- Demonstrate active listening by reflecting back what you hear from candidate.
- When candidates answer questions well, give them some feedback to let them know this.
- If a candidate is struggling to answer a question, consider offering the candidate some scaffolding to support them answer the question - break the question down and offer them a starting point.
- If the candidate cannot satisfactorily answer a question and you have tried reframing / scaffolding the question move on and recognise the need for this to be addressed in corrections.
- Remember that you do not need to agree with everything the candidate is proposing. You are assessing against the criteria set by the examining institution – none of which ask the question do you agree with the candidate's argument.
- Make sure you put in place breaks. These allows you time to check in with the other examiner about progress of the exam and what you still need to cover to reach a decision. If you are doing the viva online, you can place the candidate in a breakout room to facilitate a private conversation between examiners.
- If the viva is online use the private chat function to communicate with the other examiner to identify what still needs to be clarified to reach a decision.

### **At the end of the viva:**

- Communicate not just the outcome of the viva but the rationale for the decision to the candidate.
- If significant corrections are required, it is helpful to have the supervisor involved in the conversation (subject to the candidate agreeing with this) as the candidate may not fully process everything that is being said if they are disappointed.
- When providing corrections make clear the intention of the corrections (i.e. an enhanced argument) as well as specific points which need to be addressed.
- Provide the candidate with a detailed written list of corrections and where possible provide annotated copies of the thesis to support the candidate undertake corrections.
- Ensure the examination report is written in a timely fashion – remember that the candidate will not be able to graduate (and this may have an impact on their future plans) until approved by the appropriate examination board.

### **Post viva:**

- If you are the internal examiner, be willing to provide time to the candidate to discuss the required corrections.
- Ask the candidate to provide a commentary as to how they have responded to corrections – this will make it easier to check that corrections have been made.
- Ask the candidate to inform you when they plan to submit corrections so you can schedule time to review them.
- Ensure that the candidate follows the appropriate route for resubmission (at the University of Edinburgh this is directly to the examiners).

*This resource was created by Robin Henderson, MY Consultants Ltd (<https://myconsultants.net/>)*

*This work is licensed under a CC BY-NC-ND licence*

*To view a copy of this license, visit: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>*