Surviving Your Viva

The Examiner Perspective

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My Experience

- PhD/EngD theses supervised: 15
- Internal examiner/assessor: 12
- External examiner: 22
- Total vivas: 34
- Failures: 2
  - One as internal examiner, one as external.
Agenda

- Examiner’s perspective on a viva:
  - Appointment of examiners.
  - How do examiners prepare?
  - What do they look for?
  - What goes on in the “pre-viva meeting”?
  - What types of questions do they ask?
  - What goes on in the “post-viva meeting”?
  - Why do theses fail?
  - Why do theses pass?
Your internal assessor will probably be the same one you’ve had throughout your PhD studies.

Your supervisor will nominate an external examiner.

- An expert in the field.
- University “prefers” senior external examiners.
- You do not get to choose your external.
- Your supervisor will (should) discuss candidates with you before nomination.
How Do Examiners Prepare?

• We read the thesis (surprise!).
  – Spend a lot of time on introduction, motivation, hypothesis – look for gaps in argument.
  – Assess the literature review: is anything missing, not analytic – look at bibliography!
  – Evaluate technical contributions: novel, precisely described, builds on literature

• Read candidate’s papers
How Do Examiners Prepare?

• Each examiner must write a preliminary report.
  – It’s usually very short.
  – Confirms that the thesis is of sufficient presentational quality to be examined.
  – Identify points for discussion in the viva.
What Do Examiners Look For?

• Clear motivation for the research.
• Novel contributions (one or more!)
• Contributions related to the literature (i.e., you understand the implications of the work).
• Logical argument.
• Evaluation of some kind.
  – Feasibility, proof-of-concept, empirical studies, experiments
  – With rigorous, motivated methodology.
• Evidence that it is your work (and not your supervisors’!)
Pre-Viva Meeting

• Your examiners will meet for 30-60 minutes prior to the viva.

• What are they talking about?
  – Protocol for the viva.
  – Major points for discussion (where the bulk of the viva time will be spent).
  – Minor points for discussion in the viva.
  – (Sometimes) What result we expect?
Types of Questions

• What is your thesis about?
  – Summarise key findings.
  – Contributions to knowledge (why is it important)?
  – Common thread/story underlying your work.
• What do your results mean?
• Technical questions about technical contributions.
• Limitations in evaluation.
• How does contribution X relate to topic Y (where topic Y may or may not be referenced!)
Types of Questions

• “Isn’t contribution Y just a rephrasing of other-research-result Z?”
• “Why did you choose methodology A? Strengths and weaknesses of this approach?”
• “Implications of your research for the rest of the field?”
Typical Opening Gambit

• “What’s your PhD thesis about? Please summarise your contributions.”
  – Prepare a 1 minute and a 5 minute answer.
  – Be prepared to expand on the 5 minute answer if asked.

• Follow-up: “What is it about these contributions that merits a PhD?”

• Then, typically, examiners work through the thesis by chapter.
Dealing with Criticisms

• Don’t be defensive, be robust (but accept criticism where merited).
  – *Define and defend.*
• “Why didn’t you build your model this way?”
• Don’t reply: “I didn’t do that because ..” [This is defensive]
• Do say: “I did the following … The reason for this is … I considered alternatives, such as what you mentioned, but …” [Defending!]
Dealing with Questions

• Listen to the question.

• Take your time.

• Talk precisely, and move from the general to the specific.
  – A succinct (short!) answer is always preferable to a long, rambling answer.
Why Do We ask Questions?

• Are we sadists?
• We are not trying to catch you out.
• We are looking for compelling evidence to weigh against the PhD criteria (novelty, rigour, contribution to knowledge…)
• We are looking for debate.
• We are testing what an academic equal thinks about a topic.
• We are clarifying confusing or ambiguous points in the thesis.
Post-Viva Meeting

- Examiners must review your performance in the viva, and make a recommendation on the thesis.
  - Pass with no corrections (very unusual).
  - Pass with minor corrections (most common) – 3 months to revise.
  - Referral (not unusual) – 12 months to revise.
  - Award of MPhil (possibly after revision).
  - Fail

- Start drafting final consolidated report (which you will receive).
Passing Thesis?

- Substantial and precisely described contributions.
- Thorough and analytic literature review.
- Good motivation and a clearly described story.
- Sensible evaluation, with limitations described.
- Some suggestions for future work.
- One or more publications.
- Listened to guidance from supervisor!
• Submitted for PhD, awarded MPhil:
  – Insufficient contribution for a PhD.
  – Poor methodology (unjustified).

• Failure (after referral):
  – Insufficient contribution for a PhD.
  – Poor presentation.
  – Inadequate evaluation.
  – No engagement with the review process.
  – Ignored supervisory advice.