



Queen Mary University of London Festival of Education 2021 Assessment – 9 March

*The Doctoral Viva:
what is its role in the final
examination and how does it
affect outcomes?*

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Today's topics



Timings

- The examination process
- Roles of the thesis and viva in the final exam
- How does the viva affect outcomes?
 - All vivas
 - Two case studies from my doctoral research
- What are examiners seeking in candidates?
- Discussion with 2 recent doctoral graduates
- Top tips for a successful viva

16.00-16.30
Talk and
questions

16.30-16.50
Discussion

16.50-17.00
Top tips

Thesis: first element, stages 1 and 2

Viva: second element, stage 3

Independent
judgements – stage 1

Individual examiners receive the thesis
Thesis is read once, twice or several times
Initial and general impressions of the candidate are refined by detailed analysis of the thesis

Shared judgements –
stage 2

Examiners share their views on thesis quality
Some exchange pre-viva reports
Examiners meet to harmonise judgements just before viva

Final judgement –
stage 3

Examination of the candidate during the viva
Emerging judgements finalised
Examiners agree recommendation and thesis corrections and inform candidate

Continuum of judgement: thesis (stages 1 and 2); and viva (stage 3)
Examiners' assessment emerges over time, concluding in the viva

What do examiners infer from the thesis?

If the amount and quality of your research is sufficient

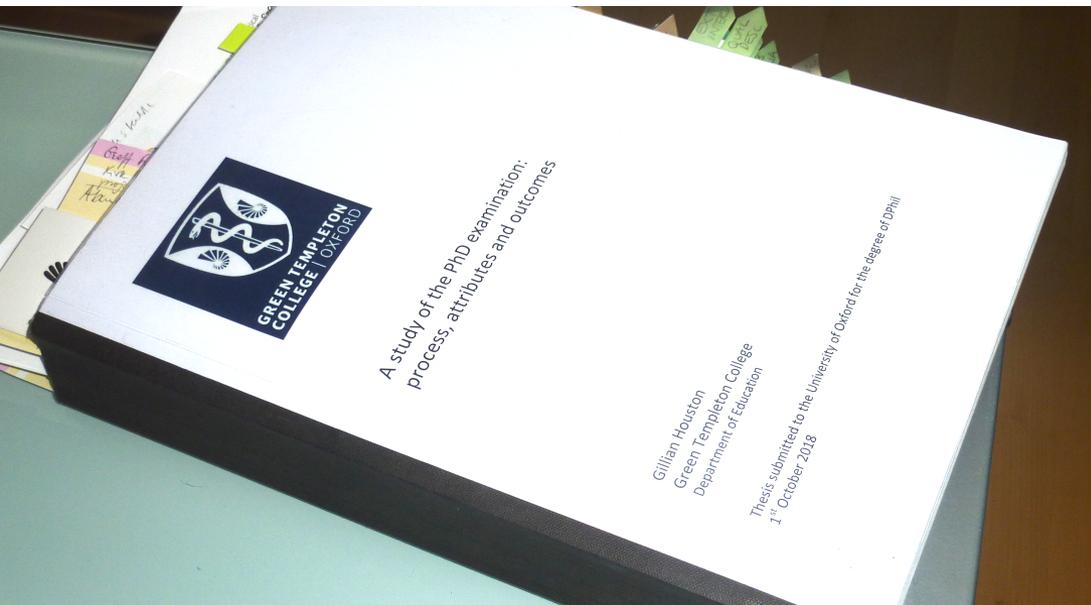
If analysis of your findings is rigorous and has integrity

If any statistical calculations are correct

What you know about the wider field

If you understand the significance of what you've found

If the conclusions you have drawn follow from your findings



Whether you can write concisely, elegantly and fluently, spell correctly and if references are complete



What are the purposes of the viva?

To assess the suitability of the candidate for the award of the doctorate

To find out whether they really know their subject well and can give a good account of what their thesis is about

**Examiners
(STEM)**

To ensure the candidate has undertaken the work and is conversant with the field

To provide an opportunity for the candidate to clarify aspects of the thesis and to ensure quality control for award of the degree

It's probably to give you a way to defend yourself? (STEM)

In some cases there's a reason for doing something but maybe you didn't explain it too well in the thesis (STEM)

It gives you a chance to defend the bits that are weaker...it gives you a chance to explain, when they challenge something (AHSS)

Candidates

To discuss...and test the candidate – if their theory or findings are really consistent. It's necessary for answering questions from reading the thesis and for a proper evaluation...testing the research. When you write the thesis you have constraints of time and space so there are lots of things that are not written that the examiners could think you aren't aware of, or you didn't think of, or that you don't have a clue about, so the viva is an opportunity to test if the researcher knows the subject (AHSS candidate)

*There's always so much that doesn't go into it...even in a thesis there are a lot of things you don't write up
(STEM candidate)*

*To understand choices the candidate has made... to clarify misunderstandings... You've got to push them on their position and get them to defend those choices
(AHSS examiner)*

Other important purposes for candidates

- *Viva is 'part of the academic debate...a seminar on a very high level'* (AHSS examiner)
- For successful candidates it represents:
 - Affirmation of their achievements
 - Rite of passage
 - Entry into the academy
- Candidates I interviewed saw these points as extremely positive

How does the viva affect outcomes?

The viva might increase or diminish confidence in the candidate's achievement. You are looking for an overall level of achievement and understanding, within the context of the thesis or viva. If they haven't managed to get this across in the thesis, you're looking for it in the viva. There is a basic level for both, as long as they can show enough understanding on one side or another. Thesis plus viva is a good format. Having the viva is part of the student's training – you are always trying to improve the student's learning rather than judge them and the viva contributes to that.

STEM examiner

Case study 1

- Biological sciences candidate (f/t)
- Unattributed jointly authored paper part of thesis
- Examiners admired experimental design but had concerns about statistics and conclusions drawn
- Internal examiner said the statistical analysis:
`...was inadequate but it wasn't totally clear why that was... was [it] because [the candidate] didn't know how to do it...hadn't thought about it, or made a decision to adopt a particular strategy? [The candidate] did worse in the viva than expected...you can do better or worse. I had a more negative view...at the end of the viva than I did at the beginning. I thought...that there would be a few small changes but it turned out to be more substantial, so...the viva does inform quite strongly what you do next.' (STEM-12)

Case study 2

- Clinical sciences candidate (f/t study) (p/t practitioner)
- Candidate's knowledge, understanding and findings outstanding, especially data emerging from experiments
- Poor quality thesis, e.g. no introduction or general discussion; work not situated in wider field
- Discussion in viva was peer-to-peer: candidate defended their research with confidence

What attributes are examiners seeking in candidates?

Originality or a contribution to knowledge

Key criterion for doctoral examination
Terminology differs between STEM and AHSS

Mainly evident from: thesis

Publishability

Almost as important as originality / contribution
Some publish before examination, others publish from thesis; often depends on discipline and thesis format
Mainly evident from: thesis

Research competence

Discipline-specific factors used to evaluate research competence; research integrity important to all, as is candidate's ability to understand the significance of their research and situate it in wider field

Mainly evident from thesis but also viva

Intellectual rigour

Displayed by attributes such as:
Critical, analytical and reflective thinking
Problem-solving and logic
Independent thought and research leadership
Thesis style and presentation
Many evident from viva but also thesis

Reference for full table: Houston, G (2021) Doctoral examiners' judgements: do examiners agree on doctoral attributes and how important are professional and personal characteristics? In: A Lee and R Bongaardt (eds.) *The Future of Doctoral Research: challenges and opportunities*. London: Routledge.

Range of achievement

There obviously is a range of achievement...[it] is probably quite broad... The minimum required to...pass is much lower than a really good [candidate] will provide in terms of the amount of information and the amount of new stuff...At the lower end, the border between...a Masters...and a PhD thesis becomes quite thin and...close, while, at the top end, some students have done probably several PhDs' work by the time they've finished...The range is...broad [and] the threshold for failing is high...You have to do pretty badly...to fail...The default is not to fail somebody. (STEM-I3)

There's...a baseline which everybody has to meet to get the [PhD]... Within that...there is a lot of diversity of extremely strong theses that... you could publish from, and ones that just about make it...because there's no grading criteria you've only got...a sense that there is differentiation between...different kinds of thesis. Sometimes, ones that just go above the line, it's not that the...work is not very good or that the person isn't very good, it's...that they've got to the point where they just want to get the thesis in and they've not gone for the most exceptional thesis on the planet....It's not like they're not capable of doing exceptional things, but...it's just that the [PhD] process exhausts people and they ...want to get it out of the way. (AHSS-S2)

Thesis

Viva

Higher quality thesis means more emphasis on peer-to-peer discussion of research results in the viva because of examiners' confidence in the candidate.

Viva becomes more important if the examiners have concerns after reading the thesis or require more information.

Much though not all evidence of research achievement is derived from the thesis, in addition to some of the candidate's professional skills, e.g. written communication.

Viva enables examiners to explore the candidate's research in more detail, check authorship and evaluate professional and personal attributes.



Discussion with QMU graduates regarding their recent vivas

- Dr Rosie Oxbury

Faculty of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences

- Dr Oscar Pundel

School of Medicine



Top tips for vivas

Do

- Make your thesis as good as it can be.
- Have a mock viva
- Be confident! Remember you're the world expert in your topic.
- Take time to consider examiners' questions and answer them explicitly
- Be accommodating of examiners' suggestions, even if you can show evidence for not accepting them

Remember

- To re-read your thesis in the week preceding the viva
- Examiners will only expect what is reasonable for you to have achieved
- Almost no-one fails on the basis of the viva
- Try not to be defensive if examiners suggest you might have done something differently
- Not to be afraid of discussing weaknesses or anything you would have done differently given the chance