

Staff guidance for conducting an Undergraduate Viva Voce Examination



**Harper Adams
University**

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Introduction

This guide highlights points to consider when conducting a *viva voce* examination. It tries to help staff provide a consistent and fair experience for all students. The recommendations contained within the document were formed in conjunction with feedback collected from students through a post-*viva* survey, and using the ideas of teaching and support staff shared through a Learning and Teaching Forum. The advice is not exhaustive and colleagues are welcome to suggest additional points for inclusion in subsequent versions.

A *viva voce* examination seeks to:

- Give students the opportunity to discuss their research project in more detail;
- Allow students to provide more details about why they made particular choices in the development of their project;
- Provide an opportunity for students to evaluate their research design and its execution.

Additional benefits of the *viva voce* might include the opportunity for:

- Those who are more confident with the spoken word to demonstrate their learning;
- A learning experience for students;
- Instant feedback on their research and performance (but not the overall module judgment);
- A two way exchange of knowledge, as staff can learn from the student as expert;
- Double checking authorship where concerns exist;
- The exploration of points that are not clear in the written work;
- Students to feel that their work is valued as they get others to also focus on the details of their research;
- Preparation for a future in research;
- Practise for job interviews.

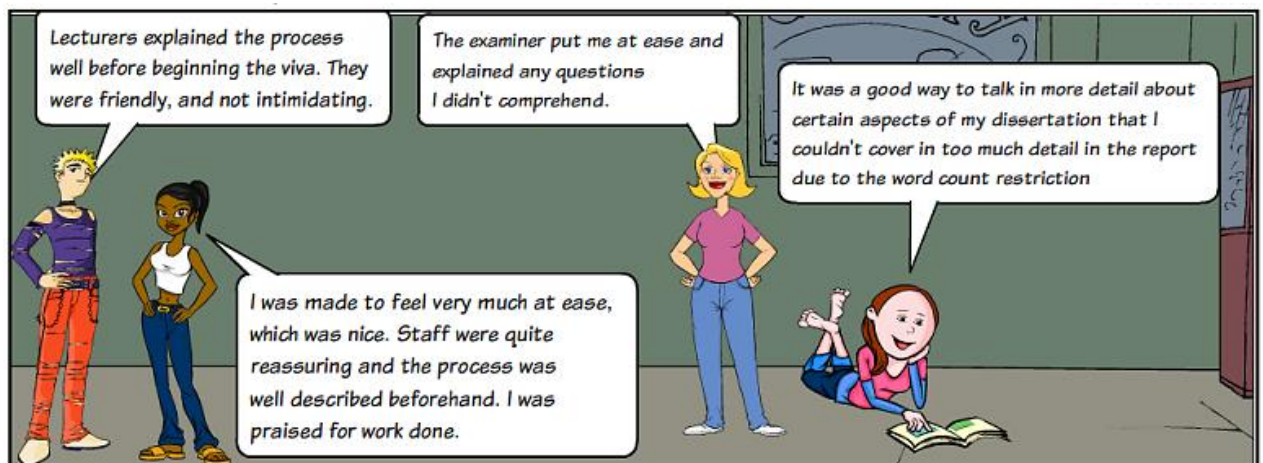
The *viva voce* can also work as a 'symbol' of a student's nearing graduation as they engage in a critical dialogue as equals with other graduates. Some students do question why they need to participate in a *viva voce*, and so it may be helpful to use this list as a reference point to provide a consistent view on why we, as a university community, took the decision to retain the *viva voce* at levels six upwards.

The student view of the viva voce examination

Students have many positive experiences of the viva. They especially appreciate:

- A friendly approach;
- Being set at ease;
- Being clear about what to expect in the viva;
- Getting in-situ feedback;
- Receiving thought provoking, specific questions.

The quotes in the picture below are taken directly from a student viva voce experience survey undertaken at Harper Adams University in 2016.



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At the same time we also know that sometimes students have a negative experience because of:

- Feeling anxious, intimidated and stressed;
- Feeling unsure of what the viva process involves, how marks are allocated and how they should prepare;
- Having an examination which focused on errors, instead of allowing the student to freely discuss their decision making, performance and understanding;
- Scheduling problems, especially when arrangements need to be moved or when scheduling of the viva is within an exam period;
- A sense that friends' viva examinations were easier, more personalized or more informal.

Some student comments that highlight some negative points in their experience are shared below:

The viva was very nerve wracking, in some places made me feel like I'd not done a good job.

I got a distinct impression that it hadn't been read in very much detail ... Can't tell you how frustrating this is.

Nothing was pointed out as good or even slightly positive just the negatives pointed out.

Mine was very unpleasant. My tutor did not help/assist in the process, neither offering assurance nor support. Instead I felt interrogated and felt uncomfortable.

Very few questions asked, only told what mistakes I'd made, and little opportunity to justify my decisions and when any justification was made, it was ruled out by examiner despite going on the advice of my supervisor.

My tutor was useful to have there but sometimes said things I wanted to say.

Two close friends had a much more even split in regards to questions.

There was a huge variation in the type of questions asked between different people. This made preparing incredibly difficult.

I think there needs to be a lot more guidance on what the viva will actually contain.

Experiences of viva are shared between students and comparing different experiences can bring about further frustration and a sense of inequity.

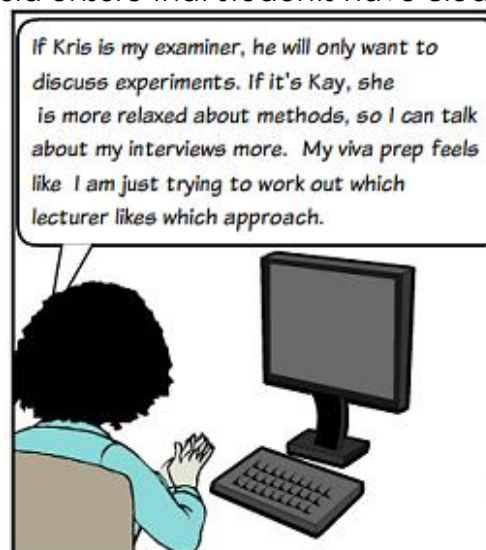


Tips for viva voce success

To help us provide a more consistent, less stressful viva, which enables all students to achieve their potential, the following recommendations are made, from staff and students, to all staff involved in conducting vivas or preparing students for vivas.

Preparing students

- Supervisors and/or course teams should ensure that students have clear expectations of the viva process. This may be done through a briefing, through online resources, or through other means.
- Wherever possible course teams should use the viva voce as a mode of assessment earlier on in the course to allow practise of this assessment format. Ideally students should not have their first encounter with the viva when the stakes are very high.
- Students should be directed to the types of questions that they might get to ensure that they can prepare.
- Students should be encouraged to re-familiarise with their research, and to read it critically before the viva. They should not be expected to re-read all of the literature associated with their project (and the questions asked should reflect this point), but they might revisit some of the material that was most influential in the formation of their research project.



Staff preparation

- For undergraduate projects, the written component must already be marked and feedback articulated before the viva. Remember that the viva must not influence the mark given to the written component.
- The role of the supervisor, in the viva, should be clear to the student. The supervisor should provide moral support to the student and help put them at ease; prompt if the student is struggling; and may intervene to highlight unforeseen circumstances that the examiner should be aware of; they might also advise the examiner of any areas that may be fruitful to explore. The supervisor is not there to lead questioning, but it may be appropriate after discussion with the examiner for the supervisor to lead on specific lines of questioning. Supervisors must not respond to the examiner's questions on behalf of the student.
- To ensure a coordinated approach, the internal marker and supervisor should have a brief discussion to see how to approach the viva (who will ask what, any special considerations to be aware of, any concerns that should be explored etc.).
- The location for the viva should be considered as an impact factor; it should be quiet and free from interruptions. Don't forget to silence office phones, as well as mobiles and place a 'do not disturb' sign on the door.
- Staff should be clear of exactly how marks are being attributed. It may be necessary to re-familiarise with the assessment criteria beforehand.
- Limit how many viva examinations are done in one day to ensure full attention can be given to each student.
- Devise questions that are specific to each student. While you may be guided by common questions, fashion the questions to the individual student – this is a personal examination.
- Have a logical progression and cover a range of areas – do not get too focused on one section or theme.
- It may be helpful to have a few prompts in mind if the student is struggling.
- Know the student background – are there factors that must be considered e.g. major impediments to the research beyond the student's control or whether the student has a specific learning disability.

Putting the student at ease

- Try to take an empathetic approach and understand what the student must be feeling.
- Clarify, and restate the purpose of the examination, introduce yourself and if possible provide an overview of how the viva will be structured, for example:

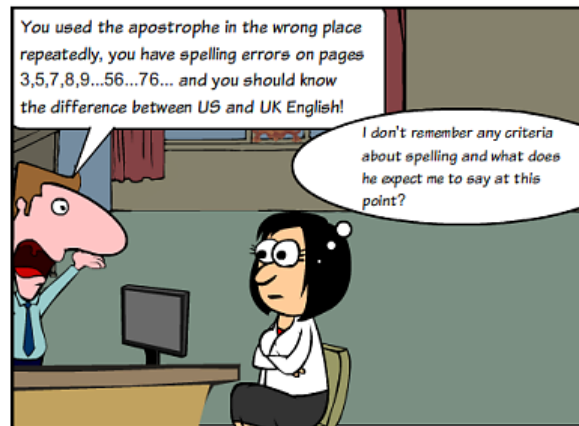
'we will start by exploring why you chose the study, we will then look at the literature you used and how you selected this, we will discuss the choices you made in your design and some of the challenges that you had with data collection, and then we will look at the strengths and limitations of your conclusions based on the data you generated. I would also like to ask about questions your work raised for other researchers in this area'.

This provides a roadmap for everyone in the room.

- Make a comment on the report to let them know that is now marked (to show that the viva is a separate task); this lowers the stakes and helps put students at ease. If possible, without unfairly raising expectations, some reassuring comments on the written element can be helpful.

During the viva voce

- An appropriate level of challenges should be made. Remember an undergraduate viva should not be as challenging as a doctoral viva.
- Don't focus on corrections of English language and grammar. The written work has already been marked before the viva. Feedback on spelling and grammar can be given in the written report from the examiner. The viva must focus on the student's decision-making process and their underpinning understanding.
- Make sure the time spent is appropriate; not so much that it's exhausting, not so little that they can't cover what's needed. The recommended norm for an undergraduate viva voce is thirty minutes.
- If a student struggles try to ask the question in a different way. Don't keep asking a question which can't be answered. If the student clearly can't answer, move on and don't 'grill' the individual.
- Allow the student's voice to be heard. Refrain from talking too much. The student needs time and space to talk. This is an opportunity for the student to be an expert – let them show their knowledge.
- A non-aggressive stance should be maintained. For example if you believe the student made a poor decision in their methodology, ask them to explore their approach and why they chose the path that they did; ask them why they discounted other methods; and ask them to tell you more about the perceived benefits and limitations of their approach. This allows the student space to explain their project decisions, whereas asking something like 'why did you not do a comparative experiment instead of a case study?' immediately leaves the student believing that they have done something wrong and that they need to try to work out what you, as the examiner want to hear. This should never be the case. Ask more open questions, which allow them freedom to explain their own research, don't impose your own preferences and beliefs on the conversation, after all there are very many ways to achieve valid and successful research.
- Allow elaboration and explanation.
- Say 'it's OK to take a moment' if the student wishes to think before they speak. Make silence acceptable.



- Use a range of questions to avoid becoming overly focused on one section of the dissertation. A student comment reminds us of the need to balance the questions: "From my personal experience there seemed to be no particular focus for the questions except for the examining tutor's specific area of expertise".
- If asking challenging questions intersperse with positive questions.
- Avoid the use of idiomatic language, which may not be fully understood by students, particularly where English is their second language.
- If you have asked a tricky question, let the student know that this was difficult so they can relax if they struggled with it.
- Verify that work is student's own and even tell the student that you are 'now going to ask one or two questions just to check that the work was their own' if these are discrete questions. Questions that focus on how the research was undertaken are particularly useful for checking that the work is the student's own.
- Feedback in situ and maybe offer some positive comments on the work where appropriate, but guard against providing an overall grade or pass judgment.
- And most importantly A constructive tone should be maintained!



Questions you *might* use or adapt in a viva voce examination

Some suggested areas for discussion are offered below. Please note these suggestions have been collated from Harper Adams University Staff. Don't attempt to use them all in one viva voce! Of course there may be other areas of the research that you want to explore in the viva; don't be limited by these question ideas. This is not intended to work as a script. You will notice that these questions are all open; they can't be answered by 'yes' or 'no', this approach should encourage students to talk and avoids giving the sense that there is a correct answer.

Introduction

- Why did you pick this study?
- Explain briefly what the aims and objectives of this research were.
- Can you summarise what you hoped to achieve by this work?
- Why was this topic important to you?

Literature review

- Where and how did you search for the literature related to your topic?
- What difficulties did you encounter when searching for literature? How did you overcome these?
- What were your main points of learning from the literature review process?
- How did the literature review influence the methods that you chose to use?
- You talked a lot about the ideas of 'author x' – why did you feel that their work was important to your study?
- Which paper, article, journal or book was most influential in your research? Why so?

Methodology

- How did you arrive at your specific research questions?
- Can you describe the steps that you went through in your methodology? *Suggest to only use this if you want to check authenticity, or if this is unclear in the written work.*
- Can you explain why your research methods were selected? Did you consider other research methods? And if so, why did you discount them?
- What problems did you encounter when collecting data? (you may need to provide some prompts which make the student confident to share this information without fear of it disadvantaging them). How did you overcome these difficulties?
- What were the main ethical issues of conducting this research? How did you deal with them?
- What were the main advantages of your methods?
- What were the main limitations of your methods?
- Looking back at your research, what would you have changed about your research design and/or the way you undertook the research?
- How did you ensure that your results were valid/reliable? You should remind students of what these terms mean if they are struggling.

Analysis and Findings

- How did you analyse the data? Why did you take this approach?
- Why did you use a particular stats test/coding approach/technique? Were there any alternative approaches that you considered?
- You might ask the student to describe specific statistical outputs, tables, summaries or graphs but if it is clear they don't understand then limit further questions on analysis; it may be better to ask the student to summarise some of the key aspects of their analysis so they can identify the points that were most significant to their findings. This really focuses on what they know.
- Which of the statistical calculations (or other analytical processes) was most useful to you in helping you to draw conclusions?
- Can you summarise the most important finding from your research? (This is tricky and you may ask the student to pause for a moment before answering.

Discussion

- How did your results compare to similar studies that you mention in your literature review?
- What do the results mean/what are the implications for practice?
- What areas would be interesting for further research?
- Can you describe anything in your research that surprised you, or did your research confirm your prior beliefs or predictions?

Conclusion

- If you could go back and change one decision in the project, what would that be?
- What did you learn most about your ability to manage a project of this size?
- How can you now make sure that others might learn from your study?
- Is there anything that you did not get chance to say in your written work, or in this viva, that you think is important to share about your research project?

If you have further suggestions for inclusion within this guide, please contact one of the EDQE team.