



Is a PhD Viva Voca Oral Examination “Really” that Daunting? Reflections from a PhD “Survivor”

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Getting a PhD is the pinnacle of an education qualification, which only a small proportion of people may achieve in their lifetime. As a PhD candidate, it was often stated that the most important facet of a PhD was the “Dr” that you will have in front of your name. However, from my perspective, the award of a PhD is the academic acknowledgement that validates a PhD candidate to merge with a privileged group of professionals who advocate for the generation and sharing of evidence-based knowledge which contributes to the global body of knowledge. A PhD thesis is central to achieving self-actualization as proposed by Abraham Maslow’s needs hierarchy. But it isn’t the only requirement for the awarding of a PhD degree. The award also requires a successful PhD viva voca oral examination universally. In this article, as a PhD “survivor” I will describe and explain a PhD viva voca within the context of my journey, what kind of questions a candidate may expect from the examiners and will offer advice for other questions that may arise during a PhD viva voca oral examination. I will also be transparent in respect to my motivation and how I passed my PhD viva voca, providing insights into the examination process, the expectations and requirements, the generic potential outcomes, and the importance of viva voca simulation practice. I will also suggest an agenda, as a checklist, which I generated for my defense preparation, as it will prepare the reader with valuable groundwork for this often-daunting event.

Keywords: Candidate; Defense; PhD; Survivor; Viva Voca**Introduction**

As a critical care nurse with 40 years of clinical experience, I had often contemplated attempting to acquire a PhD in nursing or a Doctor of Nursing practice (DNP), after graduating with a master’s degree in nursing. Why? Because it is the ultimate educational accomplishment in an academic discipline [1]. However, the overwhelming challenge to achieve it was often daunting and seemed unattainable to me. Was I capable? Could it do it? Am I good enough? It was not until a colleague, who was also a mentor, and a friend, that reminded me of the importance of Abraham Maslow’s humanistic need, a need for self-actualization [2]. Nursing is a profession, and nurses are healthcare professionals (HCP), and as such are aware that a PhD or a DNP is a major undertaking and requires considerable commitment, passion, and determination, in order to advance the understanding of phenomena, which create our reality, and therefore our world.

My PhD study in a nursing context was situated in Riyadh, in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which was a unique setting for the phenomenon of patient advocacy, which I was going to investigate. However, I elected to enroll and undertake my doctorate at the MA-

SHA University in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, as my home was now in Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia. The PhD education system at the Malaysian universities is in general fashioned after western international universities. Therefore, universities from Southeast Asia have a propensity to embrace and follow academic models and global superlative organizations [3]. The MAHSA University in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia is one such example as its genre of study and the PhD requirements are similar to those offered in the universities in the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States of America (USA). For example, there are two approaches for a PhD, which are offered at the MAHSA University in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Those being PhD by coursework and minor thesis and a PhD by research. Candidates, such as I, who enrolled for a pure research PhD in nursing are given a minimum time of 6 semesters or 3 years to complete their dissertation. Supplementary obligations for doctoral students such as myself, who elect and commit to a PhD by research, must provide a proposal defense to validate the proposed research study, produce a thesis with a specified word limit, meet with primary and secondary supervisors in and at a predetermined timeframe, in addition to providing and passing the Viva voca, which is an oral defense of their research study.

Reviewing the timeframe requirements, the research proposal defense was completed, and my research study approved, then my research commenced and the written document, my thesis generated, with continuous feedback and recommendations from my primary and secondary supervisors. The dissertation was completed, written up, edited, and presented in the required academic format proposed by MAHSA University, for grading by both internal and external examiners. The examiners could take several weeks to determine the outcome of my research study, which allowed me time to reflect and prepare for my Viva voca, the oral defense of my research study.

I had “willingly” committed three enthusiastic years of my life to my PhD dissertation, I had submitted the final manuscript for examination and now the next phase of the doctoral process was to commence, to pass the PhD Viva voca, the oral defense exam. However, in my subsequent discussions with supervisors, current PhD students, colleagues, and other academics. I became concerned and aware of the general lack of understanding of what a PhD Viva voca was, what to expect and how to prepare for it. When I searched the internet for insights, there was conflicting information in respect to the Viva voca, and depending on the university, country, profession, and sphere of study. There was a degree of unpredictability in the procedure, types of questions asked and the application of the oral defense examination itself. However, there were generic fundamentals for the Viva voca that were mutual across the diverse applications of the examination process.

The purpose of this short communication is to explain what a PhD Viva voca is and what candidates can expect to encounter during the defense. In addition to “reliving” and sharing my enthusiastic reflections on my PhD Viva voca journey and “survival” to relieve reader anxiety pertaining to the PhD Viva voca method. The insights offered by this article are also important for the following reasons. First, to augment the theoretical understanding of the PhD viva voca within a Malaysian and international context [4-7] and revisit the process of a Viva voca to provide understanding for candidates in higher education [8]. Second, the article offers realistic advice and guidance for candidates involved in the PhD Viva voca and doctoral assessment [9]. Third, for academics who are examiners, the article also serves as a reminder and as an incentive to promote research on the topic of the PhD Viva voca, correct a PhD candidate’s misconceptions and provide transparency to examiner practices. In doing so, an evidence-based understanding of the doctoral assessment in a Viva voca and the expected examiner practices could increase clarity for PhD candidates in nursing.

Background

The PhD Viva voca (“Viva voce”: Latin for “by live voice” or oral examination) is essential to the doctoral appraisal and performs as a required formality for the obtainment of a doctorate. It is em-

ployed internationally for diverse intentions [10], comprising of assessments, education development, and customary rituals [11]. A Viva voca is an oral defense examination as the final stage in a doctoral assessment to validate that the research has been generated by the PhD candidate and no plagiarism is involved. The term ‘viva’ or ‘Viva voce’ is commonly used in the UK, USA, Canada [12], Australia and New Zealand [13]. and Malaysia to refer to any oral examination including the viva at the PhD level. It is also known as thesis defense in Canada and the USA [12] and oral examination in Australia and New Zealand [13]. However, it should be noted that most universities in Australia do not include a Viva voca oral examination as a standard practice, but external examiners can request an “oral component” should they feel it necessary [14].

The goal of the Viva voca in a doctoral appraisal is to determine if the research was by the candidate, and as such have examiners allocate a grade, which includes either a pass, a re-viva (repeat), or a fail. The examiners are officially appointed by the relevant university to partake in the doctoral candidate’s assessment, and are expected to comprehend and appreciate what, why and how when evaluating the authenticity of a candidate’s PhD thesis.

As I was in my second year of candidacy, I became aware and concerned in the projected complexities associated with my concluding PhD viva voca. I was, constantly inundated with negative accounts and explanations of the event. Numerous of my colleagues who had been contemplating or were in the process of completing or commencing their PhD or DNP often revealed negative Viva voca narratives. When I probed further, with my qualitative descriptive inquiry, I questioned what they knew about the Viva voca method. Their descriptions included a process which was often a closed-door question-and-answer session that is liable to be unfriendly and hostile, hence the term “defense”. This unfavorable perception of the “horror stories” generated by candidates who had survived the Viva voca “terror”, and regrettably and inappropriately fueled my negative perceptions, not having experienced the Viva voca process myself.

In the process of establishing background insights as to what a Viva voca would entail, I entertained negative descriptions such as described by [15] “a battlefield”, “a gun fight”, “grilling session” and a “final hurdle”. These undesirable metaphors gave me an impression of the Viva voca as an aggressive and violent confrontation. Hence, providing clarification for employing the justification term, Viva voca “defense”. Therefore, to pass the Viva voca, PhD candidates are required to defend and therefore contest to answer the questions presented by the examiners. In doing so, candidates have to demonstrate and convince the examiners verbally of their dissertation’s validity, the research process, knowledge pertaining to the research study, contribution of the study to the body of knowledge, and proficiency related to the research methodology

employed. Postgraduate colleagues stated that sometimes, the Viva voca could become a cross-examination interrogation if examiners were not satisfied with the candidate’s responses to their questions, and unacceptable responses would ultimately affect the assessment outcome. The Viva voca defense can be a daunting prospect, but some PhD candidates really enjoy deliberating and debating their PhD research with truly interested experts. On reflection, despite being lengthy and comprehensive, this was very much the case for me. I really enjoyed my PhD Viva voca oral defense examination, as it provided useful networking opportunities, although the build up to it was stressful, and I was dreading the fear of the “unknown”.

The format for a “Viva voce” can vary considerably, as every university will have specific guidelines and regulations for the “Viva voce” thesis defense. In some countries or institutions, the convention is for a doctoral defense is to be a public event where the candidate will give a presentation explaining their research [12]. As a public event, there will be invited examiners, university faculty and family members in the audience who are able to ask questions about the candidate’s research. This typically has a timeframe of 30 to 60 minutes, followed by a discussion with a panel of examiners who are experts in their field and will question the candidate about the research study. In other countries, such as Australia and the UK [16], the “Viva voce” oral defense is normally conducted within a private, internally situated environment “behind closed doors” by two examiners. The examiners, one being external, from another college or university and the other internally, both are often experts in the topic of research, are being defended. There has been a great deal of interest in the examination processes associated with the PhD amongst researchers in higher education both in Britain [11] and in Australia [16]. However, the processes often remain mysterious and unfamiliar to doctoral candidates, which was confirmed by Morley, Leonard, and David, when they claimed that “Doctoral studies can be experienced as mysterious and mystifying” and the assessment and examination process can seem “secretive” [17]. A review of the available literature also indicates that while some examiners consider the Viva voca like a collegial discussion, other examiners approach it like an examination or interrogation [18].

Since I was the first PhD candidate for Nursing at MAHSA University, my Viva voca in 2017 was a unique experience, in respect to standard global procedures, setting and attendance. The MAHSA University executive and faculty wanted to observe the first PhD Viva voca that the department of nursing was employing. The examiners comprised of one external assessor from Brunei, two internal examiners, which included the chairperson from my university MASHA, in Malaysia. The public attendance for the “Viva voce” oral thesis defense, was open, and comprised of the Chairman of the University; numerous university faculty, from the Department of Nursing and Allied health specialties; two members of the Ma-

laysian Board of Nursing; my two supervisors, a Professor from MAHSA university and a Professor from the Universiti of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. In my “Viva voce” oral thesis defense, my supervisors did not participate, but observed my presentation and the questions offered from the attending gallery. They also provided me with feedback after the process was completed.

What are the characteristics of a PhD Viva voca oral defense examination?

In common terms, a Viva voca (AKA Viva) is an oral examination that occurs at the completion of a candidate’s PhD program. A Viva voca is compulsory in the main for all PhD students, which has an objective to verify the candidate’s knowledge and understanding of the field of study, knowledge imparted, as well as an evaluation of the contribution and originality of the study to the existing body of knowledge [18]. Therefore, a candidate should expect evaluation in the following characteristics, 1. To determine there has been no plagiarized data from another source. 2. The depth of the new knowledge in the study’s specific research domain, 3. Whether the scope of the new knowledge will have an all-encompassing contribution to the existing body of knowledge. 4. To evaluate the candidate’s understanding of their study’s potential limitations and how these potential limitations could be addressed.

The Viva voca oral examination characteristically has a duration of two to three hours, though it can persist for a minimum of 20 minutes or up to a maximum of four to five hours [19]. In view of fact that a Viva voca oral examination can be managed and conducted behind closed doors, establishing the average duration of a Viva voca is challenging. Nevertheless, there are exemplars in the literature, which took equal to four hours [20]. My personal Viva voca experience in 2017, at MAHSA University had a very “pleasant and positive” duration of approximately three hours.

What is the rationale for a PhD Viva voca oral defense examination?

The rationale for a Viva voca oral examination that occurs at the completion of a candidate’s PhD program is focuses on the candidate’s knowledge in their field of study, which requires explanation for validation of the thesis. In essence, it is considered the “final phase” a “rite of passage” and is an ever-present perception in the literature [21]. A perception that denotes a PhD candidate’s transition from being a student to an academic. Rowarth and Fraser also validate this perception when they stated that the Viva voca oral examination warrants that the PhD candidate will be “a credible member of the academic community” [22]. Also corroborated by Dunleavy who regarded the PhD Viva voca oral examination as a traditional “life-changing” event and must be the final assessment for a PhD candidacy [23].

“The research or the researcher” Who or what are examined in the Viva voca?

The conventional process for PhD candidature was initially regarded as a process for a person’s academic development [24]. Johnson, concurred that through traditional methods for PhD direction an “intelligible academic identity” is academically produced, in essence an accredited scholar and researcher, who is trustworthy to perform research effectively [25]. However, Sutherland and Corballis, also underscore that the PhD candidate has a primary objective to produce an original study/thesis, which contributes to the body of knowledge [26]. The academic stance concerning why PhD candidates can then involve both the person and the product. [27], and personal development is often acknowledged as an influencing dynamic to commence a doctorate.

Despite conflicting academic opinions about the intent of the PhD there has been negligible attention placed on the Viva voca oral examination, although [1] did emphasize that the advancement of the skills agenda has repercussions for the assessment of a candidate’s PhD. If the dual goal of the PhD is to promote the advancement of a one who is skilled in research, and the production of an original thesis. How can these twofold goals be appraised in the Viva voca oral examination? The candidate and the examiner may perceive the intent of the Viva voca oral examination in a different way, if they both have a different perception of whether the function of the PhD is the process of evolving into a researcher or the primarily the generation of an original doctoral thesis.

Reflecting on my journey, as a PhD candidate, completing the doctoral thesis was at that time my primary objective. Although the final doctoral thesis must be of a high-level standard, which conforms to University guidelines. I also think that an important component of the process is the candidate’s ability to reflect on the PhD journey, throughout which includes the strengths and weaknesses of the Viva voca oral examination. Through the timely process of self-reflection, the Viva voca oral examination provided me with an opportunity to demonstrate the importance of my research to my academic superiors, supervisors, and peers. Addition to absorbing and digesting the feedback, provided by the panel of learned examiners during the process.

What is the duration for a Viva voca oral defense examination?

It is almost impossible to provide accurate timeframe information, and advice on the duration that a candidate may be required to endure for a Viva voca oral examination. For example, my Viva voca in was completed after approximately 3 hours. But, after reviewing the literature, there have been instances where Viva voca oral examinations have taken less than 2 hours and more than 4hours. Nonetheless, from my evaluation, the average duration for a Viva voca is 2.5 hours [11]. Duration of the Viva voca examination also involves components such as how comprehensive and

thorough was the candidate when they presented the PhD research thesis and whether there were any major issues that were identified by the examiners. Additional elements I respect to time frame, could include, candidate preparation, and response to examiner questions. A positive facet for a lengthy examination could also be that the examiners are to the highest degree enjoying the discussion about the research study. Finally, the duration of a Viva voca oral examination must also consider the country, status and locale of the university, and the specified guidelines, rubrics, and regulations regarding the duration for PhD evaluation.

Who are the examiners in the Viva voca examination process?

A Viva voca oral examination follows the completion of a candidate’s PhD thesis assessment by internal and external examiners. The Viva voca has an objective to verify the candidate’s knowledge and understanding of the field of study, knowledge imparted, as well as an evaluation of the contribution and originality of the study to the existing body of knowledge [18]. The examination panel typically consists of 2 examiners, one being external, from another college or university and the other internally, both are often experts in the topic of research that is being defended. The primary role of the examiners is to assess the originality of the research dissertation and whether you, as the candidate, are validated as the researcher. The examiners will endeavor to address any issues and challenges they discovered when they examined the submitted dissertation prior to the Viva voca. They will also test the candidate’s knowledge, comprehension and insight related to key concepts and theories that have been proposed or advocated in the candidate’s thesis. The rationale for this method of evaluation, is to establish first, the originality of the research and second, to ascertain whether the candidate is proficient to conduct and discuss research at an academic level, which is also required to be awarded a PhD degree. It is also customary that the examination panel will have a chairperson, and their role is to ensure, that the examination process for the Viva voca is applicable, objective, unbiased and fair. At some universities, it is shared role that an internal examiner acts as a chairperson, for example during my Viva voca at MASHA University in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, the chairperson was also the internal examiner. An additional point to consider, is that depending on which country and university that a candidate is undertaking the PhD degree, the examination may be a closed encounter between the candidate and the examiners, as in the UK, and Australia. Or it can be an open PhD defense, as in Europe, Malaysia, and the USA. The open Viva voca oral defense is standard in most of the European countries and the USA. The open process often requires the candidate to provide the following facets to the examiners, a presentation about the research, and answering questions from the examiners.

Which would you prefer, “Open or Closed”? At MAHSA University, in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, I had an “Open” Viva voca and I was perfectly content with the examination process.

Why? Because I was prepared for it.

What are potential outcomes of the examiner’s Viva voca oral examination report?

In the previous sections, I have discussed what a Viva voca oral examination entails, the duration, who may be present during the examinations and what could be expected from the candidate. is expected of you. But what happens after your examiners finish their questioning? An additional component is that the examiners need to agree on the outcome of the Viva voca, which truthfully embodies the quality of the doctoral dissertation and the candidate’s performance during the oral defense examination. The examiners’ report can have various potential generic outcomes after a doctoral thesis defense. Typically, the examiners will recommend to the candidate’s university that the doctoral student is awarded a degree subject to minor corrections. Although in some instances the examiners may recommend major corrections, which will require significant effort and time from the candidate.

In general, there are six potential outcomes for a PhD Viva voca, and the examiners are required to select one. The following are potential recommendation outcomes which each university or college will adhere to, with modifications.

- **Award the PhD degree:** This is a passing recommendation for the PhD degree without any corrections and is a rare commendation and is a celebration for the student.
- **Minor corrections are required to the PhD degree:** This is a passing recommendation for the PhD degree, which has achieved the required standard, but usually requires grammatical, typographical, textual, or presentational issues to be modified in the thesis. This is often the most common recommendation from examiners and the candidate should be very proud.
- **Major corrections are required to the PhD degree:** This recommendation indicates that the candidate’s doctoral study is at the required standard to be awarded the PhD degree, but only after substantial corrections and revisions are completed. Major corrections may include thesis formatting, clarity and simplification, reworking chapters, and additional analysis. This is a common recommendation, and often requires verification that the corrections have been made.
- **Revise the PhD degree and then resubmit:** This result designates that the thesis content, the analysis, and discussion are not at the required standard to be awarded the PhD degree. However, the PhD examiners note the potential of the dissertation submitted and recommend that with additional endeavor, it can meet the standard requirements. The candidate will therefore be required to agree to undertake additional research and analysis and present it to the examiners and the Viva voca examination committee again.

- **Award an MPhil degree:** This outcome indicates that the level of the doctoral thesis doesn’t meet the PhD standard. However, it does meet the lower award standard of Master of Philosophy (MPhil), which can be assessed in terms of content originality and capacity. The examiners typically make this recommendation, if they conclude that it won’t be realistic for the candidate to complete additional research for the revise and resubmit outcome.
- **Immediate fail:** This recommendation as an outcome is very rare and means that the doctoral student has failed to meet the required standard for a PhD and an MPhil.

How do you prepare for the “Viva voce” oral examination defense?

How do you prepare for a Viva voca oral defense? If your university or supervisor has official guidelines, that is an excellent foundation for preparation. However, I was not that fortunate in 2017, other than being advised when my Viva voca would “probably” be. I was informed about my “potential” Viva voca 3 weeks prior to the actual event by my primary supervisor. The details provided included, a “potential” date and time, the venue at the university, who would or could be attending the open examination. Once names had been provided, it was requested of me to know all the official attendees’ names and titles and address them as such in a respectful manner. I was also asked to be 30 minutes early and wear a nice suit to present myself as an academic student. All of these recommendations were adhered to, and more, as I did not want to compromise myself or my university. Remember, that I was MAHSA University’s first doctoral nursing student to be offered the opportunity to graduate.

My preparation was more extensive and motivated by a transparent desire for success. Therefore, I commenced my preparations six months prior to the submission date of my final thesis. I assumed that the Viva voca defense date would be sometime after submission and examiner assessment of my doctoral thesis. For that reason, I created an agenda and a checklist over that 6 months which I prayed would ensure that I was prepared for anything that an examiner might ask me about my research study.

Before I review the details of the agenda and checklist that I created for myself in preparation for my Viva voca oral defense. The doctoral student should always remember several important suggestions. Be a sincere, motivated, and enthusiastic candidate, and take the time and make the effort to prepare for your Viva voca. Preparation is frequently the key to success, but also remember, that this is your “original” research study, which essentially makes you the “expert” on the topic being presented.

Agenda/Checklist

This agenda will provide you with useful advice for preparation to defend your doctoral thesis:

- If possible, review your University guidelines for the Viva voce oral examination defense, as I attempted to do. However, since there were no official guidelines, I devised my own, which I am imparting to you in this short communication.
- Attempt to find out who the examiners are that examined your thesis, as they will be on the panel, so that you are aware of their name, title, backgrounds, expertise, and publications. Have knowledge of their published contributions, especially those that are related to your thesis. This can orientate and prepare you for their potential questions during the viva voca.
- When addressing the examiners always use their correct title and name. For example: Thank you for clarifying that point for me Professor Dr. Florence Nightingale.
- Without a doubt, you must comprehend, grasp, and know your research thesis completely, back to front, top to bottom. It's important to defend your claims about the originality of the thesis and its contribution to knowledge. However, no research is perfect, and stating if asked, that you have considered what could have been done differently, is a positive response. Also, check to see if any relevant recent papers have emerged since submitting the thesis and, if so, read these.
- During the Viva voce oral examination defense, have a copy of your thesis available, and have it marked with sticky labels to identify certain sections, or individual chapters. Or importance studies in your literature review if you need to refer to them. Being prepared demonstrates your critical thinking to anticipate what the examiners could ask about.
- If possible, submit a conference paper or journal publication prior to your Viva voce oral examination defense. This was my approach, as my research involved Muslim Saudi Arabian nurses, I presented my pilot study and preliminary research findings, at two conferences, one in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, the other in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. In addition to submission of articles to two international journals which were published. The rationale, being that dissemination of the research findings and interest displayed by conferences and journals, supports the research dissertation, and provides encouragement for a positive outcome for your Viva voce oral examination defense. If international conferences and journals want your original work, then that is validation.
- Be prepared to answer and explain how your research thesis contributes to the gap in the current evidence-based body of knowledge.
- Be focused to explain the relevant literature in your review, and how it relates to your research thesis, any gaps that you identified, which makes your dissertation valid.
- Know what the significance and implications of your research will have on theory and clinical practice.
- Prepare with a simulated viva voce oral examination defense, with your primary supervisor or academic colleagues. I prepared by having two simulated viva voce. One with my academic colleagues in a college of nursing and the second with a Professor who was my mentor at that time. Both sessions were in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia and added positivity to my preparation methodology, presentation skills and confidence to succeed.
- Have your academic peers “interrogate... quiz” and challenge you about your thesis. My colleagues provided me with insights that I did not expect or consider.
- Ask your friends and family who are not familiar with your thesis topic to read it and state whether they understand the rationale for you generating it. My academic belief is, that regardless of whether a simple story or a PhD dissertation, the rationale and the findings should be stated transparently. Therefore, any reader regardless of affiliation, mum, dad, sibling, doctor, nurse, etcetera should be able to understand the research topic. I requested my sister, who was not a nurse or an academic, to read my thesis, and despite the fact my doctoral dissertation employed a qualitative grounded theory methodology she validated that the thesis rationale was clear, and the findings were understood.
- Identify areas in your thesis that could be challenged. The peer colleague review, the mock viva voce with colleagues, the friend or family feedback could identify areas that are likely to be challenged. If these “lay” groups can identify issues, then the examination panel will most definitely.
- Prepare a list of potential questions that the examiners could ask during the viva voca. “Preparation is the key to success” (Anon) For example, these were some of the questions that I devised, and several were asked of me:
 - Why did you choose this research topic?
 - Why is the topic important?
 - Who is the topic important too?
 - What motivated and inspired you to do this research?
 - What is the relevance of your work to the other researchers?
 - Has your view of the research topic changed since submission?
 - What did you enjoy most about your PhD journey?
 - What are you proudest of in respect to your PhD journey?
 - What was the most difficult aspect that you encountered during your PhD?
 - What surprised you most about the PhD journey?
 - If you started again, what would you do differently?
 - What are the contributions to knowledge of your doctoral thesis?
 - What are the strengths and limitations of the research study?

- Where do you see this research going in the future?
- What do you plan on doing with your research after graduation?
- Do you have a follow up research project?
- Does this thesis deserve the merit of a PhD award?
- Prepare a list of questions that you could ask at the end of the viva voce when the examiners ask if you have any questions for them. Do not say, no questions. Always have at least 3 questions, as it demonstrates your enthusiasm and interest in the process that you have just concluded. For example: Q1. Sir, you made a point of asking about this in my study, why did you ask that? Q2: Madam, I agree with your point of view about this concept in my study, however could you explain why it may be considered a limitation? Q3. When will I know the outcome of my viva voce?
- Always remember to thank the examination panel at the end of the viva voce for their time, enlightening comments, and constructive feedback. Also, when doing so, use their correct title and name. For example: Thank you Professor Dr. Florence Nightingale.

Useful advice during your viva voca oral examination defense

Remember that you are a PhD candidate, a student and you are not expected to have perfect recall of your thesis and everything that you have read and done. I also, had to keep reminding myself, that I was a student and had an objective to graduate with a PhD. If you get nervous, confused, or need to refer to notes. The examiners will understand, as they have been in your position and situation themselves. Therefore, take note of the following suggestions.

- Ask for clarification of confusing questions or ask for the question to be repeated
- Take time to think before answering
- Be prepared to ask questions and enter into a dialogue with your examiners
- Be prepared to discuss your research in context of other work done in your field
- Be ready to admit if you don’t know the answer to a question
- Be prepared to express opinions of your own

Reflecting on the PhD Viva voca oral presentation experience.

As a PhD candidate, my primary supervisor often stated that the most important facet of a PhD was the “Dr” that you will have in front of your name. Without any disrespect intended, I would disagree then and now. From my perspective, the award of a PhD is the academic acknowledgement which allows me to merge with an privileged group of professionals who advocate the generation and sharing of evidence based knowledge which makes a contribution to the global body of knowledge. Remember, your PhD thesis is important but isn’t the only component that will get you a PhD. It is also the PhD viva voca. In this article, I explained what a PhD viva voca is, what kind of questions you can expect from your ex-

aminers and offered advice for other common questions about the PhD viva voca oral examination defense. I was transparent in respect to my motivation and how I passed my PhD viva voca. I also provided insights to the examination process, the expectations and requirements, potential outcomes, and the importance of simulation practice. I suggested an agenda, as a checklist, which prepared my groundwork for the event.

Paramount advice I received from my professorial mentor in Saudi Arabia, was “Try to enjoy your viva voca” as it is an opportunity to dialogue with someone who is informed about the research topic but is also conversant with the originality of your study. It is a wonderful opportunity to discuss and explore the elements of your research. Therefore, if you consider it in this light, it will not be as daunting. He also asked me this question. Do you want to be seen as a student or as a doctor during that oral examination? Remember that you, despite being a candidate, a student, are the expert in your PhD topic, and you need to present yourself as such. Therefore, I suggest that you consider the viva voca as an academic discussion and think of yourself as equal to the examination panel in respect to your study.

Closing comments

Have questions for the examination committee?

- Keep them simple, but have some

Thank the committee members

- Tell them what you have learnt from this experience / them and the feedback recommendations.

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