

De-mystifying & Preparing for the Doctoral Viva

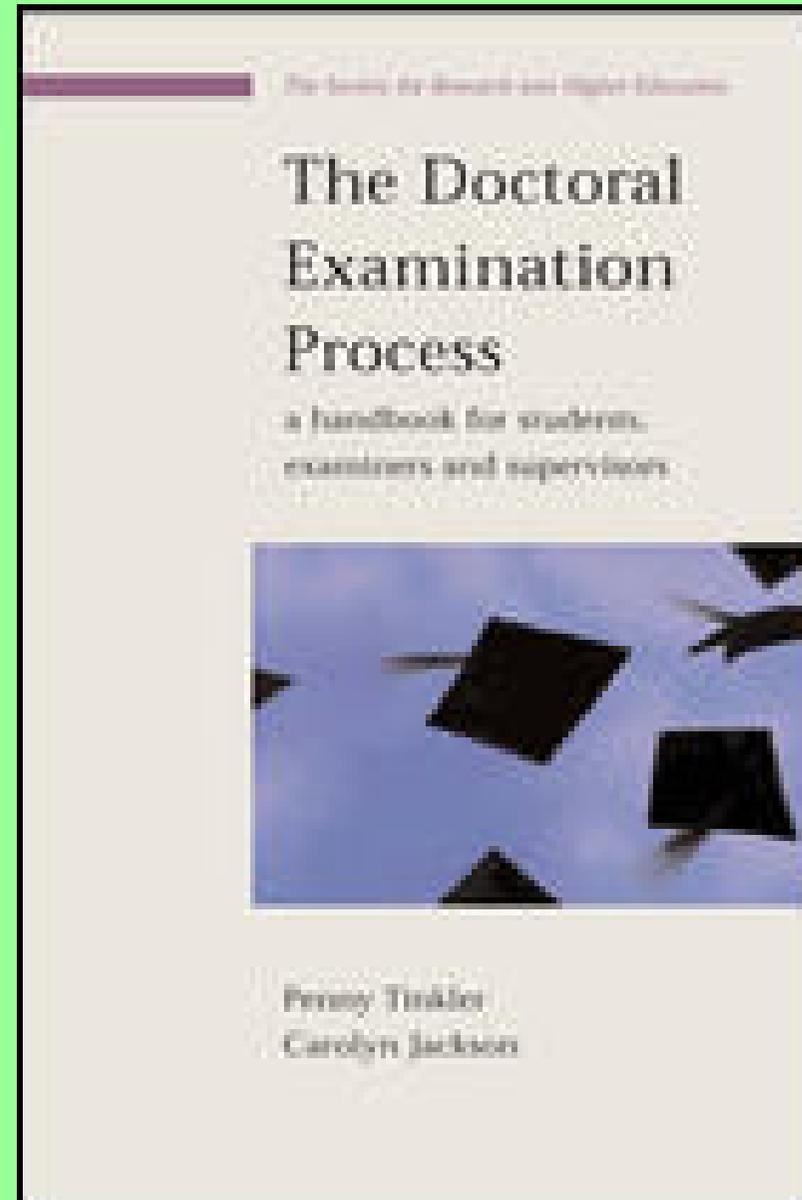
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This presentation draws on material from our book –

The Doctoral Examination Process: A Handbook for Students, Examiners and Supervisors

(Open University Press, 2004)



Our Research

- Institutional policy survey – 20 universities.
- Questionnaire survey – 2 universities.
- Interviews with 30 doctoral candidates – before and after viva.
- Interviews with 20 ‘experts’.
- Information from colleagues – interviews, letters, accounts . . .

- Check understanding and ability to produce research to PhD standard (36%)
- Clarify areas of weaknesses (32%)
- Ensure authenticity (31%)
- Develop ideas further & publication advice (25%)
- Thesis defence (24%)
- Test knowledge of the broader context (22%)
- Test oral skills (11%)
- Final decision making in borderline cases (11%)
- Rite of passage/ritual (6%)
- Test oral skills
- Gatekeeping

Examination

- **Authentication of the thesis**
- **Locate the PhD in the broader context**
- **Check understanding and ability to produce research to PhD standard**
- **Defend the thesis**
- **Final decision making in borderline cases**
- **Clarification of obscurities and weaknesses**

To allow the examiners to question issues arising from the submission and for the candidate to support the thesis in a broader context than is normally possible within the submission (ie. to discuss and respond to questions and the relevant work of others in the same field). (Senior Lecturer, Music)

Ensuring that the candidate not only knows the research reported in the thesis but is able to locate this in a wider field of knowledge. (Professor, Art History)

Absolutely crucial for testing candidate's full understanding, for enquiring further about, for example, research methodology and practice . . . for engaging candidate in an in-depth intellectual discussion on her/his subject . . . (Professor, Spanish)

Well, pretty much it was all to show that I understood, that I had a clear understanding of what my research was about, where it could potentially go, rather than just getting examined on things which I could have looked up in a library book. (Dan, Chemistry)

To provide the student with an opportunity to defend his or her thesis; to respond to criticism; and to discuss what he or she sees as ‘problems’ with interested experts. (SL, Social Policy and Social Work)

To clarify problems arising in the text; to test the student’s ability to justify (where there was any doubt in the text) arguments. To vindicate/salvage the thesis if in doubt in the text. To defend the thesis presented in the text, in general and particular. (Lecturer, Religions and Theology)

You have to be able to justify your choices, like where you set the boundaries kind of thing. And if you didn't explore something you have to be able to justify why not. So you have to like, justify the parameters of your discourse, but also like, situate it in some way as to ok well why did you do it in the first place?

(Carla, Art History)

Basic Development

To be able to indicate in detail how to improve the thesis. (Professor, Government)

To give candidate chance to defend position where weak and to help clarify necessary areas for revision where appropriate. (Lecturer, Theology)

Advanced Development

I think it's [the viva] good 'cause it can give you good ideas about future development and future work. (Silvo, Economics)

I think the very important thing [to come out of the viva] since I plan to publish the thesis is that I got some idea of the way in which I should change it in order to make it better. So that, I thought, was very important and also some suggestions concerning some other literature at which I can look and whereby I can extend my argument which was also good. (Sorrel, Government)

[The purpose of the viva is] to subject the candidate to the most unnecessary form of misery and humiliation possible. Then, to check that they really are responsible for the work presented for examination. Finally, to remind the candidate that they have a long way to go before they can achieve the superior knowledge of senior academics. I have never felt more of a failure *and* a fraud than when I passed this examination.

(English and American Studies).

Is the viva always an examination?

- 32% of candidates = informed of decision at start of viva
 - 47% - arts/humanities/social sciences
 - 15% - natural or applied sciences
- 74% - viva as confirmation

Understanding the doctoral Viva

How does it work?

Viva component: *SKILLS*

- Structure (oral exam)

Viva component: **CONTENT**

- Examiners' assessment of thesis
- Examiners' knowledge expectations

Viva component: CONDUCT

- Examining Styles
- Examiners' personal/political agendas
- Interpersonal dynamics

None of them spotted the one big mistake [in the thesis] in the viva. I pointed that out . . . and obviously some discussion occurred . . . in which my supervisor actually waded in and caused the most trouble. . . . He was arguing about the nature of the correction which I had to make on this mistake and I was adamant it was one thing and he was adamant it was another, and I just thought why don't you shut up, it doesn't really matter what you think, you're not examining this anyway.

(Shawn, Engineering)

Making the most of mock vivas

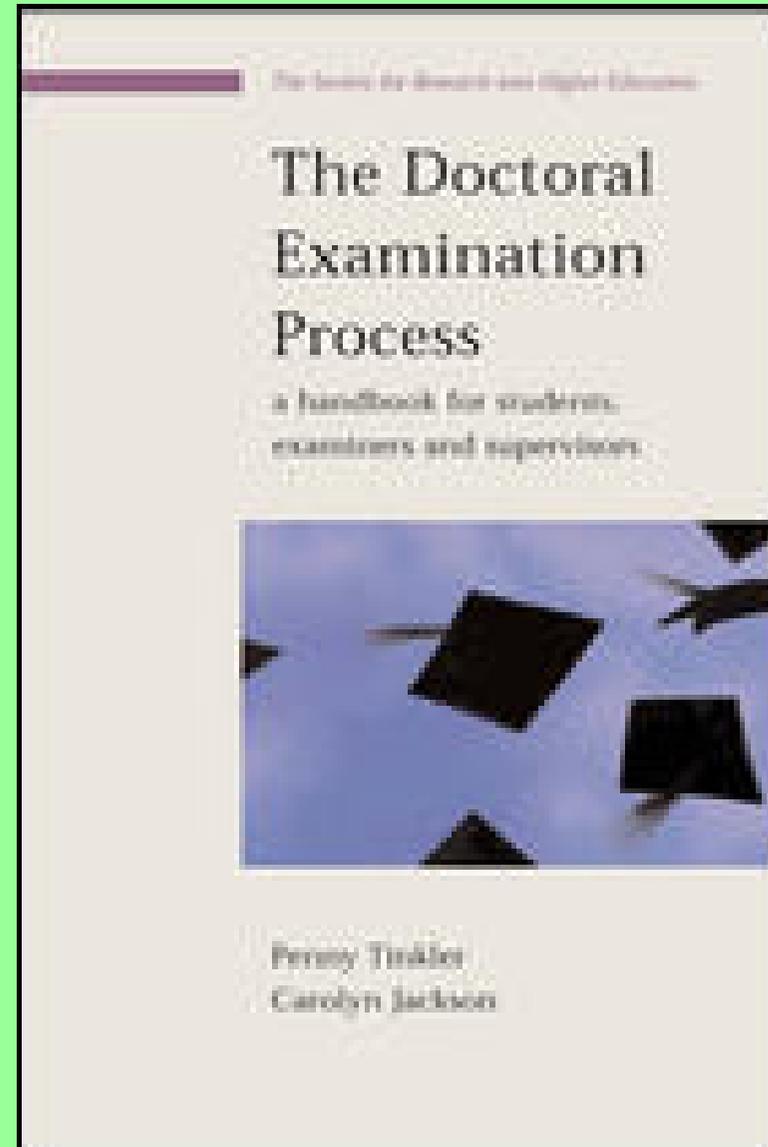
- What do you want to get out of the mock viva?
 - What are your strengths and weaknesses?
 - What do you need to practice?
- Prepare thoroughly
- Don't think of it as a trial run for the real thing
- Ask for feedback
 - How did you fare in handling the skills demands, the content of the questions, the conduct of the exchange?
- View it as **one part of a package** of preparations

Objectives of re-reading the thesis

- Know what is written
- Know the layout
- Understand what is presented
- Justify and ‘defend’ the thesis
- Identify, and be prepared to discuss, weak areas, gaps and mistakes
- Identify the originality, contribution to knowledge and implications of the thesis
- Reflect on what could be done differently if starting again

The Doctoral Examination Process: A Handbook for Students, Examiners and Supervisors.

- In our book we explore all aspects of the PhD examination process from the student's perspective, but also from the perspectives of supervisors and examiners. Our discussions are illustrated with real life accounts drawn from our research. Topics include: the purposes of the PhD viva, understanding how vivas work, viva preparation – long-term, short-term (including the use of mock vivas) and final-stage, selecting examiners, the roles and obligations of viva participants, how to conduct yourself in the viva and what happens after. For examiners we also offer chapters on whether to accept an invitation to examine, how to assess a doctoral thesis, tips and issues for in the viva and after.
- Of particular relevance to students, we offer a wide range of examples, exercises and tips on preparing for the viva using long-term, short-term and final-stage strategies.



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