Surviving Your Viva

The Examiner Perspective

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My Experience

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

Agenda

- Examiner's perspective on a viva:
  - Appointment of examiners.
  - How do examiners prepare?
  - What do they look for?
  - What goes on in the "pre-viva meeting"?
  - What types of questions do they ask?
  - What goes on in the "post-viva meeting"?
  - Why do theses fail?
  - Why do theses pass?

Appointment of Examiners

- Your internal assessor will probably be the same one you've had throughout your PhD studies.
- Your supervisor will nominate an external examiner.
  - An expert in the field.
  - University "prefers" senior external examiners.
  - You do not get to choose your external.
  - Your supervisor will (should) discuss candidates with you before nomination.

How Do Examiners Prepare?

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

How Do Examiners Prepare?

- Each examiner must write a preliminary report.
  - It’s usually very short.
  - Confirms that the thesis is of sufficient presentational quality to be examined.
  - Identify points for discussion in the viva.

What Do Examiners Look For?

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

Pre-Viva Meeting

- Your examiners will meet for 30-60 minutes prior to the viva.
- What are they talking about?
  - Protocol for the viva.
  - Major points for discussion (where the bulk of the viva time will be spent).
  - Minor points for discussion in the viva.
  - (Sometimes) What result we expect?

Types of Questions

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

Types of Questions

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

Typical Opening Gambit

- “What’s your PhD thesis about? Please summarise your contributions.”
  - Prepare a 1 minute and a 5 minute answer.
  - Be prepared to expand on the 5 minute answer if asked.
- Follow-up: “What is it about these contributions that merits a PhD?”
- Then, typically, examiners work through the thesis by chapter.

Dealing with Criticisms

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

Dealing with Questions

- Listen to the question.
- Take your time.
- Talk precisely, and move from the general to the specific.
  - A succinct (short!) answer is always preferable to a long, rambling answer.

Why Do We ask Questions?

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

Post-Viva Meeting

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

Passing Thesis?

- Substantial and precisely described contributions.
- Thorough and analytic literature review.
- Good motivation and a clearly described story.
- Sensible evaluation, with limitations described.
- Some suggestions for future work.
- One or more publications.
- Listened to guidance from supervisor!

Failures?

- Submitted for PhD, awarded MPhil:
  - Insufficient contribution for a PhD.
  - Poor methodology (unjustified).
- Failure (after referral):
  - Insufficient contribution for a PhD.
  - Poor presentation.
  - Inadequate evaluation.
  - No engagement with the review process.
  - Ignored supervisory advice.