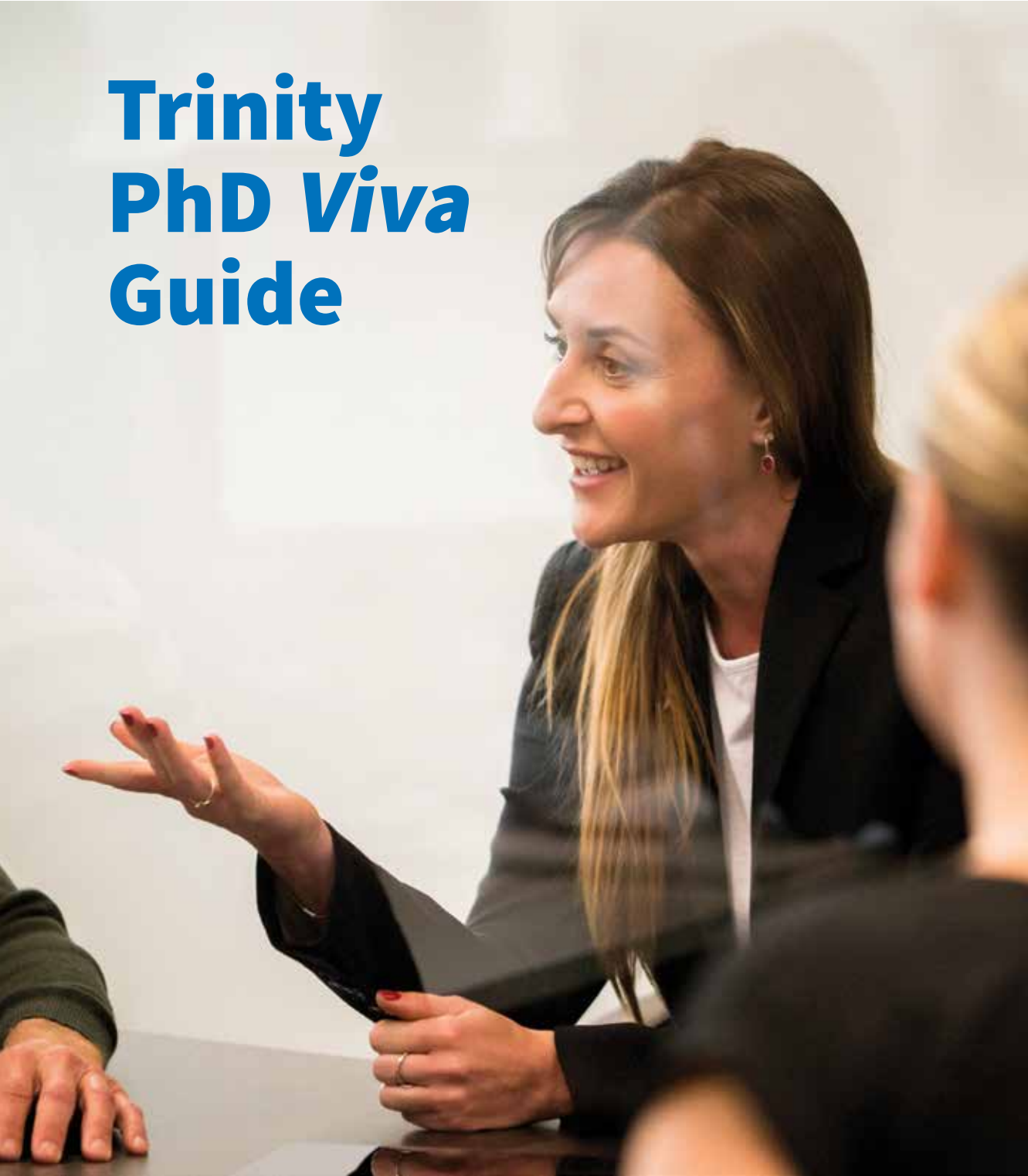




Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin

Trinity PhD *Viva* Guide





Trinity

PhD *Viva* Guide

A *viva voce* examination is, essentially, an oral defence, by the student, of his or her thesis. It is a context in which the examiners will satisfy themselves that the thesis is, in fact, the student's own work, but also in which the student is given a chance to deal with any concerns that the examiners may have with the thesis and, especially, to defend the hypothesis that s/he is putting forward.

In many cases, the student's performance in the *viva voce* may have the effect of settling any concerns that the examiners will have with the thesis. Ideally, however, a *viva voce* examination should be a deep intellectual conversation between experts in a particular field (of whom the student, who has worked on the particular topic for many years can be regarded as the primary expert). As such, and whereas this may be somewhat unrealistic for students who will understandably be nervous, it should (again ideally) be an enjoyable experience — one that will be memorable for the student.

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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01

Organisation of the Viva

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 for the thesis 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 person of its Director of Postgraduate Teaching and Learning. This decision is made in consultation with the student's supervisor (albeit that the final decision of whom to nominate 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 relevant nomination forms, and may either approve or decline to approve the examiners 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. In such circumstances, the school, through its Director of Postgraduate Teaching and Learning is asked to nominate an alternative examiner or examiners.

When the nomination of examiners is eventually approved by the Dean, s/he writes to them formally confirming their appointment (the school will already have been in touch with them informally) and enclosing the student's thesis. Examiners are asked to complete the examination process within eight weeks, albeit that, on occasion, this may simply not be possible.

It is the function of the internal examiner in conjunction with the School's administration staff to organize the *viva* itself. This will involve liaising with the external examiner, the student and the Director of Teaching and Learning (postgraduate) in the school, to arrange a time and date for the *viva*. 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.

Viva Voce examinations are held in person and in Trinity College. This is because the *viva* experience is significantly impoverished if all parties are not present in person. In extreme situations the Dean of Graduate Studies might grant permission for one of the examiners to attend via audio visual link up, but this happens very rarely (in normal circumstances if one party cannot attend in person because of ill health, the remedy is that the *viva* is postponed). 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.



Who is present at the *Viva Voce* examination?

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

Most relevantly, in some schools, the *viva* begins with a presentation, by the student, of his or her 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 **student**, 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, s/he may apply to the Dean to have another nominated person present in lieu of his or her 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

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

Of course the most important ‘preparation’ will already have been done — in that the candidate will have submitted a thesis that s/he regards as the most important evidence that s/he merits the degree in question! Many candidates will, indeed, be preparing for their *viva* in the course of writing up their thesis, by seeking to identify potential weaknesses or points in relation to which they may be questioned. Beyond this, however, all of the following steps may be helpful.

Reviewing the Thesis

A student, in his or her *viva*, is expected first and foremost to be so thoroughly familiar with his or her work, that s/he can discuss it expertly and answer deep and probing questions in relation to both the scholarship and the arguments contained therein. Indeed in many cases, the first question that the student will be asked is to outline and summarise the hypothesis of the thesis. Given that a number of months will generally have elapsed between the date of submission of the thesis and the date of the *viva*, it is critical that, in the lead up to the *viva*, the student reviews his or her work thoroughly, to refamiliarize him or herself with its content.

Reviewing the thesis at this point is also useful because, at the time at which it was originally submitted, the student will often be under such pressure that s/he may not be able to ‘see the wood for the trees’ so to speak. Reviewing it after some weeks have elapsed, when the stress of submission is over, may foster clarity and enable the student either to gain a deeper level of insight into what is contained in the written work and also, critically, to identify gaps and weaknesses therein. This is hugely important in that, very often, the questions in the *viva* will focus on such gaps and weaknesses and hence (and subject to what is said below about seeking to identify, in advance, questions that might be asked), it is important for the student to prepare him or herself to respond in relation to potential weaknesses in the thesis. Preparation in this regard is critical – the worst thing for a student in a *viva* is to be taken by surprise by a question — especially if it is one related to a potentially obvious flaw in the work.

Preparation, however, can involve more than just reviewing the written thesis. There may, for example, be an important recent publication or other development that has occurred since the thesis was submitted. Of course the student is only examined in relation to material available up to the date of submission. But it is also very impressive (and reveals a deep mastery of the subject) when, in the context of the *viva*, the student can point to developments that have occurred since submission.

The student's external examiner will often be a global expert in the field. That being the case, the student will naturally often want to have referenced the examiner in his or her thesis. But again, in preparation for the *viva*, the student may want to refamiliarise him or herself with the work of the external (and, where appropriate, the internal) examiner (including any work published since submission), in order better to understand his or her approach and the nature of his or her arguments.

Familiarity with the Viva

Beyond reviewing the scholarship in the area and his or her thesis, it is also strongly recommended that the student take steps to ensure that the *viva* itself does not present any surprises. Remember that, naturally, you may be stressed enough on the day, and so it will be helpful in advance, to ensure that you are fully aware of the way in which *vivas* generally, and your *viva* specifically will operate so that you can focus exclusively on the discussion with the examiners.

In the first place, you would be advised to read over both the college Calendar Part III rules in relation to *viva voce* examinations, and also any local information specific to the way in which a *viva* operates in your school. If it would be helpful, you should speak either to your supervisor or to the Director of Postgraduate Teaching and Learning in your school, so that you can be confident, on the morning of the *viva* that you are absolutely clear as to the mechanics of what awaits you.

Secondly, it is recommended that you familiarize yourself with the room(s) in which your *viva* will take place. Checking the projector colours and computer types are compatible with your presentation is important and checking that the sound system, videos and any animations work is also important. Some experts recommend that you try to spend some time in the room and to imagine defending the thesis there. You may also ask colleagues to have a mock of the thesis defence with questions. It is also very important to practice your talk many times yourself and in front of others, making sure the timing of your presentation is well organized.





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The Day of the *Viva*

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

For obvious reasons (and not least to reduce your stress levels), it is strongly recommended that students seek to attend at the venue well in advance of the starting time, having their presentations loaded-up (where appropriate) and perhaps having time to practice before examiners arrive.

Students should dress smartly for the occasion (in that this is an important ‘businesslike’ event and you should seek to create a good impression) 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.

A *viva* may be a draining experience, and so it is important to ensure that you do what you can to keep your energy levels up for the event.

The Operation of the *Viva*

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. Examiners cannot, however, form *definite* views in this regard, in that the *viva* is part of the examination process.

In some disciplines, the *viva* has two component parts. First, the candidate delivers a presentation on his or her 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. The second part (or, in many disciplines, the only part) is the defence itself.

The defence is chaired by the Director of Teaching and Learning (Postgraduate) within the school or his or her nominee. The chair has no role in asking questions or in determining the result of the *viva* but is simply responsible for ensuring that it operates appropriately and according to Trinity regulations. The substantive operation of the *viva*, however, is determined by the examiners. Finally the candidate's supervisor is permitted to be present (though in many cases s/he will not be) but purely in an observational capacity —

that is s/he 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 his or her 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. If at any stage during the *viva* you need a comfort break you should ask for it. The Chair of the *viva* must check after 2.5 hours whether you would like a 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.

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 so critical that the candidate ensure, in preparing for the *viva*, that s/he is fully familiar with the work that may have been submitted some months earlier and also, that s/he is cognizant of potential weaknesses in the work – something that may enable him or her, 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. By not seeking such clarification you could miss the point and give the wrong answer and this might, quite unfairly, lead the examiners to infer that your understanding not of the question but of the topic is deficient.

What if you don't know the answer to the question?

It is often suggested, in the relevant literature, 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 his or her way through the situation, but instead should candidly admit that s/he does 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 s/he does 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* (and 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, s/he is 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.

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

Finally, and whereas it is your thesis that is being examined, and thus, of course, the *viva* is the end of the examination of the thesis as submitted, 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*

In normal circumstances, when the *viva* is concluded, the candidate (and, if present, his or her 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.

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

First, they may decide to recommend award of the degree for the thesis *as it stands*. This is, obviously, 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.

Secondly, they may recommend awarding the degree subject to *minor corrections*. The vast majority of students get this decision, and it is a positive one. In essence it means that you have the degree, but just have to make some corrections, within two months. The corrected thesis has to be submitted to and approved by the internal examiner¹ who informs the Academic Registry when the changes have been made at which 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 if s/he completes these changes.

Thirdly, the examiners may recommend referring the thesis back for re-examination following major revisions. In such a 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 that s/he will, following completion of revisions, ultimately obtain the degree. When a referred thesis is resubmitted it is again fully examined by both examiners (albeit that 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.

Fourthly, the examiners may conclude that the thesis cannot be brought up to the required standard even following a referral for re-examination following 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 making of minor corrections.²

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.

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

² 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.

Next Steps

Following the completion of the *viva*, the examiners submit their independent reports and results recommendation forms 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 and the Director of Postgraduate Teaching and Learning in his or her school, 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 s/he needs 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 his or her 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.

Conclusion

The *viva voce* exam may seem like a very daunting prospect — especially to students who are already under stress as a result of finishing up their theses — but it need not be.

The principal work in the PhD process is already completed through submitting the thesis. If your work is strong and, especially, if you are properly prepared for it, the *viva* can be both enriching and empowering.

Remember that you are the expert in your subject area, you have worked very hard to get to this point, and you are discussing the fruit of your labours (of which you should be proud) with people who are interested in it and interested in what you have to say.

It is our hope that some of what is in this guide may be useful to you and may help you to have a positive experience and, hopefully, a very positive result.



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