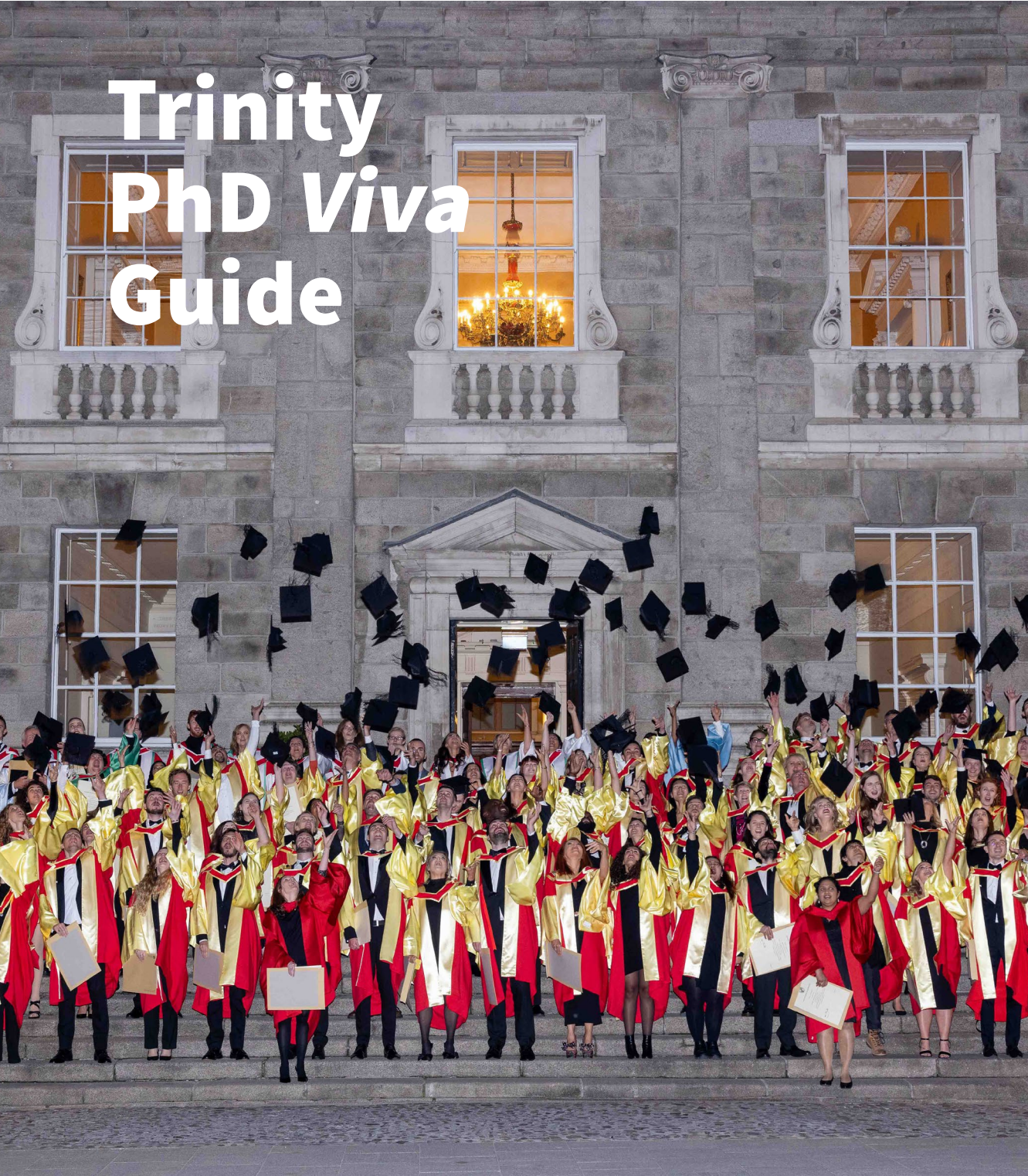




Trinity College Dublin  
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath  
The University of Dublin

# Trinity PhD Viva Guide



# Trinity

## PhD Viva Guide

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**A *viva voce* examination is an oral defence by the student of their thesis. For the examiners, it is an opportunity to satisfy themselves that the thesis is the student's own work and that it represents a genuine scholarly contribution. For the candidates, it is a chance to deal with any queries the examiners may have and to defend the thesis they are proposing.**

Most often the *viva voce* provides an opportunity to explore anything that the examiners feel was unclear in the thesis submitted, to address any concerns they may have or to tease out areas that they regard as under-explored. Ideally, it is a stimulating intellectual conversation between experts in a given field – the candidate being one of those experts. Although it is inevitably a stressful situation for the PhD candidate, ideally it should also be enjoyable and memorable, representing one of the few opportunities to discuss in depth that work that has been completed.

A *viva voce* examination is always held in the case of a PhD thesis submission. Most professional doctorate examinations (the D.Ed and D.Ch.Dent) also always entail *vivas*. In the case of research masters degrees (M.Litt, M.Sc) or in the case of the MD degree in the School of Medicine, a *viva voce* will only be held where the examiners do not agree that the degree can be awarded for the thesis either as it stands or following the making of minor corrections.





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# Organisation of the Viva

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**The organisation of a *viva voce* examination is a complex process that requires the seamless collaboration of multiple stakeholders to ensure its success. This chapter outlines the roles and responsibilities of those involved, including the candidate, supervisors, examiners, and School administrative staff, highlighting the importance of clear communication and coordination at every stage. From the selection of examiners to the logistical arrangements for the examination itself, each element must align to create a fair, professional, and supportive environment.**

**By understanding the processes and contributions of all parties, students can better prepare for this pivotal milestone in their academic journey.**



Either immediately prior to or following submission of a student thesis, the relevant school nominates examiners of the thesis.

Generally, the thesis will have both an internal and external examiner but in some situations the decision may be taken to appoint two external examiners — and this is always the case where the student is also a member of staff.

The decision of whom to nominate as examiners is made by the School, generally through the Director of Teaching and Learning (Postgraduate). This decision is made in consultation with the student's supervisor (albeit that the final decision is the School's and not the supervisor's) and in many cases, the supervisor will also have discussed this with the relevant student. The School formally nominates the examiners and the Dean of Graduate Studies then reviews the nomination forms, and may either approve or decline to approve those who have been nominated. Typically, the Dean would only *not* approve nominees if it is felt that they are insufficiently qualified, insufficiently expert or, in the case of external examiners, insufficiently independent to be appointed or do not meet Calendar criteria with respect to who can be nominated as an external examiner. In such circumstances, the School, through its Director of Teaching and Learning (Postgraduate) is asked to nominate an alternative examiner or examiners.

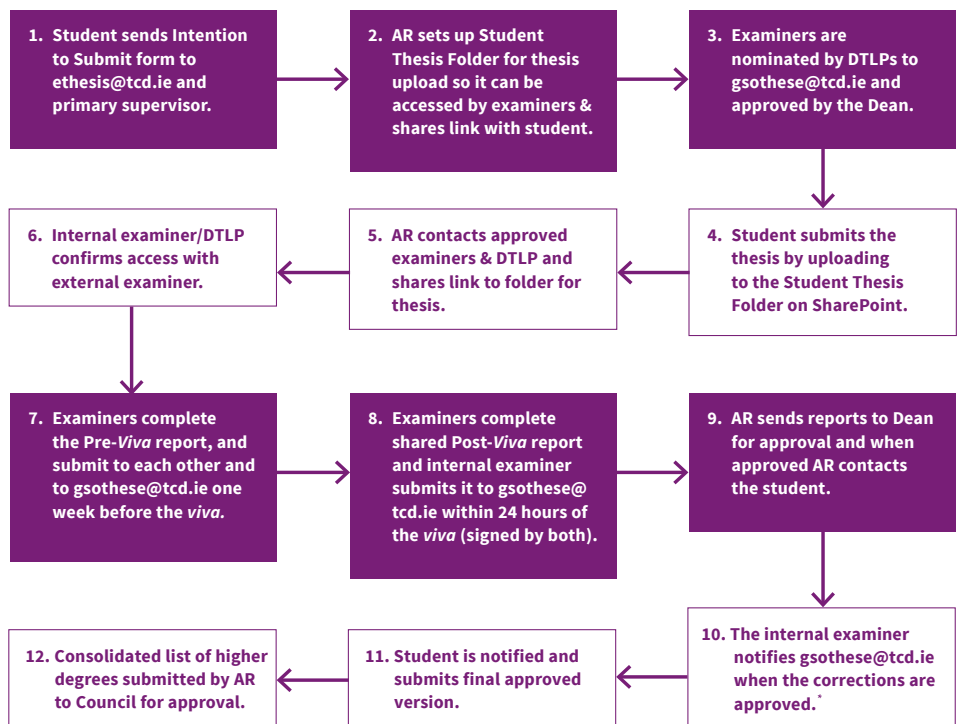
When the nomination of examiners is eventually approved by the Dean, Academic Registry writes to them formally on behalf of the Dean confirming their appointment (the School will already have been in touch with them informally). AR also provides them with a hyperlink to the thesis in an online shared folder.

Normally, examiners review an electronic version of the thesis, but they can also request a hard copy for review. The candidate is not responsible for ensuring a hard copy is provided.

Examiners are asked to complete the examination process within eight weeks of receiving the thesis, albeit that, on occasion, this may not be possible.

The [External Examiner Policy](#) offers guidance on the external examining system for research programmes at Trinity. Additionally, [Guidelines for Internal Examiners](#) (<https://www.tcd.ie/media/tcd/graduate-studies/pdfs/guidelines-internal-examiners.pdf>) provide a helpful overview of the key responsibilities of an internal examiner across the assessment process.

The diagram below outlines the steps of the thesis examination process, starting with a student's submission of the [Intention to Submit](#) form, which initiates the formal nomination of examiners for the thesis.



\* Step 10 refers to minor corrections only. See Chapter 05 for more guidance.

The organisation of a doctoral *viva voce* involves collaboration of multiple stakeholders, with practices differing significantly across Schools and Disciplines.

Schools and Disciplines should consider all tasks outlined in the table and allocate responsibilities in accordance with their established practice.

It is essential that all tasks are carefully considered, and information is provided to all colleagues and students in their local units.

The table below outlines tasks involved in the organisation of a *viva voce* and proposes allocation of responsibilities within a School or Discipline.

<b>TASKS</b>	<b>RESPONSIBLE</b>
<b>Step 1: Scheduling of the Viva</b>	
Liaise with the external examiner, the candidate and the Director of Teaching and Learning Postgraduate (DTLP) to arrange a time and date for the <i>viva</i> .	Internal examiner or Supervisor with support of School / Discipline administrator
Appoint a Chair for the <i>viva</i> .	DTLP
<b>Step 2: Sharing the thesis with the examiners</b>	
Submit the thesis to the designated Student Thesis Folder on SharePoint.	Candidate
Share a link to Student Thesis Folder with internal and external examiners as soon as the examiners are approved by the Dean of Graduate Studies.	Academic Registry gsothese@tcd.ie
Allow sufficient time for examiners to familiarise themselves with the thesis (8 weeks to read and assess the work submitted).	School / Discipline Administrator Academic Registry
Confirm access to the thesis folder with external examiner.	Internal examiner
<b>Step 3: Arranging the logistics</b>	
Contact the external examiner to agree a date, time and venue for the <i>viva</i> . <sup>1</sup>	Supervisor or Internal examiner
Book a suitable venue (in-person <i>viva</i> ) or set up a video conferencing facility (online <i>viva</i> ).	Internal examiner or School / Discipline Administrator or Supervisor
Alert the Chair to any reasonable accommodations (e.g., an accessible venue, use of assistive technology, questions submitted in advance, extended, or more frequent breaks) in the LENS report pertaining to the <i>viva</i> .	Student
Ensure any reasonable accommodations requested are implemented on the day of the <i>viva</i> .	Chair
Confirm the travel arrangements (flights, transport, accommodation) for external examiner, if applicable.	School / Discipline Administrator
Ensure any necessary AV equipment and presentation technology are in place.	School / Discipline Administrator
Arrange for refreshments and water.	School / Discipline Administrator
Make arrangement for lunch or dinner for the examiners (after the <i>viva</i> ).	School / Discipline Administrator
Request the candidate to confirm if they wish their supervisor to be present.	Chair

<sup>1</sup> If it is proposed that the *viva* be held online, a written record is required to show that the student agreed to this format.

<b>TASKS</b>	<b>RESPONSIBLE</b>
<b>Step 4: Communicating with the external examiner</b>	
Ensure clarity on the examiners' responsibilities and the format of the <i>viva</i> .	Internal examiner or DTLP
Consider any reasonable accommodations or accessibility requirements the examiner may need and brief them on any reasonable accommodations to be implemented for the student.	Chair
Complete internal examiner <u>pre-<i>viva</i> assessment form</u> and ensure the external examiner completes theirs also.	Internal examiner
Exchange pre- <i>viva</i> reports and submit both forms to <a href="mailto:gsothese@tcd.ie">gsothese@tcd.ie</a> one week before the <i>viva</i> .	Internal examiner and External examiner
Arrange an online meeting with external examiner to discuss each other's reports if required and agree a plan for how to structure the <i>viva voce</i> examination.	Internal examiner
Share relevant meeting links for the <i>viva voce</i> with the external examiner.	Internal examiner or School / Discipline Administrator
<b>Step 5: Supporting the student in preparation to the Viva Voce</b>	
Explain the <i>viva</i> process to the candidate, including potential outcomes.	Supervisor
Conduct a mock <i>viva voce</i> .	Supervisor and Student
Prepare the candidate for the questions they may expect and discuss any concerns.	Supervisor
Point the student to the sources of support including training offered by Skills for Success and Student Learning Development and pastoral care available (Student Counselling, Postgraduate Advisory Service).	Supervisor
Share a copy of Trinity <i>Viva Voce</i> Guide with the candidate.	Supervisor
<b>Step 6: Conducting the Viva Voce</b>	
Before the <i>viva</i> starts, check that the candidate and examiners are familiar with the procedure and respond to any related questions.	Chair
Ensure that the candidate is as comfortable as is reasonable to expect and check whether a break may be needed.	Chair
Ensure that any areas of concern that were identified are explored.	Internal examiner
Agree a recommendation with the external examiner.	Internal examiner
<b>Step 7: After the Viva Voce</b>	
Complete and sign the joint <u>Post-Viva Form</u> and submit to <a href="mailto:gsothese@tcd.ie">gsothese@tcd.ie</a> within 24 hours of the <i>viva</i> . Ensure the external examiner has also signed the form.	Internal examiner
Communicate the outcome and provide feedback to the candidate at the end of the <i>viva</i> .	Chair
Arrange for travel reimbursement (if applicable).	School / Discipline Administrator



Students should be given appropriate notice of the date of the *viva* so that, not merely can they organize to travel to Dublin for the event, but also so that they can undertake any preparations for it.

Although in-person *viva voce* examinations with all parties physically co-present remain the standard form of examination, the options of an online combination or in-person and on-line participation can be considered, if one of these formats are deemed desirable by the Director of Teaching and Learning (Postgraduate) following consultation with the examiners, the supervisor and the student.

The Director of Teaching and Learning (Postgraduate) manages the process of determining the preferred format for a *viva voce* examination in respect of each student, taking account of the preferences of all those involved, the availability of relevant

specialist expertise and the feasibility of travel for external examiners. Responsibility for granting permission to conduct any element of the *viva voce* online rests with the Dean of Graduate Studies, but this responsibility may be delegated, on an annual basis and with the permissions of the Graduate Studies Committee to the Director of Teaching and Learning (Postgraduate) within each School.

It is also possible, on occasion, for the *viva* to be held outside of Trinity or outside of Dublin. Again, however, this requires the permission of the Dean and there would need to be very strong justification for such a step to be taken.

Further guidance on the procedures for the operation of an online *viva voce* examination is available on the website of the Office of the Dean of Graduate Studies: [Procedures for the operation of an online \*viva voce\* examination of a research thesis or dissertation.](#)



# Who is present at the *Viva Voce* examination?

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**As is outlined below, the specifics of the procedures for *viva voce* examinations will vary from School to School.**

In some Schools, the *viva* begins with a presentation, by the candidate, of their work. These presentations may be public or semi-public, typically with other members of the School community being present.

Thereafter, the *viva* proper is a private event, attended by the **candidate**, the **examiners** (who will typically have had discussions about the thesis prior to the *viva*), and the Chair. The student's **supervisor** may also attend purely in an observational capacity - it is not mandatory that they attend.

The supervisor takes no part in the examination and will leave the room, with the student, following the conclusion of the discussions and when the examiners engage in their deliberations.

If the supervisor cannot attend, or where the student wishes, they may apply to the Dean to have another nominated person present in lieu of the supervisor. In such circumstances, again, the nominated person takes no part in the *viva* and attends in a purely observational capacity.

# Preparing for a Viva

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## There are any number of things that a candidate may do to prepare for a *viva*.

The usual progression milestones on the doctoral student journey, including the meetings with the Thesis Committee and particularly the confirmation interview, are valuable experiences that prepare the student for the final *viva voce* examination. Beyond this, however, all of the following steps may be helpful.

### 1. Familiarize yourself with the regulations and policies governing the operations of *viva voce* examinations.

Ensure you are familiar with the regulations and policies governing the operations of *viva voce* examinations. In the first instance, you would be advised to read over the regulations in Calendar Part III with respect to the conduct of *viva voce* examinations, and any relevant policies, e.g. External Examiners Policy.

### 2. Familiarize yourself with your School's guidelines for the conduct of the *viva voce* examinations.

Schools may have specific local information and guidelines prescribing the way in which a *viva* should operate in their School. Review these guidelines thoroughly to understand the process, duration, and expectations of the examination. Talk to your supervisor or the Director of Teaching and Learning (Postgraduate) in your School to be confident that on the day of the *viva* you are absolutely clear as to the mechanics of what awaits you.

### 3. Understand the structure of the *viva voce*.

The structure of your *viva* depends on the norms within your School or Discipline. In some Disciplines, the *viva* has two component parts. First, the candidate delivers a presentation on their work. The exact form and nature of this presentation is Discipline specific — and so you should seek advice from your School in relation to this. Where presentation is the norm, you will be giving a presentation of your research, highlighting the key objectives, methodologies, and findings.

The second part (or, in many Disciplines, the only part) is the defence itself, which entails an in-depth discussion with the examination panel.

#### **4. Get familiar with the space in which your *viva* will take place.**

If your *viva* involves a presentation, check in advance if the projector colours and computer types are compatible with your presentation. Ensure that the sound system, videos and any animations will work. Some experts recommend that you try to spend some time in the room and to imagine defending the thesis there.

#### **5. Review the Thesis.**

You are expected first and foremost to be so thoroughly familiar with your work, that you can discuss it expertly and answer deep and probing questions in relation to both the scholarship and the arguments contained therein. Thoroughly review your thesis and be prepared to defend each chapter, including your research design, methodology, results, and interpretation.

Familiarize yourself with the key literature in your field and be prepared to discuss the broader implications of your work.

#### **6. Practice mock *viva* voce sessions.**

Ask colleagues, your peers or your supervisor to have a mock of the thesis defence to stimulate the real examination environment. Practice your talk many times and in front of others, making sure the timing of your presentation is well organized. The mock *viva* exams will help you gain confidence, refine your answers, and identify any gaps in your knowledge.

#### **7. Anticipate potential questions.**

Reviewing your thesis and reflecting on your research will help you gain a deeper level of insight into what is contained in the written work and also, will help you identify any gaps or areas of inquiry. This is important as often, the questions the examination panel may ask focus on such gaps or shortcomings. Prepare responses to these questions and consider seeking input from your supervisor(s) or other research students to help anticipate possible challenges. It may be also advisable to familiarize yourself with the key literature in your field and be prepared to discuss the broader implications of your work.



## 8. Reach out to the fellow students who have recently gone through the *viva voce* examination.

Where possible, discuss the *viva* experience with those in your School or Discipline who have recently gone through the process. The Director of Teaching and Learning (Postgraduate) could help facilitate making this connection through an email introduction if students are not aware of who has had a *viva voce* recently.

## 9. Avail of *viva voce* specific training opportunities or engage in a peer support group.

Consider availing of the training resources provided by Student Learning Development, for example:

### a) *Viva* & oral defence preparation workshops: <https://www.tcd.ie/sld/services/workshops--webinars/>

The workshops are focused on the *viva* and confirmation interview process and provide tips and strategies on how to prepare for a *viva* and defend your thesis.

### b) Tailored departmental workshops: <https://www.tcd.ie/sld/services/workshops--webinars/customisedtailored/>

These workshops have been developed in collaboration with academics to provide tailored information on the *viva* and confirmation interview process.

### c) Planning and Managing your Research Process (PMRP), 5ECTS module: <https://www.tcd.ie/sld/your-student-journey/postgraduate-students/phd-module---5ects/>

This module provides doctoral candidates with opportunities to develop and enhance their research practice and reflect on their process. The module focuses on self-management, academic and communication skills as well as personal effectiveness and wellbeing.

### d) Presentation practice & general appointments: <https://www.tcd.ie/sld/services/individual-services/presentation-practice/>

Throughout the calendar year students are invited to attend individual appointments where they can discuss their *viva* preparation with an advisor. They are also able to book appointments specifically to do a practice *viva* presentation to a 'naive audience'.

### e) PGR Skills for Success

[Viva preparation workshops](#) are also delivered twice per semester as part of the PG Transition Programme in collaboration with Transition Officer.

### f) Doctorate Research Support Groups: <https://www.tcd.ie/sld/your-student-journey/postgraduate-students/doctorate-research-groups/>

## 10. College Support Services

If you feel anxious about the prospect of approaching *viva*, avail of the College support services including:

### a) [Postgraduate Advisory Service](#)

### b) [Student Counselling](#)



## Familiarity with the *Viva*

Although there may be some variances across Schools and Disciplines, a *viva voce* usually entails the following steps:

1. A *viva voce* often starts with a brief conversation between the Chair and examiners to agree the flow of questions and run of the *viva*.
2. The student is invited into the room and welcomed by the Chair who introduces the examiners and briefly outlines the format of the *viva*.
3. In some instances, students may be invited to give a brief presentation of their thesis or may briefly present an overview of their research, its objectives, methodology and key findings.
4. The panel members will then ask questions related to the candidate's research, with an objective to assess the student's understanding of the topic, their familiarity with the scholarship in the area, their critical thinking skills, and the originality of their work.
5. The *viva* usually involves the discussion between the student and the examination panel, which may focus on the hypothesis of the work, specific areas of methodology or probe the perceived weaknesses of the thesis. The Chair usually does not partake in the questioning or discussion but plays an important role in ensuring good timekeeping.
6. At the end of the questioning and discussion, the student is typically asked to leave the room to allow the examiners to discuss their performance and determine a recommendation. The possible outcomes are:
  - a) The degree be awarded for the thesis as it stands,
  - b) The degree be awarded for the thesis subject to minor corrections, for which two months are allowed from the time of notification,
  - c) The thesis be referred for major revision and subsequent re-examination, for which six months are normally allowed from the time of notification,
  - d) A lower degree be awarded, if necessary, following minor corrections to the thesis, or
  - e) The thesis should be failed.
7. Once the panel reaches a decision, the student is invited back into the room and is informed of the decision and next steps. The examiners may provide constructive feedback and suggestions for further improvement of the research.



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# The *Viva Voce*

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**Prior to the date of the *viva*, you will have been told the exact time and location for it.**

Students should attend at the venue well in advance of the starting time and have their presentations loaded-up (where appropriate).

You should dress smartly for the occasion but also ensure that you will be comfortable – and remember that the *viva* exam may take several hours.

You will be provided with water, but obviously it makes sense to bring your own water and any sweets or energy snacks that might help, and also to ensure that you have had a good breakfast and whatever other food is appropriate.



**In advance of the *viva*, it is common for the examiners, along with the Chair, to meet to discuss both the thesis itself and also the precise form that the *viva* will take.**

In many cases the examiners will have the same preliminary views as to the likely outcome for the thesis, but in some they may differ. Each examiner is asked to complete an independent pre-*viva* report and share it with the other examiner no later than one week before the *viva voce* examination. The forms should be also submitted to [gsothese@tcd.ie](mailto:gsothese@tcd.ie) no later than a week before the *viva*.

These reports must be independent to allow for examiners to take different positions if they wish. Examiners cannot, however, form definite views in this regard, in that the *viva* is part of the examination process.

The defence is chaired by the Director of Teaching and Learning (Postgraduate) within the School or their nominee. The Chair is responsible for ensuring that the *viva* operates appropriately and according to Trinity regulations. The substantive operation of the *viva*, however, is determined by the examiners. As explained in Chapter 2, the candidate's supervisor is permitted to be present on the invitation of the student (though in many cases they will not be) but purely in an observational capacity – that is they will not be directly involved in the *viva* itself. In rare circumstances, the candidate may apply to the Dean of Graduate Studies for someone other than their supervisor to be present in this observational role.

There is no set length of time that a *viva* takes. To some extent this is Discipline specific, but in reality, even within Disciplines, it depends on the examiners, the student and the thesis. It would be unusual for a *viva* to go on for less than an hour or for longer than four, but not impossible. On the other hand, the *viva* is a test of your knowledge and insight not of your stamina. Breaks are at the discretion of the Chair, and in accordance with the Calendar regulations the Chair of the *viva* must check after 2.5 hours whether you would like to take a 10-minute comfort break. If at any stage you are feeling that a break or water is required then you should make that known to the examiners.

Importantly, the *viva* is not a memory test. You are strongly encouraged to bring a copy of your formally submitted thesis with you and to make notes (directly on your thesis, if easier) to any points raised during the *viva*. This may also help when it comes to making corrections if they are required later on.

Finally, if there are particular special circumstances that are relevant to you (including but not limited to a disability or mental health concern) and that should, reasonably, be relevant to the operation of the *viva*, please raise them in advance with your supervisor or Director of Teaching and Learning (Postgraduate). Reasonable accommodations are available to research students with disabilities and students should be guided to disAbility service to discuss their needs.

## Questions that may be asked

There is no set list of questions that will be asked at a *viva*. Broadly speaking, however, the questions will generally be aimed at:

- (a) enabling the candidate to restate and explain the hypothesis of the work, as well as the methodology used and its findings
- (b) testing the candidate on perceived weaknesses of the thesis – whether these be in relation to methodology, familiarity with the scholarship in the area or aspects of the hypothesis or findings
- (c) satisfying the examiners that the work is, genuinely, that of the candidate and
- (d) allowing the candidate to assuage any concerns that the examiners may have with the work.

This is why it is critical that the candidate ensure, in preparing for the viva, that they are fully familiar with the work that may have been submitted some weeks earlier and also, that they are cognizant of potential gaps in the work – something that may enable the candidate, in advance, to predict some questions that may be asked.

Remember that the examiner will understand that some weaknesses or gaps exist in the thesis work, and will expect the student to be aware of these as well as having insights into what could have been done better or in addition.





## Tips For Answering Questions

In so far as answering questions at the *viva* is concerned, there are a number of publications that offer advice. These are worth reading. Of course the best advice is that you prepare thoroughly, but this is obvious! Beyond this, the following useful points can be distilled from the literature.

### **There is no need to answer a question immediately or on any kind of a ‘rushed’ basis.**

You will have worked for perhaps four years on the piece of scholarship and long and detailed thought will have gone into it. It is perfectly reasonable for you to take a note of the question and simply say ‘let me just think about this briefly’ before giving your answer - it is not a sign of weakness! Remember that you are a scholar providing a scholarly answer and not a contestant on a TV quiz show!

### **What if you don’t understand the question?**

The fact that you may not understand a particular question asked or cannot work out exactly what an examiner is looking for does not, of itself, indicate any problem with your work! It may be that the manner in which the question was asked was confusing, or it may simply be that you don’t fully get the point made in the question (and remember, you will probably be nervous and there is always a risk of being flustered). It is perfectly reasonable to seek clarification on what is being asked — and indeed to do so repeatedly until you are quite clear that you understand the question.

### **What if you don’t know the answer to the question?**

It is often suggested, that, irrespective of how good the thesis is or how diligent their preparation for the *viva*, most students will face at least one question to which they do not know the answer. The advice in the literature is always the same – that student should not seek to bluff their way through the situation, but instead should candidly admit that they do not know the answer, but will, following the *viva*, seek to engage with the relevant question. Obviously there is a problem if that question relates to something fundamental to the thesis, but more often than not, it will concern a peripheral matter and thus the student admitting that they do not know the relevant answer is a good thing because it indicates that all the answers to the other questions are, in his or her view, grounded in knowledge and understanding.

### **Have you answered the question that was asked?**

There really is only one way to determine whether you have satisfied the examiners in answering a question — namely ask them! Follow up your answer, if appropriate, by saying ‘I don’t know if that answers your question’. At best, they may simply reply that you have. At worst, it may elicit a further line of questions enabling you further to display your knowledge.



### **Pitfalls to avoid.**

The literature in this area suggests two common actions by students (typically when things are going badly) that should be avoided. The first is becoming defensive, or regarding perfectly reasonable questions as personalized attacks on your work. In fact it is really important to stay calm and polite throughout the *viva*. Remember that, being nervous, it may be that the candidate will think the *viva* is going terribly when in fact, in the eyes of the examiners, they are actually doing very well. The second, again when things tend to be going wrong, is to blame either other people or personal circumstances. No doubt these may be relevant concerns, but the *viva* is not the place to mention them. These matters should be raised in advance with your Director of Teaching and Learning (Postgraduate).

### **Seeing the *viva* as a step in research rather than the end.**

In the *viva*, it is your thesis that is being examined and in that sense the *viva* is the end of the examination of your work. However, your research in the area may well continue. Bearing this in mind as you approach and take part in your *viva* is useful. After all, a criticism from an examiner (including the question ‘why did you not assess this particular issue’) can be met with the response that this is something that you intend to address in further study of the issue, including through amendment of the thesis. Less tangibly, however, because the *viva* is a conversation between three experts in an area, the insights that you pick up in this context may be invaluable to you as you move forward with your research.

# Following the *Viva*

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**In normal circumstances, when the *viva* is concluded, the candidate (and, if present, their supervisor) will be asked to leave the room and the examiners will begin their deliberations. In principle, these deliberations are to assess whether, having regard to the combination between the thesis itself and the *viva*, they are satisfied as to the particular result that will follow.**

**In many cases, they will assess whether concerns that they might have had *before* the *viva* have been assuaged. In very rare circumstances, they may seek to assess whether, having regard to the performance in the *viva*, they have doubts as to whether the thesis can, properly, be regarded as being the candidate's own work.**

## Possible outcomes of the Viva Voce examination

The examiners have five choices as to the result that they recommend.

### 1. The degree be awarded for the thesis as it stands.

This is the ideal award for the student who will then be contacted by the Academic Registry and given further instructions about submitting the final hard copy and electronic versions of the thesis and then applying to graduate.

Although it is the ideal outcome for the student, very few *vivas* conclude with this outcome.

### 2. The degree be awarded for the thesis subject to minor corrections, for which two months are allowed for full-time candidates from the time of notification (three months for students on the part-time register).

The vast majority of students receive this decision, and it is a positive one.

It means that you have the degree, but just have to make some corrections, within a fixed time of two months. The corrected thesis has to be submitted to and approved by the internal examiner<sup>1</sup> who informs the Academic Registry when the changes have been made. At this point the student is contacted in relation to submission and graduation.

In practice the concept of 'minor changes' is a broad one, covering everything from minor typographical changes to more detailed amendments. In a majority of cases, however, the student will receive the degree when they complete these changes.

<sup>1</sup> Where there are two external examiners, one is nominated to approve the minor changes.

<sup>2</sup> Obviously this can only happen when a doctoral thesis is examined – an examiner of, for example, a masters' degree cannot recommend a lower degree if it does not hit the required standard.

### 3. The thesis be referred for major revision and subsequent re-examination, for which six months are normally allowed for full-time candidates from the time of notification (nine months for students on the part-time register).

In this case a student must re-register and pay fees for a period prescribed by the examiners in order to complete the revisions under supervision – this period will be a minimum of six months and a maximum of two years.

When a thesis is referred for re-examination, the candidate does not have any guarantee they will, following completion of revisions, obtain the degree.

When a referred thesis is resubmitted, it is again fully examined by both examiners (but there is no second *viva voce* exam). The examiners may choose any of the results normally available for an initial PhD submission, save that it cannot be referred for re-examination following major revisions a second time.

### 4. A lower degree be awarded, if necessary, following minor corrections to the thesis.

The examiners may conclude that the thesis cannot be brought up to the required standard even following a referral for re-examination after a period of 'major revisions' and may thus decide that the appropriate result is to recommend the award of a masters degree (M.Litt or M.Sc) either for the thesis as it stands, or following the completion of minor corrections.<sup>2</sup>

## 5. The thesis should be failed.

Finally, the examination panel may decide that on the basis of the *viva voce*, the thesis should be failed. If this result is awarded, the examiners' reports must make clear to the student the areas in which their thesis is deficient and why, in the examiner's view, the thesis is irredeemably flawed.

Following the *viva*, then, the examiners seek to decide which of these results would be appropriate. In many cases, their deliberations will not take long and the student will be called back into the room to hear the decision. On occasion it may take longer and it may be the next day or possibly longer before you hear the result.

In very rare circumstances, the two examiners will not be able to agree on the result. This can happen both following an initial submission and also following re-examination after a thesis has been referred for major revisions.

In such circumstances, the Dean of Graduate Studies will seek to mediate between the two examiners in order to see if a result can be agreed upon. If not, then it becomes necessary to send the thesis out for an initial fresh examination with two new examiners.

Further guidance for examiners and students is provided in the External Examiners Policy.



06

## Next Steps

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**Following the completion of the *viva*, the examiners complete a joint *Post-Viva* report and internal examiner submits it to the Academic Registry.**

**These are reviewed by the Dean of Graduate Studies who will either approve them or, where appropriate, may seek further clarifications and amended reports from the examiners.**





The reports, when approved, are sent to the student's supervisor, the Director of Teaching and Learning (Postgraduate) in their School, as well as the internal examiner and the student will receive notification from the Academic Registry of their examination result at the same time.

The student thus learns what needs to be done — that is to say, whether they need to make minor changes or to register for revisions (which will entail the payment of a fee). Students should note that the time frame for the work that needs to be done starts from the point at which the reports are received by the School (though in many cases, the student will already have been given informal notice, at the *viva*, of what changes, if any, need to be made).

When the thesis has been confirmed, by the Dean of Graduate Studies, as meriting the award of the degree with no further changes (either because the examiners recommend the award of the degree for the thesis as it stands, or because the internal examiner has confirmed that required minor corrections have been completed) the student will receive information from the Academic Registry about how to submit the final version of their thesis and to apply to graduate.

Final versions of theses must be submitted both electronically and in hard copy, and students will receive clear instructions as to how this is to happen. All decisions to award postgraduate research degrees (whether doctorates or masters degrees) must be approved by the Higher Degrees Subcommittee of University Board and Council, which meets once a month between September and June, thus when the final version of your thesis has been submitted, your name will be placed on the list to be approved by the next meeting of the University Council.

Thereafter, you are free to apply to graduate at the next available commencement ceremony. In this regard, students should note that there are particular deadlines by which they need to apply to graduate, if they are to be accommodated within a particular graduation ceremony.

# My *Viva Voce* Experience

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**A *viva voce* is a significant moment in your academic journey, offering a chance to showcase your deep knowledge of your subject area and discuss your key research findings. Let's hear from two students who recently passed their *vivas* and shared their tips to help you prepare for your final examination.**

**Dr Shelby Zimmerman, Doctor in Philosophy in School of History and Humanities, Trinity College Dublin**

On 12 December 2023, I passed my *viva voce* examination in Irish history. The *viva* was a positive and enriching experience to discuss my research with experts in the field. I admire my external examiner's work, so I valued the opportunity to discuss Irish medical history with her. As cliché as it sounds, the *viva* truly was the only opportunity to discuss my thesis with an engaged audience who read the entire document. My *viva* felt like a conversation, in which the examiners responded to my answer rather than immediately proceed to the next question. My nerves subsided after the first few questions and I felt more confident in my responses.

I prepared for the *viva* by reading the thesis in advance. I printed a spiralbound copy of the thesis from Reads on Abbey Street and placed post-it notes at the start of each chapter and the methodology section. In anticipation of corrections, I kept a running list of typos. Printing the thesis was beneficial as I could see whether the figures and maps were legible. In order to prepare for the types of questions asked at the *viva*, I read online *viva* guides from Trinity College's Graduate Studies and other Irish and British universities. My supervisor was extremely helpful during this process. She discussed the entire *viva* procedure with me so it would feel less daunting on the day. She also facilitated a mock *viva* for me, so I could get a feel for common questions and receive feedback on

my responses. My supervisor tried to anticipate what the examiners would ask based upon their research interests, so she gave me some topics to prepare in advance. Although the questions from the mock *viva* were different from the actual *viva*, the mock *viva* helped build my confidence. I also met with friends and colleagues who passed their *viva voces* for insight into the candidate's perspective.

On the day prior to the *viva*, I visited the room to ensure I would not be lost on the day. I also printed out a copy of the major figures in my thesis and some of the pivot charts that did not make it into the submitted version in case the examiners asked about my quantitative data. I typed around a page of notes with the key points in bold, so I could quickly consult that document rather than searching through the thesis.

I elected for my supervisor to attend the *viva*. She sat behind me and was not allowed to speak during the examination. However, she was able to take notes on my behalf. It was quite challenging trying to take notes during the *viva* as I was thinking about my answers while engaging with the examiners. According to my supervisor, the questioning section took approximately seventy minutes. The exam felt long but definitely did not feel like it surpassed an hour. After the questioning, my supervisor and I were sent into the hallway whilst the examiners deliberated. Having my supervisor wait with me helped alleviate my nerves. The chair invited us back into the room and told me the result. The examiners discussed my minor corrections and I had the opportunity to ask them questions about publications arising from the thesis and converting it into a monograph.

#### Advice for Candidates:

- Make sure to bring water.
- Have a friend or a supervisor walk with you to the *viva* room. It helped having that distraction.
- Dress as if you are giving a presentation. You want to look professional while still being comfortable.
- Remember that the purpose of the *viva* is to discuss and defend your thesis. The examiners are interested in your work and not trying to call you out.
- Ask for clarification or the examiner to repeat the question if needed.
- Try to enjoy the *viva*. Writing the thesis was the challenging part and now you get to discuss your hard work with interested readers.

#### Dr Emilio Vozza, Doctor in Philosophy in School of Biochemistry and Immunology, Trinity College Dublin

Firstly, huge congratulations for your thesis submission! Thesis writing is honestly one of the most intensive parts of your PhD. It comes at a time when you are likely burnt out and your mind is racing with all the loose ends you are working to tie off.

However, you did it and can now take pride in the body of work you put together. For most, this is the hardest part so enjoy this moment, take a break, and relax!

When you are ready, it is time to prepare for the *viva* but I would not go running to your thesis just yet. Remember, you have spent years with your project and likely months writing about it in detail so whether you like to admit it or not, you are the expert!

I would encourage you to do a pre-*viva* talk, which can be hugely beneficial as you need to practice how to convey to an audience why you embarked on this project, why it is important, what you did, the results you got and what the potential is of your research.

As you can probably guess, this level of detail is not just great for a presentation, but also for the *viva*! It is a lovely way of keeping your thesis fresh in your mind without reading it over and over again.

The next thing you should focus on is the general knowledge of your field. We, as PhD students, are so zoomed into the fine detail of our projects that often we get tripped up on the more basic knowledge.

So, think about the literature and even your undergraduate studies but do not overload yourself. Honestly, going with what feels right to you is the best way forward so keep calm and relax taking it day by day.

For my *viva* day, I felt like I was having an out of body experience. Having watched so many people go through this rite of passage, it felt hugely surreal giving my pre-*viva* talk, going into my *viva* room and experiencing MY DEFENCE!

It is an odd experience which I cannot quite articulate but if I could go back, what I would say is enjoy yourself! Relax!

I was so concerned with saying all the right things and doing a good job that I became overwhelmed. Your examiners have read your thesis and they are there to hear your thoughts and not catch you out as an imposter!

When I look back, I realise my examiners were interested and loved my theories and work but, in the moment, I was too overwhelmed to notice.

So be realistic and go in with confidence that you deserve to be there! Relax and enjoy yourself!

You have been working towards this moment for years now and if you have gotten this far, you truly will be fine!

So, take a break, recharge and go into your *viva* proud of what you have done, knowing the limitations of your work, but most importantly, the potential of your research!







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