

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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ACROSS TIME AND SPACE: EXAMINER AND CANDIDATE EXPERIENCES OF ONLINE DOCTORAL VIVAS.

Gina Wisker¹, Rachel Spronken-smith², Joseph Waghorne³, Ludovic Highman¹

¹University of Bath, Bath, United Kingdom ²University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand ³University of Essex, Colchester, United Kingdom

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Abstract: Doctoral vivas are now mainly online, building on a well-established history in New Zealand. Our research from the perspectives of examiners and candidates in remote online vivas, is drawn from reflective auto-ethnographic responses to semi-structured open-ended questions devised by and responded to by the four researchers: a new doctor and three experienced examiners across three universities in UK and NZ. All four researchers were involved (2020-1) in doctoral vivas conducted remotely with participants in different locations, across different time zones. Research considers experiences of the process, personal, learning and institutional dimensions, situating this exploration in the literature of doctoral vivas and doctoral examination (Kiley & Mullins, Kiley & Wisker, Holbrook et al., Trafford and Leshem) and remote vivas (SRHE, UKCGE), asking how in these (often stressful) conditions intended intellectual dialogue can constructively engage candidates, clarifying and confirming rich experience of doctoral work and awareness of contributions to knowledge.

Paper: Our research concerns the changing processes and experiences of doctoral vivas, now online, from the perspectives of examiners and candidates. Not every country has a doctoral viva. Its original function, ensuring the work is the candidate's own, still underpins the process but mostly vivas are formal dialogues clarifying decision-making, understanding of contributions to knowledge, expressed through the thesis and underlying research (Trafford & Leshem). Little is known of examiners' reflections on the viva process although examiner reports (Holbrook et al.) indicate discussions on initial choices, ongoing decision-making, clarification around theory, literature, methodology and methods, data analysis, ethics, findings and an understanding of contribution to knowledge. Much experience remain anecdotal (Denicolo, Boulter & Fuller) with advice to students (Tinkler & Jackson; Wallace & Marsh). Recently, Kumar, Sanderson, & Kaur consider duty-of-care offered by viva convenors/chairs. Less is formally known of candidates' viva experiences, although anecdotal and blog responses abound.

There is a well-established history to online remote doctoral vivas in New Zealand initially for international examiner accessibility. Under Covid pandemic conditions, doctoral vivas went online.

Our research on examiner and doctoral graduate experiences of remote online vivas, draws from reflective auto-ethnographic responses to semi-structured open-ended questions devised and

produced by the four participant authors: three examiners (UK, New Zealand: 50+ doctoral vivas between us, one new examiner, one doctoral school lead) and one newly-awarded doctor. We focus on doctoral vivas conducted remotely (2020-1) with participants in different locations, across different timezones, considering personal, learning and institutional dimensions, situating this exploration in literature/webinars on doctoral examinations, remote supervision and vivas (SRHE, UKCGE), asking how in these (often stressful) contexts we can constructively engage candidates, clarifying, confirming the rich experience of doctoral work and contributions to knowledge.

Our research considers three dimensions: personal (wellbeing, hierarchy of needs); learning (doctoral vivas as liminal spaces, conceptual threshold crossings) and institutional (contexts, technology quality, access, formal roles). It is theorised considering: (1) *Doctoral liminality - the viva as an accelerated liminal space before the last crossing*, noting the “rite of passage” (Keefer) of the remote viva with “ceremonial patterns” accompanying transitions. This dialogue-based oral examination is now both more formal, in remote online contexts with technology, formal starts, breaks, conclusions, yet experienced in participants’ homes, across timezones, distances, culturally and personally inflected contexts. (2) *The viva conceived as a conceptual threshold crossing stage* sees doctoral students articulating and defending research choices and findings including a “perspective shift” (Keefer) becoming recognised academic researchers (3) *Acquiring the necessary academic capital and liminality* (Bourdieu) to be awarded a doctorate, successfully transitioning from student to colleague. Academic capital constructed and evidenced in doctoral vivas is understood as an “institutionalized form of cultural capital based on based on properties such as prior educational achievement, a 'disposition' to be academic” (Naidoo). Work on online supervision (Gray&Crosta;Kumar,Taylor; Wisker) and vivas report ‘the high-stakes oral nature of the viva made the weeks preceding the event some of the most nerve-wracking’ (Inouye), identifying duty-of-care (4) *hierarchy of needs* (Maslow).

All co-researchers were involved in doctoral vivas conducted remotely with participants in different locations, across different timezones. Data collection and analysis occurred via an iterative approach, consistent with collaborative autoethnography. First each co-researcher responded to collectively developed questions including our experiences with vivas in general eg. roles taken in vivas, purpose and challenges of vivas. Then we considered our experiences of remote vivas, including any changes we noted moving to online formats, protocols followed, highs and lows, and whether we felt online vivas are suitable replacements for face-to-face vivas. Second, we exchanged our written/transcribed accounts, discussing perspectives and insights via Zoom, prompting further thoughts, identifying emerging themes. Third we re-analysed our reflective accounts, confirming and fleshing-out emerging themes.[\[RS1\]](#) Fourth we met again via Zoom, planning and commencing co-writing.

COVID-19 meant vivas were fully online, so it was essential to be supported by experienced eConferencing teams, relieving stress for all involved, ensuring smooth experiences, efficiently sorting issues. Vivas during the pandemic seemed to have higher levels of duty-of-care for candidates, ensuring preparedness (at least regarding technology), and genuine checks on welfare

(breaks). A loss was the celebration usually occurring at the viva's end: 'As a supervisor involved in a recent viva, hitting 'leave meeting' seemed a deflating end to an otherwise very good viva'. However, levels of engagement in intellectual debate seemed unchanged.

The remote online viva is a challenging, highly intellectual, dialogic experience enabled by technology . Distanced yet close, collegial, yet lone, domestic, personal.

could put something in here about creating vignettes too [\[RS1\]](#)

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Webinars:

UKCGE 'Effective Practices in Doctoral Supervision at a Distance' 1st May 2020
<http://www.ukcge.ac.uk/article/supporting-members-during-covid-19-coronavirus-pandemic-454.aspx>

SRHE 'Doctoral Supervising and Examining Remotely – meeting the challenges of working under Covid19' <https://www.srhe.ac.uk/events/pastevents/details/?eid=479>