

Examination Guidance for Postgraduate Research Students – what can you expect from your viva?

The full requirements for research degree examinations are in the Research Degree Regulations, Regulations 9 – 15, available to students and staff on the Research Degrees Blackboard site. The documents under the 'Examination Information' section of the Research Degrees Blackboard site provide some additional information which you may find useful, particularly in relation to online or videoconference vivas. See also the list of useful resources at the end of this document.

Your viva should be a testing, long, yet enjoyable experience. Your examining team will have been chosen by your supervisors for their mix of subject expertise and experience of examining research degrees. Your examiners and final thesis title should be proposed on an RF3 form at least 4 months in advance of submission of your thesis. Your Director of Studies is responsible for completing this.

Some supervisors consult with their students about the choice of examiners whilst others don't. If you have a strong preference, then please tell your supervisors. You may have met someone at a conference who you think would make an ideal examiner for your particular piece of work. However, if you are not familiar with the examiners appointed, it may be wise to read up about them and become familiar with their work so that you know their background and which methodological tradition they advocate.

1. Submission of thesis and pre-examination

- 1.1 You are required to submit your thesis and a loose copy of your abstract by email in PDF format. Your thesis is then emailed to the examiners by the Doctoral School team (referred to as 'team' hereafter). We normally aim to do this within 7 working days of receipt.
- 1.2 The examiners then assess your thesis. The team will write to the examiners requesting that they submit their preliminary/independent reports on your thesis at least one week in advance of the oral examination. The reports will then be exchanged between examiners for information.
- 1.3 It is the responsibility of your Director of Studies to liaise with you and your examiners to confirm the viva arrangements. Sometimes your Director of Studies may ask the Research Institute PGR administrator or the internal examiner to help with the organisation.
- 1.4 Vivas can be held via three modes; videoconferencing, in-person, or a hybrid model where some participants are co-located and some join by videoconferencing. Your Director of Studies will ask you for your preference on how your viva will be conducted, but please be aware it will only be possible to accommodate your preference if the circumstances of the examiners allow for that. In particular, External Examiners who are at a distance from the University will not be expected to travel. You should discuss the options available with your Director of Studies.
- 1.5 Your Director of Studies will liaise with you and your examiners to agree a mutually convenient date. The regulations state that your viva will *normally* take place between 4 and 6 weeks after submission of your thesis. However, 'normally' is key here as the date entirely depends on yours and your examiners' availability. So, it might sometimes be more than 6 weeks but at the earliest possible convenient date.
- 1.6 The Doctoral School team will write to you to confirm the arrangements made by the Research Institute regarding date, time and location of the examination.

2. Preparation for viva

- 2.1 It is a good idea to read through your thesis before your viva and take a copy along with you to the exam. You could even make a list of typos you've spotted (there will always be a few!) and earmark some of the pages with post-it notes so that you can easily find key bits which you know the examiners will ask you about.
- 2.2 Your supervisors should offer you the opportunity of undertaking a mock viva which you may or may not accept. It is up to you. Obviously, the questioning will differ in the real event, but it will give you an idea of how the exam might work and the sorts of basic questions you may encounter.
- 2.3 There is an unregulated practice in some areas where students have been advised by their supervisor to prepare a formal presentation of their work at the start of the viva. This is not a mandatory requirement, and we advise against it. We feel this adds pressure, is not something that forms part of the assessment, and can affect the time allocated for the examiners questions. The assessment tasks are the thesis and the viva. You have presented your thesis and you are now defending your work through your responses to the examiners' questioning. The examination should be led by the examiners. The following article from The Guardian provides a really useful checklist of what you can do to fully prepare.

<https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/2015/jan/08/how-to-survive-a-phd-viva-17-top-tips>

Point 9 outlines the icebreaker question. This is something you can prepare for and to which you can provide a detailed answer. This DOES NOT REQUIRE THE USE OF A FORMAL PRESENTATION/ POWERPOINT to articulate your reply. Just be ready to talk to the examiners.

3. Examination day

- 3.1 The examiners will meet for a private discussion before your examination to set an agenda for the viva, based on the points raised about your thesis in their independent reports.
- 3.2 This agenda will be presented to the Independent Chair who has been appointed by your Research Institute Head of Research Degrees to manage the viva proceedings. The main role of the Chair is to ensure that fairness prevails in the assessment, and that you are allowed the utmost opportunity to be able to defend your work. The Chair will not take part in the assessment but will be there to oversee the process and advise the examiners on regulatory and procedural matters.
- 3.3 You are allowed to have one or more of your supervisors in the examination with you if you wish. They can act as a silent observer, there to support to you, but can speak if the examiners wish them to. If you have a learning contract, then your support worker/mentor may attend the exam with you at your request.
- 3.4 Science-based vivas tend to be on average longer than social science science/humanities - a shorter thesis usually demands a longer defence! A science-based viva might be an average of around 3 hours or more, whereas a social sciences or humanities viva would generally be around 2 hours or less. Then again, it depends entirely on how much the examiners have to discuss with you. Basically, the length is as long as it takes! Make sure you have some water with you in case you get thirsty.
- 3.5 After the examiners have finished their questioning and discussion with you, you will be asked to leave the room whilst they deliberate and agree their joint decision. You will then be invited back to the room and the examiners will inform you of their recommendation to the University's Research Degrees Committee. NB - some examiners may inform students of the outcome *before* the viva has begun but this is not recommended practice; the point of the viva is to authenticate authorship of the work and to test your knowledge of the subject.

3.6 For reference, the award criteria for Doctorate and MPhil/research masters can be found in appendix A of this document.

4. Examination outcome

4.1 The outcome for of your viva will be one of the below:

- a) the candidate is **awarded the degree**. We don't have many examinations resulting in a 'straight pass', but in this case no further work is required – see section 6 for next steps
- b) the candidate is **awarded the degree subject to amendments** being made to the thesis (see Regulations R14.4). You will have 4 months to complete the amendments if you are studying full-time, or 8 months if you are studying part-time. You will be required to send the revised version to the Doctoral School via rdcadmin@shu.ac.uk for forwarding to the examiner(s).
- c) the candidate is permitted to **resubmit for the degree and be re-examined**, with or without an oral examination (see Regulations R15). If you are awarded a re-examination opportunity, this means you have not yet passed and will need to revise your thesis quite substantially in line with the examiners' written guidance. See section 5 below.
- d) in the case of a Doctoral examination, **the candidate is awarded the degree of MPhil** (for PhD candidates) **or MProf** (for Professional Doctorate candidates), subject to the presentation of the thesis amended to the satisfaction of the examiners, and provided that the candidate clearly satisfies the requirements for that award as indicated in Regulations R1.4/Annex A.
- e) the candidate is **not awarded the degree and is not permitted to be re-examined** (see Regulations R14.7). This would only be in cases where research misconduct is proven.

4.2 Your examiners may give you the amendments after your viva but, if the amendments are quite lengthy, you may have to wait for a week or so before the examiners jointly agree them.

4.3 The joint examiners' report and any required amendments or rationale for re-examination are sent to the Doctoral School Team who will then write to you to officially confirm the outcome.

5. Re-examination

5.1 If your outcome was resubmission and re-examination, you will need to revise your thesis in line with the examiners' written guidance (see Regulations R15). You will have up to 12 months to revise your thesis although you can submit before this deadline if you wish.

5.2 It would be really helpful if you would email rdcadmin@shu.ac.uk to inform us of the date you plan to resubmit. If you can do this a month in advance, we can then inform the examiners so that they are expecting your thesis and can do the reassessment in a timely manner.

5.3 You will need to email a PDF of your thesis to rdcadmin@shu.ac.uk by the deadline specified in the outcome letter after your first assessment. You will also need to submit a covering letter for the examiners explaining how you have addressed the issues raised by them in the first examination. You will normally have 12 months from your first viva date to submit your thesis and letter. If there was a delay in the examiners providing their comments after your first viva, you will be allowed 12 months from the date of dispatch of the amendments to you.

5.4 Your thesis and covering letter are sent back to your examiners who complete a further independent report. It is this report that will state whether you will also have to undertake another viva. If you do, your Director of Studies will make the necessary arrangements, and the team will write to you to confirm the details. However, if the examiners are happy with your revised thesis and were satisfied with your oral defence of your work in the first examination, you will either be offered a straight pass or pass subject to amendments.

- 5.5 The outcomes for re-examination will be one of the below:
- a) the candidate is awarded the degree
 - b) the candidate is awarded the degree subject to amendments being made to the thesis (see Regulations R15.7)
 - c) in the case of a Doctoral examination for PhD or Professional Doctorate, the candidate is awarded the degree of MPhil or MProf respectively, subject to the presentation of the thesis amended to the satisfaction of the examiners, and provided that the candidate clearly satisfies the requirements for MPhil or MProf as indicated in Regulations R1.4 or Annex A
 - d) the candidate is not awarded the degree.

6. Conferment

- 6.1 Once the assessment process is complete and you have achieved either a straight pass or have completed all amendments to the satisfaction of the named examiner(s), then the university's Pro Vice-Chancellor (PVC) for Research, Innovation and Knowledge Exchange will be asked to confer your award. The PVC will consider your Abstract and the examiners' reports before signing off your draft certificate.
- 6.2 The team will then send you the draft certificate by email and ask you to check that all words are spelt correctly before the final certificate is printed and posted to you by Registry Services. The Graduation Office will send you details of the graduation ceremony date. Attendance at the ceremony is not mandatory but it is a special occasion which is nice to share with family and friends so we would encourage you to attend if possible.
- 6.3 You are required to submit the final version of your thesis as an e-thesis in PDF/A format. This will be uploaded to the University's Research Archive SHURA <https://shura.shu.ac.uk/>
- 6.4 Finally, the team will email you a link to a conferment questionnaire to complete online. We would welcome your feedback on what was good and not so good about your student experience. We use this for quality purposes and the results from the questionnaires inform our annual research degrees report and plans.

7. Appeals

- 7.1 If you are offered an MPhil/MProf as the outcome of a doctoral examination, you can appeal the decision within 10 working days of receipt of the results letter. Note that you can only appeal on the grounds specified in the [Appeals Policy and Procedure](#). You cannot appeal on the grounds of disagreement with the academic judgement of the examiners.

If you have any queries, please email rdcadmin@shu.ac.uk

Gillian Taylor, Secretary to the University Research Degrees Committee.

Useful Resources

E-theses and copyright (online course)

All doctoral researchers must submit an electronic copy of their finished and accepted thesis to the Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA). This online course covers: Benefits of putting your thesis on SHURA; Copyright; Embargoes; Uploading your e-thesis; and Your rights.

The course is accessed via the Researcher CPD online courses Blackboard site.

The Good Viva video (Angel Productions)

This video was made by Angel Productions in cooperation with Birkbeck, University of London. The Good Viva Video will help you understand: What is a viva? How important is it to your degree? How do vivas differ between disciplines? How can you prepare? Should you relax or panic? What are the roles of the internal and external examiners, the chair and your supervisor? How are examiners chosen? What questions should you expect? How to use a practice viva. Knowing the strengths and weaknesses of your thesis. What are the examiners looking for? Coping with examiners' mistakes or aggressive questions. Understanding the outcome. [The Good Viva Video \(panopto.eu\)](http://panopto.eu)

Preparing for your Viva

Sheffield Hallam University has contributed to a project led by The University of South Wales (USW) Graduate School along with the University Alliance, Coventry University and the University of Huddersfield to create a unique resource for postgraduate research students across the UK, providing everything they need to prepare for their viva exams. The web page (hosted by USW), [How to Prepare for the Viva Examination](#), contains a series of videos and resources for PGR students across the sector and these resources are freely available to PGRs across all Higher Education Institutions in the UK. The resources aim to enhance students' learning experience by showcasing real-life experiences and possible viva questions; helping them to shape and develop their preparations, anticipate potential questions and test out possible answers, to help eliminate some of their fears and concerns and give them the best possible chance of success.

Resources from Vitae

The Vitae website has some useful information on completing your doctorate, including tips on writing and submitting your thesis, and the viva (to access these you may need to register with your SHU email address).

<https://www.vitae.ac.uk/doing-research/doing-a-doctorate/completing-your-doctorate>

The website also includes information and resources on careers inside and outside higher education.

<https://www.vitae.ac.uk/researcher-careers>

Other resources

[Preparing for your Viva - UK Council for Graduate Education.pdf](#)

The Library Research Support Team can provide advice on submitting your final thesis for SHURA

<https://libguides.shu.ac.uk/researchsupport>

The following article from The Guardian provides a really useful checklist of what you can do to fully prepare: <https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/2015/jan/08/how-to-survive-a-phd-viva-17-top-tips>

The book 'How to Survive your Viva' by Rowena Murray has been recommended by colleagues at our staff examiner workshops. Feedback by students on the usefulness of this has been mixed but you might want to test it out. It is available via the [SHU Library - http://viva-survivors.com/](http://viva-survivors.com/)

R1.4 MPhil award objectives

The MPhil will be awarded to a candidate who, having critically investigated and evaluated an approved topic and demonstrated an understanding of research methods appropriate to the chosen field, has presented and defended a thesis by oral examination to the satisfaction of the examiners.

R1.5 Doctoral award objectives

The Doctorate will be awarded to a candidate who, having critically investigated and evaluated an approved topic, resulting in an independent and original contribution to knowledge, and demonstrated an understanding of research methods appropriate to the chosen field, has presented and defended a thesis by oral examination to the satisfaction of the examiners.