Preparing for the Viva
Insights from an Examiner

Prof. J. Bernard Walsh, Clinical Professor,
St. James’ s Hospital and Trinity College Dublin
Director Mercer’s Institute for Research on Ageing
Prior To Viva

PhD will have been submitted - (Triple Check for Grammar and Proof Read for Spelling before submission - DO NOT TRUST Spell Checking Software)

Exam Office will Liaise with Supervisors re a list of Potential Internal and External Examiners

Dean of Graduate Studies Office will decide on the Examiners but in practice relies heavily on recommendations

Supervisors MUST GET THIS PART RIGHT - Not always easy as sometimes the “Friendly” “Benign” Examiner can cause Huge Grief !! - So the supervisor taking his/her time in this selection and consulting with colleagues is essential before deciding who to approach
Supervisors usually try and identify an Extern who they know very well and who they feel will be just and fair - This is Essential

Someone who is comfortable in their own skin and is an expert in the field - (Not out to score points)

The “Proper” Internal Examiner is also Crucial as sometimes the External examiner is much more balanced and straightforward than the Internal Examiner

If thesis is “Multidisciplinary” - “So should be the examiners”

Personal Contact by the Supervisor with the Examiners is essential to tease out beforehand that they currently have time to examine the thesis and that they are OK with the topic in question
Prior To Viva

Picking a “World Expert” in a Field usually works out well as they are usually able to take a broader experienced view of the subject - But they must be known well to one of your supervisors

Some young examiners who are new to examining doctorates are over pedantic in picking out small flaws - They sometime feel that they must prove themselves

Examiners especially new examiners can sometimes be nervous about examining as they may be concerned that there may be a huge gap between their mark and that of the other examiner

The Examiners themselves also have to put a great deal of preparation into the Viva to pick out and ask the right questions as they are aware that they are in ways also being “examined and tested”’
Pick the right examiners

“Make sure that the examination team fits your subject area well, and are the best, most senior academics you can find.

When I first heard this advice myself, it seemed counterintuitive. What? pick the best, most experienced, most expert examiners I can find? no thanks…I want an inexperienced and friendly examination team that wont give me a hard time thank you very much…..But think about it, in actual fact

An inexperienced examination team are more likely to have a point to prove, or an axe to grind. They may want to demonstrate that they are rigorous academics, superior to the student sitting opposite them.

They may feel that they must give the candidate as hard a time as possible in order to justify their examination fee. Both of my examiners were (are) hugely experienced, at the top of their game, and had examined many doctoral students prior to my viva. They gave me a hard time, but no more than was necessary. They had nothing to prove.”

Professor Matthew Leach, (University of Surrey) Dr John Brady – “Dr Sustainable Website”
Publications pre Viva

Publications Before the Viva can be hugely beneficial as it will reassure Examiners that the work has already reached an independent Peer Reviewed Level

If your work is not published prior to Viva it should have been submitted for publications - This is expected and nowadays essential

It will often take multiple submissions to get a publication so “Try and Try and Try Again” - Often papers can be rejected by lower impact journals and readily published in higher impact publications - depends often on the Editorial Team’s Current interests

Take every opportunity to present various aspects of your work at AGM’s and International Conferences and build your published papers submissions “as soon as possible” on these presentations
Excellent References to prepare for Viva Exam

PhD Viva Guide - Galway University Excellent on line reference ——

University of Leicester - Preparing for your Viva ——
http://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/ld/resources/presentations/viva

“Preparing for Your Viva” by Martin Stanistreet University of Liverpool


Many other Universities now have good online guidance advice on Submitting a PhD thesis and on the Viva - well worth reading through a number of these
Prior to the Viva

Re-read your thesis carefully

Try to anticipate questions, comments and criticisms, and think how you would respond

Refresh your memory of the relevant literature.

Do not attempt to re-read every paper referenced in your thesis - instead, re-read carefully the more recent key references.

Ask your supervisor a couple of weeks before the viva whether any work of direct relevance to your thesis has been published since you submitted your thesis - Sometimes a major article may just have been published in the few weeks or months preceding the Viva and may have been missed by yourself
Practice Vivas - Essential

**Practice Vivas** — Essential with Supervisors and in a forum of Colleagues and Friends familiar with your work

In the Medical School in TCD and in Cork PhD students give a presentation to the School just before the VIVA - at which the examiners also are present - - Not always done everywhere or in all schools but even if it is not current practice a **Departmental Presentation beforehand will be hugely beneficial**
The Viva itself

Present will be the Exam candidate, the chairperson and the two examiners

Your supervisor is usually invited (unless you wish otherwise which you shouldn’t!!) but must remain totally silent unless the examiners request clarification on some point from the supervisor

Helpful to have your supervisor present to support you (and as a witness if something major goes wrong!)
On The Day

Dress Formally (and Modestly !!)

It will help to relax you and will impress the examiners

Greet Your Examiners by Name of possible and with a “Warm Firm Hand Shake”

Try and Smile !!
The Viva itself

The examiners will expect you to:

Show a critical analysis of your own work and of that of others

Appreciate the limitations of the methods employed and the results obtained by yourself and others

Understand how the broad conclusions of your thesis support, add to or conflict with previous work

Know the major concepts and recent developments in your subject
There is no formal procedure laid down for the conduct of the viva examination.

Some examiners prefer to work through the thesis in the order in which it is written.

Other examiners prefer to discuss topics. Very few examiners will perform a page by page criticism.

You may be asked to prepare a presentation of your work in a suitable format.
You are not expected to know your thesis by heart !!!

But you are expected to refer to the appropriate page when the examiners wish to discuss a specific point - Hence have it well indexed

Please ensure that you bring to the viva examination a copy of your thesis paginated in the same way as the copies you have submitted to the Research Degree Examinations Office.
The Viva itself

Do not answer simply 'yes' or 'no' to questions

On the other hand do not give a prepared “exposition”

Try to answer the question as it is put, remembering that you are engaged in an academic conversation.
Avoid shooting yourself in the foot by highlighting the weaknesses in the thesis by being overly humble (e.g. “I didn’t think this would be an acceptable piece of research given the way I handled x or y”) or by saying what you “failed to achieve” or “did not manage to carry out in a robust manner” etc.

Leave that to the examiners to pick up in their reading, they don’t need help.

Dr Mariana Bogdanova, lecturer in management, Queen’s University Belfast
The Viva itself

Be prepared to justify your ideas and conclusions.

If the examiners challenge your interpretation but you feel that your case is a good one, muster your arguments and be willing to present your case firmly but courteously.

However, if the examiners have identified a genuine weakness, concede the point gracefully.

Even if you feel the examiners are unreasonably critical do not become argumentative or allow the discussion to become heated.

You can agree to differ and to reconsider the point.

If you make any comments to your examiners which put them under moral pressure (e.g. alluding to the consequences of failure for you) or if you offer any incentive to your examiners to pass you they must terminate the examination and Report to the Director of Examinations and to the Board of the University.
# Length of Viva

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Length of viva</th>
<th>Natural and applied sciences (%)</th>
<th>Arts, humanities and social sciences (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Up to 1 hour</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-2 hours</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-3 hours</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3+ hours</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
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## Outcome of Viva

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recommendation</th>
<th>How likely is this?</th>
<th>What you need to do</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Immediate award of the degree without any changes being made to the thesis</td>
<td>Although this is possible, it is very rare</td>
<td>No further work needed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Award of the degree subject to minor amendments</td>
<td>This is a common result</td>
<td>Amendments to be made and submitted to the internal examiner within one month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Award of the degree subject to amendments</td>
<td>This is a common result</td>
<td>Amendments to be made within six months to the satisfaction of the internal and external examiner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revision of the thesis and a requirement to resubmit</td>
<td>You may feel disappointed with this result but it is not uncommon and the vast majority of students go on to resubmit successfully</td>
<td>You may be required to rewrite substantial parts of the thesis and the revisions needed are not minor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revision of the thesis and the requirement to resubmit for a lower degree</td>
<td>This happens rarely</td>
<td>Amendments need to be made as required for submission for lower degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Award of a lower degree with or without minor amendments</td>
<td>This happens rarely</td>
<td>Amendments need to be made as required for submission for lower degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thesis failed with no right of resubmission</td>
<td>Very rare</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Day of the Viva should be a “Joyful Celebration of Many Years of Hard Work” !!

Enjoy the opportunity of having an in-depth discussion of your research with two other experts in the field !!

Don’t Forget - You are THE Expert at the Viva

Agus Bail ó Dhia ar do chuid Oibre