
In the dark? Preparing for the PhD viva

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Abstract

In a climate of tightening quality controls and audits within higher education, the transparency of doctoral examination practices is increasingly the subject of scrutiny. Examines quality and standards issues that arise in relation to setting up, and preparing for, the examination of the research PhD. Specifically, the ways in which the examination is organised and the ways in which candidates prepare for the *viva* are addressed. The discussion draws on three sets of data collected between 1999 and 2001: institutional policy data; questionnaire data from PhD candidates, examiners and supervisors; and interview data with candidates before and after their PhD *vivas*.

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In a climate of tightening quality controls and audits within higher education, the transparency of doctoral examination practices is increasingly the subject of scrutiny. While concerns have been raised periodically in the past about the "mysterious" nature of the PhD examination, in particular the *viva* (Burnham, 1994), the relatively recent emphasis upon making higher education assessment processes transparent seems now to add extra legitimacy to these long-standing concerns. Questions about the fairness and reliability of doctoral examination processes have been, and will be, the focus of a number of national seminars, for example, the British Educational Research Association (BERA) National Event on PhD Assessment (June, 2000), the UK Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE) specialist seminar on research degree examining (June, 2000) and the UKCGE Symposium on Research Degree Examining (April, 2002). Concerns about the doctoral examination stem mainly from two features of the current system. First, the PhD *viva*, which is a compulsory component of the examination process in Britain, is usually a private affair that takes place "behind closed doors"; there are only a few institutions that operate "public" *vivas* and access is still restricted to members of specific academic communities. Often, only the candidate and two examiners witness the *viva*, although there are variations depending upon departmental and institutional policies (see Tinkler and Jackson, 2000; Jackson and Tinkler, 2000); sometimes the supervisor attends the *viva* and in some cases a chairperson or observer may be present. Except in a few cases, there are usually no formal detailed records of the proceedings and therefore *viva* processes are not open to scrutiny. The second feature that causes concern is the variability of the doctoral examination process. Recent research on the PhD examination process (see Hartley and Jory, 2000; Tinkler and Jackson, 2000; Jackson and Tinkler, 2000, 2001) provides evidence that there are "inconsistencies and contradictions in PhD examination processes, both at the levels of

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policy and practice" (Jackson and Tinkler, 2001, p. 364)[1].

Evidence that there are inconsistencies and contradictions in doctoral examination processes raises important questions about how PhD awards are monitored both within and between institutions to ensure a national (and international) "common standard"; this is an issue dealt with elsewhere in this issue (see Powell and MacCauley; Shaw and Green). In this article we specifically address quality issues that relate to candidates' experiences of preparing for their PhD *vivas*, and we consider whether PhD candidates are, or can be, prepared adequately for the *viva*. Although our research has suggested that for three out of four candidates their *viva* performance is not of great importance in terms of the examiners' decision about whether to award a doctorate or not, for a quarter of candidates the *viva* remains a key site of assessment (see Jackson and Tinkler, 2001, for further discussion; Hartley and Jory, 2000). Further, for the majority of candidates the *viva* experience is of considerable importance for how they feel and think about themselves and their work. Data from our questionnaire survey of 88 candidates from across the disciplines demonstrated that while 53 per cent of candidates reported that the *viva* had a positive effect on their perceptions of their academic competence, 17 per cent of candidates reported a decrease as a result of the *viva* (see Jackson and Tinkler, 2001). Some of the candidates who reported a decrease in their self-perceived academic competence following the *viva* had their PhD theses referred, and therefore this negative effect is perhaps unsurprising. However, one in ten of those candidates who were awarded their PhD with no or with minor corrections also described the *viva* as having a negative impact upon their perceptions of their academic competence; in these cases the negative effect clearly cannot be attributed to the examination result. The *viva* is therefore of critical importance in discussions about the quality of student experience in two key ways: for a minority the *viva* is a site of decision making; for the majority, the *viva* experience has important effects on academic self evaluation. Whether candidates can prepare adequately in ways that enable constructive *viva* experiences is, therefore, an important quality issue.

Outline of the research

The discussion in this paper draws on three main sets of data collected between 1999 and 2001. First, we draw on institutional policy data concerning the PhD from 20 UK universities (11 "old" and nine "new" – see Tinkler and Jackson, 2000 for details of data collection and analysis). Second, we draw on questionnaire data relating to the PhD examination process from four perspectives, namely, the perspectives of:

- (1) external examiners ($n = 54$ – 14 women, 39 men, one unspecified);
- (2) internal examiners ($n = 46$ – 11 women, 34 men, one unspecified);
- (4) supervisors ($n = 42$ – 8 women, 34 men)[2];
- (5) candidates ($n = 88$ – 46 women, 42 men).

Responses were drawn from lecturers and previous PhD students at two (old) universities in the north of England over a two-month period in 1999. The lecturers were all based in arts, humanities or social sciences departments. The range of departments surveyed was determined by resource constraints, which prohibited a university-wide survey. Owing to the much smaller pool of candidate respondents relative to academic respondents, we were able to draw candidates from a broader pool of departments that included the natural sciences as well as the arts, humanities and social sciences. All candidates had undertaken their PhD *vivas* between January 1998 and June 1999. The four questionnaires were tailored to the respondent groups, although the format of the questionnaires was broadly the same. Information was ascertained relating to: background (gender, age, experience); selection of examiners; *viva's* panel composition; *viva's* procedures; outcomes; perceptions of the purpose(s) of the *viva*; and for candidates, their expectations and experiences of the *viva*. The questionnaires to candidates focussed primarily on their own *viva*. The questionnaires to lecturers focussed primarily on the PhD that they had examined/ supervised most recently in the UK. In addition, all respondents were asked to outline, in general, what they saw as the purpose(s) of the PhD *viva*.

Third, we draw on interviews with candidates that took place before and then

after their PhD *vivas*. These candidates were drawn from two universities in the north of England, and from across a variety of disciplines including social sciences, arts and humanities, science and technology. These interviews are ongoing, but the data in this paper are taken from 24 before *viva* interviews (seven women and 17 men) and 11 after *viva* interviews (five women and six men). Both before and after *viva* interviews were semi-structured and were approximately 30–45 minutes in duration. Before *viva* interviews focused on: the process of doing a PhD; selection of PhD examiners; expectations of the *viva*; preparation for the *viva*; careers plans. After *viva* interviews focused on: the experience of the *viva*; outcomes; feelings about the process; future plans.

Drawing on these three sets of data, we explore how PhD candidates can, and do, prepare for their *vivas* and consider whether candidates are necessarily in the dark and ill-prepared for the demands of this examination. The following section provides the necessary context for this discussion in that it explores and explains the variability of the PhD *viva*. Further, it provides a model of the *viva* that informs our evaluation of candidate preparations, and facilitates a consideration of methods for improving the quality of candidates' *viva* experiences.

Viva variability

There is no such thing as a typical oral examination (Cryer, 2000, p. 240).

The variability of PhD *vivas* is widely acknowledged and this variability inevitably prompts questions about fairness and standards in PhD examination procedures. From a candidate's perspective, the variability of *viva* examinations makes preparation for their oral examination difficult. As one candidate told us:

It seems that there's no clear set up rules for it [the *viva*] or criteria. Oh yes there are some, but they're quite weak. So it just feels like, it depends everything on the external person, ... It's just kind of scary (Social Science).

In this section of the paper we will explore why the *viva* is so variable by examining the different components of the PhD oral examination.

We argue that there are three key components of the *viva* and that two of these components provide extensive opportunities for divergent practices. The first, and least variable, feature of the *viva* is the "basic skills" component. This is determined largely by the structural requirements of the *viva* in that: the *viva* depends on oral communication; candidates are required to "think on their feet" without recourse to notes, books or advisors; candidates need to be able to perform under pressure. "Content" constitutes the second feature of the *viva*. In his typology of achievement, Pole (2000, pp.101–2) identifies several types of knowledges and skills that PhD students are expected to acquire. Pole argues that students acquire "substantive knowledge", which is specialist knowledge that is specific to the disciplinary focus of the doctorate; "technical skills" that are developed as a result of conducting research; and "craft knowledge", which includes the capacity to manage a research project throughout its various aspects. The content of the *viva* can embrace substantive and craft knowledges and knowledge of technical skills. It can also include other types of knowledge deemed appropriate by the examiners, including the ambiguously labelled "broader context". The third feature of the *viva* is its "conduct" in terms of how the examiners behave and how the group of examiners, candidate and other participants interact. Although the basic skills component of the *viva* is relatively standardised and, therefore, easy to predict, the content and conduct elements are highly variable and, in many cases, difficult to anticipate. Each of these components, which are presented in Table I, will now be examined in more detail.

Skills

The "skills" component of the *viva* results largely from the structural requirements of the oral examination and receives little or no explicit attention in the university policies examined in our survey. However, numerous skills are implicit in the criteria for success in the *viva* set out in (some) university policies. As the name indicates, the *viva* is an oral examination. The candidate's verbal skills are, therefore, either explicitly or implicitly

Table I Components of the *viva* and their variability

| Component | Shaped by ... ^a |
|-----------|---|
| Skills | Structure of the <i>viva</i> |
| Content | Examiners' views on the state of the thesis (pass, border/refer, fail) Examiners' academic agendas, i.e. what PhD candidates should know |
| Conduct | Examiners' academic agenda, i.e. what PhD candidates should be able to manage Examiners' personal agendas Interpersonal dynamics in the <i>viva</i> |

Note: ^aExaminers' views on content and conduct can be informed or regulated by university, or professional, guidelines

crucial to the examiners' assessment of the candidate. The centrality of verbal skills is evident in the frequent reference to the candidate being able to "defend" their thesis and "clarify" aspects of their work.

Whether a candidate's verbal skills are interpreted by examiners as an indicator of other competencies is not certain. However, a number of our questionnaire respondents (academics) did make an explicit connection between verbal and intellectual skills, for example, one told us that:

Articulate thoughts mean articulate words, that is, an oral examination offers evidence of the candidate's ability to think independently and originally (Arts and Humanities).

Given that a key point of the *viva* is to check that the thesis is the candidate's own work, it is understandable that candidates are expected to explain and justify their work, interpretations and ideas during the *viva*. However, candidates are also expected to work through questions and problems in the *viva*. In cases where the thesis is weak, candidates are usually required to work through the weaknesses of their thesis, and in cases where the thesis is strong, the candidate can be asked to develop their ideas further. Both of these expectations require that candidates are able to "think on their feet" or, as one academic respondent put it, "think on the hoof". This is a particular way of thinking and one that should not be conflated with intellectual competence – some people require time and certain conditions to tease through problems, others may be additionally challenged by working in a second language.

Being able to "think on one's feet" and to articulate clearly are more difficult under examination conditions. Therefore, a further skill that is being evaluated in the *viva* is whether the candidate can perform well under pressure. In summary then, being able to

communicate clearly, often while under pressure, being able to "think on one's feet", and being able to defend one's ideas, are key skills required for a successful *viva* performance.

Content

While one might expect institutional policies to provide common and clear standards regarding the purpose and content of PhD *vivas*, in practice, institutional policies are frequently vague on these points. Although the *viva* is a compulsory element of the PhD examination in the UK, the requirements for passing the *viva* are frequently not explicit in institutional policy documentation. Some institutions provide no guidelines about what should be assessed in the *viva*. Where guidelines are provided, the assessment criteria usually specify that the candidate should be able to locate her/his PhD research in the broader context; display knowledge of the thesis; prove that the work is their own (authentication); and "defend" the thesis.

In practice, the purpose of the *viva* generally varies, depending on the examiners' assessment of the thesis. This is made quite explicit in BPS/UCoSDA (1995, p.11) guidelines on PhDs: the oral examination "serves different functions for candidates of differing qualities". Rather crudely, we can identify three basic types of *viva*, depending on the assessment of the thesis (a similar but more detailed exposition of categories is presented in BPS/UCoSDA (1995, pp. 11-12)).

- (1) *Good thesis*. The *viva* is used to authenticate the thesis, clarify points, develop ideas, and offer advice on publication.

- (2) *Borderline/referred thesis*. The *viva* is used to authenticate the thesis and to decide:
- whether the candidate has done sufficient research of an appropriate standard to produce a thesis for the award of a PhD;
 - whether the candidate understands and can reflect critically on their research in ways that are appropriate at PhD level;
 - explore ways in which the thesis could be brought up to standard.
 - *Failed thesis*. The *viva* is used to confirm the fail and explore why the candidate has failed.

While *vivas* vary according to the examiners' assessments of the thesis, they also vary according to the academic agendas of the examiners (this can be informed, or constrained, by university guidelines). Examiners vary, not least by discipline background (Becher, 1989, pp. 19–35), concerning what they think PhD candidates should know and be able to demonstrate alongside knowledge of their thesis. Although all of the universities in our sample that presented criteria for the *viva* mentioned that doctoral candidates should be able to locate their research in the "broader context", this broader context can be interpreted in very different ways. The following examples from successful candidates that we interviewed after their *vivas* illustrate how differently examiners can approach content.

Carla, an Arts candidate, described how "it was kind of what I'd hoped for in that they asked me very specific things about what I'd written". A different type of knowledge was expected of some science candidates as Shawn explained: "one they like to do in electronics is how does a transistor work, something really basic and fundamental which may have nothing to do with your software project". In contrast to this, Alice, a Humanities candidate, described how her examiners asked much broader questions:

... they didn't really say "why did you do it this way, why did you do it that way" which was what I was expecting, it was much more kind of, I don't know it was kind of beyond anything you really addressed, just like the bigger impact of your work as a whole.

Douglas, a social science candidate, similarly recalls being asked questions beyond the

specific topic of his thesis. He recalled that his supervisor told him:

... you were getting some pretty heavy questions about sociology and major debates within that field which you [the candidate] weren't equipped to answer.

Conduct

There are considerable variations in the conduct of the *viva* (Phillips and Pugh, 2000, p.189).

The conduct of the *viva* is potentially the most variable aspect; it is also the least regulated. Only a few institutions provide conduct guidelines for *vivas* and these are only effective if accompanied by mechanisms to ensure that they are adhered to. Our questionnaire to academics revealed that different examiners do behave towards candidates in different ways according to their view of what types of academic exchanges a doctoral graduate should be able to manage (the examiner's academic agenda). This can be an individual view or it may represent assumptions about professional exchange that are specific to particular disciplines or cultures. The academic agenda of one examiner cited by Wallace and Marsh (2001, pp. 53–4) is delineated very explicitly in the following quote:

The *viva* is an ordeal, a baptism of fire. The external examiner, when challenged by Barbara's supervisor, insists that the candidate must learn to fight and take hard knocks as a preparation for the academic world.

It is this type of agenda that Delamont *et al.* (1997c, p. 145) acknowledge and criticise in their guide to supervisors: "a graduate student's examination is not the right place to practise the academic equivalent of the martial arts".

Candidates' accounts of their *viva* experiences also suggest that the conduct of examiners in a *viva* is frequently driven by personal agendas. This evidence must be treated with caution because PhD candidates are not privy to the intentions of their examiners and because their evidence is often produced from a position of defensiveness and stress. Nevertheless, this evidence does reinforce anecdotal accounts from academics which suggest that some examiners are motivated by non-academic agendas such as: self-promotion and aggrandisement; a desire

to establish their intellectual superiority relative to that of the candidate and co-examiner; the promotion of their own perspective; and gate-keeping concerns[3] Baldacchino (1995, p. 73) for example, explains how:

Examiners may be more intent to impress, . . . rather than (or in preference to) listening to and engaging with the student. Examiners may feel that their reputation is at stake, unless they somehow prove to be more knowledgeable or to be capable of prising open an argument; hence, an element of critique may be indulged in perfunctorily.

One of our interviewees told us that she was given quite explicit guidance by lecturers in her department about the types of personal agendas that may be driving some academics, in this case, junior academics:

. . . don't touch someone who's very young because they're going to want to prove themselves at your expense. So they [lecturers in her department] are like, don't take a junior anything, they'll be like "this is, this T isn't crossed" and it'll be more about them than you. So they said try to get someone established and if you know their personality great, but stay away from the junior people who are going to want to mess you about basically (Arts).

An examiner's personal agenda, like all other aspects of the content and conduct of the *viva*, does have implications for interpersonal dynamics. Interpersonal dynamics are constantly being produced by specific verbal and non-verbal communications within the *viva*, at the same time as they provide frameworks within which group members interpret and respond to each other. These dynamics are extremely difficult to predict because they are unique to each group and the specific and dynamic contexts in which members of the group interact. In some *viva* situations the interpersonal dynamics include the candidate's relationship to his/her supervisor. The experience recounted by Shawn provides a graphic, if unusual, example:

. . . none of them spotted the one big mistake 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" (Science)

In this section we have introduced the three principal components of the *viva*, namely skills, academic content and conduct. Further, we have mapped out ways in which these constituent parts of the *viva* may vary, depending on the examiners' assessment of the thesis, the examiners' academic and personal agendas, and interpersonal dynamics. As we have seen, the skills component of the *viva* is relatively constant, shaped as it is in the UK by a fairly standard *viva* format, although this is not usually made explicit. Content and conduct are, however, far more viable; although institutional guidelines sometimes attempt to inform and regulate these aspects of the *viva*, these guidelines are often vague and not enforced. This breakdown of the *viva* into components makes visible those aspects of the *viva* that candidates and supervisors can influence and prepare for, and those that are more difficult to control and predict. In the remainder of this paper we utilise this model to explore and evaluate the ways that candidates and their supervisors can, and do, prepare for the *viva* either directly or indirectly.

Preparing for the viva

Our questionnaire data suggest that for a large proportion of candidates, their expectations of the *viva* did not match their experience of the *viva*. The disjuncture between student expectations and experiences prompts questions about how candidates are prepared for the *viva* and whether this preparation is, or indeed can be, adequate. Results from our questionnaire survey pertaining to sources of *viva* guidance received by candidates are outlined in Table II. These data will be used to inform our discussion in the next three sections of this paper.

Skills preparation

It was argued in a previous section of this article that being able to communicate clearly, often while under pressure, being able to "think on one's feet" and being able to defend

Table II Sources of guidance received by candidates

| Guidance | Percentage receiving guidance | Percentage finding it useful | Percentage not finding it useful |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Guidance from supervisor | 90 | 76 | 13 |
| Upgrading | 23 | 21 | 2 |
| Mock viva | 11 | 9 | 2 |
| Other student experiences (recent) | 57 | 48 | 9 |
| Grapevine stories | 55 | 30 | 25 |
| Books or articles | 18 | 11 | 7 |
| Department/unit training | 10 | 5 | 6 |
| Other formal training (e.g. ESRC) | 1 | 0 | 1 |

one's ideas, are some of the skills required for a successful *viva* performance. How do students develop these skills and how do they prepare for the "skills" component of the *viva*? Access to academic research cultures is a key way in which these skills may be developed. In their study of Social Science doctoral students at two universities, Deem and Brehony (2000) argue that access to academic research cultures is important for PhD students. According to Deem and Brehony (2000, p. 158), academic research cultures include:

... disciplinary and interdisciplinary ideas and values, particular kinds of expert knowledge and knowledge production, cultural practices and narratives (for instance, how research is done, and how peer review is exercised), departmental sociability, other internal and external intellectual networks and learned societies.

Although Deem and Brehony do not write about the implications for *viva* performance of access to, or exclusion from, academic research cultures, we argue that access to academic research cultures can enable candidates to acquire discipline-specific academic capital that may equip them to handle the skills requirements of the *viva*. For example, through access to academic research cultures, candidates can acquire appropriate ways of speaking, experience of engaging in different types of academic verbal exchange, and confidence derived from working with established academics.

Deem and Brehony (2000) suggest that some groups of students have greater difficulty accessing research cultures than other groups. They suggest that international students and part-time students have the most difficulty accessing academic cultures, they also tentatively suggest that women encounter some

difficulties too. Drawing upon data from interviews with PhD candidates before and after their *vivas*, we would endorse Deem and Brehony's findings. However, we suggest that it is not simply domestic, full-time male students who are so advantaged, but that the situation is more complex. Access to research cultures is shaped in important ways by language and by social class and, more specifically, whether the student comes from a family with an academic background. A full discussion of this issue is beyond the scope of this paper (see Tinkler and Jackson, 2001). However, perhaps the main point here is that the skills required in the *viva* are (hopefully) built up during the years preceding the *viva* (sometimes in research training courses), and are not ones that are likely to be quickly acquired in pre-*viva* preparations.

Pre-*viva* oral examinations or mock *vivas* do, however, seem to be popular ways in which candidates "rehearse" the skills required for the *viva*. Just under a quarter of our questionnaire respondents had undergone some form of pre-*viva* oral assessment, usually alongside the submission of written work, as a means of converting or upgrading from a MPhil to PhD and/or of moving between stages in a PhD programme. Virtually all of these candidates described this experience as offering useful preparation for the *viva*. This suggests that formal assessment procedures modelled on the form of the *viva* can serve constructive purposes, in particular the fostering of skills useful in the oral examination. Although only 11 per cent of our respondents had received a mock *viva*, most rated this as a valuable source of practical experience (see Table II). Our data do not identify why candidates found mock

vivas useful, although our model of the *viva* would suggest that one of the main ways that they are useful is in the development and practice of skills. Discussion of the limitations of the mock *viva* will follow in later sections of this paper.

Content preparation

As outlined earlier, the content of the *viva* depends on the examiners' judgement about the quality of the thesis, and also on their own academic agendas. So how do, and can, students prepare for this aspect of the *viva*?

As Table II reveals, most candidates rely mainly upon advice from their supervisor in preparing for the *viva*. Reassuringly, the data also suggest that most students found this advice helpful overall. However, for a quarter of candidates, supervisors either provided no guidance or they provided guidance that was regarded to be of little or no use. Trying to judge what the substantive content of the *viva* will look like is a difficult task for supervisors. Clearly, it will be difficult for the supervisor to know how the examiners will rate the thesis, although hopefully in most cases the supervisor will have judged it to be a "good" thesis before recommending submission by the candidate. Inside knowledge about the academic agendas of the examiners can enable the supervisor to have a broad idea about the likely content of the *viva*. This is one reason why supervisors tend to select examiners who they know [4]. In our questionnaire survey, only 6 per cent of supervisors and external examiners reported that they did not know one another. Furthermore, our interview research reveals that many supervisors deliberately select an examiner that they "know" quite well in terms of professional and/or social links. For example, when asked about his examiners, Douglas told us:

I know who they are – Harry is one and I know him again from the pub casually, I've never worked with him but I've met him down the pub so I've got to know him. The other one is a guy called Leon, I know him as well actually but only through attending conferences and research workshops. The ... research community is quite a small group in the UK actually and there's certainly less than one hundred academics involved, so I've met him at conferences and he was a PhD student of my supervisor many years

ago, so we have the same kind of attitude to science I think . . . (Social Science).

An Arts candidate told us that her supervisor warned her of the dangers of selecting an examiner whose academic agenda is unknown:

I came up with a few names of people that Mary [her supervisor] didn't know and she was kind of like OK it could be dangerous when you don't know them at all right. So in the end I was reading a lot of Gertrude anyway and she knows Gertrude and they have a lot of respect for each other's work (Arts).

Selecting examiners that are known does not, however, guarantee the content of the examination. After her *viva*, Carla's supervisor commented that the examiners had been unexpectedly "hard" on her:

... so she called me that night not knowing if I'd passed ... and she was excited cause she said "I wasn't sure if they weren't going to refer you from the tone of the questioning" (Arts).

Similarly, Douglas noted in his post-*viva* interview that his supervisor

... was quite surprised I got them [questions] really. And some of the questions I just didn't understand. It wasn't unpleasant, but it wasn't how I expected it to be given how well I know these people ... (Social Science).

Douglas' supervisor may have been particularly surprised by the examiner's approach given that he had previously supervised the external examiner's PhD. One possible explanation for the external examiner's unexpected approach may relate to interpersonal dynamics and the external examiner's need to demonstrate his intellectual competence and independence to both his ex-supervisor, who attended the *viva*, and the candidate.

Advice from supervisors about the content of the *viva* can be useful, particularly if the supervisor has knowledge about the likely academic agendas of the examiners. Where supervisors are familiar with the approaches of the examiners they are also more able to conduct a mock *viva* that provides a close proximity to the actual *viva*. However, mock *vivas* often do not resemble actual experience because, as we have seen (see also Wallace and Marsh, 2001), supervisors cannot always predict the content and conduct of the actual *viva*. Indeed, one of the main limitations of the mock *viva* is that it is necessarily premised on certain assumptions about the content of

the "real thing". As discussed earlier, *vivas* can have diverse content depending on the examiners' views of the standard of the thesis being examined and the views of each of the examiners about what types of knowledge and technical skills a PhD candidate should possess. So, for example, a candidate who has submitted a thesis that is judged to be borderline may receive a very different type of *viva* in terms of content to a candidate who has submitted a thesis judged to be strong. Further, a candidate who has submitted an excellent thesis may be examined very differently by examiners who have different ideas about what PhD candidates should know. The following quote from a successful PhD candidate hints at some of the limitations of the mock as a preparation for the content of the *viva*. Asked how she could have been prepared better, Leila replied:

I don't know really. I suppose a better mock *viva* might have helped, like a really sort of full on, proper, you know let's read this as if we're not your supervisor and we don't like what you've done sort of thing. That maybe would have given me a bit more, a bit more of a sense of where these kind of questions might come from, or where the difficulties might lie, so I don't know, it's difficult. It's not something that, I don't think you can necessarily prepare for because you're talking about two kind of individual people with particular perspectives on their own work and that's what they are going to bring in. So I'm not sure you ever can. A *viva* that you would have had with two other people would have been completely and utterly different. So I'm not sure it is possible to prepare because it's down to whoever you are fortunate or unfortunate enough to have as your internal or external examiners. Two other people would have given me a significantly easier time, two other people might have given me a significantly harder time, but I'm not sure (Social Science).

While this candidate wanted a more challenging mock *viva* in order to prepare her better, she also recognised that the content of a *viva* is subject to the interests and approaches of the examiners.

Most PhD students that we interviewed prior to their *vivas* had clear expectations about the content of their *viva* and this invariably, and understandably, centred on their thesis. Following from this, students usually read their thesis in preparation for the oral examination (see also Hartley and Jory, 2000, p. 80). However, predicting the content of the *viva* is a very difficult task. While some supervisors can attempt to shape the content

of the *viva* by selecting examiners who they know, and therefore, whose academic agendas they also may know, candidates have little influence in this area. Nevertheless, as with skills preparation, access to academic research cultures can enable candidates to respond more easily to unexpected knowledge demands within the *viva*. In particular, "departmental sociability" and involvement in "other internal and external intellectual networks and learned societies" (Deem and Brehony, 2000, p. 158) can equip students with contextual knowledge and understanding of the issues and debates in their own and adjacent fields. But what kinds of preparation can, and do, students undertake to equip them for the conduct of the *viva*?

Conduct preparation

PhD candidates glean insights into the conduct of the *viva*, and how to prepare for this, from the comments of supervisors and, importantly, from a range of informal sources. Our questionnaire survey revealed that grapevine stories and fellow students' experiences were sources of information on *vivas* for over half of the candidates. Moreover, as our interviews revealed, peer and grapevine stories usually focused on the conduct of the examination and how the candidate was made to feel during their *viva*:

I asked them [recently graduated PhD students] and I asked the junior lecturers – like what was it like and do you have any advice kind of thing – it's really random. Like some people said, I walked in and they gave me a bottle of champagne and said relax you've passed and other people said they left crying after four hours (Arts).

... everyone's got a nightmare PhD story. One of my friends in History passed his about a month/ two months ago and it was fine, basically they were lovely. Another friend of mine in Anthropology walks in and they said – oh it's great, don't worry, let's talk about how to turn this into a book and it was fine – and then another two friends of mine had horrendous, absolutely horrendous experiences where they've just been sort of unable to speak for hours and one of them for days properly because they had such an upsetting time, aggressive, nasty, demoralising external examiners who just seemed to think their job was to make the person at the other side of the table feel like they'd done

a ***** piece of work (our emphasis) (Social Science).

As these quotes suggest, peer and grapevine stories often provide extreme examples. As Sorrel put it: "I've heard some very nice and some very awful stories . . . I've heard people who've failed with no good reasons, according to them, and I've heard people who are very happy" (Social Science). This polarisation is also evident in published accounts of PhD *vivas*. For example, Quale in his graphically entitled "Return of the runny bottom: my PhD experience", refers to:

Stories ranging from: "I walked in and they said "congratulations, let's have an informal chat about your research", at one end of the continuum, to: "They went through my thesis word by word, and I've been in counselling ever since" at the other end (Quale, 1999, p. 46; see also Giles, 1995, p. 226).

These accounts, While often dramatic, do refer to very real problems, namely the widespread lack of regulation of the conduct of oral examinations. They also symbolise candidates' feelings of powerlessness:

. . . the thought of being examined on your own work and potentially by people who aren't necessarily fair is very scary for most people I think, cause it's really out of your hands at that point no matter how hard you've worked (Arts).

However, in reflecting on candidate preparations it is useful to differentiate between different aspects of *viva* conduct. As we have seen, *viva* conduct can vary according to examiners' personal agendas and the interpersonal dynamics in the *viva*. It can also vary depending on the examiners' views about what PhD candidates should be able to cope with. The choice of examiners is one important way in which supervisors attempt to regulate the conduct of the examination, but, as previously shown, these attempts are not always successful, not least because of the difficulty of anticipating personal agendas, but especially interpersonal dynamics.

Specific forms of *viva* preparation, such as mock *vivas*, are of limited value in terms of conduct preparation unless the conduct of the actual examination corresponds to that of the mock. Again, it is the examiners' personal agendas and, more particularly, interpersonal dynamics that are difficult to predict and replicate. In terms of an examiner's academic conduct agenda, it is difficult to predict what kind of academic exchange an examiner will

expect a PhD candidate to manage. However, students can gain experience of different, and even hostile, academic conduct models through participation in events where academics engage with each other's work and ideas. Once again, this type of *viva* preparation is long term; awareness of different academic styles and experience of handling them is most effectively acquired throughout the course of PhD study.

Conclusion

Although in recent years a growing body of literature has emerged that aims to advise postgraduate students and their supervisors on different aspects of the PhD (Cryer, 2000; Delamont *et al.*, 1997; Graves and Varma, 1997; Phillips and Pugh, 2000; Salmon, 1992), only 18 per cent of candidates in our survey used this literature in their *viva* preparations and only 11 per cent found it useful. One reason why literature, like other forms of *viva* preparation, may not be perceived as helpful is because the *viva* is highly variable and therefore difficult to predict and prepare for. In this article we have deconstructed the *viva* to demonstrate the areas where divergent *viva* practices are most likely to occur and we have developed a model to evaluate the ways in which PhD candidates can, and do, prepare for their *vivas*. We have demonstrated that candidates can be prepared for many aspects of their *vivas*, in particular the skills and content components, although some of these preparations are best done throughout the course of doctoral study rather than in the immediate pre-*viva* period. We have also shown how some supervisors select examiners that they know in order to prevent the appointment of a "rogue" examiner, that is, someone who pursues an unexpected academic agenda or who behaves in an inappropriate manner in the *viva*. In some cases, however, the practice of selecting known examiners casts doubt on the extent to which examiners can be seen to be independent. Furthermore, although supervisors may attempt to control the content and conduct aspects of the *viva* by selecting examiners that are known to them, our research suggests that their efforts are not always successful.

Our model can help supervisors and candidates identify aspects of the *viva* that can be controlled and/or prepared for and, following this, contribute to the quality of the candidate's preparation for the examination experience. Viewed in this way, our research can assist supervisors and candidates to work more effectively within the current system. However, our research findings also suggest that aspects of the current system of oral examining are problematic and that these aspects should be contested. While it is expected that *viva* content should vary by the state of the thesis submitted, it is not always the case that other ways in which content, and also conduct, vary are academically defensible. The enormous potential for variability (aside from that relating to the examiners' views on the state of the thesis judged within the terms of the discipline) militates against uniformity of standards and also against fairness. Our research suggests that lack of transparency about the purposes of the *viva*, and lack of clear guidelines about appropriate types of content and conduct, provide the conditions for unnecessarily divergent, and sometimes unconstructive, practices.

Notes

- 1 Although the PhD examination has only recently become a focus for substantial research, other aspects of the PhD have received attention, most notably, PhD supervision processes (Hockey 1994, 1995, 1997; Delamont *et al.*, 1998) and doctoral research cultures (Deem and Brehony, 2000; Delamont *et al.*, 1997a, b, 2000). The work on supervision and research cultures clearly raises important issues about quality and standards in doctoral awards, but is beyond the scope of this paper.
- 2 We received responses from 71 lecturers relating to external examining, 66 lecturers relating to internal examining and 61 lecturers relating to PhD supervision. While all of these responses were analysed in relation to questions about training for examining or supervision, not all of these lecturers had experience of examining a PhD or supervising a PhD to completion. As such, the figures reported here are those that did have examining or supervisory experience at PhD level.
- 3 There has not been any research on PhD examiners as gatekeepers although research on other aspects of academic life indicates that gatekeeping practices do occur. See, for example, the implications of Becher's research (1989) and, specifically in relation

to women and women's studies, see Brookes (1997) and Ramazanuglo (1987).

- 4 There are also intellectual, strategic and practical reasons why supervisors select examiners that they know.

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