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The final hurdle: preparation for the PhD viva examination

The viva examination is the culmination of the PhD process. However, it is important to prepare carefully for this final and important hurdle. In this paper, Barbara Jack looks at the different stages of the viva examination, which include undertaking a careful and systematic preparation. This preparation involves gaining a comprehensive awareness of the university procedure for the viva, researching examiners, and considering the value of having a mock viva. The paper explores the actual viva and makes suggestions to deal effectively with questioning from the examiners. Finally, the results of the viva and steps needed to address corrections are discussed.

Key words: PhD, viva examination, preparation, corrections

Introduction

The PhD viva examination is the final hurdle at the end of a long and winding road, especially if the PhD has been undertaken on a part-time basis, in which case it could be the culmination of six years' work. Twigg (1997) likens the experience to that of climbing to the top of a mountain: you spend a long time training for the journey and then undertake a sustained effort to reach the summit. Once at the top (when you have submitted the thesis) you can briefly enjoy the view before you have to carry on the journey (to the viva).

There are several general textbooks and papers that offer advice on how to prepare for the viva, with an increasing amount of material available on the internet (Blaxter *et al* 2001, Cryer 2000, Glatthorn 1998, Holloway and Walker 2000, Phillips and Pugh 2000). The majority of the literature refers to the general process of the viva, however there is less written on the practical aspects of the viva, including how to deal with the outcome. In fact, Burnham (1994) goes so far as to refer to the viva as being 'one of the best-kept secrets in British higher education. To

all but the initiated, what occurs in the lengthy judgely huddle from which nervous postgraduates emerge either victorious or distraught is a mystery'. This paper focuses upon the preparation for the final hurdle of the PhD journey, including preparation before the viva examination, the actual viva, and dealing with corrections.

The purpose of the viva

The viva is an integral part of the research degree examination process and therefore needs careful preparation. The viva has several broad purposes: to enable the examiners to ensure that the thesis is your own work; to give you the opportunity to defend your thesis; and importantly, to clarify any areas where there may be some confusion. Lastly, it allows the examiners to assess your knowledge of how your work fits into the general field of your project area (Holloway and Walker 2000).

Preparation for the viva

The preparation for the viva involves several key areas, which are summarised in Box 1.

Box 1. Key areas for viva preparation

- The examiners – know the work of your internal and external examiners
- The university – policies and procedures
- The period between submission and viva:
 - Writing papers
 - Oral publications
 - Mock viva
 - Revision
 - Defence preparation

The examiners

The preparation for the viva usually starts towards the end of your thesis writing period, with the selection of the internal and external examiners. This is usually made in conjunction with your supervisors and may have been discussed fairly early on, especially if your research is in a highly specialised area (Holloway and Walker 2000). Each university has its

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own criteria regarding the appointment of PhD examiners; these can include their previous experience and length of time from obtaining their own PhD, as well as their relationship with the examining university, especially if they completed their own studies there.

Knowing who your examiners are can be a good starting point for your preparation, as knowing their written style and current research interests can help to identify areas that may be raised in the viva. This preparation can include looking at the examiners' own theses, which are obtainable via the inter-library loan system. This can give some insight into how the examiners went about their own PhD, including their approach and presentation. This is a particularly useful exercise as it enables you to get a feel for the methodological stance that the examiner may hold.

A search of the examiners' publications may be useful, especially if they have either published something on your specific topic or on research methodology, or if you have quoted them in your thesis (Holloway and Walker 2000). I found this to be an extremely useful process, as a search of my internal examiner's publications highlighted a research paper on randomised controlled trials. In the viva, when being questioned on methodology, I was prepared for the direction in which the questions were going and was able to pre-empt further questions.

The university – policy and procedures

Each university has its own policies and procedures for the conduct of the viva examination, which are normally available on university websites. The information will relate to the conduct of the examination as well as to the range of recommendations that examiners can make. At several universities viva examinations are open to all academic staff and PhD students of the university. Although the opportunity to attend viva examinations is not usually taken up, nevertheless, you must be prepared for this occurring. If it were the norm for students to attend viva examinations at your university, then this would undoubtedly be a valuable experience to witness.

Similarly, the presence of your supervisor at the viva examination needs to be discussed. Some students feel that the presence of a familiar face

is comforting (Holloway and Walker 2000). On the other hand, as supervisors are not allowed to smile or nod encouragingly during the viva, the change in role from someone who has nurtured you over the last few years to someone having an expressionless face may be off-putting (Cryer 2000).

It is very important to be aware of the recommendations that the examiners can make. Holloway and Walker (2000) refer to three broad categories: a pass; a provisional pass; or a failure. Additionally, there is the option for the examiners to award an MPhil. However, within each category there may be sub-divisions, and there appears to be some variation between universities as to what each category and sub-division refers to. A comprehensive understanding of what each possible category means, prior to the viva, is important as it can remove anxiety following the examination if corrections are required, as some categories require a further viva.

The period between submission and viva

The amount of time available to prepare for a viva depends on the examiners, and can be as much as six months from the date of submission. Unfortunately, most institutions have no set guidelines, and there may be a considerable wait just to know when the viva is to take place. It is important to use this time wisely to remain focused on the final hurdle, and to be aware that there may be little time from being informed of the viva date to the examination. One valuable use of the time is to write papers from your findings. Although this initially may be quite a daunting task, having just finished writing up, nevertheless it will ensure that you remain in touch with your material.

Oral presentation

As well as writing papers from your thesis, the oral presentation of part of your findings is a very useful exercise. At some universities it is a requirement that you present your work to a research support group (Jack 1999), which allows you to become familiar with the questions you may be asked. Additionally, conference presentations as well as presentations to local audiences can enable you to get a feel for areas

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that people want you to justify, and can highlight potential routes of questioning at the viva. Moreover, they also allow you to develop confidence about your work.

Mock viva

The value of a mock viva should not be underestimated (Holloway and Walker 2000), and your supervisors usually arrange this once the date of the viva is known. This is usually made as realistic as possible with supervisors acting as ‘difficult’ examiners. The identification of areas in which you were unclear, or potential weaknesses, can allow you to rehearse those areas until you have confident explanations.

Revision

The first stage is to remember that the viva is an examination and therefore requires revision of the material on which you will be examined (Holloway and Walker 2000). The difference from other types of examination is that it is your own work that you are revising. The initial step is to familiarise yourself with your entire thesis, bearing in mind that some of the work may have been written a few years ago (Holloway and Walker 2000). A careful and critical re-reading of the thesis is needed to identify areas of potential weakness. A very useful focus is to be aware of limitations of the content, and as you start to identify them you can also develop your defence as to why the limitations are there. For example, although a randomised controlled trial might have been the gold standard in terms of research methodology, you may not have been able to perform one for ethical reasons.

It is acceptable to take a copy of your thesis into the viva with you, although it is a matter of personal choice. Personally, I found it offered some comfort and sense of control knowing that I had a copy to refer to in the viva. It is useful to highlight in the text areas of potential weakness, either of the study or issues that were weak at your mock viva. A highlighted note in the text may save the day if your mind goes blank. Additionally, the use of Post-it index tabs and Post-it notes can help you to locate key points.

Defence preparation and question rehearsal

Twigg (1997) suggests preparing a summary (Box 2) in which you condense your thesis into several bullet points. By doing this you are providing a comprehensive overview of your thesis. Furthermore, the opening question of the viva often asks you to summarise your study, so rehearsing the points suggested by Twigg (1997) helps you to provide a logical and structured overview.

Box 2. Thesis summary (from Twigg 1997)

- What have you done?
- Why have you done it?
- How did you do it?
- What have you found?
- What are the implications?

Having identified the limitations of your study and discussed with your supervisors areas to concentrate upon following your mock viva, it is worth mentally rehearsing stock answers (Glatthorn 1998). This allows you to feel more confident (Holloway and Walker 2000), and also appear so, if questioned on weaker points.

As well as an opening question regarding the summary of your study, there is often a closing question of what you would do differently if you were to do it again. Be careful that you do not give an answer that implies that what you have done is methodologically unsound. Careful preparation of this answer can ensure that you have a strong reply.

The viva

Usually a viva is held at your home institution, so it is unlikely that you will have any problems in finding the venue – although if it is in an unfamiliar building it is worthwhile checking that you know where it is. Obviously, arriving in plenty of time goes without saying. Cryer (2000) suggests that a consideration of the dress code is made, recommending that you dress for the importance of the occasion and adopt a business-like approach.

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External and internal examiners

Usually you will have an internal examiner from your home institution and an external examiner from another university. The external examiner is normally a specialist in your specific field of study whose role is to ensure that the thesis meets the required standard. The internal examiner is there to ensure that the procedural requirements of the awarding institution are upheld. Although the internal examiners may not be specialists in your specific field they will have a general knowledge of the topic area and the methodological approach taken (Holloway and Walker 2000).

Role of the examiners

Prior to the viva the examiners will have separately read the work in detail. Before the examination they usually discuss their individual comments and agree a line of questioning. After the viva the examiners jointly report upon the quality of the work, usually verbally to the candidate and then formally in a report to the university (Holloway and Walker 2000).

Structure of the viva

A viva is likely to last between one and three hours depending upon the examiners and also on how you answer questions. However, the most important advice that I was given was to remember that it is a defence of what you have done, not what you have not done, so you should sell your work and not apologise for it.

It is likely that your examiners will question you on each section of your thesis, and it is important to remember that your thesis is a story that has a start and an end. Being able to look at how each chapter fits in with the whole thesis is imperative. For example, examiners may ask you to justify a particular question within your data collection process. Being able to direct them back to your literature review can support your justification for it.

Questions you cannot answer

A useful strategy, as with a job interview, is to ask the examiners to rephrase the question. This can sometimes help, but being honest is the

best policy. If you have absolutely no idea of the answer it is best to say so. Remember you are being examined by very knowledgeable and skilled academics, who can see if you really understand something or not.

The result and feedback

Usually you are asked to leave the room while the examiners discuss the verdict. This is a most nerve-racking experience and it seems to take forever before you are recalled. If you are fully aware of the different recommendations that the examiners can make, you will understand what is required of you. It is usual to be asked to make corrections, and it is best to prepare yourself psychologically for this eventuality by expecting that there will be more work to do on the thesis.

If you have been told that you have corrections to make then the examiners will provide written feedback in due course. However, as this has to go through the examinations office it can take a few weeks for the letter to get to you. It is worthwhile asking for specific verbal feedback and it is very important to take written notes. This will enable you to start the corrections immediately and also to see exactly how much work there is to do.

After the viva

Your result will clearly dictate how you feel, and it is useful to arrange to contact your supervisor immediately after the viva to discuss the outcome, especially if corrections are requested. I was fortunate in that my main supervisor was available for the afternoon, and although we had agreed that she would not be present at the viva, she was waiting for me when I came out. This was particularly helpful as she was quickly able to make me see that the corrections that I had to make were easily achievable.

Corrections

This is probably the hardest part of the whole PhD process and initially requires a huge amount of energy especially after the viva examination. However daunting it may seem, the earlier a start is made the better, whilst the content of your thesis is fresh in your memory. There are several steps that can be taken to help to minimise the pain.

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Preparation for corrections

Whether you have undertaken the PhD on a full-time or part-time basis, it is worth considering the possibility of having to do further work. Once you have your viva date it is possible to consider when the corrections can be done and arrange for some free time in the few weeks that follow your viva. Discussion with managers can be useful, or alternatively consider using annual leave, bearing in mind that a blocked period of time to focus on the corrections is going to be more valuable and faster than odd days here and there. If you have been successful and require no corrections, I am sure you can find something else to do!

The examiners' report

If you are given a verbal report, this can allow you to make a start on the corrections. The first step is to check that you understand exactly what is required of you; therefore discussion with your supervisor is advisable. Once you have the formal report, if you are unsure of any aspects it is advisable that you contact the internal examiner to discuss the report and obtain clarification. Once you know exactly what is required of you then you can start to address the points that have been made.

Amendments

It is psychologically helpful if you refer to the 'additional' work as amendments, because you are not correcting your work, you are amending it to meet the examiners' requirements. Once you have addressed all points made by the examiners it is recommended that you arrange to see the internal examiner to discuss how you have addressed each point in the report. It is useful to prepare a list stating each point from the report and under each point stating exactly where in the thesis you have made the change, stating page number and, if appropriate, sections. This will allow the examiners to focus on their specific requirements and find exactly where the amendments are located. Not only will this process be beneficial to the examiners, but it will also allow you to ensure that you have addressed every point and can demonstrate it.

Following discussion the internal examiner may suggest certain points that need further elaboration. Additional appointments with the internal examiner may be appropriate depending on the amount of changes required. Alternatively they may recommend resubmission. The process regarding the resubmission of a thesis and confirmation of the results will vary from institution to institution so it is useful to ask the internal examiner what the procedure will be, particularly if you are required to have a further viva.

Appealing against the outcome

Occasionally the outcome of the viva is not what the student expects and if this is the case each university has an established appeals process. Generally appeals can be lodged for administrative errors or examination procedural irregularities, although careful attention to the university regulations and the areas that appeals are allowed for is the first step for the student to take. Most universities have a member of the students' union who can help to provide additional support and advice as to how to undertake an appeal. (Holloway and Walker 2000).

Conclusion

The official notification of your results and award of the PhD is a wonderful moment and should be enjoyed to the full. It is the end of a long and winding road, a road that is full of road works and appears to have been mainly uphill, against gale force winds. The viva examination is the culmination of the PhD process and as such requires careful planning. The role of your supervisor in this final stage cannot be underestimated and for me was invaluable in helping me to achieve my PhD.

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Acknowledgments

To Dr Annie Topping for her useful advice in the run up to my viva and to my supervisors Professor Jackie Oldham, Professor Anne Williams and Dr Valerie Hillier, for all their support and guidance. Thanks also to my examiners Professor Bonnie Sibbald and Dr Lois Thomas for their professional handling of the viva

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