The twin threads: Academics’ thoughts on the doctoral viva as examiner and student

UKCGE, Salford, 1-2 July 2019

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Context: Data collection, analysis, participant characteristics

Halcro & Robb Research

Data Collection
- purposive sampling; minimum 2 doctoral completions
- Pre-interview short questionnaire
- Semi-structured interview (45 minutes – 2 hours)
- 17 interviews, 9 UK universities:

Data analysis (Three stages)
- Researchers blind reviewed and identified themes
- Researchers compared themes
- Established common themes

Participants’ characteristics
- median 8 (doctoral supervision), median 11 (doctoral completions), median 2 (doctoral non-completion);
Activity 1: What is the purpose of the viva – examining the student and … Academic rationale

Purpose of viva (theory): Carter & Whittaker (2009); Houston (2018); Jackson and Tinkler (2002); Sikes (2017);

1. Assessing the student’s knowledge is of doctoral standard
2. Ensure authenticity
3. Test candidate’s oral skills
4. Decide borderline cases
Activity 1: What is the purpose of the viva (examining the student)

Participants’ comments:

1. Does the student understand the material AND are they discussing it at doctoral level
   “The student must demonstrate doctoralness in their understanding of the work; you are looking for conceptual awareness.” (E) **

2. Authenticity – verifying the student
   “Assure the university the person sitting the exam is the person that did the work” (D 2)**

3. Oral skills – the student voice
   “Important for their (the student) voice to be heard, especially helpful to students whose second language is not English” (H)**

4. Borderline – student opportunity
   “At the viva the student was able to provide explanations and we could discuss our methodological differences...the student was able to defend her decisions. She passed with minor changes – if there had been no viva I would have been recommending major changes to the methodology.” (M)**
Activity 1: What is the purpose of the viva (academic)

5. Network – staff build/develop
   Develop and foster existing or even new networks (A)

6. Enjoyment, learn new knowledge (E), source of new research/thesis (A)

7. Carries academic kudos, it is a mark of credibility in the academic community (E)
Activity 2: How did you prepare as a student for your viva?

- I spoke constantly to other doctoral students, asking them to challenge me, particularly one friend who was at a similar stage to me, it was very competitive, we pushed each other on (P)
- My supervisory team was largely disengaged they expected me as a doctoral student to problem solve (D1)
- I was never offered a mock viva, I don’t know why, it was never in my thinking (H)

Sense of a different time (late 1990s onwards – more professional) restricted v extended (Taylor 2013)
Activity 3: Examiners’ experiences of their own viva

• “I loved my viva. I had two people trapped in a room with me for hours, during which time only my research could be discussed and they couldn’t talk about their research! No other time in my academic life have I had this opportunity.” (E)

• “I quite enjoyed my viva it was collegial. It was challenging, but fair. It was an opportunity to have a wider discussion. It has influenced me in the way I approach the viva process with my students.” (H)

• “The chair in my viva should’ve intervened and didn’t. This has made me alert to ‘is the student being treated fairly? If not I will intervene.” (M)
Participants’ experience as an examiner (viva’s characteristic examiners’ perspectives)

Structure

• Usually follows a chronological order, i.e. chapter by chapter (Be) calms student (P)
• Tendency is for open ended focussing on why? Looking for student to defend position, but sometimes suspect other examiner has not properly read or doesn’t understand the thesis (Be)
• Duration 2-2.5 hours “You know” (B, D2)

Looking for doctoralness?

• “The student demonstrates a clear contribution to knowledge” (B)
• “Doctoralness is that ability to make clear their contribution to knowledge and how that knowledge contributes to society” (A)
• “The student’s thinking extends beyond what is on the page (H)
Participants’ experience as an examiner (viva’s characteristic examiners’ perspectives)

What gives you confidence that the viva will be a positive experience?

• The student sees it as a test of their argument, they engage with the themes, the literature, the wider environment (H)
• Student’s ability to flex and accept the ‘argy-bargy’ of academic debate (P)
• The thesis all connects, the viva is more a discussion seeking to elaborate on points, a feeling shared by the other examiner (J)

What gives you a sense of foreboding?

• Student lacks enthusiasm, evasive in their answer, ill prepared and go downhill during the exam – a reflection of supervisory team, ill prepared. (D2)
• Weak at connecting the pieces and fail to understand the whole picture, invariably their methodology chapter lacks robustness (Be)
• Student takes criticism personally and lets their emotions rule their head (E)
Process of becoming an examiner

Why have you examined doctoral students?
- Develop and foster existing or even new networks (A)
- Enjoyment, learn new knowledge (E) source of new research/thesis (A)
- Carries academic kudos, it is a mark of credibility in the academic community (E)

How did your experiences as a student influence your approach to examining doctoral students?
- Good experience - collegiate (H) Bad experience – aggressively inquisitorial (M)
- I was asked very specific technical questions at my viva and this tends to reflect my approach (Be)
- The process evolved based initially on my experiences as a student. (D2)
- Up to a point, but then there was different climate and arguably less support (P), world has moved on, less hierarchical, society more interested in research, examiners more empathetic (A)

What training has your current/past employer provided to help prepare you to be an doctoral examiner?
- You are required to undergo training before you start supervising and thereafter you have to undertake regular training. New supervisors are mentored by a more experienced supervisor. The university requires supervisory experience and specialist knowledge; but a lot of learning how to examine comes through experience (A)
- I have received supervision training from the university, but on how to examine nothing (P)
Process of becoming an examiner

How did you prepare to become an examiner? Own initiative

• Read the (university) regulations and procedures (B)
• (Seek to) examine at other universities, because it gives you insights into different practices, some better, some worse than your own university (D1)
• Asked others how they examine (P)

Have your training needs evolved as you have gained more experience?

• Focus now more on process makes it easier to be more objective (D1)
• (Practice) The more I have examined the better I understand it (B)
• (Seek opportunities elsewhere) Examine at other universities (D1)
How could the viva be improved?

• Develop new lecturers from the outset as examiners – it is under-developed (D 2)
• All vivas should be recorded for learning (E)
• Ensure all vivas have an independent chair to prevent conflict of interest and ensure fairness (D1, H, D2, A, E)
• Provide greater recognition of the chair’s importance (P, D2, A)

• Sikes (2017); Taylor (2013);