Suggestions on the future of the UK Viva: The findings from a UK wide study

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Context: The UK Viva Voce

The UK model of the PhD/Doctorate viva:

- A *closed-door* oral examination.
- Typically involves one internal examiner, one external examiner, and a Chair.
- Common in the UK, Ireland, and some Commonwealth countries (Kumar et al., 2021).
- The outcome is determined solely by the examiners, with little external moderation.

Concerns:

- The viva has faced critique for decades (e.g. Matthews, 1957; Park, 2003; Sikes, 2017).
- Key concerns relate to **transparency**, **consistency**, and **examiner conduct**.

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What we know…

Student perspectives:

- Most (approx. 90%) candidates report neutral-positive viva experiences and most feel their experience was fair.
- Descriptions from students who report negative experiences (despite positive viva outcome) include:
  - Words such as "traumatising", "intimidating", or "unfair".
  - Aggressive/biased behaviour from examiners

Examiner perspectives:

- Commonly known that unfair practices take place and that examiner conduct varies.
- An awareness by some examiners of a lack of knowledge on how to examine.

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Why was the study needed?

Rationale:

- Even if only 10% of candidates have poor experiences, that equates to *thousands of students every year* – a significant minority.
- That proportion is not trivial – especially at the highest academic level.
- The sector has a duty to ensure viva assessment is rigorous, fair, and aligned with **best practice** – which is not yet clearly defined.

A key gap:

- Much has been written about student experiences.
- This is the first large-scale study of UK examiners' views on how the viva could be improved.

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Method

Design:
- Anonymous online survey (quant + qual).
- Open to UK academics who had examined at least one viva.

Participants (N = 326):
- 50% from Russell Group institutions.
- Range of academic roles: Lecturer to Professor.
- 20% had examined 15+ vivas.
- Broad age and gender representation.
- Approx. 90% reported a neutral – positive experience in their own viva (consistent with previous literature)

Motivation:
- To explore examiner perspectives on:
  - Needed improvements.
  - Barriers to change.
  - Broader reflections on the viva's role.

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What we asked

Framing:
- Survey began with a research summary to ground participants in the known issues (e.g. ~10% negative student experience rate, variation across institution in policy/procedure).

Survey topics:
- Do examiners believe changes are needed?
- What types of policy or procedural improvements?
- What barriers exist to implementing change?
- More broadly, should the format or purpose of the viva be reconsidered?
- Optional open-ended responses for further insights.

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Analysis

Quantitative:

- Descriptive stats (yes/no responses).
- Chi-square tests for demographic associations.

Qualitative:

- Open-text responses were thematically grouped.
- Representative quotes selected to illustrate patterns.
- Focused on examiners' own words, particularly around training, fairness, and conduct.

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Results: Headline findings

Examiners overwhelmingly support change:

- **97.2%** of participants said *some form of improvement is needed*.
- **85%** agreed there was a need to consider more significant change

Key areas for improvement:

- Examiner selection.
- Examiner conduct.
- Candidate well-being and support.
- Training (examiners and chairs).
- Gathering candidate feedback.

"Academics rarely agree on something as simple as a lunch order, let alone something as significant as this"
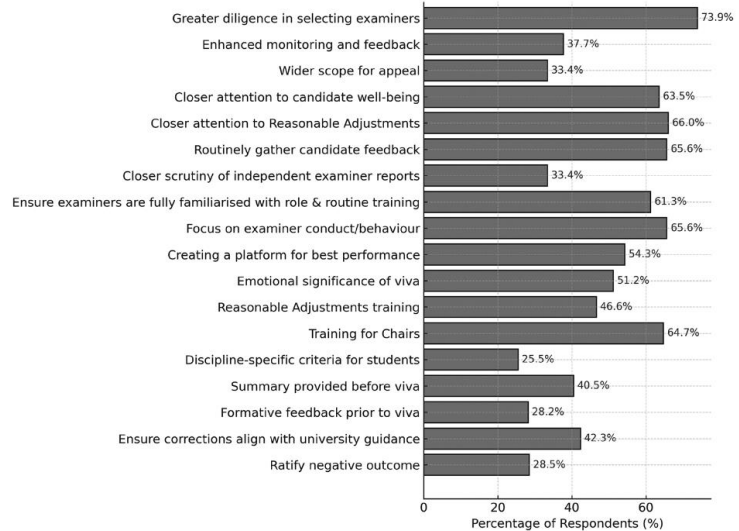
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Results: What examiners want to see

Over 60% support:

- **Better examiner selection** (73.9%)

- **Attention to reasonable adjustments** (66.0%)

- **Routine collection of candidate feedback** (65.6%)

- **Training on examiner conduct** (65.6%)

- **Training for chairs** (64.7%)

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Category	Percentage of Respondents (%)
Greater diligence in selecting examiners	73.9%
Enhanced monitoring and feedback	37.7%
Wider scope for appeal	33.4%
Closer attention to candidate well-being	63.5%
Closer attention to Reasonable Adjustments	66.0%
Routinely gather candidate feedback	65.6%
Closer scrutiny of independent examiner reports	33.4%
Ensure examiners are fully familiarised with role & routine training	61.3%
Focus on examiner conduct/behaviour	65.6%
Creating a platform for best performance	54.3%
Emotional significance of viva	51.2%
Reasonable Adjustments training	46.6%
Training for Chairs	64.7%
Discipline-specific criteria for students	25.5%
Summary provided before viva	40.5%
Formative feedback prior to viva	28.2%
Ensure corrections align with university guidance	42.3%
Ratify negative outcome	28.5%

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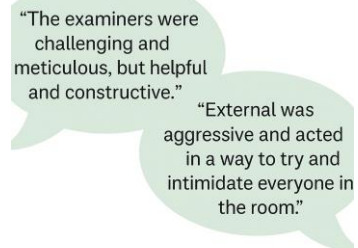# Results – Do Demographics Affect Examiner Views?

Age
•Older participants (51–70):
   •**More likely** to support diligent examiner selection and attention to reasonable adjustments.
•Participants aged 41–50:
   •**More likely** to endorse routine training for examiners.

Gender
•**Female participants**:
   •**More likely** to support policy/procedural improvements overall.
   •**None** selected "no changes needed."
•**Male participants**:
   •**More likely** to believe no changes were necessary (although *n*=2).

Personal Viva Experience
•Those with **negative experiences**:
   •**More likely** to support:
      •Routine student feedback.
      •Enhanced training, particularly around reasonable adjustments.
      •Ratification of negative viva outcomes before final decision.

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"The examiners were challenging and meticulous, but helpful and constructive."

"External was aggressive and acted in a way to try and intimidate everyone in the room."

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Qualitative insights: Policy/procedural change

Examiner selection and training

- *'In most instances we know who the a#######s are. We need to keep them away from our students'*

- *'Virtually all these issues can be addressed through i) initial training for all examiners (including auditing one or more viva), ii) remedial training where necessary, and iii) the involvement of an independent chair'*

- Largely concerns were around examiner conduct (i.e. a trial by fire approach, aggressive techniques etc...). Suggestions of the need for stricter oversight and consequences.

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Qualitative insights: Policy/procedural change

Transparency

- Discipline specific criteria:

'*I think there needs to be a much more detailed and clearly defined set of criteria against which the thesis is being evaluated. The vagueness of the guidance put out by most universities just leaves room for subjectivity and bias*.'

'*Each thesis is its own discipline and needs to be judged in depth. The suggestion is lowest common denominator stuff*.'

- Pre-viva report:

'*...the current kind of 'withholding' strategy, where the student has no idea what they are going into, with such high stakes, feels a bit punitive in its nature, and unnecessary*'

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Qualitative insights: Policy/procedural change

Subjectivity and inter-subjectivity

'The examiners are given far too much power here, and they are often a huge unknown before the viva. We know they have supervised PhDs and published papers, but are they a reasonable person? Do they exhibit good judgement?'

- Concerns raised over the variation in views and power dynamics between examiners with one holding more sway than another.

- Examiner views cannot be effectively challenged under the current system by students or supervisors.

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In defence of the closed-door format

- *'I think it's [closed-door viva] the best and most effective method for evaluating how much learning has taken place and how much of the student's work is their own. It is meant to be challenging, but it should still be carried out in a supportive and friendly way. Improving training of examiners and fixing progression monitoring processes will go a very long way to solving many of these problems.'*

- *'I have examined in six countries outside of the UK (on three continents) and still believe the UK approach has significant merit. However, I do think much more needs to be done to ensure that those conducting the viva are candidate-focused. Creating a friendly yet professional environment that seeks to draw out the best from the candidate is key here.'*

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Results – is more significant change needed?

Table 3. Examiner views on what topics would benefit from consideration/discussion regarding the need to consider more significant change to the closed-door viva.

Issue to be considered	N	%
What is the role and purpose of the closed-door viva?	215	**66.0***
What elements of the closed-door viva would it be beneficial to retain	187	57.4
What, if anything, can we learn from best practice in countries who do not use the closed-door viva approach?	177	54.3
What, if anything, can we learn from best practice in oral assessment at university level (i.e. BSc, MSc etc.)	140	42.9

Note. *Value is over 60%.

'It is essential that closed-door vivas are retained; they are a key peer review process. They've been around for a long time (just like round wheels) – because they work'

'The closed-door policy is not in line with modern education and must be challenged'

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Qualitative insights: Comparisons with other countries

'I much prefer the US system of having a panel of examiners; I've rarely seen or heard of an examination with 3-5 examiners resulting in the kind of behaviour I routinely see in UK panels where one examiner can easily take charge'

'I would argue there are many features of the UK approach that we should retain. Given the implementation of appropriate training and communication around expectations for examiners...I believe the closed-door style viva is preferable to the systems used in North America/European countries'

'I have examined theses in the UK, US, Canada, Portugal, Australia, NZ, and the UK is certainly the least transparent and most uneven'

'...some candidates might experience even more anxiety if not comfortable to have members of the public at their viva'

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Results: What are the barriers?

- **Examiner resistance**

'Yes, you can change the rules and guidelines, but you can't change the individuals and their egos...if you're an established academic and you're angry about a young scholar not citing enough of your publications, they there really is no hope'

'In my experience, sociopaths are often very good at being compliant. We might be able to be reduce the number of people who are unaware that they behave like #####, but unfortunately, I think many of these people are perfectly aware and will find ways of continuing despite the measures introduced'

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Results: What are the barriers?

- **UK academic culture**

A *'rite of passage'* rather than a fair academic evaluation

'The UK university system is outdated...UK academics are stuck in the nineteenth century when decisions were based on esoteric "judgement"'

In reference to more significant change: *'There is a lot of emotional and cultural attachment to the old system'*; *'Legacy effects'*; *'The status quo is hard to shift'*

- **Gender and power dynamics**

'The current system is just quite masculine in its set-up – almost like a duel, and white men continue to hold most of the institutional power'

The candidate is '*powerless*' in their viva.

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Results: What are the barriers?

- **Bureaucracy and financial constraints**

'This will create more work and bureaucracy for acadamics who do vivas with little reward, recognition or renumeration'

'Academia is a bureaucracy! It is hard to implement ANY change'

- **Resource and practicality constraints (in reference to larger change)**

'We simply do not have the administrative support or just the time in our day for more reform right now'

'The PhD examination process needs parity across the sector, so change needs to be implemented everywhere. We can't risk creating a two-tier examination process'

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Results: What are the barriers?

- **Debate on the scale of change**

'I think it is preferable to get rid of the viva altogether'

'Some examiners might be poor at their jobs, doesn't mean the whole system needs and overhaul'

- **Change will always have trade-offs**

'Any change will solve problems and create new ones'

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Results: Continuing the conversation

- **What is best practice?**

'I would be in favour of always exploring the best and fairest ways of assessing PhDs'

'Engaging in discussion around the way we assess PhDs is, however, an important part of academic due process and diligence. It is important that we reflect on our assessment processes and act where there may be room for change and improvement'

'Changes are sometimes received with scepticism and implementing them might require a long time and discussion, but given the evidence provided, it would be worth reassessing the process to improve it'

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Strengths and limitations

- Biggest sample size so far but still a small % of examiners overall
- Potential for response bias
- Variation in what is currently available in their own institutions
- The premise of the study that there are short-comings was claimed by a small minority to be biased.
- Limitations of list of suggested improvements – scope for additional suggestions

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Where do we go from here?

What we know

- The numbers tell us there will always be resistance from academics regardless of the type of improvements we want to implement – it's an emotive topic – people who implement the changes won't always be popular
- Academics want to achieve best practice (but opinions are divided as to what this is)
- Academics recognise that improvements are needed

Questions (big ones!) remaining

- What is best practice in conducting oral assessment at doctoral level? (i.e. quality, safe-guarding, reliability/consistency)
- How can we achieve parity across the sector?
- How can we implement changes in the current climate?

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ANY Questions?

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