Preparing for the PhD Viva

Matthew Fisher, Dpt. Infectious Disease Epidemiology
Preparing for the PhD Viva

Why this presentation?

• What is a viva voce (‘live voice’) examination?
• What can you expect?
• How can you prepare?
• A personal reflection on the process from a ‘survivor’ and an ‘examiner’
A common perception of the *viva voce* is this…
...when actually it should be more like this
A PhD is about…

• Knowing your field thoroughly
• Making a useful contribution
• Mastering appropriate techniques and knowing their limitations
• Communicating in a professional way
• Making something ‘your own’
A PhD is about…

• Knowing your field thoroughly
• Making a useful contribution
• Mastering appropriate techniques and knowing their limitations
• Communicating in a professional way
• Making something ‘your own’

A ‘GOOD’ VIVA SHOULD REFLECT THIS
In ‘Imperial speak’…

2. The examiners further report that they have satisfied themselves that the thesis:

*Please tick relevant boxes unless reporting 3(2) or 3(6)*

- (a) is genuinely the work of the candidate
- (b) forms a distinct contribution to knowledge of the subject
- (c) affords evidence of originality:
  - (1) by the discovery of new facts
  - (2) by the exercise of independent critical power
- (d) is an integrated whole and presents a coherent argument
- (e) gives a critical assessment of the relevant literature
- (f) describes the method of research and its findings
- (g) includes discussion of those findings and how they advance the study of the subject
- (h) in so doing demonstrates a deep and synoptic understanding of the field of study, objectivity and the capacity for judgment in complex situations and autonomous work in that field
- (i) is satisfactory as regards literary presentation
- (j) includes a full bibliography and references
- (k) demonstrates research skills relevant to the thesis
- (l) is of a standard to merit publication in whole, in part or in a revised form
A Viva is about…

• **Examining** the candidates knowledge of their subject (is the work your own? Do you *really* understand it?)

• An **independent assessment** of ‘quality’

• Allowing the examiner the opportunity to **clarify queries** that arose during the reading of the thesis

• To give you the opportunity to ‘**defend**’ the thesis in person

• To assist in deciding **how and where to publish** the research

……..AND
A Viva is about…

- ENSURING THAT THE THESIS IS NOT PLAGIARISED
The procedure at Imperial College

(http://www3.imperial.ac.uk/registry/exams/thesisandvivas)

**Before you can submit your thesis or have a viva voce examination** you, your supervisor and your department/division will need to complete **examination entry forms** 4 months before your final submission date.

**Examiners appointed**  
*make sure that your supervisor knows the procedure & guidelines*

Examiners read theses and prepare **preliminary reports** independently which they exchange prior to the viva. Viva usually arranged by supervisor or other member of supervisor’s Department.

**The Viva**  
Examiners viva student after a pre-viva meeting. If the student agrees, the supervisor may be present at the viva.

Examiners agree joint written report and send this (plus the theses if they have them) to Research Degree Examination Office; otherwise the student is responsible for submitting the final copies to the SenateHouse Research Degree Examination Office.

**Award of PhD recommended subject to no or minor corrections.** Student makes corrections which are checked by **examiners**. The designated checker(s) of the required corrections then complete another form (Certificate of Completion of Minor Amendments) to certify that the thesis is now satisfactory and that the degree can be awarded.

**Senate House Research Degree Examinations Office sends result to student including examiners joint report.** This correspondence also copied to College Registry. Copies of the thesis are sent to the Senate House Library, which then sends a copy on to the Imperial College Library.
The Viva – The examiners

• You should have a role in picking your examiner

• However, this will not stop them from falling into three types

Friendly & Interested
Examiners will make you feel at ease. They will want you to explain your research.

Adversarial
Some examiners will challenge your views, in order to hear your argument.

Detailed
Some examiners inspect every word and phrase. “On page 32, you say ... please explain.”
The Viva – What to Expect

• Before the viva, both the external and internal examiners will have (hopefully) read the thesis.

• They will have both written preliminary reports.

• They will have exchanged these before the viva.

• Before the viva starts, the examiners will meet and discuss their preliminary reports.

• They will also discuss strategy. How are they going to ‘play’ the viva…
The Viva – What to Expect

• The responsibility for ensuring that ‘good practice’ is followed depends on both examiners.

• Start with polite introductions

• The ‘Chair’ should be clear – this is usually the Internal *they should introduce the external examiner & will start the viva*

• Chair should explain that this is a ‘focused discussion not an interrogation’

• Chair should briefly review the process and procedures (They should know them!)
The Viva – What to Expect

• They will start with an easy ‘warm-up’ question, usually ‘tell us in brief what your thesis is about’. Can you summarise your PhD in 3 minutes?

• They may ask you about what is your ‘original contribution’. Claim a ‘fresh approach’ or a ‘new perspective’ rather than world shattering originality.

• They may ask you to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of your study. The weaknesses are tricky-

  this is not an invitation to publicly destroy your work. Look at weaknesses in terms of limitations. Difficult decisions had to be made in planning the research, leading to subsequent tradeoffs. Then, focus in on the need for future work.
The Viva – What to Expect

• Every viva is different. However, it should proceed logically.

**General**
- What is your motivation?
- What is your contribution?

**Theoretical framework**
- Talk us through the main research questions that you were trying to address?
- What shaped your literature review?

**Methodology/Analysis**
- What informed your choice of methods? Could it have been done in another way? Which aspects of the work could be taken further?

**Open forum**
- Strengths/weaknesses. Future plans?

Any questions for us?
## The Viva – Do’s and Don’t’s

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Don’t</th>
<th>Do</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Be dogmatic</td>
<td>Be thoughtful and reflective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be defensive</td>
<td>Be honest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be long-winded</td>
<td>Be concise (but do not give one-word answers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Try to please examiners by ‘contriving’ to include their work in the references</td>
<td>Carry out some ‘homework’ on the examiners and their work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demand certain examiners, for example, for being the ‘expert’ in your field</td>
<td>Have some involvement on in discussing and choosing the examiners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be ‘laid back’ and blasé</td>
<td>Be prepared. But not over-prepared, for example, by trying to predict questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Be apologetic for what you have done</em></td>
<td>Be confident, but not over-confident</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

pp 194, Wellington et al.
THAT'S AN INTERESTING QUESTION. CERTAINLY, PRECISE DETERMINATION OF CURRENT TEMPORAL STATE IS OF UTMOST PRACTICAL IMPORTANCE. WHILE IT IS NOT POSSIBLE TO PROVIDE DEFINITE ANSWERS WITHIN THE PRESENT CONTEXT, FUTURE WORK WILL...

YA MEAN YOU DON'T KNOW THE TIME?
Prepare yourself

• Know your thesis inside out
• What have you done?
• Why have you done it?
• What have you found?
• What are the implications?

• Prepare several bullet points on each
Prepare yourself

• Know the Imperial Rules and Regulations

• Arrange a mock viva to practice your general oral skills and ability to respond to challenges on details of the thesis. Don’t try and second-guess questions (but prepare for the ‘stock’ questions). Do you have future plans? What are they?

• Talk to others who have had vivas recently. Avoid the horror stories – they are not helpful

• Eat well. Sleep well. Don’t drink. Be Calm. Don’t over caffeinate – you will have plenty of natural adrenalin
TOMORROW I DEFEND.
WHAT IF I'M NOT READY? WHAT IF I CAN'T DO IT?
WHAT IF I FAIL?

EVERYBODY'S COUNTING ON ME.
JEN AND THE BABY...
I CAN'T LET THEM DOWN.

MAN, I DON'T KNOW HOW I'M GOING TO SLEEP TO-
ZZZZZZZ...
The Viva – The Verdict

There are gradations between a straight pass or fail

• ‘Pass’- highly unusual. They probably didn’t read it.
• ‘Minor Amendments’- Typos. Small underlying changes. A *small* quantity of additional information. This is the most usual outcome.
• ‘Re-submission’- Varies from rewriting chapters to changing data-analysis or discussion. Maybe further data collection. Time-limited to a year.
• ‘Fail’- This is a very uncommon decision which usually reflects a failure in the system, usually your supervisor.
The examiners fill out an ‘Examiners Report’

3. The examiners report that they have determined **one** of the following: **Please tick relevant box**

(1) That the candidate has satisfied them in the examination for the degree of PhD. □

(2) That to satisfy the examiners in the examination for the degree of PhD, the candidate is required to make specified minor amendments to the examiners’ satisfaction □ within three months (see overleaf)

(3) That the candidate be permitted to re-enter for the examination for the PhD degree and to re-present the thesis in a revised form within eighteen months. [A further oral examination is at the discretion of the examiners.] □

A further oral examination is: □ required □ not required □ not yet decided

(4) That the candidate be permitted to re-enter for the oral examination (on the same thesis) □

not later than .................................................................*

(5) That the candidate has satisfied the criteria for the award of the degree of MPhil and should be awarded this degree. □

(6) That to satisfy the requirements for the degree of MPhil, the candidate is required to make specified minor amendments to the examiners’ satisfaction within three months □

(see overleaf).

(7) That the candidate be permitted to enter the examination for the degree of MPhil and to re-present the thesis in a revised form within twelve months. □

(8) That the candidate has not satisfied them in the examination. (Such a candidate will not be permitted to re-enter for the examination for the PhD or the MPhil degree). □

*A candidate to whom all rights are not given should be specified in the report.
The Viva – The Verdict

• After the viva the examiners will write a joint report stipulating the corrections that are needed. This will be sent to the student. *make sure that this happens fast while it is still fresh in their minds*

• The final joint report (with the preliminary reports) will be attached to the signed IC Examiners sheet and, once the corrections have been checked, this will be submitted to registry.

• At this point you are home and dry!

• Check whether the Dpt. has money to help you print your final bound thesis copies
...and finally…

Go mad, Party, then…

“Mat, can I borrow a tenner to go and get some Champagne?”

Prof David Walliker, 1997, on finishing my viva