

## **Doctoral vivas/orals : collegial invitations into the doctoral community?**

Gina Wisker<sup>1</sup>, Joseph Waghorne<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Bath, Bath, United Kingdom. <sup>2</sup>Sussex University, Brighton, United Kingdom

### **Research Domains**

Postgraduate scholarship and practice (PGSP)

### **Abstract**

Collegiality is identified as a characteristic of successful doctoral vivas where examiners as academic colleagues engage with an emerging researcher about their research and written thesis, identifying and rewarding well-managed, theorised contributions to knowledge evidencing 'doctorateness', thus leading to researchers becoming full members of the international research community .

However, even this description recognises gatekeeping and insider/outsider positioning of examiners and candidate, where context, intent, roles and practices are perhaps not conducive to collegiality.

Ongoing research in three countries suggests that while examiners might intend and perceive vivas as collegial experiences, some candidates are less than positive , even quite traumatised by the viva process.

Using literature around aims and experiences of doctoral vivas, focusing on collegiality and community, our current data highlights examiner and candidate expectations and experiences of collegiality in the viva. Finally we suggest positive practices for respectful, collegial vivas truly welcoming newer researchers into international communities.

### **Full paper**

## **Doctoral vivas/orals : collegial invitations into the doctoral community?**

### **Introduction**

The doctoral viva/oral is widely considered an experience in which both ownership of the research and original doctoral contributions to knowledge are explored and examined.

Our ongoing research (2022-5) on the doctoral viva/oral in three different country contexts: UK, New Zealand and Gibraltar, indicates some tensions between acknowledged features of a viva ie, gatekeeping and power relations inherent in examination, and a significant characteristic of a successful doctoral viva/oral , collegiality .

## **Literature**

The doctoral viva/oral is international (Kumar 2022; Taylor 2022) but not worldwide. Murray (2009) offers practical support while Trafford (2003), Stephenson (2022), Wallace and Marsh (2001) explore viva examiner questioning, mentioning both power imbalances and enabling dialogues . Gender is an issue (Crossouard 2001) and distance in the online viva (Wisker et al 2022). Imbalances of power , and the gatekeeping of the viva mitigate against its aims of collegiality and dialogue between equals, aiming to welcome new doctoral graduates into international research communities.

## **Methods and data**

We (seven researchers, four countries) gathered data, 2022-4 through interviewing candidates, examiners and chairs/convenors in three countries : UK, New Zealand and Gibraltar. We thematically analysed the data, relating themes to the three sets of participants.

## **Emerging themes**

**(1)Collegiality, (2)Power and secrecy, (3) Questioning and dialogue.**

**Collegiality** was an expectation from several candidates seeing the viva as an opportunity to share their work, where examiners recognised a collegial approach , engaging in dialogue with new colleagues, somewhat relaxed, respecting candidates and their work. However not all candidates experienced collegiality in the viva.

Examiners noted.

*'The approach to questioning is designed to open up a conversation rather than merely solicit direct answers. Examiners seek to foster a collegial atmosphere where intellectual dialogue can flourish, allowing candidates to display their analytical skills and thought processes.'* (UA )Examiner data.

**Power and secrecy** Some candidates who expected respect as an intellectual equal, (particularly those already successful in their careers outside the doctoral identity and process ), reported the viva as very disempowering, far from a collegial experience.

Discovering a presentation was not expected was irritating and disempowering:

*... taking away that thing from me the slides it means that I will not be able to in a way lead that discussion, like present my topic in a sequential way... in my mind I wanted to present my topic as a story but being told that there are no slides it directly meant I will be answering just random questions here and there and then jumping in between the thesis* (UA 1) Candidate data.

Examiners however frequently suggested they intended respect and kindness in their interactions with the candidate .

Possibly the examination context, however intentionally collegial, necessarily leads to imbalances in power , the probing questions undermine candidate security in their new work.

**Questioning and Dialogue** Candidates felt the viva was there to test knowledge as well as ownership , some felt the atmosphere was formal or hostile , and some commented on gatekeeping where a viva decides who enters the research culture. If there are hurdles and gates, there are gatekeepers and not everyone perhaps wants to let everyone in . In New Zealand, pre-release of examiner reports enables candidates to prepare for broad questions. They also present their work, recognised as empowering, enabling confidence they have conveyed their understanding of their contribution. *"Actually, read the examiners report, yeah, many times and try to note down what, how I want to answer all those questions. ... And because we need to do a 10-minute presentation, actually try to find the common questions the three examiners have. ... And then I try to address those questions in my*

*presentation first, before they ask me....But you still feel really nervous. You don't know how I'm going to get challenged or how they are going to ask me about something I didn't think about"*  
(UC10). Candidate data

## **Conclusions**

The viva will probably always be a rite of passage :it confers a title, is an entry point into an international group of intellectuals. One question is whether the maintenance of secrecy (about examiner questioning areas) and the lack of candidate opportunity to lead in sharing one's own understanding of the contribution to knowledge undermines viva/oral equality and collegiality. If as researchers , supervisors, examiners, leaders of doctoral programmes, we really aim for collegiality then emphasising interactions, encouraging preparedness based on sharing of questions pre-viva, and the option for a presentation might be positive steps forward.