

What to Expect at the Oral Examinations for Higher Degree by Research Candidates

at The University of Queensland

1 Introduction

The University of Queensland introduced oral examination to enhance both the examination and experience of the higher degree by research (HDR) candidate at UQ. The oral examination provides candidates with an opportunity to discuss their research directly with recognised experts who have been appointed as their examiners and also helps them establish stronger ties and networks across their discipline of study.

2 Possible questions asked at an oral examination

Once you submit your written thesis for examination, it's time to start preparing for the oral examination. One of the most common questions candidates have is, "what types of questions can I expect?". Below are a selection of possible types of questions that examiners' may ask compiled by Patrick Dunleavy.

2.1 Value added and originality

- What are your overall findings and results?
- What are the most significant or value-added parts of your thesis? Why?
- How does your work take forward or develop the literature in this field?
- Which propositions or findings would you say are distinctively your own?
- Which components of the work were done by your collaborators, and to what extent did you contribute to that work?

2.2 Origins and the scope of the research

- Can you explain how you came to choose this topic for your doctorate?
- What was it that first interested you about this topic?
- How did your research focus change over time?
- Why have you defined the final topic in the way you did?
- What were some of the difficulties you encountered and how did they influence how the topic was framed?
- What main problems or issues did you have in deciding what was in-scope and out-of-scope?

2.3 Methods

- What are the core methods used in this thesis?
- Why did you choose this approach?
- In an ideal world, are there different techniques or other forms of data and evidence that you'd have liked to use?

2.4 Data or information

- What are the main sources or kinds of evidence?
- Are they strong enough in terms of their quantity and quality to sustain the conclusions that you draw?
- Do the data or information you consider appropriately measure or relate to the theoretical concepts, or underlying social or physical phenomena, that you are interested in?

2.5 Findings

- Briefly explain your findings, or some aspects of those findings.
- Are there any limitations or caveats on your findings?
- How do your findings fit with or contradict other literature in this field?
- How do you explain the differences of findings, or estimation, or interpretation between your work and that of other authors?

2.6 What next?

- What are the main implications or lessons of your research for the future development of work in this specific sub-field?
- Are there any wider implications for other parts of the discipline?
- Do you have 'next step' or follow-on research projects in mind?

3. Preparing for the oral examination

It is important to do some preparation for your oral examination. In addition to the advice given below from an article in The Guardian newspaper (Ratcliffe, 2015), you may like to speak with your advisors and with other students who have previously completed an oral examination.

3.1 Check UQ policies, procedures, and guidelines (PPL 4.60.08 Higher Degree by Research Examination)

Institutional policies and guidelines are described in that document, including who will attend your oral examination and the timeframe by which things should proceed.

3.2 Re-read your thesis – and keep up-to-date with research

Don't underestimate the amount of time the examiners will have spent reading and thinking about your thesis – however, you should remember that you are still likely to be the “expert in the room” on this particular topic. Check to see if any relevant recent papers have emerged since submitting the thesis and, if so, read these.

3.3 Think about your examiners.

Your examination panel will consist of two external examiners in your subject area. However, they will likely have varying expertise and viewpoints. It is important to have a knowledge of their published contributions, especially those that are related to your thesis. Examiners often focus on their area of expertise when asking questions, so you may be able to predict the topic areas of some of the questions.

3.4 Think about what how you will respond, including when asked difficult questions

Give some preparatory thought to:

- what you will defend fully (such as your claims about the originality of the thesis and its contribution to knowledge), and what you will concede (for example, no research is perfect, and showing that you have considered what could have been done differently, or even better, is often a strength).
- a list of possible questions. To help, questions from a number of places can be found [listed here](#). Some sources suggest putting together a list of difficult potential questions. (This can be useful, but it's also important not to frighten yourself). If you seek some help, you may well be able to predict most of the questions you will be asked.
- how you will talk about your work as opposed to writing about it. By the time you finish your PhD you'll know your thesis inside out. One of the things at which you won't be as practised is talking about it. When preparing for your oral examination, practise vocalising answers. It's not a case of needing to learn the answers verbatim – this would only work as a technique if you could guarantee the exact way your examiner will ask a question – but it is about thinking about how you will articulate certain things. In an oral examination you need to give your answers in “real time”, and cannot go back and edit successive drafts in the way you could when writing the thesis.
- Your individual “contribution to knowledge”. This is the aspect of what you have done that makes your work appropriate for doctoral level. Be sure that you understand exactly what your contribution is, and that you are able to express and explain it clearly and concisely. Make sure that you can relate your contribution to other work in your field and that you are able to explain how your work is different. You may wish to discuss this with your advisors.

3.5 Bring a printed copy of your thesis that is exactly the same as that of your examiners

Ensure you have a printed copy of your thesis that is exactly the same as that of your examiners (specifically the same pagination). Mark with tabs the key sections and highlight for reference important quotes and points you might want to refer to.

3.6 Introductory presentation

Your oral examination will involve you giving a brief summary of your results, the significance of your work and your individual contributions to this work. This will typically run for 10-20 minutes, and you should think carefully about what you will say, and how you will say it. If you are going to use PowerPoint or any similar materials (remember, the examiners are likely on video conference so formal PowerPoint presentations may be tricky), it is useful to send a copy of the presentation to the Chair of Examiners who can pass it on to the examiners prior to the meeting. This presentation is in part an ice-breaker to help you relax, but it also gives your examiners some insights into your understanding of your work and its significance. It will also answer some of their questions up front, and give them some ideas of additional questions to ask.

3.7 Know yourself!

Oral examinations are not intended to be adversarial, and you hopefully will enjoy much or all of the process. The panel is not “out to get you”, and indeed will want to be supportive and helpful. However, we know that examinations, particularly oral examinations, can be stressful for some students. You know yourself: if you believe that you are likely to find aspects of this process difficult then you might wish to develop some strategies up front to minimise this. Make sure that before the examination you get plenty of sleep, eat properly and de-stress.

4 Undertaking the oral examination

4.1 Get off to a good start

Be friendly with your examiners and the Chair of the panel, but don't be overly informal. This is an important process, and you want to make a good impression. Pay attention to their responses to your questions, and try to get the right level of detail in your answers. If you do a good job of demonstrating your knowledge, describing your thinking, justifying your choices and explaining your working in the first 10-20 minutes, then you and the examiners are more likely to be relaxed through the entire process. If your responses are too short and non-specific and do not demonstrate knowledge, then this can begin to raise concerns.

4.2 Don't overstate or understate your work.

It's important not to claim credit for work that isn't your own, or to overstate your results or their significance. Acknowledge any work done by others, and be realistic about what you have shown, what it means, and why you made the choices you did. Conversely, you should

also not understate what you have done. Your oral examination is not a time for false modesty. It's also not a time to be too self-critical. It's perfectly appropriate to acknowledge limitations of your work, but do this in an academically confident manner.

4.3 Don't answer in ways that appear to be memorised

Do not learn answers off by heart, or give answers that appear to be have been learned off by heart. Doing so removes the spontaneity and is usually obvious to examiners, in part because you may answer the question for which you prepared rather than the specific question they asked. Remember that one of the roles of the committee is to determine whether you are familiar with the work in your thesis. If it becomes apparent that you may have memorised an answer, it is likely that the committee will very quickly find different questions for which you haven't prepared answers, precisely so they can see how you respond to unexpected questions.

4.4 Be prepared for friendly questions and complex debates

Oral examinations can appear to be (or are) friendly and then suddenly become very conceptually complex. You will think agilely, and be able to alternate between accessible everyday language and specialised arguments. Make sure you are able to do this.

4.5 Everyone is human!

The panel understands that you may find aspects of this process to be difficult. They will not expect perfect answers to their questions, and will be considerate of your situation. If things get too much when you're in there, don't be afraid to take your time in answering, ask that a question be repeated, or request a short break if you need it. If you disagree with the panel on a comment they make, then it is perfectly acceptable to express that disagreement in a respectful and academically justified manner. If the panel disagrees with you, then you do not need to back down on your perspective, provided you can justify what you are saying. The panel will respect academic quality more than they respect agreeableness.

4.6 Enjoy the process!

The name "oral examination" may make it appear that this process is solely about determining whether you have met the quality standards to be awarded a thesis. Whilst this is certainly an important outcomes of the process, the examination gives you an opportunity to discuss your work with two independent experts in your field. Take the opportunity to learn from the panel members, and to impress them! Perhaps, in the future, they may be in a position to offer you employment or act as a referee for you. Provided you are familiar with the work in your thesis, can explain it, and answer the questions reasonably well, then there is no objective reason to be intimidated by the oral examination, and you can instead regard it as a stimulating opportunity to demonstrate your quality and to learn.

References and useful links

Budd, Richard (2014). *Is it a PhD...or not a PhD? Unpacking the viva.*

(<https://ddubdrahcir.wordpress.com/2014/09/15/is-it-a-phd-or-not-a-phd-unpacking-the-viva/>)

Dunleavy, Patrick (2014). *Top ten questions for the PhD oral exam.*

(<https://medium.com/advice-and-help-in-authoring-a-phd-or-non-fiction/top-ten-questions-for-the-phd-oral-exam-c3687cc75962>)

Ratcliffe, Rebecca (2015) *How to survive a PhD viva: 17 top tips*

(<https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/2015/jan/08/how-to-survive-a-phd-viva-17-top-tips>)

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