

The PhD viva: a necessary rite of passage

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A PhD is an amazing accomplishment and the title of 'Dr' is something of which to be really proud. It symbolises dedication, commitment, sacrifice, personal achievement and a successful academic journey. Naturally, one expects a robust system to be in operation to ensure that those who successfully acquire this prestigious title are indeed worthy of it.

The viva as evidence

Academic institutions need to be certain that those who attain a PhD have been subject to a rigorous examination process. Evidence of achievement must be demonstrated on paper in the written thesis and (in most countries) also in person.

In the viva voce or oral examination, the student is called upon to discuss and 'defend' their thesis. This is the arena in which they must articulate in-depth knowledge and understanding of their particular research in the context of what is already known. Examiners must be satisfied with evidence that the candidate has:

- A thesis that offers a 'unique contribution'
- The competence to 'research with the necessary rigour'
- 'Expert knowledge' in the subject area.

Candidates may well ask whether it is possible to prepare for safe passage through this daunting experience, and the answer is 'Yes'.

Preparation is the key to success

There is no doubt that preparing for a PhD viva can be stressful for students, supervisors and examiners, as well as family and friends. Information on how to prepare is available from supervisors, student support services, university departments, peers, colleagues and friends. A simple internet search for viva preparation provides at least six months' material to work through.

The best advice that anyone can give is: 'Read, read and read!' Read the thesis in question, read journals and conference proceedings, and read other PhD theses. Candidates should read their thesis in a structured way, bookmarking key chapters with coloured tags, selecting points that answer specific questions and summarising all chapters. They should compose responses to the most important and probable questions, such as 'Tell me about your PhD research' or 'What is your PhD all about?' Answers should be written out, read and learnt, and students should practise articulating and elaborating on them.

It is crucial for candidates to be ready with a well rehearsed two-minute oral presentation on what their thesis is about – what was done, why it was done and what was found. Every student needs this distilled and ready to recall, as they will be sharing it with peers, academics and others for the rest of their life. However, the viva requires more than a summary – it needs to elicit the distinct contribution of the research to the knowledge in this area. The thesis should contain a section that demonstrates this contribution clearly, such as new methodological approaches or theoretical developments, and candidates must know this section in depth and be ready to discuss it with confidence.

Students should remember that this is their PhD – their contribution to the body of knowledge, theory, practice and

understanding in this subject area. They should acknowledge the limitations of their research – no research is perfect or complete – but also recognise the new knowledge emanating from it.

Examiners expect candidates to have rehearsed their answers to being asked 'So what?' questions, which are designed to enable the student to talk about their research with confidence. The examiner is not out to fail them, but needs to be sure that the research was conducted by the student, and that they know and understand it. Candidates must also be ready to address deeper and more probing questions, and to talk about their future plans. The question 'If you were to start all over again, would you do anything differently?' is sometimes asked at the end of the viva. It is looking for a response that demonstrates the student's overall understanding of the research process. The PhD is a training exercise in research so there is no need to be too self-critical, but candidates should think about this question carefully as their thesis will present a justified and soundly argued case for asking the research question, selecting an appropriate method and mode of analysis. The question requires a response that is relevant, appropriate and meaningful. Hindsight is a great advantage, but none of us have it without lived experience.

On the day

It is important for candidates to remember that they know more about their PhD than anyone else in the room. The viva is a great opportunity for them to talk about their research, and they should go into it with a positive attitude and an expectation that it will be challenging and fair.

On a practical level, arriving in good time with all the necessary materials and switching mobile phones to silent mode will certainly help! Having family or significant others nearby may also provide support. Candidates can bring anything they need as evidence of their personal journey through the PhD, be it a field diary, wallchart, notes, videos, emails or text messages. They should have a copy of their thesis that is signposted with colours or codes to ensure easy and quick retrieval of information.

If a question is not understood, honesty really is the best policy. Asking if it could be rephrased, or for an indication of the page number or section of the thesis to which it refers can unlock the thoughts that lead to an answer. Students should also ask if unsure whether they are answering with the appropriate depth or breadth.

The PhD viva is a necessarily challenging experience, and the acquisition of a doctorate is all the more rewarding for it. Although it may be an understandably intimidating prospect, with the right preparation, a positive mindset and a confident approach, midwives can (and do) perform brilliantly at their viva. In doing so, they step into a 'wider world' of midwifery research that enriches the profession immeasurably.

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