How can we better support PGRs preparing for their Viva

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The viva

Cosy chat amongst friends?
or
A trial by ordeal or Inquisition?

The viva should be
“…..fair, rigorous, valid, reliable and fit for purpose.”
(Wallace 2003)

Burnham (1996) described the viva as
“one of the best kept secrets in higher education”
1. Survey of PGRs preparing for their viva

2. Survey of PGRs post-viva

3. Survey of Supervisors
Student Pre-Viva Findings
Anticipated Challenges

1. Lack of Confidence

“I think that it will be a long and intense examination and my thesis will be revealed to be seriously flawed”

“I am not comfortable with my methodology and I am worried that the examiners will pick up on this”

“I think it will be difficult to discuss aspects of my thesis that are ....complex, in a concise way”
Anticipated Challenges

2. Distrust of the examination panel

They felt that the panel be either prejudiced against aspects of their research or unprofessional in their approach.

“It will be a gratuitous attack to make you ‘defend’”

“Examiners are more interested in feathering their own nest, attempting to improve their standing or generally act unprofessionally rather than objectively assessing the work”
PGR preparation for the viva

Support available

• Majority felt that they were not being supported
  • by their university (not aware of existing supports)
  • by their supervisor.
• Students were actively engaging with viva advice via social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook as well as blogs and chat rooms.

Support requested

• mock viva
• concrete information about the format of the viva; (e.g. examples of questions and what would cause a candidate to fail)
PGR preparation for the viva

Perceived useful Information

• social media and other online resources
• also enthusiastic about peer mentoring as a good source of information.
Student Post-Viva Findings
Experience of the Viva

![Bar chart showing the distribution of experiences during the viva](chart.png)
Experience of the Viva

Mainly positive (~80%)

“rigorous intellectual engagement” or a “thorough conversation

More negative respondents reported:
the exam was “not as searching as I thought it would be”, “underwhelming”

or “I got very flustered and felt stupid”.

Experience of the Viva

Challenges

- General nerves/fear of the unknown
- Not knowing how far you can go in the Viva in disagreeing with the examiner(s)
- Difficulty with the personality/style of questioning of an examiner
- Realising information given by peers was not helpful
- Badly chaired viva
- Particular difficulties for university employees who are also PGR candidates in the viva
Most Useful Preparation

- Mock Viva: 46%
- Peers: 21%
- Books: 13%
- Online advice: 8%
- Supervisor: 8%
- No support used: 4%
Supervisor Findings
How do you feel before a student's viva?

N=74
Anxious, vivas are unpredictable

Terrified

Depends on the student. At least slightly nervous

Responsible. That the student's success in part depends upon my ability to support their learning, so their performance reflects upon me strongly

Apprehensive mostly, because of potentially unknown quirks of examiners
Fine

Fine, more a case of keeping them calm

Calm, they are ready for it

Confident they can do well but need to give them a practice viva

No difference to how I normally do – if I’ve done my job correctly, they will be fine

Usually confident that they will pass, though not always certain whether they will have corrections, or how many
Focused on ensuring the students are adequately prepared

Relieved, that they have submitted in time

Confident that they are well prepared and we have chosen the most appropriate examiners

Excited
What sorts of support/advice/resources do you give your students

- Mock Vivas: 35
- Meetings/tutorials: 21
- Talks with recent postdocs: 8
- Resources: 7
Our Conclusions
Institutional Support

• Ensure Guidance is visible, well signposted and up to date.

• Encourage Supervisors to take an active role in preparing their students

• Ensure the guidance for examiners is clear and appropriate and well signposted.

• Provide good development support for your students around viva preparation often enough for it to be useful to all students.
Supervisor Preparation

• Choose appropriate examiners
• Be honest about the thesis’s merits and weaknesses
• Organise a mock viva
• Provide encouragement

• Ensure that throughout the PhD your student’s are developing their critical thinking skills and their ability to have serious academic discussions. Team meetings, group presentations, supervisor meetings etc.
Towards High Quality, Visible & Consistent Advice and Guidance

- Student Preparation and Behaviour
- Examiner Preparation and Behaviour
- Supervisor Support
- Institutional Support

Successful Viva Voce
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Useful Resources

- PhD Viva Guide, UCG
  [Link](https://www.nuigalway.ie/media/graduatestudies/files/phdvivaguide/phd_viva_guide.pdf)

- Vitae, Defending your doctoral thesis: the PhD viva
  [Link](https://www.vitae.ac.uk/doing-research/doing-a-doctorate/completing-your-doctorate/your-viva)

- Preparing for the Viva Insights from an Examiner, a presentation by Prof. J. Bernard Walsh, Clinical Professor, St. James’s Hospital and Trinity College Dublin
  [Link](https://www.irishgerontology.com/sites/default/files/basic_page_pdf/Preparing%20for%20the%20Viva.pdf)

  [Link](https://www.amazon.co.uk/How-Survive-Your-Viva-Examination/dp/0335233821)

  [Link](https://www.srhe.ac.uk/downloads/guides/guides_on_postgraduate_issues_2.pdf)
Useful Resources

Some videos on viva preparation or what to expect:

- Preparing for the PhD Viva
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x3o86_GRJCw
- Preparing for your Viva and What happens in a viva? Doctorate viva tips and advice
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a3hnu2aq8P4
- Preparing for your Viva: The Viva Interview
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xncsi6RR8Ss
- How did you prepare for your viva?
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TmSl3WjnHGo
- And a whole set of videos from the University of Nottingham see
  https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLDF2D8A2B06D71432
• Burnham P (1994) Surviving the Viva: Unravelling the Mystery of the PhD Oral. Journal of Graduate Education 1: 30-34

Thank You!