

Implementing a Viva for the Doctorate

A guide for curriculum developers, doctoral programme coordinators, supervisors, and others



The **"Questions to ask"** series draws from literature and experience worldwide to offer a set of questions to be posed when implementing or evaluating a practice: in this case, the implementation of a viva voce (oral examination) for the doctorate.

Context matters — there is no such thing as generic best practice across countries, universities and disciplines. Answering these questions should assist curriculum developers and others ensure best practice in their context.

How to use the "Questions to ask" series

These guides can be used for individual reflection or as the basis for staff development workshops, curriculum development initiatives, and evaluations. The document lists the benefits and challenges of the viva identified in the literature and offers a series of questions to assist in maximising the benefits and mitigating the challenges. Additional support materials, such as short videos, can be found at postgradenvironments.com

THE BENEFITS OF THE VIVA IN THE DOCTORATE

Enables assessment of graduate attributes that cannot easily be assessed through written text alone.

- ◆ What graduate attributes — such as the ability to defend a position, communicate research verbally, and engage critically — are expected of a doctoral graduate in your country, institution and field?
- ◆ How might the viva be designed to assess these attributes in ways that are fair, rigorous, and coherent with the written examination?
- ◆ How can the viva be structured so that it assesses research competence rather than performance anxiety or presentation style?

Improves examination rigour and transparency.

- ◆ How can the viva create an opportunity for examiners to seek clarification on the written thesis and for the candidate to respond to examiner concerns?
- ◆ How can the viva facilitate consensus-building among examiners leading to evidence-based recommendations?
- ◆ How can the viva enhance examiner accountability and reduce the risks associated with anonymous examination processes?
- ◆ How can the viva serve as an authenticity check, particularly for thesis-by-publication formats or where there are concerns about the candidate's own intellectual contribution?

Serves as a rite of passage and professional induction.

- ◆ In what ways can the viva function as an induction into the candidate's academic or professional field and community?
- ◆ How might the viva be structured to allow candidates to articulate their research contributions and receive guidance for future dissemination?
- ◆ How might the viva contribute to scholar recognition and academic community building?

Contributes to the development of communication and scholarly identity.

- ◆ How can the viva help candidates develop the capacity to articulate and defend their research in ways expected of a doctoral graduate?

- ◆ How can preparation for the viva be integrated into the doctoral programme rather than treated as a last-minute event?
- ◆ How can the viva contribute to the candidate's ongoing development as a researcher and academic?

MITIGATING THE CHALLENGES OF THE VIVA IN THE DOCTORATE

Power imbalances and fairness concerns.

- ◆ How can the viva be structured to avoid inquisitorial dynamics characterised by aggression or sarcasm rather than collegial engagement?
- ◆ What training and preparation should examiners and chairpersons receive to ensure that the viva is experienced as a scholarly dialogue?
- ◆ How can the process be designed so as not to disadvantage candidates with speaking difficulties, language differences, or other communication challenges?
- ◆ How can the institution ensure that the viva does not reproduce or exacerbate existing inequalities relating to race, gender, class, or institutional affiliation?

Implementation inconsistencies and lack of clear protocols.

- ◆ What institutional guidelines are in place to define the purpose, format, and assessment criteria of the viva?
- ◆ How will the timing of the written thesis examination in relation to the viva be determined, and how will both components feed into a final examination outcome?
- ◆ How will the possible outcomes of the viva (pass, revise and resubmit, fail) be defined, and how will their meanings be communicated clearly to all parties?
- ◆ How will discipline-specific differences in viva practice — for laboratory-based research, practice-based research, research by publication, and other formats — be incorporated into institutional protocols?

Resource and logistics demands.

- ◆ What administrative and logistical support will be put in place to ensure that the viva runs smoothly, including in online contexts?
- ◆ How will chairpersons be trained to manage the process independently of the examination team, and to handle unexpected difficulties?
- ◆ What arrangements are in place for recording vivas where required, and what are the associated data management and quality assurance protocols?

Risk of the viva becoming a superficial add-on rather than a rigorous assessment.

- ◆ How can the viva be designed as an integral component of doctoral examination rather than a procedural afterthought?
- ◆ How will examiner composition be determined, and how will the same examiners be involved in both the written thesis examination and the viva as a coherent process?
- ◆ What mechanisms are in place to review viva outcomes systematically and use this information for continuous improvement of the examination process?
- ◆ How will the viva complement rather than duplicate or undermine the rigour of the written thesis examination?

REFERENCES

- Cortazzi, M. & Jin, L. (2021). *The Doctoral Viva: Questions for, with and to Candidates*. *International Journal of Education and Literacy Studies*, 9(4), 2–15.
- Council on Higher Education (2018). Qualification Standard for Doctoral Degrees.
- Council on Higher Education (2022). *National Review of South African Doctoral Qualifications 2020–2021*.
- Council on Higher Education (2024). Briefly Speaking #30: Viva Voce: The Oral Examination of a Thesis for a Doctoral Degree.
- Houston, G. (2018). A study of the PhD examination: Process, attributes and outcomes. University of Oxford.
- McKenna, S. & van Schalkwyk, S. (2023). A scoping review of the changing landscape of doctoral education. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*.
- Teijlingen, E. et al. (2022). Reflections on variations in PhD viva regulations. *Journal of Education and Research*, 12(2), 61–74.

