

## Guidance on the Conduct of the Oral Examination

### INTRODUCTION

This guidance is intended for Examiners and Internal Advisors of Research Degrees. It sets out good practice in terms of the conduct of Postgraduate Research degree oral examinations. Attached to the Guidance is a Research Student Oral Examination checklist which may be used during the oral examination.

### THE PURPOSE OF THE ORAL EXAMINATION

The purpose of the viva is to gather further evidence from the candidate about their suitability for the award, in particular:

- to ask the candidate to clarify issues relating to meeting criteria relating to specific parts of the thesis, to the thesis as a whole, and to the award;
- to ascertain that the thesis is the candidate's own work, that he or she has developed research skills at this level, and that he or she understands the relationship of the thesis to the wider field of knowledge;
- in cases where the thesis and/or the candidate clearly does not meet the criteria for the award, to find out the reasons. These may include the abilities of the candidate or other factors affecting the research, e.g. deficiencies in research training, the quality of supervision, the availability of resources, disruptions to the research process, or personal circumstances

### THE ROLE OF THE SUPERVISOR(S)

It is normally the Internal Examiner or Internal Adviser who arranges the date, time and place of the viva. The supervisor should normally be available for consultation if necessary prior to and during the viva although they are not normally present. The supervisor may however at the invitation of the examiners, attend all or any part of the oral. In such circumstances, the supervisor is permitted to comment only if expressly asked to do so by the Chair of the examiners.

### BEFORE THE ORAL EXAMINATION

The Internal and External Examiners are required independently to assess the thesis and each prepare an individual independent report on the work. Normally a couple of hours before the viva, the examiners should arrange to exchange and discuss their individual independent reports. Examiners should then, bearing in mind each other's comments upon the written work, jointly determine:

#### **The key issues to be raised with the candidate**

These will be those identified in the initial reports where clarification is required or where criteria have not been met.

#### **The order within which they are to be raised**

In order to encourage candidates to talk, it can be helpful to raise relatively uncontroversial/factual issues at the start and then proceed to ones which are likely to be more difficult/conceptual when the viva is well underway.

#### **Who will 'lead' on each issue**

Examiners usually decide upon a division of labour based upon their expertise in the topic, with one leading on each issue and the other asking supplementary questions. Normally, the external examiner chairs the proceedings and has overall responsibility for conducting the viva. In cases where there is more than one external, it should be agreed who will undertake this role.

## **AT THE ORAL EXAMINATION**

Good practice in conducting a viva is:

### **To ensure that the room is appropriately laid-out**

The viva is a formal occasion, and the room should be appropriately laid out.

### **To welcome the candidate and introduce the examiners**

It is courteous to the candidate for the chair of the examiners to introduce him- or herself and the other examiner(s) to the candidate.

### **To explain the purpose of the viva to the candidate**

It can be useful to explain to candidates that the purpose of the viva is to provide them with the opportunity to defend their thesis in high-level debate with experts drawn from the relevant research community.

### **To explain the process of the viva to the candidate**

As many candidates will not have previously undertaken a viva, it can be helpful to explain the process to them. This involves the examiners asking questions about their work and supplementary questions based upon their answers.

The chair should make it clear that the examiners have a duty to thoroughly explore both the work presented and the candidate's knowledge and understanding of both it and the wider field and that persistent questioning is a normal and necessary part of the process.

The chair should not allow a candidate to be apprised of the likely result of the oral examination.

The candidate should also be told that he or she may, if they wish, consult with their copy of the thesis throughout the viva.

The chair should explain that the University has an equal opportunities policy and only matters relating to the research will be considered in the examination.

The chair should also advise the candidates of any housekeeping issues regarding comfort breaks etc.

### **To start by commending the candidate**

Candidates can be extremely nervous, and it is important to try and settle them down at the start of the viva by saying something commendatory but non-committal, eg 'We found your thesis very interesting, we particularly enjoyed ...'.

### **To question the candidate**

Examiners should then start the questions. Normally, the external examiner begins the questions, and he or she should choose ones to start with which candidates should be able to answer without undue difficulty, eg 'why did you decide to do this topic?', 'what aspect of the work have you most enjoyed?' Further questions should then be asked covering the key issues and in the order previously identified. In questioning the candidate, examiners should:

#### **ask questions in a constructive and positive way**

Examiners should try to ask questions in ways that are constructive and positive rather than destructive and negative, eg 'why did you try to solve the problem using method X rather than method Y?' rather than 'Didn't you realise that you could have avoided these difficulties with method Y?'

**use an appropriate range of questioning techniques**

Questions may, as Murray (1998) has noted, be general ('How did you come to study this topic?'), open ('tell me about your methodology?') or closed ('why did you think that the confidence limits were unimportant in this case?').

General or open ones are useful in encouraging the candidate to reflect upon their work, while closed ones lead to specific answers. Examiners should try to tailor the type of question to the type of answer required and, if possible, aim for a mix of general and open questions (which are harder to answer but can reveal much more about the candidate) and closed ones (which may reveal less but are easier for the candidate to answer).

**recognize that candidates may need time to answer**

Particularly when asked general or open questions, candidates may need some time to gather their thoughts together and produce a coherent answer. Examiners need to recognize this and encourage candidates to reflect, eg by telling them to 'take your time'.

**praise a good answer**

When candidates give a particularly incisive or interesting answer, it can be helpful to their morale to praise them.

**give candidates a chance to recover from a poor answer**

When candidates give a poor answer, this may be through misunderstanding or nerves. Rephrasing a question and asking it again gives the able candidate the opportunity to recover the position or may confirm the inability to respond of a weaker one.

**To conclude the viva**

After you and your co-examiner(s) are satisfied that you have gathered the relevant evidence, you should indicate this to the candidate, thank them for answering your questions, ask whether there are any concluding comments which they wish to make, explain again that the examiners will now consult about the outcome, and tell them how the recommendation will be communicated to them. While this may be done informally after the viva, candidates should be informed that formal notification of the result will be given by the Graduate School Office.

**POOR PRACTICE**

Poor practice in conducting the viva (see Partington, Brown and Gordon (1993: p78)) would be for an examiner to act throughout as:

**An inquisitor**

This examiner behaves like a TV interviewer quizzing a politician during an election campaign, rapidly shooting out hostile questions, interrupting the answers and generally trying to score points. Such an approach may intimidate the candidate so that he or she is unable to respond, or anger them to the extent that the viva becomes an adversarial confrontation.

**A proof reader**

This examiner takes candidates line by line through their theses asking questions about errors of spelling, punctuation and grammar. If these are exceptionally poor, instead of proof reading in the viva, examiners can make it a requirement that the thesis is re-typed or hand the candidate a list of corrections after the viva.

**A committee person**

The committee person takes the candidate through the thesis page by page questioning each matter as it arises rather than synthesising points into key issues relating to the trigger for the study, the methodology, the design, etc.

**A hobby horse rider**

This examiner has strong feelings or prejudices about one area of the thesis and keeps returning to questions on this while neglecting other aspects of the research.

**A kite flyer**

The kite-flyer has identified a – usually fairly tenuous – link between the thesis and another subject and persists in exploring this to the detriment of the examination of the topic as defined by the candidate, ie effectively examines a thesis which the student did not write.

**A reminiscer**

This examiner continually regales the candidate with stories of their own research career to the detriment of the examination of the candidate's work.

**AFTER THE ORAL EXAMINATION**

After reading the thesis and, if appropriate, conducting the viva, examiners have to decide upon a recommendation, write a report on the examination, and decide what information should be given to candidates required to amend or re-submit theses or dissertations.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This Guidance has been brought together by the Assistant Registrar of the Graduate School which is based primarily on work already developed by Dr S Taylor, Academic Staff Development Officer

Graduate School  
July 2005

## RESEARCH STUDENT ORAL EXAMINATION – CHECKLIST

### Welcome and Introduction at the start of the Examination

At the start of the viva, the chair should:	
Introduce the examiners	
Ensure that the candidate has received a copy of the Guide for Postgraduate Research Students on the Research Degree Examination Process and that they have read sections 2 and 11 and Appendix A or B (as appropriate)	
Explain the purpose of the viva to the candidate	
Explain the process of the viva to the candidate	
Explain that the examiners will produce a joint written report at the outcome of the examination and that they may make notes during the examination.	
Explain that the University has an equal opportunities policy for students and that only matters relating to the research will be considered in the examination.	
Explain any housekeeping issues including comfort breaks.	
<b>Conclusion of the viva</b>	
When the Examiners have finished their discussion with the candidate, the chair should:	
thank the candidate for answering the questions,	
ask the candidate whether there are any concluding comments which he/she wishes to make,	
explain again that the examiners will now consult about the outcome, and tell them how the recommendation will be communicated to them. (Normally, the candidate should leave the room and be asked to return at an agreed time to be invited in to hear the informal result.)	
explain that a letter will be sent to the candidate giving formal notification of the outcome of the examination and giving information on what to do next.	

Graduate School  
July 2005