

Graduate School

# Your Viva Voce Exam



2013-14

# Introduction and Contents

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The viva voce exam is where you will give a verbal defence of your written thesis.

It is the culmination of your research degree, but many postgraduate researchers are unsure what to expect and what they can do to prepare. Here we want to take away some of the mystery - allowing you to take control and look forward to the viva exam as a positive experience.

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# Purpose and Format of the Viva Voce Examination

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Literally, "viva voce" means by or with the living voice - i.e., by word of mouth as opposed to writing. So the viva examination is where you will give a verbal defence of your thesis. Put simply, you should think of it as a verbal counterpart to your written thesis. Your thesis demonstrates your skill at presenting your research in writing. In the viva examination, you will demonstrate your ability to participate in academic discussion with research colleagues.

## Purpose of the Exam

The purpose of the viva examination is to:

- demonstrate that the thesis is your own work
- confirm that you understand what you have written and can defend it verbally
- investigate your awareness of where your original work sits in relation to the wider research field
- establish whether the thesis is of sufficiently high standard to merit the award of the degree for which it is submitted
- allow you to clarify and develop the written thesis in response to the examiners' questions

## The Examiners and Exam Chair

You will normally have two examiners:

- an internal examiner who will be a member of academic staff of the University, usually from your School/Department but not one of your supervisors
- an external examiner who will normally be a member of academic staff of another institution or occasionally a professional in another field with expertise in your area of research (candidates who are also members of University staff will normally have two external examiners in place of an internal and an external examiner)

Your supervisor should let you know who your examiners will be as it is important that you ensure you are familiar with their work and any particular approach that they may take when examining your thesis.

In some cases there may also be a Chair person for the examination. A Chair is appointed if the Graduate Dean or either of the examiners feels this is appropriate, for example where the examining team has relatively little experience of examining UK research degrees. The Chair is there to ensure the examination is conducted in line with University regulations and is not there to examine your thesis.

If there is a Chair person, it will usually be a senior member of the academic staff of your School/Department.

Normally no one else is present in the exam.

## **Exam Venue and Arrangements**

Your internal examiner is responsible for arranging your viva exam and they will contact you with the relevant details - date, time, venue, etc.

Usually the viva exam will take place in your School/Department, though occasionally another University location may be used. If you are unsure where you need to go, make sure you check this before the day of your exam.

If you returned your Notice of Intention to Submit Your Thesis three months before your submission date, your viva exam should normally take place quite soon after submission. Almost all viva exams take place within three months of thesis submission and in many cases it is within one month.

## **Format of the Exam**

All viva examinations are different, so it is not possible to describe exactly what will happen - but there are general points which can be made which may be helpful, and you should have the opportunity before your examination to discuss what will happen with your supervisor or to attend the University's pre-viva examination workshop.

The purpose of the viva is to establish that your work is of a sufficiently high standard to merit the award of the degree for which it is submitted. In order to be awarded a research degree, the thesis should demonstrate an original contribution to knowledge and contain work which is deemed worthy of publication.

In order to do this, examiners may:

- ask you to justify your arguments
- ask you to justify not only things which you have included in your thesis but also things which you may have left out
- ask you questions about the wider research context in which the work has been undertaken
- argue certain points with you
- expect you to discuss any developments which may flow from your work in the future

Inevitably, your thesis will have strengths and weaknesses and the examiners will want to discuss these. It is considered a positive thing, indeed an essential thing, that you can discuss both the strengths and the weaknesses. You can think of the weaknesses as an opportunity to demonstrate your skill at critical appraisal.

Remember that examiners seek to find and discuss weaknesses in all theses - you should not interpret criticism as an indication that the examination will not end successfully.

# How to Prepare for Your Viva Voce Examination

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**Getting ready for your viva exam isn't something you need to panic about. It's normal to be anxious, but you can prepare yourself for the big day in four easy steps - Get to Re-Know Your Thesis, Practice Your Exam Responses, Think About Your Examiners, and Use the Support Available.**

**Taking a structured approach to your exam preparations and making sure to follow each of these steps will help give you the confidence you need to effectively defend your thesis.**

## Getting to Re-Know Your Thesis

Having spent so many years with your thesis, it may seem strange to hear that a key part of your preparations is to get to re-know it. Your examiners will expect you to have a good understanding of the structure and contents of your thesis and that means getting to know it in a different way.

### Step Back from the Detail

Your examiners are likely to ask you to comment on the wider implications of your work, so you should take some time to think more broadly about your research.

You may wish to use the following questions to help you prepare for discussing these issues in your viva examination:

- What is your thesis? - i.e., What is your original contribution to knowledge?
- Which overarching philosophical or theoretical assumptions have you been working within? Why? How successful were you working within these assumptions?
- If you were given a block of new funding now, how would you like to follow up your work?
- Think about your examiners: What links their work with your own research? Have you got hold of some of their published work to get a feel for how they work and how they discuss research?
- What would you do differently if you were starting again?

- What has been happening in your field since you completed your research? Is a further literature review necessary? How does your research fit into this updated context?

### **Return to the Detail**

Your aim is to know your thesis very well and be calm and confident as you begin your viva examination. You should try to remember that most research students who reach this stage do succeed in gaining their degree.

Here are some ideas to help you regain and retain familiarity with the detail of your thesis:

- Re-read your thesis carefully; do not panic if you notice any mistakes - make a note of them so that it will not come as a surprise to you if they are mentioned in the examination and so that you can address them when you are making corrections for your final submission
- As you re-read your thesis, make summary notes on the main points from each page
- Print a copy of the List of Contents with plenty of spacing so that you can write a brief summary of the content under each heading
- Practice telling the story of your research in two minutes
- Practice telling the story of each chapter - giving yourself two minutes in each case
- Identify areas of weakness and make notes on each of these
- Identify the elements of originality in your thesis
- Identify your contribution to knowledge in your field
- Identify the theoretical, empirical, and practical implications of your findings

### **Practice Exam**

Once you have re-familiarised yourself with your thesis, you can move on to practising your responses to some common viva exam questions.

## Practice Your Exam Responses

Every viva examination is different, so it is not possible to know in advance exactly what the examiners will ask you. However, there are some common questions which you may like to practice as part of your own preparations.

Generally, the questions that are asked in viva examinations can be grouped under four basic headings:

- What is it about?
- What did you do?
- What did you find?
- Why does that matter?

Practicing how you would answer these four basic questions will take you a long way in your preparations.

Below are some more specific questions that follow on from these basic questions; these are arranged following the order of a typical thesis. Again, practice how you would answer them and think about any other questions that might come up in the context of your own research.

### General Questions

- Why did you decide on this particular research question?
- What have you found the most interesting aspect of your research?
- How did your thinking about this topic develop as you went through this research process?
- Now that you have completed the research, which part of the process would you say you enjoyed most and why?
- Were there any surprises along the way?
- How did doing this research change you as a researcher?

## **Research Context**

- You refer to ... as a key influence on your research - can you summarise the particular relevance of their work?
- What developments have there been in this field since you began your doctorate? How have these changed the research context in which you are working?
- You make only passing reference to the field of ... why do you think that field is less relevant than the others you have given more space to?
- You do not say much about the ... theory in your thesis - can you explain why you have not focused more on that?

## **Research Methods**

- How well did the study design work in practice?
- Did you have any problems with the data collection process?
- You used an existing research method and developed it further - can you tell us why this further development was needed?
- What were the main ethical issues of conducting this research?
- How did you establish the limits around the scope of your data collection?

## **Analysis and Findings**

- Can you talk us through your methods of analysis?
- Did you encounter any problems with applying this method of analysis?
- Do you think the data you collected were the most appropriate to answer your research question or are there any other data you would have liked to have collected?
- Can you describe your main findings in a few sentences?

## **Discussion**

- If you were starting your research again now, are there any changes in the way you would plan it?
- You interpret these findings as ... but do you think there could be an argument for interpreting them as ... instead?

- You said in your thesis that ... - can you expand on that point?
- In what way do you consider your thesis to be original?

### **Conclusions/Implications**

- What are the empirical, practice, and theoretical implications of your findings?
- How would you hope that this research could be followed up and taken further?

### **Think About Your Examiners**

Different examiners have different styles when it comes to conducting viva examinations. Thinking about your examiners and their interests can give you some idea what to expect in your own exam.

#### **Examiner Interests**

Examiners are often guided in their examination questioning by their own research interests; familiarising yourself with the research interests of your examiners can therefore give you some indication as to the lines of questioning they may follow.

Of course you won't be able to anticipate their lines of questioning entirely, but you might gain some insight and be able to anticipate an area of your own research in which they may show a particular interest.

Ask your supervisor for advice - your supervisor may well be familiar with your examiners and their work and be able to suggest areas of your own work where the examiners may have a specific interest. You may also want to consult any recent journal articles or other works published by your examiners to see if there are aspects that relate to your research and on which they may therefore want to question you.

## Examiner Approaches

You also need to think about what sort of approach your examiners may take in the exam. Again, your supervisor may be able to give you some clues in this respect.

One thing that you particularly need to anticipate is that some examiners may take an approach that can feel challenging. Experienced and effective examiners will not be inappropriately confrontational - but some personalities are more prone to such an approach. It is important that you do not take offence. A relaxed, thoughtful, and non-confrontational response from you will help rebalance the discussion.

Murray (2003:105) suggests the following are ways not to respond to a challenge of a weakness in your research:

- give a general, resigned declaration that "this happens in every study"
- blame your supervisor
- blame your data
- say "that was beyond the scope of my study" without giving a cogent argument to support the statement
- dismiss as unimportant what has been identified as a weakness

Rather than responding in these ways, a better approach is to:

- take time to consider before replying
- remember to breathe and speak reasonably slowly
- not take the criticism personally
- not take offence
- not get angry
- enjoy the opportunity to talk about your research

Finally, remember that your examiners may be very precise in their questioning, referring to particular pages in your thesis - so do not forget to take a copy with you to your examination.

## Use the Support Available

We hope you will find these pages of use in developing your own plan for preparing for the examination, but research students can access a range of University and other support.

### Your Supervisors

Your supervisors can play a key role in developing a plan for your viva examination preparations.

Your supervisors can offer guidance and reassurance as to what to expect and may also be able to help you with your preparations - for example, by going through a practice viva examination with you.

Speak with your supervisors early on in your preparations to see how they can help.

### The Good Viva Video

Registered University of Leicester research students can also watch The Good Viva Video. This thirty minute film will explain what you can expect at your viva examination and how you can ensure your preparations are as effective as possible:

▶ [www2.le.ac.uk/departments/gradschool/training/eresources/study-guides/viva/viva-video](http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/gradschool/training/eresources/study-guides/viva/viva-video)

### Preparing for the Viva Examination – Workshop

The University runs a workshop for research students preparing for their viva examination. It is recommended that you should have already made your first thesis submission before attending the workshop or be planning to submit in the next six months. This workshop is presented regularly during term time - see the events diary:

▶ [www2.le.ac.uk/departments/gradschool/training/diary](http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/gradschool/training/diary)

There may also be viva preparation training in your College and/or School/Department - if you are unsure, please speak with your supervisors or postgraduate tutor.

## External Resources

There are also a number of external online resources you may want to look at:

- ▶ Vitae Viva Preparations Guidance  
[www.vitae.ac.uk/researchers/1241/Your-viva.html](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/researchers/1241/Your-viva.html)
  
- ▶ Vitae Viva Checklist  
[www.vitae.ac.uk/researchers/1258/Viva-checklist.html](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/researchers/1258/Viva-checklist.html)
  
- ▶ Tara Brabazon Ten Tips for Viva Success  
[www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/411311.article](http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/411311.article)
  
- ▶ PORT Viva Tutorial  
<http://port.igrs.sas.ac.uk/tutorials/viva>

## And finally...

A further and final step in your preparations may well be the most difficult - think positively! Positive thinking will help you feel in control of the situation which will increase your confidence. Try to be:

- anticipating a potentially interesting discussion
- ready to engage in debate
- confident in your preparation
- eager to get on with it
- relieved at being there at last
- excited at the challenge ahead

And, perhaps most importantly, try to look forward to completing your research degree!

# Final Preparations for Your Viva Voce Examination

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While good preparation for your viva examination is clearly important, you should not allow yourself to overlook the more practical details. Making sure you are clear on these will help you feel in control of the process and avoid any unnecessary anxiety that could affect your performance on the day.

And don't forget that if you are at all unsure as to the details for your examination, contact your School/Department as early as possible for advice.

## Getting There

Plan your travel ahead of the exam - it will be one less thing to worry about on the day. Aim to arrive 15-30 minutes early and this will give you time to settle and make any last minute preparations.

## Exam Length

There is no standard viva exam length and it can vary between disciplines. Usually they last between one and three hours. Your supervisor can advise you what is normal in your discipline.

## Things to Take With You

It's a good idea to have a notepad and pen in case you want to make a note of any comments that are made at the end of the examination.

The most important thing to bring however is your thesis itself. You are not expected to have memorised your thesis and you may want to refer to it at points during the examination. However, the examiners will be unimpressed should you need to flick back and forth through your thesis to find what you need.

You should have a good idea of where things are in your thesis and many research students find it useful to use Post-It notes to locate pages that they think they may need to refer to.

## **And finally...**

Good luck! Try not to worry - you can do this. And in a very short space of time you will find yourself submitting the final version of your thesis and getting ready for the graduation ceremony.

## Examination Outcomes and What They Mean

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The University's Regulations Governing Research Degree Programmes set out what decisions your examiners may make following your viva examination.

At the end of your viva exam, your examiners will ask you to leave the room so that they can discuss what recommendation to make. Do not worry if it is some time before you are asked to come back in - your examiners will have a lot to discuss, so it is not a sign that you have done badly if this does take some time. Most research students who get to this stage are successful and are awarded their degree - try to relax and to stay positive while you wait.

### Examiner Decisions

Depending on what type of degree you are registered for, your examiners will make one of the following decisions following your viva examination:

- to award the degree for which you were examined with distinction (research students examined for the degree of MD)
- to award the degree for which you were examined
- to award the degree for which you were examined subject to the satisfactory completion of minor amendments to the thesis
- to award the degree for which you were examined subject to the satisfactory completion of major amendments to the thesis
- to refer you for resubmission of the thesis for the same degree as which you were examined
- to award a degree lower than that for which you were examined (research students examined for the degree of PhD, DSocSci, or EdD)
- to award a degree lower than that for which you were examined subject to the satisfactory completion of minor amendments to the thesis (research students examined for the degree of PhD or EdD)
- to refer you for resubmission of the thesis for a degree lower than that for which you were examined (research students examined for the degree of PhD or EdD)
- to fail the thesis with no right of resubmission

It is only very rarely that examiners decide to award a degree without requiring some amendments to the thesis – in the majority of cases, examiners will decide to award the degree subject to amendments or, in a smaller number of cases, will decide that the research student should be referred for resubmission of the thesis.

## **Minor Amendments**

Being asked to complete minor amendments is the most common outcome of a viva examination. The amendments that you will need to complete will be largely typographical or grammatical and may include corrections to references and/or diagrams and the re-writing of small sections of text.

If your examiners decide that minor amendments are needed, they will explain what these are at the end of the examination. Your examiners will then give you a period of between one to three months to complete the required amendments and submit these to your internal examiner.

## **Major Amendments**

If you are asked to complete major amendments these will be more substantial - they will involve more than typographical and other minor corrections and may include substantial re-writing of parts of the thesis.

If your examiners decide that major amendments are needed, they will following the examination provide you with a written report which indicates what these are. Your examiners will then give you a period of between three to six months to complete the required amendments and submit these to your internal examiner.

## **Referral for Resubmission**

Referral for resubmission means that the examiners are agreed that you need to undertake further research or repeat completed research and/or re-write or restructure large parts of your thesis. While this outcome can be disappointing, it is important to remember that most referred research students do go on to successfully complete their thesis.

Your examiners will give you a referral period of between six and twelve months from the date at which you are provided with the examining team's post-viva exam report including details as to the changes and corrections required. You must then submit two soft bound copies of your revised thesis to the Graduate School Office.

If you are referred for resubmission of the thesis, a resubmission fee is payable.

If you are referred for resubmission of the thesis, the examining team will decide whether a further viva examination is needed. The decision whether to hold a further viva examination will be taken once the examiners have assessed your resubmitted thesis. On completion of the assessment of the resubmitted thesis, and a further viva examination if one is held, the examiners will jointly make one of the following decisions:

- to award the degree for which you were examined with distinction (research students examined for the degree of MD)
- to award the degree for which you were examined
- to award the degree for which you were examined subject to the satisfactory completion of minor amendments to the thesis
- to award a degree lower than that for which you were examined (research students examined for the degree of PhD, DSocSci, or EdD)
- to award a degree lower than that for which you were examined subject to the satisfactory completion of minor amendments to the thesis (research students examined for the degree of PhD or EdD)
- to fail the thesis with no right of resubmission

## **Award of a Lower Degree**

A lower degree can be awarded if you have not met the requirements for the degree for which you have examined but have met the requirements for a lower degree.

Lower degrees can be awarded only in the case of research students examined for the degree of PhD, DSocSci, or EdD. On these programmes the award of a lower degree is conditional on:

- the thesis meeting the requirements for the degree of MPhil (research students examined for the degree of PhD or EdD)

or

- the student having successfully completed the taught components and other programme requirements (research students examined for the degree of DSocSci or EdD)

Research students examined for the degree of DSocSci or EdD and who are awarded a lower degree on the basis of the successful completion of the taught components and other programme requirements, will receive the degree of Master of Social Science or Master of Educational Research.

## **Clarification of Examiner Comments**

If you are required to make minor or major amendments to the thesis or are referred for resubmission of the thesis, you must not contact members of the examining team regarding the changes or corrections required.

Research students who need clarification on any points relating to the changes or corrections required must seek advice from their supervisory team.

## **Support for Research Students Awarded a Lower Degree or who Fail**

These outcomes are uncommon and it is very rare for a thesis to fail at this stage with no possibility of re-submission. If you are awarded a lower degree or fail, it is important that you seek advice on the options that are available to you. Make time to speak with:

- your supervisors
- the postgraduate tutor in your School/Department
- the University's Student Support Service
- the Students' Union Education Unit

If you are unhappy about the way your viva examination was conducted or the recommendation made by your examiners, please contact the Graduate School Office.

## Final Submission of Your Thesis

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**If you have been awarded your degree without amendments being needed, or you have made any amendments needed and your internal examiner has confirmed these have been completed satisfactorily, you need to prepare and submit the final version of your thesis. This should be done promptly – the conferral of your degree may be delayed until the final bound copy of your thesis has been received.**

### Binding and Submitting Your Thesis

For your final submission, you are required to submit one copy of the final version your thesis to the Graduate School Office. This copy must be hard bound and the binding must be Standard Green – Arbelave Library Buckram No. 563. The front and back covers should be blank while the spine should have your name, thesis title (abbreviated to fit if necessary), degree, and year of first submission in gold lettering.

You can download an illustration of what your thesis spine should look like:

- ▶ [www2.le.ac.uk/departments/gradschool/training/eresources/study-guides/viva/after/final-submission/spine.pdf](http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/gradschool/training/eresources/study-guides/viva/after/final-submission/spine.pdf)

Theses which are not bound correctly will be delayed while arrangements are made for them to be re-bound at your expense.

The University's Print Services can print and bind your thesis - for more advice, please visit the Print Services Website:

- ▶ [www2.le.ac.uk/offices/printservices](http://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/printservices)

Theses do not need to be submitted in person, but if you are sending yours by post you should consider using a secure means such as recorded delivery. If your thesis is being printed and bound by Print Services, they can normally deliver the bound copies to the Graduate School Office for you.

You must also submit to the Graduate School Office a completed final thesis submission form:

- ▶ [www2.le.ac.uk/departments/gradschool/zone/thesis-submission/final-submission/form](http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/gradschool/zone/thesis-submission/final-submission/form)

The final submission form must include an original signature. If you are not submitting your thesis in person, the final submission form should be sent to the Graduate School Office by post – electronic or scanned signatures are not permitted.

## Submitting Your eThesis

In addition to the hard bound copy of your thesis, you are required to submit to the University Library an electronic copy of the final version of your thesis. The electronic copy - also known as an eThesis - should be submitted as a single PDF at the same time as you submit your hard bound copy.

The eThesis will be made available through the University's Leicester Research Archive and the UK's Electronic Theses Online Service (EThOS).

Etheses are much more accessible than printed theses. Adding your thesis to the Leicester Research Archive means that it will be accessible to the worldwide research community and significantly improves the chances that your work will be viewed, consulted, and cited – something that is particularly important as you look to take your first steps into your career beyond your degree.

You can learn more about the benefits of etheses and how to create and submit your eThesis in the University's etheses study guide:

- ▶ [www2.le.ac.uk/departments/gradschool/training/eresources/study-guides/etheses](http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/gradschool/training/eresources/study-guides/etheses)

## Graduation and Staying in Touch

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Once the Graduate School Office has received from your examiners confirmation that you have met the requirements for a degree, you will receive a letter notifying you of your degree award. Normally this will be sent at the start of the following month.

### Degree Congregations

In due course you will also be invited to attend a degree congregation to collect your degree certificate. Degree congregations are held in January and July each year and you will be invited to the next degree congregation following the confirmation of your award.

If you are unable to attend, you can request to graduate in absentia – in which case your degree certificate will be posted to you after the degree congregation has taken place.

To learn more, visit the Graduation Advice Website:

- ▶ [www2.le.ac.uk/offices/sas2/graduation](http://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/sas2/graduation)

### Alumni Association

We hope that you will want to keep in touch with the University by visiting us and by studying with us again in the future. More formally, you can stay in touch through the University of Leicester Alumni Association.

Whether you graduate in person or in absentia, you will remain a member of the University's community and will be automatically accepted as a member of the University of Leicester Alumni Association.

To learn more, visit the Alumni Association Website:

- ▶ [www.le.ac.uk/alumni](http://www.le.ac.uk/alumni)

## Help Other Research Students

The Graduate School is always keen to hear from research degree graduates, particularly if you are able to share your career story with current research students or can support current research students through funding or internship opportunities.

To get in touch, please email [graduatedean@le.ac.uk](mailto:graduatedean@le.ac.uk)

## Your Career After Your Research Degree

A postgraduate qualification is an investment in your future. Like you, we are keen that your investment pays off. The University offers continuing support to all University graduates - helping you to take your first steps into a career beyond your degree.

Read more about careers support for alumni:

- ▶ [www2.le.ac.uk/offices/careers-new/apps](http://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/careers-new/apps)

You might also want to look at the Vitae guidance on CVs, applications, and job interviews for research degree graduates:

- ▶ [www2.le.ac.uk/departments/gradschool/training/eresources/vitae/effective-cv](http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/gradschool/training/eresources/vitae/effective-cv)

The Graduate School  
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