

The Doctoral *Viva*: A Great Educational Experience or a Gun Fight at the OK Corral?



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THE DOCTORAL DEGREE

The doctoral degree is the highest degree a university or a business school has to offer. It is considered the pinnacle of the education process. In the business and management field of study, it is awarded to individuals who have clearly demonstrated a high level of competence in the research process by being able to add something of value to the body of theoretical knowledge in their field of study.

To obtain a doctorate a candidate needs to have undertaken a substantial programme of original research. In this context, originality may take several forms. It could be based on a new theory that is being developed or an old theory that is being tested. An old theory may have been examined and modified for a set of specific circumstances such as a unique way in which it applies to a particular industry. The originality might also in part be related to a novel research methodology that has been used in the research programme, or it may be derived from the fact that the domain in which the theory and the methodology is being applied has not previously been approached or studied in this way.

A doctoral candidate is expected to be fully familiar with all the important literature appertaining to the subject area that is being researched, as well as to have a broad knowledge and understanding of the subject in general. This is the essence of scholarship. In the field of business and management studies, this typically requires familiarity with two or on occasion three literatures. The candidate has to show that they have understood and critically assessed all the main issues, especially the theoretical ones, in the field of study. Arising out of this critical assessment, they will then extend the body of knowledge by developing

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a new aspect of the field of study. To achieve this, it is essential that the researcher be fully conversant with the principal research methodologies available. This is because the researcher's claim to have contributed to the body of theoretical knowledge needs to be justified by demonstrating that a sound scholarly approach has been taken to the research.

Although an increasing number of universities offer a course in aspects of research methodology, sometimes this does not constitute a formal part of the doctorate.² In such cases, the doctoral candidate is left very much on their own to sort out their understanding of research methodology and where this occurs, it is most important that the candidate attend several conferences and research colloquia to make up for this lack of discussion. There are many topics under the heading of research methodology and the degree candidate may have to show knowledge of several of these. An area of great importance, into which the examiners will certainly enquire, is the justification of the approach taken in the research. This must be made on both a practical and a philosophical level and explains to some extent why the main doctoral degree is still the doctor of philosophy.³

THE EXAMINATION

Somewhere between three to eight years⁴ after the doctoral degree candidate has registered, the dissertation will be completed and submitted for examination.

The examination consists of two distinct parts, which are semi-independent of each other. These are the evaluation of the formal written dissertation⁵ and the assessment of the doctoral degree candidate at a *viva voce*. These two parts of the doctoral examination are semi-independent in the sense that a candidate may have presented a good dissertation but be shown to be inadequate at the *viva voce*; conversely, a candidate may have produced a poor dissertation and be able to redeem themselves at the *viva voce*.

Once the dissertation has been submitted (or sometimes even before this⁶) examiners are appointed who will be responsible for evaluating the dissertation and attending the *viva voce* to assess the degree candidate. The *viva* or the *viva voce*, which is Latin for The Living Voice, in the UK and in the Republic of Ireland is held in private and is an integral part of a doctoral examination.⁷ The principle is that the doctorate will not be awarded until the degree candidate has demonstrated in person⁸ that they are fully acquainted with the material in the dissertation and that they have a thorough understanding of all the issues that surround the topic. It is clear that by far the most effective way for this personal demonstration of competence to be achieved is through an oral encounter or discourse between the degree candidate and examiners who have sufficient knowledge of the field of study and of research methods to assess the candidate's competence.

THE EXAMINING GROUP

The *viva* is attended by the degree candidate, the examiners and sometimes by

the Director or Dean of Research from the university or business school at which the candidate is registered. In some institutions, the degree candidate's supervisor can also attend this examination.⁹ Most institutions appoint one internal examiner and one external examiner. The internal examiner will be a knowledgeable individual working at the same university or business school who will frequently be from the same or an adjacent field of study to that of the candidate, but who will not have had any direct involvement in helping with the dissertation. The external examiner will be an expert in the field of study which has been researched and in which the degree candidate is being examined, and will probably hold a senior appointment at a similar university or business school.¹⁰

The *viva* will normally be conducted between one and three months after the dissertation has been submitted. The actual timing will depend on the availabilities of the examiners but it is important to hold this event while the material is fresh in the mind of the degree candidate.

While the arrangements described above do vary considerably, in all cases a group of examiners will be assembled for the *viva*.¹¹ They will then spend time talking to the candidate and, at the end of this discussion, will decide if and under exactly what conditions a doctorate will be awarded.

EXAMINERS

The supervisor and the university, if they are doing their job properly, will select and appoint an appropriate examiner(s). Some universities will actually discuss possible examiners with the candidate. In no circumstances would it be appropriate for a candidate to pick their examiners, but sometimes the candidate's knowledge of experts in the field of study may be better than that of the supervisor and, for this reason, the supervisor may wish to consult with the candidate about the options.¹² Examiners, or at least external examiners, should be expert in both the field of study and the research methodology used, as well as have a wide knowledge of research methodology generally. It can happen that an external examiner is chosen who is deeply unsympathetic to the philosophy or methodology adopted by the candidate. When this happens, the unfortunate candidate can find themselves being sent off to investigate a completely new literature that happens to be the pet field of the examiner. It is the responsibility of the supervisor to ensure that this does not happen.

THE OUTCOME OF A *VIVA*

The outcome of a *viva* can also vary considerably. At the positive end of the spectrum, the examiners may decide to award the degree without asking the candidate to undertake any changes or improvements to the dissertation. At the other end, the examiners can, at least in theory, fail the candidate. Although examiners always reserve the right to fail a candidate, it is very unusual for this to happen. One of the reasons for this is that an outright failure would reflect badly on both the supervisor and the institution in general. For this reason, weak candidates are normally advised not to proceed to examination.¹³

If the dissertation is not of sufficient quality and if the doctoral candidate is not competent, then the usual procedure is for the examiners to request additional work. They can instruct the doctoral candidate to review a body of literature or to repeat or extend an evidence collection exercise that could take at least another year – maybe even two or three years. This outcome would not be regarded as a success.

An outright failure is unusual and will only occur in extreme circumstances such as when there is clear evidence of complete incompetence or maybe of some form of cheating. The term failure here is being used in the sense that the degree candidate is told that the work is so poor that the university is discontinuing their registration and that the work will not be considered for any other degree at that institution. There is another set of circumstances that is sometimes referred to by academics as failure of the doctorate. This occurs when the degree candidate is told that their work is not appropriate for a doctorate, but that it is adequate for a master degree such as a MPhil.¹⁴

It is not that uncommon for the examiners, even when the dissertation and the *viva* are both good, to require some additional work to be done. In fact, examiners sometimes, if not often, feel that they need to ask the candidate to add something to the dissertation so that the examiner has made a contribution to or just made their mark on the work. The candidate should not be concerned when this happens.

THE *VIVA* PROCESS

The oral examination itself has been known to be as short as 60 minutes and as long as all day.¹⁵ It is often the case that the shorter the duration of the examination the more competent the degree candidate. When a *viva* takes many hours, it is often because the examiners are trying hard to find the positive side of the candidate's research.

The *viva* process is, or should be, simply one of scholarly debate, which is stimulated by the examiners and especially the external examiner. This debate can be challenging, with the candidate being required to face quite penetrating questioning. The examiners will have previously read the dissertation and in some instances will have already shared their personal views by means of a pre-*viva* report. In the case of strong candidates, the examiners may have decided that, subject to the doctoral degree candidate not making a fool of themselves during the *viva*, the degree will be awarded.

Tone of the *Viva*

The tone of the *viva* will of course depend upon the individuals taking part and it can vary considerably. The candidate can do a great deal to influence the mood of the examination through dress, body language and general behaviour. It needs to be understood by the candidate that they are seeking the acceptance of the examiners and thus need to exude confidence without arrogance. It is extremely important that *egos* do not become vulnerable, as this can lead to unpleasantness. The candidate needs to be conscious of the fact that there is a

substantial imbalance in power between themselves and the examiners. However, the examiners need to ensure that the candidate does not feel unduly pressurised and that they may have a break for refreshments whenever it is required during the examination.

In general terms, the *viva* is not intended to be confrontational or adversarial. The main purpose of the event is to confirm what the doctoral degree candidate actually knows about the research and the field of study in order to be confident that the doctorate has been duly earned. If the degree candidate has obtained an excessive amount of help in producing their dissertation, this should become obvious in the debate. Many successful doctoral degree candidates have reported that the examination was actually a pleasant experience and that they learnt quite a lot from it. However, it is not guaranteed that this will be the case and from time to time, the experience is reported as being very harrowing indeed. The doctoral candidate needs to be prepared for this eventuality.

Central Issues to be Raised at the *Viva*

There are seven central issues that should be addressed by the examiners in establishing whether the doctoral candidate has met the requirements. These are high-level issues or concerns that go to the very heart of a doctoral degree.

1. Does the candidate have a thorough understanding of the field in which the dissertation is presented?
2. Is there a clearly articulated research question that seeks to establish a new theory, refute an old theory or develop an extension of an existing theory?
3. Is the work framed within the body of current theoretical knowledge or has an established theory been used as a base for testing new ideas?
4. Has the research been conducted with appropriate procedures, discursive or observational and analytical, quantitative or qualitative?
5. Has the contribution to the body of theoretical knowledge been expressed clearly as a convincing and reflective argument?
6. Has it been demonstrated that the new theoretical knowledge has practical management validity and utility, i.e. potential value in use?
7. Is the work substantively that of the candidate?

If these criteria are met, even if not entirely, then the research should have a sound claim to be regarded as both rigorous and relevant, which is central to the doctorate.

A Contribution to the Body of Theoretical Knowledge

A contribution to the body of theoretical knowledge is notoriously difficult to define and thus it is useful to think of it in terms of two broad issues. Firstly, it is essential that the doctoral degree candidate produce some new and interesting ideas as a result of the research. New and interesting ideas can of course have a number of meanings, but certainly the research findings should not smack of recycled motherhoods. There should be some angle that the examiners have not

thought of before.¹⁶ Specifically, the new angle could be an extension of existing theory, a new application of existing theory or a confirmation or rejection of some aspect of an existing theory.¹⁷

Secondly, the findings of the research should have a degree of general applicability. This does not have to be very broad, but the research finding should in the field of business and management studies be relevant and have real value to a reasonable number of practising managers.

From the point of view of the *viva*, the examiners will try to probe the doctoral candidate on these issues and will use detailed questions in order to evaluate to what extent the candidate has achieved these points.

Possible Detailed *Viva* Questions

Although every *viva* will be different, a number of generic questions that will usually be asked at any business and management studies doctoral examination can be identified. The detailed form or wording of the questions will vary, but they will usually fall within eight major groups and it is useful to be aware of these.

1. The first group of questions relates to confirming the degree candidate's understanding of the doctoral degree objectives and how the degree can affect the life and the career of the candidate. These questions are often asked to simply warm up the examination process. Thus, these questions relate to the degree objectives.
2. The second set of questions relates to the degree process and concerns whether this process had the effect on the candidate that is normally intended. Thus, the second group of questions deals with personal development.
3. The third set of questions relates to issues concerning the research question. In some respects, this is significant because if a poor research question was originally chosen it can adversely affect the rest of the work.
4. The fourth set of questions relates to issues concerning research methodology. Here the research candidate is being asked to demonstrate their understanding of the philosophical underpinning of the research and to show the different views which could have been adopted. The candidate might, for example, be asked whether there were any alternative approaches considered and to compare the relative merits of such alternatives with the method chosen.
5. The fifth set of questions relates to issues concerning fieldwork. Here the research candidate is being asked to demonstrate their understanding of the different approaches to evidence collection and the management thereof.
6. The sixth set of questions relates to the analysis of the evidence. Here the research candidate is being asked to demonstrate their understanding of the decisions that were taken with regard to the selection and use of the quantitative or qualitative tools utilised.

7. The seventh set of questions relates to the results of the research. In some respects this is the most difficult part of the research process and perhaps only really strong doctoral degree candidates should be expected to perform really well here. The main reason for this is that even with good research results the candidate will have to apply considerable creativity to come up with something new and interesting to add to the body of theoretical knowledge. However, it is important for all candidates to have some explanation as to how their theory generation and its validation proceeded.
8. The eighth set of questions relates to the value of the results. In the field of business and management studies, it is important that the research be seen to have real utility and this set of questions helps to focus on this.

It is obvious that there are no right or wrong answers to these questions. The questions are used to stimulate debate, which will allow the degree candidate to show their understanding of the research and the field of study in general. Although these questions, from Set 3 onwards, have been listed in the order in which the dissertation would probably have been written, it is quite possible that the examiners could select questions virtually at random.

SET 1: Questions used to warm up, i.e. related to the degree objectives

1. Why did you undertake a doctorate?
2. What did you think a doctorate was when you started out on your studies and what do you think it is today?
3. Who are the main stakeholders in this research? In which way will they be able to benefit from the results of your research?
4. What will a doctorate do for you in your private life and your business career?

SET 2: Questions related to personal development

5. What do we know now that we did not know before you started your doctorate studies?
6. What would you say were the most important things that you learnt from your research both in terms of personal development and from a contribution to the body-of-knowledge point of view?
7. What would you do differently if you were starting now?

SET 3: Questions related to the research question

8. What was the original problem/research question?
9. In which theoretical frame of reference were you able to place this research question?
10. How was the research question modified as a result of the literature search?
11. Why was it changed?
12. Specifically, which authors most influenced your thinking about your research question?

13. In what way does your research question seek to establish a new theory, refute an old theory or develop an extension of an old theory?
14. How do you describe your theoretical conjecture and how did you derive your hypotheses, empirical generalisations or propositions for testing?

SET 4: *Questions related to the research methodology*

15. How would you describe your research methodology?
16. What influenced you to choose this approach to your research?
17. What other research methods did you give serious consideration to and why did you reject them?
18. What would you say were the central methodological difficulties you experienced whilst doing your research and how did you overcome these challenges?
19. How would you advise a student on the research process with specific reference to methodology?
20. What are the philosophical assumptions underlying your methodology?

SET 5: *Questions related to the field work*

21. What was your primary method of evidence collection?
22. How did you acquire an appropriate measuring instrument?
23. Did you undertake a pilot study and if so how would you describe its outcome?
24. How did you locate a suitable sample of informants?
25. How do you know the informants/sample that you used are/is representative? If it is not representative, how do you defend its use?
26. What sort of research protocol did you use?
27. How did you decide when you had enough evidence to proceed with your analysis?
28. How would you describe the achievements of your fieldwork?
29. What, on reflection, are the limitations, if any, of the approach you used in your fieldwork?

SET 6: *Questions related to the analysis of the evidence*

30. What analytical techniques did you use to help you understand the evidence you collected?
31. Why did you choose these specific tools?
32. What other tools did you consider and why did you reject them?
33. What were the biggest surprises you encountered and can you give an account of what was occurring?
34. Did your analysis of the evidence support your theoretical conjectures and if not how did this influence your theory development?

SET 7: *Questions related to the results of the research*

35. How would you describe your thesis?

36. How did you arrive at your final thesis?
37. In what way does it contribute to the body of theoretical knowledge?
38. How do you regard your work from the point of view of the validity and reliability of the findings?
39. How do you regard your work from the point of view of generalisability?

SET 8: *Questions related to the value of your results*

40. How have you demonstrated that the new theoretical knowledge you have contributed has practical management validity and utility?
41. How might the results of this research be converted into a practical application or outcome?
42. What are the major weaknesses of your research?
43. What questions have you discovered in your research that still need addressing?
44. Where might this research go from here?

It is important to point out that it is not likely that all these questions will be raised at one *viva* examination. It would simply take too much time. However, a substantial set of these is likely to be asked at any thorough examination.

SATISFYING THE EXAMINERS

It is not possible to provide specific guidance as to what will satisfy a set of examiners. However, one important guideline is that candidates should listen carefully to the questions asked and give a clear and concise answer. By the end of the examination, it is likely that the doctoral degree candidate will have demonstrated that they know at least as much, and preferably more, about the specific topic as the examiners. The degree candidate will also have demonstrated that they have thought through all the issues related to the type of research undertaken and will have shown a high degree of competence in the way the research was pursued.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The *viva* is an integral part of the doctoral degree examination and it is important that a doctoral degree candidate perform well at this. The objective of the *viva* is to establish, as fully as possible, the breadth and depth of knowledge of the degree candidate. This is achieved by establishing a meaningful or insightful debate, dialogue or conversation between the examiners and the doctoral degree candidate. This is typically initiated by a series of questions.

The exact form of the *viva* will differ with the examiners and the precise subject of the degree being examined. However, it is possible to anticipate the general nature of the discussion and therefore anticipate some of the questions that are likely to be asked. These may fall into the eight categories discussed earlier, related to the degree objectives, personal development, the research question, the research methodology, the field work, the analysis of the evidence,

the results of the research and the value of the results. Degree candidates can simulate their *viva* by using the above questions. If they feel competent with these questions, they should also be able to answer questions on the more specific aspects of their research.

The outcome of most *viva* examinations is that, subject to some changes, the doctoral degree will be awarded. However, there are occasions when the degree candidate is instructed to do considerably more work or is even told that their research is not good enough to be awarded a doctorate.

The *viva* itself is often a great educational experience for the degree candidate and should be even for the examiners themselves. It should not be seen as a confrontational or adversarial event. The *viva* has actually failed in its purpose if it becomes the Gun Fight at the OK Corral.

- 1 In some cases, more than three literatures can be involved. When this happens, candidates should really review their research question. Even attempting to be fully familiar with three bodies of literature is too much for most doctoral degree candidates.
- 2 To be a formal part of the degree, these courses need to be compulsory. In the UK, for example, the Economic and Social Sciences Research Council (ESRC) and the Sciences and Engineering Research Council (SERC) etc. increasingly require methodology courses.
- 3 Of course there are now numerous different doctorates including doctor of science, doctor of engineering, doctor of education, doctor of commerce and doctor of business administration, to mention only four.
- 4 Three years is often regarded as the minimum number of years a full-time doctoral degree candidate should spend on the degree and eight years is normally regarded as the maximum.
- 5 Although by no means in universal use, the term dissertation is preferred to thesis, as it more accurately describes the document that is submitted. The Oxford dictionary defines dissertation as a long essay, especially one written for a university degree or diploma, from the Latin *dissertare* meaning "continue to discuss"; the Oxford dictionary defines a thesis as a statement or theory that is put forward as a premise to be maintained or proved. In Hegelian philosophy, a thesis is a proposition forming the first stage in the process of dialectical reasoning.
- 6 Increasingly, supervisors are thinking about appropriate examiners before the dissertation is submitted. It is certainly not satisfactory for the Dean of Research to be rushing around trying to find an examiner sometime after the dissertation has been submitted!
- 7 In the USA, the *viva* is referred to as the doctoral defence. The doctoral defence has virtually the same objectives and form as the *viva*. However, due to the structure of the typical doctorate from a US university there may be less emphasis placed on the theory development aspect of this degree.
- 8 In the Southern hemisphere, in countries such as Australia and South Africa, *vivis* are uncommon. Universities in these countries frequently do not believe that there is adequate expertise in their countries to examine doctorates and they also believe that they cannot financially afford to bring individuals from abroad. Consequently doctoral examinations are conducted by written report.
- 9 Not very long ago, it was customary for the supervisor to be one of the examiners.

However, this has largely been abandoned. Of course, in a very important sense, the supervisor is always a sort of examiner and if a doctoral degree candidate does not have the full backing of their supervisor, then the outcome of the examination may not be favourable. At some universities, the supervisor may only attend the *viva* with the express permission of the degree candidate.

- 10 The holding of a senior position is often more important than the formal qualifications of the examiners. Where a member of the university or business school faculty is being examined, there are sometimes two external examiners and, on occasion, no internal examiner.
- 11 Some universities will allow one of the examiners to be absent from the *viva* and will accept a written report from that examiner. There normally has to be a good reason for this absence.
- 12 It is important that the supervisor, the examiners and the student be independent. This is difficult to define and the key issue is that there is a high degree of intellectual and personal integrity among the individuals concerned.
- 13 Candidates usually have the right to demand an examination. When a candidate disregards advice not to proceed to examination and forces one, it is often not successful.
- 14 With regard to obtaining an MPhil in lieu of a doctorate, the actual mechanism depends on the particular university or business school. In some cases, it will be decided that a masters will be awarded at the end of the unsuccessful *viva*. In other cases, it will be only decided that the doctoral degree dissertation will be withdrawn and that the work will be resubmitted for separate reconsideration as a masters degree. In some cases, it may be necessary to allow a period of six months to elapse before the work may be re-submitted for consideration for an MPhil.
- 15 There have even been incidents where the *viva* has run into a second day. However, this is very unusual.
- 16 This does not mean that the candidate has to be unknown to the examiner or vice versa. They may well know each other or at least each other's work through conferences or journal articles, but the new and interesting ideas in the dissertation should have been first encountered by the examiners through the work of the candidate.
- 17 It is possible that a completely new theory is formulated by a doctoral degree candidate, but this is a rather rare event and should not be expected.

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