



Preparing and surviving your Master's or PhD's viva voce (oral exam) in Malaysian universities

Viva voce, or simply called *viva*, is the most anticipated stage of your research postgraduate study because this is the stage where you will defend your research work under the intense scrutiny of several examiners, which may include examiners from outside your university, even from overseas universities. These examiners will determine if your work is credible, important, scientifically robust, and worth the level of your study (Master or PhD). Most of all, your examiners will determine if your research have adequately extended the frontier of knowledge.

A successful viva is the final major hurdle of your postgraduate study, after which, and providing you do all the corrections as recommended by the examiners, you will at long last be awarded the coveted Master or PhD degree.

[Viva is an oral examination](#) different from a written or take-home exam where for the latter, you can delay or research further before answering any difficult questions. In your viva, however, you have no such options. Consequently, you must thoroughly understand your work and be able to convince to your examiners on your expertise, confidence, intelligence, competency, and maturity in your research work.

There is no universal operating procedure for conducting a viva. Different universities will conduct their viva differently, but regardless of the exact viva procedure in your university, you will find that all universities share several commonalities with one another in several respects. Your viva will have examiners who will critically examine your work. Your viva will require you to do a short oral

presentation of your research prior to your examination. And most importantly, the criteria on what determines a successful viva candidate are very similar across all universities.

I have been a university lecturer at [Universiti Putra Malaysia \(UPM\)](#) for many years and have participated in many vivas. My postgraduate students too have undergone their vivas, and I am glad to report none of my students under my main supervision have faltered in their vivas. All of them have successfully graduated.

This blog article is to share my experience with you on how to prepare and survive your viva in local Malaysian universities.

Your internal and external examiners

There are two types of examiners: internal and external. Internal examiners are people from within your university, whereas external are those from outside your university. External examiners can also be from a foreign university. Some universities make it mandatory that external examiners be those who are attached with a foreign university, whereas some are more flexible: allowing external examiners to be appointed from another local university.



One of the viva rooms at Uni. Putra Malaysia (UPM). Seated around the table would be your examiners, your supervisor, and, *well*, you!



Teleconferencing with your examiners is possible at my university, UPM.

For my university, UPM, Master's students will have one internal examiner and one external examiner, where the external examiner can either be from a local or foreign university. For PhD students, they will have two internal examiners and one external examiner, and the external examiner must only be from a foreign university. Your main supervisor selects your viva committee, but the final selection requires approval from the faculty level, then the university graduate school before formal appointments can be made.

To succeed in your viva, you must convince your examiners that: 1) your thesis is your own work (plagiarism and data fabrication are very serious offenses that can return to haunt you even years after your graduation), 2) you understand what you have done and written, 3) you are aware where your work sits in relation to the wider research field, 4) your work is of sufficiently high standard (in terms of scientific rigor and writing maturity), and 5) you can defend your work in response to the examiners' questions.

What some students fail to fully realize is your examiners will evaluate your research strictly based on your written thesis and face-to-face interaction (question and answer) with you during your viva. Your examiners will not contact you or any members of your supervisory committee prior to your viva to obtain further explanation or to clear up any confusion about your work.

What this means is your thesis must be robust enough as a standalone defense that adequately explains the problem and justification of your work, the purpose of your work, how you carried out your work to meet your work's objectives, your

results and interpretation of those results, and the significance of your work to the body of knowledge, as well as to the society.

Consequently, do not submit a shoddily prepared thesis, thinking you would be able to explain any shortcomings or confusions during your viva. Your examiners, reading your shoddy thesis, will not be kind in their evaluation of your work. I have witnessed such students who, because they were in a hurry to return home, submitted a shoddy thesis, only to almost fail their viva. One PhD candidate, ignoring my warning that his thesis was not ready, still submitted his subpar thesis. Unsurprisingly, his viva committee was merciless in their evaluation of his work. Although he was very, very fortunate to receive an “Accepted with Major Revisions” outcome from his viva committee, he, at the end, still failed his PhD because he was unable to make the corrections as demanded by his viva committee. His required thesis corrections were just too much for him to handle, as they would require a deep overhaul of his work methodology, analysis, and reinterpretation of results.

Some universities make it a confidential affair on the appointment of your viva examiners. But if your university allows even you to suggest possible candidates to be your examiners—or if the appointment of your viva committee is not confidential, then I recommend that you find out as much as you can about the research background and the current research of your examiners.

Read up on the publications of your examiners (even if they are not directly related to your work) to determine their research interests. This will help you anticipate the kind of questions your examiners would likely ask you. Finding out their research interests would also help you identify specific areas in your work that would strongly draw interest from your examiners; thus, these areas would likely be more rigorously examined by them.

Are external examiners more critical or stricter than internal examiners? Not always. Internal examiners can examine your work in a more rigorous manner than your external examiners. But do not be surprised, if during your viva, you find that it is the other way around. In other words, treat both your internal and external examiners as equals, that no one is automatically more lenient or stricter simply on the basis of being appointed as the internal or external member in your viva committee.

Lastly, you should not contact any of your examiners before your viva such as to get tips or hints on their questions or even to get their overall impression on your work.

Your oral presentation

Just before the Q & A (question and answer) session begins in your viva, you will be required to make an oral presentation in front of your viva committee for usually 20 to 30 minutes.

The purpose of this oral presentation is to highlight the problem and justification of your work, the objectives of study, how your work was conducted (methodology), key findings and your interpretation of them, and finally, the conclusions.

Keep your oral presentation to the allocated time. Do not exceed the time, or try to speak fast (or flash the slides forward too fast for the examiners to read) just to keep your presentation within the time. As a rule of thumb, one slide takes an average of one minute to present, so a 20-minute presentation means you need no more than 20 slides in total. As usual, practice your presentation prior to your viva, preferably also in front of your supervisory committee to obtain their feedback.

You do not have to present all your findings in this oral presentation, merely the key findings or those that are most important and interesting. There is no need to have a separate literature review section in your presentation but to incorporate this section as you discuss your results. For instance, as you present your study's results, you can cite references or discuss previous studies that support your results and your interpretation of them.

One common mistake among postgraduate students is to present the conclusion of their study as if it is a summary or an abstract. The conclusion section is the "take home message" from your work. One way to present a conclusion section during your viva is to imagine trying to succinctly answer a news reporter on live TV who is sticking a microphone at your mouth and asking you, "What did you find out, and why should we care?"

Although examiners often wait until you have finished your oral presentation before asking you any questions, some examiners may interrupt you to seek

further clarification or give their comments on any of your slides. Expect to be interrupted during your presentation; there are no rules that examiners must stay quiet during your oral presentation.

Know your thesis, Please

The days leading up to your viva date are crucial. Use this time to mentally prepare yourself and to reacquaint yourself with your own thesis.



Prepare for your viva by familiarizing yourself with your own thesis, reading up on your examiners' work (if possible), and reading up on scientific literature related to your research. (c) torwaipphoto @ fotolia.com

I find it irritating when viva candidates sometimes behave as if their thesis had been written by someone else. These candidates, for instance, forget about what they had written or forget the location of some text excerpt, equation, figure, table, or chart in their thesis.

Some viva candidates even become surprised by what they had written or become perplexed by their own written explanation in their thesis.

Of course, no one expects you to have a photographic memory of your thesis, but at least, please be aware of what you have written and generally know what is located where in your thesis. Of all people, you the author of your thesis should be most familiar with your own written word!

Supporting documents and note-taking

Bring your notebook (laptop) into the viva room. Ensure your notebook contains all the necessary supporting documents (such as photos of your work or results, articles, saved web sites, etc.). Depending on where the discussion leads to during your viva, you might find it most useful to show one or more of your saved supporting documents to your examiners.

Other than your laptop, you should also bring a pen and scratchpad for taking down comments, suggestions, and corrections from your examiners. Your notes will ensure you do not inadvertently forget any corrections or improvements your examiners want you to do for your thesis. Even if you have an outstanding memory capacity, jot down the comments from your examiners to at least show them that you are treating their comments as important and useful.

Question and answer (Q & A)

Whatever questions your examiners ask you, their questions are intended to evaluate you based on the following nine main areas:

1. Is the problem of study clear and important?
2. Are the study's objectives clear, achievable, and sufficient?
3. Are the methods used sufficient?
4. Are the results clear, sufficient, and important?
5. Can the results be explained clearly and sufficiently?
6. Have the study's objectives been achieved?
7. Is the scientific work robust/rigorous?
8. Is the level of work sufficient for the awarded degree?
9. Are the presentation of work and writing in thesis adequate?

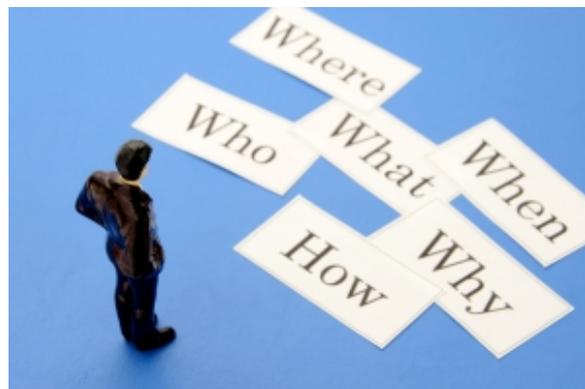
In other words, to pass your viva, your examiners must be convinced by the following:

1. that your research problems are clearly identified and important
2. that your research objectives are adequate and correct
3. that you have used the correct methodologies
4. that you have correctly interpreted your results
5. that your research objectives have been achieved
6. that your research scope and workload are sufficient for your awarded

degree

7. that the presentation of work in your thesis is clear, understandable, correct, accurate, professional, and follow all formatting guidelines
8. that your work is original

Anticipate the questions your examiners could ask you. Be honest with yourself. Identify weaknesses in your study and prepare good answers on why and how these weaknesses exist. No research is perfect, but it is important to identify the weaknesses in your research and understand how they impact the validity of your work.



Anticipate the questions your examiners could ask you and come up with good answers for each of them. (c) takasu @ fotolia.com

Examine your research methodology. Why did you use this particular method to measure a given parameter? Why this particular method and not another, for example? Why did you design your experiment in such a way? Justify your research design, even if it was based on an accepted or standard method. Deeply understand your methodology, in particular of your statistical analysis and design. Why the large error bars?

Examine your research results too. Do your results make sense, and are your results dependable? Can you explain the observed trends in a scientifically robust manner? Do your results agree with previous studies? If not, can you explain why? And how do your results answer your research objectives?

If you have published any papers about your research during your postgraduate study, consult the feedback from your paper reviewers or referees. Their

feedback is immensely useful because these are the types of questions, comments, criticisms, and suggestions you could be asked during your viva too.

As discussed earlier, knowing who are your examiners will be beneficial to you, so you can better anticipate their questions and pinpoint areas in your work that would likely be more intensely examined.

How to receive questions and answer them

The mood during your viva is extremely important. You want a cordial, diplomatic, and conducive viva environment. You want a discussion but not a heated one.



Your viva should be an environment where healthy, meaningful, and useful discussion about your research take place. (c) Minerva Studio @ fotolia.com



Avoid heated, angry discussions during your viva at all cost. You may

win the battle of an argument but
lose the war — and badly. (c)
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Some viva candidates can adopt a “siege mentality” especially under the intense questioning by their examiners. So, these viva candidates become confrontational, angry, or impatient at their examiners. But even examiners cannot entirely be faultless. Some examiners, due to their personalities, can appear aggressive, authoritarian, or confrontational, even if that was not their intention. If you encounter such a personality, relax. Do not be offended or become confrontational; you will only make things worse for yourself. Instead, take a relaxed, thoughtful, and non-confrontational response to such personalities, and you will often find the viva discussion rebalances itself back into a more diplomatic tone.



Do not be defensive or
confrontational with your examiners.
Do not take their criticisms or
suggestions on your research as a
personal attack. Your examiners can
add value to your research. (c)
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Be confident, eager, and enjoy the opportunity to share your work to the examiners. Receive any questions gladly, without being defensive or offended. Do not rush to answer the questions, but take time to consider before answering. Do not take any criticism, comments, suggestions, or feedback about your work as a personal attack. No research, even if carried out by a world-renowned scientist, is free of weaknesses or faults. No research is perfect or complete such that no

more suggestions can be offered to improve it.

Realize that your examiners, rather than being your taskmasters or saboteurs, are actually your impartial evaluators to help improve your research work. You will find that your examiners' comments, criticisms, and suggestions will add value to your work. Your examiners can give you a deeper insight of your work or make you realize of other possibilities that could explain your research results. Your examiners may offer suggestions of additional or more detailed data analysis that add value to your research.

If you do not know the answer to a question, it is best that you just admit it - but then still try to answer it based on your most intelligent guess. Your examiners will respect your effort. Avoid lying, being evasive, or "talking in circles".

If you have difficulty answering any question, avoid blaming the whole world and everyone else except yourself. Avoid blaming your supervisors, university, data, resources, or situation. You need to show competency, intelligence, and maturity in your work. So, merely blaming others or your situation for your work difficulties, especially without showing sufficient problem-solving efforts, will not reflect kindly on you.

Also avoid giving common excuses like "this is beyond the scope of my study", "this problem occurs in all studies", or "it's like that" without first giving a convincing argument to support such excuses.

Handle misunderstandings or misinterpretations

So, what happens if you think your examiners have misinterpreted or misunderstood your work? Do not be so quick to blame your examiners. You need to ask yourself first: "Was my explanation clear in my thesis?" Some misunderstandings or misinterpretations can occur due to unclear, misleading, or even missing explanations on your part. You of course did not intend it as such, but before blaming your examiners, you need to re-look at your thesis to evaluate if their misunderstandings or misinterpretations were caused by you.

Of course, your examiners are not perfect. Your examiners may misunderstand some aspects of your work due to their careless reading or simply because of their absent mindedness. This can happen if they are reading a thesis on a large, multi-faceted research work. Your examiners often do not read your thesis in a

single continuous session. They may, for instance, have read your chapters 1 to 3 two weeks ago, chapter 4 one week ago, and only complete reading your thesis this week. Some facts you had earlier written could have been forgotten by the examiners.

Whoever fault it is, it is important to explain well to your examiners to clear up any misunderstandings or misinterpretations. If your writing was indeed unclear, then merely explain you would rewrite that section of text. If your examiners had read your work wrong, then kindly explain their mistake.

Outcome of your viva

Your examiners will complete their evaluation of your thesis and your ability to defend your work and then decide to give you one of the following viva outcomes: 1) Accepted with distinction, 2) Accepted with minor modifications, 3) Accepted with major modifications, 4) Oral re-examination (Re-viva voce), 5) Re-submission of thesis, 6) Re-submission of a PhD thesis as a Master's, or 7) Fail/reject.

Different universities will have slightly different viva outcomes than that presented here. One local Malaysian university has an additional viva outcome: Accepted with moderate modifications.

Whatever the set of viva outcome your university offers, you must aim for either viva outcomes (1), (2), or (3). It is important that your viva receives the "Accepted" outcome. This means there are only corrections to be done on your thesis before you would be awarded your degree (provided of course you satisfactorily do the corrections according to the examiners' recommendations). You need to consult your university on the exact definition for each of the viva outcome, and I would not discuss them here.

All other viva outcomes (*i.e.*, those without the "Accepted" outcome) are bad, *really bad*, because they involve a very major re-work of your study and a re-sit of your viva. It could also mean a downgrade of the offered degree (instead of a PhD, you would be awarded a Master for your work) or, the worst outcome, you fail.

If your viva is one of those with the "Accepted" outcome, you would be given some time to make the corrections. Again, consult your university on exactly the time limit given (*i.e.*, different universities set different time limits). Stay within the time limit given to make your corrections.

Do not pick and choose which corrections to do - all recommended corrections must be done. Read the examiners' reports for the list of corrections to make, as well as check the examiners' copies of your thesis. The latter is because your examiners will also write along the margins inside your thesis on the corrections you need to do.

You can see or contact any of your examiners to resolve issues like contradictory corrections suggested by two or more examiners or unclear corrections or comments. If you disagree with the corrections, you need to give your reasons for your disagreement, but again, as discussed earlier, you need to ask yourself first if your writing, explanation, or presentation was unclear, leading to that misunderstanding.

Failing your viva - but only if you want to!

You might be surprised to learn that failing your viva is actually pretty difficult - unless you intentionally, ill-advisedly, or recklessly want to.

Before you even submit your thesis for examination, your supervisors must collectively agree that your thesis and research work are able to hold up to the intense scrutiny of your viva. In other words, you only head into your viva with your supervisory committee's blessings. If they feel your research work are not up to the standard of your degree, you would not be given their permission to head into your viva.

So, do not "arm-twist" or "emotionally blackmail" your supervisory committee into letting you head into your viva despite their objections or reservations about your viva readiness. Unfortunately, there are some problematic or stubborn viva candidates who do this: for whatever reasons, adamantly convince their supervisory committee to allow them to head into their viva - and this is where these viva candidates face a torrid time during their viva, with some even failing or unable to make the recommended corrections.

But for most postgraduate students, their viva, though nerve-wrecking, often left a good memorable experience because their vivas had allowed them to share and discuss their work with their examiners in a cordial and professional manner.

It is normal to be nervous going into your viva. But your nerves are good. They keep you alert and ready for questions coming your way. As you grow in

confidence during your viva, you will find yourself relax and even enjoy the discussions about your work.

Good luck!

interview with one viva student

To end my article, here's a brief and simple video interview with one of my Master's student, Abba Nabayi, who recently went for his viva on April 5, 2016 at Uni. Putra Malaysia.



Abba Nabayi, my Master's student, recently had his viva at Uni. Putra Malaysia on April 5, 2016. Find out how he did by watching the brief video interview just before and after his viva!

The following video is just prior and after Abba's viva.

References

1. ["How to defend your dissertation"](#) video series by Dr. Marche

2. [“Your viva voce exam”](#) by Uni. of Leicester
3. [“The viva voce exam”](#) by Uni. of Sheffield