

Oral examinations for undergraduate students- (the 'viva')

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Introduction

Traditionally, the oral examination (a.k.a. the oral, *viva* or *viva voce*) occurs after the written final exams. There is a lot of misunderstanding and misplaced apprehension about such oral exams, and here we attempt to present an overview of the oral examination, remove some of the mystery, promote your confidence and help you to prepare effectively.

Oral presentations and examinations are becoming more common throughout degree courses, as educational practitioners increasingly appreciate that a very good measure of someone's understanding of a subject is their ability to verbally explain the subject to someone else. For our purposes, we will only explicitly consider the oral examination that occurs with an external examiner after the written final exams of an undergraduate degree. Much of this section will also apply to taught MSc degrees.

Why are oral exams conducted?

Oral examinations typically have two main purposes. Firstly, the oral exam allows an external examiner to ascertain the comparability of a degree grade amongst different educational institutions. Secondly, it allows the external examiner to confirm or improve the appropriate degree grade classification for a student that may be just under the borderline for a higher degree grade, or a student whose performance may have been impaired due to mitigating circumstances. Students that are just above a degree grade may not be marked down on the basis of the oral examination. Thus, you should always look upon the oral exam as an opportunity to improve your grade.

Oral examinations are not just an assessment of the student's performance- oral exams are usually an opportunity for the external examiner to get feedback from the students on the [performance of the department](#) and university.

Who conducts the oral exam?

Typically, an External Examiner is appointed, who chairs the oral exam.

The details of practice vary amongst universities, and you will almost certainly be well informed about the particular practices that occur in your Department. If not, however, be sure that you are aware of what will happen by asking in advance. As an example of how practices may differ, some oral exams have a panel of two or three members (e.g. the External Examiner, the Degree Course Co-ordinator and the Head of Department). In other universities, it may only be the External Examiner that is

present.

What is examined?

The oral exam is an academic interview at which the examiner(s) will be looking at your understanding and breadth of awareness of the subject area of your degree course. The approach of different External Examiners varies considerably, and the information here should only be used as a very rough guide. You may get further information by talking to your lecturers, as well as to past students.

Nevertheless, the oral exam may well involve a discussion of topical subjects that are relevant to the degree course content (e.g. Environmental sciences: what might be the impacts on vegetation of the removal of large herbivores, as occurred in many areas in the UK following foot and mouth disease?). You may be asked what your favourite modules were, and why you found these modules academically interesting and/or challenging. This may lead on to a further discussion based on your favourite modules. For example, if you state that Environmental Impact Assessment was your favourite module and explain why, you may then be asked a variety of questions, such as: What is the legal backing for EIAs?; What are common problems in EIAs?; How could the EIA process be improved? Can you discuss different examples of where the EIA process could be considered a success and a failure?

In addition to considering the taught content of your module, the examiner(s) will also be examining your understanding of the subject matter of your thesis, your appreciation of its significance to established knowledge in the field, and your awareness of the breadth of the subject area. A considerable proportion of the exam may be spent discussing your final year project, given that it is an independent and novel piece of research that you were responsible for designing and executing. The External Examiner will have read (and graded) your final year project, and you should be prepared for a quite rigorous discussion of your project (See [How can I prepare?](#)).

The oral exam as feedback for the department

As mentioned above, oral exams are usually an opportunity for the external examiner to get feedback from students on the performance of the Department and University. Depending on the examiner, you may be asked to comment on your experience during the three or four years that you have spent at the Department and University. This gives you an opportunity to comment on issues such as the following:

- Teaching quality: teaching methods and facilities, clear communication to students of the academic aims and objectives of modules, level of help and guidance during and after modules, provision of tutorials, provision of feedback
- Research support: level of help and guidance during the final year project, availability of equipment and facilities
- Student support: library facilities, IT courses, computer availability, printing facilities, photocopying etc.

Remember that you should give credit and praise where it is due! If there are areas where you can suggest an improvement, do so in the spirit of constructive criticism- departments regularly adopt many of such suggestions. Finally, use your judgement to decide if the viva is the appropriate time to mention a particularly negative experience: if so, do so as objectively as possible and avoid naming individuals.

How can I prepare?

1. Final year project

Read your final year project, and be acquainted with the most important references. Be prepared to discuss such questions as:

- Tell me what you learned from your project?
- Why did you choose this project?
- What were the objectives of the project?
- Were the objectives addressed?

- How did you go about doing (experiment A)?
- Tell me another way of doing (method B).
- How did you know when you were finished?
- What would happen if _____?
- What did not work?
- Why did you choose (method B)?
- What are the limitations of (method B)?

- If you were to start again, is there anything you would like to change?
- What were the best features of your project?
- Why did you choose the statistical methods that are in your project?
- Is there another possible explanation for your results?
- What further research would you liked to have conducted, and why?

2. Be ready to discuss central themes of your general degree discipline and academic modules.

In many ways, there is not a lot that you can do to prepare for discussions on these subjects- the preparation has been the learning effort that you have put in over the duration of your degree!

3. In anticipation of being asked to comment on the support that you have received, have a few positive and negative aspects of your learning and teaching experiences.

Tips and advice for the oral examination

Be prepared

Be well presented. It may well be customary for students in your department to wear a suit. The oral exam is not a fashion show, but you should at least be well groomed and neatly dressed.

Stay calm and pleasant

Listen carefully to the questions.

Don't answer simply 'yes' or 'no' to questions; on the other hand do not give a prepared speech. Try to answer the question as it is put, remembering that you are engaged in an academic conversation. If you don't understand the question, ask the examiner to repeat the question, or repeat your interpretation to the examiner. If you still don't understand the question, then it is better to admit it than to try and bluff.

Be prepared to justify your ideas and conclusions. If the examiners challenge your interpretation but you feel that your case is a good one, muster your arguments and be willing to present your case firmly but courteously. However, if the examiners have identified a genuine weakness, concede the point gracefully. Even if you feel the examiners are unreasonably critical do not become argumentative or allow the discussion to become heated. You can agree to differ and to reconsider the point.

Don't be overly worried that some parts of the exam were really difficult- it is only by pushing your to your limits that the examiner can determine your ability.

Useful websites and references

http://www.liv.ac.uk/ccap/academic_practice/study_skills/exams5.html

[How to improve technique in oral examinations](#)

Written as part of a study skills resource for undergraduate students, this gives a basic overview of what happens during an oral examination, how to prepare for one, and how to conduct yourself during an oral exam.

The Doctoral School, Institute of Education, University of London provide the following website that is intended for PhD degrees, but has elements that will be useful for other types of viva: [PREPARING FOR THE ORAL EXAMINATION OF YOUR PhD THESIS \(THE VIVA VOCE\)](#)

Cryer, P. Research students guide to success. Chapter 19: *Preparing for and conducting yourself in the examination.*