

# Supporting students through the PhD viva: A guide for supervisors

The viva can be one of the most stressful parts of [the PhD journey](#). As a supervisor, you play a key role in supporting the students that you supervise through this process. Some practical ways to support your students with their viva are outlined below.

## During the PhD:

- Encourage regular presentations: Find opportunities and motivate your students to present their work to both internal and external audiences. This builds confidence in presenting their work, enhances their ability to discuss their research and provides opportunities to engage with feedback. Encourage them to keep track of questions and comments received as these can inform both thesis writing and viva preparation.
- Reflect on formal review points: Many institutions hold formal review stages during the PhD (e.g. annual progress reviews which can be seen as mini-vivas). After these, help the students reflect not only on content discussed, but also on how they handled the interaction, so they can develop skills in managing similar situations ahead of the final viva.

## During the write up phase:

- Clarify the assessment criteria: Ensure the students understands the criteria used to assess both the thesis and their performance in the viva.
- Arrange a mock viva: Conducting a mock viva allows students to practice responding to questions and identify areas of weakness in advance of thesis submission.
- Promote available support: Encourage students to attend viva preparation workshops which are often provided at Faculty, College or University level, and to access any other resources provided by their institution, the SGSS or other providers –bearing in mind that PhD examinations may be different outside the UK.
- Demystify the viva: Students often hear only overly positive or negative experiences from other students. Share your own experience as a student or examiner to provide a balanced view. Discuss:
  - Who will be present and what their roles are.
  - How the viva may be structured e.g. chronologically, thematically, or process-based.
  - What the possible outcomes mean in practice.
  - That it's acceptable to ask to take a break during the viva.
- Reinforce that the thesis is central: Emphasize that a strong, well-written thesis aligned with the assessment criteria is the foundation for a successful viva.
- Select the examiners carefully and as early as it is feasible: consider both subject expertise and interpersonal style, so the external examiner is a good fit for the student. Some universities allow students to be involved in selecting their examiners, while others explicitly prohibit it. Be sure to familiarise yourself with your university's regulations.

### **Between submission and the viva:**

- Suggest that students take some time off from PhD focussed work so that they can enter the viva preparation stage with fresh eyes when reviewing their thesis.
- To help with preparation encourage continued writing and review: Help the students consolidate their understanding of the thesis through proposing tasks such as:
  - Drafting a 1 page abstract for each chapter to ensure clarity and coherence
  - Preparing written responses to common viva questions (e.g. using published guides such as [this one from UKCGE](#))
  - Be prepared to offer feedback to students on the writing work they undertake during the viva preparation phase.
- Have a mock viva with the supervision team, giving the student feedback on how they have approached answering questions (the process) as well as the content of their answers.
- Ask the students to prepare a short verbal overview of their work and provide feedback on this. There may not be a formal opportunity to present that, but many examiners use this as a starting question to help settle students at the start of their viva.
- Some universities state in the regulations that the work should be publishable in some form. If this statement is included in the regulations where you work and the student has not published during their PhD ensure that you have had a discussion about what work may be publishable from the thesis, in what form, and what the working title of the work(s) would be.
- Normalise nerves: Reassure students that it is completely natural to feel nervous. Support them to think about strategies for managing this.
- Clarify supervisor attendance: If your institution allows supervisors' attendance, make clear this is optional and let the student decide whether they want you there.

### **Viva day and post viva support:**

- Be available afterwards: Be present after the viva to celebrate success or offer support if the outcome is disappointing. For remote vivas, discuss in advance how the student can access support from you or others including friends and family.
- Support post-viva corrections:
  - Reassure the student that corrections are a common outcome of the assessment process and a normal part of the academic publication process.
  - For major revisions, arrange a meeting with the student and internal examiner (if regulations permit) to clarify expectations for corrections.
  - Help the student develop a plan, including clear timeframes, to address corrections and schedule time into the plan for you to review work before resubmission.
  - Keep an eye on timeframes to ensure the student is meeting institutional requirements for resubmission.