

Best practice for PhD examiners

Examiner's role:

- Support the candidate in performing to the best of their ability, enabling a fair assessment of the thesis.
- Assess the quality of the work against the institution's established criteria, which may be different than your own.

Before the viva:

- When invited to examine, consider:
 - Do I have sufficient time to prepare properly and to conduct a thorough examination?
 - Am I suitably qualified in this subject area?
 - Are there any conflicts of interest e.g. with the supervisor or the student?
- Skim the thesis promptly upon receipt to identify any potential issues that may require in-depth reading or discussion with the external examiner.
- If institutional regulations allow it, consider the need for a non-examining chair. While not always standard across institutions, a chair can be helpful and may be requested when:
 - The thesis raises concerns likely to result in a challenging viva.
 - One examiner lacks experience or is unfamiliar with UK practices.
 - There is a significant power dynamic between examiners -e.g., a junior internal examiner and senior external examiner.
- If you are the internal/convenor examiner, share relevant institutional regulations with the external examiner as early in the process as possible.
- If you are the external examiner familiarise yourself with the institution's specific viva procedures.
- Read the thesis in detail and annotate the thesis as you go with the aim of supporting the candidate understand corrections which might be required.
- When assessing the thesis ensure that you focus on the criteria of the **examining** institution. Provide appropriate levels of detail in the pre-viva report to justify your assessment for each criterion.
- Submit your independent report several days in advance and in accordance with the requirements of the examining institution. Internal examiners should ensure the external examiner does the same.
- Arrange a pre-viva meeting, ideally not on the day of the viva, to:
 - Share initial impressions.
 - Agree on key areas for clarification.
 - Assign question leads and agree on the viva structure.
- Be mindful of potential accessibility needs. If the candidate has disclosed a disability or mental health condition, ensure agreed adjustments are in place e.g. extended breaks, alternative formats, or pacing of questioning.

During the viva:

- For in-person vivas, ensure the room is set up to support open discussion e.g. a small round table rather than a board room arrangement, perhaps a whiteboard to support the student express their ideas.
- Begin with words of encouragement. If possible, share a positive but non-committal comment on the thesis. Where there is a VIVA chair, they will do this.
- At the start of the viva:
 - Explain the viva structure.

- Let the candidate know they can request breaks.
- Reinforce that the viva is a space for discussion.
- Reassure nervous candidates that they are not being assessed on their nerves.
- Use "settling" questions e.g. "Talk us through the main ideas of your thesis" to help ease the candidate into the discussion.

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- Show engagement with the thesis through thoughtful, varied questions, such as:
 - Clarifying: "How did you approach X?"
 - Justifying: "Why did you choose this method?"
 - Contextual: "How does this relate to existing literature?"
 - Conceptual: "Explain X."
 - Reflective: "What would you do differently?"
- Avoid over-reliance on justification ("why" questions), which can hinder constructive dialogue.
- Practice active listening and reflect the candidate's answers back to them.
- Offer positive feedback when questions are answered well.
- If the candidate struggles with a question, provide scaffolding for them. Break down the question or suggest a starting point. If they still cannot respond adequately, move on and note the issue for possible corrections.
- Remember, your role is to assess whether the candidate meets their institution's criteria, not whether you agree with their conclusions.

At the end of the viva:

- Clearly communicate the viva outcome and the rationale behind it.
- If major corrections are needed, involve the supervisor (with the candidate's consent) to help ensure understanding, especially if the result is disappointing.
- Clarify the purpose and scope of the required corrections.
- Provide a detailed written list of corrections and, where possible, annotated versions of the thesis.
- Submit the final report promptly—delays may impact the candidate's graduation and future plans.

After the viva:

- Request a commentary on how corrections have been addressed as this simplifies review.
- Ask to be notified when the candidate intends to resubmit, to allow time for review.
- Ensure the candidate follows the correct resubmission procedures.