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

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ABSTRACT

The closed-door PhD and doctoral viva voce - the approach adopted in the United Kingdom - is esteemed by some as being a valuable academic tradition. However, an increasing body of literature and research has raised concerns about the quality, transparency, reliability and validity of this viva format. This systematic literature review aims to explore the closed-door viva from the candidate perspective. Eight studies, encompassing 267 participants, were included. Themes which emerged from a narrative synthesis of the data were: emotional response; psychological impact; power; examiner conduct (i.e. questioning techniques and interpersonal style); fairness; and practical and procedural issues. A great deal of variation was found across all accounts. Whilst some were indicative of positive and constructive viva experiences, there were also concerning reports of candidate distress as a result of examiner conduct, behaviour and use of positional power. Implicit and explicit reference was made to the lack of fairness. Given that concerns regarding the closed-door viva are now well-established, results are discussed with reference to recommendations for change; ultimately, to ensure best practice in PhD and doctoral assessment in the UK as well as to offer academic providers in other countries valuable insights into this form of viva.

KEYWORDS

Higher education
assessment; viva voce;
PhD examination; quality
assurance

Introduction

Since the emergence of the first research doctorates in the nineteenth century there has been a steady increase in the amount of PhD and professional doctorate courses being offered and undertaken, both in the UK and internationally (Simpson 2009). The UK has the second highest number of students, with approximately 23,000 obtaining a PhD or doctorate every year for the past seven years (Higher Education Statistical Agency (HESA) 2022).

The viva voce (hereafter referred to as the viva) is derived from Latin meaning 'living voice', and thus represents an oral examination that is used to complement the written research element of a PhD or doctorate. The specific role, purpose and format of the viva varies greatly across disciplines, institutions and countries (Park 2003; Crossouard 2011), and indeed within the UK itself. However, the fundamental essence of the viva is that it acts as a final 'rite of passage' (Park 2003, 3); an opportunity for the candidate to engage in academic debate and defend or present their research by demonstrating it has made an original contribution of knowledge to their field.

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Vivas can be seen to fall into three categories: 1) compulsory oral examination; 2) hybrid examination; and 3) ritualised examination (Kumar, Sanderson, and Kaur 2021). The UK adopts the compulsory examination, also known as a 'closed-door' viva; aptly named as it is conducted in privacy, commonly with two examiners (one internal and one external to the university), a chairperson, and in a small number of cases, the candidate's supervisor (Crossouard 2011). The closed-door format is unique in that it is possible for the candidate to fail their viva, and by consequence their qualification, solely based on the views of the examiners. This is unlike other viva formats - for example the hybrid examination adopted in the US, Australia and many countries across Europe (also known as a 'public defence') - whereby the viva is not the ultimate deciding factor in whether or not a candidate is awarded their qualification (see Byram and Stoicheva 2022 for further detail).

Within the closed-door viva, there are limited criteria for which candidates can submit a formal complaint or appeal. For instance, they may appeal if institutional policy and procedure has not been followed correctly (e.g. the chairperson not being present), but they are commonly not permitted to appeal the outcome of the examination based on, for example, concerns regarding examiner conduct or expertise. The UK is in the minority within Europe, with 87% of institutions across 32 countries having a right to appeal the final examination decision (Hasgall et al. 2019).

It is without doubt that the viva is esteemed by many in the world of academia. It has been the epitome of academic tradition for hundreds of years (McAdams and Robertson 2012). It can provide a platform for useful feedback, promoting further academic and professional development. Questioning used in the viva can be a means to check the originality of the thesis, evaluate the candidate's depth of knowledge and understanding, and explore how their research could be applied in practice. Engaging in such dialogue is a necessary skill in academia (McAdams and Robertson 2012).

As noted by Remenyi (2019), many candidates have constructive, positive and enjoyable viva experiences; an assertion that is not in question or challenged throughout this review. However, 'mistakes are sometimes made' (70). Whilst the closed-door viva is intended as a method of academic assessment and evaluation, it is, at the same time, a 'social practice that is "fraught with risks and uncertainties"' (Morley 2004, 91). It has been suggested that such vivas 'are subjective, mysterious, and culturally based at a time when greater objectivity, transparency, and cultural inclusion are preeminent educational values' (McAdams and Robertson 2012, 179). It is important to note the wider shortcomings of the culture of academia (Anderson 1992) in which the viva takes place. For example, research has found that bullying is rife (Tight 2023) and that the priorities of academics are not always concurrent with the best interests of students. It is not surprising therefore, that Anderson (1992, 62) noted that the potential for the abuse of candidates in the viva is 'awesome'.

Concerns about the quality of the viva process were raised in academic literature over 60 years ago (Matthews 1957; Halio 1963) and have gradually accumulated over the last few decades. There now exist numerous books, chapters, discussion pieces and critical commentaries exploring, critiquing and questioning the role and process of the viva (e.g. Park 2003; Sikes 2017; Dobson 2018; Taylor 2022); noting issues with quality assurance (e.g. validity, reliability, transparency and fairness), and considering how to achieve 'best practice'. Similar conversations have also made their way into the UK media (The Guardian 2016).

In 2007, these concerns were officially recognised by the UK's Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), which made recommendations for improvement within their Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes (2014, 2018). However, in a recent review conducted by the UK Council for Graduate Education (Taylor 2022), variation was found to persist across eight domains: 1) criteria for the doctorate; 2) consulting candidates prior to the nomination of examiners; 3) criteria for their appointment; 4) reporting by examiners prior to the viva; 5) the role of supervisors in the examination process; 6) access to the viva; 7) the conduct of the viva; and 8) differences in the recommendations that examiners could make. The review confirmed that 'the UK viva remains firmly closed' (2022, 5).

Rationale and aims

In lieu of this, it seems necessary to de-mystify ‘one of the best kept secrets in higher education’ (Davis and Engward 2018, 30). It is imperative if we are to ensure that higher education providers are upholding academic standards, and that they are acting in accordance with their duty of care towards students. One of the ways this can be achieved is to look more closely at the literature that focuses on the people who have experience of the viva themselves.

The aim of this review is to explore first-hand experiences of PhD or doctoral students having been examined through a ‘closed-door’ style viva. Findings will be analysed using narrative synthesis. Recommendations for potential improvements or changes made by authors of the included studies, others in the field, and the authors of this review are then drawn together.

Methodology

Search terms

Search terms were developed iteratively through discussions between the authors, based on the results of initial scoping searches. The keywords were purposively chosen to be broad in scope (e.g. capturing public defence formats and participants who had experiences of a viva examination in a role other than a student) to ensure an exhaustive search:

viva or viva voce or doctoral viva or doctoral defen or phd viva or doctoral viva AND student* or candidate* or graduate* or examiner* or supervisor* or convenor* or chair* or academic* AND experience* or perspective* or insight* or discussion* or view* or exploration* or pre-conception* or expectation* or account* or satisfaction* or feeling* or thought* attitude* or perception**

Inclusion criteria

The ‘SPIDER’ framework (Sample, Phenomenon of Interest, Design, Evaluation, Research type) (Cooke, Smith, and Booth 2012) was used to develop inclusion and exclusion criteria. We chose to only include studies that met the following criteria: all participants are current or former PhD or doctorate level students; the primary focus of the study is to obtain the first-hand experiences of participants who have been examined through a ‘closed-door’ style viva; any research design (e.g. qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods); any evaluation; peer-reviewed empirical papers, written in English.

Identification, screening and selection of studies

The search strategy comprised two main stages (see PRISMA diagram, Figure 1). The first involved searches of six online databases, conducted on 10th June 2023. Key words were searched within the field ‘abstracts’ or equivalent. Limits of ‘English language’ and ‘peer reviewed’ were applied where possible. Relevant subject filters were also applied to ProQuest as the platform retrieved a higher number of hits. This process retrieved 468 potential references. After titles and abstracts were screened for relevance and duplicates were removed, 60 references remained, five of which were identified as definitively meeting the inclusion criteria (Wallace 2003; Crossouard 2011; Carter 2012; Share 2016; Davis and Engward 2018).

The second stage involved manual searches, conducted throughout June 2023. The reference lists of the five studies meeting the inclusion criteria were hand-searched. The same five studies were then inputted into Google Scholar and Web of Science for citation searches. An email

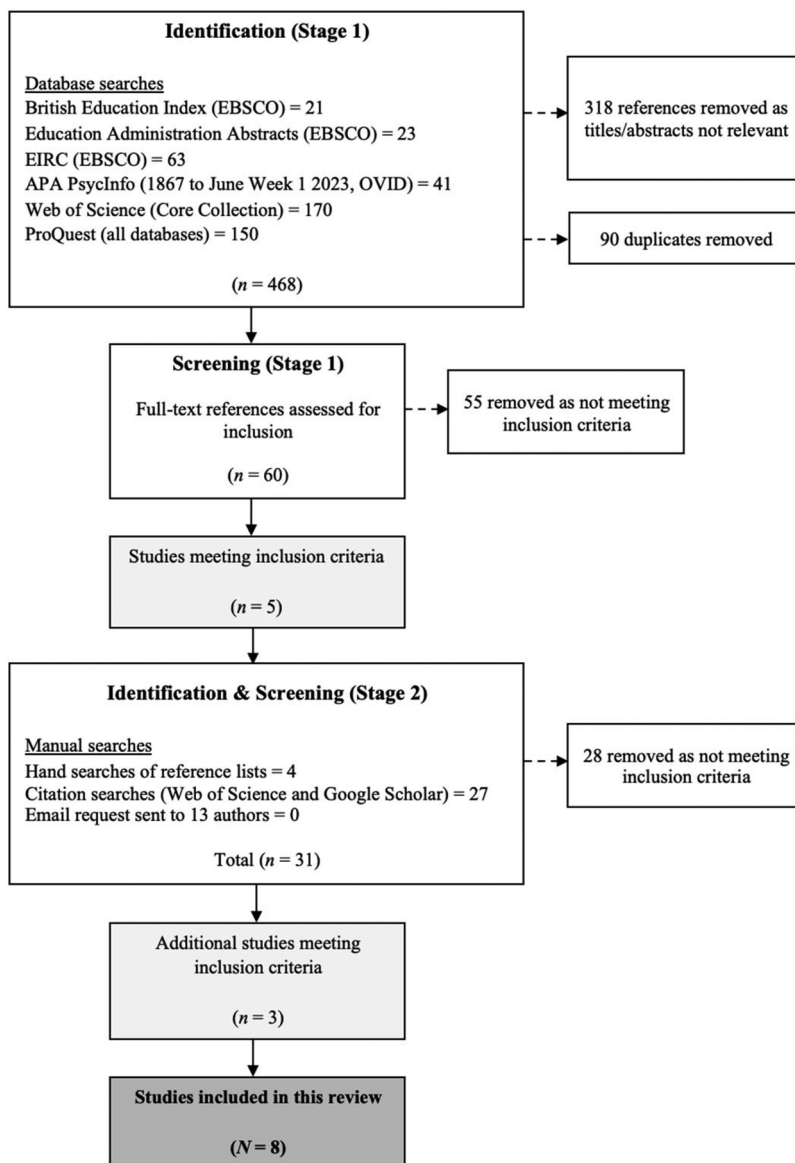


Figure 1. PRISMA diagram.

request for further potential references was sent to the authors of the five studies, in addition to eight key authors in the field. The manual search process identified an additional 31 potential references, three of which were identified as meeting the inclusion criteria (Hartley and Jory 2000; Wallace and Marsh 2001; Kelly 2010).

Deliberation occurred for two studies retrieved through manual searches (Hartley and Fox 2002; Mushibwe, Musonda, and Kazonga 2021). Following email contact with authors, it became clear that the latter did not meet the inclusion criteria, and the former utilised secondary data that would not have made a unique contribution to this review.

The eight studies were subjected to quality assessment using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) (Hong et al. 2018) by two of the authors. The decision was taken for all papers to be included in the review.

Results

General and demographic characteristics

Table 1 shows the general and demographic characteristics of the included studies. A large majority of the 276 participants received a 'positive' viva outcome, defined as an outright pass or minor amendments (243, 88%). Only a minority received 'Negative' outcomes, defined as: major amendments (25, 9%); revise and re-submit (5, 2%); and fail (1, 0.5%).

Narrative synthesis

Due to the inclusion of both qualitative and mixed method studies, a narrative synthesis was deemed the most appropriate approach to analyse the data. Guidance provided by Popay et al. (2006) was followed. The synthesised data is presented under headings denoting the main themes. Studies are referred to by their index number provided in Table 2.

Emotional response

All studies reported the range of emotions that were experienced throughout the viva process. Six explored emotions during the viva itself (1–4, 7, 8). Naturally, feelings of anxiety were the most common; the intensity of which varied across participants. Some were mildly anxious, whereas others were 'petrified' (3, 32). For some, this manifested in physical symptoms, such as shaking (2, 3) and feeling physically unwell (4). Davis and Engward (2018) found that candidates felt anxious even if they were not the type of people to normally feel anxious. A key reason for feelings of anxiety was the lack of knowledge about what the viva would entail; 'the unknown' (3, 11). As one participant stated, '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' (3, 43).

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.

The immediate impact of the viva is summed up by Crossouard (2011, 2) who used the term ‘emotional labour’ (317). Some reported a sense of relief that it was over, alongside tiredness and exhaustion (6). In response to the question ‘In as few words as possible, how would you sum up your own experience of the viva?’, 39% of the participants in Hartley and Jory’s (2000, 4) study used negative terms such as ‘nerve-racking, scary, devastating, and awful’ (46). Forty-four percent used positive terms such as ‘enjoyable, positive, rewarding, and fair’ (46). Other emotions included elation and happiness, even if participants had been asked to make major corrections (6).

Psychological impact

Five studies included reports that indicated the longer-term psychological impact of the viva (4–8), despite many receiving positive outcomes. Four studies described some candidates as feeling traumatised (5–8). One participant reported feeling depressed and suicidal (6), and another used the term ‘destroyed’ (7, 104).

Others found the viva had an impact on their self-esteem and confidence (4–6); ‘it was a horrible experience, and it has had long lasting effects on my self-confidence, both personally and professionally’ (6, 187). More specifically, Kelly (2010, 5) found that all participants experienced a decrease in their perceived academic competence. Hartley and Jory (2000, 4) reported that many experienced a reduction in their self-esteem, with 20% reporting a reduction in morale. That said, 64% reported the viva boosted their morale, and one participant said that the viva boosted their confidence. However, it was noted by the authors that this participant had a particularly positive viva experience whereby the two examiners were friends of his.

Power

The issue of power relations was raised in four studies (2, 3, 7, 8). Candidates spoke of an awareness that examiners were in a position of power over them; with one referring to this as the ‘strong hierarchical relations of authority’ (2, 321). Numerous participants hinted at the ways examiners used their positional power. One said, ‘there was this power, the examiners had absolute power, I had none’ (3, 32). One participant expressed feeling ‘at the whim of people in power’ (7, 103). Implicit in all studies was reference to the conduct of examiners; indicating that the way in which they used their power had an impact on candidates’ overall viva experience. More specifically, influencing candidates’ emotions and, subsequently, their performance; for better or worse. One participant described the questioning style as being ‘all about them showing they were more powerful than me’ (3, 32). Many described being left feeling disempowered or powerless (2, 3, 7, 8). Davis and Engward (2018, 3) concluded that examiners use of power in this way ‘appeared to be able to affect the outcome of the examination’ (33).

Wallace and Marsh (2001, 8) noted the power imbalances between examiners. This was based on a response from one participant who spoke of one examiner being the more dominant. The authors elaborated that ‘less confident examiners who themselves may be in awe of

their longer established, better known fellow examiners and either follow their lead or, at best, fail to curb behaviour and demands which they themselves consider inappropriate or unjust' (56).

The issue of power in the form of gender bias was mentioned in two studies (2, 3). Crossouard (2011, 2) specifically set out to explore the 'gendered nature' of the viva (313). Weaved throughout candidates' accounts are 'gendered metaphors' that describe heteronormative stereotypes with reference to examination styles (320). Masculine examining was associated with aggression, hostility and intimidation, whereas feminine examining was associated with softness, facilitation and an expression of emotions. One participant expressed concerns that she would be subject to questioning with 'masculine, interrogatory, overtones', which stemmed from an 'expectation of academic cultures being antagonistic' (318). The participant did not, however, experience this; noting that both of her examiners were female. Davis and Engward (2018, 3) noted that their study 'does not identify gendered concerns', despite participants being 'mainly women' (34); 'negative experiences of emotion were reported in examinations where both female and male examiners were appointed' (33).

Crossouard (2011, 2) was the only study to reference power in the form of socioeconomic status; noting that some candidates felt they were at a disadvantage due to their working-class roots. One participant expressed concerns that examiners would think of them as being inarticulate and 'unacceptable within academic communities' (323). Crossouard was also the only study to reference positive biases, as one participant reported a personal friendship with his supervisor and the internal examiner.

Examiner conduct

Most studies explored the conduct or behaviour of examiners (1–3, 5–8). This has been further categorised into findings that represent the specific examination techniques employed and their interpersonal style.

Examination techniques. Numerous participants reported on whether or not the examiners approach enabled them to engage in academic debate and defend their thesis (2, 3, 5, 7, 8). One participant 'viewed the examiners as willing to listen to argument which was well founded, and able to ask searching questions which enabled the participants to provide detailed responses' (3, 32). Others made similar comments, explaining their examiners were 'these two people who'd actually read this thing... really seriously, and they were really engaging with the things I was trying to say' (7, 104). One felt the examiners' approach was constructive and collaborative because 'what I liked about these two examiners is that they didn't pick [questions] out on the basis of their own particular concerns or areas' (7, 105). A participant in Crossouard's (2011, 2) study held an 'old fashioned' expectation that the examiners would be intimidating (319). However, the examiners opened her viva by explaining that 'we obviously have lots of things to ask you about and question you on and explore with you, but we obviously want to do that in the context of making it possible for you to perform at your best' (319).

Other participants had very different experiences. Davis and Engward (2018, 3) found that 'not all candidates were permitted their own voice', which meant that 'opportunities for defence of their work were limited' (32). Four studies reported accounts of candidates who struggled to understand examiners' questions and the way in which they were posed (2, 3, 7, 8). One explained 'I couldn't for the life of me understand where she [the examiner] was coming from' (2, 322); and another found 'the questions were long and all over the place' (3, 32). Some reported that the questioning led them to query whether the examiners had fully read and/or understood their thesis. Despite a positive viva outcome, one stated, '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). This response is supported by quantitative data from Share (2016, 6), who found there to be

dissatisfaction with internal and external examiner understanding of the thesis content: 20% and 14% respectively. Two of the six participants in study 8 (2001) raised concerns that the questions and comments from examiners focused heavily on negative elements of the thesis, despite both receiving positive outcomes: ‘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’ (45).

Examiner interpersonal style. Many studies reported on the conduct or behaviour of the examiners with reference to interpersonal style and general communication (2, 3, 5, 7, 8). One had a positive experience, implying that the examiners were patient, understanding, and had a calming effect from the beginning of her viva: ‘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). Crossouard (2011, 2) reported on the variation in the style of examiners: ‘some being seen as distant and impassive, with others seemingly smiling and enthusiastic’ (321).

Five studies included reports of examiners being aggressive in their manner (2, 3, 5, 7, 8). Two participants, who both passed with minor corrections, described their examiner as being ‘aggressive and challenging’ (5, 81), and ‘really aggressive’ (3, 32). Another participant who received minor corrections explained that the questioning was ‘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 piffling, minor things’ (3, 49). One participant, who received an outright pass, reported that her external examiner put questions in a ‘bullying’ way (2, 321); a view that was also shared by her internal examiner and supervisor. Wallace (2003, 7) draws attention to the ‘metaphors of punishment and interrogation’ (104) used by four of the six participants, all of whom received a positive outcome. Another participant explained that ‘it was by no means the most taxing or aggressive meeting that I’ve ever been involved in’, but implied that 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).

Fairness

Two studies asked direct questions regarding candidates’ views on the fairness of their viva (3, 4). Eighty-two percent of participants in Hartley and Jory’s (2000, 4) study believed their viva had been fair. By contrast, 11 out of the 18 participants in Davis and Engward (2018, 3) study did not believe their viva had been fair. Seven felt that the viva process as a whole was not fair, but their own viva had been. One participant deemed themselves ‘lucky’ (3, 33). Elaborating on this, two participants noted the lack of fairness was exacerbated by the chair’s lack of knowledge regarding acceptable examiner conduct and/or their unwillingness to intervene.

A third study found that four out of six participants spoke of their viva being unfair, without having been asked directly (8). The author’s summarised these accounts with the following statement: ‘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 over-rides, for them, the fairness of the verdict’ (50).

Practical and procedural

Six studies included a wide range of practical and procedural issues (2–4, 6–8). The location of the viva was mentioned in four (3, 4, 6, 7). Differences were apparent regarding participant’s

familiarity with the room and its layout (3, 4). Examples of bad layouts were where a participant could not clearly see the examiners' expressions (7), and where the walls were glass which meant little privacy (6). Positive experiences of room layout included being near an exit and having a window (3).

The duration of the viva varied across all participants. The greatest variation was found in Hartley and Jory's (2000, 4) study; the shortest being 45 min and the longest four hours. There was also variation as to candidate's supervisor/s being present or not (4, 8); and whether, if present, they were permitted to speak (8). Contrary to standard practice in many institutions, not all participants had chairs present (4). Some candidates were 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).

Discussion

Summary of findings

The purpose of this review was to explore candidate experiences of the closed-door viva. As noted in the introduction, that many candidates have constructive, positive and even enjoyable viva experiences is not being questioned. However, it is obvious that there was considerable variation in how each of the 276 candidates experienced their vivas - the reality is that some of these were negative. Many candidates highlighted the immediate and longer-term impact of their viva experiences with reference to a reduction in self-esteem and perceived academic competence. Several used the term 'traumatised'. The way in which examiners used their positional power played a significant role in shaping both candidate experiences of the viva and the outcomes that they received. Worryingly, this review also found evidence that some candidates reported they were subject to rude, aggressive and bullying examination behaviours. Both implicit and explicit reference was made to the culture of academia being antagonistic and the expectation that aggression within vivas was simply part of the process.

It is recognised that reports of negative experiences were more common in those who received a negative outcome. However, the assumption held by some academics that negative experiences are a result of a poor thesis or a deficit in the candidate's ability to engage in academic debate and defend said thesis is challenged by the finding that negative experiences were reported by participants who received both positive and negative outcomes. A large majority of the accounts included in this review were from participants who had received a positive outcome ($n=243$, 88%).

This review has therefore substantiated existing concerns about the validity, reliability, transparency and fairness of the viva; those that have been accumulating within the literature for several decades, and those that have been officially recognised by the UK Quality Assurance Agency (2007) and the UK Council for Graduate Education (Taylor 2022). Research exploring the views and experiences of both examiners (e.g. Sikes 2017; Tan 2023; Wisker et al. 2022) and chairs (Kumar, Sanderson, and Kaur 2021) has raised many of the same concerns as candidates in this review.

Taking all the above into consideration, it can be stated with certainty that it is not possible to ensure a fair and constructive closed-door viva experience for *all* students. Some will experience injustices which - due to the limited criteria for which candidates are permitted to report or appeal within the UK - they and/or their supervisors are powerless to fight. The impact or consequences of these can be life changing. Examination practices 'fraught with risks and uncertainties' (Morley 2004, 91) are not in-line with the academic standards and duty of care towards students that universities are expected to uphold; as such, it is clear that change is needed.

Recommendations for improvement and change

This section contains a discussion of potential recommendations for improvement or change to the viva process. The authors included in this review made their own recommendations based on their findings, and much literature has explored ways in which the closed-door viva could be improved or reformed (e.g. Park 2003; McAdams and Robertson 2012; Watts 2012; QAA 2018). It is evident that views regarding the degree of change necessary vary. We propose that recommendations can be broadly categorised into three levels. Providing a list of all suggested recommendations is beyond the remit of the current review, however, some examples of types of recommendations will now be discussed.

Level of change 1: efforts to assist candidates whilst the viva remains in its current closed-door form

Level 1 recommendations would place the onus on the students and supervisors to ensure candidates are prepared for their viva (e.g. familiarising themselves with their thesis and managing their emotional responses). In addition, some success has been found in students engaging with peer mentoring (Knight, Dipper, and Cruice 2018) and undertaking mock vivas (Lantsoght 2022). However, given the knowledge that examiners hold considerable power in shaping both the viva experience and the outcome (for better or worse), it is argued that student preparation alone would not suffice. Therefore, recommendations in this level should also include ensuring appropriate support or adaptations for candidates with additional physical and/or mental health needs. This may include, but is not exclusive to, neurodiversity (with or without a diagnosis) (Sandland, MacLeod, and Hall 2023) and reasonable adjustments to be made for students with a disability (in line with the Equality Act 2010). Close attention should be paid to the well-being of candidates; where candidate distress is observed or reported, university well-being services should be notified and offer appropriate support even if the candidate does not reach out for support themselves.

Level of change 2: efforts to address quality assurance of the closed-door viva (i.e. improve transparency, reliability, validity)

Level 2 recommendations would place the onus on institutions to target key issues with quality assurance to improve the transparency, reliability and validity of the viva. These might include various procedural changes and additional safeguards, for example, training for examiners with an emphasis on conduct/behaviour and examination techniques, with reference being made to university harassment/bullying policies and the Equality Act (2010). In addition, Cobourne (2010) highlights the importance of diligence in the selection of examiners.

Similarly, given the literature regarding the critical role that chairs can play in the viva process (e.g. ensuring appropriate/constructive questioning of the candidate), as well as providing valuable pastoral support (Kumar, Sanderson, and Kaur 2021; Kumar, Kaur, and Sanderson 2022), it is suggested that greater recognition is given to their role, that they are carefully selected, and that training for chairs is provided.

Institutions could help candidates plan for their thesis defence by making independent/preliminary reports available prior to their viva (Battua 2023; Taylor 2023), and by ensuring candidates undertake formative examinations (e.g. presentations to academic staff) prior to their viva in order to identify any conspicuous flaws (Battua 2023).

Quality of the viva process could be improved by enhanced monitoring/feedback in the form of audio-recordings (which could be used if a candidate wished to appeal) and candidate evaluations of their viva experience. Changes made in this way would recognise the power held by examiners and accept potential fallibility with regards to conduct, examination techniques, knowledge/expertise and other influences (e.g. conscious and unconscious biases) (Morley, Leonard, and David 2002; Remenyi 2019). Ostensibly, questioning the expertise of examiners is a

contentious stance to take. Yet, the expertise of academics is put to question in other contexts - most obviously within the journal peer review process.

Regarding the potential for one examiner to dominate another (Wallace and Marsh 2001), as well as wider literature around power relationships between academics (Tight 2023), it is recommended that independent reports (i.e. reports commonly written by each examiner prior to meeting) could undergo some level of scrutiny (i.e. looking at potential inconsistencies between pre-viva and post-viva reports) in an attempt to ensure that the outcome has not been determined by one examiner.

The issue of subjectivity is also raised in this review. Such concerns have been substantiated by research that has found viva outcomes do not necessarily correlate with the outcomes students have received from other, more objective and transparent methods of examination (Khan et al. 2016; Torke et al. 2010). Dobson (2018) provides a detailed discussion regarding the issue of inter-subjective judgements in the viva. An example of how subjectivity could be addressed is to introduce discipline specific assessment criteria which could be made available for students. Part of the training for examiners could be around the administration and scoring of criteria in order to further improve consistency (Cobourne 2010).

Additional improvements which would fall within this level of change can be taken from practices within other countries (see Kumar, Taylor, and Sharmini 2023). Key to any changes would be the need for ongoing monitoring and evaluation with a view to achieving best practice.

Level of change 3: substantial reform of the closed-door viva

Level 3 recommendations would involve questioning the very role and purpose of the closed-door viva as a method of examination. It is important, although not surprising, to note that the majority of studies included in this review posed these questions. More specifically, questions which may need to be asked are: aside from academic tradition, what is the rationale for retaining the closed-door viva?; and what elements, if any, of the closed-door viva would be beneficial to retain?

It is not possible at this juncture to make concrete suggestions as to what alternative assessment measures may look like, however, examples could be drawn from PhD and doctoral examination in other countries (e.g. Australia, the US, majority of Europe) (Carter and Whittaker 2009; Lantsoght 2022; Kumar, Taylor, and Sharmini 2023), as well as what is known to be 'best practice' for assessment and evaluation in other areas of higher education.

The example recommendations across the three levels are not considered to be an exhaustive list and we do not claim all of them to be new. It is possible that these conversations are already taking place outside the realm of published academia. Indeed, some universities have implemented individual recommendations outlined in Levels 1 and 2. For example, some academics and agencies have developed guidance on how to address quality issues (e.g. Park 2003; QAA 2018; Wellington 2021), and some research teams are making concerted efforts to improve the process for candidates with specific needs (e.g. those who identify as being neurodivergent, with or without a diagnosis) (Sandland, MacLeod, and Hall 2023). These efforts should certainly be commended. However, to decrease variability and ensure the viva is fair for all candidates, change needs to address the pervasive issues with the quality of PhD and doctoral examination and, ideally, needs to be consistent across universities.

Recommendations for research

There are certainly areas that still remain hidden with regards to the closed-door viva, for example, examiner reports and the voices of candidates who failed their viva. However, it is hoped that the evidence presented in this review is sufficient to confirm quality issues and concerns. Future research efforts may be best placed focusing on what improvements can be made and how these can best be implemented.

Strengths and limitations of this review

A comprehensive search strategy was employed that was able to retrieve a combination of qualitative and mixed-methods studies. This enabled a sufficient sample size whilst still capturing the voices of candidates themselves *via* verbatim quotes. However, data from other sources (i.e. editorials, book chapters) were not included in the review which could be viewed as a limitation. The review did not seek to quantify the number of positive or negative experiences. An unanticipated strength of the papers was that the authors distinguished between positive and negative viva outcomes. It is presumed this was an attempt to address the assumption that negative experiences are a result of failings in the student's thesis or performance.

Conclusions

This review has drawn attention to significant issues and concerns with the closed-door viva. It is nonetheless encouraging to see that the closed-door viva is undergoing academic scrutiny, and that there is recognition from some individuals and institutions that change is needed; some of which has already begun (e.g. Park 2003; QAA 2018; Wellington 2021; Sandland, MacLeod, and Hall 2023).

However, 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). It has been over two decades since Wallace and Marsh aired this view, and it is argued that the closed-door viva *has* now undergone scrutiny, and concerns *have* been substantiated. As such, beyond the desire to maintain academic tradition, it is curious as to why the closed-door viva approach remains largely unchanged. It is hoped that responses to the findings of this review (whether positive or negative) act as a catalyst for more open discussions across the academic community both within and outside the UK as to how we move forwards to achieve best practice in PhD and doctoral assessment and evaluation.

Competing interests

The authors confirm that there are no relevant financial or non-financial competing interests to report.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Data availability statement

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article and within the articles contained within the review.

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