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Preparing for a doctoral viva

Abstract

This paper discusses the issues which need consideration before, during and after a doctoral viva. It is concerned with ensuring that doctoral candidates are well positioned and prepared to maximise the opportunities the viva voce (oral examination of a doctoral thesis) offers them to assist them in achieving a successful outcome. It provides a clear account of the viva process and discusses the associated processes and formalities associated with a viva. The viva voce examination can be an anxiety provoking experience and this paper suggests a number of ways of thinking about and working with this. It suggests strategies relating to presenting doctoral work in the viva as well as considering and answering questions in line with the relevant protocols and procedures. It also considers areas which have the potential to cause difficulties or lead to disappointment for candidates and offers a range of suggestions about how to prepare and present appropriately at a doctoral viva. The paper also offers some potential questions for the doctoral candidate to consider. Doctoral candidates report that it is hard to imagine in advance, but that the viva voce can be an informative, positive and enjoyable experience which provides an opportunity to discuss their work in detail with two experienced and interested senior academics who have studied the work thoroughly.

The purpose of the viva- a summary

This is for the examiners to ensure that the candidate;

- is the author of the work
- is able to critically evaluate and defend all the theoretical decisions made and the underlying rationale of their study (this might be in regard to the literature cited, population selected, the methodology, analysis, of the data, conclusions reached, choice of psychometric test and any other aspect of the thesis).
- can discuss how their research relates to other research and current practice and any implications of these
- is aware of any inconsistencies or problems and is able to provide verbal clarification or further details relating to any queries requested by the examiners

- through their thesis, makes an original/distinctive contribution to the discipline and that the candidate can discuss this at the appropriate level and in relation to other studies.
- can critically evaluate and analyse all aspects of their work

Preparation in advance of the viva by the candidate

Try to remain positive; although it is an examination, it is also an excellent forum for showcasing original work, scholarship and personal and professional development. Remember you have spent years reading and thinking about the selected topic and it is this very expertise that you are asked to convey and share in your viva. You are the expert on the topic but at the same time you are addressing answers to questions posed by academics who are experts in related fields and within your discipline. Recognising this duality will serve you well and will help you develop a mental attitude that positions you as author of the thesis and as a candidate seeking appropriate recognition for this work. Try and avoid feeling intimidated. You are asking to join peers who have seniority in terms of knowledge as contributions made to the field. Your work will join others and will (if successful) join their ranks, celebrate the originality of your work and remain sensitive to its positioning among other high quality works. Think in advance about managing your expectations; be prepared to be asked to make corrections, very few people come out of their viva with no corrections.

The doctoral viva is a fairly formal occasion and which requires you to present yourself accordingly both in terms of physical appearance and mental attitude; formal presentation can add face validity to what is going to be presented and of yourself as the author of a doctoral research thesis and as a professional person. The most similar occasion is a formal job interview. You may find that the examiners may present themselves or conduct the viva in a less formal manner, but that is not usual but is their right should they choose to do this. Remember they have been through the vice voce

process themselves and appreciate first hand that this is a momentous event for the candidates and, often, met with apprehension and nervousness. Most examiners will have examined a number of theses before and are very familiar with the process and experience. If you feel it would be helpful to tell the examiners or the chair person that you feel very anxious that is quite acceptable, by doing this, it can in itself reduce anxiety. You will find that as you progress through questions and slip into the familiarity of talking about your thesis, it will dissipate.

It may be helpful to request that your supervisor or other tutors organise a mock viva, so that you get an experience of the process in advance of the actual viva. Some universities offer teaching on viva preparation and you may also find it helpful to practice this scenario with colleagues. It is important to prepare for a viva; this is likely to pay dividends in the longer term and is likely to reduce your stress levels. There may be a time lag between submission of the thesis and the viva. Do not assume you will remember the contents of your thesis after some time has passed. A candidate who is unprepared is unlikely to impress their examiners and could lead to a disappointing outcome as they may be unable to answer questions as well as they would if they had prepared.

The first thing to consider is the purpose of the viva. This is an opportunity for the candidate to discuss their work and more importantly to defend their thesis with two interested and experienced examiners who will ask probing questions about the work. A defence may include questions on the choice of topic, participant selection, theoretical underpinnings, methodological decisions and all related issues. Candidates are expected to be well prepared for the viva, that is, to be thoroughly conversant with all aspects of their thesis, to be prepared to answer questions on it and to engage in discussion and debate on all aspects of it and its wider implications. Candidates need to help the examiner's grasp the foundations on which your knowledge claims are based and the originality and relevance of your recommendations for practice/knowledge/theory development. It is helpful to keep this in mind when preparing and within the viva itself. The take home message of the

doctorate goes beyond the abstract in the thesis and captures a direct relationship between the main research questions and the results/findings as direct answers to these questions.

It is helpful to check in advance who your examiners are, and candidates may wish to identify what work they have produced, and their areas of interest, this does not mean that they will ask questions about this area though. In some universities the candidate may be asked to make suggestions about who might be the external examiner, in other universities this will be decided by members of the university or the research supervisory team. All doctoral examiners will have been through a viva as a candidate themselves and most universities ensure that the examining team have already examined a certain number of theses between them, so you will be in the hands of capable and experienced examiners. The viva is a rite de passage. Your two examiners may not have met each other before your viva. It is a demanding and time consuming job for examiners. They are undertaking the viva as a means of encouraging academic development, debate and professional development for the candidate as well as supporting their peers and profession.

Candidates may be helpful to prepare possible questions and answers in advance; this can be done in the same way as you might consider possible questions before a job interview, candidates often do not consider the possible questions in advance and this could put them at a disadvantage. It is not helpful to try and memorise answers though and this may only increase stress levels.

Remember, the viva is not a memory test, candidates are not expected to remember every minute detail of their thesis, and it is quite acceptable to look something up in the viva. It is important to go prepared, but not overly prepared or worse still under prepared. Spend time re reading the thesis itself and ensure that you are familiar with the important facets of it. Candidates may also wish to check if there been any major developments, between completion of their study and the date of the viva, if so, try and be conversant with these. If there are any areas of weakness in the thesis, prepare yourself to defend and explain these.

In general examiners are likely to be interested in:

- the candidates motivation and rationale for undertaking the study
- Key findings
- What does the work add and why is this important?
- Any areas of particular interest or unusual aspects of the research.
- Areas they think may need probing (omissions, lack of clarity, assumed understanding)
- Areas that prompt or require self-reflection
- Theoretical and clinical/practical/policy relevance
- Candidate's view of the strengths and weaknesses of the project

Possible Viva questions

Introductory questions might include;

- Why did you choose this topic?
- What are the main findings?
- What does it add to existing literature?
- What are the main implications of your research for practice, policy and for further research?
- What have you personally learned?
- What is the epistemological stance of the research and how does this relate to your research question and methodology/methods?
- What (if anything) would you do differently and why?
- What would you like the examiners to know?

Abstract/Overview

- Could you tell us in the equivalent of a paragraph what your research is about?
- If you had to sum up the best features of your thesis what would they be?
- Is there a clear and detailed rationale for the project and/or specific research questions?

- What surprised you about your findings?
- What are your major/key findings?
- Why did you undertake this particular piece of research? What is important or significant about your research?
- To whom is it important and why?
- What previous experience/ preconceptions/values/did you bring to this study?
- Were these (question above) helpful/unhelpful?
- How did you manage these?
- How might these have affected your data?
- In what ways?
- How do these add to the current literature?
- What specifically is your distinctive/ original contribution to the literature or practice?
- How might you disseminate your findings?
- What are the areas of weakness in your thesis?
- Knowing what you have learned through the process of undertaking this work, with hindsight what might you have done differently?

Literature/Content

- What interested you in this topic? / What brought you to this area of interest?
- What is its relevance to clinical/counselling/health psychology and psychology generally?
- On what basis did you undertake your literature review?
- With hindsight what would you do differently?
- Why did you not include the literature on X or the work of Y?
- Were you informed by any particular theoretical models or positions?
- Is the content homogenous and is this reflective of a wider literature or have you been selective, if so on what grounds?
- What are the limitations of the current literature?
- What aspects do you think need developing further?
- Explain how the literature informed your study?

Methodology

- What made you decide to ground your position in the epistemology that you did?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of using mixed methods?
- What difficulties arose for you with regard to your methodological selection?
- What made you choose IPA/DA/ FDA/ GT/Multiple regression/ etc ?
- In retrospect, what were the strengths and limitations of your chosen methodology?
- How is your epistemological position reflected in your research?

- What are your research questions?
- On what basis did you formulate these research questions?
- Explain the theoretical underpinnings of these questions?
- With hindsight might you change these questions, if so to what and why?
- How important is reflexivity and how have you addressed it in your work?
- How does your reflexivity impact on your research?
- How did you select your participants?
- How did you decide your inclusion/exclusion criteria?
- What are the limitations about your choice of participants/criteria?
- How did you go about recruiting?
- Was your sample homogenous?/Should you have achieved homogeneity?
- What are the shortcomings of IPA IPA/DA/ FDA/ GT/Multiple regression/ your methodology?
- Why couldn't you overcome the shortcomings of your methodology?
- Why did you use questionnaire x rather than questionnaire Y?
- Why did you decide to use this form of statistical analysis rather than x?
- How did you try to ensure that you maintained an ethical stance throughout your study?
- Tell us about any distress protocol you devised?
- With hindsight might you have changed this in any way?

Analysis

- Given the relatively small size of your sample, what can be taken from your research findings?
- Have you attended to the interpretative element of IPA rather than just described the findings?
- Did the themes really emerge from your data or did you already have these in mind already?
- How did the themes you list emerge? Talk us through this process?
- Why did you label a theme x rather than Y?
- What were your most interesting findings?
- What surprised you about your findings?
- Was there anything you expected to find which did not emerge?

Discussion

- Do you feel you brought together the literature and your findings into the discussion?
- What aspects of your work do you think could be published?
- What aspects of your work might be presented at a conference?
- Do you have any plans for publishing or presenting your work?
- What are you most proud of about your research?
- Knowing what you know now, how might you have undertaken any aspects of your research differently?

- You claim x, what is your rationale for saying this?
- What are the key take home messages from your research?
- What are the implications of your research for psychologists/health professionals/ experts by experience/researchers/ policy makers?
- With hindsight, what might have you done differently and why?
- How might future research build on your study?
- Is there anything you would like to tell us about which we have not given you an opportunity to discuss?

You may find that there are areas which you expected to be questioned about, which do not come up in the viva and examiners may also raise questions which you had previously not considered. If you do not know the answer to a question, it is quite acceptable to ask for a moment to think about this. If you still don't know the answer to a question, it is better to state this than to try and bluff, the examiners are likely to see through this. Some candidates find it useful to use post-it notes to mark the sections, important parts or tricky or challenging aspects of the thesis. Common questions would include the theoretical and applied aspects of the rationale, as that warrants the underlying structure/justifies the thesis to begin with. This rationale may on occasions include personal reasons, it is okay to add them as part of the narrative but avoid making it too confessional or self promoting, as this is not appropriate in this context. As with a job interview, it is possible to imagine what some of the questions you will be asked may be. Time spent on this may prove a useful investment of your time and may also help in reducing anxiety.

Preparation in relation to practical matters;

The thesis document

We recommend that candidates take their thesis annotated with appropriate labels to the viva, perhaps marking particular sections or areas which are considered important or you suspect that you might be questioned about. Do ensure that this copy has exactly the same page numbering as the copy given to the examiners, as they may wish to refer to a particular page in relation to a

question. It will assist you to be able to find it straight away, rather than having to search for it and perhaps becoming anxious in the process and not appearing professional or in control. It is quite acceptable to look things up and refer to your thesis. You may wish to take water or some notes in with you.

Difficult though it may be to imagine, once the viva is over, candidates often report having enjoyed the process. It may be helpful to remember that you are the person who is most expert in the area of your thesis, you have spent three years upwards thinking about and working on it and you have two people in the room who have read it and are very interested in the topic. Remember you are there to defend your thesis, do not interpret questions which appear critical as indicative of your thesis being poor or meaning that the outcome of the viva will be negative. All examiners have different styles. Your examiners may be the only people other than your supervisors who will read and study the thesis with this degree of attention and care.

The viva room

Candidates may find it helpful to go and look at the room where the viva is going to be held if it is a room or in a building with which they are not familiar, so that the route and lay out of the room are familiar. Prior to your viva the examiners will have provided individual reports on the thesis including areas they wish to discuss further in the viva and indicating a possible outcome. If they examiners feel the thesis is not ready for submission at this point they will state this and the viva will be postponed to enable the candidate to undertake further work on this. If this happens, whilst it may initially feel disappointing, it may be helpful to think of this as an opportunity to improve the work, as the candidate will normally receive guidance on what aspects require further work and an opportunity to improve the work before it is examined. This is a better alternative to failing a viva.

The viva itself

Who will be present

Examiners are there to ensure that a candidate can provide an academic explanation and rationale for the decisions made in their thesis. In the UK, there will usually be an external examiner (from

another university) who is an expert in the topic of the thesis or the methodology used, an internal examiner someone from the candidate's own university, (whom the candidate may already know). Most universities also have a chair person present, whose role is to ensure that the candidate is comfortable and that university rules and procedures are followed and to ensure 'fair play'. Other countries have different procedures and approaches. They play no part in the discussion and decision-making process. The doctoral supervisor may also be in attendance if the candidate requests this and they are available, but their role is merely as an observer, and they are not allowed to participate in the viva. The task of the examiners is not to be punitive or to try and catch candidates out, but to ask them to critically consider, discuss and evaluate their research. It may be helpful to remember that no research is perfect, often decisions have had to be made at a number of stages in the research process which are not what might have been made if budget and time were limitless. In addition, having completed the research, there may well be things the candidate might have done differently. Most researchers find this and it is a normal part of the research process.

By completing the programme of research and writing up the thesis candidates have already demonstrated commitment and undertaken considerable work. The viva is the culmination of all these efforts to date. Try and attend the viva in a positive frame of mind. It is a form of celebration and the culmination of your achievements and many years hard work. As stated earlier, vivas make most people anxious and the examiners understand this and will usually start the viva with some general straight forward questions.

Throughout the viva process candidates should aim to be polite and attentive, to try and be honest and open. The length of the viva will vary, but is usually of several hours duration, it is important that you schedule to keep the morning or afternoon free and to avoid scheduling anything challenging or difficult just before the viva. Candidates need at all times to listen to examiners' questions and comments carefully and thoughtfully consider their responses. It is important to listen carefully to the questions that you are asked and not to assume you know what you will be asked. Try and avoid getting defensive, even if you feel it. Be aware that, as far as your own research is concerned, you are "the expert". As stated earlier, don't be disappointed if your examiners don't ask you some questions which you expect to be asked. Also remember that your examiners will not be as familiar with the details of your thesis as you are. If you become aware that there is a misunderstanding over an aspect of your thesis, you should aim to ensure that matters are appropriately clarified. You may find you are asked a question which you believe has been answered in your thesis, if so it is helpful to answer the question honestly. Be prepared to be challenged and to agree and disagree, If you don't know the answer to a question, it is fine to say that you hadn't thought about it and then asked for a moment to collect your thoughts and give an answer.

Your examiners might ask you how you're finding or study relate to other studies or changes in the field, it is fine to give your opinion of something. Candidates need to be prepared to defend the methodological and theoretical decisions made. The examiners may ask about all aspects of the thesis, and they may make or imply criticisms of parts of your work in their questioning. They may do this in order to give you the opportunity to demonstrate that you have given thought to the limitations and constraints within which all research is undertaken. Avoid saying any theoretical or methodological decision was made on the basis that your supervisor told you to do this as it implies you are not conversant with the underlying rationale and reasoning which comprises your thesis, as well as implying that it was not a decision, which should have been made by you. Also try and avoid saying a decision was made because 'of the word limit or I ran out of time'. This does not give a professional impression and is not appropriate at doctorate level. You may find that there might be things that you regard as important about the thesis that you might wish to draw to the examiners' attention even if they do not directly ask about them (e.g. unusual/hard-to-reach participants).

The conclusion of the viva

At the end of the viva you will be asked to leave the room to give the examiners time to confer and will be called back once the examiners have reached a decision about your work. Do not read anything into the length of time you are asked to wait, some examiners write their reports during this period or spend time working on the wording regarding exactly what they will tell you. The decisions will normally be one of the following, the award of the degree with or without minor corrections, undertake major corrections with or without another viva, the award of an MPhil or fail. The latter two are a rare occurrence. The examiners may outline verbally any changes required at this point, although the candidate is generally not permitted to challenge or question the examiners at this point. You do not need to take notes about these changes as you will receive full details in writing shortly after the viva. If your supervisor is present they may take notes which can be discussed afterwards. Also you may find that you don't remember much other than the outcome. You will be sent details of the corrections required in written form quite soon after the viva and given the requisite time frame for completing these. It will be helpful to discuss these with your supervisory team. Candidates need to attend to all the corrections requested and it is important to prepare a brief document which clearly details how the correction has been addressed and details the page and paragraph number where each correction can be located. You will not win the good will of an examiner by expecting them to hunt through your entire thesis to find the corrections. A candidate may on occasions feel that they have addressed an issue and that in their opinion, the correction is not required. Corrections following a doctoral viva are not a matter of choice; they are a requirement made by the examiners who are invested with this power by your university. On occasions you may feel that your examiners have not clearly understood what you believe you have

already explained, but remember that you have been immersed in the topic for a number of years and the examiners did not find that it was clear. Although if you have clearly stated what they have requested, it is fine to draw the examiners' attention to this and quote the relevant page and paragraph numbers to them. It is not recommended that you show any annoyance in the document accompanying the corrections at this juncture but just ensure that what is requested is merely explained clearly and in line with the requirements of the examiners. You can of course, query or ask for clarification of a correction, but most universities prevent candidates from contacting the examiners directly, any communication during this period would all be conducted through the envoy of the supervisor or the chair of the examination. You will be given a time period by which the corrections must be completed, this must be adhered to. If they are completed more quickly it is quite acceptable to submit them earlier than the date given to you. Most universities will let a candidate know the outcome following the submission of their corrections within a set period (usually 2-3 Months). The award is then formally ratified by the relevant committees within the university and will then be formally awarded. Once you have been formally notified of this by your university you may start using the title of Doctor before your name, it should not be used until the formal written notification has been received. This is the final process in an academic and personal journey which culminates in the award of your doctoral degree and the change to the personal title you may use before your name.

Additional references which may be of interest

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