

How to survive (and even enjoy!) an on-line viva?

Having successfully survived an on-line viva at the time of the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown, and having actually quite enjoyed the experience, I was asked to write a quick note about how to prepare for it and what to look out for.

I am not going through all viva prep I did, just the items that are specific to the current circumstances. If you want more details or have any questions about my other viva related experiences (or anything else!), do drop me a line to matjaz.vidmar@ed.ac.uk

Preparation (day before?)

The biggest difference with a face-to-face viva is, obviously, the use of an on-line platform. Here, the collective preparation was crucial for me.

My viva took place on MS Teams, where my non-examining chair set up a special team¹ consisting of the four of us (me, him and the two examiners). This took **a little troubleshooting**, as external examiner needs to be added as a guest² and it is better if they sign out of their institutional profile (if they have one). I am sure we could do the same on other platforms, and I did set up a Blackboard Collaborate Ultra session³, in case something went wrong (both for the test as well as viva). We did not need this in the end.

Having a chair was invaluable, as they handled all the interactions about the set-up and also **run a test session the day before**, where we made sure all is working. It took us about 30min to make sure all is running properly.

Thus, I have not really had to prepare much myself, apart from **setting up my “workstation”**. I set it all up well before the test, so I could make sure everything works in the “exam conditions”. I would recommend in particular:

- I made sure I picked a good spot, with a comfortable chair, so I could easily sit still there for a while. Of course, I made sure that the place had a good and stable WiFi connection.
- As I have a spare external monitor, I have set up the Teams call on the main (laptop) screen and used the second monitor to have access to any other resource. That turned out to be entirely unnecessary, I did not look at it once.
- I had a printed copy of my PhD on the table and that was really useful, as I could also lift it up in front of camera to point to any sections or figures to the examiners. If you don't have a printed copy, I am sure you can make do equally well with an electronic one. Whatever format it is in (perhaps download it to your phone or tablet?), I would sure you are comfortable navigating it, if you need it⁴.

¹ If anyone is stuck, there are guides how to do that available from Microsoft: <https://docs.microsoft.com/en-us/microsoftteams/get-started-with-teams-create-your-first-teams-and-channels>

² This is how you add a guest: <https://support.office.com/en-gb/article/add-guests-to-a-team-in-teams-fccb4fa6-f864-4508-bdde-256e7384a14f>

³ I did this myself, though you can also ask your chair to do it. Here are the instructions:

<https://www.ed.ac.uk/information-services/learning-technology/communication/virtualmeeting>

⁴ If you have it all on one screen (Teams and PhD), then I think it makes sense that you make sure beforehand that you have them in windows sized so that you can see everything side-by-side.

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- As it happens, I have some pop-up banners at home, and I put those behind me for a more professional looking background.⁵
- I made sure I have something to write to hand, for noting their remarks/questions. I had a notebook and post-it notes, in the end I used the later.
- I also made sure I had a glass of water nearby. (Even though I am normally not getting a dry throat, it was useful this time!)

Despite spending most of my days in pyjamas and tracksuits these days, I did dress in business casual attire for the test and the viva, which gave a bit of gravitas to the occasion (but then you all know how much I like my ties!).

On the day

I did not do anything specific on the day. I was quite a bit nervous so I was ready early (about 30min before scheduled start).

Obviously, I made sure that everyone around me (my partner) was aware of what is going on so there are no strange background noises or disruptions. Also, if you have an ordinary broadband connection like me, it may make sense to **ask that other usage of internet in the household is kept at minimum during viva time**, so that I was sure there was enough bandwidth for a good video link. All of this is more so that I could feel confident the technology will work than actually being vital for the success of the link – I found it a great comfort that I felt like I did everything to have the technology in best possible shape.

Viva-time!

Viva structure stayed the same for me as to what I expected from a face-to face viva. The examiners and chair had a quick chat before we started (the chair called me into the meeting via MS Teams when they were ready), then we had the examination and afterwards I left the call when they deliberated (again, chair called me back when done).

Some (more general) advice I found useful from my supervisors, friends and (senior) colleagues:

- **Prepare an “opening statement” briefly summarising your PhD** – most examiners ask for something like that. You don’t have to stick to your abstract – you must have re-read your thesis several times by now; how would you summarise it NOW? Also, this is about telling the **STORY** of your PhD journey, not just list off academic achievement
- When questions are asked, remember that this is a defence not a progress board, **so DEFEND what you did**, rather than be overly deferential to examiners points of views.
- Know where your weaknesses are and **think in advance** how you are going to defend/explain them.
- **Take a deep breath and try to relax!** (Easier said than done, but do try!)

⁵ That was actually remarked upon very favourably by both examiners, so setting up a background is a good strategy. I think using Teams background or some relevant posters on the wall may have similar effect. It basically shows that you care about the occasion and the image you show them.

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Post-viva

Not sure this is a piece of advice or not, but I went for a walk after the viva (one exercise outing a day!), to walk off all the adrenalin and get a bit of fresh air. Take a couple of deep breaths – you have done it!

Then organise a virtual drinks party so we can all e-congratulate you! 😊

Later...

My experience with post-PhD admin was that it was really lightning fast (in comparison what I was told to expect). Maybe it is to do with everyone working from home, or I was lucky with timing, but my outcome letter arrived in 10 days⁶.

For final submission you also don't have to submit a hard copy now, only an electronic one via PURE. PURE system needs a little getting used to, though the instructions you will have received are very self-explanatory. If you are a tutor like me, make sure you sign in with your student UUN as that is where the thesis needs to go (I accidentally uploaded it to my staff profile, though the very nice PURE team then moved it to the right place).

⁶ Other parts of the process went equally fast – my corrections were really minor, so I could submit them immediately, examiners approved them in a matter of days and the resubmission request came 2h after that. I submitted final electronic copy within an hour and had the award letter by the end of the day. Total viva to award time: 16 days.