

# The Dark Romanticism of Vivas: Practice Issues and Preparation

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*This paper addresses three areas. The first is a discussion of the context for doctoral education and the use of vivas across higher education as the assessment method for doctoral education. The second area is a review of the data on submissions for doctoral examination across a post-92 university. The findings of the paper are based on a review and analysis of data concerning submission for examination and outcomes from viva examination across three colleges across a two-year period. A qualitative analysis of anonymised data was completed from three areas. The third part of the paper addresses the advice and guidance given to candidate in preparation for the viva. This informs the aspiration to increase the postgraduate research community of the university, increase the offer of professional doctorates (PD), and grow the post graduate intake for the Doctoral School.*

**Keywords;** doctorates, qualitative analysis, preparation, vivas

## Introduction

The dark romanticism<sup>1</sup> of the viva is the appeal and aspiration of joining a doctoral community of practice and the promise of entry into the academy as a fully-fledged, peer member of academia, accepted by authorities in the field of research, and judged on the quality of the doctoral thesis and performance in the viva voce. The darkness of the viva is a reference to the 'dark art' of vivas and the circulating narratives that inform the backdrop to viva preparation, provide the contextual 'wall paper' to the viva process and make available

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the competing 'atrocious' stories of successfully completing the viva. The viva carries this Janus-faced dialectic of opening new doors, crossing new thresholds and providing a horizon of possibilities or leaving a permanent and indelible trace of an experience not to be forgotten (Carter & Whittaker, 2009).

Quality Assurance Agency (QAA, 2015) provides a set of expectations and indicators for higher research degrees with research defined as 'creative work undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge' (OECD, 1993) or 'a process of investigation leading to new insights, effectively shared', through 'applied research' excluding routine testing and analysis and teaching materials ([www.ref.ac.uk](http://www.ref.ac.uk)). Hoddell (2002: 62) states '[a] Professional Doctorates is a programme of advanced study and research which, whilst satisfying the University criteria for the award of a doctorate, is designed to meet the specific needs of a professional group external to the University, and which develops the capability of individuals to work within a professional context'.

In the UK, the oral examination is usually a 'closed' examination, where only the candidate, examiners, and any independent observer or chair is present. An External Examiner is appointed according to quality assurance processes of the University with an Internal Examiner consonant with internal processes. Many Universities permit the supervisor to be present to observe the examination with the candidate's and examiners' permission, but they do not play an active role in the final decision-making process. This differs from some non-UK European oral examination models involving a public defence, where the candidate may invite family and friends to join the audience in what is considered a celebration as well as a defence of the thesis, and where the outcome of the award is usually already known. Where UK universities are offering joint programmes with other European partners the public defence is sometimes used rather than the 'closed' UK model (QAA, 2015) with considerable variation and some mystification (Morley et al., 2002).

The QAA (2015) suggests whether the candidate is being examined on a 'traditional' thesis, portfolio, artefact(s), clinical practice or other outputs the critical evaluation in answer the research question(s) and performance in the oral examination is the point at which a decision is made in the award of the doctorate. The dominance of vivas as the final

assessment method is under scrutiny given the proliferation of professional doctorates and the various forms of assessment they require. For example, practice based doctorates, work based doctorates, doctorates by public works all require different forms of assessment and creative and performing arts require artefacts or creative products accompanied by as critical commentary.

### **The postgraduate context**

The postgraduate landscape is 'neglected' (The British Academy, 2012) and in crisis, overlooked and undervalued, muddled with transitions (Wakeling & Hampden-Thompson, 2013), motivations (HESA, 2013; Mellors-Bourne et al., 2014) and recruitment and selection processes (CRAC & Vitae, 2014) determinant on funding (Lindley & Machin, 2013; NUS, 2012) in an international field (Clarke & Lund, 2014).

The issue of funding for postgraduate taught students has come into focus with the announcement of the Government back loans scheme for the foreseeable future with BIS (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills) overseeing its implementation. The needs of distance learning and part-time postgraduate research students awaits sustained discussion.

### **Vivas**

Researching the proceedings of doctoral viva is difficult (Burnham, 1994) although generic guidance on viva performance is provided (Cryer, 2006; Churchill & Sanders, 2007; Philips & Pugh, 2005; Rugg & Petre, 2004; Sharp & Howard, 1996). The process of examining doctoral thesis is surrounding by different agendas, ideologies and practices (Carter & Whittaker, 2009) and the very notion of 'doctorateness' has received continued debate but unsuccessful resolution. Trafford and Lesham (2008; 2009) have suggested preparing for the viva, at the start of achieving a doctorate, is an integral part of achieving 'doctorateness'. 'Doing a doctorate' is in the production of the written thesis and the oral defence of the thesis in the viva. The literature surrounding vivas is often confined to generic guidance on students' projects or guidance manuals (Philips & Pugh, 2015; Jackson & Tinkler, 2015).

The received wisdom on the viva process is that it is at best 'traditional'. At worst, the viva

is the dark arts of doctoral study. The UK doctoral assessment (thesis and oral examination) provides evidence of equivalence of standards across different institutions, doctorates and candidates (QAA, 2015). The question of providing cohesive, comprehensive and helpful learning materials and support for candidate preparing for vivas has triggered the need to review viva outcomes. This also contributes to the monitoring and review of quality assurance mechanism on doctoral programmes.

### **Methodology and Data collection - Review of the data on submissions for doctoral examination across a university.**

Using archival research methods, the data is thematically coded for rich detail and flexibility (Braun & Clark, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017) and below is a review of preliminary report forms, external examiners comments and recommendations to candidates that have been reviewed over a two-year period in a school of a Higher Education provider. The most desired outcome of the viva is a straight pass with no recommendations from an unusual 'word-perfect' thesis with the necessary rigour for doctoral work. Most results of vivas, fall into the category of pass, pass with minor amendments, major amendments or resubmission. The results of vivas resulting in resubmission usually fall into with or without a viva, an acceptance of an MPhil or the worst-case scenario: a fail. The following section investigates the minor, major and resubmission.

The University Research Regulations state that the award of PhD/PD subject to minor amendments is the Recommendation 10.2. This recommendation "*should be used where the requirements of the degree have been met, except that minor typographical and/or minor editorial amendments are needed and a re-examination is not required*". Three months is permitted for submission of amendments.

Typical comments and conditions specified by examiners within the cases reviewed follow the format of the thesis and include: change title ; re-word abstract (e.g. to cover contribution to knowledge/ add sample size) ; summaries necessary for end of each chapter; address inconsistencies in use of "I" and "We"; re-word aims and objectives; divide large chapter into several chapters; strengthen aspect of argument in an identified chapter and re-organise discussion in an identified chapter/

The combination of the early part of the thesis (title, abstract, summaries, aims and objectives, purpose, strength of argument and organisation) are overarching themes that apply to the production of the thesis. The critical literature review was assessed with corrective attention needed for: greater critical evaluation of selected aspects of the literature; clarify lack of recent papers used in the discussion and include brief discussion/ expand identified section, e.g.: ethics; limitations of study; short reflective section in methods chapter; explanation for choice of items included in a particular table; more detail re: reliability and validity in methodology section; include details of ethical procedures followed; clarify decision for focus on an identified key concept; note (but do not explore) an identified parallel literature; clarify meaning of a particular approach (e.g. mixed methods”); rationale for particular aspect of method(s) / approach(es); more detail re practical/ implementation of methods for data collection and include information on the sample.

The literature review contains elements of methodological discussion and care needs to be exercised to control and marshal the material into navigable and coherent sections that have a continuity and consistency of argument. The depth and detail of the thesis comes under scrutiny to include all collected data, formatting and presentation issues, stylistic issues, flagging work forward and proof-reading are all identified.

Comments for minor changes include: qualify small aspects of the discussion; deeper explanation of some identified results; omitted, but already collected and available data to be included in thesis; re-format diagrams and tables / reduce tables and peripheral findings; add appendices to two chapters explaining a particular issue or method (e.g. derivation of equations - minor amend); minor amends such as *Acknowledgments* section. These stylistic changes include tonal changes to soften tone to minimise impression that candidate is dismissive of a particular approach; re-fashion conclusion in light of new aims and objectives; highlight potential future work; provide list of conferences attended; check references in main to ensure they match those in the main reference list and conduct thorough proof-read and correction of grammatical and typographical errors.

These comments fall into three categories. The first are presentation issues. The second are process issues and the third product issue. Presentation issues concern the process of delivery of a topic to an audience, to inform, persuade or convince and compel on the quality and veracity of the argument produced.

These presentation issues include: title change; reworded abstract; summaries; consistencies in presentation; reformatting diagrams; minor amendments to targeted areas. Process issues relate to the conduct of the research. These include: re-worded aims and objectives; brief descriptions and expansions; qualification of discussion; deeper explanations; softening tone of argument. Product issues relate to the satisfaction of the needs of 'doctorateness' and a set of deliverables to provide solutions to thesis production. Product issues include: strengthening arguments; reorganising discussions; greater critical evaluation; clarity; inclusions of data; adding appendices; potential of future work; contributions to conferences. Although there are fluid and debatable boundaries between presentation, process and product, the conceptual delineation provides a scaffold for engaging with the thesis and revisiting amendments.

The award of PhD/PD subject to *substantive* amendments occurs, according to The University research degrees regulations, when there are changes that are more substantial. The regulations state substantive amendments "*should be used where the requirements of the degree have been met except that the thesis contains limited deficiencies which the examiners consider can be corrected by the candidate without the need for re-examination of the thesis*". Six months is permitted for submission of major amendments.

Typical comments and conditions specified by examiners within the cases reviewed, include:

- Re-structure the thesis in a series of identified ways (eg., to reflect the value of a selected research site to the research, collect findings in a single section, review quantify of data set in thesis)
- Re-write of introduction – more sign-posting and clearer focus for thesis
- Expand introductory chapter and signpost conceptual framework, need for study, potential contribution to knowledge / Re-write chapter two and three in line with suggestions made by external examiner in additional report (not supplied)

- Refine the research question
- Amend claims re contribution to knowledge
- Extend discussion in literature review chapter / at times over-reliance on limited range of sources/ over-reliance on web-sites/ greater reference to primary rather than secondary sources required
- More critical evaluation with literature
- Ensure consistency of philosophical grounding of thesis
- More sustained development of theoretical underpinnings
- Greater explanation of, and justification for, conceptual framework
- Re-interpret some key (qualitative) findings
- Development of conclusions required (double length of concluding chapter), and more critical reflection / Short concluding chapter required (5-10 pages)
- Brief overview of the comparative method (3-5 pages)
- Include diagram for conceptual framework
- Synthesise findings – refer back to conceptual framework
- Provide more detail regarding the process of data analysis
- Inclusion of additional data
- Correction of grammatical and typographical errors
- Over-length of thesis is noted – condition set to reduce length of thesis.

The majority of requirements and recommendations for major amendments fall into the process category of the activity and conduct of the research. These are structuring, expansion, and clarity. For example, restructuring to reflect value of selected site of the research; expanding discussion on conceptual frameworks; need and contribution of the research; refining research questions; claims of contribution to knowledge; discussion of literature review and its critical evaluation; more refined conclusions; and greater synthesis. The processing issues also demand further work such as consistent philosophical grounding; theoretical underpinnings; greater explanations of key areas; re-interpretation of presented data; overview of comparative methods; and detail of process of data collection. The presentation issues are of lesser concern and the inclusion of diagrams and correction of grammatical and typographic errors. Similarly, the product issues concern rewriting

introductions and conclusions and the overall length. Substantive amendments demand more and sustained work to satisfy the Examiner's criteria.

The third category is for re-submission for PhD/PD. The University research degrees regulations state that this recommendation should be used in cases "*where the candidate's performance in the first oral or approved alternative examination and /or the thesis was unsatisfactory*" and has in general not reached the standard required for the PhD/PD. Twelve months is permitted for submission of revised thesis. Often, given the challenge of full-time workloads, this result allows the candidate a year to rework to the satisfaction of the nominated examiners.

Typical comments and conditions specified by examiners within the cases reviewed, include:

- Statement of originality is only tentative (and needs to be addressed more fully)
- Significant re-organisation of material required throughout / restructure thesis/ major re-thinking and re-organisation of the literature review
- Major re-write of two early chapters (including literature review)/ Re-write and expand conclusion / include methodology chapter
- Introductions and conclusions required for each chapter
- Absence of hypothesis
- Number of misinterpretations of literature identified for reflection and amendment by student.
- Considerably more needed by way of synthesis of literature/ connections between key identified literatures and between key concepts require clarification/ clarify conceptual framework
- Relevance of key literature for the research study needs clarification / some of the literature identified as key is out-dated / over-reliance on a literature that is too narrow in scope
- A key theme is left underdeveloped
- Research endeavour is very inefficient (20 overseas interviews in 11 trips)/ weak (e.g. sample size very small)

- Some methodological matters not dealt with in sufficiently robust or sophisticated manner
- Insufficient justification for, and characterisation of, choice of research design/ methods/ case studies
- Research methods issues – discussion not sufficiently accessible/ more detail required regarding implementation/ additional readings required
- Analysis lacking in sufficient depth and rigour/ analyses need to be more systematic / data not fully exploited or inferences drawn-out
- Greater engagement with theory in the analysis/ implications of theory and data need elaboration
- Ensure claims follow from the data
- Strengthen conclusions with greater emphasis given to the original contribution to knowledge
- Conduct thorough proof-read and correction of referencing system as well as grammatical and typographical errors
- Over-length of thesis is noted – condition set to reduce length of thesis.

These more challenging requirements and recommendations are focused on product and process issues. Product issues of originality; reorganisation; rewrites; hypothesis construction and testing; and length are required. Process issues include misinterpretations; synthesis; relevance; key themes; insufficiencies; methodology; justifications; research design; implications; analysis; engagement; and substantiated claims. Interestingly the more serious concerns requiring resubmission are process and product driven with more latitude in interpretation conveyed to the candidate. The depth of changes required also increase in magnitude and significance.

The award of MPhil subject to amendments is in cases where the candidate has in general not reached the standard required for the PhD/PD, they may be awarded the degree of MPhil subject to the presentation of the thesis amended to the satisfaction of the examiners. The period permitted for submission is not specified within the regulations.

Typical comments and conditions specified by examiners within the cases reviewed, include:

- Re-write abstract and more clearly emphasise key findings of the thesis
- Clear statement of research topic, purpose and hypothesis/es
- Research questions need clearer articulation, and to be related to the hypothesis/es
- Extend background discussion to place study in context
- A more critical engagement with relevant literature, including more recent literature and that which is appropriate to the research / integration and discussion of literature vis-à-vis the focus of the research
- (Minor) restructuring of thesis (eg move statistics and other data to appendices)
- Main thesis to engage closely with statistics and other data in appendices
- Re-write (identified) chapters with a clearer focus on the purpose of the research study
- Student to demonstrate a more comprehensive understanding of methods and techniques applicable to the research / a more explicit justification and critique of research design
- More detailed engagement with key research methods issues – eg., the nature of ‘insider’ research, research ethics, objectivity, validity
- Compile a properly assembled bibliography / correct format and order of reference list and ensure that all citations have a reference entry
- Correct all typographical errors / Correct all errors in figures, graphs and tables
- Full proof-reading and writing to the required standard in English

These conditions and recommendations fall into seven substantive areas. These are firstly, presentation issues; secondly research aims and questions; thirdly literature review, fourthly theories and conceptual framework; fifthly methodology; sixthly data collection, processing, analysis and discussion; finally, contribution to knowledge and further work. They follow a line of the general construction of a thesis.

### **Discussion**

The lighter touch of conditions for ‘minor amendments’ are overwhelmingly represented by presentational issues of wording, formatting, shape, structure and layout of the thesis. The

recommendation of 'substantive' or 'major' amendments are characterised by a change in focus on the conditions towards the literature review, conceptual framework and data collection and discussion and involve process issues particularly structuring, expansion and clarity. The third category of 'resubmission' is characterised by a fusion of conditions. For example, reorganising material, restructuring and rethinking and reorganising literature review covers the literature review and presentational issues and contributions to knowledge. Greater development of key themes, analysis and implications cut across a number of the themes identified. The conditions also highlight omissions such as the need for the inclusion of research aims and hypotheses, original contribution to knowledge and dissemination strategies.

These assessments of viva outcomes can be clustered in presentation, process and product issues. They also follow the structure of the thesis from title page, research question, abstract, literature review, ontological questions, epistemological questions, methodology, methods, data collection, discussion, limitations, conclusion and contribution to knowledge. Further evidence of assessments in vivas is presented by external and internal examiners feedback. These cluster around the structure of the thesis. Title page have been criticised for a mis-match between the title and the actual content of the thesis or the title should accurately reflect the methodology used. Research aims and questions should address the specific context of the research and so should not be framed too widely. For the abstract, comments refer to formatting appropriate to discipline and the need to strengthen content to concisely and accurately detail the content and advances made in the work. Similarly, abstracts should be concise, but clear, to provide the reader with a 'way into' the thesis.

For the literature review, Examiners were critical of a literature review that focused too heavily on a limited number of journals. Significant contributions in the relevant area were not considered or discussed as a result. Literature may be strong in relation to, say, the content focus of the thesis, but may be weaker in relation to the chosen methodology. It is important to address literature relating to all aspects of the study. Literature needs to be current, which may mean some updating is necessary as between the final thesis and the earlier drafts of the literature review. 'Currency' may be a particular issue with statistical data or official reports, where it might be reasonable to expect very recent data to be

available. Ontological positions were required to be spelt out, epistemological issues such as a clearer explanation/rationale of research process, sample choice/selection and a clear articulation were required to explain and illustrate the limitations of the methodology.

Methodologically, Examiners wish to see a central theoretical focus within a clear conceptual framework and research design. Projects that incorporate multiple theoretical concepts, or extraneous philosophical discussion, have been less well received. Examiners also highlighted limitations in methodological reflexivity. A sufficiently clear rationale was not always given for the chosen methodology; candidates did not always (a) identify positive benefits of the particular methodology and (b) explain why obvious alternatives had not been chosen.

Candidates need to address any obvious tensions or inconsistencies between the articulated methodology and the selected research methods e.g. in one thesis, an interpretative, qualitative approach was taken to data collection and analysis that did not align to the core theory or methodology. In another thesis, an emphasis was placed on grounded theory in a methodology section, but only elements of this were then evident in the actual study and data analysis. Conversely, another thesis indicated that a grounded theory approach had been taken during data analysis, but no explanation had been offered as to how this was reflected in the research design.

Data collection / processing / analysis / presentation including results and discussion were further areas of concern with a step by step detail of the approach taken to data analysis being important. A sample of the data should be included as an appendix to the thesis e.g. a transcript of an interview, perhaps annotated to illustrate the approach taken by the candidate to thematic coding. Care needs to be taken to ensure that charts or figures are readable and clear e.g. by including percentages on columns and by selecting titles that show how one chart builds upon an earlier chart, with an awareness of what claims can be made and what cannot, so more detail on analysis that has been undertaken is clearly shown. Ethical position/processes need to be clearly stated with the procedure followed (note that there could be ethical implications of using Social Media as a data collection tool).

The contribution to knowledge and contribution to practice for practice-based research, needs care in construction so that too much emphasis is not be placed on the individual's professional role and identity and consequently the impact on their specific practice, at the expense of the scholarly nature of doctoral study and wider impact. The thesis requires a clear explanation of the contribution to knowledge.

Examiners expect the thesis to be clearly structured around a delimited research question, with a careful and critical unfolding of the argument required to pursue and answer that question. Too much 'signposting' was an issue, as was not enough. A balanced and stylistic judgement needs should be made to add to the 'elegance', flow, direction and purpose of the thesis. A strong thesis will get to the heart of the argument more directly. Examiners consider that the thesis should be viewed as a professional document that will be read by a public audience, with appropriate care taken in respect of presentation, layout, fonts, referencing, anonymisation of research participants and typographical accuracy. The presentation of the thesis includes presentational issues of typographical and grammatical errors - including US spellings, line spacing, over word limit. The quality of the articulated argument in the thesis is needed to avoid poor written English including the need for editing, proof-reading and sense-checking. These aid avoiding referencing errors (adhere to style guidelines for discipline) and adopting a suitable writing style that includes a critical approach. The presentation of tables and figures within the thesis - including introducing tables in the discussion, should explain how tables relate to each other and the arguments being constructed. Clear definition of key terms used in the thesis, abbreviations need to be explained, and the inclusion of transcript, interview schedule or other data capture tool in appendix are all necessary inclusions.

Having discussed the contextual landscape of postgraduate education and specifically UK doctoral education, the review of viva outcomes has shed light on the reception and assessment of theses. This provokes the question of how best to support students and candidates in their preparation for vivas.

### **Guidance to candidates.**

The final section of the paper is the support offered to the candidate to prepare for the viva. It is encouraging that the conditions identified by External Examiners are consistent with the guidance provided on constructing the thesis during the process of instruction on professional doctorate courses and provision offered to PhD candidates. Professional doctorates provide supportive research workshops cover the main aspects of presentation, literature review, conceptual frameworks, methodology, data collection and analysis, evaluation and original contribution to knowledge in professional practice. This evidences the 'doctorateness' of professional doctorates and their significance and their parity and equity with PhDs. Candidates are further supported in preparation for the viva by conducting 'mock' vivas where these areas are significantly identified and addressed and a 'dry run' of the conduct of the viva is experienced and explored.

### **The advice and guidance given to candidate in preparation for the viva.**

The final section of this paper examines the advice and guidance offered to doctoral candidates preparing for viva examination. Silverman (2010: 397) suggests the process of viva preparation requires that you revise your thesis, particularly the concluding chapter, prepare a list of points you want to get across, be ready to explain and defend any changes to your original research questions, read up recent work in your field, find out about your external/internal examiner's work and practise with others in a mock viva.

Whisker (2012: 477) recommends how to prepare for the viva or oral examination (viva voce) in many ways but there are common themes. These are practice presenting and discussing your work at conferences and dealing with questions and find colleagues/staff who are willing to read parts of the thesis and then ask questions. Candidates are advised to make a systematic summary of the thesis so you know the contents of every page, talk to colleagues who have gone through their oral examination successfully and ask for their advice and make sure that you have read the thesis and are thoroughly familiar with it, immerse yourself in the material, particularly with the whole argument, the main findings and major contribution of your work. A simple sentence statement of the contribution you are making should reflect the title, summarise the argument, identify the original contribution to knowledge and to professional practice. Further suggestion it to write a book proposal

based on your thesis, thus requiring you to present your work and to justify to a prospective publisher why it should be published, what is original, what are the competitors in the market, where is the market, and who is the audience.

As well as the viva preparation, there are sets of questions that it is helpful to anticipate that follow the 'normal' structure of the thesis. Earlier questions are often used to enable a candidate to 'settle in' to the viva, to tell the story of the research, and to make clear opening claims.

Questions to be asked in the viva process are general, aims and research questions, literature review, theory, methodology, data collection and analysis and further work. General questions ask of motivation: what made you do this piece of research? Why did you choose this topic? Why do you think it's important? Why is timely and current? Your own position (professional and personal) in relation to this field and these research questions? These questions have become increasingly central to doctoral education.

Research aims and questions normally involve the story of the research, the timeline of when it was conducted, contextual (personal, professional, academic) and the contribution in terms of originality and novelty. Questions of the literature review usually ask 'What shaped or guided your literature review? Why did it cover the areas that it did? (And not others?) Why did you/did you not include the work of X in your study? Have there been recent significant works that have not been included? How does your project contribute to the literature?'

Theories and conceptual frameworks ask of the main framing device used in the thesis, what theories informed the study, what ontological positions did you draw to inform your project and the limitations of this theoretical framing.

Methodological questions concern why did you employ the methods you used? Why not others' for example X? What informed your choice of methods? What would you do differently, with hindsight? Is there a key recommendation you'd give to colleagues working in this area? Why did you select this sample? Can you see problems with it? If it is a small-

scale study, can you justify why so few were involved? Are there improvements that could be made with the sample? What would you do differently? Received wisdom suggests that methodology is the pivotal moment in a thesis and if used well defines the outcome of the assessment.

Questions regarding data collection, processing and analysis normally asks of anomalies or surprises, how the data was analysed or categorise, why it was analysed in this way and not another and what was the most significant finding. Broader questions such as did themes emerge from your data (a posteriori) or did you 'bring them to the data' (a priori) cross-cut ontological, epistemological and methodological areas.

Connections and linkages of how are the findings related to the literature review, are findings consistent with your methodology and what are the linkages that can be made to the literature review add cohesion, consistency and self-referential strength to a thesis.

The final area of discussion usually surrounds further work, the original contribution to knowledge, the contribution to professional practice, which aspects of the work could be taken further, and which elements are worthy of publication and/or presentation at a conference. Plans for publication and dissemination and if any of the work been published or presented already?

Generalise from the work, lessons learned for practitioners/ policymakers/ other researchers professional practice address the 'so what' question of what are its key messages and implications of the research.

Often an open forum includes reflections on the process (thesis), its strengths and its limitations or weaknesses. Viva should end with 'Is there anything else you would like to say or discuss that we have not asked you about?' to allow questions to be asked of examiners by candidates.

It is also recommended that the candidate can take control of the process and provide prefaces and thinking time. For example, "that's a good point", "does that answer your

question(s)?”, “do you mean” and re-presenting questions to ensure clarity in what has been asked and what answer is to be given.

A viva voice is both a dialogue with experts and an oral defence of the thesis. It is an opportunity to engage with the research community and a ‘testing moment’ to explore, clarify, discuss and defend the thesis. There are a range of anecdotal and apocryphal stories about vivas (e.g. taking two days, falling out with the external, examiners not understanding the thesis format or examining process) (Delamont & Eggleston, 1983; Hartley & Jory, 2000). Independent Chairs are becoming increasingly popular to ensure fairness, equity, and consistency following policies and procedures.

Whisker (2012: 744) suggests knowing your thesis very well and develop a brief outline of the main argument, conceptual conclusions, key points you would like to make. Responses to common questions and knowing the abstract and conclusions well and that you are able to articulate them. Find out about your examiners, rehearse with friends and supervisor, manage stress before and during the viva and know the abstract and conclusions well. Post-it notes highlight particular areas for you to focus on and make quick reference to. Candidate are also coached on the ability to managing fear and anxiety particularly the feeling of seeing an External Examiner with a host of marked pages at the viva.

During the viva, Wisker (2012) suggests, you sit down and place the thesis in front of you. Feel secure about it being there. Thank the examiners for the opportunity to talk with them about your work. These people are key figures in your field/methods, and they have spent time on your work. Answer questions clearly and concisely throughout, ask for clarity when needed but remain focused and direct. It is not the time to digress. Use the arguments, ideas and examples you use in answering questions. Feels secure with them. Focus on linkages, justifications and rationales. Make is clear who the conceptual framework links questions, themes, methodology, methods, fieldwork, findings and conclusions. Be able to refer to texts you have used and demonstrate critical awareness and ability by criticising, disagreeing or agreeing with texts and explain your position. Use eye contact throughout – appear confident and positive, comfortable and relaxed. Do not fumble through the thesis, use markers to move quickly and easily to key pages.

There is an increasing move towards greater openness and transparency in the conduct of vivas and a focus on fairness, and equality of opportunity in the proceedings of the final exam. Vivas are the end of a sustained period of work, the 'capstone' project to the research conducted, and the crossing of a threshold to a community of academic practice.

### **Conclusion.**

This paper has discussed the context for doctoral education and the widespread use viva as the final point of the doctoral process. Reviewing the results of external examiners comments and preliminary reports provides guidance on how candidates can and should prepare for the viva.

The paper has discussed the University regulations for postgraduate research degrees provide formal statements on the award of the degree and/or the recommendations for successful completion. Mayer and Land (2003) discuss 'a portal of understanding' and coined the term 'threshold' as a portal of learning-gain which passage through transforms capabilities in conceptualisation that has four characteristics, irreversibility, integrative, bounded and troublesome. Firstly, irreversibility since new perceptions and understandings cannot be unlearned. Secondly, thresholds are integrative since interrelationships previously not anticipated become clear, comprehensible and potentially usable. Thirdly, they are bounded through application to specific sets of ideas or concepts. Finally, thresholds are potentially troublesome in raising new that maybe quite unfamiliar or which raise new issues that might be concerns (Mayer & Land, 2003). The engagement with the viva process is a capstone project that consolidates years of work and research. It has the transformative capacity to open new portals for understanding as well as qualifying for the title 'Dr'.

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## Notes

1. The dark romanticism is attributed to Michael Löwry's Consumed by Night's Fire – the dark Romanticism of Guy Debord, *Radical Philosophy* 87:31-34 (1998).

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