

Student guidance for the Undergraduate Research Project Viva Voce Examination



**Harper Adams
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Introduction

This guide provides some information about what to expect when undertaking a viva examination as part of the Honours or Degree Research Project (HRP) or Degree Review Project (DRP). It provides advice on how you can prepare and succeed in the assessment. The points in this short guide were developed with staff and students at Harper Adams University.

What is a viva voce examination?

A *viva voce* exam involves an examiner asking questions about your work, and you responding as fully as possible.

Why do we have a viva exam?

The HRP viva examination is part of your undergraduate assessment because:

- It provides the opportunity to discuss your research project in more detail;
- It allows you to provide more information about why you made particular choices in the development of your project;
- It gives an opportunity for you to stand back and evaluate your research design and the way you actually carried out the research.



Viva voce is Latin for 'by word of mouth'.

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

- Those who are less confident with the written word to demonstrate their learning;
- Some instant feedback on your research and performance;
- You to pass on your learning to staff at the university;
- Practice in presenting your ideas;
- Double checking authorship of large projects (to check that this is a student's own work);
- The exploration of points that are not clear in the written work;
- Preparation for a future in research (vivas are common in research and higher level degrees).

The viva is your chance to talk about all of the work you have undertaken over the last year, and add additional detail to that which was included in the written project submission.

The student view of the viva voce examination

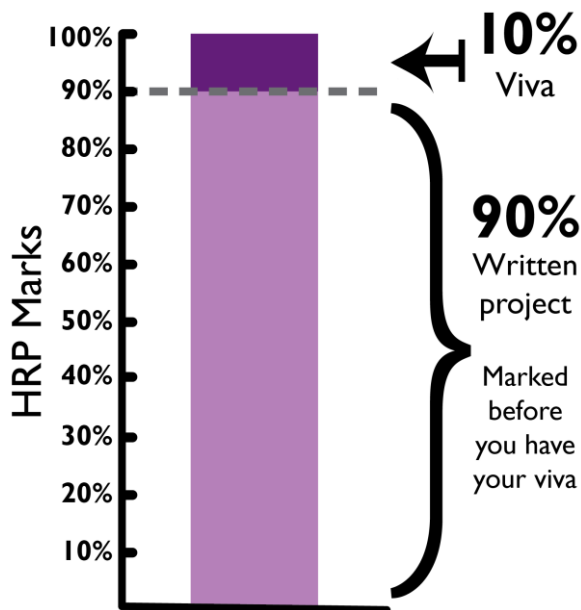
Students have many positive experiences of the viva. They especially appreciate:

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

“I was made to feel very much at ease, which was nice. Staff were quite reassuring and the process was well described beforehand. I was praised for work done.”



At the same time, we also know that sometimes students can feel anxious, intimidated and stressed by the viva process. The information in this booklet intends to answer any questions about the process and put your mind at ease.



What proportion of my marks come from the viva?

Your written project and viva together generate your overall module mark for the HRP. The written element is worth 90%, and the viva generates 10% of your marks. It's really important to note that the written element is decided before the viva. Your marks on your written project are not in any way affected by your performance in the viva. Your performance cannot negatively influence the mark you have for your written project.

About the viva – essential information



One of the Heads of Academic Departments will allocate your examiner; they will choose someone whose academic area matches your project. The examiner will make contact with you by email to arrange a mutually convenient time for the viva. It can take a number of emails going back and forth to arrive at the agreed time and date, so please work positively as these arrangements are made.



On the day, you should go to the viva location, usually a member of staff's office, with a copy of your HRP.

- This HRP must not have any annotations;
- You should not have a mobile phone on your person as this is a formal examination;
- You should arrive in good time and wait to be called in.



Before you begin the examiner will introduce him or herself. They will clarify, and restate the purpose of the examination, and if possible provide an overview of how the viva will be structured

- The examiner may make a comment on the report to put you at ease but won't be able to reveal your project mark.



The viva should typically last 30 minutes. Sometimes they can be a little longer, but you should not be concerned by this – the length of the viva is not related to the marks awarded.



Questions should be answered as fully as possible. Try to avoid 'yes/no' answers and instead expand on your points giving as much detail as you can.

- Make sure that your response answers the question that has been asked and does not go off at a tangent.



If you need a moment to think and to quickly jot a few key words down to keep you on track as you speak, then do so. This can be helpful particularly if you are feeling nervous.



Don't be concerned if your examiner moves on with the questioning. The viva time will go quickly and there is a lot to talk about! You will be asked a range of questions to avoid becoming overly focused on one section of the project.



The viva will focus on your decision-making processes in the project and your underpinning understanding of different aspects of the work you have produced. There are some example questions at the end of this guide. These illustrate the types of area that might be explored in your viva. Please note though this is not a script, and your examiner may cover areas not listed here.



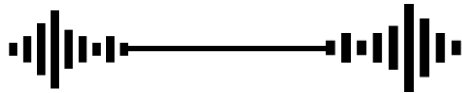
Within the viva you may be asked why did you do 'this' in your research. This can feel like an attack, but you are encouraged to see these sorts of questions as an opportunity for you to be confident and explain why you chose one course of action over another. For example you may explain that you chose to conduct an interview study over a survey because of perceived difficulties gaining access to a large, valid sample size and you might say that the area of study was so new that interviews were needed to help understand the topic area before larger scale research can be done. This is your opportunity to say why you made the choices you did. Be confident in discussing your decisions, after all this has been your research and no one knows the detail as well as you do.



If you don't understand what is being asked in the viva, then tell the examiner. By saying something like 'I'm not clear what is being asked here' the examiner can rephrase the question slightly.



If you just don't know the answer to a question, your supervisor may give you a prompt to remind you, but if you are still unable to answer don't be afraid to say, I don't know. At this point the examination can move on.



Don't be worried by any silences, this just gives you some space for thinking.



You may get some questions to verify that the project was your own work; this is entirely normal and you should not be concerned by this. These questions do not mean you are under any kind of suspicion but the university, as with all work, needs to make routine checks to ensure the work has been your own.



If you now, with hindsight, believe that you made some poor choices in your research, then it is OK to say this in the viva. You can say why you took the decision that you did, show your awareness of its limitations and suggest what you might have done differently instead. You will not lose marks for showing that you would have done things differently; you may get credit for your mature reflections and learning from the process of research.

"Lecturers explained the process well before beginning the viva. They were friendly and not intimidating"



What's the difference between my supervisor and my examiner?

Your Supervisor

Your supervisor attends your viva to provide moral support and to help put you at ease, after all you have most likely been working with your supervisor over a long period of time.

They may:

- Ask you a few questions
- Prompt you if you are struggling
- Help you explain if you faced unforeseen circumstances in your project

They **won't**

- Answer for you

Your supervisor is there to help you. If there are any factors, including specific disabilities, that may affect your performance in the examination, then you should inform your supervisor in the first instance.



Your Examiner

Your examiner will not have been closely involved in your project.

The examiner:

- Asks you questions to check your understanding
- Decides your viva mark
- Is still nice and friendly underneath!

How to prepare for a viva

1. Take some time out and take a step back from your involvement with your project. You have worked so hard to finish the project and it has probably been on your mind for many months. By stepping back for a week or two you can let go of your connection to your project. This will actually help as you begin your preparations for the viva as you will come back to the viva preparation with a clearer mind for tackling the viva.
2. You should re-familiarise with your research, and to read it critically before the viva.

Reading critically might include:

- Looking out for the things that you did well, and the things that are covered less well. Make lists of your own areas of concern and then ask yourself questions such as 'why did I do this?' or 'what other choices could I have made?'
 - Paying attention to the literature that you used in your project. Consider: Which are the most influential books or papers that you read?; How did your findings relate to your reading?; and, remind yourself of how you found the literature.
 - Revisiting your analysis, making sure that you are familiar with the steps that you went through, and being clear on what any statistical tests actually mean. Check that you can explain them clearly, without jargon.
 - As you read, note areas where you felt that you should have said more in your written work. Particularly note areas where you had wanted to say more but then, for word count reasons, cut back on the detail. You may be able to cover this extra material in the viva.
3. You are not expected to re-read all of the literature associated with the project, but you might revisit some of the material that was most influential in the formation of their research project.
 4. Practice!
 - Jot down bullet point responses to some of the example questions provided, or others that you may form yourself. Do not try to memorize responses though as your questions will be phrased differently, and they may cover other areas of your project. Answering example questions is a way of developing your ability to form answers, and it is a way of getting familiar with your project again.
 - Either alone or with a friend, rehearse answers to practice viva questions. As you practice, try to stay on point and give clear answers.
 - Practice with a family member or friend who knows little of your project or specialist area of research. This will force you to be absolutely clear in explaining what you mean.

Questions to help prepare for your viva voce

Please note these suggestions have been collated from Harper Adams University staff. Of course there will be other areas of the research that examiners want to explore in the viva; you are in no way guaranteed to get these questions, but these should help you prepare for the types of question that come up. You might practise with a friend, or rehearse answers to yourself.

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?
- 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? 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 Lydia Arnold (lyarnold@harper-adams.ac.uk).