Prepare to defend your doctoral thesis

Pam Denicolo, Dawn Duke and Julie Reeves demystify the viva process for PhD students

In many countries, the final examination of the doctorate consists of two components: the examination of the written dissertation, and the viva voce or dissertation defence. The weighting of these two components and the way in which vivas are conducted vary tremendously, even across institutions. However, combining many years of experience examining, giving seminars and leading workshops on what to expect, we can provide answers to some common questions with the aim of quelling the fear associated with the event.

Preparation makes perfect

One critical reason for a viva is to ensure that the work done in the thesis is in fact the work of the candidate. Another reason is to facilitate deeper exploration into areas that were less well developed in the thesis, to determine your understanding of them and perhaps seek to improve the final thesis. Even the best theses have their weaker points. When examiners are reading through this large book of work, they are looking very carefully for the parts that are weak as well as appreciating its strengths. This may sound a bit scary; however, this is a very important piece of work, so you and they want it to be as good as possible.

Given the importance of a viva, you can see that it is well worth preparing thoroughly for it. We suggest that you ask your supervisors to provide you with a mock viva, encourage as many friends and colleagues as possible to quiz you on aspects of your research and practise answering mock questions, especially the ones that you hope will not be asked.

Questions about questions

“What are they going to ask?”

“What will I do if I don’t know the answer?”

And perhaps – “What if I lose the ability to speak?” Are among the most common questions we hear when we talk to doctoral researchers about the viva.

Of course, we cannot predict exactly what questions you will be asked. However, there are some common question types, which can give you an idea of what you can expect. You are likely to be asked about why you have taken specific approaches, used specific theories, and chosen specific methods.

When you are asked these types of questions, the examiners are looking for your ability to justify your research decisions with a coherent and critical argument. Some of these decisions may have been made for very pragmatic reasons, for example resource availability, cost, practicality or supervisor expertise.

However, examiners are looking for a more robust answer related to rigour in the research. Make sure you can make a strong, reasoned case for the advantages reaped because of your decisions.

While there are no true right answers, one truly wrong answer is “My supervisor told me to.” This is your doctorate, so even if a decision was made on the advice of your supervisor, you must be able to argue and defend the scientific merits of your choices.

Presenting your answers

People are often worried about not being able to answer a question or freezing up, but the most important thing is to remember that you do not have to answer immediately. You have time to think and to consider your answer.

Breathe – then think. If there is something that you do not understand, ask for clarification. Do interact with your examiners. You can say, “I’m not sure if this is what you are looking for...” They should then be able to provide guidance to enable you to answer their questions more fully.

It is acceptable to admit to being nervous or say that your mind has gone blank for a minute. Examiners should understand this and allow for it. Ask if your answer was headed in the right direction.

Most importantly, if you honestly do not know an answer, do not make up one. Show interest in the question and in following it up later. As a rule of thumb, it is OK not to know a few of the answers; however, it is not OK not to care.

Enjoy the final stretch

Think of the viva as your big day to shine. This is when you show off all your hard work to experts in your field – you should be up to the challenge.

Prepare yourself, and enter the viva with a positive yet realistic mindset. It is important to know that it is common to have at least some corrections after the viva, and for a fair number of people these may be substantial.

However, these corrections are to make your written work even better. Your name and that of your institution are on this thesis, and it is important that this academic work represents you and your research in the best light. Therefore, go into the viva open to further improvement, but confident in the hard work and rationale that you have put into your research already.

Pam Denicolo, emeritus professor at the University of Reading, and Dawn Duke, head of the researcher development programme at the University of Surrey, are hosting an all-day workshop, Demystifying and Preparing for the Doctoral Viva, at the Society for Research into Higher Education on 24 May. This is an edited extract from their book with Julie Reeves, researcher developer at the University of Southampton, Success in Research: Fulfilling the Potential of your Doctoral Experience.