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Viva Voce: The Oral Examination of a Thesis for a Doctoral Degree

Abstract

A *viva* examination of a thesis for a doctoral degree is standard practice across many countries, but it is unevenly used in South African higher education institutions. The report on the recent national review of South African doctoral qualifications, which was conducted by the Council on Higher Education from 2020 to 2021, recommended that all higher education institutions offering doctoral qualifications should include a *viva* as part of the examination process to assess for the graduate attributes specified in the *Standard for a Doctoral Degree*, published by the Council on Higher Education in 2018. This *Briefly Speaking* provides an overview of the use of the *viva* in South Africa and reviews literature to understand how and why the *viva* is used around the world. The *viva* is considered as an opportunity for examiners to clarify issues in the study reported in a doctoral thesis, and to welcome the doctoral candidate into the field, just as it is a chance for the doctoral candidate to engage with the examiners and discuss the implications of the research. Depending on the purposes of the *viva*, higher education institutions may choose to have a public *viva*, a private one, or a blend of the two. The literature is clear that while issues of authenticity might come to light during the *viva*, ascertaining authenticity should not be its intention. As far as possible, concerns about authorship and academic integrity should be addressed before a *viva* takes place. Five recommendations emerging from the literature on the implementation of the *viva* are offered.

Keywords: Assessment, doctoral thesis, defence, examination, higher education, research, *viva*.

Introduction

The Latin term *viva voce* means "the living voice". The oral examination of a thesis for a doctoral degree is thus seen to be a more 'living' assessment opportunity whereby the candidate can have a conversation with examiners, rebut arguments, clarify any confusions and ambiguities, take advice for improvements of the thesis, and get developmental feedback for future research endeavours. The event is variously referred to as a '*viva*', 'oral defence', 'thesis defence', or 'oral examination', with the wording possibly implying differences in purpose (Murray, 2002).

There is currently much interest within the South African higher education sector in using the *viva* as part of the examination of theses for doctoral qualifications, given the reference to it in the recent national report on the CHE's review of doctoral qualifications offered by higher education institutions in South Africa (CHE, 2022). This report included the following statement and recommendations:

In many institutions, the oral examination/defence is optional and is used in

instances where it is necessary to confirm a student's achievement of some (or all) of the expected graduate attributes, such as reflection and autonomy, and independent ownership of the work reported in the thesis. In other instances, the oral defence is more of a celebratory presentation (a 'rite of passage'), with no associated regulatory requirement. In other cases, the oral defence is used to obtain an agreed recommendation from the examiners, either as a standard step in the examination process, or as an option when there are conflicting assessment results.

It is noted that an oral examination, especially one which requires a presentation, discussion of the research and the thesis, and engagement with examiners, provides a useful means of assessing the achievement of the graduate attributes.

Recommendations

- It is a recommendation that all institutions implement oral evaluation of doctoral degrees, since this is a key element of assessing achievement of the graduate attributes.
- In all cases, the process to be followed for oral examinations must be clear and the oral examination must be conducted according to specific guidelines, based on faculty- or discipline-specific requirements. It should be made explicit whether the oral examination precedes or succeeds the thesis examination, and how it can influence the final examination outcome.

(CHE, 2022, p 56)

This *Briefly Speaking* reviews the current use of the oral examination in South Africa as described in publicly available institutional policies and guidelines. It also considers some of the reasons for its use, as discussed in the literature.

The viva in the South African higher education sector

Publicly available institutional documents for most of the universities in South Africa do not stipulate a requirement for an oral examination of a thesis for a doctoral degree. Those that do, include Stellenbosch University, which has used the *viva* for many years. It is included in the general rules (Stellenbosch University, 2024), and discipline-specific processes are spelt out at the faculty level - see, for example, the *Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences PhD Guidelines*, 2018 (Stellenbosch University, 2018). While the rules at the University of Pretoria indicate that it is up to faculties to decide whether an oral examination is needed (University of Pretoria, 2024), the oral examination is used in most cases. The University of South Africa indicates that since 2021 it has been compulsory for a *viva* to be used for the granting of all doctorates (University of South Africa, 2020a, 2020b). The University of Venda's calendar for the Faculty of Management, Commerce and Law (University of Venda, 2023) also indicates that an oral defence is compulsory. However, it also states that the oral defence must take place in person on campus, which is logistically and financially challenging. Since the Covid-19 pandemic, it seems the University of Venda's *viva* has shifted online.

University of Johannesburg, citing the CHE report, indicates that the *viva* will be made compulsory for implementation from 2024 onwards (University of Johannesburg, 2023). The University of Cape Town is piloting an oral examination process which students can opt into (University of Cape Town, 2023). The Central University of Technology previously only included an oral examination if it was called for during the examination process (Central University of Technology, 2021) but indicates that there are plans to implement it more routinely in the future ("Seminar on Doctoral Vivas," 2022).

Rules at Rhodes University (2024), Nelson Mandela University (2019) and University of the Free State (2022) allow for oral examinations, but these are rarely used and only when the examiners request them. The implementation of the *viva* is thus uneven in South African higher education. There seem to be discussions in many universities, however, about implementing it consistently, going forward, starting soon.

Of the six private higher education institutions that were offering doctoral qualifications at the time of the national review of doctoral qualifications (CHE, 2022), three have the *viva* as a requirement. These are STADIO Higher Education (2022a, 2022b), Regent Business School (2023) and The DaVinci Institute (2023).

Multiple functions of the *viva*

There are several reasons for including a *viva* in the examination of a doctoral thesis. Discussions are needed to understand why a higher education institution would like its doctoral candidates to have a *viva* before rushing to decide how the institution will implement this. This is necessary to prevent miscommunication (Houston, 2018). The purpose of the *viva* underpins decisions about when the *viva* takes place, who should be present, what the agenda should be, and what the general tone or culture of the event should be. The literature suggests that there are four primary purposes of a *viva*. These are to present a research orally, to provide an opportunity to clarify ambiguities in the thesis, to induct the candidate into the knowledge field, and to verify the authenticity of the authorship of thesis. These are discussed in the ensuing subsections.

Presenting research orally

Being able to make a formal presentation that sums up the research problem, methods, key findings, and contribution of the study reported in a doctoral thesis, is recognised as an important part of research competence, and this could only be ascertained through a *viva*. The abilities to grapple with questions 'on the spot' and to deliberate the details of one's research with peers, are also considered attributes worth having (Tusiime, 2019). The *viva* is the ideal and possibly only opportunity to assess the student's ability to communicate the contents of a doctoral thesis and their implications convincingly beyond the strictures of academic writing (Habimana, 2022).

In East African countries, the Qualifications Framework for Higher Education states that a doctoral graduate should have "communication skills to present cogently a complex investigation of originality or original research for external examination against international standards and to communicate results to peers and the community" (Inter-University Council of East Africa, 2015). This focus on communication was the rationale for the *viva* being adopted as a compulsory aspect of doctoral education across this region.

Similarly, South Africa's Qualification Standard for Doctoral Degrees (CHE, 2018) specifies the graduate attributes of reflection, autonomy, communication skills, and critical and analytical skills, which can arguably be only partially ascertained through a written text. This doctoral standard (CHE, 2018) specifies that the graduate should be able to:

communicate research findings effectively to expert and non-expert audiences alike, to defend them in the context of intellectual contestation, and to disseminate them in appropriate forms.

However, it must be acknowledged that, just as some students may experience significant challenges in academic writing despite research competence, some students may have difficulties in public speaking that disadvantage them in the *viva*. Preparation for the *viva*, and examiners' understanding of such issues are crucial for addressing this concern (Davis and Engward, 2018; Wisker *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, examiners must be reminded that the assessment is against the Standard for a Doctoral Degree (CHE, 2018) and institutional criteria, and evaluating the candidate's public speaking skills or use of presentation software should be a minor focus, if at all.

An opportunity to clarify ambiguities and areas of confusion

Examiners may misunderstand some of the written work, and while clarity in writing is critical to a robust doctoral study, often a conversation is needed to ensure shared meaning. The *viva* is not only an opportunity for the examiner to seek clarity on the candidate's meaning but also a chance for the candidate to seek clarity from the examiners. In many cases, the candidate and the supervisor/s would already have received written reports before the *viva*, which means the candidate can include responses to these in the presentation or grapple with them in the question-and-answer section. Ideally, the *viva* should be "genuinely dialogic" (Lovat *et al.*, 2022).

The *viva* is also a chance for the examiners to discuss their positions with each other and establish the basis on which each has reached their evaluation of the quality of the study. When such conversations are undertaken collegially, they can ensure a more rigorous examination process than relying only on separate examination reports that a third party must

collate. The *viva* typically ends in a consensus position being taken by the examiners.

The *viva* is seen to be a means of making the assessment of doctoral thesis more transparent, and of making examiners more accountable (Houston, 2018). In the case where the examination for doctoral thesis takes place in writing only, some examiners select to remain anonymous. This is not possible in the case of a *viva*, and this is seen to enhance the trustworthiness of the process while reducing the potential for power imbalances.

Inducting the candidate into the field

The doctorate is how scholars make a "contribution at the frontiers of a field" (CHE, 2013). The *viva* was seen as a means by which examiners help students articulate their contribution and even deliberate where and how best to disseminate such contributions more widely.

At Makerere University in Uganda, the *viva* is a public process and is seen to be crucial to the PhD candidates' training in becoming recognised scholars (Kabonesa *et al.*, 2022). The *viva* is thus very explicitly a space of experts in the field interrogating the contribution and, importantly, opening the door for the novice to be admitted into the community of experts (Bitzer *et al.*, 2018).

Verifying authenticity

Much of the literature refers to using the *viva* to verify that the student had conducted the research and written the thesis themselves and had sufficient intellectual ownership of the processes (Watts, 2012). This is particularly vital where the thesis is by publication, and the publications are multi-authored (Kiley *et al.*, 2018). In an era in which many students

might use generative artificial intelligence (AI) to assist them with their writing, this is an opportunity to ascertain that the student is indeed as competent in research as the written thesis suggests.

Writing from Rwanda, Habimana (2022) argues that the *viva voce* is of particular importance in the African context given what he terms "the rise of the predatory university". He suggests that the rapid growth of the doctorate in the continent is often accompanied by weak examination processes that do not include independent external examiners and do not include a *viva*. Brodin, Wao, Kabonesa and Onyango (2022) suggest that in Kenya and Uganda the *viva* has enhanced the validity of the examination process.

While concerns about authenticity in the study can sometimes emerge via the *viva*, the literature strongly warns that this should be approached cautiously (Poole, 2015). Where examiners come into the *viva* with an agenda of 'proving' whether the student has 'cheated', they may well draw on adversarial approaches of mistrust, which undermine the entire process. Academic integrity is central to knowledge creation and dissemination, but this is best nurtured and assessed during the doctoral study process rather than judged in the examination (Mullins and Kiley, 2002). If the supervisor or university has doubts about the study's validity or concerns about any ethical aspects, this should be addressed before the study goes to examination. If the examiners have any concerns about the same, this should be addressed before the *viva*.

The *viva* policies from various universities make this clear. For example, the policies of Harvard University (n.d) and the University of the South Pacific (2022), respectively state as follows:

If any defense (*sic*) committee member foresees problems with the examination, they should contact the chair of the defense (*sic*) committee in advance of the meeting. If major problems are found with the written document, the Committee can decide to postpone the oral defense (*sic*) until satisfactory changes are made. While rare in our program, these occasions can involve the insufficient or improper use of statistical methods, grossly overstated conclusions, insufficient background or discussion, or evidence of plagiarism.

(University of Havard, n.d.)

If the examiners' reports indicate that the thesis must go undergo major revisions or when there is a significant variance in the examiners' recommendations or concerns about the standard of work, the oral defence may be deferred or not take place, as determined by the Chair. Revision of the thesis should be undertaken by the candidate (as guided by the supervisory panel) and the thesis should be re-examined. If the revised thesis is of an acceptable standard or minor revisions are recommended by the examiners, the oral defence can be scheduled.

(The University of South Pacific,
2022)

While breaches in academic integrity might unfortunately become evident in the *viva* process and, in such cases, would need to be addressed there, the *viva* should not be seen to be the place to identify breaches in academic integrity or to address them. If the *viva* is explicitly positioned as the space to judge the candidate's authorship, it can take on the style of a court hearing, which undermines its potential to address the functions listed above and exacerbates issues of power discussed below.

The *viva* thus serves different functions. Houston's study of the *viva* in universities in the United Kingdom (2018) stressed the need for clarity around the function

of the *viva* and the relationship between the examination of the thesis and the *viva*. She found that things go awry when examiners, supervisors, and candidates are unclear about what the *viva* is meant to achieve. Teijlingen *et al* (2022) also note that the variation in purposes of the *viva* can lead to all manner of conflicts and confusions between the examiners, the supervisors, the institution, and the candidate. The functions that the university seeks to achieve with a *viva* will also determine which model should be used.

Models of *viva*

There are variations across countries, institutions, and even faculties, in the model of *viva* used. In the UK, for example, the *viva* is a closed event (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2020), whereas in many countries in Europe and Africa, such as the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Austria, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Rwanda, Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania, it is a public process (Habimana, 2022).

A few commonalities between the models are that:

- In all models, the examiners review the written thesis and write a report before the *viva* takes place, although such a report might be preliminary.
- In all models, the *viva* includes a presentation by the candidate, followed by engagement with those present at the *viva*. The candidate brings a copy of the thesis (often heavily marked up for ease of reference).
- In all models, the supervisor is present at the *viva*, albeit with slightly different rights and responsibilities depending on the model.

The approach to the *viva* can crudely be divided into three models: the private *viva*, the public *viva*, and a combination of the two (Bitzer *et al.*, 2018).

Model 1: The private *viva*

The private or closed *viva* takes place after examiners have already completed their assessment of the written text and prepared individual draft reports. The pre-*viva* reports might or might not have been shared between examiners (whereby a composite report might be developed) and might or might not have been shared with the candidate and the supervisor/s. Where the candidate and supervisor have had access to the reports prior to the *viva*, the candidate's presentation might include discussion about the concerns raised in those reports. Having access to the reports prior to the event might mitigate the potential for the private *viva* to function as a “black box” where the student and supervisor live in “constant fear of what is going to happen” (Kumar *et al.*, 2021, p. 1085).

The private *viva* is attended by the candidate, examiners, chair and supervisor or supervisors. The supervisor typically attends in a non-speaking capacity. The open-ended discussion following the presentation should allow the examiners to explore the doctoral candidate's understanding of the contribution that the thesis makes to knowledge so that the recommended outcome to the awarding university is evidence-based.

The supervisor and candidate are asked to leave the room while the examiners deliberate. The supervisor and candidate are permitted to return once a decision has been reached. This is typically verbally provided at the event, with a formal report being received by the supervisor and student a week or two later.

If the examiners have serious concerns about the written thesis (especially but not limited to issues of academic integrity), the *viva* is generally not held until these have been attended to. While a failure is possible after a private *viva*, this would be an unexpected outcome. The *viva* only takes place where the written thesis has enough to convince the examiners that a pass is likely, even if a resubmission may be necessary. As Tinkler and Jackson (2004, p. 31) explain, “the *viva* is not usually the key site of decision making about the outcome of the examination process”.

Model 2: The public viva

In this model, the *viva* is held after examiners have already completed their reports and the supervisor and candidate have received these. Edits and revisions would usually be complete prior to the *viva*. In the case where a re-submission is required, that process, including re-examination, would be completed prior to a public *viva* being scheduled.

Sometimes this form of the *viva* includes a speech (also known as a ‘citation’) by the supervisor, who explains to family and friends present what the study's significance is. Usually this happens before the candidate's presentation, which is typically much shorter in this model. In such situations, the supervisor might also have been an active part of the examining committee, as is often the case in Japan, Brazil, Iran, Finland, the Netherlands, and elsewhere (Cortazzi and Jin, 2021).

One or two ‘paranymphs’ are often included in the Dutch public *viva* process. These are typically fellow PhD candidates who are very familiar with the thesis and can read out sections of the text as needed (Cortazzi and Jin, 2021; Habimana, 2022). There, as in Belgium and many Scandinavian countries, the

celebratory event can begin with music and a procession of academics in full academic gowns, and end with the signing and handing over of the degree certificate to the successful candidate. While questions are asked at such events, the *viva* is a public celebration of the candidate's graduation and part of the process of dissemination of the study and does not serve as a ‘defence’ as such.

Model 3: A combination of public and private viva models

While the private *viva* is typically positioned as an examination and the public *viva* as a celebration, there are also examples in the literature of a combination of the two. In such cases, the public are invited to the scholar's presentation and the question-and-answer segment that follows and may participate in question-and-answer segment alongside the supervisor and anyone else present. The public is then asked to leave while the supervisor, candidate, examiners and chair remain for further discussion. The candidate and supervisor then leave to allow the examiners to deliberate before they are called back in and informed of the final decision. Again, this is typically verbally provided, with a formal report being received by the supervisor and student within a week or two.

These different models signal different understandings of the purpose of the *viva*. There are some additional issues raised in the literature that institutions planning to implement any model of *viva*, should consider. They are briefly discussed below.

Power play

Researchers such as Kiley (2009), Mullins and Kiley (2002), and Wisker and Kiley (2014) indicate that an oral examination can be a place of harmful power imbalances, and that this needs to be carefully managed. Houston (2018), in her study of the *viva* in the United Kingdom, raised concerns that some *viva* examinations were inquisitorial, and that there was pervasive aggression or sarcasm that was both unprofessional and not collegial in nature. She indicated that many found the *viva* to be "mysterious, overly private and an opportunity for examiners to engage in power-play, with one another and with the candidate ...it is generally viewed as a phenomenon that has evaded the basic principles of valid and reliable assessment and 'escaped' quality assurance practices" (Houston, 2018, p. 15). Sadly, where power plays out in the *viva*, it is often related to the idea that the *viva* is a 'rite of passage' in the same way as hazing initiation rituals (Poole, 2015).

Having more than two examiners assists in ensuring that abuses of power do not occur in the examination process, including during the *viva* (Houston, 2018). While in many countries one of the examiners is internal to the institution and in some countries the supervisor is on the examination panel, ideally at least two examiners should be external to the university where the study is registered.

As with examination of the written text, there is at times the problem that examiners have an idea of how they would have undertaken the study, and thus make comments or ask the candidate questions from this premise, rather than considering the study in its own right (Poole, 2015). There is also a concern that in both the written examination and the *viva* there can be a problematic focus on surface level issues when the examiners are inexperienced as researchers and as examiners. Interestingly, experienced

researchers are generally found to offer more substantial feedback but to do so in a more collegial and developmental way (Mullins and Kiley, 2002).

Preparing for the *viva*

There is a wealth of materials available online to support the candidate (and supervisors) to prepare for the *viva*. Many recommend having a 'mock *viva*' or practice round as part of doctoral education and as an opportunity for those starting out on their doctoral studies to come to understand the process long ahead of time (Davis and Engward 2018). Cortazzi and Jin (2021) suggest that preparations for the *viva* should continue throughout the duration of the doctoral studies. In other words, when the candidate makes a specific argument or chooses a particular methodological approach, the supervisor can ask how they would articulate this in a *viva*. They also recommend regularly asking candidates about the kinds of questions they might anticipate in a *viva*. The following are included in their useful list of common *viva* questions and suggestions for responses:

What led you to this topic?

[In a few sentences describe your background, the context, maybe share a relevant story of your personal involvement]

What are the most significant current directions of the relevant literature?

[Do not try to summarise the literature review here: this is a question about what is happening in your general field. Identify and briefly comment on several outstanding directions or trends, and show their

importance, interest and relevance for your research].

How did you handle ambiguous data?

[Linguistic, educational, and social science data always have some less clear-cut or ambiguous components. Have some examples to provide so that you can say why they are ambiguous or difficult to classify. Say how you made decisions about these examples. Talk about your decisions with less clear cases and overlapping data, and about data that can be classified in multiple ways].

How do your conclusions relate to the conceptual framework?

[Surprisingly, these links are not always made obvious in thesis conclusions: make the connections clear and explicit by explaining your ideas of the links. You do not need to explain everything ... simply provide good examples].

The role of the chairperson

The role of the chair or convenor is significant. While chairpersons are not expected to make comments on content of the study, they are expected to mediate the process in ways that ensure collegiality. They keep time and indicate who should speak and when they should do so. This is especially important for online *viva* examinations. The chairpersons are there to put the candidates at ease and ensure that they are not badgered by examiners. They are thus central in setting the tone of the event and managing the process (Poole, 2015). It is often the chair who ensures that the *viva* is an educational space rather than “a sadistic ritual” (Kumar *et al.*, 2021).

It is vital that the chairperson ensures that there is a shared understanding of the examiners’ options and the meanings of each. Examiners are generally asked to select one of four options, which are (1) *accept*, (2) *revise and resubmit* (to examiners or to supervisors), (3) *downgrade* (This is not an option in South Africa as students may not receive a master's degree for a study registered at doctoral level) and (4) *fail* (Teijlingen *et al.*, 2022). But the meaning of each of these options varies. In some countries, the first option, *accept*, can include changes at editorial level and minor restructuring or extending. In other countries, *accept*, means that the thesis is accepted as it is and any restructuring or extending would entail the second option, *resubmit*. In some countries, a resubmission to the examiners is common, while in other countries, this is considered a significant blow. In some countries, a *fail* can mean that significant revisions are needed and a new examination process is required, whereas in South Africa, *fail* generally means the end of the doctoral study with no further options (besides an appeal) being available. Examiners come from different backgrounds and may have very different understandings of the *viva* process of each higher

education institution. The details as to the purpose of the *viva* and the meanings of terms need to be explicitly spelled out in the *viva* guidelines or protocol (Cortazzi and Jin, 2021) and discussed by the chairperson before the *viva* begins.

Viva is typically a once-off event

The literature also shows differences in how long a *viva* lasts, though it is typically one to three hours (Houston, 2018; Tusiime, 2019). As indicated earlier, the *viva*, whether public or private, is typically undertaken only where the examiners believe that there is strong potential for the study to pass having met the requirements of the doctorate. There is, however, always the small possibility of a failure, even in the case of a celebratory public *viva*, as unusual as that may be. This would typically be because details of fraud or doubts of authenticity come to light in the *viva* itself.

There is also always a possibility that a re-submission might be called for after the *viva*. While a call for a re-submission after a *viva* would not be as unusual as a failure, it is not common as re-submissions typically occur before the *viva* process begins. But at times, examiners will use the *viva* as the means by which to decide whether the candidate is capable of attending to the specified revisions without resubmission or whether a re-examination is needed.

In the case of a re-submission after a *viva*, a repeat *viva* may or may not be called for. "A re-*viva* is an option if the examiners are not satisfied with the responses given by the candidate" (Tan, 2023, p. 528). However, it is common for re-submission and re-examination to take place without a second *viva* (Teijlingen *et al.*, 2022), as these regulations from

Oxford University (*General Regulations for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, 2023-24, n.d.*) demonstrate:

Where a recommendation of approval subject to major corrections has been made, the examiners, on receipt of the corrected thesis on the first occasion, may conclude and report one of the following:

(a) the original recommendation is now fully substantiated;

(b) the work as submitted still requires minor corrections prior to confirmation of the original recommendation and a further one month may be allowed for this from that date;

(c) the work as now submitted still requires major corrections prior to confirmation of the original recommendation and a further six months may be allowed for this from that date.

Recommendation (a) or (b) may be made without a further oral examination on condition that both examiners have reviewed and approved the major corrections. A further oral examination must be held if either of the examiners requires it or if the recommendation is likely to be (c).

The online viva

Technology has removed many of the constraints in having a *viva* as more *viva* examinations are now conducted online (Ferreira-Meyers, 2022). There is usually a pre-*viva* meeting of the examiners to ensure they understand the requirements in regard to each person's role. Where connectivity becomes an issue, the chair needs to decide when the event has become so disrupted that a new meeting should be scheduled. It is ideal that the candidate, chair, and examiners have their cameras on for the duration of the *viva*, though this is sometimes challenging if connectivity is a problem and so cameras might only be used when a specific person is speaking. The 'chat' feature of the meetings programme is typically not permitted during a *viva* examination. Permission for the candidate to use presentation software varies from institution to institution.

Recording of the *viva* is increasingly considered to be important for both quality assurance purposes and for

institutional review (Houston, 2018; Morley *et al.*, 2002). All participants are informed that the entire process will be recorded. Institutions vary in their protocols as to who may access the recordings and under what circumstances and to what ends this may happen.

Conclusion and recommendations

The *viva* allows for the assessment of graduate attributes that are difficult to evaluate in a written text. The *viva* enables a more personal engagement between examiners and between the candidate, supervisor and examiners. This can allow for a more open, collegial, and negotiated review of the contribution to knowledge. It can also be a means of providing the candidate with a platform to share the work more widely and to obtain advice for future dissemination. It can be a space to ensure rigour and confirm authenticity. However, the extent to which it achieves all of these depends largely on how the process is managed.

There is a wealth of literature on the use of the *viva* and those institutions planning to implement this as a routine part of their doctoral assessment process will find lots to learn from this. The key recommendations drawn from the literature are summed up below.

- 1) Institutions need to have very clear protocols as to the process, with purpose and roles spelled out. The protocols must also spell out the relationship between the *viva* and the written thesis.
- 2) The *viva* should enable more transparency and accountability in the examiners and be seen as a space for deliberations about knowledge contribution.
- 3) The success of the *viva* rests largely on well-trained chairpersons who are independent of the examination.
- 4) Recording the *viva* proceedings is recommended, alongside clarity as to who has access to these and under what circumstances.
- 5) Candidates need opportunities to develop the attributes and skills being assessed in the *viva*, and may also need access to preparatory support for the *viva* process.

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