

# Student experiences of the closed-door PhD and Doctorate level viva voce: a systematic review of the literature

Dr Zoe Stephenson & Dr Amy Jackson



UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM



# The “Closed-door” Viva

- Conducted in privacy with two examiners (internal and external), chairperson, and sometimes supervisor/s
- Possible to fail viva (and qualification) solely on view of examiners
- Limited criteria to submit formal complaint or appeal (e.g., cannot appeal re examiner conduct or expertise)
- Other countries – Pass/fail decided upon from input from supervisors, the student themselves on what they have learnt, input from examiners but not solely their decision
- UK minority within Europe - 87% of institutions across 32 countries having a right to appeal the final examination decision (Hasgall et al., 2019)



# The Closed-door Viva - Concerns

---

- Esteemed in academia and epitome of academic tradition for hundreds of years
- Many candidates have constructive, positive and enjoyable viva experiences
- Many excellent examiners

## However...

- Issues with quality assurance (e.g. validity, reliability, transparency and fairness), and how to achieve 'best practice'.

Method of assessment and evaluation also a "social practice that is "fraught with **risks and uncertainties**" (Morley 2004, 91)

"**subjective**, mysterious, and **culturally based** at a time when greater objectivity, transparency, and cultural inclusion are preeminent educational values' (McAdams and Robertson 2012, 179).

Culture of academia (Anderson 1992) - bullying is rife (Tight 2023) and priorities of academics not always in best interests of students

"**Mistakes are sometimes made**" (Remenyi, 2019, p. 70)

# Aims of the literature review

---

- To explore first-hand experiences of PhD or Doctoral students having been examined through a 'closed-door' style viva.
- To synthesise/summarise recommendations for potential improvements or changes made by authors of the included studies, others in the field, and the authors of this review.

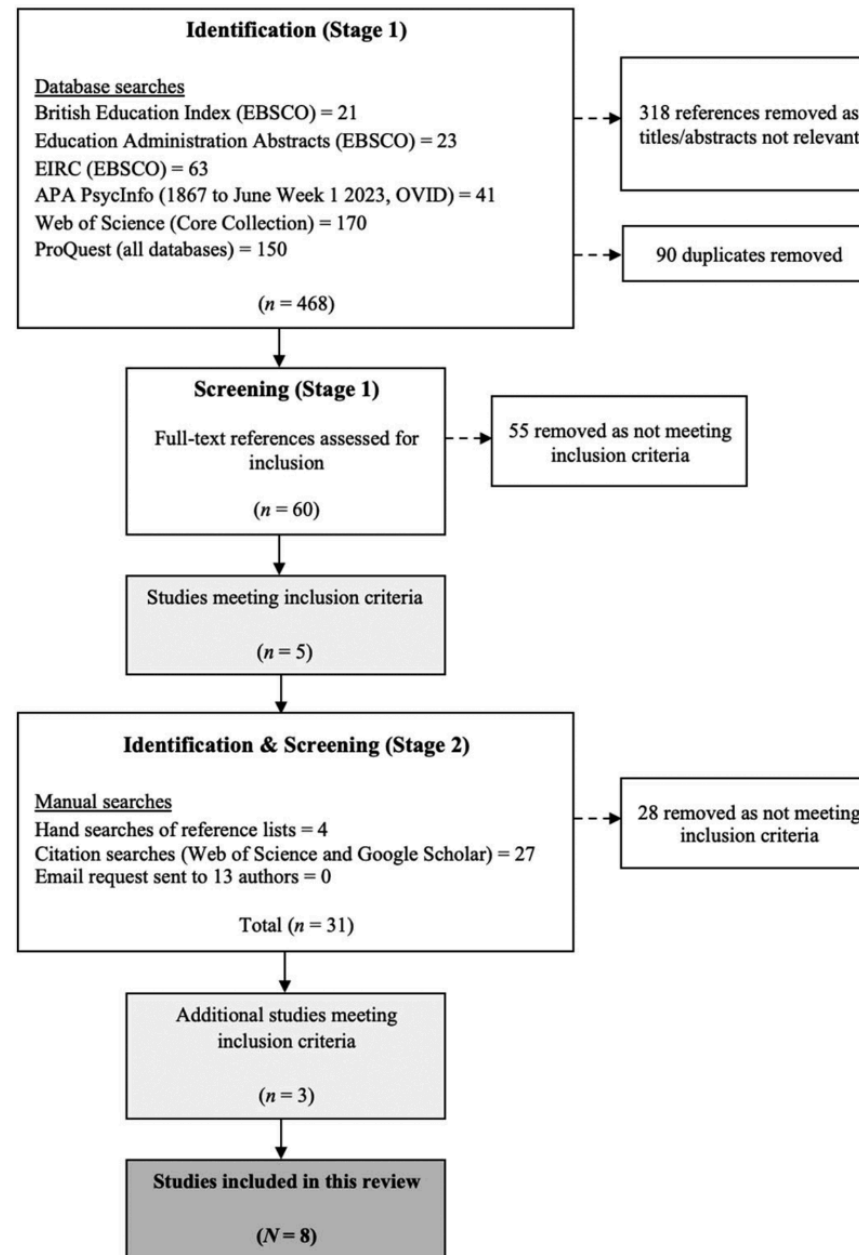


Figure 1. PRISMA diagram.

**Table 1.** General and demographic characteristics.

|   | Number of Studies (N=8) | Number of Participants (N=276)* |
|---|-------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Research design and data collection     |                         |                                 |
| Qualitative (interviews)                | 5                       | 55                              |
| Mixed methods (questionnaire or survey) | 3                       | 221                             |
| University setting                      |                         |                                 |
| UK                                      | 6                       | 155                             |
| New Zealand                             | 1                       | 34                              |
| Ireland                                 | 1                       | 87                              |
| Degree type                             |                         |                                 |
| Psychology PhD                          | -                       | 100                             |
| Education or social sciences PhD        | -                       | 93                              |
| DPhil or PhD                            | -                       | 63                              |
| Other (e.g. professional doctorate)     | -                       | 9                               |
| Not reported                            | -                       | 11                              |
| Viva outcomes                           |                         |                                 |
| Outright pass                           | -                       | 34                              |
| Minor amendments                        | -                       | 183                             |
| Outright pass or minor amendments       | -                       | 6                               |
| 'Successful'                            | -                       | 20                              |
| Major amendments                        | -                       | 25                              |
| Revise and resubmit                     | -                       | 5                               |
| Fail                                    | -                       | 1                               |
| Not reported                            | -                       | 2                               |

Note: Two studies (7, 8) utilised the same dataset ( $n=6$ ). Both were included in this review as the data were analysed using different methods and therefore presented unique findings (including both participant quotes and researcher interpretations).

**Table 2.** Study authors and index number.

| Authors                  | Index number |
|--------------------------|--------------|
| Carter (2012)            | 1            |
| Crossouard (2011)        | 2            |
| Davis and Engward (2018) | 3            |
| Hartley and Jory (2000)  | 4            |
| Kelly (2010)             | 5            |
| Share (2016)             | 6            |
| Wallace (2003)           | 7*           |
| Wallace and Marsh (2001) | 8*           |

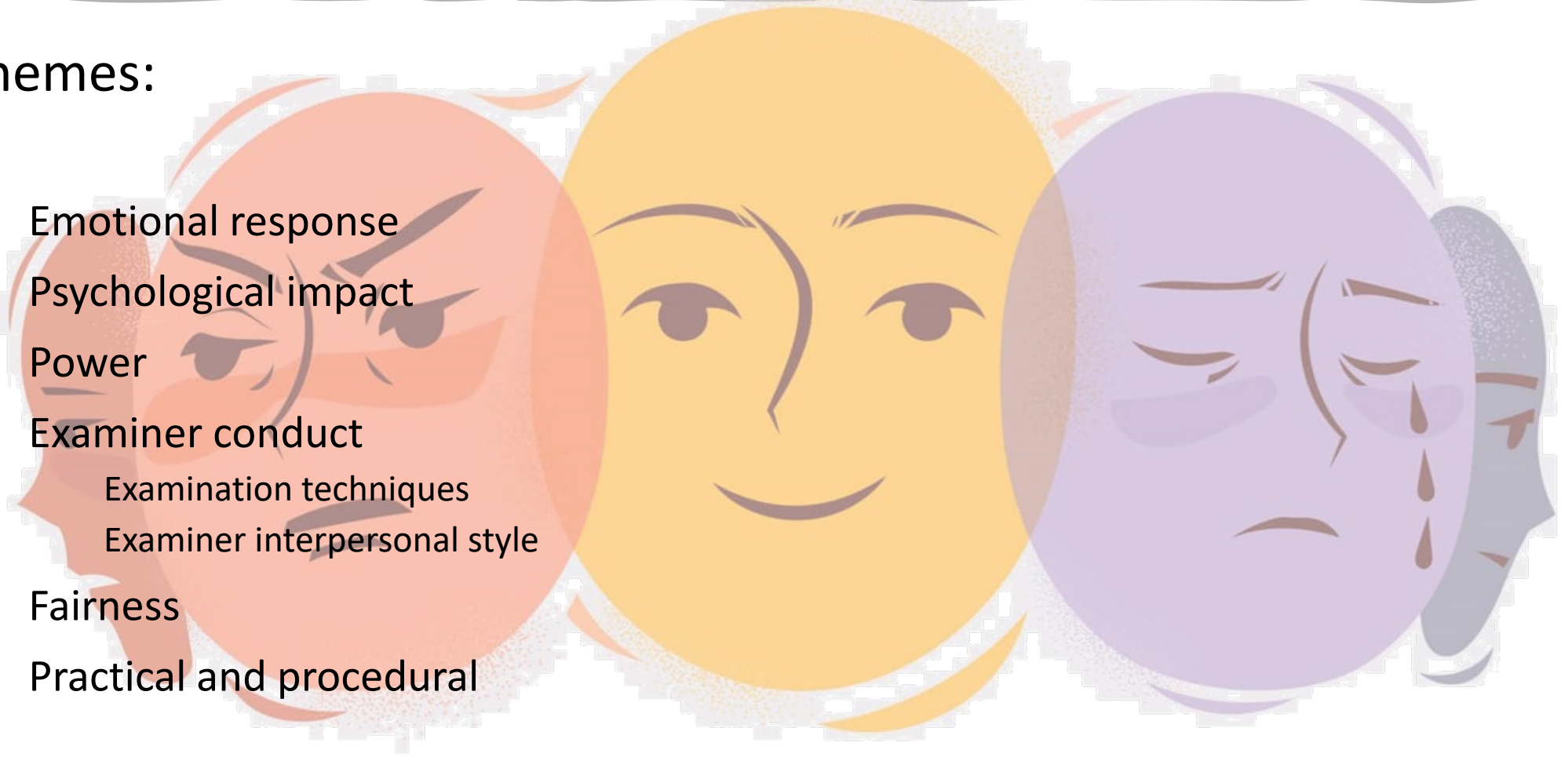
\*The same data set was utilised by both studies.

# Results – Narrative Synthesis

---

## Themes:

1. Emotional response
2. Psychological impact
3. Power
4. Examiner conduct
  - Examination techniques
  - Examiner interpersonal style
5. Fairness
6. Practical and procedural



# Theme 1: Emotional Response (1-8)

---

Range of emotions experienced

- Anxiety most common; mildly anxious to “petrified” (3)
- Physical symptoms: shaking and feeling physically (2, 3)
- Elation and happiness (8)
- Emotional labour (2)
- Relief, tiredness and exhaustion (6)
- Enjoyable, positive, rewarding, and fair (6)

*the “unknown” (3, p.11)*

*“Nerve-racking, scary, devastating,  
and awful” (4, p.46)*

*“I had no idea what it would be like, I didn’t know  
how it was likely to be structured, whether there  
were any ground rules”*

# Theme 2: Psychological Impact (4-8)

---

Longer-term psychological impact (despite positive outcomes)

- Depressed and suicidal (6)
- Impact on self-esteem, confidence and morale (4–6)
- Decrease in perceived academic competence (5)

*“Destroyed” (7)*

*“Traumatised” (5-8)*

*“it was a horrible experience, and it has had long lasting effects on my self-confidence, both personally and professionally” (6, 187).*

# Theme 3: Power (2, 3, 7, 8)

---

**Examiner use of positional power** - impacted on viva experience and outcome (for better or worse)

Candidates disempowered or powerless (2, 3, 7, 8)

*Questioning style “all about them showing they were more powerful than me” (3, p. 32)*

**Power imbalances between examiners** (8)

*Concerns they would be subject to questioning with “masculine, interrogatory, overtones” which stemmed from an “expectation of academic cultures being antagonistic” (2, p. 318).*

**Gendered metaphors** - No gender specific concerns - negative experiences with both male and female examiners (2)

**Socioeconomic status:** disadvantaged due to working-class roots (2)

*Concern examiners would think of them as “inarticulate and unacceptable within academic communities” (2, p. 323).*

# Theme 4: Examiner Conduct (1-3, 5-8)

## Examination techniques

- Comments around whether the examiner approach enabled academic debate and afforded candidates the opportunity to defend their thesis (2, 3, 5, 7, 8)
- Constructive and collaborative (3, 7)
- Difficulties in understanding examiner questions (2, 3, 7, 8)
- Questioning indicated examiners had not fully read and/or understood their thesis (6, 8)
- Questions and comments heavily focused on negative elements of thesis (8)

*“opportunities for defence of their work were limited” (3, p. 32)*

*“the main theme of my thesis was never addressed, I’ve even reflected afterwards on whether they’d read it at all or not” (8, 46)*

*“I couldn’t for the life of me understand where she [the examiner] was coming from’ (2, p. 322); “the questions were long and all over the place” (3, 32)*

*[despite very positive outcome]: “the messages I got from the questioning was that they hated the thesis, that it was a total and absolute disaster... they were not about fundamental academic questions” (8, p. 45)*

# Theme 4: Examiner Conduct (1-3, 5-8)

## Examiner interpersonal style

- Examiners patient, understanding, calming effect (3)
- Examiners aggressive in manner (2, 3, 5, 7, 8)
- Metaphors of punishment and interrogation used by 4 participants (7) [all positive outcomes]

*External examiner put questions in a “**bullying way**” (2, 321) [outright pass]*

*“aggressive and rude... if it had been difficult I would have been delighted because I would have been able to defend stuff I’d been working on for four years. But it wasn’t. It was barked at me aggressively and it was about pif-fling, minor things” (3, 49) [minor corrections]*

*“some being seen **as distant and impassive**, with others seemingly **smiling and enthusiastic**” (2, 321)*

***Aggression is normalised within academia as ‘part of a process**, this is part of you becoming a bona fide academic, it’s part of a probing’ (2, 324)*

*“they **were lovely, told me to take my time, very calm and kind**... one examiner, he was really good at getting the best out of me, I was getting a bit agitated trying to explain, he told me it was OK to take some time to think” (3, 32)*

# Theme 5: Fairness (3, 4, 8)

---

Candidates reported on their views on the fairness of their viva

- 18% believed viva had not been fair (4)
- 11/18 believed the viva had not been fair (3). Lack of fairness exacerbated by the chair's lack of knowledge regarding acceptable examiner conduct and/or unwillingness to intervene (3)
- 6 participants spoke of their viva being unfair (without being asked directly) (8)

One participant deemed themselves "**lucky**" (3, 33)

*"what emerges very strongly here is the sense of injustice... Even though they have been judged successful and awarded their PhD conditionally upon making only minor amendments, the perceived unfairness of the way they were treated overrides, for them, the fairness of the verdict" (8, 50)*

# Theme 6: Practical & Procedural (2-4, 6-8)

---

- Location of the viva (3, 4, 6, 7)
- Differences in participant's familiarity with the room and layout (3, 4)
- Bad layout examples: participant couldn't clearly see examiners expressions, walls made of glass so little privacy (6)
- Positive examples: room near exit and having a window (3)
- Duration of viva varied – shortest 45 min, longest 4 hours (4)
- Variation as to whether candidate's supervisor/s present (4, 8)
- Not all participants had chairs present (4)
- Some candidates given the outcome of their viva as soon as it began (4, 7, 8)

*"[The external examiner] started off, much to my surprise, that he wanted me to know that it had passed. I think he said something like, 'Nothing I could say in the next hour could make any difference'" (8, 45)*

# Summary

---

- Many students have constructive, positive, enjoyable vivas – **this is not in question**
- However, considerable variation across the 276 candidates (despite majority positive outcome - 88%)
- The student voice has substantiated existing concerns about reliability, transparency and fairness of the closed-door viva
- Students are suffering as a result of poor practice in PhD and doctoral examination

*To question the viva 'challenges one of the few remaining traditions of academia that have retained the aura of mystique by remaining largely beyond scrutiny. But injustice and unkindness, even if suffered only by a minority, should not be tolerated within any community. **Formality, transparency and good faith should be the abiding experience of every viva candidate and not reserved for the few or even for only the majority**' (Wallace and Marsh 2001, 58)*

# Recommendations for Improvement

---

## Level 1

Efforts to assist candidates whilst the viva remains in its current closed-door form

---

## Level 2

Efforts to address quality assurance of the closed-door viva (i.e. improve transparency, reliability, validity, and fairness)

---

## Level 3

Substantial reform of the closed-door viva

---

# Level 2: Quality assurance of the closed-door viva

---

Responsibility of: Institutions (i.e. changes to be implemented and monitored at school/college level)

Examples:

- Enhanced monitoring and feedback via audio recordings (e.g. to be used should a candidate wish to appeal the outcome of their viva, to provide examiners with constructive feedback, to monitor the quality of vivas)
- Wider scope for candidates to appeal the outcome of their viva (e.g. based on examiner conduct/behaviour and knowledge/expertise – something that is currently not permitted in the majority of UK institutions)
- Closer attention to candidate well-being
- Greater considerations to neurodiversity (i.e. ‘design for diversity’).

# Level 2: Quality assurance of the closed-door viva cont...

---

- Enhanced guidance and training for examiners regarding their role
  - Specifically, what is deemed acceptable and unacceptable conduct or behaviour (e.g. clear definition of “rigorous academic debate” and reference to Bullying and Harassment policies) – something not currently provided in many institutions
  - Specifically, creating a platform that enables candidates to perform at their best (e.g. reference to examination techniques, style of questioning, strengths of the thesis etc.)
- Training for chairs
- Some pre-defined assessment criteria
- Checking/monitoring of independent reports in relation to joint reports

# Level 3 Change: Substantial reform of the closed-door viva

---

Questioning the role and purpose of the viva (raised by all authors)

institutions encourage and facilitate open discussion and debate:

- The role and purpose of the closed-door viva
- Elements of the closed-door viva would be beneficial to retain (if any)
- Alternative assessment measures drawing from other countries examination methods (e.g. public defence format adopted in the US)
- Alternative assessment measures drawing from best practices in other areas of higher education within the UK

# Next steps

---

Sufficient evidence to confirm the quality issues and concerns regarding the closed-door viva. So....

- Discussions are needed around how to achieve best practice in PhD and Doctoral level assessment
- Future research efforts should be focused on what improvements can be made and how these can be implemented
- We need to open the door on the closed-door viva



# With that in mind...

---

If you have a spare 10 -15 minutes at some point and would like to take part in a short survey....

**“Addressing the Shortcomings of the Closed-door Viva for PhD and Doctoral Candidates in the UK: A Voice for Academic Examiners”**

*Thank you*  
for listening



<https://birmingham.ac.uk/schools/psychology/centres/cap/closed-door-viva-for-phd-and-doctoral-candidates/closed-door-viva>

# Key references

---

- Carter, S. 2012. “English as an Additional Language (EAL) Viva Voce: The EAL Doctoral Oral Examination Experience.” *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 37 (3): 273–284. doi:[10.1080/02602938.2010.528555](https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2010.528555).
- Crossouard, B. 2011. “The Doctoral Viva Voce as a Cultural Practice: The Gendered Production of Academic Subjects.” *Gender and Education* 23 (3): 313–329. doi:[10.1080/09540253.2010.508453](https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2010.508453).
- Davis, G., and H. Engward. 2018. “In Defence of the Viva Voce: Eighteen Candidates’ Voices.” *Nurse Education Today* 65: 30–35. doi:[10.1016/j.nedt.2018.01.038](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2018.01.038).
- Hartley, J., and S. Jory. 2000. “Lifting the Veil on the Viva: The Experience of Psychology PhD Candidates in the UK.” *Psychology Teaching Review* 9 (2): 76–90. doi:[10.53841/bpsptr.2000.9.2.76](https://doi.org/10.53841/bpsptr.2000.9.2.76).
- Kelly, F. 2010. “Reflecting on the Purpose of the PhD Oral Examination.” *New Zealand Journal of Education Studies* 45 (1): 77–83.
- Share, M. 2016. “The PhD Viva: A Space for Academic Development.” *International Journal for Academic Development* 21 (3): 178–193. doi:[10.1080/1360144X.2015.1095759](https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2015.1095759).
- Wallace, S. 2003. “Figuratively Speaking: Six Accounts of the PhD Viva.” *Quality Assurance in Education* 11 (2): 100–108. doi:[10.1108/09684880310471524](https://doi.org/10.1108/09684880310471524).
- Wallace, S., and C. Marsh. 2001. “Trial by Ordeal or the Chummy Game? Six Case Studies in the Conduct of the British PhD Viva Examination.” *Higher Education Review* 34 (1): 35–59.