

SUMMARY OF RESPONSES RE VIVAS

Vivas: Just a couple of thoughts on this: In my previous school (SBS) it was mandatory for all PhD students to give a final seminar prior to submission and I think that is a great idea. I believe our assessment methods at UWA are rigorous and sufficient already and I do not see a need for vivas. I have sat on vivas overseas (France and UK) and have seen the stress this causes the students (and their family member who attend and some supervisors!!) but I am not convinced vivas are worthwhile or needed at UWA. Many of the overseas students would not be able to afford family 'support by attendance' whereas locals could, etc.

As regards the oral defence of the Doctoral Thesis, I was not aware there is such a widespread problem with the current system, that is more rigorous than many systems I have seen (having worked in four continents), that a drastic change is required. However, if an oral defence is adopted, I would strongly advocate that the PhD supervisor be present, as an observer and that a record of the oral defence be kept.

I have already provided this feedback at the School level, but would like it to be reiterated in the UWA ASA forum. I am extremely sceptical about the efficacy of the proposed oral defence for the following reasons:

- The proposal implies that current arrangements for thesis examination lack rigour in its aim to 'enhance the rigour of the examination process'. In my view, the existing requirements for examining Doctoral theses are rigorous, effective and efficient.
- The organisation of the viva appears to be highly complicated and riddled with potential pitfalls for the unwary. This situation is likely to be compounded when dealing with relatively large numbers of Doctoral students, which tends to be the case in the GSE.
- At a time when university funding is being cut back, the financial outlay involved in travel expenses for examiners may appear to be profligate. In this regard, it should be highlighted that Perth is the most isolated capital city in the world, so the 'tyranny of distance' will inevitably have an impact on expenditure.
- Related to the point above, supervisors may be inclined to opt for the proximity of prospective examiners rather than their 'quality' when nominating the examining panel.
- The viva arrangement could be problematic for those international students who are required to return to their home countries after they have submitted their thesis for examination. In other words, it would be impracticable for these students to return to Perth in order to attend a viva once their thesis has been examined.

Oral defence of Higher Degrees will bring UWA into line with normal practice internationally. In the 21st Century, the tyranny of distance is no longer an excuse.

As a PhD supervisor – now graduated 61 PhDs out of 64 taken on. Even if you enrol students in an orderly way they often tend to clump together at the end and then finding examiners is difficult. Once over a period of 2 months I had to find 28 examiners. I don't know how I would have found oral examiners for these candidates. Initially in Australia, orals were not required because of the expense of getting appropriate examiners together for the oral examination. This would still be the case for my area of research and further more in my experience the current system has worked well and as far as I can see if supervisors are supervising properly no advantaged is gained from oral examination.

- A) Assurances have been obtained from GRS that – despite pre-existing regulations permitting Vivas – no student enrolled without clarification that Vivas are being implemented will be forced to undergo one. We also strongly recommend that all offers issued to students that WILL be subject to such examination clearly clarify this change in practices.
- B) We are concerned at the reduction of the UWA standard of 3 examiners to 2. We understand the cost-saving considerations in the reduction, but would encourage consideration of an additional 3rd examiner recruited internally in order to ensure the continued UWA best practice of 3 examiners at

minimum cost. We suggest that to cut costs only one external examiner needs to be present at a Viva Voce.

- C) We are very concerned at the absence of the supervisors in the Viva hearing. While it is clear that the supervisors can have no active role or be permitted to speak at the examination, their presence is essential for a student receiving suggestions for major corrections or other instructions. The supervisor's involvement in a pastoral role is also significant. We do understand that not all students will wish to have their supervisors present. Hence, we would like to see assurances that IF THE STUDENT REQUESTS IT a supervisor or supervisors can be present at the Viva hearing.
- D) We also discussed the issue of unnecessary examination of a student where all examiners are of the view it is a fail. Students can be given an option of a Viva to change the examiners' minds but should also be given the option of a "graceful retreat" from the Viva to avoid an unnecessarily unpleasant experience.

I do not oppose PhD vivas per se, but I am very concerned that their introduction will be a retrograde step at UWA. The present system permits the recruitment as thesis examiners of the very best international experts in the field. It also allows time for the candidate to ponder and deliberate on their responses to any criticisms, and this seems to me only to be a good thing. I am unaware of any evidence that this system produces scrutiny other than of the highest standard. If vivas are mandated, then I think it is highly likely that top class overseas and interstate examiners will be less likely to participate, regardless of the mechanism. Travel to UWA will be too arduous and time consuming for many and an internet-based viva is generally seen as a poor substitute.

I might also mention that I have seen vivas operate in the US and was shocked to see in at least one institution, that local internal examiners were used. I suspect this was done as an administrative and economic convenience, but it is a recipe for cronyism, intimidation and flawed outcomes. UWA's geographical isolation means that we must be very careful to avoid changes that might increase parochialism.